

# Re: Difference between semivowel and consonant

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*Source:* <http://sci.tech--archive.net/Archive/sci.lang/2006-12/msg01727.html>

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  - *Date:* Fri, 15 Dec 2006 11:05:19 +0100
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14 Dec 2006 14:54:34 -0800: "ranjit\_mathews@xxxxxxxxx"  
<[ranjit\\_mathews@xxxxxxxxx](mailto:ranjit_mathews@xxxxxxxxx)>: in sci.lang:

According to the IPA consonant chart, it's a palatal approximant. That would seem to specify only how the tongue is oriented relative to the roof of the mouth, with no more constraint on how the lips are shaped than there is such a constraint on its fricative counterpart SAMPA [j\].

Perhaps in the context of a consonant, what is called rounding in the context of vowels, would rather be a bilabial coarticulation? (But these aren't the same: English /w/ is rounded, and Spanish [B] is not; both are bilabial).  
So there is an implicit constraint to the position of the lips?

That is, if French Jean may be described with SAMPA [j\], then

German Jung would seem to be equally describable with SAMPA [j], since the only change I've seen stipulated for making a fricative an approximant is to increase space (or conversely, decrease constriction) sufficiently to ease friction.

If you round your lips, it becomes a different sound (IPA turned [h], your [y]). Of course, this is speaking phonetically. Phonologically, the phonemes of a language may be unspecified for certain features that get filled in by context (through coarticulation/assimilation) or with a default feature when the context provides no feature. This seems to be the case with roundness for English /j/ (in contrast to /w/).

In the case of the <you> sound, it seems that both [ju:] and [yu:] can convey the same sound.

Because in English, these sounds are not contrastive.

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Native speakers of which language would articulate [jo:jo:], borrowed from English <yoyo>, with spread lips for the [j]s and rounded lips for the [o:]s?

Consider <weewee> vs. <yoyo>. In the first case, the lips keep changing shape – rounded, spread, rounded spread. In the second case, lips typically remain rounded for the duration of the word.

This suggests that English /w/ is specified as [+round] while /j/ is unspecified for [round], picking up its specification from the following vowel (or perhaps both are specified, but there is a rule that changes /j/ to [+round] when adjacent to a round vowel).

Assimilation can affect any class of sound. Cross-linguistically, there are many examples both of vowels and of consonants undergoing assimilation. That /j/ assimilates lip rounding, but /w/ does not, is not an indication that they are different classes of sounds. Consider English /m/ and /n/, both of which are nasal stops, but /m/ does not usually assimilate to a following consonant, while /n/ often does:

warmth: [wArmpT] or [wArmpT], never \*[wArn[T]  
cf. tenth: almost always [tEn[T]

lambda: [læmd@], never \*[lænd@]  
cf. Canberra: usually [kænber@], but can be [kæmber@]

roomkeeper: [mk], never \*[Nk]  
cf. innkeeper: either [nk] or [Nk]

(Something can be said here about the higher relative markedness of labial articulations versus coronal articulations; marked sounds are often more resistant to assimilation than unmarked sounds are.)

The above analysis presumes that semivowel means syllabic vowel. If semivowel means other things too, then what prevents approximant r from being a semivowel?

Nothing does, and in fact, many linguists treat English /r/ as the consonantal counterpart to a mid central vowel.

Yet, I have seen more than one claim that English has 2 semivowels

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usually spelt <y> and <w> whereas in addition to these, French has another, used in [huit]. No mention of [r].

Nathan

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