

Is the labial-palatal approximant a phoneme in Southern Kurdish?

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Semivowels, or vowel-like approximants, are found in most of the world's languages. According to one survey, the palatal approximant [j] occurs in 85% of languages, and the labial-velar [w] in 76% (Maddieson 1984). The remaining two semivowels – the labial-palatal approximant [ɥ] and the labial-velar [ɰ] – are much less common, together being found in less than 2% of the world's languages (Ladefoged & Maddieson 1996:322).

In the languages where the labial-palatal approximant [ɥ] occurs, it has been variously interpreted as:

- an allophone of the high front rounded vowel *ü* [y] (e.g., French: Leon 2005; Swedish: McAllister et al. 1974; Mandarin Chinese: Duanmo 2000) or part of an allophonic extension ([yɥ]) of this vowel (Swedish: McAllister et al. 1974);
- an allophone of the phoneme *w* when followed by an unrounded front vowel (e.g., Korean: Lee 1999; Central Kurdish: MacKenzie 1961); or
- an allophone of the phoneme *y* in the context of a rounded vowel (e.g., Spanish: Martinez 2004; Shanghai Chinese: Chen & Gussenhoven 2015).

For some of these languages, the sound [ɥ] has been conventionalised, even in major reference works, with a separate phonemic symbol *ɥ* or *w̃* (e.g., French: Fagyal 2006; Leon & Bhatt 2009). All detailed phonological accounts of the topic, however, including those cited above, point to allophonic status – predictable variation of an existing phoneme. In other words, clear evidence is lacking for the manifestation of [ɥ] as a distinct phoneme in any language.

In this paper, we investigate the phonemic status of the labial-palatal approximant [ɥ] in Southern Kurdish. To our knowledge, apart from MacKenzie's brief reference to the sound in Central Kurdish (1961:7), it has not been reported from other languages of the Iranian family. However, given the lack of detail or clarity in many of the relevant phonological descriptions, the possibility remains that it will be found, at least as an allophone, in other related languages.

The existence of a labial-palatal approximant in Southern Kurdish, and its possible patterning as a phoneme, was first observed by Fattah (2000:110), who writes it with the symbol *w̃*. He categorises this segment a “non-generalised phoneme”, but his account of its phonetic and phonemic functioning is undeveloped. In contrast to all of the other phonemes described in his book, he does not provide a specific phonetic symbol, and his prose description of the sound is vague – “bilabiale continue centrale sonore” (voiced central bilabial continuant). By comparing the four lexical examples that Fattah provides here with our own data from Southern Kurdish, we can confirm that he is indeed referring to a labial-palatal approximant [ɥ].

Despite a lack of phonetic detail, Fattah (ibid.) provides useful commentary on several kinds of restrictions in the distribution of this segment: it is absent in “initial” position; it is found only in dialects that also have a high front rounded vowel *ü* [y], and only in some of these dialects; and that even in the dialects where it does occur, it is limited both in its lexical

distribution (found in only a few items) and among speakers (used by only some speakers of each dialect).

In the course of fieldwork for the *Atlas of the Languages of Iran* (ALI 2016) between June and December 2015, we encountered the labial-velar approximant [ɟ] in a number of dialects of Southern Kurdish (Author A et al., forthcoming), as well as neighbouring dialects of Laki and Lori (Author B et al., forthcoming). In light of the great range in dialectal variation, we focus our own investigation on the Kalhori dialect of Southern Kurdish, which is spoken in northern parts of Ilam Province, southern parts of Kermanshah Province, and across the border around Khanaqin in Iraq (Fattah 2000). In Kalhori in particular, the occurrence of [ɟ] in several contexts and in a significant number words raises the question of whether it might indeed be best interpreted there as a phoneme.

From our data, we have observed that [ɟ] occurs in three syllabic contexts in Kalhori: 1) in simple word-internal onsets; 2) as a second element in a complex word-initial onset; and 3) as a coda element. In addition, it is only ever found after the vowels *ü*, *a* [a] and (rarely) *ā* [ɑ]. In this study, basing our analysis on original sound files (to be included in the presentation), we examine its patterning in each of the three contexts and evaluate alternative explanations regarding its phonological status. (Nuances of the argumentation will be expanded in the full presentation, but an overview of key points and a selection of the data is provided here.)

(1) The first situation – [ɟ] in simple word-internal onsets between *ü* and a following vowel – is the most common. A partial list includes the simple and complex items: *dü[ɟ]a* ‘back’, *rü[ɟ]a* ‘layer’, *kü[ɟ]a* ‘mountain’; *bü[ɟ]ē* ‘he/she was there’, *mü[ɟ]aga* ‘the hair’, *šü[ɟ]eyl* ‘husbands’. These examples do not preclude the existence of a phoneme *w̄*; after all, the semivowels *y* and *w* (established as phonemic from word-initial contrasts) also appear predictably in equivalent contexts (*āšyāw* ‘mill’, *nūwā* ‘front’). However, in absence of a phoneme *w̄*, the appearance of [ɟ] could simply be due to an allophonic glide insertion after the phonetically similar vowel *ü*.

(2) There are also a number of items with [ɟ] as a second element in a complex word-initial complex onset. Here is a partial list: *d[ɟ]aka* ‘yesterday’, *d[ɟ]at* ‘girl’, *s[ɟ]aqa* ‘cough (n.)’, *s[ɟ]arāna* ‘vegetable sp.’, *t[ɟ]anem* ‘I can’. Although this appears at first impression as distribution in a distinct context, the motivation for the appearance of [ɟ] may be the same as in (1). Other complex word-initial onsets are an optional pronunciation of word-initial {C + high V + inserted semivowel} sequences (e.g., *čyanī~čīyanī* ‘well (n.)’), with the high vowel being systematically dropped in natural speech. In the same way, it is possible that [ɟ] is allophonically inserted after *ü* (as in (1)) before the syllabic component of the vowel is dropped, resulting in a C[ɟ]V sequence.

(3) In the third and final context, [ɟ] occurs in coda position, alone or in combination with a single consonant: *da[ɟ]* ‘ogre’, *ma[ɟ]* ‘grapevine’, *te[ɟ]la* ‘stable’, *xa[ɟ]r* ‘dough’, *za[ɟ]* ‘earth’. Here, it is harder to justify any explanation that [ɟ] is an allophone of *ü* or any other phoneme. It does not depend on any other phoneme (such as *ü*) for its articulatory properties. Since it is word-final, and it contrasts with vowel-final words (e.g., *la* ‘from’, *lā* ‘side’), it cannot be viewed as epenthetic. Like the phonemes *y* and *w* in this position, and unlike an underlying word-final vowel, it cannot carry stress and does not add a syllable to the word.

In light of the evidence from this third context, we argue that the labial-palatal approximant [ɥ] should be considered a distinct phoneme in the Kalhori dialect of Southern Kurdish. In parallel with phonemic semivowels *y* and *w*, which are also inserted in equivalent pre-vocalic contexts, we contend that this interpretation should also be extended to “epenthetic” [ɥ]. We conclude the paper with a call for methodical further analysis in other languages since, as shown in the present study, the interpretive process can be multi-faceted and delicate.

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