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## Po? Pow? What! A Class Project to Study Linguistic Variation in English

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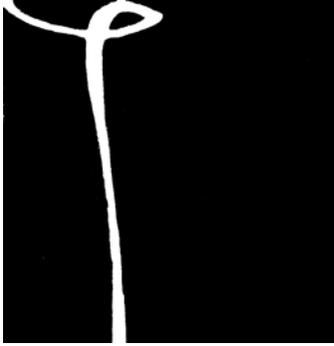
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# Po? Pow? What! A Class Project to Study Linguistic Variation in English

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*By Bruce A. Sofinski with Dyan Hansford, Sue Matthews, Rochelle Taylor, Kathryn Wilson, Rachel Henry and Lydia Polonofsky*

How does one teach critical thinking? How does one foster teamwork? What are the parts of a research study? Why is it important to learn this “stuff” anyway? We hoped to answer those questions during the spring 2007 semester at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College (JSRCC) when fourteen students in “Comparative Linguistics: American Sign Language & English” (ASL 220) embarked on a class project focused on linguistic variation.

This class project required students to apply various skills learned in the course, including critical thinking skills, teamwork, and grappling for understanding. The result was the development of standardized data-collection procedures and coding tools, which collectively resulted in a corpus of data coding the interviews of 166 individuals. This corpus was then used by the students to test hypotheses through the individual analysis and manipulation of data incorporated into a final class project write-up.

## The Capstone Project

Since 2000, I have had the opportunity to lead various groups of committed learners through this course, ASL 220, which is a prerequisite for students beginning the American Sign Language (ASL)-English Interpretation Associate of Applied Science and a requirement of the Arts and Sciences’ social sciences specialization in ASL/Deaf Studies. Students in this course aspire to work in some way with deaf people, a cultural group of Americans who use ASL as the primary mode of communication. Their future endeavors are highlighted by ASL-English (sign language) interpretation, but may also include other scholarly and educational pursuits such as teaching, audiology, speech pathology, and linguistic research.

The capstone project in ASL 220 is a class project studying linguistic variation in spoken English. While variation can and does occur in many different ways, this project focuses on two common types of variation – phonological and

lexical. Phonological variation occurs within the realm of sound when one produces a certain word differently (e.g., “ant” vs. “awnt,” a term used when referring to the female sibling of one’s parent). Lexical variation occurs within the realm of words, when more than one term is used to identify the same object or concept (e.g., “couch”, “sofa”, “davenport,” terms used when referring to a piece of furniture designed to seat at least three individuals) (Crabtree & Powers, 1991a; Crabtree & Powers, 1991b; Valli, Lucas, & Mulrooney, 2005).

Each semester, each new class of students begins as many different individuals, yet somehow congeals as a cohesive unit. Differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 1999, 2003) is employed to foster this group cohesiveness to pull together the final class project. In the case of ASL 220, the final class project in linguistic variation is the vehicle through which important skills in teamwork, critical thinking and application of content are combined to form an activity that is differentiated by interest and learning style of the students in the class. The process, product, and content of this activity are the same for everyone. However, the particular aspects of variation and the methodology employed to collect and report the data are determined and standardized through guided compromise and negotiation with the entire class (Sofinski, 2005; Sofinski, 2007). While many lessons are learned through the grappling of concepts and with hands-on application (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004; Eggen & Kauchak, 2001; Richard-Amato, 2003), the final project write-up is further differentiated through each student utilizing the corpus of data to assess hypotheses made prior to the implementation of data collection. In the end, students have experienced the many facets of empirical research, providing them with the foundation to apply newly-developed critical-thinking skills when reading, digesting, and considering the claims made by various researchers.

The final product is called a “write-up” for several reasons, including the fact that the literature review and methodology sections are completed through whole-class activities and are not written individually by each student. Instead, each student focuses upon the development of two thesis statements, which are based upon hypotheses made prior to data collection. Each of these theses is then either supported or rejected based upon the corpus of data collected individually, but reported in standardized format, compiled, and used by all members of the class.

## Methodology

As part of the introduction to ASL 220, the concept of lexical variation is presented. During this first course meeting, the syllabus is reviewed and the final class project is discussed, typically to many sad-looking faces. The instructor then leads the class on a discussion of critical thinking and teamwork, challenging the students to put aside differences and work together on the final class project.

Over the course of first half of the semester, as the other topics in the course are introduced, taught, and discussed, ten- to twenty-minute periods of several classes are used to encourage students to think about examples of linguistic variation that they would be interested in studying. After Spring Break, with the other lessons behind them, the class then focuses attention upon the final class project.

