

The Phoneme /l/ in English and Arabic

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### Abstract

The present study aims at identifying the phoneme /l/ and its variants known as allophones such as clear [l] and dark or velarized [ɫ] in both English and Arabic. It is hypothesized that in English, clear [l] occurs in initial positions of syllables referred to as onset whereas dark or velarized [ɫ] occurs in final positions known as coda. In Arabic, clear [l] and dark or velarized [ɫ] occur in different positions depending on the sounds that precede and follow them. In both English and Arabic, the phoneme /l/ is described as alveolar, lateral, voiced, approximant and liquid. In addition, it functions as syllabic to form a syllable without a vowel sound. Concerning assimilation, the phoneme /l/ in Arabic assimilates to certain consonants, a process which has no counterparts in English. Finally, such a phoneme plays a significant role in forming the meaning of words evoking emotions. Dark [ɫ], for instance, may express melancholy and mystery whereas clear [l] glides gracefully within the rhythm of the recitation.

Key words: phoneme /l/, allophones, dark /l/, clear /l/.

### المخلص

صوت اللام في اللغتين الإنجليزية والعربية

تهدف الدراسة الحالية الى التعرف على صوت اللام ونوعيه الخفيف والثقيل في اللغتين الإنجليزية والعربية. وقد افترض ان النوع الخفيف لهذا الصوت في اللغة الإنجليزية يظهر في بداية المقطع الصوتي بينما يظهر النوع الثقيل منه في نهاية المقطع الصوتي. اما في اللغة العربية فان هذين الصوتين يظهران في مواقع مختلفة اعتمادا على الأصوات التي تسبقها او تليها. يوصف صوت اللام في اللغتين الإنجليزية والعربية على انه لثوي وجانبي ومجهور وسائل. اصف الى انه يعد صوتا مقطوعيا حيث يكون مقطعا بحد ذاته بدون صوت علة. وبخصوص الادغام فان صوت اللام في اللغة العربية يدغم في مجموعة معينة من الأصوات العربية مكونا ظاهرة لامثيل لها في اللغة الإنجليزية. وأخيرا فان صوت اللام يلعب دورا مهما في تكوين معاني المفردات واثارة المشاعر. فالنوع الثقيل او المفخم لهذا الصوت قد يعبر عن التعاسة والغموض اما النوع الخفيف او المرقق فانه ينساب بطيبة خاطر مع موسيقى الترتيل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صوت اللام ، أنواع اللام ، اللام المفخمة ، اللام المرققة.

## 1.Introduction

The /l/ is described as lateral in terms of manner of articulation since, in its production, according to Katamba (1996: 7), the air is blocked by means of the tongue along the center of the mouth and it escapes between the sides of the tongue. In this case, Davenport and Hannahs (2010: 31) point out that in the production of the lateral /l/, the tongue known as an active articulator is in contact with the palate defined as the roof of the mouth which is described as a passive articulator. Here only the central part of the tongue is involved in this contact. Such a process is referred to as ‘mid – sagittal contact’ where the sides of the tongue are lowered. Accordingly, the air is free to pass along the sides of the oral tract. The blade of the tongue touches the alveolar ridge. Thus, the phoneme /l/ is described as alveolar in terms of place of articulation. This phoneme, according to Yavas (2013:8), is termed liquid. In this case, Akmajian et al. (1997: 72) point out that the term liquid is ‘a non – technical, impressionistic expression indicating that the sound is smooth and flows easily’.

With regard to elision defined as the omission of sounds, the phoneme /l/ can be elided when preceded by the long vowel /o:/ as in:

always [o:ɪweɪz] → [o:weɪz]

already [o:ɪredi] → [o:redi]

all right → <http://en.wikipedia>.

[o:lraɪt]

[o:raɪt]

The phoneme /l/ can be classified as [+ cont] to indicate that the air flows continuously; or [- cont] to refer to the obstruction of the air (Ibid:99). Fromkin et al. (2003: 586) agree with Akmajian et al.(1997: 106) that the tip of the tongue obstructs the air stream partially where the air is allowed to escape between the sides of the tongue.

