/l/-vocalisation in Mehri

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1. Aim. Our aim is to provide a description and analysis of the behaviour of /l/ in Mehri, a Modern South Arabian language (Afroasiatic, Semitic) spoken in Yemen and Oman. Our data come from the relevant literature and original fieldwork in Oman. WATSON (2012: 35) states that "/l/ vocalisation […] has never been completely satisfactorily described" in Omani Mehri. The reason is, we think, that it is a complex process where various factors interact: i) stress, ii) syllable structure, iii) the following context, iv) the preceding vocalic context. Moreover, Mehri /l/ patterns neither on a par with the other liquid of the language, /r/, nor with the sonorants in general (/m, n, r, w, j/). Furthermore it interacts in the same way with two natural classes of consonants that are not expected to behave alike, the gutturals /ʁ, x, 9, ħ, h/ and the glides /w, j/. This case study is intended as a contribution to the more general debate on i) the vocalisation of /l/ in coda position and ii) the issue of the internal structure of liquids and, more generally, sonorants (RICE 2005).

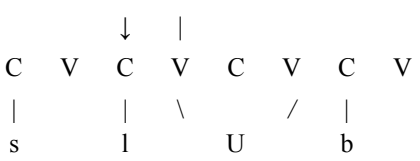
2. Data. The distribution of /l/ and its allophones in Mehri is summarized and exemplified in (1).

(1)				V_1 = ə/ø	V_1 = full/ stressed			√, gloss
a.	onset:	{V_1 ,C}_ V C_x			l	səlu:b		√slb *disarm,* pf 3ms
b.	coda:	V_1 _ C_x	C_x=[-gutt], [-gli]	w	ɛ:	/šəlbu:d/ → šəwbu:d	/jəšalbəd/ → jəšɛ:bəd	√lbd *be hit,* pf 3ms | sbj 3ms
c.			C_x=[+gutt], [+gli]		l	səlje:ba		√slb *disarm,* fut 3ms
d.	edge:	# _ V_1 C_x V	C_x=[-gutt], [-gli]	əw	l	əwbu:d	lu:təʁ	√lbd *shoot*|√ltʁ *kill,* pf 3ms
e.			C_x=[+gutt], [+gli]		l	ləħa:f		√lħf *come to so,* pf 3ms
f.		V_1 _ #			l	jəhabhəl		√bhl *cook,* sbj 3ms

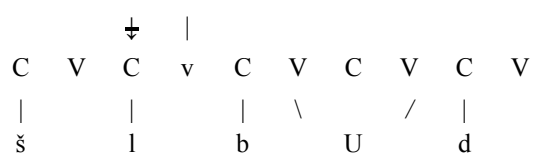
/l/ vocalisation applies in coda position (1b) and word-initially (1d). Intervocalic /l/ always remains stable (1a). Additionally, (1c) et (1e) show that /l/ vocalisation is blocked when /l/ is followed by a guttural consonant or a glide. In V__# (1f), /l/ behaves as in intervocalic position. This is consistent with the fact that in Mehri the CVC# syllable behaves like an open-syllable w.r.t. stress assignment. In coda position, two cases must be distinguished. On the one hand, if /l/ is preceded by epenthetic /ə/, it surfaces as /w/. On the other hand, if /l/ is preceded by a full stressed vowel, /l/-vocalisation results in the lengthening of the preceding vowel, which is realized as /ɛ:/. Notice that codas are licit in Mehri: all sonorants, except /l/, can appear in this position. Hence, it is not sufficient to ascribe the weakening of /l/ to the fact that it is located in coda: the adjacent context crucially interferes.

3. Analysis. When /l/-vocalisation applies, the result is either the "total loss" of the internal content of /l/ (with compensatory lengthening of the preceding V: /jəšalbəd/→ jəšɛ:bəd) or a reconfiguration of its content with a loss of "manner" elements ("semi-vocalisation": /šəlbu:d/ → šəwbu:d). Both the right context and the left context must be considered. We examine them in turn.

(2) a. səlu:b



b. šəwbūd

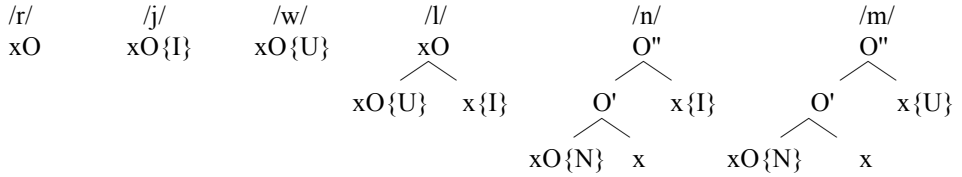


– Right Context: /l/vocalization takes place only if there is no expressed vowel immediately to the right of /l/ (coda condition). The contrast onset vs coda is easily captured in the framework of Government Phonology (LOWENSTAMM 1996): the C-position hosting /l/ is followed by an identified V-position (2a) vs by an empty V-position (v in 2b). This suggests that /l/ needs to be licensed by the following V-position, and that v cannot be a licenser. In other words, in Mehri like in many other languages, the absence of licensing induces a weakening process expressed by dissociation of melodic content (HARRIS 1990).