Having given consideration to which examples of phonological and lexical variation individual students wish to study, the instructor leads a brainstorming session. During this session, all ideas are proposed and described. After a break, students are asked to discuss which examples are the best to focus upon. It is during this phase that the final write-up is discussed in detail. After a session to continue the discussion of potential focal points via discussion board (ASL 220 Blackboard), students come to the next face-to-face class meeting for a final opportunity to convince classmates on which areas to focus. Then, each student casts a vote, which narrows the focus of the study to two examples of variation. During spring 2007, the class initially decided to investigate phonological variation in the pronunciation of the Powhite Parkway in Richmond and lexical variation through words chosen to identify a particular type of t-shirt (e.g., wifebeater, muscle shirt, undershirt, etc.).

Next, according to student interest in the topics, four groups are formed – two subgroups for each topic (i.e., two for Powhite and two for t-shirt). Each subgroup then comes up with two or three possible ways to collect data, which the subgroup prepares and presents to the other subgroup that is covering the same topic. After presentation and discussion, the subgroups merge, leaving two groups (one for each topic) and selecting and refining the best two data-collection procedures. During this process, the combined t-shirt group decided to change the topic of study to another topic, a lexical variation regarding how people refer to the vehicle known as a Volkswagen Beetle. At the end of this process, the two combined groups reconvene in one large group (i.e., the entire class), and the procedures are refined and finalized.

During the refinement and finalization of the data-collection procedures, the demographics to be collected and the reporting tool (an Excel spreadsheet) are developed. Then, one or more test subjects are selected and standardization of the procedures (focusing on data collection, identification, and reporting) is completed. By the end of the face-to-face meeting, the final data-collection procedures and reporting tools are uploaded to Blackboard. (See Appendix for the final data-collection procedures developed by the ASL 220 students in spring 2007.)

During the intervening period between these two face-to-face meetings, each student is then required to complete at least ten complete pieces of data (interviews). At the next face-to-face meeting, the data collected by each of the ASL 220 students is then combined into one master Excel spreadsheet, which is shared via Blackboard. Each student then completes the final project write-up by accessing, manipulating, and analyzing the same, shared corpus of data to investigate the two individual hypotheses made prior to the initiation of data collection. The final write-up consists of three major parts: introduction, analysis/discussion, and conclusion. These final products are assessed based upon these three parts, as well as appropriate use of English grammar.

## Student Involvement

While not required, some students conducted limited research, typically restricted to online search engines, into the backgrounds of the foci of the class project (Henry, 2007). For example, Matthews cites a source regarding the Powhite Parkway:

The *official pronunciation* is “Pow-hite,” in the same manner as you pronounce “Powhatan” and “Powder.” The name comes from the name of the creek that the parkway follows. References to the creek by this name have been found in records more than 300 years old, and the creek probably was named by Native Americans who were in the area long before colonial settlers arrived. ([www.rmaonline.org](http://www.rmaonline.org) in Matthews 2)

Some other students used broadcast media as information for the basis of thesis statements:

What I was hoping to gather from the data collected was that, regardless of how long someone has lived in the Richmond area, they would pronounce the parkway as the “Po-white” parkway, even if they knew that it was not the politically correct way to say it. I think people adapt to the majority. Since starting this project I started paying attention to how the media pronounces the name of the parkway. Most of the TV news stations will say

Pow-height so as to be politically correct. I did see on the news the other afternoon that on Channel 12 one reporter said Po-white Parkway and he was instantly corrected by an older newsperson that told him it is pronounced Pow-height. (Taylor, 2007, 1)

Students were required to make initial hypotheses and translate these into thesis statements in the final project write-up. The goal was to analyze, manipulate, and utilize the shared corpus of data either to provide support for or to refute the assertion made. To do this, students found the importance of collecting demographic information in order to examine one's hypothesis:

I believe that the pronunciation of the word "Powwhite" would break down along ethnic lines regardless of age and gender, and without regard to where they were born and raised or even how long they lived in the area. I anticipated that most black people and other minorities would pronounce the word "Po-white," while most white people would pronounce the word as "Pow-hite" or "Pow-white". As for the lexical differences for the Volkswagen Beetle, I anticipated the differences to be attributed to whether or not the person had children and the age of those children. Whether or not those surveyed had siblings and the age of the siblings were not taken into account for my hypothesis. (Hansford, 2007, 2)

Students then applied basic critical-thinking skills as the hypothesis was analyzed in light of the corpus of data. This typically required students to sort the data in different ways before coming to some type of conclusion.

