

# 2.6

## How does language represent social distinctions and identities?

### OBJECTIVES OF CHAPTER

- ▶ To understand the terms 'identity' and 'social distinctions'.
- ▶ To examine the relationship between language and identity.
- ▶ To consider the importance of accent in the media.
- ▶ To explore the differences between mother tongue and second languages.
- ▶ To consider the problematic appropriation of language originating from cultures other than our own.

The language we use can be revealing, sometimes without us even realizing. In person, the **accent** of our language can reveal where we are from and sometimes even our social class. But even the written form of language, when stripped of **paralinguistic** features like accent, can still provide insight into our identity and social distinctions. This guiding conceptual question requires us to explore how this is possible.

First, let's clarify what we mean by the terms 'social distinctions' and 'identity':

- **Identity:** In psychology, the term 'identity' is taken to mean the characteristics and idiosyncrasies that make you who you are. You have a particular way of speaking, acting and seeing the world that is unique to you. These are influenced by how you define yourself, and are often tied in with the social distinctions below.
- **Social distinctions:** Despite us all being unique, humans like to categorize, and we also like to fit within communities. This process of classifying ourselves into groups is often called social distinctions. There are a great many forms of social distinction, and we are often members of multiple social groups at the same time. Below are some of the main social distinctions we see in most societies:
  - **Social class:** Most societies contain people who have differing amounts of wealth, power, authority and esteem. This leads to differing access to educational opportunities, healthcare, culture and leisure time. These differences can be broadly grouped into the following classes: upper class, middle class and working class. Each has a strong bearing on a person's chances of success in life, and each has its own particular characteristics.
  - **Race, ethnicity and cultural background:** People are often grouped by their race, ethnicity and cultural background – of course, these particular aspects of someone are often inter-linked.
  - **Gender and sexuality:** People within different genders and sexualities often share characteristics and may be treated differently depending on which group they are in.

Each of us is at the point of intersection between these various social groupings, something known as **intersectionality**; for example, you may be a middle-class, black, Christian, heterosexual American woman. This provides a mix of advantages and disadvantages that impact your opportunities in life.

Our primary focus is language, and each of these social distinctions has an impact on how people speak and what they say. More often than not, particular vocabulary, accents and sometimes even grammar are distinct to a particular social group. All of these are deviations from what we call **Standard English**. This is one of many **linguistic terms** that help us talk about ways of speaking language. Below are some key terms that you will need to understand.



■ Table 2.6.1

Term	Definition	Example
<b>Accent</b>	The pronunciation of words	The difference between an American accent and a British accent
<b>Contraction</b>	The process of shortening a word by <b>elision</b> and/or combining two words	would've (would have); can't (can not)
<b>Dialect</b>	A form of English that is specific to a particular region or social group	The Scottish use of 'bairn' to mean 'child'
<b>Elision</b>	The omission of a sound or syllable when speaking, sometimes combined with contraction	I'm (I am); dunno (don't know)
<b>Ellipsis</b>	When a word or words are omitted from a sentence for expediency, creating an informal and casual tone	You going? ('are' has been omitted)
<b>Mother tongue</b>	Mother tongue is generally understood to mean the language of your parents and that you are exposed to from birth	Often, people learn English as a second language and have a mother tongue of a different language
<b>Phonetic spelling</b>	Words written in such a way as to mimic how they sound when spoken	How lang wull yah be? ('How long will you be?' in a Scottish accent)
<b>Received pronunciation</b>	The standard accent of English based on how it is spoken by educated people in southern England	The Queen speaks with received pronunciation
<b>Slang</b>	Words and phrases regarded as very informal and often used in place of Standard English words	'Fleek' for something that is attractive or stylish
<b>Standard English</b>	The standard spelling, punctuation, grammar and vocabulary that is considered acceptable wherever English is spoken or understood	Use of formal English as opposed to dialect or slang

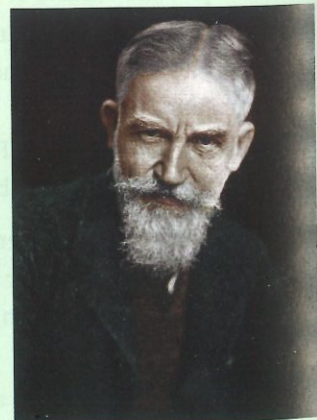
## Social distinctions: social class through accent and dialect

