

## **The effacement and vocalization of pre-consonantal *l* in Old French**

The evolution from Latin to the Romance languages has fascinated historical linguists for years.\* Because of the prestige given to Latin and the dominance the Romance languages have held over the world in the past, this historical process has been the source of much interest. The changes involved in this process include modifications in the syntax, morphology, and phonology. In this paper, I will be exploring some of the phonological changes that separated French from its Latin roots, in particular, the effacement and vocalization of pre-consonantal *l*.

Between 400 and 700 AD, Latin began its evolution into the different Romance languages. In tracing this process, linguists have created an intermediary step between Classical Latin and the different forms of Romance called Proto-Romance.<sup>1</sup> This is a reconstructed step based on the examination of the differences between Latin and Romance and on the few examples of colloquial Latin that exist. This Proto-Romance was a spoken language not represented in writing. It cannot be proved that Proto-Romance existed exactly as it has been reconstructed, but it serves as a useful tool to show the progression from one way of speaking to another.

Proto-Romance gave way to several types of Romance. In Gaul, we find Old French, the precursor to today's Modern French, and Old Provençal, a romance language

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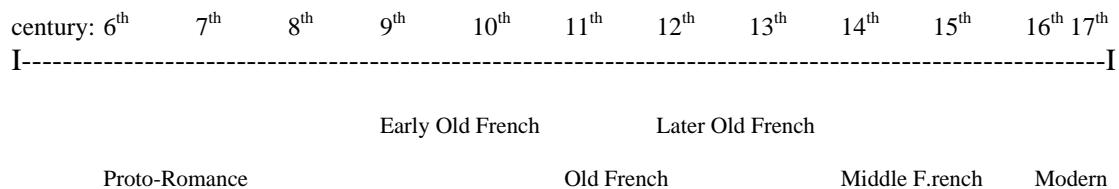
\* I would like to thank Ted Fernald first and foremost for his help. I am grateful to Jennifer Tyson and Rashad Foley for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Instead of the more traditional term, Vulgar Latin, I have chosen to use the term Proto-Romance as suggested by Posner (1996) and Wright (1982), since the name both implies the reconstruction of the language and avoids the implications of the word vulgar. This is especially important in light of Wright's

that surfaced sometime in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and was used until the 13<sup>th</sup>. In the Iberian Peninsula, Latin becomes Old Spanish, Portuguese, and Catalan. In the Italic peninsula, Old Italian, along with Sardinian, Rheto-Romansh, and Dalmatian appear.

The evolution of French, the language on which this paper concentrates, can be broken down into four periods. The first is Proto-Romance (discussed above), which was spoken from around the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The next stage, Old French, covers the period from the mid 9<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Many scholars further break this period down into Early Old French (mid 9<sup>th</sup> century to end of 11<sup>th</sup> century) and Later Old French (end 11<sup>th</sup> century to beginning 14<sup>th</sup> century). Middle French covers the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and Modern French is considered the language spoken after the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

**Figure 1:** timeline of progression from Latin to Modern French



French became linguistically distinct from Latin earlier than the other Romance languages. While there is no one theory that explains this, it is known that Old French had a strong stress accent (as opposed to Modern French, which has no word stress accent but uses rhythmic group stress), which brought about a great many of the language’s phonological changes. Heavy stress at the beginning of words caused the attrition and

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hypothesis that Classical Latin was not a language of the upper classes used simultaneously with the “vulgar” romance languages of the common people, but rather an invention of Carolingian reforms.

deletion of unstressed vowels in the final position, which gives French its distinctive “e muet,” in contrast to the frequent vocalic endings of Italian and Spanish (for example, in the words for palm, the final vowel in French’s *palme* is not pronounced, whereas the final vowel in Spanish’s *palma* is). Other changes caused by the stress accent, as detailed by Pei, include diphthongization of stressed vowels, weakening of consonants between vowels, and palatalization of velars (1976, 109). Some of the distinctive phonetic features of Modern French were created in the Old French period: palatalization of the velar [u] to [y], devoicing of word-final consonants (as in *chanter* [ t̥e]), and the appearance of nasalized vowels (Posner, 1997: 22).

