

1 **REMEMBER YOUNGER BROTHERS**

by Du Fu

Not a single soul around while sentries beat drums,  
A lone swan cries somewhere at the autumn boundary;  
Commencing tonight dews are supposed to turn white,  
The moon at home must be very much brighter by now;  
All my younger brothers thus far are still missing,  
After homeless I can't tell they are dead or alive;  
All the letters I sent home were found undelivered,  
What else can I do when no truce is still in sight?

2 **AN UNTITLED POEM**

by Li Shang Yin

'Tis excitedly unbearable to meet as well as to depart,  
Easterly wind weakens while all kinds of flowers faded;  
Spring silk worm died after it ended fibre productions,  
A candle turns to ashes when shedding of tears dries up;  
Looking at morning mirror I worry my temple is changed,  
Humming verse at night moonlight appeared to be chilly;  
As the legendary Mount Penglai isn't far from my place,  
I asked the blue bird to convey you my kindest regards.

3 **MEETING AT NIGHT**

by Robert Browning

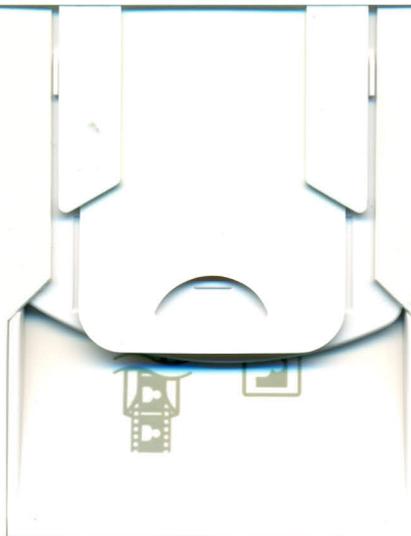
The grey sea and the long black land;  
And the yellow half-moon large and low;  
And the startled little waves that leap  
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,  
As I gain the cove with pushing prow,  
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;  
Three fields to cross till a farm appears;  
A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch  
And blue spurt of a lighted match,  
And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears,  
Than the two hearts beating each to each!

4 **METAPHORS**

by Sylvia Plath

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,  
An elephant, a ponderous house,  
A melon strolling on two tendrils.  
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!  
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.  
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.  
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.  
I've eaten a bag of green apples,  
Boarded a train there's no getting off.



PYGMALION: FROM GREEK LEGEND TO *MY FAIR LADY*

Tony T.N. Hung

**Abstract**

Besides being one of the most popular plays and musicals of all time, Shaw's *Pygmalion* and its musical offshoot *My Fair Lady* will always hold a special fascination for teachers and linguists, in particular teachers of phonetics. Is it really possible to transform a common flower girl into a princess merely (or mainly) by changing her pronunciation? And is every successful teacher essentially a kind of Pygmalion figure, creating a new being out of lifeless stone and shaping it in his own way? The present paper traces the development of the Pygmalion legend from its classical origins to its ultimate transformation in *Pygmalion* (1912) and *My Fair Lady* (1956), which have in turn spawned plays and musicals in other languages, including Cantonese (*Yaotiao Shunu*). Various linguistic, sociolinguistic and educational issues thrown up by these modern-day versions – including how pronunciation is taught, the phonological features of different accents, the role of accent in defining a person's social class, linguistic prejudice, and the relationship between teacher and pupil—are touched on.

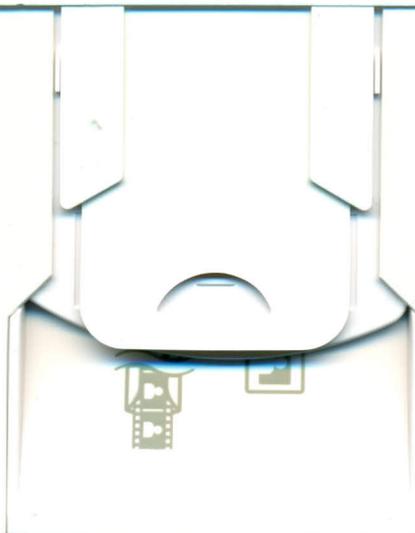
**1. Introduction**

Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, and its musical offshoot *My Fair Lady*, are among the most enduring and endearing dramatic/musical works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and their popularity continues unabated into the 21<sup>st</sup>. Apart from their intrinsic dramatic and musical quality, part of their perennial appeal is surely due to the universal theme of metamorphosis which underlies their plots and characters. More even than in Shaw's time, we live in an age of upward mobility and image consciousness. Individuals are no longer pre-destined to a particular station in life, and transformations are the order of the day. Truck drivers may be transformed into film stars and pop idols, and film stars into politicians and even presidents; there are seemingly no limits to how far a person can be "made over," not only in matters of speech, but in every physical, social and cultural aspect.

For linguists and language teachers, what is even more interesting is the extent to which the linguistic consciousness manifested in Shaw's play has taken on a more complex character in our day and age. In the last century, the standardisation of dominant languages has proceeded apace, along with the stigmatisation of what is perceived (by the privileged classes) as "non-standard." In English, RP (or BBC English) attained an unprecedented prestige and status in many parts of the world which is only now beginning to show signs of decline, while in Chinese, Mandarin was declared the "common language" (or *Putonghua*) for all Chinese, with the Beijing accent assuming the status of a prestige pronunciation, against which other accents of *Putonghua* are measured (to their disadvantage naturally).

