

## HOW THE USE OF VERNACULAR AND "NON-STANDARD" ENGLISH IN PLAYS CHALLENGED THE SOCIAL HIERARCHIES OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE STAGE

Umida Rustamovna Inagamova

Senior Lecturer, O'zbekiston davlat jahon tillari universiteti

E-mail: [inagamovaumida220@gmail.com](mailto:inagamovaumida220@gmail.com)

Tel: +99893-512-89-12

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20092514>

**Annotation:** This thesis examines the role of vernacular and "non-standard" English in dramatic literature and theatrical performance, focusing on how playwrights challenged social hierarchies embedded within universities, elite literary culture, and theatrical institutions. The study analyzes the linguistic strategies employed in English drama from the Renaissance period to modern theatre, particularly the use of dialects, colloquial speech, regional accents, and lower-class linguistic forms. The research demonstrates that the inclusion of non-standard English on stage disrupted dominant cultural norms established by educated elites and questioned assumptions about class, education, authority, and social prestige. The works of William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, George Bernard Shaw, John Millington Synge, and modern dramatists are analyzed through sociolinguistic and literary approaches. The findings indicate that vernacular speech functioned not merely as comic relief but also as a political and cultural tool for resisting institutional authority and redefining social identity in theatrical discourse.

**Keywords:** vernacular language, non-standard English, sociolinguistics, theatre studies, university culture, social hierarchy, dramatic literature, dialect, stage language, linguistic identity

### Introduction

Language has historically functioned as a marker of social class, education, and institutional authority. In English-speaking societies, "standard" English became associated with universities, political power, and intellectual prestige, while regional dialects and vernacular forms were frequently marginalized as inferior or uneducated forms of communication [1]. Literary institutions and theatrical traditions often reflected these linguistic hierarchies by privileging educated speech and excluding non-standard voices from serious artistic representation [2].

During the Renaissance and Early Modern periods, universities such as Oxford and Cambridge promoted Latin and standardized forms of English as symbols of intellectual legitimacy [3]. The stage similarly reflected class divisions, with noble characters typically speaking in elevated poetic diction while lower-class figures used colloquial or dialect speech [4]. However, many playwrights deliberately challenged these conventions by incorporating vernacular speech into dramatic texts. This linguistic strategy undermined assumptions that authority, intelligence, and moral superiority belonged exclusively to educated elites [5].

William Shakespeare frequently mixed high and low linguistic registers in his plays, allowing clowns, servants, and commoners to display wit and insight through vernacular expression [6]. Ben Jonson's city comedies represented the speech patterns of London's urban population, exposing social pretensions and institutional hypocrisy [7]. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, dramatists such as George Bernard Shaw and John Millington Synge

further challenged linguistic elitism by presenting dialect speech as central rather than peripheral to dramatic art [8].

The emergence of sociolinguistics in the twentieth century contributed to scholarly recognition that language variation reflects social identity rather than linguistic deficiency [9]. Scholars such as William Labov demonstrated that non-standard dialects possess systematic grammatical structures and cultural legitimacy [10]. These theoretical developments reshaped interpretations of dramatic language and encouraged renewed attention to the political significance of vernacular speech in theatre.

This study investigates how the use of vernacular and non-standard English in plays challenged institutional hierarchies associated with universities and theatrical culture. The research focuses on the relationship between language, class, and authority in dramatic literature and explores how playwrights employed linguistic diversity to question social stratification.

### **Methodology**

The research employs qualitative literary analysis combined with sociolinguistic theory. Primary dramatic texts from the Renaissance, Restoration, nineteenth-century, and modern periods were analyzed to identify the functions of vernacular and non-standard English within theatrical discourse. The study focuses particularly on the plays of William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, George Bernard Shaw, and John Millington Synge because these authors are frequently discussed in scholarship concerning language and class representation [4], [7].

