Like, unique...

Were you to design a signal system using the voice to form the sound of words, you might do it a little differently than Nature did. For one thing, you would eliminate ambiguity by giving everyone the same acoustic machinery. After all, why have everyone use a unique voice? If you want to know who is talking, ask them to say their social security number.

Then, you would probably rule out all homonyms, on the argument that ambiguity can thereby be further avoided. After all, why rely on context for meaning? Let the words do the work.

Last, you would want everyone to say the same word the same way, instead of tolerating regional differences and even individual differences in articulation. The goal, once again, is the engineer’s aim of isomorphism between the meaning and the sign.

Alas, languages, even English, exhibit all of these forms of variation. Anatomical variation affects the frequencies at which resonances occur; homonymy means that sometimes a bat in a playground is a flying rodent and sometimes a stick used to strike a baseball. But, what about dialect and idiolect?

You can document differences in phonetic manifestations of unambiguous word-forms by asking your friends to produce these sentences, and noting what they say. Try to indicate, in your own invented shorthand, how your friends differ among themselves when they speak these sentences.

The nurse was near the North square.
I thought a goose had fleece on its face.
I have four dogs in my house.

Say a word in conclusion about the design features of language, specifically, why the integrity of the message apparently seems to be risked in order to provide a vehicle by which the talker can express personal uniqueness. Bring your essay to class on April 29.