

Hi,

The interconnection between **typology**, language **change** and language **contact** is fascinating. But since one cannot gulp a whole meal in a single bite, no matter how tasty it is, I chose to focus on a specific subset of sounds to investigate these connection in: the lateral fricatives, mainly /ʎ/ and /ʝ/ (all of the other ones are vanishingly rare). They are neither **too common**, making it hard to make non-trivial generalizations because of the great diversity, nor they are **too uncommon**, not providing enough data to generalize anything at all. So they are in a kind of a ‘Goldilocks zone’, making them **ideal candidates** for studying the connections in question.

The first part is a ‘low resolution’, zoom-out **overview**, the main part consists of four **case studies** from which I hope we can learn general principles and the last concludes with a unifying theory of the effects of perception, production and language contact on the dynamics of these sounds.

In **Welsh** older /l/ changed ultimately into /ʎ/ in several positions, one of which is word-initial, making it voiceless and fricative. Now Welsh has a morphologized system of consonant alternations called ‘**mutations**’; e.g. *ei thad* ‘her father’ vs. *ei dad* ‘his father’. Combining these two facts we see that the connection between /ʎ/ and /l/ in Welsh is not limited to **diachrony** but also includes **synchrony**: the soft-mutated form of /ʎ/ is /l/, making the distinction between them the locus of morphological distinctions like *ei llygaid* ‘her eyes’ and *ei lygaid* ‘his eyes’.

In several **Sinitic** languages like Táishān and Púxiān there was a different source for /ʎ/: sibilants. In Táishān this was limited to /s/, but in Púxiān it was more comprehensive, leaving a system with /ʎ/ but no other fricatives, which is **typologically very rare**. An interesting **similarity** between a Púxiān dialect called Xiānyóu and Welsh is that not only both have /ʎ/ and a consonant mutation system, both also soft-mutate /ʎ/ into /l/ (even though in Xiānyóu /ʎ/ has nothing to do with /l/ diachronically).

This was one direction, now for the **opposite direction** in the next case study. **Proto-Semitic** had two lateral fricative phonemes: plain /ʎ/ and emphatic /ʎʕ/. Modern South Arabian languages have **retained** the lateral realization, but most Semitic languages **merged** them into sibilants. Among the **lines of evidence** for lateral fricative in ancient Semitic languages there are contemporary grammatical treatises and lateral reflexes in loanwords from Semitic languages, e.g. Spanish *al-calde* (from early Arabic *ʿal-qāḍ(i)* [-ʎʕ-]) or Greek *bálsamon* (probably from Hebrew *bōśem*). This last phonological accommodation is interesting because Greek split here the lateral fricative qualities of /ʎ/ into a lateral /l/ and a fricative /s/.

In **Khalkha Mongolian** the realization of the phoneme /l/ changed to /ʝ/, leaving yet again a **typologically rare** inventory with /ʝ/ but no /l/. In native words this /ʝ/ does not occur in word-initial position, but its **phonotactic** scope has been expanded in loanwords, such as these examples from Russian and Tibetan. In addition, Tibetan voiceless approximant /l̥/ was borrowed as fricative /ʎ/ in a few loanwords, not **accommodated** with existing phonemes as we’ve seen before.

So, although **sibilants** and **lateral approximants** are not the only sounds that have to do diachronically and synchronically with lateral fricatives many languages do bind them together. The connection can come from two directions:

- **Perception:** /s/ sounds quite similar to /ʎ/, and
- **Production:** /ʎ/ is articulated in a similar manner to /l/, and /ʝ/ even more so.

We’ve seen cases where lateral fricatives resist **borrowing**, but the case of Mongolian seems to support the putative notion that expansion of distinction is easier than adding a whole new manner of articulation. This may make a part of the explanation for the distribution of lateral fricatives in the world’s languages.