The Mascot Effect 2:

Social Factors Influencing Pronunciation of the Word *Coyote*

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Abstract

A sociolinguistic field study was conducted to follow up on previous findings that a "mascot effect" at North Dakota State University (NDSU) may include social factors that influence the pronunciation of university athletic monikers (mascots). Data was collected at NDSU and University of South Dakota (USD) to investigate whether the USD Coyotes, like the NDSU Bison, encode group identity through a preferred pronunciation of their mascot. Results showed a significant preference for a perceived "correct" pronunciation of the word *coyote* on USD campus and supported the mascot effect at NDSU. While the NDSU Bison encode group identity through voicing of the intervocalic *s* in *bison*, the USD Coyotes seem to encode not only group identity but also ties to rural or Old Western culture through removal of the third syllable and shift in stress pattern in their pronunciation of *coyote*.

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Sociolinguistics recognizes two main functions of language: to communicate and to identify. Sociolinguists are concerned with the second function—how speakers use specific language features either to identify as a member of a specific in-group or to differentiate their identity from that of an undesirable out-group. In both cases, the specific language features involved are marked by region or by social class or status. This notion is exemplified in the works of Labov (2006) and Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2006), and much of the foundation of this work has been provided by Hans Kurath as well as by the *DARE* project at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. The present study explores the social factors influencing pronunciation of the word *coyote*, focusing on a particular phenomenon found thus far in the Upper Midwest known as "the mascot effect."

Literature Review

Throughout the study of social and regional varieties of English in the United States, the Upper Midwest region, which includes North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, and Nebraska (Allen, 1974) has not been given the attention afforded the South, the East Coast, or even the neighboring Great Lakes Region, although it has increasingly been the object of linguistic study. When Allen put together a detailed description of speech patterns—semantic, syntactic, phonological, and phonetic—in the Upper Midwest, he based his atlas for all five states on only 437 total *informants* (those actually interviewed in the field) as well as 1,064 mail *respondents*, who filled out and returned questionnaires. The data from mail respondents may be suitable in approximating certain lexical and syntactic speech patterns, but the validity of studies of spoken language can only be ensured by removing the observer's paradox—change in speech due to self-consciousness—to elicit the *vernacular*, a speaker's natural style of speech (Labov, 2006). Only field interviewees provide this kind of data.

In Labov's own atlas (Labov, Ash, and Boberb, 2006), the description of The North dialect region ignores almost all of North Dakota (geographically), as well as half of South Dakota and nearly

half of Minnesota. These areas are classified together as a transitional zone known as "The North Central Region," which is represented only by eight telephone respondents (p. 141). In defense of Labov et al., his atlas aimed to gauge specific sound change patterns which were not prevalent in sparsely populated areas like The North Central Region. However, the notion that this region is defined mostly by what it *lacks* in language features demonstrates a lack of recognition of linguistic character in the region:

> [The region] does not participate actively in any of the sound changes in progress discussed so far except for the low back merger. It is distinguished from the North by the strong presence of that merger...It is distinguished from Canada by the absence of the Canadian Shift. It is distinguished from the both [sic] Canada and the West by a very limited fronting of /uw/ after coronals. (p. 141)

In other words, the region including most of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota lacks most of the features that interested Labov during the research for his atlas.

Furthermore, discussion by McDavid and McDavid (1960) about the North Central states ignores North Dakota and South Dakota. Only Allen (1964), prior to his in-depth study of the Upper Midwest, acknowledges dialect diversity within North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota. However, Carver (1987) expands the definition of the Upper Midwest "layer" of the dialect of the North to include Wisconsin and parts of Illinois and western Michigan, downplaying the North Central region while alluding to a level of character unnoticed by Labov and noting that "its heterogeneous nature creates a confusing web outlining what appear to be minor dialect areas" (p. 83).