Issues of language and power, and the survival of "non-standard" languages or dialects, have come much more to the fore since Shaw's time. In places like Singapore, it took the form of the suppression of the other Chinese dialects, such as Cantonese and Hokkien, in favour of Mandarin ("Speak more Mandarin, less dialects" used to be the slogan of the day), the rationale—which was totally fallacious—being that Mandarin was the "mother tongue" of all ethnic Chinese.<sup>1</sup> As for English, it has (since Shaw's time) developed into a *de facto* world language, and in the process sprouted many "new varieties" of English (Singaporean, Malaysian, Indian, etc.). One cannot help but wonder what Shaw — who was so scathing about Cockney and other regional/social accents within Britain — would have made of them?

At a personal level, Shaw's play also raises questions about the relationship between teacher and student which are even more relevant today, with our concerns about teacher-centred vs. student-centred approaches to teaching, and the teacher as "creator" vs. the teacher as "facilitator" of learning.



In the present paper, I shall briefly trace the development of the Pygmalion legend from its classical origins to its ultimate metamorphosis in the form of *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*, and its adaptation into a totally different language and culture, namely Cantonese. Along the way, some of the linguistic, sociolinguistic and educational issues thrown up by the play will be discussed.

## 2. Pygmalion through the ages

The hero of Shaw's play takes his name from a Greek legend which had its most famous retelling in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Pygmalion was a sculptor in ancient Cyprus who remained a bachelor because of his distaste for women:

*Pygmalion* had seen them, spending their lives in wickedness, and, offended by the failings that nature gave the female heart, he lived as a bachelor, without a wife or partner for his bed.

Here are the unequivocal origins of Professor Higgins' notorious misogyny (especially the Higgins of *My Fair Lady* – with his "Let a woman in your life" and "Why can't a woman be more like a man"). Ovid continues:

But, with wonderful skill, he carved a figure, brilliantly, out of snow-white ivory, no mortal woman, and fell in love with his own creation.

No less exquisite is the transformed Eliza Doolittle, created by Higgins out of "squashed cabbage leaf"; and Higgins, in spite of himself, falls in love with his own creation in *My Fair Lady* ("I've grown accustomed to her face").

He dresses the body, also, in clothing; places rings on the fingers; places a long necklace round its neck; pearls hang from the ears...

This has an ironic parallel in Shaw's play, where Higgins and Pickering can hardly keep their enthusiasm down: "We're always talking Eliza, teaching Eliza, dressing Eliza", which prompts Mrs. Higgins to chide them: "You're two babies playing with their doll!"

The day of *Venus's* festival came... Pygmalion stood by the altar, and said, shyly: "If you can grant all things, you gods, I wish as a bride to have..." and not daring to say "the girl of ivory" he said "one like my ivory girl." Golden Venus knew what the prayer meant, and as a sign of the gods' fondness for him, the flame flared three times...

When he returned, he sought out the image of his girl, and leaning over the couch, kissed her. She felt warm.... It was flesh! ... The girl felt the kisses he gave, blushed, and, raising her bashful eyes to the light, saw both her lover and the sky. The goddess attended the marriage that she had brought about, and when the moon's horns had nine times met at the full, the woman bore a son.

Note that, in these early versions of the legend, Galatea made an adoring and submissive wife, a tradition which persisted long into later recreations of the legend in various art forms.

■ *Though not as well-known as Prometheus or Orpheus and Eurydice, Pygmalion has been a fairly popular subject for artists since Ovid's time, especially in the last three or four centuries. There were notable series of paintings by Jean-Léon Gérôme (French, 1824-1904) and Edward Burne-Jones (British, 1833-1898), both of whom were particularly fond of recreating ancient legends. For some reason, Pygmalion was a particular favourite of ballet composers – the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Ballet lists no fewer than a dozen such ballets.*

Perhaps there is some special fascination about watching a dancer remain frozen throughout the first half of the ballet and then slowly come to life in the second half?

Of these ballets, only Rameau's *Pygmalion* (actually an opera-ballet, with singing in the first half and dancing in the second) has remained popular to this day.

Written in 1748, it follows Ovid's legend fairly closely, and perpetuates the image of Galatea as an adoring, submissive wife. The scene of her awakening says it all:

- Heavens! What thing is this? My soul is captivated;  
to see him fills me with sweetest delight.
- Ah! I sense that the gods who give me life  
do so for you alone...
- My dearest wish is to please you.
- I shall obey your command for ever.