Old French also differentiated itself morphologically. Unlike other languages within the Romance family, Old French (and Old Provençal) used a double case system as a middle step between the six-case system of Latin and the case-less system of Modern French (Pei, 1976: 109).

The many changes French underwent during the Middle Ages create an important distinction between early French and the early versions of the other Romance languages. Pei gives a good description of this, saying: “The ‘old’ forms of Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, are still accessible to the modern reader with, perhaps, the aid of a glossary to explain words, uses of words, and a few grammatical forms that have become archaic. In the case of languages like French and Provençal...the ‘old’ language is accessible only in spots to the modern reader without a special and separate course of study. It is, to all intents and purposes, a different tongue from the one he knows, though related to it” (Pei, 1976: 107).

The phonological change on which this paper focuses is the effacement and vocalization of pre-consonantal *l*, which was one of the many changes in the Old French period.<sup>2</sup> This change began sometime before the 10<sup>th</sup> century and was generalized in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>. Any *l* after *i* and before a consonant was effaced, as can be seen in the word for son, *filz* [fis] (the *l* remains orthographically but it is not pronounced). Before a consonant and after any vowel aside from *i*, *l* was vocalized into a *u*. The *u* merged with the preceding vowel(s) to form a diphthong or triphthong, sometimes with a glide. These diphthongs and triphthongs were later simplified to single vowel sounds such as in the change *al* > *au* > *o*. This [o], however, is still represented orthographically in Modern French by *au*.

**Table 1:** *l*-vocalization and effacement patterns in French

$$\begin{array}{l}
 l / \_ C > u, 0 \\
 \quad \quad l / i \_ C > 0 \\
 \quad \quad \quad l / V \_ C > u \\
 \quad \quad \quad \quad \quad \text{(not } i)
 \end{array}$$

This change is what is termed a “complete” change, meaning it took effect in all possible situations showing the proper conditions (i.e. all *l*’s after a vowel and before a consonant). It can be seen in all parts of speech, for example, adjective (*dolce* > *douce* [dus]), adverb (*gentilment* > *gentiment* [tim]), verb (*saltar* > *sauter* [sote]). Through enclisis, prepositions and articles combined and the same *l*-vocalization can be seen in the

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<sup>2</sup> Vocalization is the change of a consonant sound to a vowel sound, and effacement is the disappearance of a sound.

new forms (Kibler, 1989: 44). For example, the preposition *a* combined with *le* to form *al*. Towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the *l* vocalized to *u* before words beginning with a consonant, and the contraction became *au*. This vocalization is found in other contractions as well (Einhorn, 1994: 22).

**Table 2:** contraction of prepositions and articles leading to l-vocalization

a le > al > **au**  
 a les > as > **aux**  
 de le > del > deu, dou, **du**  
 de les > **des**  
 en le > el > eu, **ou**, u

(modern spellings bolded)

Before the vocalization of *l* was complete, however, there was a period of time in which the *u* and the *l* were co-articulated. There are, therefore, two periods in the vocalization: partial vocalization (both sounds can be heard) and total vocalization (only the vowel sound can be heard). The first examples of total vocalization are found in the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Fouché, 1961: 856-858).

Despite the claim that this phonological change was complete (i.e. acted on all words with the proper conditions), there are still words in Modern French with pre-consonantal *l*. This can be accounted for in several ways. First, some of these words with pre-consonantal *l* were introduced into the lexicon after the vocalization of *l* had stopped and the process, therefore, did not affect them (Fouché, 1961: 865). In other cases, the *l* that is now part of a word was restored. For example, the *l* in the word *quelque*, although it remained part of the spelling of the word, was lost in pronunciation. This loss of *l* was supported by grammarians in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (k lk > k k),

but the pronunciation of *l* was later brought back into fashion and is pronounced today. The word *malgré* presents another, more extreme case of this restoration. The *l* in *malgré* was vocalized to *u* just as in other words and the word's spelling was even changed to *maugré* in some texts of the period. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, through the same reforms that brought back the *l* in *quelque*, the *l* was restored in *malgré* both in pronunciation and in spelling. The *l*-vocalization is retained, however, in the related verb *maugréer* (originally *malgréer*) (Robert, 1972: 395).

