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Citation
Padareva Ilieva, G., Mitsova, S., & Dick Smakman, D. (2025). Studying /l/ Vocalization. Methodological Challenges. *Journal Of Global Sociolinguistics*, *1*(2), 34-40. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4290861

Version:	Publisher's Version
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Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4290861

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Studying /l/ Vocalization. Methodological Challenges

Изучаването на вокализацията на съгласната /л/. Методологически предизвикателства

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Abstract. Although the vocalized /l/ has been present in the Bulgarian language for almost half a century, there is no comprehensive methodology that would encompass the phenomenon in many aspects. Our aim in structuring such a methodology is to place the phenomenon at the center of various linguistic theoretical frameworks so that it can be justified and explained. Based on several years of extensive literature research and our own research and experiments, we propose a methodology that examines the vocalized /l/ at different linguistic levels (phonetic and phonological, semantic, pragmatic), foreign language acquisition and teaching, as well as from the perspective of sociocultural factors influencing its dynamics.

Абстракт. Въпреки че в българския език вокализираното /л/ присъства от почти половин век, липсва цялостна методология, която да обхване явлението многоаспектно. Нашият стремеж при структурирането на такава методология е да поставим явлението в центъра на различни лингвистични теоретични рамки, за да може то да бъде обосновано и обяснено. Въз основа на продължителни няколкогодишни изследвания на литературата и на собствени проучвания и експерименти предлагаме методология, която изследва вокализираното /л/ на различни лингвистични равнища (фонетично и фонологично, семантично, прагматично), чуждоезиково усвояване и обучение, както и от гледна точка на социокултурните фактори, влияещи върху неговата динамика.

Keywords: vocalized /l/, linguistic levels, L2 learning, Sociolinguistics, methodology

Ключови думи: вокализирано /л/, лингвистични равнища, чуждоезиково обучение, социолингвистика, методология

1. Introduction

1.1 /l/ Vocalization

This article is an attempt to develop a methodology for observing /l/ vocalization in languages where this phenomenon appears based on observations and a methodology for Bulgarian vocalized /l/ (Mitsova & Padareva-Ilieva, 2024) as a sociophonetic phenomenon. It refers to pronouncing the lateral consonant /l/ in Bulgarian as a vowel-like allophone, very similar to the English approximant [w]. Many practical and theoretical challenges come with such an analysis. A broad methodology is required in order to make investigations on /l/ vocalization mutually comparable. We propose a methodology based on /l/ vocalization observations at different linguistic levels: phonetic, perceptual, evaluative, phonological, semantic, and practical.

The phonetic level delivers articulatory and acoustic descriptions of vocalized /l/, based on perception and on acoustic measurements. Perceptual data show that vocalized /l/ is perceived and evaluations of this phenomenon reveal whether there are any chances of this issue being at the source of problems, like spelling irregularities. The phonological level deserves attention because the place in the syllable strongly correlates with vocalization of /l/. Semantically, /l/ vocalization may lead to the misinterpretation of the phoneme, and the pragmatic level pays attention to the deliberate use of /l/ vocalization to express irony and sarcasm.

All of these levels are discussed in this article and are followed by a discussion on language planning/management. Such a discussion includes attention paid to learning Bulgarian as a second language, and English as an L2 is also relevant.

1.2 Goal of this Paper

The main goal of this paper is to outline a methodology for exploring a specific phenomenon at the segmental language level. It is based on almost ten years of research on a particular sociophonetic feature of contemporary Bulgarian language broadly known (in other languages) as /l/ vocalization. It is a relevant phenomenon, because it does not only occur in Bulgarian but in other languages as well, and seems to have been noticed as recently as 40 years ago (either as marked or unmarked).

1.3 Background

Our initial aim was to expand on a new broad research project in Bulgarian linguistic literature. In this literature, we noticed that although there are some mentions in several linguistic papers, there is a lack of a detailed description of Bulgarian vocalized /l/. It is not even included in any of the Bulgarian grammar books and readers (Mitsova & Padareva-Ilieva, 2024). During the process of our research different aspects of this phenomenon gradually appeared, thus we found out that it could be interdisciplinarily observed. Initially we began to explore /l/ vocalization as an isolated articulatory phenomenon in relation to its origins. We continued it in the framework of dialectology as well as diachronically with its historic and regional dispersion. In broader context similar processes were found in other Slavic languages where this phenomenon is already completed in particular phonological positions (as in Serbian) or could be continued nowadays (as in Ukrainian). Exploring /l/ vocalization in Bulgarian, we found it reasonable to start from phonetic and phonological levels. Besides articulation and acoustic/phonetic characteristics, we worked on the description of the occurrence of the vocalization of /l/ in different phonological positions.

