



## *An overview of the phenomenon of L-vocalisation in English varieties around the world*

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### **Abstract:**

*This study is an attempt to review one of the increasing phenomena in English varieties around the world: L-vocalisation. It seeks to shed light on the nature of this phenomenon as well as the contexts in which it is possible. It also highlights the social behaviour of this feature and how it is spreading to different places where English is spoken. A historical overview of the genesis of this phenomenon is also given reviewing in the process the main studies that tracked its occurrence in different English varieties. The study thus captures some prominent observations reported on the behaviour of L-vocalisation.*

*The study concludes that while this feature is well-established, there are potential lines of further research that can be pursued as regards L-vocalisation.*



## 1. : Introduction

Several ground-breaking studies have revolutionized the field of research on language variation and change. In light of this, much work has gone into examining the phonological phenomena that have been around in different varieties of English. Chief among these phenomena is L-vocalisation, which is by far one of the most notable linguistic variables informed of in and outside the British Isles. Given the limited space in this study, it is not possible to provide a thorough analysis of this element of variation in English. However, we will try to provide a brief account of this phenomenon and the numerous studies that covered its occurrence and spread in different accents and dialects. We will also provide a portrait of how the researchers take into account the social and linguistic factors that influence whether or not L-vocalization occurs.

First of all, let us define this phenomenon and then discuss how it has been explored. Basically, L-vocalisation can be defined as a process whereby /l/ loses its alveolar lateral nature and becomes a vowel of the [o] or [ʊ] type. In other words, the lateral is replaced by a vowel or semivowel sound. This phenomenon occurs most often to the velarized alveolar lateral approximant [ɫ], also known as the 'dark' allophone of /l/. L-vocalization is accordingly restricted to the environments appropriate for, namely pre-consonantal and word-final (except where the following word begins with a vowel) in words such as *milk* and *middle* (Wells 1994a: 199). With this in mind, the next few sections will shed more light on this feature.

## 2. L-vocalisation: an overview of its history and distribution

Lateral consonants in English display two main tongue constrictions: an apical constriction and a dorsal one (Gick et al. 2006). Nevertheless, there is a rather subtle variation as regards the rendition of these sounds. Broadly speaking, the literature has reported three main variants of /l/: namely, 'light', 'dark', which are also phonetically referred to as "palatalised" and "velarised" respectively. The third variant of /l/, which is the focus of this study, is the vocalised one. The vocalised realisation of /l/ often involves rounding of the lips.

Even though this type of realisation lacks reliable and well-documented acoustic indicators, scholars resort to auditory judgements to detect the occurrence of this feature (Hall-Lew and Fix 2012).

The bulk of research on L-vocalisation has been concentrated on how this form has been diffusing and the linguistic and social constraints on its variation (Johnson &



Britain 2007: 296). The envelope of variation in the allophony of palatalized and velarised forms of /l/ has received a great deal of attention, past and present.

Generally speaking, it has been reported that palatalized forms of /l/ is most likely to occur in onsets while the velarised ones can be found in codas (Johnson & Britain 2007: 294).

The occurrence of vocalisation is one of the prominent innovations that have been reported in word-final and pre-consonantal contexts. As we will show in more detail below, this feature has been reported in English varieties spoken in and beyond the United Kingdom.

Vocalisation of lateral /l/ may also involve a simultaneous process of vocalic merger in positions that precede vocalised /l/. This is particularly the case in Cockney whereby we could see homophonous realisations of words such 'real' reel' and 'rill' (Altendorf, 2003).

Another context in which vocalised variants of /l/ were reported is syllabic /l/ in which it is rendered into /o/. For instance, the word 'bottle' /'bɒtlo/. A historical portrait has also been given by some researchers who have considered the possibility that the past and present constraints of L-vocalisation have rather similar roots.