It took the light-hearted frivolity of Viennese operetta to finally turn this mindless statue-turned-human stereotype upside down. Franz von Suppe's *Die Schoene Galathee* (*The Beautiful Galatea* – note who has now become the protagonist) presents us with a Galatea with a mind and will of her own. In more ways than one, this 1865 operetta is a precursor of *My Fair Lady*. As a musical genre, Viennese operetta is a direct ancestor of the modern musical, with its combination of arias or musical numbers and spoken dialogue, and its generally comic, entertaining character. But it is in the “new” Galatea that Suppe's operetta really makes its mark. Far from the obedient, adoring statue-woman of Ovid and Rameau, this Galatea promptly decides that Pygmalion is too old and unattractive for her, and flirts with his handsome young assistant Ganymede instead, meanwhile demanding gifts from a rich suitor, Midas; in the end Pygmalion implores Venus to transform her back into stone. Though infinitely more frivolous than Eliza Doolittle, Suppe's Galatea foreshadows her—a Galatea with a personality, and her own likes and dislikes rather than a pre-ordained love for her creator (compare Galatea's opening aria, “feeling, so warm, so sweet”, with Eliza's “warm face warm hands warm feet—ah wouldn't it be lovely”). Even the title “The Beautiful Galatea” seems to anticipate “My Fair Lady”.

In England, until the appearance of Shaw's play, the Pygmalion legend had not made much of a mark on English literature. The legend was retold by (among others) the 17<sup>th</sup> century poet and dramatist John Marston and the 19<sup>th</sup> century poet and painter William Morris, and was the subject of W.S. Gilbert's comic play *Pygmalion and Galatea*. But by and large, had it not been for Shaw, the name Pygmalion could have passed unnoticed in the annals of English literature.

### 3. Shaw's *Pygmalion*

By far the most brilliant transformation of the Pygmalion legend in any language or medium, Shaw's 1912 play gives the main elements of the legend a modern twist. The protagonist, Professor Henry Higgins, is a Pygmalion-like figure who “creates” Eliza from trash (“squashed cabbage leaf, draggletailed guttersnipe”), and transforms her into an exquisitely beautiful creature that he (in his own way) falls in love with. It must have amused Shaw, who was incurably anti-romantic, to subvert the traditional ending and make Eliza marry her clueless suitor Freddie instead of her “creator”. This marks a major departure from tradition (anticipated in Suppe's *The Beautiful Galatea*), where Eliza develops a mind of her own and rebels against her creator. A lifelong supporter of women's rights, Shaw must have felt more than a tinge of satisfaction in making Higgins a rabid misogynist and having Eliza stand up for herself against his tyranny in such a way as to win his admiration in the end.

Shaw was even more of an incurable didactic than an anti-romantic, and he makes no apologies for it in his Preface:

It [*Pygmalion*] is so intensely and deliberately didactic, and its subject is esteemed so dry, that I delight in throwing it at the heads of the wiseacres who repeat the parrot cry that art should never be didactic. It goes to prove my contention that great art can never be anything else.

Like almost everything else that Shaw said, this has to be taken with a grain of salt: the fact that great art can be didactic does not mean (of course) that all great art *must* be.

In *Pygmalion*, the main object of Shaw's didacticism is the deplorable speech habits of the English:

The English have no respect for their language, and will not teach their children to speak it.... It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth without making some other Englishman despise him.

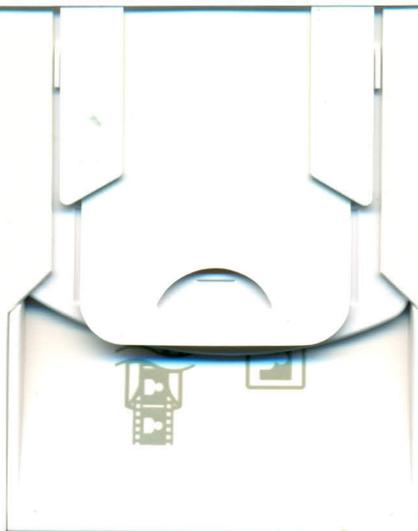
The chief target of his scorn is the Cockney dialect—the dialect of the working class in London in Shaw's day, and even till this day (though diluted by greater social and geographical mobility). But it is not just Cockney, but sloppy speech habits in general, that Shaw deplors. The so-called upper-class characters in the play who say "Ah-de-doo" for "How do you do" are also derided.

Somewhat surprisingly, Shaw blames this state of affairs on the English alphabet:

They have nothing to spell it with but an old foreign alphabet... Consequently no man can teach himself what it should sound like from reading it... German and Spanish are accessible to foreigners: English is not accessible even to Englishmen. The reformer we need most today is an energetic phonetic enthusiast: that is why I have made such a one the hero of a popular play.

Granted that English spelling is one of the least consistent and accurate representations of pronunciation among European languages, Shaw seems to have overlooked the fact that native speakers of a language acquire their phonological patterns well before they acquire the writing system, and (therefore) that spelling cannot have that much influence on a native speaker's accent, though it would (of course) make the learning of English as a second language somewhat easier.

