

**INTERSECTIONAL OPPRESSIONS THROUGH LANGUAGE: CASE
STUDIES IN RACE, GENDER AND CLASS IN *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*
AND *MY FAIR LADY***

**OPRESIONES INTERSECCIONALES A TRAVÉS DEL LENGUAJE:
ESTUDIOS DE CASO EN RAZA, GÉNERO Y CLASE EN *TO KILL A*
MOCKINGBIRD Y *MY FAIR LADY***

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the impact of many dimensions on language use in Harper Lee's *To kill a mockingbird* and George Cukor's *My fair lady*. Regarding the first one, we distinctly focus on racially charged terminology, further exploring gender and class biases portrayed in the second one. Our methodology involves in-depth discourse analysis and critical examination of linguistic nuances, societal implications and narrative contexts within the works. The main hypothesis is that language acts as both a reflection and a catalyst for societal norms, playing a pivotal role in shaping perceptions, either for inclusivity or exclusion within specific communities.

Keywords: language, discourse, Harper Lee's *To kill a mockingbird*, *My fair lady*.

RESUMEN

Investigamos el impacto de diversas dimensiones en el uso del lenguaje en *To kill a mockingbird*, de Harper Lee y *My fair lady*, de George Cukor. Nos enfocamos en la terminología racialmente cargada de la primera obra y examinamos los sesgos de género y clase en la segunda. Nuestra metodología implica un análisis profundo del discurso y un examen crítico de los matices lingüísticos, las implicaciones sociales y los contextos narrativos dentro de ambas obras. La hipótesis principal considera al lenguaje como reflejo y catalizador de normas sociales, desempeñando un papel fundamental en la formación de percepciones, para inclusión o exclusión en comunidades específicas.

Palabras clave: lenguaje; discurso; *To kill a mockingbird*; Harper Lee; *My fair lady*.

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Initial considerations

Language resonates the multifaceted essence of society, which means the derogatory and prejudicial sides of human possibilities are included. A concept that encapsulates and helps explain how complex and dynamic the linguistic system of communication is is *diglossia*, a term which denotations englobe from the state of being multilingual to the use of different varieties of language for different purposes. Example of this is the ability individuals have in navigating between the so-considered low and high varieties, resorting to distinct strategies for spoken and written communication. Varieties of a language can be studied by areas like Sociolinguistics to comprehend how they are shaped by social and cultural factors, as well as their relationship to other varieties of the same language. The academic interest on the subject has rendered a range of studies showing how low varieties are often associated with speaking, characterized by its flexibility and informal nature, while high-valued varieties tend to be more formal and typically linked with the written sphere.

In this work, our goal is to delve into how political, social, cultural and other dimensions may influence language use and the evolving semantics of certain terms, as racially charged words/expressions in Harper Lee's *To kill a mockingbird*. Additionally, we will explore gender and class-based biases depicted in George Cukor's 1964 film *My fair lady*, an adaptation of Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, highlighting the pivotal role language plays in shaping not only the narrative, but also attitudes that foster either inclusivity or exclusion, such as a mirror reflecting societal norms, prejudices, ideologies *etc.* that ultimately contribute to the fabric of our collective experiences.

Regarding specially the first case (and, of course, our study itself), there should come to notice the debate, for example, on the navigation through the delicate terrain of racial sensitivity in language. That is because, for example, education-academical settings may grapple with the social-political-ethical dilemma of whether to refuse or accept the utterance of racial slurs. While some advocate for the outright banishment of such terms, others acknowledge the complexity of the issue and propose a nuanced approach. The consciousness in detriment of the use racial of slurs is what we believe aligns with a broader discourse on political correctness, that is, without endorsing any kind of erasure. We think acknowledging what had been wrong is crucially necessary

for us as society never to prompt into the same old hurtful and oppressive mistakes again.

