

# CONFUSION OVER LIGHT AND DARK "L"

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Recently on the TV show *Home improvement*, *fool* was made to rhyme with *duel* (in Northern States English); it sounds odd to a Southerner, who pronounces the two words without a single phonetic segment (or vowel length) in common (some have [j] in *duel*, some don't). These two words no more rhyme than do *fool* : *fuel*, *goal* : *bestowal*, *drawl* : *withdrawal*, and *fowl* : *towel*. In each pair, the Southerner has a dark CONSONANTAL "l" in the first item in each pair and, in the second item in each pair, a diphthongal satellite which is otherwise identical with the [dark] lateral VOWEL at the end of *riddle*. (That's parallel with the way "r-ful" speakers have, as a diphthongal satellite in *bear*, the otherwise identical sulcal or grooved vowel at the end of *rudder*.)

The linguistics literature exhibits a great deal of confusion over the difference between 1 or 2 (which are consonants) and 3 (which is a vowel, or rather a semivowel, the corresponding unstressed vowel being [ɪ]):

1. light (clear) consonantal "l" [l] (or, more exactly, [[ l̥ ]]) or [[ l̥ ]]) in English *leave* (this is the "l" in Irish English; also in German, French, etc.; Dutch is rather more like English, except that it lacks 3 below).
2. dark consonantal "l" [l<sup>u</sup> l<sup>o</sup>] in English *loaf* and Southern States *school*, *goal*, *call*, *cowl* (not *towel*!), etc. (Scottish English and some East/West-coast Americans outside of the Southern States have this "l" in *let* and *leave*)
3. (dark) diphthongal satellite [ɪ] in English *loom*, *love*, etc.; Northern States English has got this in *school*, *goal*, *call*, *cowl*, etc.

Further, a retroflex version of the last two occurs in Southern States *toolrack* (with [ɻ]) and in non-Irish pronunciations of *Kilroy* (with [ɻ]); the diphthong is long). The Irish probably have a retroflex light consonantal "l" in *Kilroy*--if that is possible. Note the Southern States

contrasts in *Jules* : *jewels*, *mule* : *fuel*, *cool* : *cruel*, *stole* : *bestowal*, *drawl* : *withdrawal*, *cowl* : *towel*. (The oldest speakers in the Southern States and New England have [ ɔ̃ ] in *cruel*.)

The relevant distinction in all varieties of English (though the situation is complicated in South Africa and neighboring English-speaking areas) is between 1/2 and 3. (The difference between 1 and 2 in lects that differentiate them is automatic in English and many languages; i.e. it depends on what underlying sounds [phonemes] are next to it. In the Slav[on]ic languages, it is this is not so.) Despite this, phoneticians (not least "data-oriented" sociolinguists) typically speak of a clear-light 'l' distinction, confusing the diphthongal satellite with a dark-l consonant; such writers exhibit utter confusion.

While the situation in any variety of English is simple enough for those who see what is going on, phoneticians can't see what is going on because they cannot accept that [ - ] and [ ( ] are diphthongal satellites behaving in ways parallel with plain-vowel satellites--which need to be written above the line level in order to distinguish them from the corresponding unstressed vowels (nuclear peaks) in *awful* and "r-ful" *suffer*--which are, respectively [ ɪ ] and [ ʊ ]. (The stressed vowels in *full* and in "r-ful" *curd* are, respectively, [ ʌ ] and [ ɜ ] in "non-Keltic" varieties; the latter is not long, though some Irish varieties seem to have [ v( \ ]).

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See C.-J. N. Bailey, *English phonetic transcription* (1985, The Summer Institute of Linguistics and University of Texas at Arlington Presses).



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