Though Shaw was obviously no linguist (and in any case linguistics was only in its infancy in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century), he evidently had some practical knowledge of phonetics (perhaps through his association with Henry Sweet, the pioneering British phonetician who was the model for Henry Higgins), and a fairly good understanding of the Cockney dialect. In this respect, he was well ahead of other writers who had tried to portray Cockney in their works, particularly Charles Dickens. As Wells (1982) has pointed out, Dickens' representation of Cockney was based on seriously out-dated stereotypes even for his time, e.g. in the alleged interchange of [v] and [w] ("I may trust you as vell as if it was my own self... So I've only this here one little bit of advice to give you"—*Pickwick Papers*). Shaw at least made good use of some genuine phonological features of Cockney, such as the shifted diphthongs (e.g. [ei] -> [ai], with *day* sounding like *die*)<sup>2</sup>, glottal stop insertion (e.g. *little* with a glottal stop in place of [t]), and h-dropping ('Enry 'Iggins for Henry Higgins). As for Higgins' Shaw's personal prejudice against Cockney speech is apparent at every turn, as when prowess as a phonetician who is able to tell, from just a few words uttered by someone, which part of London they come from ("sometimes within two streets"), this is surely something of an exaggeration, at least for today. According to Wells (1982), it is not known that there are any geographical differences within London English, other than the broad difference between (what he calls) "general Cockney" and "popular London", which is not geographically defined.



Higgins says of Eliza that "A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere, no right to live". Linguistic prejudice of this kind does not really stand up to close scrutiny. Is Cockney inherently more "ugly" than RP? Shaw, or at least Higgins, evidently thinks so, when he scoffs (in *My Fair Lady*) at a Cockney bystander who said "What do you take ([taik]) me for, a fool?", commenting that "No one taught him [teik] instead of [taik]". Is [taik] inherently uglier than [teik]? When a Cockney pronounces the word *take* as [taik], it is supposed to be ugly, but when an RP-speaker pronounces the word *tyke* as [taik], then it is beautiful—even though the sounds are essentially the same! It is basically a question of one's prejudices and preconceptions.

With his prejudice against Cockney, one could only shudder to think what Shaw would have to say about the "new varieties" of English that have sprung up all over the world since his time – Singaporean, Malaysian, Hong Kong English etc. (cf. Kachru, 1992; Hung, 1995 & 2000; Brown, et al., 2000, etc.). One doubts very much that he would come to accept them as legitimate dialects of English, with their own systematic linguistic features, rather than as a corruption of "good English". Shaw's views on language would, in other words, be very much of an anachronism in the world today, as much as those of Higgins' latter-day "disciples", such as John Honey.<sup>3</sup> The real issue today is not how much a given variety of English conforms to some perceived norm (such as British RP), or how some native speakers might react to it, but how *internationally intelligible* it is (cf. Jenkins, 2000; Hung, 2002). And given that English is no longer the exclusive property of a few traditional English-speaking countries, but has become a *bona fide* world language, it is spoken even more by second-language speakers in the world today than by "native" speakers (cf. Graddol, 1997; Crystal, 1997). For that reason, the real yardstick for "international intelligibility" no longer rests with "native speakers" alone (be they speakers of RP or General American or whatever), but with a cross section of international users of English today, such as the sample reported in Smith and Rafiqzad's well-known experiment (cf. Smith & Rafiqzad, 1979).

Though Shaw has made a phonetician the hero of his play, and much of Eliza's transformation is wrought through phonetics, it is apparent, even during the course of the play itself, that the importance of pronunciation in defining a person's social class is greatly exaggerated. Other qualities soon emerge as being equally important, including a command of the proper vocabulary and discourse, not to mention manners and poise. This is brought home forcibly and amusingly in Act III of *Pygmalion*, during Mrs Higgins' tea party, where Eliza—now speaking perfect RP—makes a spectacle of herself with such startling anecdotes as to how her aunt died, and choice phrases like "Them as pinched it, done her in", all impeccably enunciated. But Shaw is certainly correct about the need to learn pronunciation scientifically. As he says in the Preface:

Finally, and for the encouragement of people troubled with accents that cut them off from all high employment, I may add that the change wrought by Professor Higgins in the flower girl is neither impossible nor uncommon... But the thing has to be done scientifically, or the last state of the aspirant may be worse than the first. An honest and natural slum dialect is more tolerable than the attempt of a phonetically untaught person to imitate the plutocracy.

Radio and TV announcers in places like Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong should take note. Some of them have ruined what might otherwise have been passable and honest Singaporean, Malaysian or Hong Kong English accents with misguided—and often unintentionally comical—attempts to imitate British RP.

How does Higgins—for all his brilliant success in the experiment of teaching Eliza to speak properly—measure up as a teacher? Quite simply, he is the very antithesis of all that modern education stands for, especially with regard to teaching students how to learn and think for themselves. Higgins boasts that there is not a single idea or word in Eliza's head which he has not put there, and that there is "no need to explain—drilling is what she needs." He scoffs at the idea that a successful learner can assume a life of her own. Yet, to his partial credit at least, Eliza's independent spirit ultimately wins his respect—no longer a "millstone round my neck" but a "consort battleship".

One does not have to be a die-hard romantic to find Shaw's anti-romantic ending to *Pygmalion* (as given in the "Postlude" to the play) highly unsatisfactory. After all, in spite of its aspirations to realism, the play is infused with elements of mythology (the Pygmalion legend) and fairy tale (Cinderella), which partly accounts for its perennial appeal. The ultimate irony is that, in the end, Shaw's characters take on a life of *their* own, somewhat differently from what he may have intended. Surely, the "real" transformed Eliza would have found the feeble-minded Freddie much less appealing than the intellectual Higgins?

