

Do we really have semi-vowels, w [w] and y [j] in Tshivenda?



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ABSTRACT

Semi-vowels w [w] and y [j] are speech sounds that are difficult to accurately define in most African languages, with special reference to Tshivenda. The main purpose of this research study is to differentiate between semi-vowel sounds and gliding sounds in Tshivenda. The sounds that are supposed to semi-vowels in full are supposed to be called semi-vowels, semi-consonants. That on its own demonstrates that they can be used or function both as vowels and consonants in any given context but only in English. This is not the case in Tshivenda, where these speech sounds can be used both as vowels and as consonants. The researcher used Qualitative Research Methodology to gather and analyse non-numerical data to gain an understanding of individuals' social reality, including understanding their attitudes, beliefs, and motivation. The researcher found that these two sounds are used as consonants since they are just like that in their nature. The nature of these two speech sounds leans on two places of articulation. Hence these sounds look to be special, dual articulation sounds. This is also the character that makes them dominate other speech sounds when they are combined with them. In some cases, when they are articulated, they sound like speech sounds which precede the actual articulation of other speech sounds or word/s because of their palatability.

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INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper poses a question that needs joint thinking and effort to answer. This paper is mainly based on the most problematic speech sounds in some African languages, including Tshivenda. The main focus of this paper is basically on two speech sounds, y [j] and w [w], with special reference to the Tshivenda language. Tshivenda is one of the tonal languages spoken in South Africa and some parts of Africa, such as Zimbabwe, Botswana, the DRC (former Zaire), Kenya, and others. The people who started to write Tshivenda were Germans, mainly the Schwellnus family. This was through the Berlin Mission Stations, which were established in various areas in Venda. The people who pioneered the writing of Tshivenda are people like Beuster, Schwellnus, Koen, and Giesecke.

The speech sounds y [j] and w [w] pose serious problems in Tshivenda. Generally, the problems around these sounds are encountered in different places, i.e., in their naming, nature of articulation, dual articulation nature, the configuration of the lips, their dominating characters when combined with other speech sounds, and changing their features of bilabial into palatal and or velar sounds. Perhaps, to resolve all these problems on both sounds y [j] and w [w], research on these speech sounds must be approached slightly differently from what other previous Tshivenda scholars and researchers have done. We have various scholars such as Muloiwa, Mmbi, Poulos, Ziervogel et al (1966), van Warmelo, Maumela and

Madiba, who regard these two speeches sound as semi-vowels in Tshivenda.¹ There are other Tshivenda scholars such as Milubi and others who do not agree that these speech sounds w [w] and y [j] are semi-vowels.

Milubi says that: “W na y tsha kale dzo dzhiiwa sa pphalanyana nge ha pfhi dzi fana na pphalandothe.² Uyu muhumbulo a u tendisei ngauri w na y dzi ima nga dzone dziṅe sa dziṅwe themba. Vhaṅwe vha dzi vhidza uri ndi giḽaidi (tsuvha) (glides). Na ḽeneḽi ḽi khwiṅe kha ḽa pphalanyana. ḽi tendelea”. “W and y ever since then have been taken as semi-vowels because they are said to be similar to vowels. This idea is not believable because w and y can stand on their own like any other consonant. Others call them glides. Even this one is better than that of a semi-vowel. It is acceptable”. This is the reason why these two speech sounds give us a huge problem in Tshivenda.

Maybe to find out what type of speech sounds these are in Tshivenda, our approach must be based on both phonetics and phonology. That is, we must not only consider the how or how these speech sounds are produced and forget the place in which these sounds are produced. The approach could bear some fruit if both phonetics and phonology are considered equally. This paper aims to demonstrate the following things:

- The flaws in the naming of the Tshivenda speech sounds y [j] and w [w].
- The dual articulation of the sound w [w], which many scholars have neglected.
- The configuration of the lips during the articulation of the speech sounds y [j] and w [w], differs depending on their range.
- The spreading of the lips during the articulation of the sounds y [j] and w [w].
- The delabialization process that takes place when these speech sounds y [j] and w [w] are used.

In most African languages, these two speech sounds y [j] and w [w] are called semi-vowels or glides. Tshivenda is no exception in this regard; the main problem with these sounds is their naming, i.e., whether we can call them semi-vowels or glides. This article employed a qualitative method since depended on books written and published by different scholars, and articles of other scholars published in various journals.