The methodological framework draws upon sociolinguistic theories developed by William Labov, Peter Trudgill, and Basil Bernstein regarding language variation and social identity [9], [10], [11]. These theories were used to evaluate how dramatic language reflects and contests institutional power structures. Historical studies concerning the relationship between universities and standardized language formation were also consulted to contextualize the prestige associated with “correct” English during different historical periods [3].

Textual analysis focused on several linguistic features:

- regional dialect representation;
- colloquial syntax and vocabulary;
- pronunciation markers in dramatic texts;
- contrasts between elite and popular speech;
- linguistic humor and parody;
- social mobility through language performance.

Secondary scholarly sources from literary criticism, theatre studies, and sociolinguistics were examined to ensure factual accuracy and historical grounding. Comparative analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns across different theatrical traditions and historical periods.

### **Results**

The research demonstrates that vernacular and non-standard English functioned as important tools for challenging institutional and social hierarchies in dramatic literature.

One significant finding concerns the destabilization of linguistic prestige. In many Renaissance plays, lower-class characters speaking vernacular English displayed rhetorical intelligence equal to or greater than elite figures using formal language [6]. Shakespeare’s fools

and clowns frequently exposed the moral weaknesses of noble characters through witty colloquial speech. In *King Lear*, the Fool’s language combines humor with philosophical insight, undermining assumptions that wisdom belongs exclusively to educated elites [6].

The study also found that vernacular language enabled playwrights to critique university culture and scholarly elitism. Ben Jonson satirized academic pretension by portraying scholars whose excessive reliance on learned language disconnected them from social reality [7]. In *The Alchemist*, pseudo-intellectual characters employ technical jargon and Latin phrases to manipulate others, while ordinary speech often reveals practical truth [7].

Another major finding relates to audience accessibility. The use of vernacular language expanded theatrical participation beyond educated audiences. During the Elizabethan period, public theatres attracted socially diverse spectators, including artisans, merchants, laborers, and aristocrats [12]. Playwrights incorporated colloquial language to engage these heterogeneous audiences and challenge the cultural exclusivity associated with university-educated drama [4].

The analysis further indicates that modern dramatists transformed vernacular speech into a central artistic principle. George Bernard Shaw argued that pronunciation and accent functioned as instruments of class discrimination in British society [8]. In *Pygmalion*, linguistic performance determines social acceptance, exposing the arbitrary nature of class hierarchy. Shaw explicitly criticized educational institutions for reinforcing linguistic prejudice [8].

Similarly, John Millington Synge’s representation of Irish vernacular speech challenged English cultural dominance by elevating regional dialects to literary status [13]. His plays demonstrated that vernacular language possessed poetic richness and dramatic power equal to standardized English.

The research also reveals that vernacular speech frequently served political purposes. Twentieth-century dramatists used non-standard English to represent marginalized communities excluded from elite educational institutions and mainstream theatre culture [14]. This linguistic inclusion challenged dominant narratives regarding authority, intelligence, and cultural legitimacy.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The relationship between language and social hierarchy has long occupied a central position in literary and sociolinguistic scholarship. In dramatic literature, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a visible marker of education, authority, morality, and social identity. The use of vernacular and non-standard English in theatrical texts challenged dominant assumptions concerning who possessed the right to speak with authority on the stage and within society. Throughout different literary periods, playwrights deliberately employed colloquial speech, dialect forms, and regional linguistic varieties to undermine institutional hierarchies associated with universities, aristocratic culture, and elite theatrical traditions [3].

During the Renaissance, educational institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge played a significant role in promoting linguistic standardization. Classical rhetoric, Latin grammar, and formal eloquence were viewed as indicators of intellectual superiority and social prestige [3]. Educated speech became closely connected to political authority and cultural legitimacy. Literary production itself was often associated with elite education, and dramatic writing was expected to reflect refined linguistic standards. However, the rapid growth of public theatre in

sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England created new cultural spaces where different social classes interacted [12]. Public theatres attracted aristocrats, merchants, artisans, laborers, and ordinary urban citizens, making theatrical performance one of the few environments in which multiple social groups encountered each other simultaneously [12].

