

The indeterminate status of /i/ in Polish.

The interaction of phonology and morphology in the distribution of two variants.

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The status of the pair of sounds /i/ and /ɨ/ in Polish is unclear. Often the contrast is clearly phonemic and marks the difference between the meanings of *być* /bitɕ/ ('to be') and *bić* /bitɕ/ ('to beat'). But on the other hand, the two variants are allophones in complementary distribution, as in the masculine suffix found in adjectives or the feminine form of the genitive suffix. In these two scenarios, the pair /i/ - /ɨ/ comprises the entire suffix, and the choice depends on the last consonant of the base, with dorsal consonants selecting /ɨ/ and coronal consonants favoring /i/. Alternating the two variants in the adjectives *czysty* /tʃɨstɨ/ ('clean') and *lekki* /lɛkki/ ('light') would not lead to a change in meaning. The same is true of other instances where the two variants are selected, including both monosyllabic and polysyllabic morphemes, such as *-ik* / *-yk* (masculine diminutive suffix) or *-ista* / *-ysta* (nominal suffix equivalent to the English *-ist*).

If the preceding consonant is all there is to pay attention to, the acquisition of the selectional properties should pose no particular challenge. However, while native speakers hardly realize that there is anything demanding about the pair, the choice between the two variants is among the most notorious banes for learners of Polish as a foreign language. It will be argued that the smooth functioning of the complementary distribution in the speech of native speakers is contingent upon the joint operation of phonology and morphology. Because the pair is a recurring component of many morphemes, the choice of the right allomorph starts from the phonology stage and automatically carries over to morphology. It will be hypothesized that the difficulty experienced by non-native speakers results from the separation of the phonological and morphological components, where the latter is not informed by the former, so the choice is either random or memorized.

One way to account for this distribution economically would be to treat one variant as a default choice. But such an account is complicated by the fact that some consonants allow both variants, and the choice does not always correlate for two given morphemes. While all morphemes act in unison following consonants /t/ or /l/ (all take /i/ in these environments, without exception), this correspondence disintegrates with bases ending in /b/, which take /ɨ/ for feminine genitive suffixes but /i/ in the case of the masculine diminutive suffix *-ik*. In other words, rather than simply pay attention to the final consonant of the base, a speaker needs to remember which variant is the default value for which morpheme, which is not as elegant or parsimonious as assuming a general default for all morphemes, but is perhaps how native speakers systematize the distribution.