

--- Extrapolated from the 06 March 2024 lecture ---

### **Approximants** (manner of articulation)

Approximant phones are produced through a slight narrowing of the vocal tract, with two articulators that are not close enough to cause turbulence, as in fricatives, or a complete obstruction, as in stops. The name approximant refers to the fact that there is an approximation, a near contact, between two articulators.

There is also a subcategory of approximants that is of particular interest, as it describes sounds common in both English and Italian. I am referring to glides. Glides, also known as semi-vowels, are intermediate sounds between consonants and vowels, displaying characteristics of both. They share properties of both vowels and consonants because they are produced with an articulation similar to that of a vowel, but with a slightly more significant restriction of the airflow caused by a less open vocal tract. Usually, glides are produced when we quickly transition to another articulation, or when we abruptly interrupt it. They are typically found in diphthongs, which are precisely a combination of a vowel and a glide. Examples of glides are the first sound of Italian 'ieri' and English 'yet', and Italian 'uomo' and English 'wet'.

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--- Extrapolated from the 13 March 2024 lecture ---

### **Length**

Length refers to the amount of time for which a phone is sustained; in other words, its duration. While every phone has an intrinsic duration, its actual length is affected by multiple factors, such as the phonetic context and the word in which it appears, and it is also conditioned by the speaker's rate of speech and habitual patterns. Moreover, our brain typically perceives the duration of a phone not in absolute terms, but rather in relation to its typical length and to the length of the other speech sounds within the same word; as a consequence, two phones of the same duration may be perceived as long in one context and short in another one.

Due to these factors, in our analysis we are not going to consider the exact duration of phones; instead, we will refer to the length of speech sounds in relative terms, categorizing them as short or long. It is important to note that 'short' and 'long' don't refer to well defined stretches of time, but rather to the duration of a phone compared to the surrounding speech sounds.

### *Consonant length*

A term often used in the study of consonants is 'geminate', which refers to consonant sounds sustained for a longer time than usual.

In Italian and other languages, geminate consonants are a crucial feature, because their presence may affect the meaning of a word. The only difference between Italian *caro* 'expensive' and *carro* 'cart', *nono* 'ninth' and *nonno* 'grandfather', *pala* 'shovel' and *palla* 'ball' is the relative duration of the consonant; and yet, that's enough to drastically change the meaning expressed. So, these examples clearly demonstrate how the use of a geminate instead of a short consonant may produce different words.

In English, however, there is no distinction between long and short consonants within words. It's important to note that the orthography can be misleading in this regard. For instance, when double consonants are used in words like *supper* opposed to *super*, they are not indicating the length of the consonant but rather the quality of the vowel. Therefore, it's essential to differentiate between geminate and double consonants, since these terms refer to different concepts: geminates are consonants pronounced for a longer duration, while double refers the use of the same letter twice; the former aspect pertains to Phonetics, whereas the latter is related to orthography.

### *Vowel length*

Long vowels are present and common in Italian. And yet, Italian speakers do not pay as much attention to vowel length as they do to consonant length, and they are usually not even aware of their existence. This is because vowel length, unlike that of consonants, does not affect the meaning of words; in other terms, pronouncing a shorter or longer vowel is not enough to produce a different word. Since in Italian the length of vowels is dictated by the phonetic context, speakers pronounce vowels of different length without being conscious of it: it comes naturally.

These circumstances are clearly different from those characterizing Latin, a language in which the length of a vowel can significantly alter the meaning of a word. We can observe this characteristic by comparing words such as *vĕnit* 'he comes' and *vēnit* 'he came': the only difference between them is the length of the first vowel. *Vĕnit*, pronounced with a shorter [e], is the present tense of the verb to come, while *vēnit*, with a longer [e:], is the past tense. Similarly, in Japanese we can easily identify pair of words distinguished by just the duration of a vowel sound, as exemplified by [tori] 'bird' and [tori:] 'shrine gate', [odzisan] 'uncle' and [odzi:san] 'grandfather'.