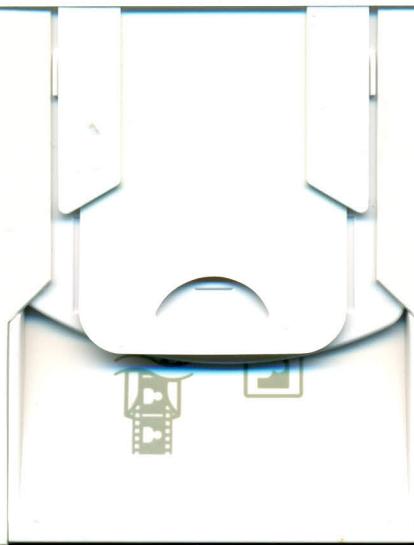
#### 4. *Pygmalion* the movie

*Pygmalion* was made into a black-and-white movie in 1938, directed by Anthony Asquith and boasting a well-nigh perfect cast in Leslie Howard and Wendy Hiller. Rather surprisingly, Shaw agreed to write the screenplay—in fact, he won an Academy Award for his effort! In some ways, the screen version is an improvement on the original—not least in the new romantic ending, where Eliza returns to Higgins, with his immortal closing line, "Where the devil are my slippers, Eliza?" The changed ending was actually made without Shaw's consent, though one would like to think that he might have been secretly pleased with it. The screenplay also filled a large gap in the original—i.e. Eliza's speech lessons, which are so crucial a part of her transformation. This opened up a golden opportunity to introduce brief and entertaining scenes of Eliza's (and Higgins') ordeal—with Eliza mumbling with marbles in her mouth and swallowing one of them, and Higgins nonchalantly assuring her, "Don't worry, we have plenty more!", and so on. All these original ideas, including the immortal line "The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain", and the romantic ending, with Eliza returning to a despondent Higgins as he listens to a recording of her voice, were later appropriated by *My Fair Lady* (hereafter *MFL*)—without due acknowledgement (!). Incidentally, in the *Pygmalion* movie, Eliza's improvements are shown to be gradual, which is far more convincing and realistic than her sudden and miraculous breakthrough in *MFL*.

The most remarkable achievement of the *Pygmalion* movie was the incomparable performance by Wendy Hiller as Eliza, whose portrayal was streets ahead of Audrey Hepburn's in the much better-known movie of *MFL*. Perhaps the most succinct way of putting it is that Hiller is a flower girl trying to pass herself off as a princess, while Hepburn is a princess trying to pass herself off as a flower girl. Leslie Howard's performance as Higgins is also more human than Harrison's, which makes the romantic ending seem more credible.

#### 5. *My Fair Lady*

*My Fair Lady*, Lerner and Loewe's 1956 musical adaptation of Shaw's play, is one of the most brilliant fusions of drama, lyrics and music in the history of the theatre. The music allows the characters to portray their feelings in a far more disarming way than is possible with any spoken dialogue, and makes the audience suspend their disbelief and tolerate (without so much as raising an eyebrow) what would otherwise seem like outrageous excesses. Thus, Higgins easily gets away with his unfashionable linguistic prejudices ("the Scotch and the Irish leave you close to tears, there even are places where English completely disappears—well in America they haven't used it for years!") and his rabid male chauvinism ("Why can't a woman be more like a man? Straightening out their hair is all they ever do, why don't they straighten out the mess that's inside"), while Eliza and Freddie give



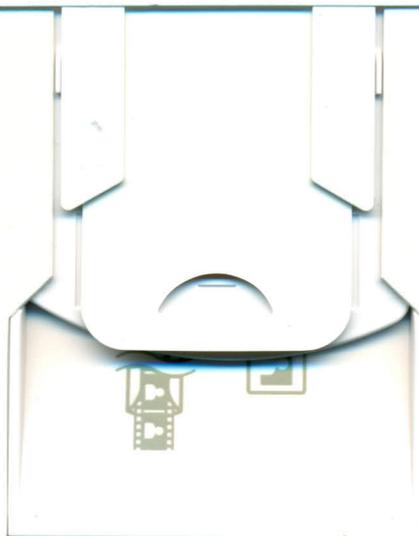
eloquent voice to their innermost feelings ("I could have danced all night", "On the street where you live") in a way that would sound embarrassingly sentimental if spoken. In this respect, *MFL* starts off with an enormous advantage over its original, and its greater popularity is thus not at all surprising.

Most readers today will have become familiar with *MFL* through the 1965 movie version. Many of its ideas (the phonetic lessons, the romantic ending, etc.) can be traced back to the 1938 film of *Pygmalion*, but it also has a number of brilliant touches of its own—none more than Eliza's first "test", which, instead of being held in Mrs Higgins' drawing room, takes place at the Ascot races, with an excited Eliza forgetting herself and letting out a blood-curdling "Come on Dover, move your blooming arse!" And at the end, Higgins' rage melts into nostalgic regret, to the poignant tune of "I've grown accustomed to her face". The star of *MFL* is undoubtedly Rex Harrison's imperious and inimitable Higgins. Audrey Hepburn's Eliza undoubtedly had her highlight in the embassy ball scene, where her ethereal grace and beauty was very much in keeping with the fairy tale character of that scene, and made Eliza's sensational triumph all the more believable.