In certain contexts, namely after /ɑ:/ and /ɔ:/ and before labials and velars, instances of vocalised /l/ may be traced to the 16th century (Johnson & Britain 2007:298), whereas the Northern and North Midland form of L-vocalisation dates back to as early as the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries (Jones 1997: 107). Therefore, this may indicate why in almost all dialects of English today a lateral consonant is absent in, for example, 'calf', 'palm', 'talk' and 'stalk'. Another indication of note is what Stuart-Smith *et al.* (2006: 4) state about the appearance of L-vocalisation in Glaswegian as being an interesting one not only because it represents another instance of an apparently diffusing feature so geographically distant from accents of Southern English with which it has been most usually associated. It is also because when this type of L-vocalisation entered this particular dialect, it is an innovation with respect to an existing form of L-vocalisation continued from Scots, which was completed by the mid-fifteenth century.

In some dialects, sporadic and apparently rather localised occurrences of vocalisation have also been found. Ihalainen (1994) reports a number of 17th to 19th century sources as showing evidence of vocalisation in 'the North', especially in Yorkshire. Petyt (1985) reports vocalisation in old words among older speakers of urban West Yorkshire. Wright (1905) notes its occurrence across the North where /l/ forms part of



a coda cluster while Orton (1933) reports it in South Durham. However, despite its pervasiveness in many dialects of English today, the current wave of /l/-vocalisation affecting south-eastern England (and many of the other locations mentioned above) is a fairly recent phenomenon. Clearly with this opinion is Trudgill (2004: 79) who claims that it is obviously a twentieth-century innovation. Wells (1982:259) also points out that there is no reference to it in descriptions of Cockney until the early 20th century.

Johnson & Britain (2007: 296) state that L-vocalisation is reported in those dialects which have developed a clear dark /l/ allophony especially in the varieties of English spoken in the South-Eastern part of Britain as reported in a number of studies (e.g. Bowyer, 1973; Hardcastle and Barry, 1989; Hudson and Holloway, 1977; Meuter, 2002; Przedlacka, 2001; Spero, 1996; Tollfree, 1999; Trudgill, 1986; Wells, 1982; Scobbie and Wrench 2003). Indeed, it appeared to be categorical in some varieties there and extended to many other dialects including American English (e.g. Ash, 1982; Hubbell, 1950; Pederson, 2001); Australian English (e.g. Borowsky, 2001; Borowsky and Horvath, 1997; Horvath and Horvath, 1997, 2001, 2002), New Zealand English (e.g. Bauer, 1986, 1994; Horvath and Horvath, 2002) and Falkland Island English (e.g. Sudbury, 2001). Stuart-Smith *et al.* (2005, 2006) also recorded this phenomenon in Glaswegian. Early studies of, and commentaries on African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) (e.g., Labov, *et al* 1968; Labov, 1970, 1972; Fasold & Wolfram, 1970; Wolfram & Fasold, 1974). These studies indicate that /l/-vocalization is also a salient feature of North American AAVE, particularly for Northern speakers of AAVE, closely resembling Edited American English (EAE) usage and realization patterns.

### 3. How it has been approached

Depending on the different orientations and purposes of the studies, a range of methods and techniques have been used in examining L-vocalisation. Each methodology facilitates good insights into the way the researcher describe the variable concerned. Therefore, in carrying out their studies, scholars have adopted varied techniques to gather and analyse a wealth of data ranging from recording spontaneous and read speech (e.g. Stuart-Smith *et al.*, 2006, Dodsworth.*et al.*, 2006, Hardcastle and Barry,

1989) to tape-recorded interviews (e.g. 1982), and wordlists (e.g. Borowsky and Horvath, 1997).

There has been relatively a variety of analytic techniques used in examining the phenomenon.