Another explanation for words that do not appear to have undergone certain phonological changes of a period, such as the vocalization of *l*, is the theory that involves the division of words into three categories: learned words, semi-learned words, and popular words. Through this theory, certain words retained Latinate phonology because of their use by intellectuals, who were theorized to be more preserving than common people. This theory, however, fits tightly with the idea that Latin and Romance were used simultaneously, Latin reserved for an educated class and Romance, the less-intelligent moderation of Latin, used by the uneducated, a theory which has been discredited by Wright among others. Although the theory creates a convenient reason as to why some words do not show certain “regular” phonological changes, it is difficult to say that phonological change is affected by meaning, especially since most of the words' meanings must be stretched and carefully interpreted to fit into such an idea.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Wright examines in particular Spanish words with initial consonant + [l] clusters that were not palatalized as the “regular” change patterns would predict. He says scathingly, “Under flojo [Corominas] declared that ‘the conservation of the FL- group is due to the moral aspect of the word, which accounts for the triumph of the pronunciation of the educated classes, as happened in flor, flaco and other similar words.’ This attempt at an explanation is unconvincing. Were it not for the fl- phenomenon, would we consider “flower” (flor), “thin” (flaco), “fringe” (fleco), “feeble” (flojo) to be essentially more moral concepts than “flames” (llamas)? The flames of hell suggest not. Even if they are, what evidence is there that uneducated groups never discuss morality?” (Wright, 1982: 11).

For the most part, the orthography of Modern French reflects the sound change in the *l*-vocalization. This reflection of actual pronunciation, however, did not occur at exactly the time of the sound change. Just as English retains spelling based on past pronunciations (such as *night* for [nayt]), Old French showed a lag between pronunciation changes and spelling changes. In 12<sup>th</sup> century texts, the *l* is still written even though it had already been vocalized into *u*. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the spelling has predominantly changed from *l* to *u*.

An example of complex spelling changes is the word *cheval* (*horse*). To form the plural, an *s* was added, making the words *chevals*. Since the *l* was then pre-consonantal, it was vocalized into *u*. When the orthography caught up with this sound change, the plural was written *chevaus*. However, a different symbol ( ) was introduced to represent *us*, making the word *cheva* . The symbol resembled the *x*, which later replaced it. However, later scribes in an attempt to represent the sound more fully restored the *u*. This gives the modern spelling of *chevaux*. In some cases, the *l* was also reinstated (*chevaux*) by the principle of rapprochement (an effort to show a word's connection with Latin), in which case the original *l* was represented three times over: in the *u*, the *l*, and the *x* (Rickard, 1974:72).

From this process of vocalization in the plural forms of nouns ending in *l*, some singulars were back-formed to sound like their plurals. For example, the word *château* was originally *chastel*. *Chastel* in the plural became first *chastels* and then *chasteaux*. The singular was then back-formed to *chasteau*.<sup>4</sup> Other words like this are *chapel* which became *chapeau*, *mantel* which became *manteau*, and *genoil* which became *genou*.

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<sup>4</sup> The *s* disappeared through a later process and is still reflected by the accent circonflexe over the *a*.

In the texts provided, we can see the development of the new spelling of certain words. The first text, from the 12<sup>th</sup> century Oxford Manuscript of *La Chanson de Roland*, shows that *l* has not yet been replaced by *u* orthographically. The plural nouns *chevals* and *mantels* have not yet become *chevaux* and *manteaux*. The adjective *mauvais* is written *malvais* and the verb *sauver* is *salver*. The next text, “Tristan et Iseut,” similarly still has *l* instead of *u* (Batany, 1972:140).

**Text 1** – La Chanson de Roland, Verse CXCIV (Oxford Manuscript – 12<sup>th</sup> century)

*Old French*

Lur chevals laisetn dedesuz un’olive.  
 Dui Sarrazin par les resnes les pristrent,  
 E li message par les mantels se tindrent,  
 Puis sunt muntez sus el paleis altisme.  
 Cum il entrerent en la cambre voltice,  
 Par bel’amour malvais saluz li firent:  
 “Cil Mahomet ki nus ad en baillie,  
 E Tervagan e Appolin, nostre sire,  
Salvent le rei e guardent la reine!”