– Left Context: The difference in the output of the process stems from the nature of the nucleus to the left of /l/: total loss after a full-fledged vowel vs /w/ after schwa. At the phonological level, Mehri exhibits only

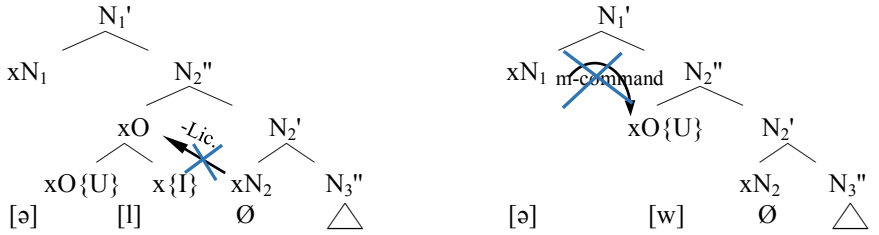
one lexical vowel per word, and this vowel attracts stress. The Mehri stress system is a classical system of Tonic Lengthening with Closed Syllable Shortening. The lexical vowel is lengthened in open syllables. We claim that the structure of /l/ needs to be licensed to surface, and that this property sets it apart from all other consonants, in particular /r/. In order to define the structure of liquids, we propose enhanced representations in the line of PÖCHTRAGER (2006). We argue that Mehri sonorants /r, j, w, l/ in (3) are unprojecting structures they must be hosted by a nucleus. /m, n/ act as regular obstruents: they project two levels (O', O").

(3)

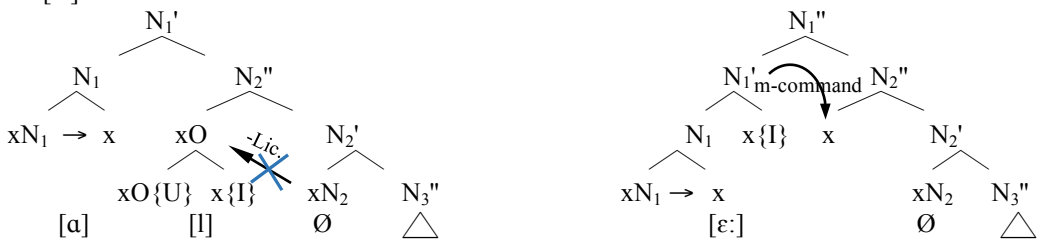


In this set, /l/ has a particular status: it is an adjunction structure (PÖCHTRAGER 2006: 166). The dependent (x) associate to the head xO without projecting an additional level (O'). /l/, like /w/, bears an |U| element (BACKLEY 2011). The adjunction structure needs licensing from the right, cf. (2). If the licenser (Right Context) is absent, /l/ has to reduce. The adjunction structure collapses to xO{U} which corresponds to the structure of /w/. If the nucleus to the left is empty (4, *cf.* PÖCHTRAGER & ZIVANOVIC 2010), m-command is blocked. If the nucleus to the left is a "full" vowel (/ɑ/ in 5), the adjunction structure collapses to x{I}. The nucleus m-commands the remnants of the reduced liquid: the vowel acquires |I| and spreads to the position left after deletion of the liquid (hence [ɛ:] on the surface).

(4) /əl/ → [əw]



(5) /ɑl/ → [ɛ:]



Finally, gutturals and glides do not trigger l-vocalisation (1c,e). We argue that this is due to two differents reasons. (a) Gutturals need more space than regular obstruents: they spread onto the preceding nucleus, v/N2, which acquires the ability to license the adjunction structure of /l/. (b) By contrast, glides consist of a head only which is hosted by the nucleus to their right (ie N3) and do not block licensing from the following realized nucleus: i.e. they are "transparent". These hypotheses are coherent with the behaviour of gutturals and glides in the language.

4. Consequences. We conclude with a discussion on the need of structured representations to express the internal organization of segments, in which laterals are expected to be in need of a host to surface, and more generally on the representations of laterals and sonorants in Element Theory.

BACKLEY 2011. *An introduction to Element Theory*. Edinburgh Univ. Press. | HARRIS 1990. Segmental complexity and phonological government. Phonology 7.1: 255-300. | LOWENSTAMM 1996. CV as the Only Syllable Type. Durand & Laks Current trends in Phonology. | PÖCHTRAGER 2006. *The Structure of Length*. Vienna: Universität Wien. PhD Thesis. | PÖCHTRAGER & ZIVANOVIC 2010. GP 2, and Putonghua too. Acta Linguistica Hungarica 57(4):357-380. | RICE 2005. Liquid relationships. Toronto WPL 24: 31-44. | WATSON 2012. *The Structure of Mehri*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.