/l/-darkening in English: is it lenition?

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The lateral approximant in General British English (GB) is realised as light (with a front vowel resonance) when it precedes a vowel or [j] (*leaf, million*), and as dark (with a back vowel resonance) when it occurs before a consonant or phrase-finally (*help*, *feel*), or when it is syllabic (*google*) (Cruttenden 2014). Non-prevocalic positions are typical contexts for lenition, which has been insightfully analysed in Element Theory as decomposition in weak positions (e.g. Harris 1990, 1997). However, it is not clear how velarisation can be characterised as element loss if light [l] is represented as |**A I**| while dark [ł] as |**A U**| (Backley 2011). Therefore, I propose that laterals in GB contain both the coronal |**I**| and the velar |**U**| element underlyingly (in addition to |**A**|), but because these cannot combine in a compound segment in English, they are both floating. Their association at the phrase-level is determined by the apophonic path (defined by Guerssel & Lowenstamm 1996), mapped onto the structure of the syllable: |**I**| is attracted to the prevocalic position, |**A**| to the vocalic position, and |**U**| to the postvocalic position. Darkening thus does not involve lenition of /l/, but partial interpretation in all positions.