Once we have the aim to discuss Lee's *To kill a mockingbird*, it's worth noting recent and controversial cases surrounding the use of n-words. One of those had as its central figure Viggo Mortensen at a screening of his movie *Green Book*. He defended his deliberate use of a racial slur by arguing that he was simply making a point about the casualty and the banality of racism taking place in the period in which the film was set. However, he also admitted he had no right nor plausible reasons to use such a word outside the circumstances of recordings, for example, and that he was truly sorry for the hurt he had provoked. Drawing parallels concerning the exercise of language to express and give expression to marginalized groups, we can say Lee made a rationalized narrative choice in order to depict racist characters, which underscores the power of fiction to touch upon societal issues. Anyways, it's always time to reaffirm: everything that may cause any harm or damage to Others cannot be acceptable. There should never be excuses for prejudices – a deliberation, we will further see, that also goes to Cukor's *My fair lady*.

On the evolution of English varieties

There are a lot of varieties of American English, some of them being the Southern American English and the African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), which not only developed over the slavery period, but also influenced and got influenced by it. A brief historical contextualization might help us better understand both of those. European settlers arrived in the early 17th century and made their way to the South of the USA, establishing colonies that were predominantly English language-oriented. Most English settlers were indentured servants, having to work for a set period of time to pay off their passage to the colonies. However, as the demand for labor increased, planters felt the need to turn to enslaved Africans, who were brought to the South in large numbers throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. Forced to work in the production of various crops, such as tobacco, rice and indigo, enslaved Africans became the economic basis in the foundation of Southern colonies. We can connect all this information to a very interesting passage in Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the world and*

me which matured the idea of *transfiguration* of the blacks, their human condition, into resources and richness:

The birth of a better world is not ultimately up to you, though I know, each day, there are grown men and women who tell you otherwise. The world needs saving precisely because of the actions of these same men and women. [...] You have to make your peace with the chaos, but you cannot lie. You cannot forget how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold (COATES, 2015, p. 71).

Despite the American Revolution, which ended British rule in the colonies, the Constitution acknowledged the institution of slavery. Its statute continued as a central and vivid issue in the United States up to the Civil War (1861-1865), started by the calling from the North colonists to the end of slavery. In this war between the Union (North) and the Confederacy (*i. e.*, the Southern states that withdrew from the Union), the winner was the former, causing slavery to ultimately come to its abolition. Amidst the slavery-free reorganization of the Society, laws were articulated to restrain African-American freedom in the South, having as one of its effects the movement of Segregation (~1883-1968), meaning systemic division(s) of racial categories with long-term consequences. After the Civil War, black people migrated to other areas of the country. Linguistically, this migration could be translated as a merging of the South accent with the way slavers used to speak. The geographic isolation of the black community in ghettos amidst Segregation favored the maintenance of distinct varieties and, consequently, the emergence of even more specific and differentiated collections of dialects.

In connection with the aforementioned, there are contemporary movements through which we can further see the intricacy of language use: the attempts to imbue new meanings into racially charged expressions, like the “n-words”, by the African-Americans. They posit themselves as agents of this linguistic reclamation also because of their deep understanding of its social-historical implications and unfortunate living experiences of them up to nowadays, as we can see again from an excerpt from Coates’ *Between the world and me*: “I knew that these were theories, even in the mouths of black people, that justified the jails springing up around me, that argued for ghettos and projects, that viewed the destruction of the black body as incidental to the

preservation of order” (2015, p. 84). Not confining the conversation into English language, it can be extended to Brazilian Portuguese as well, in the usage of the terms “Preto” and “Negro”, which had different meanings, perceptions and receptions in the course of years in our country. This cross-cultural analysis helps us see the nuanced ways language reflects and shapes social attitudes towards race.

What and who is wrong?

A) Racial linguistic dimensions in *To kill a mockingbird*

To kill a mockingbird is a novel Harper Lee wrote in 1960 that makes the differences in these varieties in American English evident. The story takes place in a fictional city in the South, Maycomb, and the characters speak AAVE, SAE and also GAE (which stands for General American English, a term created by George Phillip Krapp, alternatively called newscaster accent). Having got its features from the West and the Middle States of the U. S., GAE is a linguistic possibility for those who have intention to speak English with a so-called “neutral” accent. Some people employ it to sound formal, like a high-level speaking. To settle a contrast, we can put SAE into spotlight again, as for being more present in rural areas and spoken predominantly by white southerners. Some researchers even refer to it as “White Southern”. The association of SAE – but also AAVE – with negative stereotypes, as ignorance and/or poverty, could lead to discrimination and belittling of the speakers, both in formal and informal settings. This example serves to prove us there is no such thing as neutrality, though.