### 1.1 Allophones of the Phoneme /l/

In English there are two variants of the phoneme /l/ such as clear [l] and dark or velarized [ɫ] as illustrated in the words ‘leaf’ [li:f] and ‘bulk’ [buɫk] respectively. There is a complexity in the distribution of such variants of the phoneme /l/. For instance, the two words ‘well’ [weɪɫ] and ‘result’ [rɪzʌɫt] have a dark or velarized [ɫ] which occur as a final or a pre

– final consonant. This means that there is an optional consonant that may intervene between dark [ɫ] and # as shown in the following rule:



The parentheses means that the consonant is optional ( Davenport and Hannah,2010: 140).

From the examples stated above, one can infer that clear [l] occurs in initial positions of words whereas dark [ɫ] occurs finally. However, the problem arises when clear [l] is found in non – initial positions as in “yellow” [jeləu] and “silly” [sili] and that dark [ɫ] is found in non – final positions as in “fullness” [fʊɫnəs]. Actually, “a single stem may alternate between clear [l] and dark [ɫ]” as illustrated in the following words:

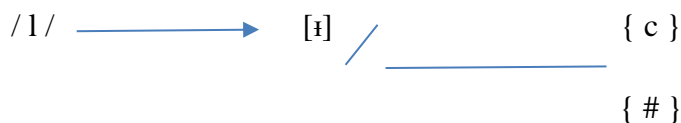
real [ri:əɫ] where dark [ɫ] occurs finally.

reality [riələti] where clear [l] occurs in the initial position of the third syllable.

feel [fi:ɫ] where dark [ɫ] occurs finally.

feeling [fi:liŋ] where clear [l] occurs in the initial position of the second syllable.

Accordingly, it can be concluded that dark [ɫ] can occur finally as in “full” [fʊɫ] and before consonants as in “fullness” [fʊɫnəs], and that clear [l] can occur elsewhere (Ibid: 151). Thus, the rule can be restated as follows:



This rule still has a defect. Thus, this problem can be taken into consideration in terms of the structure of the syllable. The occurrence of clear [l] and dark or velarized [ɫ] in a word can be noted according to their positions in a syllable. As a result, clear [l] appears in the onset of the syllable where a single consonant or a consonant cluster precedes the center of the syllable whereas a dark or velarized [ɫ] appears in the coda of the syllable where a single consonant or a consonant cluster follows the center of the syllable. This can be elaborated in the following examples: leaf [.li:f.] where clear [l] appears as an onset of the syllable.



of words such as “little” [litɪ] or “ladle” [leidɪ], the tongue is released at the end of the word where no vowel sound is pronounced in the second syllable and the dark [ɪ] functions as syllabic to form a syllable by itself without a vowel sound (Ladfoged and Johnson,2015: 68).

In this respect, Yavas (2013: 8) affirms that lateral plosion can be investigated in words such as “cattle” [katɪ] (/t/ + /l/) and middle [midɪ] (/d/ + /l/) and in the sequence of words such as “bud light” [bʌd laɪt] (/d/ + /l/ and “at last” [ət la:st] (/t/ + /l/). However, the sounds which have no “homogonicity” have no lateral release as explained in words such as “tickle” [tikɪ] or “niple” [nipɪ]. In such words, the phonemes /k/ and /p/ are described as velar and bilabial respectively in terms of place of articulation whereas /l/ is alveolar. Therefore, such sounds are not homogenous, i.e. they have different places of articulation.

### 1.3. Lateral Approximant

The production of the phoneme /l/ involves obstructing the air stream by means of the tongue where incomplete closure is investigated between the sides of the tongue and the palate (the roof of the mouth). As a result, the air passes freely between the sides of the tongue. Since the air does not stop and there is no friction noise, the phoneme /l/ is classified as approximant or alveolar lateral approximant (Ladfoged and Johnson, 2015: 18). In this case, Roach (2001: 24) states that the phoneme /l/ is approximant where the center of the tongue touches the palate and the air passes between the sides of the tongue. Hudson (2000: 25), in this case, points out that “if the lateral lowerings of the words (lip) and (roll) are absent, the result is /d/ instead of /l/: (dip) and (rode)”.