Metcalf (2000), within what he calls "The Inland North," singles out Wisconsin, Minnesota, and the Dakotas as having "their own Scandinavian and German-flavored styles of speech" (p. 93). Metcalf further comments on the "North North Central accent," which provides the pure Minnesota /o/ exemplified in the 1996 movie *Fargo* (p. 106). He goes on to illustrate the Canadian influence on

North Dakota and Minnesota but differentiates South Dakota from the "North North," noting its speech patterns as "more typical of the West, the Mountain West in particular" (p. 112).

Frazer (2006) further dispelled "the mythical homogeneity of Midwestern English" (p. 102), noting the variety, including the influence of immigrant languages like Finnish, German, Swedish, and Norwegian in the "North Central" or "Upper Midwest" area that includes Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, and South Dakota (p. 104). Additionally, Frazer noticed the increase in Spanish-speaking influence in the Midwest, asserting that "the effect a growing influence of Spanish grammar and pronunciation will have on Midwest English is hard to predict" (p. 104).

Very recent research unearthed a language feature unique to the North Central Upper Midwest previously undescribed by the literature regarding this linguistic region—a feature that doesn't align neatly with *any* of the previous regions or subregions described in that literature but rather is encoded by strong social ties to a university athletic moniker or *mascot*.

The Mascot Effect

Schell & Barta (2011) presented work on a variation in pronunciation of the word *bison* on NDSU campus that seemed to be an artifact of regional identity. They found that students who pronounce the word with a voiceless intervocalic *s* (/s/) tend to come from hometowns outside of the sphere of influence of the Fargo-Moorhead metropolitan area, as opposed to Fargo-area residents who tend to pronounce the word with a voiced intervocalic *s* (/z/). A follow-up study by Barta, Black Cloud, Randklev, and Schell (2012) strongly suggested what the initial study hypothesized: that the existence of the NDSU mascot, the Bison, plays a significant role in the pronunciation variation and that the pronunciation of *bison* with the voiced *s* is a language feature that encodes local identity for residents of a specific "pocket" of speakers who identify with the area and are much more likely to be aware of the NDSU mascot than those who pronounce *bison* with the voiceless *s*. The 2012 study robustly defined an *isogloss*, or transitional area, between local "/z/-speakers" and non-local "/s/-speakers" in the tri-

state area (Figure 1) and posited a "mascot effect" on speakers who transgress the proposed isogloss into the local region. In other words, people who move into the Fargo-Moorhead area from outside the pocket of /z/-speakers tend to change their pronunciation of the word *bison* (adding the voicing of the *s*) to identify as part of the local community, the members of which consider the NDSU Bi/z/on to be a regional icon. Additionally, the researchers noted stories of coercion, wherein people who moved to the F-M area were gently "bullied" into conforming their pronunciations of *bison* to the local pronunciation. Many locals even admitted to perpetrating such coercion.