What do we call these speech sounds y [j] and w [w]?

Mmbi only identifies two semi-vowels in Tshivenda when he says “Pphalanyana ndi mbili Tshivenḽani.³ Dzone a si dzi, y na w”. “There are two semi-vowels in Tshivenda. They are y and w”. Mmbi is also supported by Poulos, who maintains that: “These sounds are called semi-vowels (y and w), and constitute that part on our continuum which may be seen as the bridge or a cross over from the consonant to the vowel area.”⁴ This definition demonstrates that Poulos takes these speech sounds as sounds which fill the space between vowels and consonants. He further illustrates that these sounds are a bridge or crossing over from the consonants to the vowel sounds area.

It is evident that this is a serious mistake because these speech sounds do not exist to fill the gap or to supplement the continuum or space between vowels and consonants. They are there on their own as speech sounds which need full recognition, like all other speech sounds in a language. The reason is that in Tshivenda we do not have any speech sound which falls between vowels and consonants. Instead, each speech sound has its own status and must be treated as such.

In defining semi-vowels or glides, Anzu says that “Even though they are vowel-like in articulation, glides pattern or function as consonants. E.g. glides can never form the nucleus of a syllable”. If what Anzu propounds means that if glides function as consonants and cannot function as nuclei, it is obvious that glides are consonants that glide.

¹ T.W. Muloiwa, *Venda Study Guide for VEN 201-F* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1982); M.N. Mmbi, *Tshikenzenke* (Tshifudu: Nev Productions, 2002); G. Poulos, *A Linguistic Analysis of Venda* (Pretoria: Via Afrika Limited, 1990); Nicolaas J. Van Warmelo, “The Classification of Cultural Groups,” in *The Bantu-Speaking Peoples of Southern Africa* (Routledge, 2024), 56–84; T.N. Maumela and M. R. Madiba, *Gondo ḽa Tshivenda. Murole Wa 10* (Pretoria: Via Afrika Limited, 1992).

² N.A. Milubi, *Ngoma Ya Vhatei* (Polokwane: Nam Publishers, 1987), 6.

³ Mmbi, *Tshikenzenke*.

⁴ Poulos, *A Linguistic Analysis of Venda*, 492.

This is the same with Tshivenḁa where they do not have a situation where these two speech sounds, y [j] and w [w], can function as the nucleus of any given syllable. This gives the impression that the idea of saying these speech sounds, y [j] and w [w] are semi-vowels in Tshivenḁa, which must be looked into.

Hawkins regards glides as consonants when he says, “The semi-vowels or glides are consonants known as approximants. Glides (approximants) are the most vowel-like of all the consonants – glides are simply consonantal versions of the corresponding vowel ([w-u])”.⁵

This tempts one to conclude that these speech sounds, y [j] and w [w], are independent speech sounds (*different from all other consonants, due to their gliding nature or their approximating characteristic features*), which must enjoy their status of being consonants, either called consonants – glides or consonants – approximant. These two terms can suit better, these two speech sounds better than the term semi-vowel. This could also sound better as this would give these speech sounds their status of being gliding consonants or of being approximating consonants as these two names are based on the movement made during the articulation process of these sounds. Furthermore, when these speech sounds are produced, there is a rapid movement towards or away from the articulatory position, which is said to be the characteristic feature of glides.

What has been discovered in Tshivenḁa is that these speech sounds, y [j] and w [w] are consonants which behave more like vowels, when it comes to how they are articulated, i.e. they are produced with voicing, they are continuants speech sounds, they are non-fricative sounds, and they are produced with no obstruction of the pulmonic air.

Dual Articulation Nature

a. Dual articulation nature of the sound w

The main characteristic features of the sound w [w]:

- **Dual articulation nature.** This speech sound is articulated at two different places simultaneously, in the soft palate or the velum, and in the lips.
This character, the researcher should believe, is the one that makes this speech sound dominant over other speech sounds.
- **The back part of the tongue.** This part is raised in such a way that it approaches, or touches the velum, the pulmonic air flows through the glottis and causes the two parallel vocal cords to vibrate, thereby allowing the air to pass through the oral cavity until it is released.
- **The lip rounding** allows the sound w [w] to be produced.

