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## Word-initial /i/~[i] in Polish

The present article examines the accuracy of the widespread opinion according to which Polish entirely lacks a word-initial phoneme or (allo)phone /i/~[i]. After reviewing seventeen nominal, adjectival, interjective, and ideophonic lexemes, the author concludes the following: the word-initial /i/~[i] is attested in Polish; however, it is peripheral from the perspective of the phonological and/or phonetic system of this language.

**Keywords:** Polish, phonetics/phonology, vocalic system, /i/~[i] <y>

### 1. Introduction

The Polish sound system contains a close (or fronted close-mid) central unrounded vowel *i* regularly spelled with the grapheme <y>.<sup>1</sup> Depending on a theory, this vowel may be regarded as a phoneme /i/ or an (allo)phone [i]. According to the traditional view, prevailing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, [i] was classified as a mere allophone of /i/ (see Milewski 1961; Stieber 1966: 101–102; Wierzchowska 1980: 158; Press 1986: 25, 28, 61; Rothstein 1993: 689).<sup>2</sup> In contrast, in more recent times, scholars generally attribute a phonemic status to /i/, fully independent of /i/ (Sawicka 1995: 120; Swan 2002: 13; Jassem 2003; see also Gussmann 2007, who, after a thorough

<sup>1</sup> The vowel spelled with <y> in Polish is traditionally classified as close, central, and unrounded and is represented by the symbol [i] in the International Phonetic Alphabet (Sussex & Cubberley 2006: 158; Gussmann 2007: 27, 61; see also Bąk 1997; Strutyński 1998: 59–60, 74; Feldstein 2001: 23). However, more accurately, <y> represents a fronted close-mid vowel corresponding to the IPA [ɨ] (Press 1986: 26; Jassem 2003: 105; Andrason 2021; cf. also Strutyński 1998: 61). I will use the former, more traditional notation (i.e., [i]) as it is significantly more widespread in Polish and international scholarship. (Regarding the exact articulation of the vowel <y>, consult Wierzchowska 1980: 87–88; Ostaszewska & Tambor 2000: 32–33).

<sup>2</sup> See however Jassem (1958) and Benni (1959) who, contrary to the opinion prevalent in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, analyzed /i/ as a phoneme.

examination, favors the phonemic autonomy of /i/; for a discussion see Press 1986: 27–28, 61; Gussmann 2007).<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of the position adopted in the ‘phoneme-versus-(allo)phone’ controversy, scholars agree in that no word may begin with /i/~[i] in Polish – /i/~[i] only being found word-medially and finally (Stieber 1966: 102; Wierzchowska 1980: 89; Sawicka 1995: 121; Ostaszewska & Tambor 2000: 53–54; Gussmann 2007: 34; see also Press 1986). Indeed, according to the two most authoritative works dedicated to Polish phonology and phonetics (Sawicka 1995; Gussmann 2007), Polish is characterized by the “total absence” (Gussmann 2007: 33), “total exclusion” (Gussmann 2007: 34), and “non-existence” (Gussmann 2007: 53; Sawicka 1995: 121) of /i/~[i] in a word-initial position.

The present article provides empirical evidence that challenges this widely accepted and, thus far, unnuanced generalization, demonstrating that /i/~[i] may occupy a word-initial position in Polish.

The data presented draw on heterogenous research activities that were conducted in 2021 and involved searches in *Narodowy Korpus Języka Polskiego* [The National Corpus of Polish] (see Bańko et al. 2008–2012), an exploration of diverse online resources such as blogs and forums,<sup>4</sup> interviews with five Polish native speakers, and my own native-speaker introspection. The research was mainly qualitative. I searched for all possible *types* of word-initial vowels /i/~[i]. That said, I neither studied the frequency of the lexical *tokens* that I collected, nor did I investigate the statistical prevalence of other possible realizations of the examples in which a word-initial /i/~[i] was attested.<sup>5</sup>

To describe the phonetics of Polish examples, I will make use of the terminological apparatus employed by Gussmann (2007). This particularly concerns the consonants and vowels identified by him as formative of the Polish sound system as well

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Ostaszewska & Tambor (2000: 121–122) adopt an intermediate, conciliatory position. They argue that for most Polish speakers, who exhibit the “asynchronous pronunciation” of palatal consonants, /i/ has a phonemic status, independent of /i/. However, for speaker exhibiting the “synchronous pronunciation” of palatal consonants, there is only one phoneme /I/ with two allophonic realizations: [i] and [i]. (Even this synchronous pronunciation does not affect changes in the distribution of [i] and [i], although it may have repercussions for the other parts of the phonological system.) Overall, the classification of <y> in Polish as either a phoneme or an (allo)phone has no important bearings on the present study. Therefore, when referring to this vowel, I will use the symbols /i/~[i].