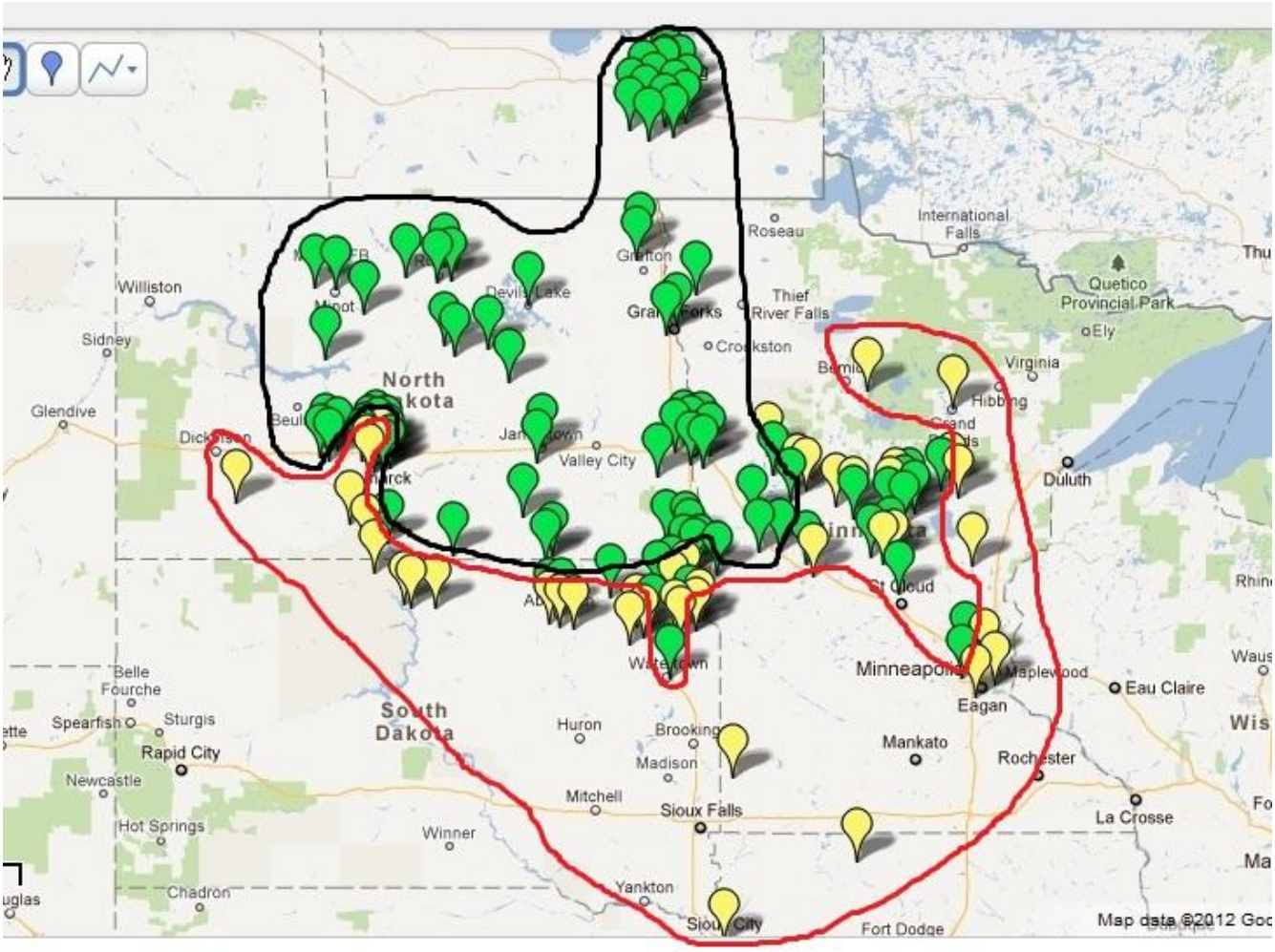

***Figure 1*. Results from Barta et al. (2012) show a transitional zone between *bison* /z/-speakers (in green) and /s/-speakers (in yellow) in North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Manitoba.**

Upon presentation of the initial study's findings to the Languages and Cultures Circles of Manitoba and North Dakota in 2011, an anonymous graduate student from the University of South Dakota

commented on a similar phenomenon at her school in Vermillion, SD. According to the anecdote, students who come to USD from outside the area may change the way they pronounce the word *coyote* to conform to the pronunciation preferred by the student body and by the locals, a pronunciation which omits the final syllable */i/* (rendering /kɑijoɾi/ or "kai-OAT-ee" as /kɑijoɾ/ or "KAI-oat") and corresponds to the school's mascot, the Coyotes (sometimes locally known as "the 'Yotes"). This appears to be another example of the mascot effect on language variation.

The purpose of the present study is to gather data to test for the mascot effect at the University of South Dakota and to lend further credibility to the notion of a mascot effect in the Fargo-Moorhead area.