Lately we also discovered that this phenomenon seemingly induces specific spelling mistakes, caused by the specific relation between articulation and perception. Especially in those cases in which speakers are negligent in their pronunciation such vocalization could influence the semantics of the utterance too. In addition, some particular communicative situations were observed, where the vocalization of /l/ was used strikingly often in order to achieve certain pragmatic goals. Examples of this kind brought us to the next stage – the need to explore the sociolinguistic stratification of the phenomenon. An interesting aspect of the phenomenon is its manifestation in the field of L2 learning in two aspects – Bulgarian as L2 and English as L2, because of the difficulties of pronouncing lateral /l/ and the confusion between the perception of the phonemes /l/, and /w/ (Mitsova, Padareva-Ilieva & Smakman, 2022).

Summarizing these observations, it appears interesting how a prima facie articulatory issue could exert influence on so many linguistic aspects and thus the phenomenon could be explored at particular language levels – phonetics and phonology, semantics and pragmatics. Furthermore, spelling issues, L2 learning and language interference could also be added as aspects relevant to studying /l/ vocalization. And above all, it seems that the phenomenon could be put in the framework of LPP and LMT. The next pages will briefly present these aspects.

2. Phonetic and Phonological Aspects

When it comes to a phenomenon that is primarily related to articulation, it is natural to first turn our attention to Phonetics. Of course, we will start with the articulation, but it usually leads to a different perception. We also include acoustic phonetics to show what the acoustic features of this type of articulation are. It is natural to expect that articulation has its variations in different phonological positions as well as depending on prosodic factors. So, in addition to the phonetic level, the phonological level and the phonological positions in which the vocalized /l/ is realized and the variants with which it is realized are an important stage in the study of this phenomenon.

The articulatory methods are already applied in literature investigating /l/ and /l/ vocalization; including using technologies such as EPG (Scobbie & Pouplier, 2010) and MRI (Gick et al., 2002). For Bulgarian vocalized

/l/ such kind of laboratory research was not yet conducted. The phenomenon is nevertheless described articulatorily in a series of publications (Mitsova, Padareva-Ilieva & Smakman, 2022; Padareva-Ilieva & Mitsova 2016; Padareva-Ilieva & Mitsova, 2012). Still, it is not yet present as a realization of /l/ in any official grammar of standard Bulgarian. The reason for this is probably that the phenomenon is relatively new – it has gradually been introduced into everyday, including standard, speech in the last 30 years. Reasons could probably also be found in the difficulty of describing a specific variant of /l/, arising from the character of /l/ itself as a liquid consonant and its different realizations depending on the position in the word and other factors. In this sense "…vocalization represents just one range of the broader articulation continuum (Hall-Lew & Fix, 2012, p. 795) which in Bulgarian could be also presented as a part of the process of hardening the articulation of /l/ (Kochev, 2007, p. 19). Until now vocalized /l/ in Bulgarian is noted in the literature as a short labiovelar sound [ў], i.e. [ŭ], due to its proximity to the articulation of the vowel [u] – rounded lips, no contact between the tongue and the alveodental area and the back tongue rising near the velum. Tentative configurations illustrating the articulation of the vocalized /l/, the standard alveodental /l/ in Bulgarian language, and vowel [u] were proposed in a recent publication (Mitsova, Padareva-Ilieva & Smakman, 2022). Earlier studies with young native speakers of Bulgarian, who pronounced sentences containing words with /l/ in different word positions, yielded a very high frequency of articulation of vocalized /l/ instead of standard alveodental /l/ (Padareva-Ilieva & Mitsova, 2014). They also showed variation in the articulation of this variant in different word positions and phonological contexts, which remain to be studied. Future research, including laboratory research, could also accurately show the articulatory difference between the different variants of /l/ in Bulgarian – labial /l/ in position before labial vowels, velar dialectal /l/ and vocalized /l/.

