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NEAL HUTCHESON (producer and director). *Mountain talk*. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Language and Life Project, 2003. DVD \$20.

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Twenty years ago, I met many of my grandmother's fifty-odd cousins for the first time. Born in Panther Hollow, North Carolina (pronounced "Painter Holler"), my grandmother moved to the nearest town, Asheville, when she was a child. On the occasion of her seventieth birthday, many of the cousins she left behind came down out of the mountains to celebrate with her. A few of them spoke in a unique dialect, a "brogue" riddled with odd turns of phrase and vocabulary.

As I learned in *Mountain talk*, a documentary on the language and culture of Southern Appalachia, my relatives' speech was informed by their Scots-Irish ancestry. Scots-Irish settlers brought a distinctive vocabulary and syntax to the region; the isolation of Appalachia helps to preserve its idiosyncrasies. The willing participants in *Mountain talk* are the residents of Robbinsville, North Carolina, a town of fewer than a thousand people situated deep in the western corner of the state, in the mountainous divide between Georgia and Tennessee. These people are articulate and knowledgeable historians of their language, able to share their mountain heritage and to detail the impact of modernity on rural life and "talk."

Jim Tom Hedrick, an elderly ham radio operator with a talent for introducing rural Robbinsville to a far-flung audience, negotiates the divide between past and present: Satellite technology links him to fellow ham enthusiasts, and a moped gets him down the mountain to the local general store. Popcorn Sutton, a moonshiner, drives a vintage Ford. The camera often peers out his car windows, providing the audience with a fast-moving view of the landscape and an apt metaphor: Mountain people hurtle through the modern world while retaining their antique and charming folkways. Missing from this community, however, are children; a younger generation could reveal how this language is changing at the moment of the documentary's production. While it is obvious that the older citizens of the

area and the younger generations have different relationships to mountain culture and its language – influenced as young people are by the encroachments of popular culture – this difference is not explored.

The Scots-Irish history accounts for the lilting, singsong quality of Appalachian speech, and its unique vocabulary. Do you carry your lunch in a paper *poke*? Drink *dopes* (soda pop, cola)? Describe breezy, cool weather as *airish*? In the film's opening scenes, local folk translate the unique vocabulary they remember hearing as children, and that they still use. Language, like the culture it articulates, is always changing. If there is not a word that suits, the people of Robbinsville turn to invention; new words continue to make the language rich and distinctive. Shots of a selection of interviewees, all local and all able to define the word without prompting, demonstrate the communal integrity of the language. For the viewer, a spelling guide appears on the screen for these unfamiliar words. This feature of the documentary is particularly helpful with words like *sigoggin* 'out of line, curvy, not straight or plumb'. *Plumb*, by the way, is used most frequently as an adverb meaning 'completely' or 'exactly', and as an intensifier, as in *plumb tuckered out*.

The North Carolina Language and Life Project (NCLLP), a research group affiliated with North Carolina State University's Department of English, and their program in language study and linguistics, produced *Mountain talk*. NCLLP carries on research across the state, and beyond, to explain the many relationships between language and culture. *Mountain talk* is just one NCLLP documentary that serves an educational mission: to inform local communities and a broader audience of the relationships between language and culture. Neal Hutcheson, a documentary filmmaker based in Raleigh, North Carolina, and a video producer in the NCSU Department of English, produced and directed the documentary. To root the language in a broader historical and cultural context, the film employs many of the documentary conventions that supporters of PBS (which aired the film to great local acclaim) will find familiar.

The visual vocabulary of the film is quite limited. Only one archival illustration documents the colonial period of Scots-Irish immigrants, and its sole purpose is to cue the history of early settlers to the region. Archival photographs are nonexistent, but would be appropriate in a film so steeped in reminiscences of an earlier time. Shots of soaring birds, winding roads, and autumn leaves too frequently signal "rural America" without drawing enough attention to a Smoky Mountain landscape rich in visual pleasure.

It is the interviews with residents that provide visual variety and local color, revealing an endearing quirkiness of character and attitude that transcends the stereotypes of mountain people as peculiar. Many of the interviews take place in people's homes, in their cars, or in the community spaces, like the general store, where they congregate. This intimacy is duplicated in the structure of the interviews: While the interviewer and camera crew are never obtrusive, their pres-

ence is always felt as part of the audience gathered around the kitchen table or pulled up next to the wood-burning stove. The editing style is also unobtrusive, with medium shots and longer takes focusing the viewer's attention on the speaker. That the filmmakers gained such intimacy with their subjects reflects the hospitality of the community, the generosity of its members, and their ability to articulate their culture, even under scrutiny.

The documentary demonstrates the cultural currency of the language – its ability to retain its meaning in a community – by appealing to the authority of “talking heads.” Yet even the “talking heads” are locals. Gary Carden, a storyteller, playwright, and painter who is a fixture in Southern Appalachia, narrates the film. Carden is nearly deaf, but his distinct and resonant voice is familiar to many in the area. Authorities on the history of English in the region include Thomas Rain Crowe, a renowned poet, publisher, and translator who lives in western North Carolina; Karl Nicholas, a professor in the English Department of Western Carolina University, in Cullowhee, North Carolina, now retired; and Jonathan Williams, a poet and publisher associated with Black Mountain College in Asheville.

The film's soundtrack includes wonderful banjo picking by Gilford Williams and featured musicians Henry Queen and his mother, Mary Jane Queen members of a musical family that goes back generations. The soundtrack highlights traditional music like “The Old Time Religion” and “I Wish I Was a Single Girl Again.” The bonus documentary, *Scenes from Southern Appalachia*, contains additional footage of musicians both young and old, demonstrating the ability of music to make connections between generations. This problem of cultural continuity is briefly highlighted in *Mountain talk* in scenes where young children join in traditional dancing. On the bonus documentary, however, the young people's lack of knowledge of the old ways and its effects on the community is made more explicit. In addition, it is only in this bonus documentary that the interviewees are introduced as they appear on screen. In *Mountain talk*, only during the credits can the viewer easily match faces with names. As a result, *Scenes from Southern Appalachia*, at 25 minutes long half the length of *Mountain talk*, is a useful introduction to the community.

*Mountain talk* is as much a story of the struggle of a unique dialect to survive as it is the story of the unique culture in which this language is embedded. Despite the leveling effects of television, access outside the mountains made easier by better transportation, and the pressures to conform inflicted by outsiders – the not-from-around-here tourists and “snowbirds” who have brought money and change to this once isolated region – the past lingers on, kept alive in the language, stories, and music of the residents of Southern Appalachia.

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