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Final Project Pitch

In our project, we seek to investigate how linguistic dialects affect perceptions of social class. Variants of languages are divided in many ways: some by region, some by ethnicity, and some explicitly by the social class of their users. All of them, however, play a role in influencing perceptions of one's social class. Some dialects or characteristics of them generate the impression that one is uneducated, or they might be associated with those who are inferior in a social hierarchy. We wish to explore the causes and implications of this process, including why and to what extent dialects identify people by social class.

Consider for example the "zero copula" phenomenon in African American Vernacular English. In that dialect, it is common to avoid copular verbs like "to be" when connecting a subject with a predicate, as in "Where you at?" This in most cases is considered incorrect or grossly colloquial by the rules of Standard English. Similarly, consider how it is common in Appalachian English to prefix verbs with "a-" as in "a-huntin'" and "a-goin'." There is a clear association between this speech habit and the stereotype of a "hick" or "redneck." This raises such questions as: What are the precise effects that this manner of speech has on a speaker of Standard English? Why do certain characteristics of dialects have class implications, while

others do not? Our project will attempt to find answers to these and more as it pursues the general question of how people perceive social class based on dialects. It is an important question to ask, as social class divisions cause great strife in society, and language is paramount in shaping human interactions. The effect of variants of the latter on the former is essential to understand in order to develop strategies for improving relations among social classes.

We will present our information using a website, which will incorporate a video of interviews we will conduct along with written analyses of different components of the research question. We will also conduct a survey and perform data analysis with R on it; that analysis will be presented on the website too. Various sections of the website will correspond to different visual presentations. One section will be an interactive map infographic made from the information collected from our survey. Another section will showcase our video interviews with diverse students around campus that reflect dialects they use as well as provide insight on how people view dialects. Other sections will present general research from linguistics and sociology, and explain how our interviews and survey fit into it.

As we have seen with readings in class, surveys are a powerful tool in learning about a topic. We want to implement a survey to collect data about the dialects of students at the University of Michigan and their thoughts about how dialects reflect social class. We will create the survey on Qualtrics and share it with all the different grade groups on Facebook and various student organizations on campus. Although none of us have done the survey practice assignment, Michelle has discussed doing the survey with her GSI and the consensus was that at least one group member would have to complete the superpower in order to run the survey. Michelle will

complete the superpower and show the survey to her GSI before promptly releasing it to the public.

Eric will use the skills he has learned from completing the two R practice assignments in order to probe for patterns in the survey data. He will test for meaningful correlations between the variables we measure for in our survey: ethnicity, perception of dialects, geographical origin, etc. He will use a variety of graphical representations to visualize the data. One potential pitfall in applying data analysis is the fact that a large portion of our survey data will be qualitative. In order to generate meaningful results from our qualitative data, we will use natural language processing tools to categorize survey responses as into broad categories. Eric will use his familiarity with Python's natural language toolkit (from taking the computational linguistics course) to segregate responses. This will allow us to divide our qualitative responses into quantitative categories onto which we can apply statistical analysis tools.

Videos are a strong tool for delivering information to an audience. We will make a video depicting our interviews with people around campus about their views on dialects and how they perceive someone's social class based on dialect. We believe that this would be a great addition to our project because it allows us to see a personal side of dialects instead of just looking at data. Our survey will focus on the big picture, while the video interviews will provide a smaller, personal representation involving specific scenarios. We hope to get a diverse group in this video to achieve the most complete picture that we can. Michelle has created a video for her visual rhetoric badge that demonstrated a mastery of filmmaking and presented information in an intriguing way, so she is prepared to make this video. The practice assignment from which we

are incorporating filmmaking skills is Archive Visit: The Games We Play and Played in which Michelle made a video contrasting a game from before the 2000s and one after.

Lastly, Noah will undertake academic research to find current and past perspectives in the fields of social science about this topic. He will utilize the "Theoretical" and "Analysis" badges from his short essays and book quest to compile his research into articulate verbal explanations which will be presented on the website, alongside visual accompaniment. This research will include resources like studies and other writings published in fields such as linguistics and sociology, which were not used in class already.

The division of labor is clear: All three members of the group are proficient at web design, so it will be the responsibility of each member to implement the products of their research. Michelle will take charge of the surveys and the video interviews, Eric of the data analysis, and Noah of the written analyses. The collective action problem is solved, since this clear separation of duties makes it impossible to be a free rider. If one person did not fulfill their duties, a third of the project would be incomplete, which is sufficient pressure on each member to comply. By the end, we hope will have created an engaging and informative website with diverse perspectives addressing the crucial question of how we perceive social class differently based on dialects.