One may question how the book was perceived right after its launching. It came right in the turn to a tumultuous decade marked by the political activism for the Civil Rights under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. Especially in this field, a topic that may come into the spotlight is the problematics that came as a result of the fact it was a white woman with a toned perspective writing about black people. The temporal context is crucial, as it helps inform why debates on reinforcement of racism by this author may not have been exactly prioritized at that moment. Of course, a literary issue could not compare to the urgency of occurrences such as the new wave of Segregation and the Ku Klux Klan persecution on ethnic groups. In the contemporary landscape, however, the book’s reception has evolved, and it is now viewed through a more critical

lens. A growing awareness of racial matters and a desire to amplify black voices and spaces have led to a reevaluation of literature, notably one like Lee's, portraying an important black character as Tom Robinson without agency and – worse – without any guilt. As an illustration of this, we can name the encouragement movement of reading works by black authors (like the ones in Howard University), showcasing black heroes from a legitimate perspective. This shift reflects a broader societal commitment to dismantling outdated narratives and embracing more inclusive literary canons (that is: refusing also the idea of a general, unique, all-broad and true canon). In consideration of all that, we now turn our eyes to this novel especially because it is a privileged means to analyze and interpret the meanings a white woman author conveyed through language, particularly taking into account racial, but also social, political, economic and educational aspects to each character and their case.

“The fact that I conjugate my verbs and speak in a typical Midwestern newscaster voice – there's no doubt that this helps ease communication between myself and white audiences. And there's no doubt that when I'm with a Black audience, I slip into a slightly different dialect”.

— BARACK OBAMA

As we said and had just witnessed, it is common for people to change the way they speak to adjust to the environment and other factors. This adequation is called *code-switching*. That is what ex-president of the U. S. owned up to doing: adapting one's language to suit the audience. In *To kill a mockingbird*, there are several occasions in which we can spot characters code-switch, needless to say they do it from different backgrounds, for different motives and intentions. Since the book portrays black characters, AAVE is present too. One of them is the housemaid of Finch's family, Calpurnia, recognized for her higher educational status if in comparison to others from her kin; as the narrator observes: “Atticus said Calpurnia had more education than most colored folks” (LEE, 1982, p. 32). She also takes care of the children, Scout and Jem, there having been a part in which she even instructs copies from the Bible. Also pondering that the children's father, Atticus, is a lawyer, a job position of prestige, they happen to receive a more privileged education and to be provided with access to a significantly broader array of linguistic possibilities for navigation. One of the most prominent features in Atticus is his propension to formality, in a way that even his

approach to his children is contaminated by that. Among the familiar activities they do together is his reading the newspaper to them. We should not forget his youngest, Scout, starts the novel as a 6-year-old child:

“I’m afraid our activities would be received with considerable disapprobation by the more learned authorities”. Jem and I were accustomed to our father’s last-will-and-testament diction, and we were at all times free to interrupt Atticus for a translation when it was beyond our understanding. “Huh, sir?” “I never went to school”, he said, “but I have a feeling that if you tell Miss Caroline we read every night she’ll get after me, and I wouldn’t want her after me” (LEE, 1982, p. 42).

He employs legal jargon, to which Scout is familiar with it, as shown by the case in which she responds to her father’s question “Do you know what a compromise is?” with “Bending the law?” (LEE, 1982, p. 41). In instances in which Atticus speaks in a too lawyerly manner – as seen in his statement to Scout “Sometimes it’s better to bend the law a little in special cases. In your case, the law remains rigid. So, to school you must go” (LEE, 1982, p. 40) –, the children request him to come again in a lighter mode. This is made clear in the earlier excerpt where Scout vindicates a “translation”, referring to the usual way a child would grasp the information.

