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A NOTE ON SYLLABIC CONSONANT FORMATION IN ENGLISH

Yutaka Soeda

\[ \text{ən} \rightarrow \text{ŋ} / \left[ \text{Stressed Vowel} \right] [\text{Plosive}] \]

This is what J. C. Wells has given as the rule coalescing /ən/ to [ŋ] in hidden etc., which, according to him, is a first approximation to Syllabic Consonant Formation. In this paper, we shall confine ourselves to syllabic [ŋ] and syllabic [l] as examples of Syllabic Consonant Formation and see how the rule will work by reviewing some instances of each in RP.

To facilitate matters, first let us take a look at the instances given in Gimson (1989: 197-198) and see how many groups we can divide them into according to their phonetic possibilities.

- **Group 1:** open, ribbon, sicken, organ (more commonly with /-ən/)
- **Group 2:** cotton, sudden, often, oven, earthen, southern, listen, dozen, mission, vision
- **Group 3:** maddening (or with non-syllabic /n/)
- **Group 4:** reasonable (or with non-syllabic /n/ or /ən/)
- **Group 5:** ordinary (or with non-syllabic /n/ or /ən/ or /ɔn/)
- **Group 6:** southerner (or with /ən/)

It may be noted that there is the question of fluctuation between [ŋ] and [əŋ] in Groups 1 and 6, between [ŋ] and /n/ in Group 3, between all three possibilities: [ŋ], /n/ and /əŋ/ in Group 4, and between all four possibilities: [ŋ], /n/, /ən/ and /ɔn/ in Group 5. It is now clear that the rule applies to Group 2 only.

Secondly, let us see, from the same standpoint, what Gimson has given on the list of syllabic [tʃ]:

- **Group 1:** apple, table, little, middle, buckle, eagle, satchel, cudgel, camel, final, etc.
- **Group 2:** quarrel (or with [əl])
- **Group 3:** spaniel (or with [-əʃ])
- **Group 4:** finally (or with [-əl-])
- **Group 5:** pommelling, tunnelling, cudgeling (or [əl] more rarely [l])
Group 6: fondling, doubling ([l], more rarely [t] or [al])

What is clear here is that, as in the case of syllabic [n], there is the question of fluctuation between [t] and [al] in Group 2, between [t] and [al] in Group 3, between [-t-] and [-al-] in Group 4, between all three possibilities [t], [al] and [l] in Group 5, and between all three possibilities [l], [t] and [al] in Group 6. The factors determining the exponents are not the same for [n] as for [l].

The fact that in most cases of syllabic [n] or [l] there is an alternative pronunciation with [a] seems to enable us to regard [n, l] as the realization of underlying /an, al/. Trager and others, indeed, have concluded that [l, n, m] are [al, an, am]. This solution might, however, appear a little hasty. Wells (1982: 55) disagrees with them for two major reasons: first, this analysis is not available under any phonological theory which regards phonemicization as the assignment of speech sounds to phonemes, the phonemes being classes (‘families’) of speech sounds fulfilling certain requirements, and secondly, difficulties also arise with the notion of contrastiveness (‘distinctiveness’, ‘opposition’), when this is seen as a necessary condition for phonemic difference.

In this connection diachronic considerations might be useful for accounting for the existence of [ə]. In the light of the general process of evolution of the English sound system English syllabic consonants originated through the weakening and subsequent loss of a preceding vowel in unstressed position, the presence of [ə] being the intermediate stage.

The conclusion to be drawn is that in addition to the rule given earlier we need another remedial rule, which is something like the following:

\[
\text{an} \rightarrow \text{an} /[^{\text{Stressed}}_{\text{vowel}}[^{\text{Plosive}}_{m, n, n}]_{r, l}^{\#}}
\]

We have found that there is no single rule which is able to explain Syllabic Consonant Formation in RP. (We have excluded other accents and idiolects from consideration.)

Notes:
1. The following are the compelling reasons given in Wells (1982: 55): ‘the morphological fact that the -en suffix is pronounced [an] in other environments (swollen); possible free variation between [n] and [an] in some other environments (station); the possibility in some accents of getting [n] as the realization of a /a/ and a /u/ which belong to different words in the sentence (hædnais 'dei] had a nice day); the extreme difficulty experienced by many native speakers of English, including some of those undergoing training in phonetics, in perceiving the difference between [n] and [an].
2. Trager (1941:232)
3. e.g. common, canon, German, barren, sullen, London, piston, apron, iron.
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References

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