

Interpretation of the Non-verbal Communication in the Film *My Fair Lady* from the Pragmatic Perspective

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Abstract

Verbal communication and non-verbal communication are two essential ways of human communication behavior. From the pragmatic perspective, non-verbal communication can even convey more content in certain situations than verbal communication. In non-verbal communication, body language, dress and personal adornment, and boundary play a single or comprehensive role in reinforcing, supplementing, and weakening verbal information. This article takes two typical scenes of the film *My Fair Lady* as examples to interpret non-verbal communication behavior in a pragmatic sense.

Keywords: *My Fair Lady*, non-verbal communication, body language, dress and personal adornment, boundary

1. Introduction

My Fair Lady is adapted from George Bernard Shaw's play *The Flower Girl*. The film was produced by Warner Bros. Pictures in 1964, directed by George Cook and starring Audrey Hepburn, Rex Harrison, Jeremy Brett, and others. After its release, the film won 8 Oscars, including Best Picture, as well as more than 20 awards including the Golden Globe, Best Director, and Best Actor.

It can be seen that the film has gained widespread recognition from society. The basic plot is about a flower girl named Eliza, who comes from a poor family, speaks and behaves rudely. After six months of language training by Professor of linguist Henry Higgins, she is transformed into an elegant and dignified lady.

The film has two important characteristics. The one is that the hero Higgins is a linguist, and the other is that the language use and teaching are important clues to the film's advancement in the course of Higgins' training of Eliza. In addition, the film also fully demonstrates the important role of non-verbal communication in private and social occasions.

We know that in the process of human communication development, there are various types of communication tools and methods, and verbal communication is just one of the important communication methods. However, verbal communication cannot work independently and always accompanies various non-verbal communication methods. As Chen Yuan said, "Language is certainly the most

important communication tool for human communication activities. But the tools of communication are not only verbal, but also non-verbal. In fact, social communication often combines both verbal and non-verbal tools to achieve the best effect of communication." The so-called non-verbal communication refers to all communicative behaviors other than verbal behaviors. If non-verbal communication is classified from the perspective of information carriers, it can be generally divided into such elements as body language (expression, gesture, body posture, touch), dress and personal adornment and boundary. These elements have the characteristics of two-way, immediacy, variability and continuity in communication, and they can help to strengthen, refer to, weaken and supplement the verbal communication, which together constitute the necessary aspects of human communication. In the film *My Fair Lady*, the role of non-verbal communication is very evident.

2. The Body Language in Non-verbal Communication

Many psychological activities that cannot be expressed by speech can be reflected through body language, so that the emotional changes of both sides and even multiple sides of communication can be observed. In body language, facial expression and body posture are two common types. In *My Fair Lady*, we can see Eliza's emotional changes, such as happiness, sadness, surprise, fear, anger, disgust, in her facial expression. The most typical scene is at the beginning of the film when linguist Higgins gave the small change to Eliza, and Eliza squatted down to look at the money in the basket. Her facial expression had a great change: her eyes sparkled with surprise and excitement, and her mouth rose, and a happy and satisfied smile on her face. This reaction perfectly fits the characters because Higgins and Eliza are not familiar. In situations where the parties involved are unfamiliar with each other, verbal communication cannot reflect the true psychological activities of the characters. However, the close-up of facial expressions can reveal the psychological changes of Eliza, and even play the effect of offsetting part of the lines to complete Eliza's emotional transformation. When Eliza learned that Higgins would take her to the Ambassador's ball, Eliza's expression was very charming: her eyes were slightly closed, her face was smiling, and she sat quietly in her place,

intoxicated. These facial expressions not only provide the audience with aesthetic pleasure in the film, but also play a good complementary role in advancing the film plot. In essence, these facial expressions have the meaning of monologues, effectively avoiding the problem of excessive monologues in the film and leaving more discourse implications.