*Modern French*

Ils laissent leurs chevaux sous un olivier.  
 Deux Sarrasins les prirent par les rênes,  
 Et les messagers se tenaient par leurs manteaux.  
 Puis ils sont montés jusqu’au très haut palais.  
 Quand ils entrèrent dans la chambre voûtée,  
 Ils firent, par amitié, un salut malencontreux:  
 “Que Mahomet qui nous tient en son pouvoir  
 et Tervagan et Apollin, notre seigneur,  
sauvent le roi et préservent la reine!”

**Text 2** – Tristan et Iseut, Verses 1753-1756

Ço di Ysolt: “Jol sai pur veir.  
 Sachez que le sigle est tut neir.  
 Trait l’unt amunt e levé halt  
 Pur ço que li venz lur falt.”

Iseut répond: “J’en suis bien certaine.  
 Sachez que la voile est toute noire.  
 Ils l’ont levée jusqu’en haut  
 Parce que le vent leur manque.”

The third text shows the new spellings of words with *u* replacing *l*, but it also has the original singulars of *manteau* and *château* (*mantel* and *chastel* respectively), showing that the back-formation of singulars related to *l*-vocalization had not yet taken place.

**Text 3** – Lancelot du Lac (13<sup>th</sup> century novel)

Qant Claudas vit que il ne panroit mie lo chastel  
 legierement, si prist un parlement au roi Ban, et  
 donerent seurté li uns et li autres de sauf aler et  
 de sauf venir.

Quand Claudas vit qu’il ne prendrait pas  
 aisément le château, il demanda une entrevue au



roi Ban, et l'un et l'autre se garantirent la

sécurité de l'aller et du retour.

In the final text, written in 1412-1413, the vocalized *l* can be seen in the orthography in words such as *haults* and *veult*. This is not a continuation of the *l* being included in spelling, but rather a return to it. These are examples of rapprochement, the principle through which the *l* was restored (in spelling only) to show the relationship with Latin (Batany, 1972:260).

#### **Text 4 – Le Livre de la Paix de Christine De Pisan (1412-1413)**

O! voirement, qui seroit la puissance qui peust opprimer ne fouler tel corps s'il est tout ensemble, sans separacion de nulz de ses membres, c'est assavoir le chief qui est le roy, les espauls et parties haultes qui representent les princes et seigneurs, .... Sans faille, se cestui corps, que Dieu maintiengne, se veult bien tenir ensemble, ne lui fault craindre tout le monde.

Oh! Vraiment, quelle serait la puissance qui pourrait écraser ou piétiner un tel corps, s'il reste bien uni, sans aucune division entre ses membres: la tête qui est le roi, les épaules et le haut du corps qui représentent les princes et les seigneurs,.... Sans doute, ce corps-là – que Dieu maintienne sa cohésion! – s'il veut se tenir fermement uni, il ne doit rien craindre au monde.

Now that we have seen how the vocalization of *l* is represented in French, we can look at occurrence of the same sound change in the other Romance languages. *L*-vocalization is found in some of the other Romance languages, but not to the same extent. Rumanian, for example, shows no pre-consonantal *l*-vocalization. If we look at French, Provençal, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, we can see examples of *l*-vocalization in each. What is interesting, however, is that each language shows a different pattern for the representation of the phonological change. As we have seen, French shows *l*-vocalization in all pre-consonantal positions and the phonological change is complete. Of the other languages, Portuguese shows the greatest similarity to French. Portuguese, too, shows a complete change, but the constraints triggering the change are tighter. Instead of showing vocalization of *l* in all pre-consonantal positions, Portuguese vocalized *l* to *u*

after *a* and only before the consonants *t*, *p*, and *s* (*c* orthographically). After *u* and before *t*, the *l* became *i* (Williams, 1962: 89-90).

**Table 3:** *l*-vocalization and effacement in Portuguese

$l / a \_ \{t, p, s\} > u$   
 $l / u \_ t > (\text{Old Ptg}) it > (\text{Mid Ptg}) t$

Spanish shows occasional vocalization of *l* before consonants and after *a*, but the change is not complete. Therefore, in Modern Spanish we can see both words with *l*-vocalization, such as *otro* (*alteru* in Proto-Romance) and words where *l*-vocalization did not take place, as with the verb *saltar* (*saltare* in Proto-Romance and *sauter* in French). Although prepositions and articles were contracted, they do not show vocalization (for example, *al* remains *al*, not *au* as in French).

