

# Lateral Articulation Across Vowel Contexts: Insights from a Magnetic Resonance Imaging Case Study

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## Abstract

The goals of lateral production are complex and imperfectly understood, partly because of the limitations of existing data. Structural Magnetic Resonance Imaging provides rich information about details of lateral production not available using other methods. /l/-articulation by a British English speaker was examined in three vowel contexts using real-time and volumetric Magnetic Resonance Imaging. Onset of lateralisation was characterized acoustically by decreased intensity and development of anti-formants, independent of the degree of tongue dorsum retraction and lingual elongation in different coarticulatory contexts. These patterns suggest that, for this speaker, active lateral channel formation is a primary goal of clear-/l/ production.

**Index Terms:** liquids, approximants, articulatory-acoustic relationships, coarticulation, goals of production, rtMRI

## 1. Introduction

English /l/ is a multigestural segment prototypically produced with a central alveolar closure, dorsal retraction and lowering, and lateral channel formation [1, 2]. Lateral approximants are characterised by complex intergestural and articulatory-acoustic relationships [3, 4, 5]. Lateral channels may form passively when the tongue is elongated through simultaneous tongue tip fronting to achieve alveolar closure and dorsal retraction, as is typically observed in dark [ɫ] [6]. Lateral channels also form in clear [l] articulated with less lingual elongation, where stable timing relations have been observed between the sides and back of the tongue, suggesting that there may be active control of lateralisation [7, 8]. Many details of lateral production are still not well understood, in part due to the limitations of methods used to study the configuration of the vocal tract.

Acoustic data offer important insights into lateral production, as /l/ typically shows three distinct formants below 5 kHz [3, 5, 9]. The low F1 (~250–500 Hz) is associated with a Helmholtz resonance between the relatively large back cavity volume and the oral constriction space [3, 5]. F1 increases when the oral constriction is reduced, contributing to the higher F1 in dark [ɫ] produced with a weakened coronal contact [3, 10]. F2 (~1.2–1.5 kHz) is associated with the back cavity, such that retracting or raising the tongue dorsum increases back cavity length and lowers F2 in dark [ɫ] [3]. Lateralized airflow can give rise to spectral zeros whose properties depend on the length and asymmetry of the channels; anti-resonances >3 kHz can result when a pocket of air above the tongue forms a side branch to the

primary lateralized airway [9, 11]. Anti-resonances raise the 3<sup>rd</sup> formant, and a high F3 well separated from F2 is one of the defining acoustic features of lateral approximants [5, 11, 12].

Lateral production has been studied using sustained /l/ [3, 4] and in specific vowel contexts [5, 10], yet dorsal posture – a key gesture affecting tongue elongation and F2 – varies with vowel-context, assuming a similar articulatory target to that of adjacent vowels [13]. In American English, onset [l] is coarticulated more strongly with the vowel than coda [ɫ] [13], predicting considerable coarticulatory F2 variation; however, Catalan /lʲ/ is articulated with a lower dorsum between low vowels, and is produced with a relatively stable F2 across vowel contexts [14].

To further examine these relationships, we analyzed time-aligned articulatory and acoustic data in a single speaker study of Standard Southern British English (SSBE) /l/ produced in three vowel contexts, using real-time (rtMRI) and volumetric magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Our aims are to (1) identify articulatory and acoustic /l/ targets; (2) describe the coarticulatory influences of vowel context on /l/; and (3) link the articulatory changes caused by vowel context to acoustic changes.

## 2. Methods

Data were collected during the pilot phase of a larger project examining development of speech motor control in adolescents. An adult female L1 speaker of SSBE (Author 3) produced intervocalic laterals in a series of speech tasks recorded out of and inside an MRI scanner. Laterals were elicited between three corner vowels: high front /i:/, low /a:/, and high back /u:/. Each token was recorded once in a quiet room with a Glottal Enterprises EG2-PCX2 digital speech recorder to familiarize the participant with the experimental materials. The same utterances were later recorded three times during a rtMRI scan, and additionally as sustained lateral productions during a volumetric MRI scan. A total of 3 (vowel contexts) × (1 pre-scan + 3 rtMRI) + 1 (volumetric MRI) = 13 laterals were included in the analysis.