Shaw (wisely) tells us very little about Eliza's phonetic lessons in his original play. The *Pygmalion* movie expands on them in a rather low-key manner, but here *MFL* really goes to town, with Higgins cajoling and haranguing Eliza until she fantasises about having him shot ("Just you wait 'Enry 'liggins"). For all its entertainment value, modern teachers of phonetics would not be too impressed by Higgins' teaching methods in the movie. He spends an inordinate amount of time forcing Eliza to recite the alphabet – an exercise in triviality surely? The sound system of a language is not made up of its letters, but of phonemes, i.e. distinctive or contrastive sound units, such as [i:] and [u:], and not names of letters like 'E' and 'U'. A modern teacher would have trained Eliza in articulating the phonemes and allophones (phonetically different variants of the same phoneme), as well as the syllable types, of standard English. In fact, syllables rather than sounds are the "building blocks" of speech, and many of the difficulties experienced by learners are connected with syllables rather than individual sounds as such. For example, the difficulty in pronouncing the final [m] in words like *some* and *time*, commonly observed among many Chinese learners (especially native speakers of Mandarin or Foochow), has nothing to do with any inherent difficulty in articulating the sound [m] itself (which they produce effortlessly in words like *man* and *mate*), but with its occurrence in syllable-final position (cf. Hung, 1993). The modern teacher would also not be relying so much on mere imitation alone, as Higgins apparently does, but on a range of teaching aids, including multimedia resources such as animated graphics demonstrating the movements of the vocal organs (cf. Hung, 2001). The fact is that imitation is greatly constrained by perception, and there is evidence that learners who are unable to produce certain phonetic distinctions are also unlikely to be able to perceive them.<sup>4</sup>

#### 6. *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady* transplanted

The theme of Shaw's *Pygmalion* (and by extension *My Fair Lady*) is so universal—not only metamorphosis, but linguistic variety and prejudice—and its plot so brilliant, that it has (not surprisingly) been adapted into several different languages. Even in the same language (English), one could easily imagine it being transplanted to a place like Singapore, where the government and educators are constantly berating its people for the way they speak English (Singlish). So much so, that Shaw's original preface could perhaps be modified to read: "Singaporeans have no respect for the English language, and will not teach their children to speak it properly... It is impossible for a Singaporean to open his mouth without making some other Singaporean despise him."<sup>5</sup>



It is an interesting challenge to adapt *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady* (hereafter *P&M*) into another language, because it is a play which cannot simply be “translated” in a strict sense, but demands to be transplanted into a different linguistic, social and cultural setting. A mere translation of *P&M* would hardly make any sense at all: imagine for a moment a dialogue such as the following (from Act I of *Pygmalion*) in Chinese or Malay:

*Clara*: I shall get pneumownia if I stay in this draught any longer.

*Higgins*: Earlscourt.

*Clara*: Will you please keep your impertinent remarks to yourself?

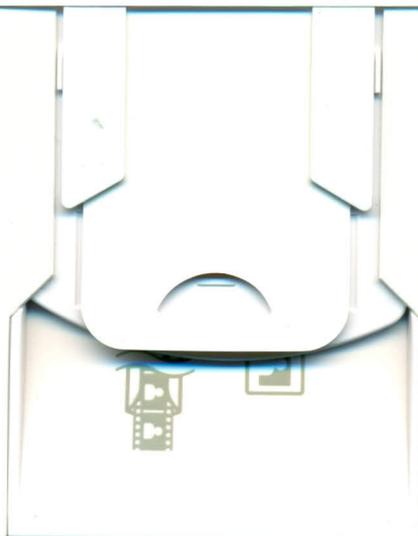
In the original, Clara’s pronunciation of *pneumonia* (which Shaw represents as “pneumownia”) gives her origins away, as someone who has grown up in Earlscourt, a not too fashionable part of London—hence her violent reaction to being identified as such. But this exchange would be utterly meaningless in Chinese or Malay (or any other language), as would many other parts of the play.

A recent adaptation which has attained some popularity is the Cantonese version of *MFL* (entitled *Yaotiao Shunu*, hereafter *YTSN*), which is set in colonial Hong Kong. Higgins is now a “Professor Tam” from the University of Hong Kong, and Eliza is “Toh Lan Heung”, a flower girl who speaks a provincial dialect of Cantonese called Toisan, while Pickering is “Dr. Ma”, a Cantonese-speaking academic from Malaysia. [For the sake of convenience, I shall continue to refer to them as Higgins, Eliza and Pickering respectively even in the Cantonese version.]

One interesting and crucial difference between the linguistic situations in Hong Kong and London which *YTSN* has to take into account is the status and phonological features of Hong Kong Cantonese (HKC). Unlike English in London, HKC does not reveal any social distinctions as far as the phonology is concerned, and there is nothing like the RP or “Estuary English” vs. Cockney divide. Purely on pronunciation alone, one cannot distinguish between the speech of an “upper class” from that of a “lower class” Hongkonger, and the differences between them lie in their lexical, discursal and paralinguistic rather than phonological features. Thus, a “lower class” person might use a lot more expletives and slang and a lot less “educated” expressions and idioms, and speak with a louder and coarser voice, than an “upper class” person, but there are no systematic phonological differences such as those that distinguish a Cockney’s pronunciation of words like *rain*, *right*, *little*, *think*, *heat*, etc. from an RP speaker’s.