We will begin by looking at texts that focus on social class. Our first text, *Pygmalion*, demonstrates how a person's accent and dialect can affect how they are viewed and treated by society. Our second text, an article from Britain's *The Economist*, shows how such attitudes to accent and language also exist in America, and are heavily tied in with race. Our third extract, from the *Radio Times*, calls on society to address this problem by having wider representation of accents in the media in order to prevent prejudice being attached to certain ways of talking.

### *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw (1913)

#### George Bernard Shaw

George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) was an Irish playwright, **polemicist** and political activist. He grew up as part of the landed gentry of Ireland, but his father mismanaged the family's wealth, causing Shaw to grow up in a type of genteel poverty. This is something Shaw found humiliating, and it made him keenly aware of social class growing up. His mother eventually left his father and moved away, with Shaw eventually following her to London. There he lived in poverty while attempting to become a writer. However, the novels he produced were rejected by various publishers. He had more success as a journalist, particularly as a theatre critic. It is around this time that he started writing plays himself, and it is here he finally found the literary success he had been craving. His realist plays were frequently controversial, often dealing with political, social and religious issues. He had an enormous and lasting impact on British theatre, living until the age of 94 years old.



Our first text is about the British social class system. Britain is a nation with a strong history of treating people differently based on their class, an attitude which still persists today, albeit to



a lesser degree. It is a stratified society, which means it is made up of distinct layers in a kind of hierarchy. At the bottom is the **working class** – traditionally people with low paying jobs in manual labour; in the middle is **middle class** – traditionally educated people who work in professions; and at the top is the **upper class** – traditionally landed gentry (people who own significant land), political leaders and aristocracy. Our first text demonstrates how these social classes had distinct **accents** and **dialects**, often affecting how people interacted with them.

*Pygmalion* is a comedy about love and the British class system. It is named after a Greek myth regarding a king who sculpted his idea of perfect womanhood and then fell in love with the sculpture. To answer his prayers, the goddess Venus brought the sculpture to life. This myth has parallels with the play, in which a British phonetician, Higgins, takes a lower-class flower girl and teaches her to speak and act like a higher-class woman. Higgins is essentially creating his image of perfect womanhood through education instead of sculpture. He teaches her to speak in a style that is known as **received pronunciation**, a particular accent that uses **Standard English** rather than a regional **dialect**. However, unlike the myth that inspired it, Higgins immediately loses interest in her once she has become his image of what a woman should be. The play reflects England's historically rigid class-based society, with a person's accent and vocabulary being the most obvious signifier of social status. This social status would have a dramatic impact on a person's opportunities in life and how they were treated by society.

For our first extract from this play, in Act 1, we will focus on how Eliza (the flower girl) has her very particular style of language represented in the script.

*London at 11.15pm ... Pedestrians running for shelter into the portico of St Paul's church (not Wren's cathedral but Inigo Jones's church in Covent Garden vegetable market).*

*[FREDDY comes into collision with a flower girl who is hurrying in for shelter, knocking her basket out of her hands. A blinding flash of lightning, followed instantly by a rattling peal of thunder, orchestrates the incident].*

THE FLOWER GIRL: Nah then, Freddy: look wh' y' gowin, deah.

FREDDY: Sorry *[he rushes off]*.

THE FLOWER GIRL: *[picking up her scattered flowers and replacing them in the basket]:*  
Theres menners f' yer! Te-oo banches o voylets trod into the mad.  
----*[She sits down on the plinth of the column, sorting her flowers ...]*

THE MOTHER: How do you know that my son's name is Freddy, pray?

