

Schwa vs. syllabic /l/ in English. A perceptual approach

The ubiquitousness of syllabic consonants and the schwa in English speech combined with the lack of agreement among phoneticians regarding their usage (Gimson, 1970; Álvarez, 1980) make them an eligible topic for further exploration. The study of the production (Cohen, 1957) and perception (van Bergem, 1995; Schaeffer & Eichorn, 2001) of English syllabic consonants “needs attention”, as pointed out by Roach (2002: 74). True that some phoneticians (Roach, 2000; Wells, 2000; Upton, Kretzschmar & Konopka, 2003; Jones, 2006) have dealt with the production of potential syllabic consonants at word level (the case of all English pronunciation dictionaries for obvious reasons) but this is a very narrow view and, in any case, it is necessary to go beyond the isolated word in order to see the extent and the typology of the whole phenomenon of swapping of a syllabic consonant and a schwa. In this research project we concentrate on potential syllabic /l/. Our main objective consists of the study of syllabic /l/ vs. schwa finally in a word as perceived by the native speaker at discourse level. We explore both 1) their production (by means of perceptual reactions) and 2) perception. We aim to answer the following research questions: 1) Which is more frequently produced according to the listeners, syllabic /l/ or schwa? 2) a) Which is the level of agreement and disagreement amongst the listeners found for potential syllabic /l/? b) Are there any factors affecting such a level?

The informants were 80 native English speakers (non-rhotic British accents) from the *BBC Learning English website* (2009) (40 male and 40 female). As referees, we used three female listeners (one of them phonetically naïve), previously chosen in view of their answers to the *pre-task* questionnaire. They filled in a *task* questionnaire sent to them by e-mail where they had to listen to 800 words in their context uttered by the speakers selected and decide whether they perceived a syllabic consonant or, on the contrary, a schwa plus /l/. After we had collected the data and transcribed all the information, the referees filled in a *post-task* questionnaire intended to “ensure the truth value of (...) data” (Creswell, 2003: 199), amplify on the information provided by the answers to the *task*-questionnaire and give prompts for further study. The results were analysed with the help of SPSS. The statistical procedure used was the contingency table analysis. Spectrograms and waveforms (acoustic analysis) were employed for comparison/contrast with the referees’ reactions.

The study reveals that 1) the listeners perceive a syllabic /l/ to be much more frequently produced than a schwa (reaching 95.4% of agreement on syllabic consonant), to some extent in accordance with Töft (2002). Only in cases where the word is emphatic, spoken carefully or occurs at the end of an utterance do we find the schwa, but the low percentage suggests that these factors may not affect /l/ to such an extent as other consonants, such as /m/ or /n/. 2) a) The level of agreement and disagreement amongst listeners found for potential syllabic /l/ is not strikingly different, 56 and 44%, respectively. b) Tentatively, *l-vocalisation* and *l-elision* may be responsible for some cases of disagreement. The listeners found it difficult to identify cases in which the acoustic analysis hinted at these two phenomena, although they tended to hear a syllabic consonant in them. In any case, the results shed by the *post-task* questionnaire show that the referees knowledgeable about phonetics were sometimes aware of *l-vocalisation* and *l-elision*. For further research, it would be advisable to study *l-vocalisation* in face-to-face conversations by means of electro-palatography.

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