

Allophonic vs. phonemic labio-palatal glide: a cross-linguistic EPG study on Italian and French

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Glides are peculiar segments in phonological inventories across languages, since they share some of the properties of both vowels and consonants. In this study, we investigate the articulatory and acoustic properties of the labio-palatal glide across two languages: Italian and French. The labio-palatal glide /ɥ/ has a phonemic status in French, while in Italian it only exists as an allophone created by the transition to a following palatal glide. In Italian one can find it in words such as: *contin[ɥ]iamo*. In French, by contrast, this sound is phonetically related to the phoneme /y/ (as in *n[y]it*). Comparison between the labio-palatal glide with the other glides (palatal and labio-velar) and the vowels most related to it (i.e., /i u/) in the two languages is the specific target of this study. Very little is known from previous studies concerning the articulation of [ɥ].

The articulatory and acoustic data were collected at Laboratorio di Linguistica of Scuola Normale Superiore (Pisa) from a few native speakers of the mentioned languages (2 for Italian, 2 for French). The labio-palatal glide /ɥ/ was produced in different contexts, taking into account: the preceding consonants, the following vowels, the context of production (isolated word vs. sentence), stressed vs. unstressed position, as well as different positions in the word. Needless to say, French offers many more materials than Italian, where this merely allophonic sound has a very limited distribution.

The analysis confirms that [ɥ] has very distinct articulatory properties, as contrasted with both [j] and [w], but also with [i] and [u]. The results will be discussed in relation to the different status (phonemic vs. allophonic) of this sound in the two languages.