

From A Flower Girl to A Lady:

The Change of Discourse and Power

D'UNE JEUNE FILLE A UNE DAME :

CHANGEMENT DE DISCOURS ET POUVOIR

Zhang Yan¹

Abstract: The theory of discourse and power, which was put forward by the French philosophy Michel Foucault, is more and more frequently employed in literary criticism. As one kind of discourse, conversation plays an essential role in understanding drama, *Pygmalion* is no exception. Applying the method of stylistic analysis, this paper aims at analyzing the change of power relationships through examining the discourses in Act I and Act V of *Pygmalion*, and then presents how Eliza changes from a flower girl to a lady through discourse.

Key words: discourse, power, relation, *Pygmalion*, change

Résumé: La théorie de discours et pouvoir, élaborée par le philosophe français Michel Foucault, est de plus en plus employée dans la critique littéraire. Comme une sorte de discours, la conversation joue un rôle essentiel dans la compréhension du drame, *Pygmalion* ne fait pas exception. Appliquant la méthode d'analyse stylistique, le présent article vise à étudier le changement de la relation de pouvoir à travers l'examen des discours dans l'Acte I and l'Acte V de *Pygmalion*, et montre comment Eliza, d'une jeune fille, devient une dame à travers le discours.

Mots-Clés: discours, pouvoir, relation, *Pygmalion*, changement

1. INTRODUCTION

Pygmalion(1916), one of the most well-known plays written by George Bernard Shaw(1856-1950), tells us a story how Professor Henry Higgins teaches a poor Cockney flower girl, Eliza Doolittle to speak and behave like an upper class lady. It had been made into a musical in 1956 and a successful film musical in 1964, both with the title *My Fair Lady*. And in the film musical, Eliza, the heroine, was played by the famous actress Audrey Hepburn. Most readers, literary critics as well as directors attributed the great success of this play to its plot. They missed the language emphasis in *Pygmalion*, preferring to regard the play as a conversational love story between Higgins and Eliza. The present author believes that, as a play about the issue of a phonetic experiment, *Pygmalion* deserves attention for its discourses. Fortunately, some critics can

be found that held the same opinion. "Eric Bentley has described *Pygmalion* as 'a battle of wills and words.' Daniel Derwin observes, 'So powerful is the word for Shaw that Henry Higgins can create practically ex nihilo a living person through speech exercises. The word made flesh is Liza. ...' And Timothy G. Vesonder has declared, 'Even a superficial examination of *Pygmalion* will show that the main focus of the play is not erotic involvement but the power of language. ...'". (Reynolds, 1994:209) The above quotation from an essay published in *The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* strongly proves that the power of discourse in *Pygmalion* deserves much more emphasis. Actually, when we mention the language of a certain play, we usually talk about the conversation in the play. Conversation plays a decisive role in understanding drama. Besides, speaking of discourse, "generally we use it, as an uncountable noun, to refer to any stretches of language, spoken or written, or of whatever length,

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Central China Normal University, China.

*Received 3 January 2007 ; accepted 20 June 2007

that is coherent and is received by the receiver as a unified whole.” (张应林, 2006: 3) Thus, conversations in *Pygmalion*, with its coherence and as a unified whole, undoubtedly can be taken as discourses. So applying the method of stylistic analysis, this paper aims at analyzing the change of power-relations through examining the conversational discourse in Act I and Act V of *Pygmalion*, and then presents how Eliza changes from a flower girl to a lady through discourse.

2. FOUCAULT'S THEORY OF DISCOURSE AND POWER

Most of the traditional ideas of power originated with Francis Bacon for it was Bacon who said “Knowledge is power”. To Bacon, the one who grasps more knowledge possesses more power. Three centuries later, Michel Foucault asserts a new model of the relations of power and knowledge, and he called it “power/knowledge”. With the publication of his book *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, Foucault's theory of discourse and power provided the literary critics with a new perspective to literary works.

In Foucault's theory, discourse is a vague and complex concept. Although it is essential in his theoretical system, he has never given a clear definition to this term. Actually, the term “discourse” can be comparatively clarified from its etymology. The Latin root of this term is the verb *discurrere*, which means literally “to run about”, from *currere*, “to run”. *Diskursus*, thus means “to run to and fro”, which has developed into the idea of an exchange of ideas, or simply conversation. So in this paper, dramatic conversation is taken as discourse for analysis. And it is no contradictory to Foucault's theory. “Foucault is interested in discourse as the societal process of understanding and self-definition. His research concentrates on the way discourses are organized and, more specifically, on who gets to participate and contribute and who is excluded” (Stahl, 2004:4330). And these are also the focus of this paper in the process of analyzing the discourse in the play.