Provençal is very similar to Spanish in its lack of uniformity of *l*-vocalization. More often than not, pre-consonantal *l* is retained, as in the word *filhs*, “son” (the *l* is pronounced, unlike in the French *fil*s). In the contraction of prepositions and articles, *l* is also kept (*de illos* > *dels*). As in Spanish, the examples of *l*-vocalization are difficult to collapse into one distinct pattern. Jensen summarizes: “*L* is usually vocalized to *u* before a dental (*t*, *d*, *n*, *s*) and more often following the vowel *a* than *e* and *o*, but retention of *l* also occurs under the very same conditions” (Jensen, 1972: 59). A text of Bertran de Born from the 13<sup>th</sup> century gives us a good example of the mixture between *l*-vocalization and *l*-retention with the phrase: *lo paire e.l filhs el.lh fraire, l'us ab l'autre* (“the father and the son and the brothers, one against the other”). The *l* is retained in *filhs*, but is vocalized in *autre*. What complicates identification of *l*-vocalization is the

fact that Provençal is no longer a spoken language, meaning we must rely on medieval texts for evidence of *l*-loss. It is quite possible that some written *l*'s were no longer pronounced (as was explained in the discussion of Old French spelling changes) and, therefore, we have no way of knowing how far the change spread.

Vocalization of pre-consonantal *l* is not present in any form in standard Italian. It does occur, however, in some regional dialects of Italian. When this change occurs, it is usually complete, but its constraints are tighter than those of French. In modern dialects of Lucca, Naples, and Sicily, *l* vocalization to *u* is present, and in modern dialects of Pisa and Florence, pre-consonantal *l* is vocalized to *i*, to form words like *aitro* (instead of *altro*). This change can be seen in texts as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century, as in a Sicilian text from 1287 that uses the changed word *l'autri* and unchanged word *alcuni* (Pei, 1941: 158, 182).

We can chart the distribution of words that undergo the vocalization of *l* within the Romance.<sup>5</sup> Using the languages Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and French, we see that there are no examples of words that show *l*-vocalization in all of those languages (given that we use standard Italian and not any of its non-standard dialects). The next possibility, vocalization in all the languages but Italian is the not common, but still possible.

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<sup>5</sup> In these charts I have used *X* to denote *l*-vocalization and *O* to denote *l*-retention.

**Table 4**

| <b>Italian</b> | <b>Spanish</b> | <b>Portuguese</b> | <b>French</b> |             |
|----------------|----------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------|
| O              | X              | X                 | X             |             |
| -----          |                |                   |               |             |
| Altro          | otro           | outro             | autre         | “other”     |
| Ascoltare      | escuchar       | escutar           | écouter       | “to listen” |
| Talpa          | topo           | toupeira          | taupe         | “mole”      |

There are also words that show vocalization in French and Portuguese, but retention in Italian and Spanish.

**Table 5**

| <b>Italian</b> | <b>Spanish</b> | <b>Portuguese</b> | <b>French</b>     |                |
|----------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| O              | O              | X                 | X                 |                |
| -----          |                |                   |                   |                |
| Dolce          | dulce          | doce              | doux              | “sweet, soft”  |
| Polvere        | polvo          | pó, poeira        | poudre, poussière | “powder, dust” |

By far the most common distribution is that of vocalization of *l* in French and retention of *l* in the other three languages.

**Table 6**

| Italian | Spanish | Portuguese | French    |                     |
|---------|---------|------------|-----------|---------------------|
| X       | X       | X          | O         |                     |
| Alba    | alba    | alva       | aube      | “dawn”              |
| Altare  | altar   | altar      | autel     | “altar”             |
| Alzare  | alzar   | alçar      | hausser   | “to shrug”          |
| Colpo   | golpe   | golpe      | coup      | “hit”               |
| Falso   | falso   | falso      | faux, -se | “false”             |
| Falcone | halcón  | falcão     | faucon    | “falcon”            |
| Feltro  | fieltro | feltro     | feutre    | “felt”              |
| Palmo   | palma   | palma      | paume     | “palm (of hand)”    |
| Polmone | pulmón  | pulmão     | poumon    | “lung” <sup>6</sup> |