Acoustic phonetics and its methods have been used to describe vocalized /l/ and to establish an objective distinction between this and other variants of /l/ (Recasens, 2012; Recasens & Espinosa, 2009). Recasens acoustically measured /l/ in different languages and found evidence that dark /l/ could be qualified as vocalized (Recasens, 2012). Nevertheless, there is also evidence that in acoustic measurements it is difficult to distinguish velarized /l/, which can readily vocalize (Hall-Lew & Fix, 2012, p. 795; Ohala, 1974), from a back rounded vowel. There are acoustic measurements of the F1 and F2 of Bulgarian consonant /l/ (Zhobov, 2004; Stoykov, 1961; Marinov, 2019) and insightful acoustic measurements of vocalized /l/ (Mitsova, Padareva-Ilieva & Smakman, 2022) aiming to show that the spectrogram of vocalized /l/ is similar in F1 and F2 frequencies to vowel /u/ than to the standard Bulgarian alveodental laminal /l/.

The description of the vocalized /l/ also includes a description of this variant with its realizations in different phonological context and syllable structure (Scobbie, Pouplier, 2010). A similar description for the Bulgarian language was made within the framework of a study which established that standard /l/ is produced correctly when it is close to a consonant with the same location of articulation as is /t/. And when the neighbouring sound is different by location it tends to become vocalized according to the principle of economy which governs the co-articulation (Padareva-Ilieva, Mitsova, 2014; Farnetani, Recasens, 1999). The ease of articulation of vocalized /l/ and coarticulation processes induce 100% of the participants to produce vocalized /l/ instead of alveodental /l/ after a labial consonant or rounded vowel and in a position in front of a rounded vowel. Padareva-Ilieva & Mitsova (2014) also affirm that word stress is a factor which exerts influence on the articulation of the /l/ consonant. The results confirm previous findings that /l/–vocalization is phonologically conditioned (Leemann, Kolly, Britain, Werlen & Studer-Joho, 2014).

3. Perception and Spelling. L2 Learning

/l/ vocalization can also be viewed from the perspective of perceptual sociolinguistics (Aleksova, 2023). Perception of /l/ vocalization itself is an issue of interest when describing the phenomenon in different languages (Hall-Lew & Fix, 2012). A series of studies on Bulgarian makes a connection between articulation, perception and spelling mistakes (Padareva-Ilieva & Mitsova, 2012; Padareva-Ilieva & Mitsova, 2016; Mitsova & Padareva-Ilieva, 2017). These studies show that the increasing normalcy of the vocalized variant instead of the standard /l/ leads to the corresponding perception. Usually vocalized /l/ in Bulgarian is perceived as the closest in pronunciation and perception to the back rounded vowel /u/. This in turn leads to spelling mistakes, where the Cyrillic letter л is replaced by the Cyrillic letter у in over 70% of the students participating in the observation (Padareva-Ilieva & Mitsova, 2020), as well as in a large number of observed texts in online communication (Mitsova & Padareva-Ilieva, 2020).

A similar observation was made by Soroka regarding the acquisition of phonetics and spelling of Bulgarian as L2 by foreign students in Bulgaria (Soroka, 2013). Bulgarians learning English as a second language also have difficulties due to the fact that the vocalized /l/ in Bulgarian is too similar to the English approximant /w/. For most Bulgarians L2 English learners it is difficult to pronounce the English apical [l] which is easily

replaced by the vocalized laminal Bulgarian [l]. The result is writing and pronouncing ‘wife’ instead of ‘life’, ‘why’ instead of ‘lie’, ‘white’ instead of ‘light’ (Mitsova, Padareva-Ilieva & Smakman, 2022). This results in semantic ambiguity.

4. Semantic Aspects

The phonetic, auditory, acoustic aspects of /l/ vocalization in different languages have already been discussed in the literature but our observations on /l/ vocalization in Bulgarian affirm that there are other interesting aspects that could be included in the consideration of this phenomenon – a semantic and a pragmatic one.