A central aspect of Foucaultian discourses is power. For Foucault, “power is recognized to be a core constituent of all discourses and one of the reasons why one participates in discourse. Discourses produce power but they can also expose it and render it fragile.” (quoted in Stahl, 2004:4330) Thus, the relationship between discourse and power is obvious. According to Foucault's theory of discourse and power, people are told that discourse is the production of power, and power is hidden in the practice of discourse. Power is the most fundamental factor in influencing, even controlling discourse. Power and discourse are inseparable, and power is realized through discourse. Discourse is not only a tool to exert power, but the key

to hold power (黄华, 2005: 38).

The following quotation presents the most essential theoretical base of this paper. In Foucault's view, “power is relations; power is not a thing, it is a relationship between two individuals, a relationship which is such that one can direct the behavior of another, or determine the behavior of another” (Foucault, 1996: 410), and the other person may try to avoid or resist such control or attempt to control the actions of others in turn, thus forming a complex network of interpersonal power relations. In this play, Eliza and Higgins are the two which produce discourses, possess power, and then form a certain kind of relationship. Foucault's interpretation of power differs all those before his. To him, “Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society”. Foucault says, “Power strategy refers to the totality of the means put into operation to implement power effectively or to maintain it” (Foucault, 1990: 93). For instance, “Every time one side does something, the other one responds by deploying a conduct, a behavior that counter-invests it, tries to escape it, diverts it, turns the attack against itself, etc. Thus nothing is ever stable in these relations of power” (Foucault, 1996: 144). So, the change of the relations of power is evident in the discourses of the two major characters in *Pygmalion*.

3. THE CHANGE OF THE DISCOURSE, POWER AND RELATION IN PYGMALION

In this paper, Eliza and Higgins are the two individuals whose discourses are analyzed, and through the analysis of their discourses, this paper aims at presenting the change of their power relation. The main action of this play centers around Eliza and Professor Higgins. The whole play consists of five acts, from which Act I and Act V are singled out for my analysis. Through analyzing the discourses of Eliza and Higgins in these two acts, we can see the change of their power relation. Specifically, the following analysis is developed around six aspects of their discourses, addresses, speech length, turn-taking, topic control, speech act and linguistic features. Besides, comparisons are made between Act I and Act V in these five aspects in order to show the change.

Eliza and Higgins are respectively a flower girl and a famous linguist at the very beginning of this play. Without considering their discourses, their power relation can be rather obviously inferred from their social status. In Act I, Eliza comes onto the stage, selling flowers to those who are waiting for taxis on a raining night. What she says is either to beg the ladies and gentlemen to buy her flowers or to follow their speeches and answer their questions. These are the speeches of a

poor flower girl. On the other hand, Higgins, as a famous linguist, is proud and arrogant. His arrogance and contempt for Eliza is clearly shown in his speeches. In Act I, Higgins calls Eliza "you silly girl". And because of her cockney accent, he speaks to her rudely, "You come from Anwell. Go back there." However, with the development of the plot, in the process of their language training, changes happen not only in their feelings to each other, but also their discourse. In Act V, after Eliza leaves, Higgins comes to her mother eagerly to look for her. On the way, he meets Eliza's father. He asks him worriedly, "Have you found Eliza? That's the point". The address has already changed from rude "you silly girl" to "Eliza". Now, calling her Eliza means respect. Maybe the characters are unaware of the change, but as readers, we can observe it. More changes can be found in the other aspects.

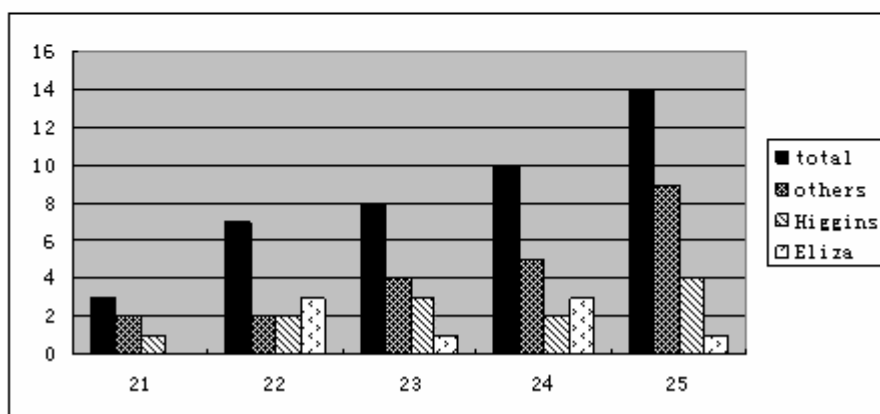
One is speech length. In a conversation, the one who speaks longer is usually the one who possess more power. Eliza's speeches in Act I are obviously shorter than those in Act V, and without much content. Also, compared with those in Act V, her speeches in Act I are not so coherent and logical. What's more important, they do not carry much meaning. As a flower girl, Eliza

