

The Vocalisation of Coda /l/ in the speech of New Zealand Five Year Olds

Elaine Ballard, University of Auckland

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/l/ vocalisation is a sound change which is more prevalent in some varieties of English than in others. It occurs when an /l/ in coda position is produced with the phonetic qualities of a high back vowel -- with or without concomitant rounding or labialisation- [ɯ]. Research into this process has generally focussed either on phonetic details (Hardcastle and Barry 1989) or on its geolinguistic spread (Borowsky and Horvath 1997, Horvath and Horvath 2001, 2002, 2003). This paper will hopefully further that research by reporting on the speech of children, a group who until now have not been investigated.

This study investigated the distribution of the vocalic variants of coda /l/ in relation to vowels that precede them. It found the phonetic variant was predictable from the phonetic environment since specific phonetic variants occur consistently with specific vowels. But it also found that the absence of any vocalic variant where we would normally expect it from the adult citation form is likewise predictable from the preceding vocalic environment.

The absence of a vocalic variant of coda /l/ is not traditionally viewed as a type of vocalisation, but given its remarkably consistent distribution in this data, and taking into account research into the role of listener and speech perception in sound change (see Mann and Repp 1981, Beddor et al. 1986, Ohala 1993, 2003), I propose that absence of any variant is in fact simply another manifestation of /l/ vocalisation.

The presentation concludes with remarks on the relationship between phonetic and phonological change as well as thoughts on the status of the phoneme /l/ in the phonological system of this particular age group.

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