Is it possible for /l/ vocalization to induce semantic ambiguity in communication? Our observations on Bulgarian speech show that it is possible although there are some limitations. Given the nature of the vocalized /l/ in the Bulgarian language, its articulation and perception, as well as the possibility of making spelling mistakes associated with the replacement of the letters л and у, this semantic ambiguity can be observed either in spoken or written speech, both in Bulgarian and in English spoken by Bulgarians. For example:

Той получава. vs. Той поучава.
Toy poluchava vs. Toy pouchava.
‘He receives’ vs. ‘He preaches’

Момичето със синята блуза vs. Момичето със синята буза
Momicheto sas sinyata bluza vs. Momicheto sas sinyata buza
T’he girl with the blue blouse’ vs. ‘The girl with the blue cheek’
(Mitsova, Padareva-Ilieva & Smakman, 2022)

Той лобира vs. Той обира
Toy lobira vs. Toy obira
‘He’s lobbying’ vs. ‘He’s robbing’
(Padareva-Ilieva & Mitsova, 2012)

and in English:

‘My wife is bad’ vs. ‘My life is bad’

It is true, however, that the larger context of the conversation or text could clarify the meaning and dispel the confusion. In fact, these examples are limited in number, and perhaps this is the reason why the semantic aspect has not been considered too thoroughly. Moreover, in oral speech, in specific phonological positions vocalized /l/ in combination with a back rounded vowel could lead to diphthongization – блуза (bluza) `blouse` – бўуза (bluza – bŭuza), i.e. the vocalized /l/ should not merge with the following vowel, but should be pronounced as a short labiovelar segment. In most cases, however, according to our observations, hyperarticulation is not a characteristic of oral speech, but coarticulation processes and speech economy lead to a more relaxed articulation, and this will lead to the pronunciation of two words with different meanings as complete homophones – блуза `blouse` – буза `cheek` [buza – buza]; слух `hearing` – сух `dry` [suh – suh]; полза `benefit`– поза `pose` [poza – poza].

5. Pragmatic Aspects

An even more interesting part of studying this phenomenon is the pragmatic aspect. Our observations show that some speakers use vocalized /l/ intentionally in their utterances, with an emphasis on this type of articulation aiming at irony or even sarcasm through a phonostylistic effect (Mitsova, Padareva-Ilieva & Smakman, 2022; Mitsova & Padareva-Ilieva, 2020). This stylistic effect can be realized in both written and spoken speech. An important aspect here is the awareness of the difference between the standard articulation of the lateral consonant /l/ and its vocalized variant. For many speakers who do not make this distinction the phonostylistic effect will not be achieved.

6. Sociolinguistic Aspects

From the point of view of dialectology and linguistic geography, the emergence and development of the vocalized /l/ can be traced back diachronically. In our earlier publications (Padareva-Ilieva & Mitsova, 2012, 2014), we have concluded that for the Bulgarian language the process of vocalization of /l/ is a relatively new linguistic phenomenon. From the linguistic literature in Bulgarian studied so far, it is clear that it was first described as a dialectal feature by the dialectologist Stoyko Stoykov in the middle of the 20th century (Stoykov, 1962). Later, in the 1970s, the pronunciation of /ŭ/ as a "new" and "affected" variant of /l/ in the speech of young Bulgarians is mentioned in studies marking this speech phenomenon. However, they did not set out to study and analyze its increasing expansion from a phonetic phenomenon of youth slang to speech manifestations in the media language (Holiolchev, 1974; Naydenova, 1998; Murdarov, 2003; Mladenov & Sotirov, 1992; Tanev, 1995). Nevertheless, it is not enough to consider this phenomenon only from the point of view of dialectology, as an interdisciplinary approach would give more complete results.

In the process of the linguistic description of a given linguistic phenomenon, conclusions are invariably reached about its social stratification, because a full-fledged study also goes through an observation of the society in whose language this linguistic feature exists. Thus, the linguistic phenomenon becomes an object of sociolinguistic research. When studying the perception of [l] and [ŭ] (Padareva-Ilieva & Mitsova, 2012, Padareva-Ilieva & Mitsova, 2016; Mitsova & Padareva-Ilieva, 2017), it becomes clear that part of the conclusions has always been related to the classification of the interviewees' attitudes towards this speech phenomenon. This means that an ethno-methodological approach can be applied to the study of the vocalization of /l/, where the observations are from the point of view of conversational analyses. But since we are talking about different social groups in whose speech the vocalization of /l/ manifests itself more or less, the variational approach can be adapted, by which to investigate what type of linguistic marker the pronunciation of /l/ as [ŭ] is (Mitsova, Padareva-Ilieva & Smakman, 2022; Mitsova & Padareva-Ilieva, 2020).

