

Liquid Metathesis

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Introduction Liquid metathesis is a sound change in which a liquid seems to move to another position within the linear sound sequence, cf. the Occitan variant “crompar” of the verb “comprar” (‘to buy’) or Low German “bölken” vs. High German “blöken” (‘to bleat’). A perception experiment was conducted to clarify some of the general tendencies of liquid metathesis.

Research questions and results In 115 out of 864 trials (= 13.3 %), participants’ responses could be classified as liquid metathesis.

(a) Do some syllable positions favour liquid metathesis more than others? The type of syllable position in which a liquid occurs significantly influences its likelihood undergoing metathesis ($\chi^2 = 33.24$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.0001$). Liquids in complex coda clusters yield to metathesis most often, followed by those in complex onset clusters, and finally by intervocalic liquids.

(b) Are laterals and alveolar taps equally prone to metathesis? Laterals and rhotic taps do not differ in their tendency to undergo metathesis ($\chi^2 = 1.26$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.2614$).

(c) Does metathesis move the liquid into the same type of syllable position (e.g. from a complex onset cluster into a complex onset cluster in a different syllable), and if not, is there a preferred syllable position type for the outcome of liquid metathesis? Only liquids in a complex onset cluster have a significantly greater likelihood of moving into another complex onset cluster than into another syllable position type ($\chi^2 = 20.15$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.0001$). Numerically, however, this observation is also true for complex coda clusters and the intervocalic position.

(d) Does metathesis operate preferably syllable-internally, and if not, how far does a liquid move? Metathesis moved the liquid with overwhelming frequency into an adjacent syllable (in 90 out of 115 cases (= 78.3 %)) ($\chi^2 = 176.58$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.0001$). The liquid remained within the same syllable in only 7 cases (= 6.1 %).

Discussion Rhotic metathesis has previously been explained with reference to the presence of the svarabhakti vocoid which accompanies the alveolar tap in consonant clusters (e.g. Czaplicki, 2013). The fact that laterals are affected to an equal extent, however, questions the idea that the svarabhakti vocoid is the principal factor in a perceptual explanation of liquid metathesis.

The preference for metathesis to move a liquid into an adjacent syllable opens up new questions about the role of prosodic constituents grouping syllables below the level of the word, inside which the sound change may operate.