In chapter 12, there is a very interesting manifestation of diglossia, pointing out to the linguistic elaborateness present in the characters’ interactions. Calpurnia takes Scout and Jem to the church she attends. Her congregation is also black, which offers insight into why they use their dialect within the surroundings. Jem is astounded to discover how varieties of the same language can be used under different conditions by the same speaker, that is, that Calpurnia speaks one variety of English with them and another with her own community. Scout also gets surprised by Calpurnia speaking AAVE: “‘They’s my comp’ny,’ said Calpurnia. Again I thought her voice strange: she was talking like the rest of them” (LEE, 1982, p. 158). Over the chapter, Scout confronts Calpurnia about her use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). She does not understand (nor does her brother) why talking like a black person even knowing it is “wrong”:

“Cal,” I asked, “why do you talk niggertalk to the — to your folks when you know it’s not right?”
“Well, in the first place I’m black—”

“That doesn’t mean you hafta talk that way when you know better”, said Jem (LEE, 1982, p. 167).

Hence, we can see how Scout and Jem’s questioning stems from their perception of what they call “colored folks’ talk” as a lesser form of language, one that deviates from the “correct” English that is considered standard, even though it indicates Calpurnia’s adeptness at navigating different linguistic contexts. Their aspiring for Calpurnia to always use what they deem as a finer English (the one spoken at their home) implies a perception of the superiority of the white community’s dialect: “‘But Cal, you know better’, I said” (LEE, 1982, p. 167). The whole interrogation (in other words: the view of AAVE as an incorrect way of speaking) is a reflection not only of a linguistic prejudice that has historically marginalized Black communities, but also of the challenges those individuals often face once they get pressured to conform to the language norms of the dominant white culture. Like any language, AAVE possesses its own distinct grammatical structures and vocabulary, which means it is not simply a “broken” or “incorrect” version of standard English. It is actually the opposite: a rich and complex linguistic proof that communicated cultural and historical experiences of Black Americans. However, code-switching could mean survival, a maneuver for Black people navigating predominantly white spaces. In an act of defiance, Calpurnia refuses to fully bow down to the white, also because she was wary of being perceived among her peers and others as someone who considers herself superior. It can be then concluded that black people speak different languages, what is even emphasized by Scout about Calpurnia: “The idea that she had a separate existence outside our household was a novel one, to say nothing of her having command of two languages” (LEE, 1982, p. 167). So, as in Obama’s quote, Calpurnia code-switches too when she is talking to white folks. What is hinted in Calpurnia’s whole speech is the notion that each language has its significance and designated space of action.

While Calpurnia code-switches from AAVE to SAE and vice-versa, Atticus, stuck on a daily basis with GAE, also demonstrates ability to mobility to SAE. There are situations in which he adapted thematically aiming to make the ones around him comfortable, as in the dinner with Walter Cunningham, seen in: “Atticus greeted Walter and began a discussion about crops neither Jem nor I could follow. [...] While Walter piled food on his plate, he and Atticus talked together like two men, to the wonderment

of Jem and me” (LEE, 1982, p. 32). Atticus does that at court too, as we are going to see in Tom Robinson’s trial in instants.

But, before we go to that, let us just strengthen the notion that everyone speaks differently. We already attested Calpurnia speaks differently from the Finches, but also Jem speaks differently from Atticus, and they both speak differently from Scout. Even Scout speaks one way and writes another, mirroring the duality of her character, as we watch her navigate in the transition from childhood to a more matured understanding of the world. There are times in which her narration presents marks of a more informal use of language: “Maybe he wadn’t mad, maybe he was just crazy” (LEE, 1982, p. 129). There should be brought attention to the gendered-oriented bias Jem exhibits towards Scout, as for her being a young tomboyish girl, what has done also taking into consideration how she speaks: “I was not so sure, but Jem told me I was being a girl, that girls always imagined things, that’s why other people hated them so, and if I started behaving like one I could just go off and find some to play with” (LEE, 1982, p. 54). By that, the narrative also conveys the understanding that languages are constituents to one’s identity, that they have a vital role in defining who they are.