7. Language Management Aspects

The dynamics in the pronunciation of /l/ as [ŭ] in the speech of modern Bulgarians can be traced through the perspective of LPP and Language Management (Nekvapil, 2011, 2016), as it is inevitable to compare this contemporary socio-phonetic phenomenon with the state language standard. According to Language Management Theory, any deviation from the standard set in the prescriptive linguistic literature can be traced as a process consisting of four stages constituting the ‘language management process’: (1) noting; (2) evaluation; (3) adjustment design, and (4) implementation of the adjustment design.

Language Management itself takes place at two levels – a micro level known as ‘simple management’ and a macro level called ‘organized management’. According to LMT methodology that we have applied in our previous studies, in purposeful interviews our informants share their personal experiences in communicative situations where a process of Simple Language Management is carried out. It starts with pointing out the pronunciation of /l/ as [ŭ] as a deviation from the language standard (Stage 1) and moves through Stage 2 – conversation and awareness of the ‘wrong’ pronunciation. In some cases, Stage 3 is reached, at which the individual decides to adjust the /l/ vocalization in accordance with the prevailing norm. In other cases, the actual implementation of the correction contemplated at Stage 3 is reached. In recent years, a more serious scientific interest has been noticed on the part of the so-called ‘language institutions’, which through the perspective of LMT can undoubtedly be related to the macro level of ‘organized management’.

8. The Future

Based on the study of the literature on the topic from recent decades, as well as on the basis of our own studies and observations, we have structured a methodology for studying vocalized /l/. Below are three important motivations for continuing this research; in Bulgaria and in close-by countries with the same phonetic variability of this lateral.

It could, first of all, serve to study this linguistic phenomenon in other languages in which vocalization of /l/ is in a process of rapid development or ended long ago and has not been studied in a multi-faceted manner. On the basis of narrow research on phonemes related to /l/ and /l/ itself, language change can be documented and predicted. The interplay of pronunciation habits (including ease of articulation), semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, phonology, and several other social, historical, and linguistic factors, can help lay bare how

phonemes – particularly liquids in general – change shape in daily discourse; and how new pronunciations, in the long run, become part of the codified language (or not). Theoretical/historical phonology can only help in a limited way in explaining the changes that these phonemes are undergoing in various languages at the same time, and seemingly independently from each other. Combining theoretical/historical and empirical forces may yield the best explanations.

Another and more pressing reason to continue to study /l/ is to create awareness in both native speakers of Bulgarian (and other countries in which the main language is undergoing similar inter-generational sound changes) and learners of this language to understand how different generations of speakers may produce, perceive and evaluate one and the same phoneme, because of notable and ongoing changes in its articulatory realisations. This would mainly be an awareness exercise; typically, one that teachers of Bulgarian will also learn from and benefit from.

A third and final reason is purely sociolinguistic/sociophonetic; inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation of the realization of /l/ in Bulgaria. The correlations between the various allophones and speaker characteristics (most importantly age, region, and gender identity) can be used to study how this sound is a social marker and whether or to what degree it is used consciously to identify oneself in some way or other. Intra-speaker variation can be studied to find out how transient certain allophonic realizations of /l/ are, the assumption being that high intra-personal variation may point to an ongoing change, either away from or towards a new pronunciation. Individuals may vary because they are adopting and trying out new pronunciations and are assumed to constantly be negotiating and renegotiating their (conscious) less stable pronunciation choices and their (less conscious) stable habits. For both inter- and intra-speaker variation studies, a strict methodology is required, in which at least ten tokens in both social and phonological/phonetic contexts per speaker are required, as well as a high number of speakers, consensus transcriptions, acoustic measurements, and statistical proofing. In other words, much research is needed. The outcomes are likely to overrule popular debates on this and similar phenomena, which is one of the main contributions of sociolinguistics.

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