only wants to sell her flowers, so begging others to buy her flowers is her major goal and almost all her speeches are presented around this. In contrast, she is not the shabby flower girl any more in Act V, and she has learned language, so she knows how to present her thoughts skillfully. When facing Higgins, she does not hesitate to express any of her ideas. So her speeches in Act V are rather longer, sometimes even longer than Higgins's, and full of her independent viewpoints.

Another aspect, turn-taking, also deserves the readers' attention. Speech acts are often connected together into sequences of turns in conversation. Usually, we expect a question to be followed by an answer, an offer by its acceptance or refusal, and order by that order being carried out, and so on. But it is not so in real conversation as well as in dramatic conversation. "The normal turn-taking patterns deviate. And turn-taking patterns and deviation from relevant turn-taking norms can easily become meaningful in texts"(Short, 1996:205) Eliza takes more turns in Act V than in Act I, while Higgins's case is just the opposite. The frequency of the two characters' turning-take in Act I and Act V is shown specifically in the following tables and charts.

Table 1 Turn-taking of Eliza and Higgins in Act I

Page No. Turns Speakers	21	22	23	24	25
Eliza	0	3	1	3	1
Higgins	1	2	3	2	4
Others	2	2	4	5	9
Total	3	7	8	10	14



The above table and bar chart show the number of turns that Eliza and Higgins take in Act I. Generally speaking, Eliza takes fewer turns than Higgins. The power-relation between them is exposed that Higgins

possesses more power in Act I than Eliza. The number of her turns is determined by her identity as a flower girl, her lower-class social status, her poor cockney accent, etc.

Table 2 Turn-taking of Eliza and Higgins in Act V

Page No. Turns Speakers	121	122	123	124	125
Eliza	7	6	3	2	1
Higgins	2	1	2	0	0
Others	6	8	6	13	4
Total	15	15	11	15	5

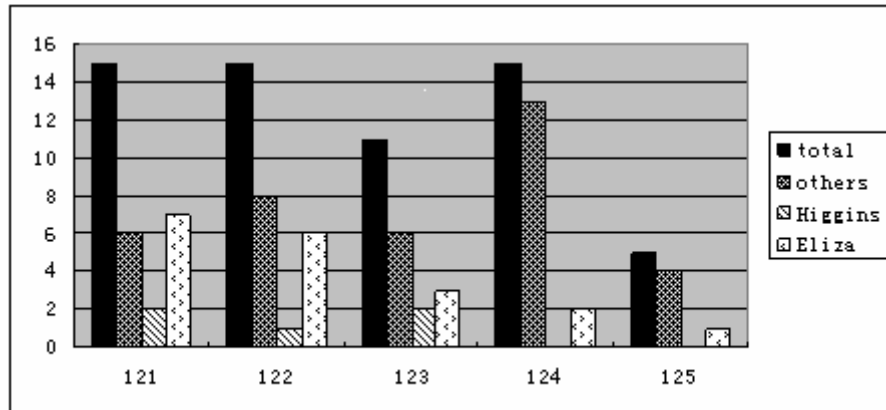


Table 2 with the bar chart following it together illustrate the turn-taking of Eliza and Higgins in Act V. It is clearly shown that Eliza takes more turns than Higgins in Act V. On p.121 and 122, Eliza takes far more turns than Higgins. To compare the two tables and bar charts, two conclusions can be made: firstly, changing her identity from a flower girl to a lady, Eliza's discourse features have changes; secondly, she possesses more power, even more than Higgins, that is to say, the power-relation between them has changed.

Mich Short's experiment and theory are more convincing enough to prove the previous conclusions. In order to judge which speaker is more powerful in a conversation, Short does an experiment in *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose*. He raises many questions and decides whether they apply best, other things being equal, to more powerful or less powerful interactants in conversations. Those questions are like these "Who has most turns?", "Who has the longest turns?", "Who controls the conversational topic?", etc. Short does this experiment according to his intuitions and suggests the readers do it just like him. After the experiment, he concludes "All other things being equal, powerful speakers in conversations have the most turns, have the longest turns, initiate conversational exchanges, control what is talked about and who talks when, and interrupt others"(Short, 1996:206-207). Although it is not completely scientific, it has won agreement of many literary critics and readers. Turn-taking and speech control play essential roles in judging which speaker possesses more power. From the previous analysis, Eliza is considered the one who becomes more powerful after changing from a flower girl into a lady because she takes more turns in Act V than in Act I.