### 2.1. Data acquisition

MRI data were acquired at Westmead Hospital (Sydney, New South Wales), on a Siemens Magnetom Prisma 3T scanner with a 64-channel head/neck receiver array coil. The speaker's upper airway was imaged while lying supine. Data were acquired from an 8 mm slice aligned with the mid-sagittal plane, over a 280 × 280 mm field of view, using a 2D RF-spoiled, radially-



ronment effects. Laterals, however, only showed lower intensity relative to the final vowel in [ili] and /a|a/, but not in /ulu/, due to /i/ and /a/ having higher intensity than /u/ (Fig. 2b).

### 3. Results and Discussion

Complete midsagittal occlusion in the dental-alveolar region was observed in all lateral tokens (Fig. 3); no vocalized /l/ was produced in these data. Achieving tongue tip contact in intervocalic /l/ is consistent with the lack of undershoot in this position in American- and British English [1, 22]. Extended /l/ duration could also contribute to achieving alveolar closure by providing enough time for the tongue tip to reach its target [23, 24].



Figure 3: Midsagittal /l/ articulation at TT target in three vowel contexts. L-to-R: [i:li:], [a:la:], [u:lu:].

Volumetric image data show the 3D vocal tract configurations used to produce laterals in each vowel context, including key details of /l/ articulation beyond the midsagittal plane (Fig. 4). The central occlusion formed by the TT against the alveolar ridge can be seen anterior to the mid-oral cavity. On either side of the occlusion, narrow lateral channels connect the mid-oral airway to the anterior part of the vocal tract formed by the sublingual cavity. The precise geometry of the lateral channels cannot be determined from this volume because these regions will also include some dentition (teeth do not image in MRI); yet, the data reveal two largely symmetrical lateral channels and a complete central alveolar occlusion.

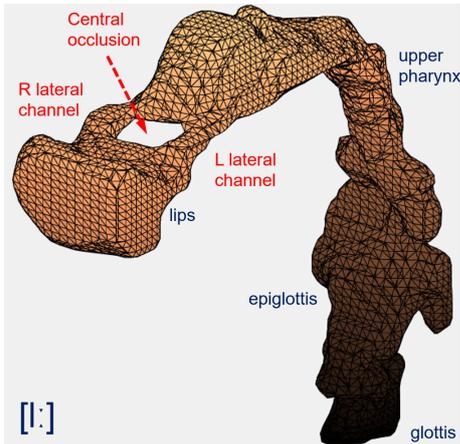


Figure 4: Three dimensional vocal tract configuration during sustained [l:]. Tract volume viewed from L. superior anterior perspective. Anterior part of volume extends beyond lips.

#### 3.1. Acoustic characterization of intervocalic laterals

Laterals were elicited in intervocalic environments, where they were acoustically delineated by a drop in intensity (Fig. 2b), formant transitions specific to the vowel context (Fig. 7), and

appearance of anti-formants. Intensity drop cued lateral onset and offset in the [i:] and [a:] contexts and lateral onset in the [u:] context (Fig. 2b). A spectrogram generated from the pre-scan recording of [a:la:] (Fig. 5) reveals a prominent antiresonance centred at 3.7 kHz throughout the lateral interval (690 to 920 ms). In Fant’s model, both reduced intensity and antiresonance would arise from a side branch of length ~23 mm [9, 25, 26]. Although the precise length of the supralingual air pocket cannot be determined because of uncertainties associated with dentition, the frequencies of the main antiformants observed in these spectra are broadly consistent with Fant’s acoustic model applied to the vocal tract configurations revealed by the imaging data. Anti-resonances in a similar region were observed in American English /l/, while intensity drop characterises Turkish and Brazilian Portuguese laterals [4, 27].

