

The ‘evanescent /l/’ in Venetan: a preliminary EMA study

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Abstract

This study is the first articulatory investigation of the so-called ‘evanescent /l/’ in Venetan. We propose that this sound be transcribed as a non-syllabic [ɛ̥] or [ɹ̥] in the variety of interest.

1. Introduction

Venetan is an Italo-Romance language spoken in northeastern Italy alongside Italian, especially in the Veneto region, as well as in diaspora communities established through migration (Cordin, 2021). Though often referred to as a “dialect” of Italy due to its unofficial status (e.g., Maiden & Parry, 1997), Venetan is not a dialect of Italian: it developed independently from Proto-Romance and differs from Italian in phonology, morphosyntax, and lexicon.

A characteristic feature of several Venetan varieties—particularly those of Venice and central Veneto—is the *elle evanescente* (‘evanescent /l/’): a process in which intervocalic /l/ weakens between non-front vowels and deletes when either flanking vowel is front. For example, /'palo/ ‘pole’ has been transcribed as [ˈpaɔ], and /'bɛlo/ ‘beautiful (m sg)’ as [ˈbɛo].

Although widely discussed, existing accounts of this process remain mostly impressionistic and diverge in their proposed articulatory interpretations. Lepschy (1962) describes a “relaxed”, non-lateral sound produced with a central groove in the raised tongue dorsum and lateral contact with the upper teeth. Zamboni (1974) and Tomasin (2010) transcribe the segment as a non-syllabic [ɛ̥] with dorsopalatal articulation. Mafera & Roman (2006) report a fleeting [e]-like vocoid with tongue-tip raising but no alveolar contact. Other accounts describe a pre-velar approximant (Canepari, 1976, 1979) or fully vocalised realisations such as [e] or [i] (Belloni, 2009; Pellegrini, 1977). This variation in impressionistic descriptions highlights the need for empirical articulatory data. The present study offers the first such analysis using Electromagnetic Articulography (EMA).

2. Methods

Two male speakers of central Venetan, aged 24 (S1) and 36 (S2), from the neighbouring villages of Loria and Cassola (provinces of Treviso and Vicenza), were recorded. The corpus included disyllabic paroxytone Venetan words with /l/, /n/, and /j/ in intervocalic and initial positions within carrier phrases (see Appendix). EMA data and synchronized audio were collected using a Carstens AG501 system. Sensors were attached with oral adhesive. Four reference sensors (left/right mastoid, nasion, upper incisor) enabled head correction. Five tongue sensors were placed on the tip (TT), dorsum (TD), body (TB), and parasagittal (lateral) edges (PARAL, PARAR). Additional sensors tracked the jaw (below lower left incisor) and lips (upper/lower vermilion borders). Stimuli were presented via MATLAB; a bite plane was recorded post-session. Head movement was corrected offline using an orthogonal Procrustes transformation and spatially aligned based on the occlusion and upper incisor sensors.

3. Results and discussion

Figure 1 displays average /VCV/ vertical tongue trajectories over time for S1 (top) and S2 (bottom). On the left, TB movements are shown for /VIV/ intervals (red) and /VjV/ intervals (blue); on the right, TT movements are shown for /VIV/ (red) and /VnV/ (blue) intervals. The segments /j/ and /n/ serve as articulatory references for TB and TT, respectively, as their primary constriction involves these tongue regions. Trajectories for TD, PARAL, and PARAR are omitted here, as they did not exhibit notably different movement patterns.

As previously proposed, /e_V/, /ɛ_V/ tokens (pooled in Figure 1) and /i_V/ tokens consistently showed elision of intervocalic /l/, with tongue gestures transitioning directly from

the first to the second vowel or remaining static in the case of /i_i/. For TT (right-hand panels), /VIV/ intervals lack the TT raising characteristic of /VnV/, indicating the absence of an apical gesture for intervocalic /l/. For TB (left-hand panels), trajectories are consistently lower for /VIV/ than for /VjV/, suggesting a reduced degree of tongue body raising in the former. In both cases, differences in tongue movement patterns were also found statistically using linear mixed-effect regression applied to functional principal component scores.