## 2. The Phoneme /l/ in Arabic

In Arabic, the phoneme /l/ is termed lateral since it is produced when the tip of the tongue touches the alveolar ridge and the air is allowed to pass between the sides of the tongue. With regard to voicing, this phoneme is voiced since the vocal cords vibrate during its production (Ibnul - Jazri, 1994). According to Al - Gailaani (1999), the phoneme /l/ is liquid because, in its production, the air is neither completely nor partially obstructed. It escapes in a way different from that of plosives and fricatives. Anees (1975: 64) refers to the phoneme /l/ as a middle consonant.

The phoneme /l/ is either dark [ɪ] [sawtun mufaxxamun] or clear [l] [sawtun muraqqaqun]. Watson (2002) states that clear [l] is produced when the sides of the tongue gently touch the palate (the roof of the mouth) whereas the dark or emphatic [ɪ] is produced with the tongue being tensed and a firm contact between the sides of the tongue and the palate.

The phoneme /l/ is termed syllabic in certain contexts since it functions as a center of a syllable to make a syllable by itself. In this respect, Abdul – Tawwab (1981: 84) states that such a syllabic consonant is restricted to final positions in paused situations. Consider the following instances:

[waʕl] وصل

[baʕl] بذل

### 2.1 Clear [l]

Clear [l] occurs in the name of our Almighty God [ʔallaah] provided it is preceded by

1. a short vowel [i] which means [kasra] in Arabic as in [billaahi] (Hassaan, 1983: 105).

2. [l] + consonant + [l] of [ʔallaah] as in the following example from the Holy Quran:

( قال تعالى: قالت رسلهم أفي الله شك فاطر السموات والأرض (سورة إبراهيم الآية ١٠

أفي الله [ʔafillaahi]

3. a word ending with [un] referred to as [tanwiin] in Arabic as in :

قال تعالى: أحد (١) الله (٢) (سورة الصمد الايات ١ و٢

أحد (١) الله (٢) [ʔaḥadun illaahi]

Clear [l] can occur in other cases rather than the word [ʔallaah] as demonstrated in the following examples:

1. It is clear when followed by the short vowels [u] or [i], i.e. [ḍamma] or [kasra] or a consonant:

[taʕluʔ] where clear [l] is followed by [u]. تطلع

[laʔuʕallibannakum] where clear [l] is followed by [i]. لاصلبنكم

[ʕalʕaal] where clear [l] in the first syllable is followed by the consonant [ʕ]. صلصال

2. It is clear when followed by a short vowel and one of the consonants such as [t] or [ʃ] as in:

[sallaḥum] where clear [l] is followed by the short vowel [a] and the consonant [t]. سلطهم

[ʔinnahaa laḍaa] where the clear [l] is followed by [a] and [d]. انها لظي

3. [l] is clear when preceded by [ʕ] or [d] + [i] as in the following examples:

[fuʕʕilat] where clear [l] is preceded by [ʕ] + [i]. فصلت

[dilaal] where clear [l] is preceded by [d] + [i]. ظلال

4. [l] is clear when it occurs between two short vowel sounds as in:

[suʕilat] where clear [l] occurs between [i] and [a]. سنلت

[yanqalibu] where clear [l] occurs between [a] and [i] (Abdul – Tawwab, 1981: 48). ينقلب

### 2. 2 Dark [ɽ]



Dark [ɫ] occurs in the following cases:

1. It is dark in the name of our Almighty God [ʔallaah] when it functions as a subject or the preceding noun is annexed to it as in :

[ʔallaahu] functions as a subject. قال تعالى: الله لا اله الا هو الحي القيوم (سورة البقرة الآية ٢٥٥)

[ʃaʔaaʔiru llaahi] where the first noun is annexed to the word [ʔallaahi]. شعائر الله

2. It is dark in the word [ʔallaah] provided that it is preceded by a sequence comprising [u], [i] or [a] + consonant + vowel as in:

[ʔaʔfaʔaha llaahu] where dark [ɫ] is preceded by [a] + consonant [h] + vowel [a]. أطفالها الله.

[waʔaʔiiʔu llaaha] where the dark [ɫ] is preceded by [i] + the consonant [ʔ]+[u]. واطيعوا الله.

There are other cases where the phoneme /l/ is dark when preceded by one of the velarized consonants such as [ʂ], [ʔ] and [ʃ] as in:

[ʔaʂɫ] where the dark [ɫ] is preceded by [ʂ]. اصل.