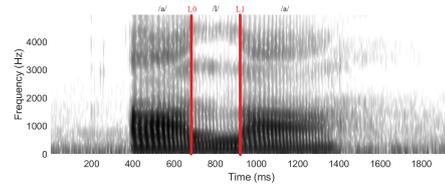


Figure 5: Spectrogram of [a:la:] (out-of-scanner): 6 ms Kaiser windows, 2 ms overlap, 1024 pt FFT. L0: beginning of lateral; L1: end of lateral. Primary anti-formant centred at 3.7 kHz.

#### 3.2. Vocalic influences on lateral production

Imaging data reveal large coarticulatory influences of vowel context on lateral production. Coronal place of articulation varies in anteriority with vowel frontness: dental-alveolar for [i:li:] (Fig. 3a) and alveolar for [a:la:] (Fig. 3b), both produced with an apical TT gesture. In [u:lu:], the midsagittal constriction occurs at a more retracted post-alveolar target through sub-laminal TT closure and a more retroflexed coronal gesture (Fig. 3c). The dorsum is raised and fronted in the high-front vowel context (Fig. 3a), lowered in the low vowel context (Fig. 3b), and high and back in the back vowel context (Fig. 3c).

F1 in intervocalic laterals ranged from 350 Hz in high vowel contexts to 750 Hz between low vowels (Fig. 7). F1 trajectories are relatively stable throughout [i:li:] and [u:lu:], consistent with the stability in tongue height observed in the correspond-

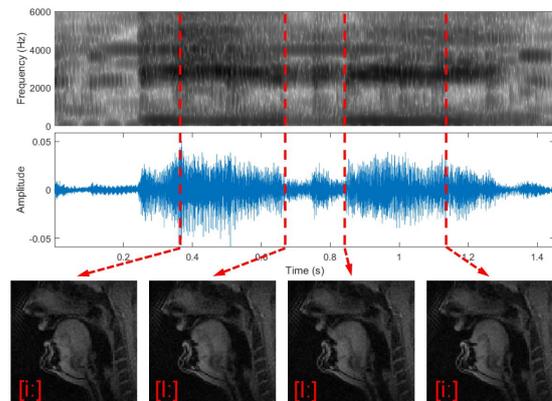


Figure 6: Lateral dynamics in the front vowel context. Spectrogram and waveform of noise-cancelled in-scanner recording of /ili/, time-aligned with MRI frames captured at (L to R): pre-/l/ vowel target, /l/ onset, /l/ target, post-/l/ vowel target.

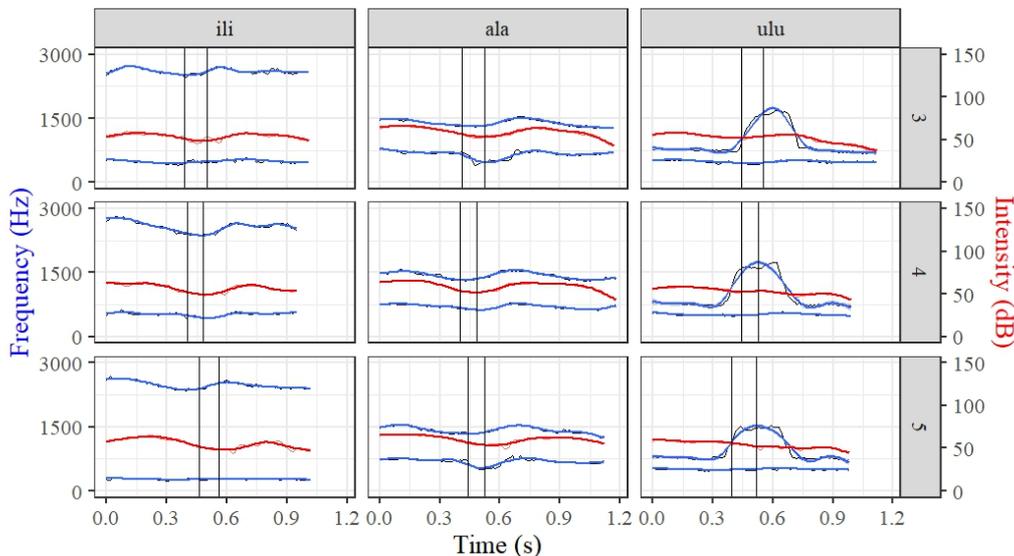


Figure 7: Formant trajectories (left y-axis, blue) and intensity contours (right y-axis, red), aligned with onset and offset of coronal closure (vertical black lines). Three in-scanner repetitions of (L to R): /ili/, /ala/, /ulu/. Top to bottom: Repetitions 1 to 3. Formant trajectories and intensity contours (thin lines) smoothed using GAMs (thick lines, std. dev. in grey).