In their study of L-vocalisation in Australia and New Zealand English, Horvarth & Borowsky (2001: 7) state that the primary objective of the Goldvarb analysis they adopted is to examine each of the social, linguistic and geographic factors which constitute 'the context' of a given utterance of /l/ and to determine the contribution that a particular factor makes to the probability that the /l/ will be vocalised". What is special about the work of Horvarth and Borowsky (2001) is that it focuses primarily on the vocalization of /l/ in a number of communities in Australia and New Zealand . Thus, this makes it stand apart from the majority of research on language change in progress whereby multiple linguistic features in a single speech community are examined. By conducting an impressionistic analysis of the vocalization of the consonant /l/ using data from speakers in Columbus, Ohio, Dodsworth et al. (2006) analyse the effect of race on consonantal variance. Their rationale behind choosing this type of analysis was because previous attempts (e.g., Lehiste, 1964; Ash, 1982) in which spectrographic analysis was employed to instrumentally determine the variants of /l/ have proven unsuccessful (Durian 2008:3). Dodsworth *et al.* (2006) utilised a sizeable sample of speakers and a larger word pool. However, the subjects of their research either included white collar EAs residing in urban and suburban parts of the greater Columbus metropolitan area or white collar EAs residing in Worthington, Ohio, a suburb of Columbus.

Another methodological observation can also be found in a study by Labov *et al* (1968) in which they investigated the development of the /l/-vocalization among young people in New York City, particularly Black and Puerto Rican communities. In this study, The phonetic constraints of /l/-vocalization in these communities were said to be similar to that of /r/-vocalization. In terms of their description of the distribution of realizations of vocalized /l/ variants, The study's scope was restricted to an impressionistic analysis of vocalisation of /l/ occurring in word-final contexts. They investigated five forms: (clear "l"; dark "l"; unrounded "l"; centralized "l"; and deleted "l").

Stuart-Smith et al., (2006) have examined the role of social factors in the occurrence of this phenomenon. Within a broad, "general-to-specific" paradigm, they used logistic regression analysis to analyse the data they had collected. The analysis was initially conducted using theme categories (such as "dialect contact," "attitudes," "television," etc.). After that, a set of final regressions assessed all significant factors collectively.

Another type of analysis used in examining the vocalisation of /l/ is electropalatography. This methodology is unquestionably a very helpful tool for finding what Hardcastle (1995: 66) refers to as the usually fairly minor changes in articulatory activity. Additionally, Scobbie and Wrench (2003) present articulatory (electropalatographic, EPG, and electromagnetic articulographic, EMA) findings for



seven English-speaking individuals from Scotland, England, and America. All speakers were found to be exhibiting "pervasive and systematic" vocalization in /l/. Other researchers such as Dodsworth (2005) and Ash (1982) conducted VARBRUL analysis of tokens taken from their informants. They adopted this technique to evaluate the degree of association between language phenomena and various extralinguistic and contextual linguistic elements in a logical manner. It is also a useful tool for exploring how much different factors can take into consideration every variation in a pool of data. It can also determine the extent that such factors can have a role in the occurrence of certain forms of a variable. It can also enable us to know when to expect these variants to happen. However, Guy (1988:133) states that "VARBRUL just manipulates a set of data mathematically." It doesn't even perform any linguistics for us; it just tells us what the numbers imply.

#### 4. State of the affairs of the literature

The bulk of research on this phenomenon has much in common. Researchers have demonstrated that the stages through which the sound change has progressed were similar in a number of English dialects and that the vocalization of velarised (dark) /l/ is widespread and on the rise, especially in those dialects which have clearly acquired a dark /l/ allophonic variation. In most dialects of English covered in the literature, this form of vocalised /l/ serves as a back vowel or semi-vowel which may take certain degrees of lip roundedness (Wells, 1982). may result in a voiced glide (Ash, 1982) reports another outcome in the form of a voiced palatal glide while front vowels still hinder it (Laurer 2008: 232) and also 'dorsal consonants most strongly disfavour vocalisation' (Durian 2008:4) . In South East London English Tollfree (1999) reports vocalised forms of /l/ in a number of contexts: word-final positions followed by a consonant or a pause as in (*all right*), and (*will*) respectively. Other contexts included word-internal position followed by a consonant as in (*filthy*); syllabic /l/ (*people*), and word-final position between vowels as in (*legal info*) although the latter context is restricted to younger generations. English spoken in Australia and New Zealand has been found to have a similar type of L-vocalization. According to Borowsky and Horvath's (1997: 102) study on Australian English, the instance of coda /l/ (such as in *cool*) is typically less vocalized than syllabic /l/. Wells (1982: 313 – 314) argues that L-vocalisation is overtly stigmatised, being disapproved by the speech-conscious. Interestingly, Hardcastle & Barry (1989) claim that Despite the fact that it is typically considered to be stigmatized, vocalization appears to be on the rise. In addition, a number of studies also show that this feature is well-established and is gaining widespread acceptance. Hay *et el* (2008: 35) state that it is evident how widely accepted this sound change is becoming in New Zealand from the fact that older