The writer of *YTSN* has rightly resorted to a different parameter of linguistic variation, namely regional dialects—not only Cantonese dialects like Toisan, but other Chinese dialects like Teochew and Hakka. With an extraordinarily high proportion of its population originating from other parts of China, Hong Kong is a melting pot of Chinese dialects, where one can constantly hear Cantonese spoken with all sorts of regional accents. Even among “native” Cantonese speakers, there are many regional accents, as Cantonese (contrary to popular impression) is not one single dialect but a family of 5 different dialect groups. Because of its status as the provincial capital, the Cantonese spoken in Guangzhou (Canton) has long been regarded as the standard, and Hong Kong Cantonese is virtually identical to it and has a similar status.

The Cantonese dialect spoken by *YTSN*’s Eliza is Toisan (a dialect from the Sei Yap group), which is a good choice linguistically as it is, of all Cantonese dialects, the one most markedly different from standard Cantonese. For instance, Toisan has no initial [t] (which is replaced by [h]), no front rounded vowels (as in HKC *syu* “book” and *hoeng* “fragrant”), no contrast between long [a:] and short [a] (as in HKC *saam* ‘clothing’ vs. *sam* ‘heart’), and so on.<sup>1</sup> Socially too, the Toisan dialect carries a certain stigma in Hong Kong, and its speakers are stereotyped as uneducated “country bumpkins”. This goes to show how universal the theme of linguistic prejudice is, and why *P&M* will adapt well to almost any language and culture today.



There is another important linguistic—actually more of a socio-cultural—factor in Hong Kong as compared with London, and that is the status of a second language, English, which has considerable prestige even when compared with standard Cantonese. Unlike *P&M*, there is quite a bit of code-switching between Cantonese and English in *YTSN*, and Higgins in particular switches to English from time to time in order to impress. To pass her off as “high society”, Higgins has to teach Eliza not only standard Cantonese but standard English as well, and in the party scene (the equivalent of *P&M*'s embassy ball), Eliza and other “high society” guests frequently switch to English. If the play were adapted for Malaysia, one would expect Eliza to learn standard English too besides standard Bahasa Malaysia, such is the hegemony of prestige languages.

An interesting and by no means predictable change concerns the professional status of Higgins. In *P&M*, he is a private teacher of phonetics, making a handsome income from teaching rich people with lower class origins to speak with an upper class accent. When Pickering asks him, “Is there a living in that?”, Higgins answers, “Oh yes, quite a fat one. This is an age of upstarts. Men begin in Kentish Town with 80 pounds a year, and end in Park Lane with a hundred thousand. They want to drop Kentish Town, but they give themselves away every time they open their mouths.” In Hong Kong, Higgins would not have been able to earn such a good living that way. There is simply no big money to be made teaching “better” Cantonese pronunciation to those already speaking Cantonese (even with an accent), as accent discrimination — even though it exists in Hong Kong — does not bar a person from rising socially and economically (witness Li Kah Shing, the richest man in Hong Kong, who still speaks Cantonese with a thick Teochew accent). Hence, the Higgins character in *YTSU* (Professor Tam) is not a tutor to the rich but a professor of phonetics at the University of Hong Kong, and he is out there doing his phonetic research rather than indulging in his hobby.

Where *YTSN* falls down is in its lack of phonetic sophistication. In the opening scene (as in *P&M*), Higgins amazes the bystanders with his ability to recognise people's origins by their accents—in this case regional accents, including Teochew, Hakka and Malaysian Cantonese. Dr. Ma, the Pickering character who speaks Malaysian Cantonese, is deeply impressed: “This is most impressive lah!”. But, in truth, it is a much less impressive feat than that of the original Higgins in *P&M*. The Cantonese Higgins, it turns out, identifies people's accents more on lexical than phonetic grounds. Thus, one person is identified as Teochew because he mixes the Teochew first-person pronoun [wa] with his Cantonese, and the Hakka similarly because of his [ngai], while Dr. Ma's Malaysian origins are betrayed by his use of *yat bai* for “once”, which is a Malaysian Cantonese borrowing from Hokkien, where a Hongkonger would have used *yat ci*. It seems that the writer of *YTSN* has taken the easy way out, by exploiting these all-too-obvious lexical borrowings to reveal the speakers' origins, instead of the much more interesting and complex phonetic and phonological features of their Cantonese. As an example of the latter, Teochew speakers of Cantonese systematically turn syllable-final alveolar consonants into velars, as in *yat man* (“one dollar”), which they pronounce as *yak mang*; this extends to their English too, as in “sunspot”, which they pronounce as “sung spock”; Teochew speakers also pronounce front rounded vowels, as in *syu* [sy] “book”, as an unrounded vowel [i]; and so on.<sup>vi</sup> It is a pity that *YTSN* should have forsaken phonology so readily (and thus the original spirit of *P&M*) for the shallower and more easily navigable waters of lexis.

