

“Just a Regular Guy”: Dialect variation and parodic stylization on Chicago radio

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Dialect stylization demonstrates linguistic variation within individual speakers. Building on Goffman (1981), Labov (1972), Bell (1984), and Rampton (1999), Coupland (2001) discusses dialect stylization of localized identities portrayed on a radio station in Wales. He claims that radio lends itself to dialect stylization, as it “can potentially deliver forms of personal and cultural authenticity that transcend local playfulness,” constructing social meanings that “do not... ultimately undermine or downgrade cultural Welshness” (347).

Like Coupland’s “Welshness”, the stereotypical Chicago identity embraces working-class values (see also Lindquist 2004, Davies 2011) as a result of the city’s gritty historical composition of unions, democrats, and “hog butchers”; this identity is expressed subtly in everyday language and forcefully in parody. “Chicago provides an abundance of fertile natural settings in which identities are linguistically constructed,” (Farr and Reynolds 2004: 14), the complexities of which Callary (1975: 156) attests have not been adequately examined.

This research provides an account of the features of the stereotypical Chicago accent (see also Cameron 2004, Minoff 2012) evidenced by analysis of recordings of well-known speakers from Chicago. We then examine the speech of “The Regular Guy” (TRG), a heavily-stylized radio character reviewing movies in a parodic Chicago accent since 1984 on Chicago’s WXRT-FM. Unlike Coupland, we have access to the “normal” speech of the broadcaster, who hosts other shows on XRT as himself, Marty Lennartz. By comparing Lennartz’s speech with that of TRG, we can pinpoint how he stylizes his speech as that of a stereotypical Chicagoan.

Furthermore, we show how TRG is interactionally positioned as an “average” Chicagoan, his linguistic features crossing neighborhood boundaries in Chicago, making him more widely relatable. We also note the contrast of TRG’s speech with that of others affiliated with XRT. In so doing, we suggest that while TRG is positioned against more affluent Chicagoans, he neither discredits stereotypical Chicago cultural values (Coupland 2001:372), nor offends or alienates his listenership (cf. Davies 2010). TRG’s appropriation of a stereotypical working-class Chicago dialect supports Chatman’s (2001) claim that parody can adopt a given style without adopting specific subject matter; the humor of TRG’s reviews lies in his use of a marked (in this particular context), and yet unmarked (in Chicago in general), dialect (see also Raskin 1985).

Given the staggering affluence of XRT’s average listener (The XRT Listener at a Glance Fall 2013), TRG’s linguistic affiliation with working-class Chicagoans should be surprising (Bourdieu 1993). However, as Agha (2007: 165) notes, “Since individuals differ in their register range, they differ in their ability to inhabit distinct, register-mediated **social personae**... Interlocutors respond to such personae, voices or figures in ways that depend on their own register range.” We argue that TRG’s caricature of a Chicago dialect does not undermine the values of either class, but appeals to an identity of “Chicago-writ-large” that complements other class identities espoused by listeners. Lennartz’s intra-speaker linguistic variation captures, through parody, a macro-social heteroglossic (Bakhtin 1981) experience of Chicagoness.

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