women from higher socioeconomic groups vocalize over 40% of read word lists. Another observation on its acceptance is Charles Jones' (1997:320), who indicates that it is unfortunate (and possibly noteworthy) that there are several reported occurrences of vocalized /l/ given the frequency of L-vocalisation among modern Glaswegian and West of Scotland speakers of practically all social strata. Durian (2008) also shows this feature is a general feature of Columbus speech while Altendorf (1999: 7) states that, on the continuum between Cockney and RP, /l/-vocalization is prevalent in all socially-defined speech varieties.

Researchers owe this increasing trend towards L-vocalisation to the influence of some factors like media. Stuart-Smith *et el* (2006) have researched the role of media in the spread of this phenomenon. They disclosed that a variety of factors, including exposure to Southern English and involvement with the hugely popular London-based soap opera *EastEnders*, are lying behind the speed of this change.

Leitner (2004: 215) claims L vocalisation is recent and is attributable to the influence of today's popular London and current RP. However, the phenomenon of vocalising /l/ is omnipresent as recent accounts (e.g. Turton & Baranowski, 2021) have shown that while it is on the increase in many British varieties, the case is not so in Manchester despite it having traces of occurrence in the speech of young Mancunians.

Although linguistic diffusion has typically been used to describe the phenomena, Johnson & Britain (2007: 294) finds that this language change is both normal and should be anticipated, provided the necessary linguistic circumstances are there. An obvious characteristic of L-vocalisation that researchers have found is idiosyncrasy. Przedlacka (2001: 41) states that it seems to be an idiosyncratic characteristic as L-vocalisation does not appear to be confined to a particular environment. While it is absent in words such as *almost*, it occurs in others such as *always*, *devil*, and *milk*. Stuart-Smith *et el* (2006), also indicates L-vocalisation is idiosyncratic in Glaswegian. Some studies provide conclusions concerning the social factors affecting L-vocalisation realisation. Laurer (2008) finds that age and gender are significant and vocalisation prevails in the speech of young male adults. Przedlacka ( 2001 : 40-41) mentions that notable social differences still exist between working-class and middle-class speakers on the one hand, and upper-middle-class speakers on the other hand, in particular with regard to the vocalisation of syllabic /l/ after /t/ and /d/.

L-vocalisation has also been described as a feature of working-class London speech and Cockney English (Gimson1980: 202-3, Wells, 1982: 313-5). Moreover, Altendorf (2006: 5) states that all three Cockney classes and styles appear to have a strong L-vocalization tradition. In terms of the relative frequency of the vocalized variation,



however, there is still some socioeconomic stratification present, which places the speakers from the middle class in an in-between situation.

However, According to Ash (1982), age and gender had no discernible effects on L-vocalization in Worthington while Durian (2008:39) argues that the only important social variable coded in the analysis influencing vocalization in Columbus is race. Furthermore, Horvart & Borowsky (2001:325-6) claim that, according to the Goldvarb analysis, gender and social class do not statistically affect L-vocalisation in Australia and New Zealand regardless of whether these factors are taken alone or together. However, age displays a pattern that is characteristic of a language change that is taking place, where the youngest speakers in a speech locale are more likely than their older counterparts to vocalize /l/ while the middle-aged age cohort fall in between.

## 5. More observations

Having summarised the results of studies on L- vocalisation, we can capture other observations on this feature.

