

Peeling lips and leaping pills: new insights into lateral approximants

Michael Proctor, Macquarie University

Lateral approximants are the unique class of speech sounds in which air flows around the sides of the tongue. /l/ is typically produced by closing the tongue tip behind the upper teeth and retracting the tongue body to elongate the tongue. New data on lateral production in Australian and American English reveals that canonical patterns of production might not always be used in the expected environments, with 'l'-vocalization a pervasive phenomenon. We show that (i) the tongue can be controlled in different ways to achieve lateralization, and (ii) individual listeners perceive vocalized 'l' in quite different ways. Collectively, these data suggest that laterals are a class of sounds characterized by more variability in production and perception than has previously been assumed, which may account for their prominence as markers of individual and social identity. We discuss implications for phonological representation in different languages, and relevance for understanding the changing sociophonetic landscape of modern Australia.

Associate Professor Michael Proctor bio

I investigate speech production and perception, and phonological organization in human language. We are developing methods using real-time Magnetic Resonance Imaging and other technologies to investigate the dynamics of speech production -- how the vocal tract is shaped over time -- to inform our knowledge of phonological structure and its cognitive representation.