Method

Experimental Group

Informants. Informants were 80 University of South Dakota students who were interviewed on USD campus. Students were approached randomly inside or near the Muenster University Center (the student union) and asked to participate in an undergraduate research project for the NDSU English Department which would involve an animal identification task.

Procedure. The interviewer notified the participant of his or her rights as a research subject and then began the animal identification task, in which the participant was shown a series of nine black-and-white pictures of animals (see Appendix) and asked to identify each one. The pictures shown were those of a dog, a wolf, an Egyptian jackal, a coyote, a red fox, another coyote, a bison, a third coyote, and another bison. During the task, the interviewer took pen-and-paper note of the participant's pronunciation of *coyote*, noting whether or not the speaker included the third syllable. If the participant identified either of the pictures of the bison as "bison," the interviewer noted whether the participant's pronunciation included a voiced or voiceless intervocalic *s*. After the animal identification task, the interviewer asked the participant for his or her academic status (student or not),

hometown, and whether or not he or she could name the mascot of USD. If the participant used a different pronunciation of *coyote* when identifying the school's mascot than during the animal identification task, the interviewer noted this.

Control Group

Informants. Informants were 19 North Dakota State University students who were interviewed on NDSU campus. Students were approached randomly inside or near the Memorial Union (student union) and asked to participate in an undergraduate research project for the NDSU English Department which would involve an animal identification task.

Procedure. The procedure was the same as for the experimental group except that these participants were not asked to identify the mascot of USD.

Results

Quantitative Results

Experimental group. Out of 80 informants at USD, 70 identified a coyote during the animal identification task, and 75 identified the USD mascot as the coyote. Ten consistently pronounced *coyote* with three syllables, 65 consistently pronounced it with only two syllables, and five produced both pronunciations. A pronunciation was considered "consistent" in any of three cases: 1) where an informant produced the same pronunciation in both the animal identification task and when identifying the USD mascot, 2) where an informant identified a coyote during the animal identification task but failed to identify the USD mascot as the coyote, and 3) where an informant failed to identify a coyote during the animal identification task but successfully identified the USD mascot as the coyote. In no case did an informant produce variation in pronunciation within either the animal identification task or the post-task university mascot query. Rather, the five informants who produced both pronunciations did so *across* tasks: one pronunciation during the animal identification task and a different pronunciation in response to the university mascot query. A chi-square test revealed that the

distribution of responses between those who produced consistent pronunciations significantly favors the two-syllable pronunciation, $\chi^2(1, N = 75) = 40.34$, $p < .001$. The five informants who produced both pronunciations produced the three-syllable pronunciation when identifying the animal and the two-syllable pronunciation when identifying the mascot. Twenty-one informants identified a bison during the animal identification task, and all 21 of these informants produced *bison* with a voiceless intervocalic *s*.

Control group. Out of 19 informants at NDSU, 10 pronounced *coyote* with three syllables, and 9 pronounced it with only two syllables. A chi-square test revealed that this distribution does not significantly favor one pronunciation over the other, $\chi^2(1, N = 19) = .05$, $p = .82$. Quantitatively, the key difference between the experimental group and the control group is that the experimental group at USD heavily favored the two-syllable pronunciation.

Qualitative Results

Experimental group. Results of the interviews at USD, plotted according to the hometowns of the informants (Figures 2 & 3), reveal no significant pattern beyond that most informants produced the two-syllable pronunciation of *coyote*. There is no discernible isogloss between speakers of the two-syllable pronunciation of *coyote* and the three-syllable pronunciation.