THE FLOWER GIRL: Ow, eez, ye-ooa san, is e? Wal, fewd dan y' d-ooty bawmz a mather should, eed now bettern to spawl a pore gel's flahrzn than ran awy athaht pyin. Will ye-oo py me f'them? *[Here, with apologies, this desperate attempt to represent her dialect without a phonetic alphabet must be abandoned as unintelligible outside London] ...*

*(George Bernard Shaw, Act 1 9–11)*



In this scene, the audience is introduced to Eliza and her cockney accent and dialect (the type of English spoken by many working-class Londoners). Cockneys are known for being quick-witted, tough and having a good sense of humour, as well as for their very distinctive accent. Shaw uses a stage direction to apologize for his phonetic spelling of her accent, saying that he only uses it to illustrate her manner of speaking at the beginning and will abandon it for the rest of the script as it would otherwise be 'unintelligible outside London'. Each line of hers in this short extract, both in style and content, reveals how cockneys were viewed by society.

### ACTIVITY 1

Eliza is speaking in a very particular dialect called 'cockney' – you may recognize it from films like *Mary Poppins*. You can hear the actor Michael Caine discuss his cockney accent by following the adjacent QR code. Shaw has used phonetic spelling to convey how she pronounces words – see if you can write out Eliza's spoken dialogue in Standard English. Once you are done, compare it to the 'translation' in the back of the book. Do you have an accent of your own? If so, you could also attempt rewriting her lines phonetically in your own accent.



Eliza's first line in the play, 'Nah then, Freddy: look wh' y' gowin, deah' (line 6), means 'Now then Freddy: look where you are going, my dear' in Standard English. The phonetic spelling, for example, 'nah' to mean 'now', captures the nasal cockney accent and immediately identifies her as a working-class Londoner. A higher-class man has bumped into her, and she reacts with the plucky and slightly cheeky attitude that was seen as being typical of working-class Londoners. She is immediately confrontational with Freddy, using an **imperative** to admonish him despite his higher social standing. Being so bold and familiar with a stranger would have been considered improper by the upper classes, but Eliza's particular regional social class has a very different manner, as demonstrated by her imperative use of language and her familiar use of the term 'dear' when speaking to a stranger.

Her next line means 'There's manners for you! Two bunches of violets trodden into the mud'.

In criticizing his manners, she is implying that he should have known better, particularly as a member of a higher class. That he dismissively bumped into her and did not stop to help shows that lower-class people were often seen as invisible by the upper classes – had it been a middle or upper class woman, he would almost certainly have stopped to apologize more formally and helped pick up the flowers.

We are then again shown the boldness typical of cockneys as Eliza says 'Oh, he's your son, is he? Well, if you had done your duty by him as a mother should, he'd know better than to spoil a poor girl's flowers then to run away without paying. Will you pay me for them?' (line 14).

Eliza's speech here is in stark **juxtaposition** with Freddy's mother's speech. Her formal question is met with a personal attack as Eliza questions her abilities as a mother. Again, her accent and the content of her words show characteristics typical of her regional social class, and the contrast with the mother's use of Standard English makes clear that accent and dialect are key to revealing social class in British society.

In our next extract, we will look at the importance of accent and how the way Eliza speaks is used by middle-class Higgins to define her as a person.



- THE NOTE TAKER: Simply phonetics. The science of speech. That's my profession; also my hobby. Happy is the man who can make a living by his hobby! You can spot an Irishman or a Yorkshireman by his brogue. I can place any man within six miles. I can place him within two miles in London. Sometimes within two streets.
- 5 THE FLOWER GIRL: Ought to be ashamed of himself, unmanly coward!
- THE GENTLEMAN: But is there a living in that?
- THE NOTE TAKER: 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
- 10 mouths. Now I can teach them—
- THE FLOWER GIRL: Let him mind his own business and leave a poor girl—
- THE NOTE TAKER [*explosively*]: Woman: cease this detestable boohooing instantly; or else seek the shelter of some other place or worship.
- THE FLOWER GIRL [*with feeble defiance*]: I've a right to be here if I like, same as you.
- 15 THE NOTE TAKER: A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere – no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech: that your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and The Bible: and don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon.
- 20 THE FLOWER GIRL [*quite overwhelmed, looking up at him in mingled wonder and deprecation without daring to raise her head*]: Ah-ah-ah-ow-ow-ow-oo!
- THE NOTE TAKER [*whipping out his book*]: Heavens! what a sound! [*He writes; then holds out the book and reads, reproducing her vowels exactly*]  
Ah-ah-ah-ow-ow-ow-oo!
- 25 THE FLOWER GIRL [*tickled by the performance, and laughing in spite of herself*]: Garn!
- THE NOTE TAKER: You see this creature with her kerbstone English: the English that will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days. Well, sir, in three months I could pass that girl off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party. I could even get her a place as lady's maid or shop assistant, which requires better English.
- 30 THE FLOWER GIRL: What's that you say?
- THE NOTE TAKER: Yes, you squashed cabbage leaf, you disgrace to the noble architecture of these columns, you incarnate insult to the English language: I could pass you off as the Queen of Sheba.

