

/l/-Velarisation in Connemara English: Irish Transfer or Dublin Diffusion?

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Irish English (IrE) is traditionally described as having a clear /l/ in all word positions, contrasting e.g. Standard British English, which has clear-dark /l/ allophony [1][2]. However, two exceptions to the IrE clear-/l/ tendency have been reported: (i) younger IrE speakers, who show velarised [ɫ] in word-final position [3], and (ii) native Irish speakers of English who are said to display a dark [ɫ] in “post and pre-vocalic positions” as a transfer effect from Irish [3][4], which has a velarised dental /ɫ/ phoneme [5]. Hickey [3] notes that the velarised [ɫ] in young IrE speech has spread from Dublin English and is now typical throughout the Republic of Ireland. Yet, its occurrence has not been quantitatively documented for English in the west of Ireland. Similarly, the reported velarised [ɫ] in the English of native Irish speakers has not been systematically analysed.

This study acoustically and statistically investigates lateral realisation within English and Irish spoken in Connemara, a western Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking region) in Galway. It aims to: (i) examine the extent of /l/-velarisation in the English of native Irish speakers and its relation to Irish /ɫ/; and (ii) examine the extent of /l/-velarisation in word-final position for younger speakers. 583 English lateral tokens were collected in read speech (sentences) and spontaneous speech (interviews) from 12 bilingual Irish-English speakers (6M, 6F) and 12 monolingual English speakers (5M, 7F) from Connemara, with an age range of 20-79 (\bar{x} = 44, SD = 18). English lateral tokens were recorded in three positions: (i) word-initial pre-vocalic, (#_V) (ii) word-medial intervocalic (V_V) (iii) word-final post-vocalic (V_#). Additionally, 115 Irish /ɫ/ tokens were collected from the bilingual speakers in positions (i) and (iii) to enable an investigation of transfer effects.

F2 was used as the primary correlate of degree of /l/-velarisation, with lower F2 signalling darker /l/ [6]. Midpoint F2 values were extracted for all tokens and were normalized (Lobanov) and then analysed descriptively via violin plots and inferentially using linear mixed-effects models in R. Word and speaker were modelled as random effects and fixed effects included age, gender, style, and two novel measures: Language Profile Score (LPS), and Local Attachment Score (LAS). For all speaker groups, English word-final /l/ was systematically darker (lower F2) than initial or medial tokens, aligning with cross-linguistic findings [7]. Younger speakers, both bilingual and monolingual, had darker word-final /l/ than their older counterparts, with younger monolinguals having the darkest word-final /l/ overall. This age-based difference reached significance ($p < 0.05$) for the monolinguals but not for bilinguals. No other effects were significant. Crucially, bilinguals maintained a clear F2 distinction between their English laterals and the strongly velarised Irish /ɫ/ in word-initial position (Fig.1). This complicates previous claims of direct Irish transfer. In word-final position, young bilinguals had a large degree of overlap in F2 between Irish /ɫ/ and English /l/, displaying clearer Irish laterals and darker English ones than those of older male bilinguals in particular, who showed no cross-linguistic F2 overlap. Coarticulation effects were observed: neighbouring vowel quality influenced F2 values for /l/, with higher F2 values in front vowel contexts, aligning with findings in [7] and [8].

Echoing descriptions in [3], younger speakers in this study showed a higher degree of /l/-velarisation than older speakers. As young bilinguals did not show strong Irish transfer effects in other features studied as part of a wider study, it is assumed that their /l/-velarisation is more likely due to a wider /l/-velarisation trend among younger speakers of IrE, rather than L1 transfer. For older bilingual speakers, where L1 transfer may have been more plausible, there is no evidence of the use of the Irish /ɫ/ in their English speech. The study concludes that present-day /l/-variation for these bilingual and monolingual speakers is better characterised as conditioned primarily by age rather than L1-Irish bilingual status. Future work should expand cross-regional

sampling and track ongoing changes in Irish laterals to clarify cross-linguistic convergence dynamics with English.

References

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