[muʔlaq] where the dark [ɫ] is preceded by [ʔ]. مطلق.

[muʃɫim] where the dark [ɫ] is preceded by [ʃ]. مظلم.

The phoneme / l / may be both clear and dark when a long vowel [aa] separates / l / from the velarized consonants as in the following instances:

[fiʂaal] where [aa] is between [ʂ] and [l] or [ɫ], i.e. clear [l] or dark [ɫ]. فصال.

[ʔaala] where [aa] is between [ʔ] and [l] (Abdul – Tawwab, 1981: 48) طال

Anees (1975: 64) points out that the difference between clear [l] and dark [ɫ] is related to the position of the tongue which takes a curved shape when producing a dark [ɫ]. It is worthy noting that the meaning of a word with clear [l] is completely different from that of the same word with dark [ɫ] as in:

[xaali] (empty). [l] is clear. خالي

[xaali] (my uncle). [ɫ] is dark. خالي

### 2.3 Assimilation of the Phoneme / l /

The phoneme / l / in the words [hal] and [bal] assimilates to certain consonants as demonstrated in the following points:

The phoneme /l/ of [bal]

According to Al – Maqdisi (n.d.: 190 – 91), [l] of [bal] assimilates to the following consonants:

1. [ s ]

قال تعالى: بل سولت لكم أنفسكم امرا ..... سورة يوسف . الآية ١٨.

[bal sawwalat] → [bassawwalat]

2. [t]

قال تعالى: بل طبع الله..... سورة النساء. الآية ١٥٥

[bal ʔabaʔa] → [baʔʔabaʔa]

3. [n]

قال تعالى: بل نقذف..... سورة الأنبياء. الآية ١٨

[bal naqðifu] → [bannaqðifu]

4. [t]

قال تعالى: بل تأتيهم بغتة..... سورة الأنبياء. الآية ٤٠

[bal taʔtiihim] → [battaʔtiihim]

5. [z]

قال تعالى: بل زعمتم..... سورة الكهف. الآية ٤٨

[bal zaʔamtum] → [bazzaʔamtum]

6. [ʃ]

قال تعالى: بل ظننتم..... سورة الفتح. الآية ١٢

[bal ʃanantum] → [baʃʃanantum]

7. [ð]

قال تعالى: ..... بل ضلوا عنهم..... سورة الاحقاف. الآية ٢٨

[bal ðallu] → [baððallu]

The phoneme [l] of [hal]

The phoneme [l] of the word [hal] assimilates to the following consonants (Al – Maqdisi, n.d.: 190 – 91):

1. [t]

قال تعالى: ..... هل تعلم له سميا. سورة مريم. الآية ٦٥



[hal taʕlamu] → [hattaʕlamu]

2. [ n ]

قال تعالى: ..... هل نحن منظرون. سورة الشعراء. الآية ٢٠٣

[hal nahnu] → [hannahnu]

3. [ θ ]

قال تعالى: هل ثوب الكفار ..... سورة المطففين. الآية ٣٦

[hal θuwwiba] [haθθuwwiba].

Hilaal (2004 :165 ) adds that it is possible to assimilate [ l ] of [hal] to [ʃ ] as in:

هل شيء [hal ʃayʔ] → [haʃʃayʔ].

This type of assimilation is considered weak since the place of articulation of [ ʃ ] is far from that of [ l ] in that [ ʃ ] is described as palato – alveolar whereas [ l ] is alveolar. Additionally, [ l ] can assimilate to [ r ] as in:

هل رأيت [hal raʔayta] → [harraʔayta] (Sibawayhi, 1983: 448).

Such patterns of assimilation show that [ l ] of [bal] is more commonly used than that of [hal]. In this respect, Al – Qaysi (1974: 153 – 54) states that [ l ] of [hal] and [bal] is not followed by a vowel sound. In addition, Hilaal (2004: 165) indicates that [ l ] and the following sounds except [ʃ] have neighboring places of articulation. In this case, Hilaal (Ibid: 160) points out that /l/ assimilates to /r/:

وقل ربي [waqul rabbi] → [waqurrabbi]

## 2.4 Assimilation of the Definite [ l ]

The definite [ l ] can assimilate to the following consonants:

1. [ t ] as in [ʔaltamr] → [ʔattamr]