The question is: is there any reason for this patterning of the sound change? Could there be an extra-linguistic factor such as contact between cultures that created the change within the pronunciation of certain words? The first thing to look at is the geographical patterning of the change. The vocalization of *l* is first noticed and indeed most complete in France. If the sound change was a case of spreading outward from a center to different speech communities, France would be seen to be the physical center of the change and the areas surrounding it would grade out accordingly. We can see, however, that this is not the case. Although France and Spain share a border, Spain shows the least dependable pattern of vocalization. Portugal is the closest to French in its treatment of pre-consonantal *l* and yet it is separated from France by all of Spain. The dialects of Italy that have vocalized *l* are scattered throughout the country and are not found along the French-Italian border.

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<sup>6</sup> In order to get a better idea of how this distribution patterns across more than just these four languages, we can look at the word for “lung.” Out of Italian, Sardinian, Rumanian, Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, Provençal, French, and Friulan, only French vocalizes the *l* (Canfield and Davis: 1975, 80).

If simple geography does not create a case for spreading of the sound change from one speech community to another, what could be another explanation? The Middle Ages was a period of much political upheaval. The borders of countries were changing constantly, making the boundaries of today's countries incongruous with the linguistic, cultural, and political boundaries of the Middle Ages. Since areas we now consider "French" or "Italian" went through many different periods of leadership, is it possible to find a link between linguistic change and the conquering of certain areas? Although it is possible to find some connections between political power and the areas of the sound change, it is impossible to find an obvious, indubitable pattern. Gaul (which corresponds roughly with today's France) remained mostly free of invading powers, while Spain (which included Portugal) and Italy fell prey to Muslim and Byzantine invaders. Spain's Visigothic leadership was destroyed by the Muslim invasion in 711, which cut most ties between the Iberian Peninsula and the rest of Europe. The Muslims then moved into southern Gaul, but were defeated at Tours. In the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Muslims and the Byzantines fought for Crete, Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica (Hollister: 1990, 56-146). While it is interesting to point out that Sicily, Portugal, and parts of France fell under Muslim control, and therefore could have been affected linguistically by the Muslims, this theory does not explain Sardinia (which was occupied but does not show the sound change) and Spain (which was occupied but shows an incomplete). Clearly, it cannot be argued that conquering people spread this sound change.

It seems that it is not likely that extra-linguistic factors such as geography and political power are responsible for the appearance of this linguistic change in different

romance languages. What then could be the explanation for this sound change? What makes the most sense is not that *l* vocalization throughout the romance family was the result of one change that spread, but rather that the change occurs naturally due to phonetic constraints, and therefore appeared independently in each of the languages. In order to understand this idea, it is important to look at the phonetic and phonological qualities of the sounds involved.

The *l* that is commonly used in French (and English) today is alveolar or dental. The *l* in Old French, however, had a velar tinge similar to the *l* in the English word *all*, meaning its articulation was farther back in the oral cavity. When the tongue lifts to articulate the velar *l*, its point of articulation is similar to that of *u* and it is given the resonance of that vowel. If apical contact with the alveolar ridge or the teeth is given up, the *l* is fully vocalized to *u*.

To further understand this, a discussion of the properties of the *l* sound is necessary. *L* is a liquid, a classification of sounds that cover the different manifestations of *l* and *r*. While liquids are considered consonants, they are set apart from the rest of the consonants because of their manner of articulation and their sonority. They are highly sonorant, so much so that some linguists classify them as having both consonantal (contoidal) and vocalic (vocoidal) characteristics. Catford puts liquids, glides, and even [u] into a class called approximants (in order to differentiate them from vocoids and contoids) which can be vocoidal or contoidal depending on their placement within a cluster of sounds (Brakel, 1983: 31). The manner of articulation of liquids facilitates co-

articulation with a vowel, which in turn creates the possibility of simplification to the vowel sound only.