(George Bernard Shaw 17–18)



Here, Shaw makes clear the distinctive qualities of British accents. Britain is notorious for its variety of accents; despite being a relatively small country, there exist a vast array of **accents** and **dialects** that have sometimes developed only miles apart from each other. This is often used in a prejudicial way, with stereotypes developing such as northern English accents suggesting a lack of education, and cockney accents suggesting criminality. In the play, the middle-class character Higgins (referred to as the 'note taker' in our extract) can geographically pinpoint where a person was brought up from the way they speak in very specific detail, something of a party trick. Shaw is satirizing the British obsession with accents by presenting a character that has this superhuman ability to locate someone's origin and then judge them by it.

This note taker's prejudice is shown in his describing of his time as being one of 'upstarts' (line 7). He is referring to improving social mobility, which means an improving ability to climb the social ladder from working class to middle class. The particular use of 'upstart' has a negative connotation, as if the person does not necessarily belong in their new, higher position. The example given is of moving from 'Kentish Town' (line 7), a lower-class area of London, to 'Park Lane' (line 8), an upper-class area, showing that working-class people are starting to find financial success. However, he claims that 'every time they open their mouths' (lines 9–10) their humble origins are revealed. A clear snobbery is shown; Higgins believes that the way people speak defines them, and that even if they have managed to attain the typical economic success of a higher-class person, they are still lower class because of the way they speak. Essentially, they need to speak Standard English with a received pronunciation accent in order to be truly accepted into high society, something shown later in the play with Eliza's new manner of speaking allowing her a social ascent.

Eliza's cockney accent leads to quite vicious criticism of her as a person. The description of her 'kerbstone English' (line 26) is a particularly revealing characterization. It suggests she belongs on the kerb next the gutter, a symbolically low place often occupied by the homeless and by poverty-stricken people selling items or begging in the street. Higgins is saying that her particular type of English shows how far down the social scale she is. Her way of speaking is contrasted with that of Shakespeare, Milton and the Bible, all examples of high culture and importance; it is as if she is defiling a language that is capable of such beauty. Because of this, she is dehumanized as a 'bilious pigeon' (lines 18–19) implying her manner of speaking is subhuman. Though humorous in its hyperbole, this reveals a very real snobbery to accent and dialect in British society. As if to illustrate his point, she responds in guttural interjections as she attempts to express frustration and annoyance, 'Ah-ah-ah-ow-ow-ow-oo!' (line 21). His writing down in the notebook of these sounds, as if she is an animal being studied, further illustrates this divide in class and the lack of respect poor people receive. Higgins then says that better English is needed to be a 'lady's maid' or a 'shop assistant' (lines 28–29).

The playwright is making clear to the audience that language defines a person's social standing, and that even jobs may be denied you if you do not speak in the correct way. Shaw is satirizing this aspect of British society to criticize it; he shows an exaggerated and humorous example of someone being judged by the way they speak to show the ridiculousness of it. It is obviously unfair that people are judged by superficial signifiers of class rather than on the content of their character. Shaw was quite pragmatic about this issue. He was well aware that people often have to adapt their manner of speaking to fit in, even writing in the preface to the play that he hopes it acts to the 'encouragement of people troubled with accents that cut them off from all high employment'. In one of his many essays, Shaw criticized the English language and its unsuitable alphabet, suggesting it is inherently difficult for English to be spoken consistently and easily, and that this creates the various regional dialects and accents that are used to fuel divides in social class.

To explore this issue further, we will look at two recent articles focused on the issue of accent and dialect. After reading both, you will get an opportunity to share your own thoughts on this issue.