***Figure 2*. Distribution of speakers of *coyote* at USD. Data points are plotted according to the hometowns of the speakers. Those in red pronounced *coyote* with two syllables. Those is blue pronounced *coyote* with three syllables. Those in green pronounced *coyote* both ways.**

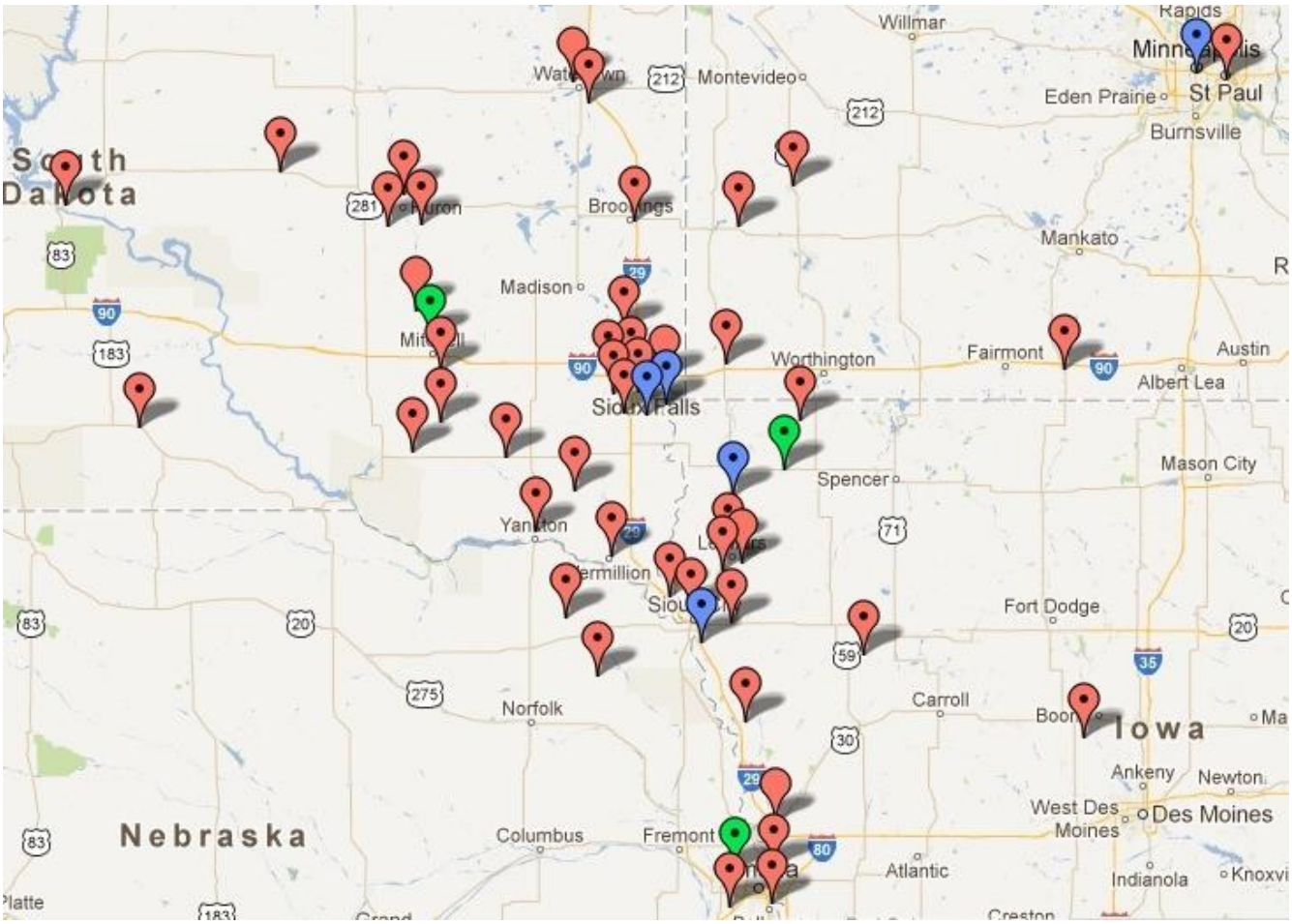

Figure 3. **A closer look at the same distribution, centered around USD in Vermillion. Data points without black dots indicate speakers who did not successfully identify the USD mascot as the coyote.**

Control group. Results of the interviews at NDSU, plotted according to the hometowns of the informants (Figure 4), reveal that speakers in the control group were divided roughly by the North Dakota-Minnesota border or by Interstate 29, which closely coincide. Speakers of the two-syllable pronunciation of *coyote* were from the west side of this possible isogloss, and speakers of the three-syllable pronunciation were from the east side.