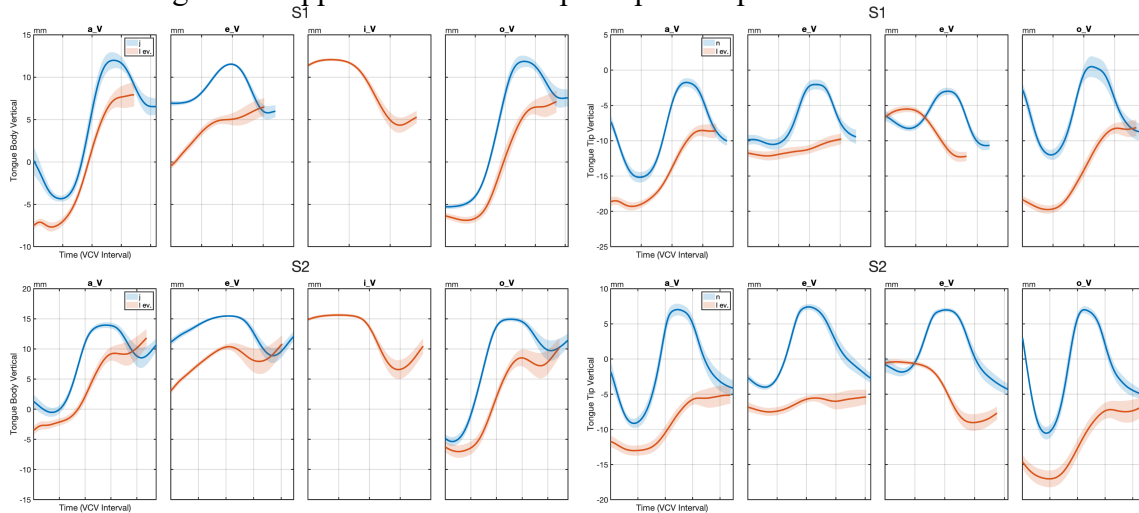


Figure 1. Mean TB trajectories for /VIV/ and /VjV/ and TT trajectories for /VIV/ and /VnV/ by speaker.

Figure 2 illustrates average midsagittal trajectories (horizontal × vertical) of TB for /aIv/ (red) and /ajV/ (blue) tokens. The /l/ gesture shows greater horizontal displacement, starting further back than /j/ but reaching a similarly front position. Vertically, however, /l/ does not reach the same height as /j/, indicating a reduced degree of dorsopalatal constriction. This articulatory difference is supported by the acoustic data: as shown in Figure 3, non-elided /l/ realisations occupy a region of the vowel space in the mid front area, though clearly lower than [e]. For the /olo/ context there is a shift towards the mid central region.

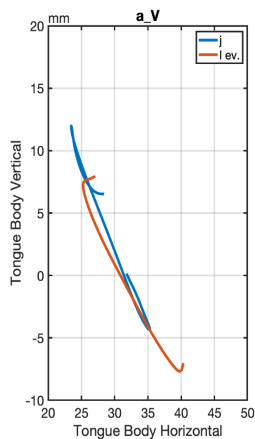


Figure 2. 2D TB trajectories of /j/ and /l/ from S1 (left = front)