I sorted the 50 participants raised in Richmond by age, setting the participant lives in now, whether the participant had siblings, and whether the participant has children. Those sorts did not show any kind of pattern. The data samples showed that Powwhite pronounced as "Po-white" is the dominant phonological variation for the participants raised in Richmond. (Wilson, 2007, 3)

The grappling with data – trying to make sense out of so many numbers (166 interviews were collected, coded and collated into the corpus of data) – was challenging for many students. In fact, some students went beyond initial theories as the analysis of data "spoke to them:"

Upon further analyzing the data from the study I noticed that quite a few people answered more than one term for their answer. There were almost 10 occasions in which a person responded with the car's full proper name, "Volkswagen Beetle," which was a combined answer of two of our choices. There were also quite a few people who answered with "Volkswagen Bug." There also seemed to be two instances of people making odd combinations

of the choices. For example, an individual gave “Volkswagen Beetle-bug” for an answer and another responded with “Punch Buggy-Love Bug.” Another interesting thing I noticed when it came to making combinations of names, is that most of the people who did this were over the age of 50.

As far as demographics go, I was correct about many people changing their answer the second time they were prompted to name the vehicle. Nearly 45 people gave two different answers, and females tended to change their answer more than males. Secondly, I found out that the only people who answered “Punch buggy” or “Punch Bug” were people who had siblings and children. I, however, found my hypothesis that men would answer with more technical manufacturer terms, to be inconclusive. (Polonofsky, 2007, 2-3)

### **Assessing the Capstone**

How does one assess student attainment? I have found this class project on linguistic variation to be useful in assessing student attainment of the over-arching goals of ASL 220, which include: developing critical-thinking skills, identifying success through teamwork, and grappling for understanding through application of various linguistic concepts. Students read many articles and are bombarded with various conclusions from these writings. Through the hands-on nature of the ASL 220 class project, students are more able to apply critical-thinking skills to these findings. Further, students learn that while teamwork takes extra effort, it also provides opportunities that “going it alone” cannot. Finally, by applying various facets required of empirical study design, students are faced with grappling with the very knowledge gained from this comparative linguistics course (i.e., phonological and morphological variation). The result of utilizing these newly-developed skills are borne out in their own analysis and conclusions contained in each student’s final class write-up.

### **Conclusion**

So, what did these students find out about the way Richmonders refer to the toll road that connects Richmond with Chesterfield County? While only 166 individuals were interviewed, this corpus of data provided students with a common set of results from which each could analyze various hypotheses. The findings of this small sample include the fact that – regardless of age, gender, race/ethnicity or time spent living in Richmond – approximately three out of four people surveyed refer to the Powhite Parkway as the “Po-white” Parkway. Further, the specific

word to identify the Volkswagen Beetle varied widely within this class project, with “bug” being the most popular response (61), followed by “beetle” (46) and “Volkswagen” (28). No other response was counted more than six (6) times.

More importantly, this process has been an effective learning tool for students to understand the various steps required in conducting and assessing research. The goal is for students to use this knowledge when reading future research in order to make better-informed decisions about the methodology, discussion, and findings presented in those studies. Through teamwork, application, and individual analysis, the goals of ASL 220 are achieved.

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## **Appendix: Interview Questions and Format**

Participant Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_

I am working on a class project. Would you be willing to answer a few questions to help me? I will only take a few minutes of your time.

First, I need to collect some background information.

1. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

If the participant will not provide the answer, say “Thank you for your time.”

2. Optional to ask: What is your gender? Male Female

3. How would you report your race/ethnicity to the census bureau?

If no answer, ask, “Would you say you are Caucasian, Hispanic, African-American, American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander... Other \_\_\_\_\_/”

4. Where were you raised? \_\_\_\_\_
5. How long have you lived in the Richmond area? \_\_\_\_\_
6. What part of town do you live in? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Would you describe that area as:    city            country            suburban
8. Do you have any siblings?    Yes            No
9. If yes, older or younger?    Older            Younger
10. Do you have children?    Yes            No
11. If yes, how old are they? \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for that background information.

### **Linguistics Questions**

1. What is the name of the Parkway in Richmond that starts with a “P”?  
Po-white                      Pow-height                      Pow-white
2. What do you call that dome shaped car that was popular 30-40 years ago?

*If no response, add, “It made a recent come back.”*

- Bug                      Punch Buggy                      VW                      Slug Bug  
Punch bug                      Volkswagen                      Love Bug                      Beetle  
Other \_\_\_\_\_

Thank You! I have two more questions.

3. What is the name of this toll road in Richmond?  
Po-white                      Pow-height                      Pow-white

4. What do you call these vehicles?  
Bug                      Punch Buggy                      VW                      Slug Bug  
Punch bug                      Volkswagen                      Love Bug                      Beetle  
Other \_\_\_\_\_