Figure 4. **Distribution of speakers of *coyote* at NDSU. Data points are plotted according to the hometowns of the speakers. Those in red pronounced *coyote* with two syllables. Those is blue pronounced *coyote* with three syllables. None of the data points have black dots because NDSU informants were not asked to identify the USD mascot.**

Qualitatively, the key difference between the experimental group and the control group is that the control group at NDSU showed a possible west-east distinction between the two pronunciations of *coyote*. The experimental group at USD showed no such distinction.

Discussion

Data from the experimental group at USD clearly shows a strong preference on USD campus for the two-syllable pronunciation of *coyote*, and it also establishes that there is indeed variation between two pronunciations of *coyote*. Data from the control group at NDSU reinforces the dichotomy between two-syllable and three-syllable pronunciation of *coyote*, illustrating a possible west-east distinction, and demonstrates that NDSU students at large have no clear preference for one pronunciation over the other. The data taken in total suggests some local factors at USD that account for its students' preference for the two-syllable pronunciation of *coyote*, although it is not immediately obvious what those factors are.

A Regional Perspective

One might argue that this difference in pronunciation is simply regional. Vermillion, SD, is far enough removed from Fargo, ND, to show difference in pronunciation based on distance alone. Vermillion is approximately 300 miles due south of Fargo, but several sources, including the control group data from the present study, suggest a west-east division between the two pronunciations of *coyote*, not a north-south one (Dobie, 1949; Adams, 1968; Blevins, 1993; Metcalf, 2000; Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2012). Metcalf goes as far as to say that the word *coyote* helps mark the linguistic boundary between the East and the West. Meanwhile, Labov (2006) marks the easternmost boundary of the West dialect region in western South Dakota and central Nebraska (Figure 5), while the Mississippi River is commonly cited as the geographic boundary between East and West. Both Vermillion and Fargo fall in between these two proposed East-West boundaries. Recalling Metcalf's assertion that South Dakota speech patterns mirror those of the West more so than do North Dakota speech patterns, one may consider that today's East-West boundary is not a straight vertical and that Vermillion speakers fall on the west side of this grand isogloss even though NDSU data suggests that Fargo lies directly *on* this isogloss. This consideration, though, that Vermillion is simply on the brink of a major isogloss and yet still demonstrates an overwhelming preference for one pronunciation over the other—where one would normally expect a more transitional distribution near an isogloss, such as is seen in the NDSU control data—begs for further investigation.

***Figure 5*. The map from Labov (2006) shows the boundaries of The West dialect region in the United States.**

The word *coyote* came to English via Mexican Spanish (from the Nahuatl word *coyotl*) through contact with Mexicans in the American Southwest (Watts, 1977). Metcalf (2000) notes that "[the coyote's] habitat is historically to the west of the Mississippi River, so not surprisingly *coyote* is more of a Western word" (p. 121). Settlers of the American West encountered this animal, the coyote, but they didn't have a word for it, so they borrowed one from Mexicans, who had been among coyotes long enough to have a name for them (a name they borrowed and adapted from an indigenous tribe). But Spanish speakers pronounce *coyote* with three syllables, and yet Western Americans pronounce it with only two. One or both of two recognized mechanisms of linguistic change may account for this Western pronunciation of *coyote*. The first is a simple shortening, or *clipping*, of the word—a very common phenomenon in English (Crystal, 2004, p. 457). The second is that English speakers took a Spanish word and shifted the Romance stress pattern to suit their Germanic language sensibilities—a phenomenon observed by Svensson and Hering (2009) in French loan words to English and German.