It is also believed that this type of production, that is, **dual articulation**, is the one that makes this sound w [w] dominate other speech sounds and makes this sound a problematic sound in Tshivenḁa. When this sound is combined with some other sounds, especially consonants, the resultant sounds become **dual articulation sounds**.

E.g. (i). lil- + -w- + -a = lilwa > [l^hi^hw^ha] (to be cried for)

(ii). bik- + -w- + -a = bikwa > [bik^wa] (to be cooked)

In the first example, (i) both the alveolar sound l [l^h] and the labio-velar sound w [w] are realized at the same time. The same applies in example (ii) where the velar sound k [k^h] and the labio-velar sound w [w] are realized simultaneously.

b. Dual articulation nature of the sound y [j]

There is a controversy on the issue of **dual articulation** of the sound y [j]. When this sound is articulated, there are no **two points** of articulation which are involved at the same time, hence no **dual articulation**. What happens here is that the middle part of the tongue approximates or touches the hard palate, i.e. the platinum, while the tip of the tongue protrudes towards the front as in the production of the vowel sound i [i]. In this instance, the issue of **dual articulation** does not apply.

The researcher believes that this is one of the elements that tempt many Tshivenḁa scholars to assert that this speech sound is a semi-vowel sound.

⁵ P. Hawkins, *Introducing Phonology* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd: London, 1984).

The configuration of lips and their implication

a. The shaping of the lips and their implication in the sound y [j]

When the speech sound y [j] is articulated, both the lower and the upper lips open up and leave a small space which allows the production and the shaping of the sound y [j]. When this occurs, the air from the lungs flows freely through the opening between the lower and upper lips, hence the articulation of the sound y [j].

b. The shaping of the lips and their implication in the sound w [w]

The other main characteristic feature of the speech sound w [w] is the configuration of the lips, that is, the way the lips are rounded. When the speech sound w [w] is produced, both the lips are completely rounded, as in the articulation of the vowel sound u [u]. It is this rounding character of the lips that confuses scholars, especially when it comes to its transcription in phonetics.

When this sound is articulated, the rounding of the lips precedes the actual articulation of the sound w [w]. This takes place when the sound is in isolation or in combination with other speech sounds. For example: w [w], as in wawe [w^aw^ε] and nwana [ŋ^wana].

This characteristic feature entices one to say that the sound w [w] must be phonetically represented as a supra-imposed sound [w], that is, [w] > [w]. This takes place not only in isolation but also in combination with other sounds, i.e. vowels and consonants.

Phonological / Syntactical position of y [j] and w [w] in Tshivenda

a. The position of y [j]

In Tshivenda, there is no combination in which the speech sound y [j] precedes other consonants. Instead, it succeeds other consonants in forming a word. We have combinations like: ny in the word nyala [ŋa^la] (to ignore in an unfriendly fashion or onion), nyimbo [ŋimbo] (songs).

In all these cases, there is no y [j] that precedes other consonant combinations; instead, it succeeds them.

b. The position of w [w]

The speech sound w [w] does not precede any consonant combination but can succeed in other consonant combinations without any problem.

e.g. lil- + -w- + -a = lilwa > [lⁱl^wa] (to be cried for)

bik- + -w- + -a = bika > [bik^wa] (to be cooked)

tshivhotsh- + -w- + -a = [tʃhiβotʃh^wa] (a prisoner)

This supra-imposed sound [w] shows that its articulation precedes the actual articulation of the syllable or the whole combination of [l^wa], in the word lilwa, [k^wa] in bikwa and [tʃh^wa] in the word tshivhotshwa. This becomes good proof that this sound must be transcribed as a supra-imposed sound as indicated above.

When these two sounds y [j] and w [w] precede vowel sounds

a. When the sound y [j] precedes vowel sounds

When the sound y [j] precedes vowels it sounds, patterns and functions as a consonant other than a vowel. There is no way in which it can sound, pattern and function like a vowel since it is not a vowel. This is mainly found in words like;

yawe [ja^wε] (his or hers)

yanga [jaŋga] (mine)

b. When the sound w [w] is preceding vowel sounds

It is also the same as in the other combination, that when the sound [w] is combined with vowels, it is articulated as a sound which precedes the whole combination. The main characteristic feature here would be the readiness to round the lips before the actual articulation.

e.g. wawe > [w^aw^ε] (his / hers)

iwe > [i^wε] (you)

nwana > [ɲ^wana] (child)
 kwata > [k^wat`a] (angry)

As a result of all these, it is proposed that when the sound [w] is either in isolation or in combination with other consonants, it must be written as a supra-imposed speech sound, as in the examples given above [w].

