

Chronotopes of Dialect Style

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To the extent that they are heard as regional at all, regional ways of speaking index places. But they rarely index place alone. Using or stylizing a regional way of speaking may call up what literary theorist Mikhael Bakhtin called a “chronotope.” Davidson (2007), quoting Bakhtin, defines a chronotope as “an ‘intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships’ that is ‘always colored by emotions and values’ (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 83 and p. 243).” This is to say that a language or dialect can index a conceptual world located in time as well as in space, with associated sets of characters related to each other in particular ways. For example, when Americans hear a posh British accent, we may think not just of England, but of the England of the BBC television program “Downton Abbey,” the England of the late 19th and early 20th centuries when people who spoke that way lived in manor houses in the countryside and had armies of servants.

In this paper, I describe how Pittsburghese, the regional dialect of southwestern Pennsylvania as it is imagined by local people, has been associated over time with three different chronotopes: the “golden age” (working-class Pittsburgh in the 1950s and 60s), the “timeless local” (“authentic” Pittsburgh, temporally located in the present but with the values and habits of the past), and the “contemporary other” (the post-industrial working class, located at the margins of the “real” Pittsburgh of today). I show how these complexes of time, place, characterological figure, and value have shaped how Pittsburghese is represented in a variety of media. More generally, I suggest that the idea of the chronotope may be useful to people interested in the relationships between language and place in Denmark and elsewhere.