French and Spanish share the Romance tendency to place stress on the later syllables. Spanish in particular tends to stress the penultimate syllable by default, as in the Spanish three-syllable pronunciation of *coyote*. Meanwhile, Germanic languages such as English tend to stress initial syllables, as in the two-syllable pronunciation of *coyote*. It is perhaps this Anglicization or, perhaps more accurately, this Germanicization of the Mexican Spanish word *coyote* that led to the two-syllable pronunciation of the American West, with the third syllable getting lost in translation.

A Social Perspective

In the United States right now, two distinct pronunciations of *coyote* (independent of vowel quality) are maintained: one with two syllables and one with three syllables. Either historical explanation above may account for the shift from one pronunciation to the other, but neither explains why the shift pervaded only half of the country. What might motivate a speaker to produce one or the other?

The Western dialect region is relatively young and relatively disorganized, much like the North Central Upper Midwest. As settlers moved into the American West, they became separated from the rest of the country by the Mississippi River and by sheer distance, and this isolation bred a distinctly Western culture, which was reflected through a distinctly Western language. Emblematic of this culture are the many lexical items that were created to give meaning to life in the West, as evidenced by the many anthologies of Western words (Adams, 1968; Watts, 1977; Blevins, 1993). Notably, these volumes contain a plethora of verbs and compound words created from the word *coyote*: *coyote dun*, *coyote hole*, *coyoting*, *coyotin' round*, *coyotin' round the rim*, *coyote diggings*, *coyote gold*, *coyote shaft*, *coyote houses*, *coyote days*, *coyote tobacco*, *coyote melon*, and *coyote thistle*. Perhaps the word *coyote* better lent itself to these Western neologisms—this verbing and compounding—when produced in the two-syllable form with the stress on the first syllable, and thus this two-syllable manifestation encoded Western culture.

On the other hand, Westerners may have distinguished themselves through their Germanicized stress patterns. David Corson (1995) identified the "pseudo-prestige" associated with Greco-Latinate vocabulary, as opposed to Germanic vocabulary (p. 46). This prestige could just as easily be ascribed to Greco-Latinate stress patterns, from which the Spanish three-syllable stress pattern of *coyote* was descended. New American Westerners may have tended toward the Germanic (perhaps in their view, American) stress pattern of the two-syllable pronunciation of *coyote* to dissociate themselves from that Old-World Latin prestige, thus conveying upon their culture a covert prestige encoded through their language style. Allen (1974) provides support for this notion, distinguishing between "cultivated" and "uncultivated" speakers and noting that "variants with final stress are conspicuously preferred by the cultivated speakers" (p. 286). It is entirely possible that Western speakers took pride in being "uncultivated" and thus preferred the uncultivated stress patterns.

In either case, the pronunciation variation of *coyote* seems to have been born out of a need to encode identity in the remote West. That this Western identity persists in modern times is apparent in speakers' allegiance to a perceived "correct" pronunciation, and this allegiance is manifested at the University of South Dakota, where one informant suggested that people who are around coyotes pronounce the word with two syllables (with stress on the first syllable), and another informant suggested that speakers who produce the three-syllable pronunciation of *coyote* ought to be punched in the face. It seems that students at the University of South Dakota, less than an hour west of Interstate 29 and just off the beaten path, encode their ties to Western culture—or what perhaps can be better understood in modern times as their ties to rural, as opposed to urban, culture—through a specific language feature manifested in the name of their mascot.

Caveats Associated with the Mascot Effect

The potential mascot effect at a given institution requires that the institution's mascot have a name that lends itself to pronunciation variation and that those affiliated with the institution conform

tightly to a single pronunciation. It also necessarily involves pressure from those among the in-group upon newcomers to change their pronunciation to match the preference of the already-affiliated. The institution in question need not be a university. Metcalf (2000) relates the story of Coyote Creek Elementary school, just outside of Denver, which demonstrates not only conformity to a single pronunciation (in this case the opposite of the pronunciation preferred at USD) of the same word as in the present study, but also the attitudes associated with pronunciation variation: "[o]nly people from New Jersey…pronounce the 'e'" (p. 121). The distinguishing feature of the mascot effect may or may not encode a predisposition to a particular social status. A comparison of the *Bison* and *Coyote* studies illustrates the difference.