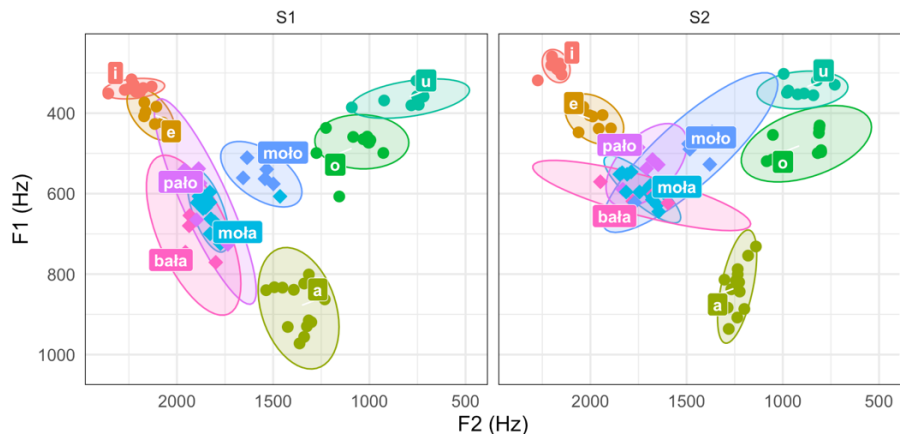


Figure 3. Acoustic vowel space for /i e a o u/ including non-elided intervocalic /l/ realisations (at peak F2 value) by speaker.

Overall, our results suggest that the *elle evanescente*, when not elided, is articulated as a low-mid front or a mid central non-syllabic semivowel [ɛ̞] or [ə̞], depending on the vocalic context, characterised primarily by forward tongue movement with no targeted tongue-tip or lateral gestures. This pattern reflects a vocalisation process affecting intervocalic /l/ in syllable-onset position. Future studies should consider patterns of variation of this sound across Venetan varieties, as previously reported impressionistically.

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Appendix

V_V	/l/	/j/	/n/	Initial /l/
a_a	<i>bała</i> ‘ball’	<i>maja</i> ‘sweater’	<i>tana</i> ‘burrow’	<i>late</i> ‘milk’
a_e	<i>bale</i> ‘balls’	<i>maje</i> ‘sweaters’	<i>tane</i> ‘burrows’	<i>lenjo</i> ‘wood’
a_i	<i>pali</i> ‘poles’	<i>taji</i> ‘cuts’	<i>cani</i> ‘dogs’	<i>lima</i> ‘file’
a_o	<i>palo</i> ‘pole’	<i>tajo</i> ‘cut’	<i>dano</i> ‘damage’	<i>longo</i> ‘long’
e_a	<i>beta</i> ‘beautiful (f sg)’	<i>sveja</i> ‘awake (f sg)’	<i>seno</i> ‘dinner’	<i>luni</i> ‘Monday’
e_e	<i>bele</i> ‘beautiful (f pl)’	<i>sveje</i> ‘awake (f pl)’	<i>sene</i> ‘dinners’	
e_i	<i>beti</i> ‘beautiful (m pl)’	<i>sveji</i> ‘awake (m pl)’	<i>beni</i> ‘goods’	
e_o	<i>beto</i> ‘beautiful (m sg)’	<i>svejo</i> ‘awake (m sg)’	<i>meno</i> ‘I beat up’	
i_a	<i>fiła</i> ‘row’		<i>mina</i> ‘mine’	
i_e	<i>file</i> ‘rows’		<i>mine</i> ‘mines’	
i_i	<i>fili</i> ‘threads’		<i>pini</i> ‘pine trees’	
i_o	<i>fiło</i> ‘thread’		<i>Dino</i> ‘given name’	
o_a	<i>moła</i> ‘soft (f sg)’	<i>moja</i> ‘wet (f sg)’	<i>nona</i> ‘nana’	
o_e	<i>mole</i> ‘soft (f pl)’	<i>moje</i> ‘wet (f pl)’	<i>none</i> ‘nanas’	
o_i	<i>moli</i> ‘soft (m pl)’	<i>moji</i> ‘wet (m pl)’	<i>noni</i> ‘grandparents’	
o_o	<i>molo</i> ‘soft (m sg)’	<i>mojo</i> ‘wet (m sg)’	<i>nono</i> ‘granddad’	

Table A. List of intervocalic (left) and phrase-initial (right) target words. ‘e’ and ‘o’ graphemes here may represent high-mid or low-mid vowels, depending on the word and/or Venetan variety, e.g. /ɔ/ for *molo* and /o/ for *longo*. The initial /l/ words shown are typically not produced with an evanescent /l/ in absolute initial position in central Venetan.

Carrier phrases:

- Intervocalic: *A digo ___ gran poco* (‘I say ___ very seldom’).
- Phrase initial: *___ zè quel che digo* (‘___ is what I say’).