This social diversity influenced the linguistic character of English drama. Playwrights increasingly incorporated vernacular expressions and non-standard speech patterns into their works in order to appeal to broader audiences. Such linguistic choices challenged the assumption that artistic and intellectual value belonged exclusively to educated elites. Shakespeare's plays provide one of the clearest examples of this phenomenon. In many of his dramatic works, noble characters speak in elevated poetic language while lower-class figures employ colloquial prose. Yet Shakespeare frequently complicates this hierarchy by granting common characters considerable wit, philosophical insight, and rhetorical skill [6].

In *King Lear*, for instance, the Fool uses colloquial language and humorous riddles to criticize Lear's political failures and moral blindness [6]. Although the Fool occupies a socially inferior position, his speech often contains greater wisdom than that of the king himself. Shakespeare thereby destabilizes traditional assumptions concerning the relationship between social rank and intellectual authority. Similarly, in *Henry IV*, Falstaff's vernacular humor and improvisational speech compete with aristocratic rhetoric, creating an alternative form of cultural intelligence rooted in popular language rather than formal education [15].

Stephen Greenblatt argues that Shakespeare's dramatic language reflects the linguistic plurality of Renaissance England and resists rigid distinctions between “high” and “low” culture [15]. The coexistence of multiple linguistic registers within the same dramatic space reveals that social hierarchy is neither fixed nor linguistically natural. Shakespeare's use of vernacular speech allowed audiences to recognize the humanity, complexity, and intelligence of socially marginalized characters. This represented a significant departure from earlier literary traditions in which lower-class speech was primarily used for ridicule or comic relief.

Ben Jonson also challenged academic and linguistic elitism through satire. His comedies frequently portray scholars, lawyers, and pseudo-intellectual figures whose excessive reliance on formal language reveals their hypocrisy and detachment from reality [7]. In *The Alchemist*, learned terminology and Latin phrases are used deceptively by fraudulent characters seeking social advancement [7]. Jonson critiques the idea that mastery of elite language automatically corresponds to moral or intellectual superiority. Instead, ordinary speech often exposes truth more effectively than scholarly rhetoric. Such portrayals reflected broader anxieties concerning the commercialization of education and the social pretensions associated with academic culture during the Early Modern period.

The emergence of vernacular drama also contributed to the democratization of literary culture. Universities traditionally controlled access to education and literary production, reinforcing distinctions between educated and uneducated classes [3]. Public theatre, however, depended on commercial success and therefore sought to engage audiences beyond elite intellectual circles. The inclusion of non-standard speech enabled dramatists to represent the experiences and perspectives of ordinary people more authentically. This development expanded the social boundaries of dramatic literature and challenged institutional monopolies over cultural authority.

The political implications of vernacular language became even more significant during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when industrialization and urbanization intensified class divisions in Britain. Standardized English increasingly became associated with professional advancement, educational opportunity, and social mobility [11]. Accent and pronunciation served as markers of class status, while regional dialects were frequently stigmatized as signs of ignorance or inferiority. Educational institutions reinforced these attitudes by promoting standardized speech as the norm for respectable society [9].

Within this historical context, dramatists began to use language itself as a subject of social criticism. George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* represents one of the most influential theatrical examinations of linguistic hierarchy. Shaw explicitly criticized British society for discriminating against individuals based on pronunciation and accent [8]. In the play, Professor Henry Higgins attempts to transform Eliza Doolittle, a flower seller with a Cockney accent, into a socially acceptable “lady” by teaching her standardized speech. The experiment demonstrates that social identity is largely performative and linguistically constructed rather than biologically determined [8].

