

Ianto Gruffydd^{1,2} & Mercedes Durham¹

¹School of English, Communication and Philosophy, Cardiff University.

²School of Sport and Health Sciences, Cardiff Metropolitan University.

Pre-/l/ breaking in South East Wales English.

Pre-/l/ breaking – where a schwa-like off-glide is inserted before word-final /l/ – is a salient feature of South Wales English that speakers are conscious of (see examples a-c from twitter data).

a) the welsh accent though. It's not 'Wales' — it's 'Way-ulls'

b) if ewe are Welsh how do ewe say these words? Field or fee-uld? Wales or Way-uls? School or skoo-ul

c) so nowadays you're too kewel for skewel?

However, beyond highlighting its existence, to the best of our knowledge, no phonetic or phonological research exists on this feature of Welsh English. This study investigates pre-/l/ breaking in four South East Wales communities: Cardiff, Barry, Caerphilly and Pontypridd. The former two represent Conurbation varieties and the latter two Valleys varieties as per Garrett, Coupland and Williams' (1999) SE Wales dialect areas.

Previous research on pre-/l/ breaking finds that breaking is conditioned by dark [ɪ] (Wells 1982: 298; Carley, Mees & Collins, 2018: 143-144; Turton 2014: 46). However, South Wales diverges in terms of /l/-darkness, with Conurbation varieties exhibiting an allophonic light/dark distinction as in other UK English varieties (Mees & Collins, 1999: 187). Whereas Valleys varieties produce light [ɪ] in all positions (Hughes, Trudgill & Watt, 2012).

This raises the following research questions:

RQ1: Which internal factors condition pre-/l/ breaking?

RQ2: Do Valleys and Conurbation varieties differentiate in their rates of pre-/l/ breaking?

This study proposes a 'breaking onset time' measure as an acoustic correlate for breaking, by calculating the formant rate of change in the second half of the vowel. We employ Linear Mixed Effects Regressions to investigate pre-/l/ breaking in different diphthongs and monophthongs across a sample of 140 speakers stratified by community and age.

We find that although vowels have later breaking onset time in Valleys varieties, pre-/l/ breaking is increasing alongside /l/-darkening in apparent time. Unsurprisingly, rime duration also predicts breaking in South East Wales English, with longer rimes more likely to produce earlier breaking onsets. Finally, we also find that breaking is lexicalised in certain words that index Welshness.

References:

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