<sup>4</sup> The written-corpus research was exploratory in the sense that it enabled me to detect possible lexical candidates for a word-initial /i/~[i]. This stems from the fact that the Polish spelling is, in principle, phonemic and the grapheme <y> indicates (or should indicate) /i/~[i]. All lexemes identified in this way were subsequently “tested” with native speakers.

<sup>5</sup> Regarding type and token frequency, consult Hopper & Traugott (2003).

as their IPA transcriptions. The only divergence from Gussmann's notation involves the so-called "hard" sibilants and affricates.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Evidence

There are (at least) seventeen lexemes in which /j/~/[j] occupies a word-initial position. All such lexemes may be divided into four main categorial clusters or lexical classes, namely, nouns (2.1), adjectives (2.2), interjections (2.3), and ideophones (2.4).

### 2.1. Nouns

There are five nominal lexemes that may begin with /j/~/[j]:

- (1) *ymydz* [ˈimɨʦ̥]<sup>7</sup> 'image' (also realized as [ˈimɨʦ̥] and [ˈimɨʦ̥]) borrowed from English (cf. *image* [ˈimɨdʒ]; Dunaj 1996: 317)
- (2) *ygrek* [ˈigrek] 'wye (i.e., the name of the letter *y*); an unknown person; something undefined' (also realized as [ˈigrek]) borrowed from French (cf. *i grec* [iˈgʁɛk]; Dunaj 1996: 315)
- (3) *Ygrekowski* [igʁeˈkɔfski] a surname (also realized as [igʁeˈkɔfski]) derived from *ygrek* (see 2)
- (4) *ypsilon* [iˈpsilɔn] 'wye (i.e., the name of the letter *y*)' (also realized as [iˈpsilɔn]; see Wiśniewski 1997: 73) borrowed from Greek (cf. *ύψιλον* (Dunaj 1996: 329), possibly via French *upsilon* [ypsilɔ̃])
- (5) *Ystad* [ˈistat] 'Ystad' – a town in Sweden (also realized as [ˈistat] and [ˈiʂtat]) borrowed from Swedish (cf. *Ystad* [ystad]).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The so-called "hard" sibilants and affricates tend to be described by Polish linguists as postalveolars and represented by [ʃ], [ʒ], [tʃ], and [dʒ] (Stieber 1966; Sawicka 1995; Jassem 2003; Gussmann 2007). (More traditional scholarship uses the signs *ś*, *ź*, *ż*, *ś*, *ź*, *ż*; Wierzchowska 1980: 51; Ostaszewska & Tambor 2000: 34; see also Sussex & Cubberley 2006.) In contrast, Anglo-Saxon and German scholars analyze the same class of sounds as retroflex and represent them as [ʂ], [ʐ], [tʂ], and [dʐ] (Keating 1991; Ladefoged & Maddieson 1996; Hamann 2003; 2004; Padgett & Zygis 2003). As I wrote recently, "[w]hile the former notation suggests a partially palatalized pronunciation (similar to [ʃ] and [tʃ] in German and English), the latter implies that the tongue shape is concave and apical or subapical. The actual realization of these consonants is, however, neither palatal(ized) nor fully retroflex, but rather laminal and flat – their closest IPA equivalents being [s̠], [z̠], [t̠s̠], and [d̠ʒ̠] (cf. Hamann 2003)" (Andrason 2021: 64). In the present article, I will follow the notation used extensively in international scholarship, i.e., [ʂ], [ʐ], [tʂ], and [dʐ].

<sup>7</sup> If the final consonant <dz> is followed by a vowel or a voiced consonant, it is not devoiced to [tʂ̥] but realized as [dʒ̥].

<sup>8</sup> The labialization in [y] in Swedish (as in *Ystad*) is different from the labialization present in French (see 4). Contrary to a canonical [y] which makes use of a compressed or inward rounding, the rounding in [y] in Swedish is protruded or outward (Andersson 1994: 272).

The list above may further be expanded by any foreign proper name of person or place that is spelled in the original language with *y* and lacks a stabilized Polish equivalent. In such cases, the borrowing is often realized with a word-initial /i/~[i], especially if the speaker does not know the source language. See, for instance, the name of the Belgian (Flemish) town *Ypres* which is sometimes (perhaps incorrectly from the perspective of the language norm) pronounced [ipɾɛs], contrary to the educated realization [ipɾ], much closer to the French original, [ipɾ].<sup>9</sup>

## 2.2. Adjectives

Three adjectives allow for a word-initial /i/~[i]:

(6) *ymydzowy* [imi'dʑɔvi] 'related to an image' (also realized as [imi'dʑɔvi]) derived from the noun *ymydz* (see 1)

(7) *ygrekowy* [igre'kɔvi] 'related to the letter *y*, to an unknown person, or something undefined' (also realized as [igre'kɔvi]) derived from the noun *ygrek* (see 2)

(8) *ypsilonowy* [ipsilo'nɔvi] 'related to the letter *y*' (also realized as [ipsilo'nɔvi]) derived from the noun *ypsilon* (see 4)

While the three adjectives are attested in written corpora and can indeed be pronounced with a word-initial /i/~[i], all informants preferred a realization with /i/~[i], including these for whom the corresponding nouns with a word-initial /i/~[i] are fully "natural".