*YTSN* makes much more of Eliza's lessons than *MFL*, stretching them out to 15 minutes or more, because they afford ample opportunities for crowd-pleasing comedy. And of all Cantonese dialects, Toisan (Eliza's dialect) is the one which differs most from HKC and therefore generates the most laughs, as when Eliza substitutes [h] for [t] in *tong tau tit toei* (“bronze head iron legs” — *YTSN*'s answer to “The rain in Spain”), which she pronounces as *hong hau hit hui*. An important difference from *MFL* is that Eliza's lessons here are bilingual, as she needs to speak flawless Cantonese and English in order to pass herself off as high society. Just how this linguistic feat could have been accomplished within a few months is anybody's guess.

## 7. Conclusion

As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, almost a hundred years after Shaw's *Pygmalion* was first written, it is sobering to think that the linguistic, social and educational issues raised by the play are still very much with us today. Whether we think that we have made much progress in the mean time is a matter of our individual perspectives and ideologies. Social barriers may have come down, but racial or cultural barriers much less so, and have in some cases even intensified. In education, much progress has been made in theory, with the focus shifting from "teaching" to "learning", from "teacher-centred" to "student-centred" education, and from the teacher as "source" to the teacher as "facilitator" of learning; but in practice many teachers are still taking the easy way out by spoon-feeding their students and testing them on their ability to regurgitate, rather than to think critically and independently. Linguistic prejudice is still alive and well, but its perpetrators can no longer take their superiority for granted but have to "justify" it, in however contrived a fashion. In matters of language policy, the conservatives tend to have the upper hand, because they can always point to a time (real or imaginary) in the past when linguistic standards were claimed to be much higher than now, if "higher" is defined (as it often is) with respect to some arbitrary and out-dated norm, and as long as the past is a matter of selective memory. With the rise of English as a global language, there is some hope that the emphasis will gradually shift to international intelligibility rather than conformity to some arbitrary "native" norm, and that "new varieties" of English—which have both standard and colloquial forms – will increasingly come to be accepted in their own right rather than as "deviant" forms of English.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Mandarin is the *official* and *national* language of China (including Taiwan), which is of course not the same as saying that it is the "mother tongue" of all Chinese. It is the mother tongue only of the Chinese from the north of China, while Cantonese, Teochew, Hokkien, Hakka etc. are the mother tongues of the others. It is surely ironic that the Chinese dialects should have continued to thrive so well in mainland China and Taiwan (where Mandarin is the national and sole official language), while they are driven almost to extinction in Singapore (where Mandarin is not the national or even the leading official language).

<sup>ii</sup> The use of phonetic symbols will be kept to a minimum in this paper, and with a simplified font (for typographical convenience). [ei] stands for the vowel in (the RP pronunciation of) *day* and *pain*, and [ai] in *die* and *pine*. The symbol [ŋ] will be used for the velar nasal, e.g. at the end of *sing*. A colon [:] indicates a long vowel, as in *beat* [bi:t], as opposed to a short one, as in *bit* [bit].

<sup>iii</sup> John Honey, the author of *Does Accent Matter?*, was invited to Singapore as a consultant in the late 1980's, and made pronouncements to the effect that Singaporeans would never "get away with" their brand of Singapore English in the international arena, and that Singapore would lose its competitiveness unless Singaporeans improved the standard of their spoken English. Strange, considering how well Singapore has been doing internationally over the past few decades, in spite of its alleged linguistic handicap, and considering that Tommy Koh, Singapore's one-time ambassador to the United Nations and (by his own admission) a proud speaker of Singapore English, was once voted the most popular diplomat at the UN.

<sup>iv</sup> In Hung 2000, I did an experiment in which a group of 15 speakers of Hong Kong English listened to pairs of words like *heat* and *hit*, *bet* and *bat*, etc., as pronounced by (i) a Hong Kong speaker, who did not distinguish between these pairs of vowels, and (ii) an RP speaker, who did. It was found that the subjects were on the whole no more successful in identifying the words correctly even when they were pronounced distinctively by the RP speaker, as when they were pronounced identically by the HKE speaker.

<sup>v</sup> As is well known, the authorities in Singapore have repeatedly curtailed or banned the use of Singlish in mass media (including TV dramas and advertisements), and conducted various campaigns against it, fearing that it would corrupt standard English as spoken in Singapore, and apparently unaware of (or unwilling to recognise) the fact that there exist colloquial forms of every living language which differ in lexis, grammar and discourse from the standard form of the language.

<sup>vi</sup> For the spelling of Cantonese words, I have followed the new Cantonese Pinyin system devised by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong (1997). "yu" stands for the high front rounded vowel (as in *syu* "book"), "oe" for the mid front rounded vowel (as in *hoeng* "fragrant"), "oei" for the mid front rounded diphthong (as in *toei* "leg"), "c" for the aspirated dental affricate (as in *cin* "thousand").

<sup>vii</sup> This arises from the phonological structure of Teochew, which does not permit alveolar consonants ([t] and [n]) to occur in syllable-final position, and which does not have any front rounded vowels.

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