

This study explores the lateral-to-rhotic transformation observed in select Romance varieties, focusing on Neapolitan, Romanesco dialects, and Francoprovençal. These changes involve the lateral /l/ becoming the rhotic /r/ in specific phonological contexts, such as preceding consonants. By employing Element Theory (van 't Veer, Botma, Breit & van Oostendorp 2023; Breit 2023; Russo & Ulfsbjorninn, 2020; Backeley, 2011), this research provides a detailed examination of the subsegmental properties driving this transition, enriching our understanding of segmental instability and its phonological consequences. In Neapolitan-like dialects, /l/ transitions to /r/ when it occurs preconsonantly, exemplified by *polpo* realized as [porpo]. Similarly, Romanesco exhibits this phenomenon in determiners, with the determiner *el* surfacing as *er* before initial consonants, in environments like *el pane* → [er pane]. These lateral-to-rhotic shifts are not isolated; they are conditioned by both prosodic domains and segmental interactions, pointing to shared tendencies across Romance languages (see Francoprovençal, which follows a comparable trajectory in specific contexts). Element Theory provides a robust framework for analyzing the lateral-to-rhotic transformation, particularly in terms of the phonological primitives and their structural relationships. The lateral /l/ is decomposed into primitive elements |I|, |?|, and |U|, representing its coronal, lateral, and velarized qualities. Characterized by |?|, |I| for its coronal quality, and |U| when velarized, its transition to /r/ involves weakening or loss of |?|, destabilizing the lateral feature, alongside strengthened resonance of /r/. The retention of |I| across lateral and rhotic representations highlights its role in voicing and liquid continuity. The vocalic element |A| in /r/, linked to low or open articulations, is also explored to explain the acoustic and perceptual reanalysis behind this shift. Such insights bridge the gap between diachronic evolution and synchronic representation, offering a coherent typological account for liquid transformations across languages. We also emphasize the interaction of liquids with syllable structure. According to this perspective, preconsonantal /l/ undergoes greater featural compression due to its marginal position within the syllable, triggering phonetic reanalysis as /r/. In Romanesco, the shift of *el* to *er* aligns with this positional analysis, as the determiner occurs in a cliticized prosodic environment where /l/ is subject to weakening. We draw comparative analyses on lateral weakening in other Romance dialects, showing that while the lateral /l/ retains its feature set in intervocalic

positions, preconsonantal contexts exert phonological pressures that lead to its reinterpretation. In Romanesco, the systematic preconsonantal *el* → *er* transition is framed as a byproduct of the interaction between segmental and prosodic hierarchies, where the loss of lateral resonance is compensated by the perceptual salience of rhoticity. The findings contribute to ongoing debates about the phonological representation of liquids, particularly the shared features between laterals and rhotics. By incorporating Element Theory and new cross-dialectal Romance data from our own fieldwork, atlases, and medieval documentation, this study offers a unified account of the conditions under which /l/ transitions to /r/. It also advances our understanding of the interaction between featural decomposition, syllabic structure, and diachronic evolution, shedding light on the broader typological patterns of liquid behavior in human language.

Michela Russo

SFL/U. Paris 8, Paris, France. UJML 3, Lyon, France

Title

Typological Patterns of Liquid Behavior in Human Language: The Lateral-to-Rhotic shift in Romance