ing image sequences of these utterances (Fig. 6). F1 was higher throughout [ɑ:lɑ:] utterances, lowering in the transition from the initial vowel to the lateral, then rising to a peak of  $\sim 750$  Hz at lateral TT release (Fig. 7) – higher than F1 values previously reported for sustained laterals (350–450 Hz) [3]. The raised F1 in [ɑ:lɑ:] is consistent with the pervasive tongue body lowering observed in the corresponding midsagittal image sequences of laterals in low vowel contexts (Fig. 1).

A wide range of F2 frequencies are seen in these data. Overall, F2 trajectories show the expected correlations with tongue frontness. In non-front vowel contexts, lateral F2 ranged between 1450–1550 Hz. F2 was most stable throughout [ɑ:lɑ:] utterances, lowering slightly before TT closure and peaking after TT release, following a similar trajectory to F1 (Fig. 7). [i:li:] was also characterized by F2 lowering in the pre-lateral vowel, however, F2 did not reach the same target in the lateral, remaining much higher ( $>2$  kHz) than in the other vowel contexts (Fig. 7). Between back vowels, F2 rose sharply to peak at  $\sim 1500$  Hz at the point of TT closure, then relowering after TT release to the  $F2 \sim 750$  Hz of context [u:] (Fig. 7). Variation in lateral formants is consistent with lateral formants not being sufficient for distinguishing laterals from other segments in SSB, similarly to other languages (e.g., Turkish, Brazilian Portuguese, Central Australian languages) [28, 27].

These formant trajectories are consistent with the coarticulatory patterns observed in imaging data. Lateral F2 is affected more strongly by adjacent /i:/, compared to /ɑ:/ and /u:/. Midsagittal images reveal that the tongue body is more advanced throughout [i:li:] compared to the other vowel contexts, and does not retract as much at the lateral target (Figs. 1, 6). Stronger coarticulatory influences of front vowels, and palatals more generally, have also been demonstrated in Catalan and other languages [29]. As a result of this coarticulation, this speaker’s laterals are not consistently produced with an elongated tongue, so it appears unlikely that lateral channels are formed passively in front vowel contexts [6]. These data – although limited – lend more support for models proposing active

lateral channel formation in /l/ production [7, 8]. The same patterns of production might also arise if tongue blade width were an active parameter of control [30], allowing side channels to form around a narrowed TT central constriction.

#### 4. Conclusions and future research

The dataset demonstrates the value of multi-modal data in the phonetic characterization of complex segments. Understanding dynamic patterns of articulation beyond the midsagittal plane and their acoustic consequences is particularly important for lateral approximants. This speaker consistently produced hyperarticulated intervocalic laterals with central TT closure and formation of lateral channels, characterized acoustically by anti-formant(s) and reduced intensity relative to vowels. Tongue body anteriority during lateral production and formant trajectories – especially F2 – were strongly influenced by vowel context, and may provide less consistent cues to lateralization. Inconsistent tongue body retraction across vowel contexts suggests that active lateral channel formation, rather than lingual elongation, is a primary goal of /l/ production for this speaker.

The data are limited in scope, as only a small number of lateral exemplars from a single speaker of SSB have been analyzed, and the speech is hyperarticulated due to the nature of the task and the unusual environment in which it was produced. More detailed analysis of the geometry and dynamics of lateral channel formation in different phonological environments is required to better understand how lateralization is achieved, and how /l/ can be characterized in articulatory and acoustic domains. Dynamic imaging in the coronal plane and modelling of dentition in MRI data will help inform these issues. Robust tracking of F3 in in-scanner recordings will be important to better characterize the acoustic dynamics of lateral production.

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