

## Polish front vowels: how many have we got?

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Polish front vowels have received a variety of interpretations in the past, the different analyses obviously reflecting differences in the underlying phonological model. Structural analyses differed mostly in the way they handled the high vowels [i] and [ɨ], where a mono- or bi-phonemic view led to significant consequences for the consonantal inventory of the language. In particular the palatal labials [pʲ, bʲ, fʲ, vʲ, mʲ] were viewed as either distinctive or allophonic units in relation to the status of the two vowels. Additionally, the semivowel [j] acquired differing positions in the posited systems of segments.

Classical generative phonology invariably recognised the two vowels as distinct underlying units, of which /i/ was endowed with the power to palatalise the preceding consonant, while /ɨ/ followed non-palatalised segments. While succeeding to describe a considerable amount of surface allomorphy by means of phonetically plausible generalisations, the resulting analyses were faulted for arbitrariness and the desire to maximally exclude palatalised consonants from underlying inventories of segments. Much more importantly, however, no generative analysis offered any account, or even a hint of an account of the total impossibility of the vowel [ɨ] in word-initial position.

Both traditional and generative interpretations operated with units which were either based on (articulatory) phonetic labels or which belonged to some variety of the distinctive feature theory. One of the major innovations introduced by Government Phonology (GP) was the view of the elemental nature of phonological expressions, where front vowels in a language like Polish – without front rounded nuclei – is the result of combining just two elements, viz. **I, A**. In addition to the elements themselves, the internal structure of the expression can contribute to its interpretation. Fundamentally, GP is a syntagmatically-oriented framework where the notion of segments (and hence also contrasts) play a far less important role; indeed, these can be regarded as downright secondary or derivative notions. The present discussion addresses the Polish front nuclei not so much in attempt to count their number, a minor and secondary concern, but to set the stage for accounting for their phonological properties. These include their primarily distributional limitations and phonotactic constraints. The relations of the vocalic expressions to empty onset positions connect them to syllabic constituents and further undermine the role of the segment (phoneme, underlying unit) in phonology.