As far as speech control is concerned, Eliza is rather passive in the conversations in Act I, following others most of the time by simply giving responses. The following extract is a good example.

THE MOTHER [to Clara] Give it to me. ... Now [to the girl] This is for your flowers.

THE FLOWER GIRL. Thank you kindly, lady.

...

THE MOTHER.. Do hold your tongue, Clara. [To the girl]. You can keep the change.

THE FLOWER GIRL. Oh, thank you, lady.

THE MOTHER. Now tell me how you know that young gentleman's name.

THE FLOWER GIRL. I didn't.(P.2)

The flower girl Eliza has no power to control any topic, but the lady Eliza is totally different. In Act V, she takes the initiative and starts the topic of conversation. Examples are easy to be found in this act. When she meets Higgins in the house of Mrs. Higgins, she greets to Higgins initiatively.

LIZA. How do you do, Professor Higgins? Are you quite well?

HIGGINS[choking] Am I—[He can say no more].

LIZA. But of course you are: you are never ill .So glad to see you again, Colonel Pickering... Quite chilly this morning, isn't it?(P.42)

The change is quite obvious that Eliza possesses more power at the end of the play after she becomes a lady, while Higgins seems to have become more powerless. By the way, the reasons why she behaves like this are different for different literary critics. Feminists hold the view that Eliza rebels against Higgins finally because her self-consciousness as a woman is awakened. Some other critics think that Eliza asks for the right of being independent so she leaves Higgins. After becoming a lady created by Higgins, she

realizes that she has lost her self identity and her present situation is even worse than being a flower girl. To present these views, this paper has no intention to judge which is right or which is wrong because it is simply done from the perspective of power-relation through analyzing the discourses.

The last but not the least important aspect is about linguistic features. In Act I, the flower girl's language is rather informal, fraught with slangs, mouth-fillers and idiolect. For example, "Ow, eez ye-ooa san, is e?", "Ah-ow-ooh!...", "what she do?", etc. Moreover, some sentences in this act are not grammatically acceptable in a strict sense. These linguistic features of her discourse this imply the girl's illiteracy and her incompetence in discourse. In Act V, after receiving the training, Eliza's language becomes refined and standard. All the slangs, mouth-fillers and idiolects are removed from her speeches. Felicitous diction is employed to fit her graceful manners of a lady. Besides, the sentences in Act V are quite long and complex in structure, and appropriate use of rhetorical devices imparts a sense of elegance, forming a sharp contrast with those in Act I which are structurally simple, with nearly no figures of

speech. All these features endow Eliza's discourse with more and more power.

To sum up, from the above analysis of the discursal features, the change of the power-relation between Eliza and Higgins is clearly presented.

4. CONCLUSION

Discourse plays an essential role in understanding the change of Eliza's identity as well as the power-relation between her and Higgins. So, to expose the change, in this paper, is realized through discourse and it is reflected on power-relation. Through the above comparative study between the beginning and the end of the play, we come to the conclusion that Eliza's final success in holding the power in her relations to others, Higgins in particular, best illustrates the dramatic change in her identity— from a subordinate and inferior flower girl to a self-assertive and respectable lady.

REFERENCES

- Foucault, Michel. *Power/ Knowledge* [M]. New York: Pantheon, 1980.
- . *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction* [M]. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Penguin Books, 1990.
- . *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1961-1984)* [Z]. Trans. Lysa Hochroth and John Johnston. New York: Semiotext, 1996.
- Reynolds, Jean. *Deconstructing Henry Higgins, or Eliza as Derridean "Text"* [J]. *Shaw: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* 14 (1994): 209-17.
- Shaw, Bernard. (1941). *Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Acts* [M]. London: Penguin Books.
- Short, Mick. (1996). *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose* [M]. London and New York: Longman.
- Stahl, Bernd Carsten, "Whose Discourse? A Comparison of the Foucauldian and Habermasian Concepts of Discourse in Critical IS Research", *Proceedings of the Tenth American Conference on Information System*, New York, 2004: 4329-4336.
- 黃華. (2005). 權力，身體與自我：福柯與女性主義文學批評 [M]. 北京：北京大學出版社.
- 錢俊. (2007). 她們自己的聲音——《都柏林人》的女性話語解讀 [D]. 華中師範大學.
- 張應林. (2006). 語篇分析學 [M]. 武漢，華中師範大學出版社.

THE AUTHORS

Zhang Yan, School of Foreign Languages, Central China Normal University, Wuhan, Hubei, 430079, P.R. China.