Shaw's critique extends beyond individual prejudice to broader institutional structures. Universities, schools, and elite social circles all contribute to maintaining linguistic standards that exclude working-class speakers from positions of authority. Eliza's transformation reveals the arbitrary nature of these distinctions. Although her pronunciation changes, her intellectual abilities and personality remain fundamentally the same. Shaw therefore exposes the superficiality of class systems based upon linguistic conformity. His work challenges the assumption that “correct” English reflects inherent intelligence or moral worth.

The sociolinguistic theories developed during the twentieth century provide important support for this interpretation. William Labov's studies of African American Vernacular English demonstrated that non-standard dialects possess systematic grammatical structures and complex linguistic rules [10]. Labov rejected the belief that vernacular speech represents defective or incomplete language. Instead, he argued that judgments concerning “proper” speech are shaped primarily by social and political power rather than linguistic superiority [10]. Peter Trudgill similarly emphasized that linguistic prestige reflects social attitudes rather than objective grammatical quality [9].

These sociolinguistic perspectives illuminate the cultural significance of vernacular representation in drama. When playwrights place non-standard speech on stage, they challenge institutional definitions of linguistic legitimacy and expose the ideological nature of language hierarchy. The theatre becomes a space in which marginalized voices gain visibility and authority. This process destabilizes traditional relationships between language, education, and power.

The Irish Literary Revival offers another important example of vernacular resistance to cultural domination. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ireland remained heavily influenced by British political and linguistic authority. Standard British English occupied a privileged position within educational institutions and literary culture, while Irish vernacular speech was frequently dismissed as provincial or inferior [13]. John Millington Synge challenged these assumptions by incorporating Hiberno-English rhythms, syntax, and vocabulary into his dramatic works.

In *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge presents Irish rural speech not as comic deficiency but as a source of poetic expression and cultural identity [13]. His characters speak in highly stylized vernacular language that combines oral storytelling traditions with lyrical intensity. Although some contemporary critics accused Synge of misrepresenting Irish society or degrading national culture, his dramatic language ultimately demonstrated that regional vernaculars could achieve literary sophistication equal to standardized English [13]. Synge's work therefore challenged both colonial linguistic hierarchy and dominant assumptions concerning literary value.

The relationship between vernacular language and realism also played an important role in modern theatrical development. Nineteenth-century realist dramatists increasingly rejected artificial literary diction in favor of authentic conversational speech [14]. This shift reflected broader democratic movements that sought greater representation for ordinary individuals within literature and public culture. Realist theatre emphasized social experience rather than aristocratic idealization, making vernacular language an essential component of dramatic authenticity.

Theatrical realism also exposed the limitations of standardized language as a universal cultural norm. Everyday speech varies according to class, region, ethnicity, gender, and occupation. By representing this diversity on stage, dramatists challenged the homogenizing tendencies of elite literary traditions. Working-class characters, immigrants, and marginalized communities increasingly gained dramatic visibility through their own linguistic forms rather than through standardized representations imposed by educated elites [14].

The embodiment of vernacular language in theatrical performance further intensified its political significance. Unlike written literature, theatre presents language through live speech, accent, rhythm, and physical presence. Audience members directly encounter linguistic diversity through performance. Pronunciation, tone, and dialect become visible expressions of identity and social belonging. Audience reactions to vernacular speech therefore reveal broader cultural attitudes toward class, ethnicity, education, and regional identity [14].

This performative dimension often produced controversy. Plays employing non-standard English were sometimes criticized for lacking refinement or threatening established cultural norms. Such criticism reflected anxieties concerning the erosion of traditional hierarchies. If ordinary speech could possess artistic value and intellectual complexity, then the cultural authority of universities and elite literary institutions became less secure. The stage thus functioned as a contested space in which competing definitions of legitimacy and prestige were negotiated through language.