## 2.3. Interjections

Interjections constitute the lexical class that contains the largest number of examples with a word-initial /i/~[i] – in total, there are seven interjections of this sort (see 9-15 below). Significantly, all the four subtypes of interjections (i.e., emotive, cognitive, conative, and phatic) attest to at least one case of a word-initial /i/~[i]. Equally important is the fact that all the relevant interjective lexemes are genuinely native; in other words, they cannot be traced to any external language system.

To begin with, there are two emotive interjections that begin with /i/~[i] (see 9–10 below). Emotive interjections are the most canonical members of the interjective category and communicate the emotional state of a speaker, i.e., their feelings/

<sup>9</sup> At this stage, I am unable to determine what the exact frequencies of all such variants are and whether the different realizations have any sociolinguistic foundation (e.g., education, age, bi-/multilingualism, and geographic origin).

affects and sensations/sensory perceptions (Ameka 1992: 110, 113; 2006: 743–744; Stange & Nübling 2014: 1982–1983).

(9) *yy(c)h* [i:x] – expresses disgust or difficulty (the lexeme is regularly pronounced with a long vowel and a low tone; it is also realized with [ə] or [ɛ])<sup>10</sup>

(10) *yy* [i:] – expresses pain or difficulty (the lexeme is pronounced with a long vowel and a high tone)

The word-initial /i/~[i] is attested in one cognitive interjection (see 11 below). Cognitive interjections refer to the knowledge of the speaker and their thought processes (Ameka 1992: 133; 2006: 744; Stange & Nübling 2014: 1983).

(11) *y* [i] – expresses surprise and/or disbelief (the lexeme is pronounced with a rising tone; it is also realized with [ə] or [ɛ])

Another example of a word-initial /i/~[i] is found in the class of conative interjections, i.e., lexemes that are used to draw attention, encourage oneself, or convey wishes directed to others (Ameka 1992: 113; Wierzbicka 1992: 165; 2003: 291–301):

(12) *y-y-y-y* [i?i?i?i] – used to warn an interlocutor about a mistake they may be committing. It corresponds to English expressions such as (*it is*) *not like this! stop (doing it)! (be) careful!* (the lexeme is also realized with [ə] or [ɛ])

The remaining three cases of interjections with a word-initial /i/~[i] come from the class of phatic interjections (see 13–15 below), i.e., lexemes or phrases that establish, maintain, or interrupt communicative channels (Ameka 1992: 113–114; 2006: 744; Stange 2016: 12; Stange & Nübling 2014: 1983):<sup>11</sup>

(13) *yhy* [if i] – expresses agreement and can be used as an equivalent to *tak* ‘yes’ (note the presence of [f] generally absent in the Polish consonantal system; cf. Jassem 2003 and Gussmann 2007)

(14) *y-y* [‘i?i] – expresses disagreement and can be used as an equivalent to the negator *nie* ‘not’ (note the presence of [?] generally absent in a word-me-

<sup>10</sup> In accordance with the Polish orthography, the consonant [x] may be spelled in this word with <ch> or <h>.

<sup>11</sup> Conative and phatic interjections are (radically) different from emotive interjections with regard to both semantic and pragmatic properties (see Andrason & Dłali 2020 for a review). The extent of this dissimilarity may be such that, in some analyses, these types of words are denied place in the interjective category (see Wierzbicka 1992; Meinard 2015). Stange (2016: 19) sees them – as well as cognitive interjections – as interjections formally only.

dial position in Polish; cf. Gussmann 2007; the lexeme is also realized with [ə] or [ɛ]<sup>12</sup>

(15) *yy* [i:] – functions as a filler corresponding to *um* and *er* in English in cases where one does not know what to say (Bańko 2008: 262); additionally, it can express hesitation, doubt, or uncertainty (the lexeme is pronounced with a long vowel and a low tone; it is also realized with [ə] or [ɛ]).<sup>13</sup>

## 2.4. Ideophones

A word-initial /i/~[i] is also attested in ideophones. Ideophones are expressive iconic depictions characterized by sensory and perceptuomotor semantics (Voeltz & Kilian-Hatz 2001: 1–9; Dingemanse 2012: 658; Lahti, Barrett & Webster 2014: 335–340). Two types of ideophones exhibit a word-initial /i/~[i].<sup>14</sup> First, a word-initial /i/~[i] is found in onomatopoeias, i.e., lexemes that mimic real-world sounds (see Johansson et al. 2020; Körtvélyessy 2020; Körtvélyessy & Štekauer 2020):