A factor in vocalization of /l/ is the relative weakness of the sound. Linguists have created strength hierarchies that show the relative strengths of segments within words. We can use this to theorize which sound segments are most likely to be vocalized or effaced. Hooper presents this hierarchy:

**Figure 2:** sound hierarchy as proposed by Hooper

| <u>Segment</u>       | <u>Relative Strength</u> |
|----------------------|--------------------------|
| Voiceless stop       | 6                        |
| Voiceless continuant | 5                        |
| Voiced stop          |                          |
| Voiced continuant    | 4                        |
| Nasals               | 3                        |
| Liquids              | 2                        |
| Glides               | 1                        |

(Hooper, 1976: 206)

This shows that liquids are extremely weak, stronger only than glides, which are known for their vocoidal qualities.<sup>7</sup>

Hooper further presents a hierarchy for American Spanish, which, although it is not identical to the hierarchy of Old French, gives us an idea of how such a hierarchy is patterned.

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<sup>7</sup> Because of this vocalic quality, glides are sometimes referred to as semi-consonants or semi-vowels, and, as we have seen, were grouped with liquids as approximants by Catford. A good illustration of the intermediate position glides hold is their use with vowels in American English. The vowel sounds [ɪ] and [e], for example, cannot occur without a following [j], which is not written and is considered part of the vowel sound.



**Figure 3:** sound hierarchy of American Spanish as proposed by Hooper

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| c                 |   |
| p, t, k           | 8 |
| f, b, d, g        | 7 |
| r                 |   |
| y, y <sup>w</sup> | 6 |
| s, x              | 5 |
| m, n, ñ           | 4 |
| l                 | 3 |
| r                 | 2 |
| y, w              | 1 |

(Hooper, 1976: 208)

As can be seen, *l* is at the very weak end of the scale, stronger only than its fellow liquid *r* and the glides *y* and *w*. This weakness makes it easy for the *l* to be blended with a vowel and later effaced or vocalized.

The ease with which liquids are vocalized can be clearly illustrated with examples drawn from different dialects of English characterized by their loss of post-vocalic *r*.

Every day tourists in Boston buy t-shirts that say "Pahk ya cah in Hahvahd Yahd" (instead of "Park your car in Harvard Yard"), in reference to the *r*-less Boston accent established by British settlers with similar accents in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Similar *r*-less speech in the United States due to British pronunciation norms at the time of colonization can be seen in New York and many areas of the South. Since this change is dialectal and not standardized, it is not represented in modern spelling.

Interestingly, pre-consonantal *l*-vocalization, as we have explored in the Romance languages, can be seen in English, too. In Middle English, pre-consonantal *l* preceded by *a* was vocalized into *u*. The *u* merged with the preceding vowel and eventually became [ ] (such as in *talk*, *walk*), except after *f*, *v*, and *m*, where it became [ ] (as in *half*, *calf*). The post-*o* *l* in words like *folk* and *yolk* was also lost in front of certain consonants. The *l*

in these examples is no longer pronounced, although in some dialects, the *l* is resurfacing, not because of any phonological process, but simply based on the orthography (Pyles and Algeo, 1993:178).

The words *fault* and *vault*, however, have a pronounced pre-consonantal *l* which has an interesting explanation. Middle English borrowed the word *faute* from Old French. The word in Latin (*fallita*) had an *l*, but the pronunciation of it was lost in French through the *l*-vocalization rule explored in this paper. Up until the 1780's and 90's, the word was pronounced without the *l* in English. An example of this can be found in "Directions for Making a Birth-Day Song," in which Swift rhymes *faults* with *thoughts*. The *l* was reinserted in the late 1700's because of its relationship with Latin and by analogy to words like *false* (which lost the *l* in French and became *faux, fausse*) (Pyles and Algeo, 1993:172).

Since English and French came in close contact after the Norman conquest of England in 1066, this *l*-vocalization could support the theory that contact between languages spread the change. However, since we can not establish an acceptable pattern with the other instances of the change, it seems more likely that this example points to the idea that vocalization of *l* is natural and has a high probability of happening due to the phonetic features of *l* as a liquid.

Interesting to note also is the weakness of *l* in Italian. Although pre-consonantal *l* was not vocalized in standard speech (as we have seen), Italian did regularly vocalize post-consonantal *l*, so that *flore* became *fiore* and *blanco* became *bianco*.

Through these examples, we can see that vocalization of *l* is a common process in many languages. The examples of this sound change in the Romance languages were not

the result of one instance of change being spread from language to language, but rather the result of the relative weakness of the liquid *l* that lends itself to vocalization or effacement.