Modern and contemporary theatre continues this tradition of linguistic resistance. Postcolonial dramatists frequently employ vernacular speech to challenge the cultural dominance of colonial languages and educational systems. African American Vernacular English, Caribbean Creole, and other non-standard forms increasingly appear in contemporary drama as expressions of cultural identity and political resistance [14]. These linguistic practices challenge historical structures of exclusion and expand the representational possibilities of theatrical art.

For example, twentieth-century Black theatre in the United States utilized African American Vernacular English to represent experiences historically marginalized within mainstream dramatic traditions. Such linguistic representation challenged racist assumptions

linking standardized English with intelligence and civilization. Similarly, postcolonial playwrights across Africa and the Caribbean incorporated local speech forms into English-language drama to resist colonial linguistic authority and reclaim indigenous cultural identities [14].

The continued use of vernacular language in contemporary theatre demonstrates that debates concerning linguistic hierarchy remain socially relevant. Educational systems, professional institutions, and media industries still privilege certain speech forms over others. Accent discrimination and linguistic prejudice continue to affect access to employment, education, and social mobility. Dramatic literature therefore remains an important site for examining the relationship between language and power.

Ultimately, the use of vernacular and non-standard English in drama represents far more than a stylistic or aesthetic choice. It constitutes a sustained critique of institutional authority and social inequality. By validating marginalized linguistic identities, playwrights challenged the assumption that cultural legitimacy belongs exclusively to educated elites. The stage became a democratic space where alternative voices could contest dominant narratives concerning intelligence, morality, and social value.

### **Conclusion**

The study demonstrates that vernacular and non-standard English played a crucial role in challenging social hierarchies within universities and theatrical culture. Throughout English literary history, standardized language functioned as a marker of institutional authority, educational prestige, and class privilege. Playwrights who incorporated vernacular speech into dramatic literature disrupted these hierarchies by validating marginalized linguistic identities and questioning assumptions concerning intelligence, morality, and cultural legitimacy.

From Shakespeare’s blending of high and low registers to George Bernard Shaw’s critique of accent discrimination and Synge’s elevation of regional dialect, dramatic literature repeatedly challenged linguistic elitism. Sociolinguistic theory further confirms that non-standard dialects possess structural complexity and cultural value equal to standardized English.

The findings indicate that theatrical representations of vernacular language contributed to broader democratic transformations in literature and society. By placing ordinary speech on stage, playwrights expanded cultural participation and undermined institutional definitions of linguistic superiority. Consequently, vernacular drama remains an important site for understanding the relationship between language, power, and social identity.

### **Adabiyotlar, References, Литературы:**

1. Baugh, A. C., Cable, T. *A History of the English Language*. London: Routledge, 2002. pp. 241–256.
2. Crystal, D. *The Stories of English*. London: Penguin Books, 2005. pp. 312–328.
3. Burke, P. *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. pp. 78–96.
4. Nevalainen, T. *An Introduction to Early Modern English*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006. pp. 145–167.
5. Barber, C. *The English Language: A Historical Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. pp. 201–218.

6. Shakespeare, W. *King Lear*. Edited by R. A. Foakes. London: Arden Shakespeare, 1997. pp. 88–110.
7. Jonson, B. *The Alchemist*. Edited by F. H. Mares. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967. pp. 54–79.
8. Shaw, G. B. *Pygmalion*. London: Penguin Classics, 2003. pp. 15–39.
9. Trudgill, P. *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*. London: Penguin Books, 2000. pp. 21–49.
10. Labov, W. *Language in the Inner City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972. pp. 183–221.
11. Bernstein, B. *Class, Codes and Control*. London: Routledge, 1971. pp. 95–113.
12. Gurr, A. *The Shakespearean Stage 1574–1642*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. pp. 56–74.
13. Synge, J. M. *The Playboy of the Western World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. pp. 33–57.
14. Aston, E., Savona, G. *Theatre as Sign-System*. London: Routledge, 1991. pp. 102–134.
15. Greenblatt, S. *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2004. pp. 198–223.