(16) *yyy(y...)* [i::(:)] – imitates a loud human cry or scream, as well as moaning or groaning of animals (Bańko 2008: 262) (the lexeme is typically pronounced with an extra-long vowel)

The other ideophonic example of a word-initial /i/~[i] is attested in the so-called “non-phonological onomatopoeia” *y*, i.e., the “imitation” of the actual sound of the vowel that the letter *y* represents, i.e., /i/~[i] (Stieber 1966: 102):

(17) *y* [i] ‘wye’; for example: *litera y* [li'tera i] ‘the letter *y*’; *generacja y* [gene'ratsja i] ‘generation *y*’; *końcówka -y* [kɔŋ'tsufka i] ‘the ending -*y*’, etc.

## 3. Results and discussion

The evidence provided in the previous section demonstrates that Polish tolerates a word-initial /i/~[i]. However, although examples with a word-initial /i/~[i] are attested, their quantitative significance is generally limited – seventeen tokens certainly do not constitute a robust sample. Furthermore, from a qualitative per-

<sup>12</sup> In Polish, the consonant [ʔ] may be used word-initially in cases where a word begins with a vowel as well as between vowels (e.g., *poeta* and *aorta*) (Gussmann 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Most speakers whom I interviewed preferred the articulations with [ɛ]. It should be noted that the sounds represented by <*e*> and <*y*> in Polish are highly similar acoustically (indeed, foreign speakers perceive the difference between them with difficulty) and the only (and minimal) contrast concerns formant 1. In fact, in some modern songs, <*e*> and <*y*> may even form part of rhymes, e.g. in *-alny* and *alne*.

<sup>14</sup> Regarding the structure of the ideophonic lexical class and the position of onomatopoeias within it, consult Dingemanse (2012), Lahti, Barrett & Webster (2014), and Johansson et al. (2020).

spective, although the collected examples are relatively diversified and instantiate four different lexical classes (or more if phatic and conative lexemes are treated as different from the (more) canonical interjections), the following should be noted: (a) all nominal lexemes are loanwords (1–2, 4–5) or derive from such loanwords (3); (b) the adjectival lexemes are all derived from nominal loanwords (6–8); (c) the remaining lexical classes that contain words with an initial /i/~[i], i.e., interjections (9–15) and ideophones/onomatopoeias (16–17), are, both in Polish and cross-linguistically, relatively extra-systematic and lend themselves to phonetic and phonological singularities and oddities (see the other uncommon features observed in some interjections and ideophones/onomatopoeias described above).<sup>15</sup> Lastly, (d) all nominal and adjectival lexemes (1–9) allow for variants with a word-initial [i], while (e) several interjective lexemes (9, 11–12, 14–15) may exhibit [ə] or [ɛ] instead of [i].<sup>16</sup>

The above allows me to propose that the word-initial /i/~[i] constitutes a grammatical, although, from the phonological/phonetic system's perspective, peripheral phenomenon in Polish. The fact that native nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs do not exhibit a word-initial /i/~[i] – categories that constitute the core of the morphological system of a language – is probably the most tangible exponent of this peripherality.

## 4. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that the claim that Polish entirely lacks a word-initial /i/~[i] should be replaced by a more nuanced statement: the word-initial /i/~[i] is attested, however it is peripheral from the perspective of the Polish phonological/phonetic system.

While the conclusion reached above is valid from a qualitative perspective, it must be confirmed quantitatively. Only a frequency analysis of oral corpora will allow us to ultimately determine the status of the word-initial /i/~[i] in Polish and, in particular, its lesser or greater peripherality.

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<sup>15</sup> Regarding the phonetic and/or phonological extra-systematicity of interjections and ideophones, including onomatopoeias, see Ameka (1992; 2006), Dingemanse (2012), Andrason & Dłali (2020), and Andrason (2020).

<sup>16</sup> As mentioned above, these variants need not be (and most likely are not) free but may depend on register, educational and linguistic background, and other factors.



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## /i/~[i] NA POČETKU RIJEČI U POLJSKOM

Ovaj članak istražuje točnost široko raširenog mišljenja da se u poljskom na početku riječi ne pojavljuje fonem ili (alo)fon /i/~[i]. Nakon što je pregledano sedamnaest imenskih, pridjevnih, interjektivnih i ideofonih leksema, autor zaključuje sljedeće: /i/~[i] se pojavljuje na početku riječi u poljskom, ali je periferan iz perspektive fonološkog i fonetskog sustava tog jezika.

**Ključne riječi:** poljski, fonetika/fonologija, samoglasni sustav, /i/~[i] <y>

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