It is interesting the author chose to compose the dialogues with grammatical inaccuracies. Accent is incorporated in the way words are written. And, striving to emphasize the South, some words are written how the characters say them. We can provide examples relying on International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). “Have to” would be written as /‘hæftə/ on IPA according with SAE; and /‘hævtʃu/ according with GAE. So, by spelling “hafta”, readers would understand how some character was pronouncing the words. The novel also presents links of American English varieties to class matters. In the earlier mentioned trail, the woman who is accusing Tom Robinson to have raped her, answers Atticus’ questions as it follows:

“Did you ever go to school?”
“Read’n’write good as Papa yonder”.
Mayella sounded like a Mr. Jingle in a book I had been reading.
“How long did you go to school?”
“Two year – three year – dunno” (LEE, 1982, p. 244).

This scene shows the speech difference between a lawyer and a person who does not have the same education as him. Mayella exhibits linguistic structures that deviate from grammatical conventions, but this does not disturb their dialogue though.

Nevertheless, it established a contrast between their social classes. Atticus adheres to grammatical prescription the whole book, even in informal situations, as we discern in the scene when he is talking to Jem and Scout's friend, Dill:

“What is it, Dill?” asked Atticus.
“Ah – I won ‘em from him,” he said vaguely.
“Won them? How?” (LEE, 1982, p. 73).

Dill reduced the word “them”, Atticus did not. In fact, the only reductions he agrees to are the common ones for the majority of the U. S. speakers, like “they are” to “they’re”. These clues lead us to infer Atticus speaks GAE instead of SAE. This also happens with other characters, such as Atticus’ sister, Alexandra, and Scout’s teacher, Miss Caroline. We should pay attention in this novel to how GAE is associated with high-level education whilst SAE is not.

One characteristic of SAE is the reduction of words or the dropping of letters. For instance, while, in GAE, the general register would be “watching”, in SAE, it would be expressed as “watchin’”. Another feature of theirs is employing “done” as an auxiliary verb to help convey that the action has come to an end: “I’ve done read the book!” – to which GAE speakers could say “I’ve finished reading the book!” (FEAGIN, 1979). There are also many occurrences of “ain’t” as to articulate as a contraction for a list of negatives: am/is/are/have/had not. Linguistic traits like those are frequently observed in the novel’s characters. In Chapter 3, Scout engages into conversation with Calpurnia and answers her as it follows: “Jem’n me ain’t ever in the house unless it’s rainin’” (LEE, 1982, p. 38). Had Scout spoken in GAE, she would have said “Jem and I are never inside unless it’s raining”; however, being a Southern speaker, she employs SAE.

It is also worthy observing how Atticus switches in a tone code, as he does in court. In Tom Robinson’s trial, he interrogated the Ewells (Bob and Mayella), as well as the accused. In the middle of chapter 18, he asks the woman: “You the eldest? The oldest?” (LEE, 1982, p. 244). He first chose “eldest” because it is rightly used to convey the status of being more advanced in age, working specifically in relation to individuals. “Oldest”, on the Other hand, is employed to denote a superior age of other non-human entities. However, using a term like “eldest” in that specific context would be taken as overly formal, considering the impoverished conditions of the Ewells. Also taking into

account Atticus' profession and all the demands implied in his practices (for instance, the need for persuasive communication), code-switching served as a means for him to create a more aligned atmosphere during the altercation. Yet, the downplaying of formality was not just for the sake of adequacy; it was a deliberate strategy to encourage Mayella Ewell to confess the truth. So, we see, he adeptly made use of language to excel in his role as a lawyer, aimed ultimately to expose the Ewells as dishonest.

As we pointed, the Ewells are a poor family of farmers that reside close to the Black neighborhood, leading to a linguistic resemblance among them all. No wonder that Mayella manages to deceive Tom Robinson into entering her house. Tom, for instance, uses a distinct third-person form of speech: "I picks for Mr. Link Deas. [...] No suh, [...] I works pretty steady for him all year round; he's got a lot of pecan trees'n things" (LEE, 1982, p. 255). This linguistic pattern serves as an indicator of economic hardship but also as a class feature, since it shows that, apart from race matters, people may present such characteristics if they find themselves in impoverished circumstances. Mr. Ewell expresses an economic condition akin to Tom's through language: "I holds with Tate" (LEE, 1982, p. 236). Even so, not being constricted to the class-related linguistic aspect, and also despite the Ewells' even worse struggles if compared to Tom's, the formers persistently resort to slurs in attempts to assert their racial superiority over him; the father said: "I seen that black nigger yonder ruttin' on my Mayella!" (LEE, 1982, p. 231). Even though Tom gets constantly offended and accused, he consistently refrains from showing any kind of disrespect towards Mayella, as, for example, never ceasing to call her "Miss"; he states: "I said somethin' like, why Miss Mayella, that's right smart o'you to treat 'em" (LEE, 1982, p. 258).