Palatalization or the overlapping process takes place

a. Palatalization process takes place

This is a process by which a speech sound, that is non-palatal or a bilabial sound, becomes a palatal sound. In this case, the cause is none other than the speech sound [w] in Tshivenda. As an example, researchers expect a bilabial sound plus a bilabial sound to become quadra-labial sound/s. Look at the following examples:

Formation	Ordinary formation	Phonetic transcription	What would have been used
beb- + -w- + -a	Bebwa	[bɛbja] or [bɛbʒa]	[bɛb ^w a]
tap- + -w- + -a	Tapwa	[t`apja] or [t`apʃa]	[t`ap ^w a]
Phaph- + -w- + -a	Phaphwa	[phaphja] or [phapʃa]	[phaph ^w a]

Looking at the table above, one can clearly see that the combinations do not have what we were expecting. Instead, they have undergone what one can call a palatalization process of the combination, which is the opposite or different from the expected.

What happens is that the speech sound [w] loses one of its main characteristics, that of lip rounding and becomes palatalized. To show that the sound has lost its lip rounding characteristic, it is noticed by replacing it with w [w] by y [j] in the table above. In articulation, this sound is produced with strong spreading lips, which are no longer related to the rounding the lips.

The overlapping process of w and y takes place

When the speech sound w [w] is used next to a bilabial sound, it overlaps with the sound y [j]. It loses its characteristic of rounding of the lips and replaces it with the opening or spreading of the lips. This becomes more noticeable when the sound w [w] is used next to a bilabial sound b [b], p [p`], phw [phj] and many others. Look at the following examples:

beb- + -w- + -a = bebwa > [bɛbja] (to be carried at the back)
 luphwaphwa > [ʌuphjaphja]

Velarization process takes place

In some cases, when the speech sound w [w] is combined with other consonants, especially bilabial sounds, the resultant sounds become velar sounds. That is, it velarizes those speech sounds that are articulated at the lips, the bilabial sounds because it has velar features.

Refer to some examples such as:

lim- + -w- + -a = limwa > liⁿwa [ʌiⁿw^a], (to be ploughed)
 lifh- + -w- + -a = lifhwa > li^xwa [ʌi^xw^a], (to be paid)

In this case, these words sound as if they should have been pronounced limwa [ʌimja] and lifhja [ʌiΦja] but due to the velarization of these sounds' mw [mj] and fhw [Φj], both the nasal and the bilabial sounds are dominated by the velar element of the sound w [w].

CONCLUSION

As we have seen the two speech sounds, y[j] and w [w], in Tshivenda have problems in calling them semi-vowels, they can combine both the phonetic and the phonological natures of these sounds and see which ones are more valuable and important than the other one, to determine their naming.

It must not only be influenced by the way they are articulated, and the movement made during their articulation and forget how these sounds function and pattern in combination with other speech sounds or in various patterns. If such a thing is done, these speech sounds y [j] and w [w] there is no doubt that they must be called gliding consonants or approximant consonants or transitional consonants or cross-over sounds or bridge sounds.

These sounds must have one status, either vowels or consonants. It is recommended that these sounds be called gliding consonants or approximant consonants or transitional consonants, specifically in Tshivenda since gliding and approximating do not differ much.

Once more, glides y [j] and w [w] share the phonetic properties of both vowels and consonants but they cannot form a nucleus of a syllable in Tshivenda. The syllables in Tshivenda rhyme with vowels and not with consonants. That is, the nucleus of a syllable in Tshivenda is a vowel and not a consonant. This statement leads one to say that these speech sounds y [j] and w [w], must be called consonants, either gliding or transitional, or approximants.

In conclusion, one is convinced to say that this speech sound w [w] is sometimes transcribed differently. It may be transcribed as [w] in some other context and as a supra-imposed [w̥] (when lips are rounded before the actual articulation) and in the other environment as y [j] (when lips are strongly spread). If that is the case, it means that the speech sound w [w] overlaps with its sister glide y [j]. This discovery may unveil or create another problem that needs full research of its kind. It should be noted that even when there are all these problems, there is no single incident where these speech sounds are used as vowels, but they are always used as consonants in Tshivenda.

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