2. [ r ] as in [ʔalrasuul] → [ʔarrasuul]

3. [ t̤ ] as in [ʔalt̤iin] → [ʔatt̤iin]

4. [ n ] as in [ʔalnimr] → [ʔannimr]

5. [ z ] as in [ʔalzuhd] → [ʔazzuhd]
6. [ Ṣ ] as in [ʔalṢayd] → [ʔaṢṢayd]
7. [ s ] as in [ʔalsayyaara] → [ʔassayyaara]
8. [ ḍ ] as in [ʔalḍabaab] → [ʔaḍḍbaab]
9. [ ʃ ] as in [ʔalʃams] → [ʔaʃʃams]
10. [ d ] as in [ʔaldaar] → [ʔaddaar]
11. [ ḏ ] as in [ʔalḏahab] → [ʔaḏḏahab]
12. [ θ ] as in [ʔalθawb] → [ʔaθθawb] (Al – Moosili, 2001: 239)
13. [ ʒ ] as in [ʔalʒalaam] → [ʔaʒʒalaam]

In this respect, Al – Rabae (2009: 68 - 9) points out that the phonologists justify the assimilation of the definite / l / to [ʔalʔaṢwaatu ʃʃamsiyya] (solar sounds) saying that the places of articulation of such sounds are neighboring to that of / l /. They add another reason for this assimilation indicating that such sounds, except [ t ] are stronger than [ l ]. It is worth noting that definite / l / does not assimilate to [ j ] which is a solar sound as in [ ʔaljanna] (paradise). Additionally, original / l / does not assimilate to solar sounds as in: [ʔalsuna] (the tongues).

### 3. Contrastive Analysis

There are certain points of similarities and differences between the phoneme / l / in English and Arabic.

#### 3.1 Points of Similarities

The following points are found in both English and Arabic:

1. There are two allophones of the phoneme / l / such as clear [ l ] and dark [ ɫ ].
3. The phoneme / l / is described as alveolar, lateral, voiced, approximant and liquid.
4. Clear [ l ] and dark [ ɫ ] are in complementary distribution.
5. The phoneme / l / occurs in initial, medial and final positions.

#### 3.2 Points of Differences

There are certain differences between English and Arabic in terms of the phoneme / l / as demonstrated in the following points:

1. In English, clear [ l ] occurs initially as onset of the syllable whereas dark [ ɫ ] occurs in final position to form coda of the syllable. In Arabic, clear [ l ] and dark [ ɫ ] are affected by the

consonants and vowels preceding and following them. For instance, if the phoneme / l / is preceded by one of the velarized consonants such as [ʃ], [t] or [ʒ], it should be dark.

2. Syllabic [ l̥ ] in English is always dark whereas in Arabic it is clear unless it is preceded by a velarized consonant.

3. In English, the phoneme / l / is elided when preceded by a long vowel / o: / as in ‘always’ /o:lweiz/ → /o:weiz/. In Arabic, / l / is not elided.

4. With regard to assimilation, the phoneme / l / assimilates to certain consonants in certain situations where it has no counterparts in English.

#### 4. Conclusions

It can be concluded that each language has its own phonological system that results in certain differences of pronunciation between such languages. However, there are similarities between them. As far as the phoneme / l / is concerned, both English and Arabic have two allophones such as clear [ l ] and dark [ l̥ ] whose production depends on the consonants and vowels that precede and follow them. In English, for instance, clear [ l ] occurs in initial positions either as a single consonant or with a consonant cluster to form the onset of the syllable whereas dark [ l̥ ] occurs finally either singly or with a consonant cluster to make the coda of the syllable. In Arabic, on the other hand, clear [ l ] can occur finally provided it is not preceded by one of the velarized consonants. The phoneme / l /, in both languages, functions as syllabic to form a syllable without a vowel sound. With regard to assimilation, such a phoneme assimilates to certain sounds in Arabic, a process which has no counterpart in English. Concerning the recitation of the Holy Qur’an, the readers are required to comprehend how to differentiate between clear [ l ] and dark [ l̥ ] in their pronunciation. The phoneme / l / is considered as a means to form meaning and evoke emotions. Dark [ l̥ ], for instance, may express melancholy and mystery whereas clear [ l ] glides gracefully within the rhythm of recitation.

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