Also having to do with ethics, Tom Robinson had been called as "boy" for times, which is also a mark of disrespect and racism, as we can see from this passage: "I just want the whole lot of you to know one thing right now. That boy's worked for me eight years an' I ain't had a speck o'trouble outa him. Not a speck" (LEE, 1982, p. 261). While the term "boy" would be chosen without much consideration to refer to a small child, its connotations shift significantly if applied to an adult black man. That is because, throughout History, white people have appropriated the word "boy" to consistently undermine black men's equality. In general sense, black people were wrongfully believed to be less than fully human. They were seen as mentally, physically

and spiritually inferior to white people, both before, during and after the period of enslavement. So, calling black men “boys” reflected racist beliefs that were common in the past, but unfortunately survived up to nowadays. That is why we still see it in a work like *To kill a mockingbird*. Due to systemic biases in society, we witness a very plausible episode like the condemnation of Tom Robinson in the novel, even though he had done nothing wrong at all but be solicitous and gentle. Not surprisingly, in the 21st century, a case like George Floyd’s resulting in his horrible death unfolded in a so institutionally naturalized way. Education did not translate exactly into progress, as many had wished and hoped. We are not free from the plague of discrimination. And that is why, as great as Atticus had been as a lawyer and proved unequivocally that the Ewells were liars, his excellence could never prevail if, to prove the innocence of a black person, it was required to attest to the guilt of white ones. That was then, but it is still now. That is racism.

Gender and class linguistic dimensions in *My fair lady*

It is crucial to keep in mind that discourses are the manifestation of language in social action. Let us introduce this section by emphatically stating that the identification of the linguistic varieties considered by many as inferior is motivated by a value judgment made based on the variety perceived to be the norm, used in educational and cultural contexts, as well as the varieties that go against the standard forms are marginalized. This notion is very present in *My fair lady*, a film helmed by director George Cukor as an adaptation of Bernard Shaw’s play *Pygmalion*. This is due to the fact the protagonist, Eliza Doolittle, has her dialect, known as Cockney, judged by Professor Higgins because it is different from the high-status variety spoken by him.

As previously highlighted during our examination of Lee’s *To kill a mockingbird*, in general, speakers tend to believe that all speech forms which cannot be understood as “the most proper” and “correct” ones are lower varieties; they find them unpleasant, as if they sound bad to the ears. These non-prestigious dialects are found in the spaces considered not the center of economy and power. Audrey Hepburn’s portrayal in the first scene of the picture is proof of this viewpoint since to demonstrate for the audience how dreadful the dialect spoken by Eliza is, her acting is permeated with an uncomfortable screaming. Trudgill and Giles add to the discussion affirming

that the “[...] standard dialects and prestige accents acquire their high status directly from the high-status social groups that happen to speak them, and it is because of their high status that they are perceived as ‘good’ and therefore ‘pleasant’” (*apud* PINTO, 2010, p. 73). In *My fair lady*, it is notable that linguistic variation is what highlights the hierarchy present between the characters and the relations of power between them; the speech forms are utilized as markers of class and to consider Eliza’s dialect as substandard is surely a prejudicial view.