As for body posture, it reflects and transmits various information through different gestures of the body. Like facial expression, it is an important part of body language in non-verbal communication. Ultimately, it is the meaning indicated by body movements. In the film, when Eliza was still a flower girl, her body movements were very casual. She walked with a flower basket on her shoulder, bent down, swayed and stumbled. When sitting, she always tilted, her legs opened in a cross shape, her neck contracted, and when standing, her body tilted forward with a slight bend in her back. These body language show Eliza's low position and lack of self-confidence, or lack of good upbringing.

And when the lucky Eliza was trained by Higgins, her body movements had obvious changes: she walked with her head held high, her pace was brisk and slow, and her manner were arrogant and noble. For Eliza, this transformation of body movements is a manifestation of grace and upbringing, and the director's intentions are also demonstrated here. Education and training can completely transform sloppiness into elegance, from lowliness to nobility, and achieve a remarkable temperament. At this level, the non-verbal communication behavior of body posture not only reflects the external changes of the characters, but also drives the development of the plot in this change, and its significance is self-evident.

3. The Dress and Personal Adornment in Non-verbal Communication

The dress and personal adornment we are talking about here broadly includes dress, shoes and hats, hairstyles, makeup, accessories, and personal items. It is a non-verbal communication method attached to the body, which reflects an individual's value selection for dress and personal adornment and appearance, and presents their spiritual outlook and emotional demands. At the same time, it can also indirectly reflect an individual's economic situation, social

status, occupational position, etc. Even with the change of specific environment, the change of individual dress and personal adornment can also provide the degree of emphasis on the communicative context and communicative demands.

From the perspective of modern linguistics, dress and personal adornment is actually a silent language that conveys and showcases oneself to others, thus serving as a semiotic medium that distinguishes it from body language that belongs to physical elements, carrying the cultural phenomena of a certain place and time. Eliza's dress and personal adornment at the ambassador's ball fully reflects the aesthetic and cultural significance of her dress and personal adornment.

The attendees of the ambassador's ball were high-ranking officials from the upper class, very particular about dress and personal adornment. Eliza, wearing a floor length white dress, white lace gloves, and a shiny necklace, wore exquisite makeup with a noble and elegant temperament, which amazed everyone present. Eliza's dress and personal adornment plays an important complementary role to her verbal communication. Her dress and personal adornment clearly showcases the significant changes in her identity and status, enhancing the expressive power of her character. At the same time, it demonstrates Eliza's recognition of the elite society, and her dress and personal adornment has gained admission to the upper class, which is a two-way effect. Dress and personal adornment here not only conveys the specific communication situation of the society at that time, but also indirectly reflects the culture of social occasions, that is, the etiquette and customs of upper class society, all of which are important manifestations of dress and personal adornment as a cultural carrier. In non-verbal communication, this external and subordinate "signifier" refers to various relational circles in the cultural field. Eliza, who attended the ambassador's ball, was vastly different from her initial image. This demonstrates the significance of the dress and personal adornment worn by characters from different social classes. It can even be said that dress and personal adornment has symbolic significance in non-verbal communication. In addition, dress and personal adornment can also have a certain ethical color by influencing the inner and outer activities of others in a gentle

and implicit way. In terms of the way and speed of dissemination, the suggestive effect generated by dress and personal adornment is also more direct and faster than that of spoken language. When Eliza met Higgins again after leaving her residence, she was wearing a pink sheer dress that shone brightly. In fact, in this scene, Eliza wanted to use her charming dress and personal adornment to indicate her admiration to Higgins. And under her suggestion, Higgins also understood Eliza's affection for her. It can be seen that the suggestive role of dress and personal adornment also plays an important role in communication.

In short, the changes in Eliza's dress and personal adornment in *My Fair Lady*, just like her changes in body movements, indicate her improvement in self-cultivation. In terms of dress and personal adornment, it highlights the significant changes in her choice orientation after training, that is, she integrates into the specific social circle and understands the meaning contained in dress and personal adornment. This non-verbal communication has achieved significant results and is also an important aspect of Eliza's transformation from vulgarity to elegance.