Johnson & Britain (2007:294) state that theoretical phonologists frequently avoid working with actual data in favor of processing data created by other scholars or relying on their own intuitions. On the other hand, Sociolinguists rarely make an effort to offer a phonological explanation for their findings since they collect and analyse real data. Thus, their research on L-vocalization helped create a field of study they refer to as "sociophonology," which combines the two aforementioned fields of study. This requires sociolinguists to search for a phonological explanation while phonologists do the hard job. Hardcastle (1989) notes that L-vocalisation, in certain cases, involves partial alveolar contact and that this articulatory contact has important theoretical implications in suggesting that L-vocalisation is not a categorical process. Labov (2001: 467) gives an interesting point is that other features like the addition of tensing that have been found in Philadelphia by Banuazizi and Lipson (1998) are connected with the vocalisation of /l/, although this issue is not entirely clear. Another point worth mentioning here is that L-vocalization could have significant effects on the restructuring of the vowel system, comparable to the size of other features like R Dropping (Wells 1982: 259). Wells also argues that L-vocalisation offers the prospect of eventual phonemic status for new diphthongs such as /ɪʊ/ (milk), /ɛʊ/ (shelf), etc. Thus, given the above scenario, further research is needed to trace these points and to shed more light on the interrelationship **between** the fields of Linguistics on one hand and linguistic phenomena on the other from the L-vocalisation perspective.





## 6. Further lines of research

Recall that there are some points that need to be addressed. Several studies (Wells 1982), (Ash 1982), (Hardcastle 1989), (Trudgill 2004), (Stuart-Smith 2006), (Johnson & Britain 2007), focus on the fact that this phenomenon is in progress and that is spreading to other parts in the UK and elsewhere. A good example of this is Gibraltar. In his study on Language change in Gibraltar, Levey (2008: 167) shows that few incidences in Gibraltar of the non-standard L-vocalisation are beginning to emerge and that the vocalisation is a culmination of the process of velarisation which is still in progress. Another study by Schneider (2007) records L-vocalisation in parts of West Africa ascribing its occurrence to the colonial dialect input rather than mother-tongue interference.

Thus, having spread to those parts of the world, the issue needs to be addressed in further research to identify its social, linguistic, phonological constraints that perhaps play a role in its occurrence and/or spread.

## 7. Concluding remarks

To sum up, we have tried in this paper to draw upon a number of studies to shed light on a long-standing phenomenon that is the vocalisation of /l/. We tried to gain some insight into the past and present state of how /l/ is vocalised, which is largely realised dark /l/, in the different accents of English around the world. Judging from all the data gathered and analysed by a wealth of methodological techniques in a span of several decades, this change has been portrayed as a sweeping phenomenon that is still vigorously progressing at the linguistic and extra-linguistic levels. While drawing a historical portrait of the variable under discussion, we reviewed some of the recent developments and the internal and external factors that promote its diffusing. Despite the fact that the vocalisation of /l/ is viewed as a stigmatised form, however, the studies provide striking confirmation of its steady incrementation.

## نظرة عامة على ظاهرة النطق في أصناف اللغة الإنجليزية حول العالم

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### المخلص :

تسعى هذه الدراسة الى مراجعة احدى الظواهر المتزايدة الانتشار في لهجات اللغة الإنجليزية في جميع أنحاء العالم الا وهي اعلال ال (L). (L) حيث تسعى إلى تسليط الضوء على طبيعة هذه الظاهرة فضلا عن السياقات التي يمكن أن تحدث فيها. كما انها تسلط الضوء على السلوك الاجتماعي لهذه الميزة وكيفية اتساع رقعتها إلى أماكن مختلفة حيث توجد الانجليزية. تعطي الدراسة نظرة عامة تاريخية عن تكوين هذه الظاهرة و تستعرض من خلال ذلك الدراسات الرئيسية التي تعقبت تواجدها في مختلف لهجات اللغة الإنجليزية. وبذلك ترصد الدراسة بعض الملاحظات البارزة التي تحدثت عن سلوك اعلال ال (L) وتخلص الدراسة أنه في حين أن هذه الميزة تعد ظاهرة راسخة فان ان هناك افق محتملة لمزيد من البحوث التي يمكن اتباعها فيما يتعلق بظاهرة اعلال ال (L).



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