Elaborating on the historical context, geographical and linguistic associations of the Cockney dialect in London, we comprehend that economic change and industrialization, in the 19th century, caused new social classes to arise in the capital of England which altered the geographical distribution present there before. Cockney developed in this context, once it was the dialect spoken, customarily in the East End, by London’s working class, thus becoming associated with lower-level education and social classes. Blake delves into Cockney’s stigmatization as a “vulgar” language, affirming that:

Almost overnight Cockney became the principal vulgar language [...]. In many ways this is not surprising since it contrasts readily with the standard and since it was probably better known to the average author and reader than any regional dialect [...]. In the second half of the eighteenth century, comments on vulgar London pronunciations begin to appear with increasing frequency in grammars and other works on language. The effect of these grammatical works was to make Cockney better known and hence to be accepted as the epitome of bad usage (BLAKE, 1981, p. 118 *apud* GÖRLACH, 1999, pp. 511-512).

For a long time, Cockney’s portrayal in literature and media had been for comedic purposes, something very noticeable in scenes from the movie in question such as the attempt of showering Eliza, in which her reception is much exaggerated and apparently an effort of provoking humor in the audience. The representation *My fair lady* creates of the Cockney dialect in association with the comedy intended to have as source Eliza’s speech form is an example of how media helps to perpetuate language stereotypes.

However, we can also perceive in the movie how oppression functions in the context of language, more specifically in terms of class and gender, as can be viewed in the actions of the character Professor Higgins over Eliza Doolittle. Higgins is constantly humiliating Eliza because of her dialect or simply because of her womanhood, as

noticed in the song “A hymn to him”. Higgins intended, because of a bet, to change Eliza through language, an endeavor he successfully finished. Unfortunately, it is the fact that Eliza actually did have to change her speech form so she could have better opportunities in life, since, as stated before, a prejudice over language persisted in that society and still does.

The movie has then detailed scenes depicting Eliza’s linguistic lessons imposed by Higgins on her in his attempt to transform Doolittle’s dialect from Cockney to the most prestigious dialect in British society, the “Received Pronunciation” (RP), with “receive” being, as stated by Trudgill and Hughes, the “nineteenth-century sense of ‘accepted in the best society’” (*apud* PINTO, 2010, p. 72). Initially, he teaches her how she must pronounce the vowels, which Eliza can never get right. Higgins, because of that, mistreats her. Subsequently, Eliza performed the song called “Just you wait, ‘Enry ‘Iggins”, in which she manifested a phenomenon that is very common in the Cockney dialect. Designated as “H-dropping”, its speakers omit the ‘h’ (the voiceless glottal fricative) at the beginning of words, which is perceived with stigmatization by users of varieties considered as of “high” value.

Another attempt done by Higgins to teach Eliza is the use of the xylophone to show her how she should rise and fall in terms of pitch and intonation. All of those efforts fail leading to a song named “Poor Professor Higgins”, in which his servants sing to him stating that Higgins must give up on Eliza, since she is impossible to be taught. The lower-class woman is held responsible for Higgins’ inability of being a good teacher, therefore, seen as “poor” by others.

The transformation in Eliza’s speech form happens through a song and she is ready to be tested among Higgins’ peers. To them, Eliza tells a random story about her family, but even though well-articulated, the content of the speech is seen with humor. She had lost all spontaneity not expected from a duchess, however, the fact that the content of the conversation was perceived as funny is not ideal, since, as someone trying to pass as a woman from the higher society, she should not be comical.

We can observe that there is a social pressure for linguistic conformity and expectations of behavior alongside language use. In other words, we come to the understanding that, to live as a woman in this society, more than use of a language considered superior, it is also necessary that one’s conduct conforms to the expected. It

is also worth noting Higgins' double standards in his fascination with foreign languages varieties, when, in the beginning of the movie, he is pleased by Pickering's work with Indian dialects, in opposition to his disdain for the variations of his own language. Ultimately, we are aware that Higgins' interest is not in Eliza herself, but in what he can achieve through her transformation.

Final considerations

As our last saying, we must recognize the power of language as a tool for shaping and reflecting societal values. The intricate link of language and society can be better understood by taking into account the interplay among diglossia, the political implications of language use and evolving perceptions in many realms, like literature and cinema, as seen through the analyses of Lee's *To kill a mockingbird* and Cukor's *My fair lady*. Having entered the complexities of racial, gender and class-oriented discourses, it becomes even more evident to us how language, both a reflection and shaper of social norms, plays a pivotal role whether in fostering a more inclusive and equitable world or making an even worse nightmare come true.

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