4. The Boundary in Non-verbal Communication

As is well known, there is a space problem in daily communication. Communication or interaction between people often leads to some interpersonal distance due to social status, identity class, etc. Social communication in daily life is inevitable, and we need to build a community of daily life. It is necessary to form a universal and stable time and space in lifestyle, interest demands, spiritual needs, or value identification. Therefore, American anthropologist and psychologist Hall subdivided the boundary of communication into four areas: intimate distance, personal distance, social distance, and public distance. In summary, the boundary in non-verbal communication is the spatial processing method between communicators, relying on it to convey a certain attitude. In essence, body language and dress and personal adornment, two non-verbal communication elements, also rely on the boundary to play a role and ultimately have an impact on the recognition of the boundary. It can be said that the boundary has more emotional and ethical significance in non-verbal communication. Both parties or multiple parties

in communication can present the attitudes of the sender and receiver of information at the boundary level.

A typical example in the film is reflected in the initial interaction between Eliza and Higgins when she was selling flowers. The distance between Eliza and Higgins has a dual significance, as she is far away from Higgins in physical space and also is timid and scared. In other words, there is a communication gap between the lower class characters and intellectuals, and both sides have their own discourse space and behavioral activity field, without any intersection. Therefore, it is understandable that Eliza has a sense of inferiority and even reverence. She is unable to enter the upper class society and does not possess the various material and temperament conditions to be accepted. If she wants to be admitted to the upper class, Eliza needs to be qualified. Another scene in the film is the appearance of Eliza and Professor Piglin at the ball, at which time Eliza had been trained by Higgins to be a “fair lady” with upper class qualities, and was no longer the vulgar image of flower girl. In general, at a solemn ball, participants should walk or stand at a suitable distance. When Eliza appeared with the help of Professor Piglin, the distance she maintained from Piglin was within the personal area, indicating a friendly relationship. When Eliza communicated with others at the ball, the distance she maintained was within the social area, known as “polite distance” or “diplomatic distance”. Eliza’s appropriate grasp of personal and social distance at the ball fully demonstrates her graceful performance as a graceful lady. It also reflects the difference in Eliza’s education level, which is conducive to highlighting the performance of the protagonist. The maintenance of the distance between these personal areas and social areas is precisely the function of the boundary, which cannot be fully reflected in verbal communication, especially in daily life scenarios. The clear boundary can reflect the level of awareness of social etiquette among characters, as well as the principles of norms required by various social places at that time. In dialog-based films, the delineation or requirement of the boundary allows the audience to understand the specific situation and cultural atmosphere reflected in the film. This is an important supplement to verbal communication.

5. Conclusion

It should be said that *My Fair Lady* vividly portrays the elements of non-verbal communication in the film. Eliza transforms from a vulgar flower girl to one who can enter and stand out in upper class, which is undoubtedly the result of Higgins training, which emphasizes the role of individual growth environment, education and training. But the effect of this result needs to be conveyed in both verbal and non-verbal ways. Eliza’s transformation gives the film a structural meaning of ups and downs, as well as a comedic effect in the viewing effect. From a linguistic perspective, what is more important is that her changes demonstrate the importance of speech for individual growth, while non-verbal communication behaviors reinforce or supplement this importance.

Speech is the most important tool for human communication of ideas, but it is not the only one. From a sociolinguistic perspective, human communication has two ways: verbal and non-verbal. In communication, a single verbal communication can make communication dull and boring. If combined with non-verbal communication, it can better achieve the effect of communication. In addition, non-verbal communication can only express clear meanings in specific environments. Therefore, both verbal and non-verbal communication need to cooperate with each other to accurately and effectively express communication information. It essentially points out the characteristics of verbal communication and non-verbal communication, that is, in the process of information transmission, they are carried out at the same time, and constitute a complex system of linear characteristics of verbal communication and vertical characteristics of non-verbal communication, both of which are indispensable, and will make communication activities more vivid and interesting. It should be emphasized that the various elements of non-verbal communication, such as body language, dress and personal adornment, boundary, etc., do not necessarily present a single character in communication, but comprehensively convey some important information, even the real psychological activities of both sides, thus making communicative activities complicated and profound. In short, non-verbal communication and verbal communication play a common role in the dissemination of human

personal emotions and daily information.

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