In the present study of *coyote* at USD, a social motivation to produce one pronunciation or the other was probably in effect 100 years before the founding of USD. USD students are now bound to historic ties to Western culture (and perhaps present ties to rural culture) through the way they pronounce the name of their school mascot. In the previous study of *bison* at NDSU (not to be confused with the present study's control group), no such predisposition to social status was found. Instead, researchers tracked the origin of the intervocalic *s* in *bison* to French influence from the north, in Canada. The study posited no social status encoded in this language feature beyond membership in "The Thundering Herd" (iconified in NDSU promotional materials) in the Fargo-Moorhead sphere of influence. Whether or not USD's "Howling Pack" is displaying exactly the same phenomenon is in good question. Certainly there is no consistency in the type of language feature implicated, as the application of voicing to an intervocalic *s* bears no resemblance to a shift in stress accompanied by a deletion of a syllable.

Additionally, the nicely-defined isogloss in the *bison* study was not paralleled in the *coyote* study. With *bison*, the pocket of /z/-speakers was defined by the area that contained only /z/-speakers (See again Figure 1). The study of *coyote* applied no such definition because the investigation is

incomplete. Recalling that all informants were USD students, whether or not speakers had already been coerced into conforming their pronunciations to the variant preferred by the USD student body could not be determined. Thus, the true pronunciation tendencies of the hometowns cited by USD students also was not determined and could not be determined without investigating the speakers of the hometowns themselves (independent of direct university influence). This investigation of hometowns *was* conducted in the *bison* study, and this gap in the *coyote* study renders the present study more of a pilot study, akin to the initial 2011 investigation of *bison*.

A final note on determining whether or not the mascot effect is indeed effect: The *bison* study was able to delineate speakers of one pronunciation from speakers of its variant definitively by region and then was able to posit something about that particular region. The *coyote* study was not able to delineate speakers in this way. The *coyote* study, however, *was* able to delineate regions of speakers based on statistical leanings toward a particular pronunciation variant. In other words, where the *bison* study demonstrated that "speakers over here all say this and speakers over there all say that," the *coyote* study demonstrated that "speakers over here have a statistically very significant tendency to say this and speakers over there say either this or that at random or based on some other regional factor." Does this make the mascot effect at USD weaker than the mascot effect in Fargo-Moorhead, or does the fact that the mascot effect at USD encodes a predisposed connection to a particular social status render it the only true mascot effect of the two?

Additionally, the two-syllable pronunciation of *coyote* is not strictly Western. Or, perhaps more accurately, the West is not strictly two-syllable territory. The National Hockey League's *Phoenix Coyotes* moniker is pronounced with three syllables in national broadcasts. Perhaps cities close enough to the Mexican border are still influenced by the Spanish pronunciation, or perhaps the fact that the hockey team (the institution) resides in a *city* and has national attention encodes urban-ness in direct contrast to the modern rural-ness encoded by the two-syllable pronunciation of *coyote*.

Over time, the bison and the coyote (the animals) have followed opposite trajectories in the United States. While the bison has steadily decreased in population and become limited in its geographical breadth, the coyote started in the West and now spans the entire United States. Preservation of the past may be a consideration in the mascot effect. If the Coyotes of USD claim Old Western cultural ties through the Western pronunciation of the word *coyote*, it should likewise be considered that the Bison of NDSU claim ties to times when the bison were more ubiquitous on the prairie by substituting *themselves* for the *actual* thundering herds, which have all but disappeared.

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Appendix

Stimuli used in the animal identification task