An unidentified marginal phoneme

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In Standard Udmurt, a semivowel /w/ occurs only in about 50 stems, always following word-initial /k/ and preceding /ɑ/ as in the word /kwɑc/ '6', with one exception, /kwiɲ/ '3', in which it is followed by /i/. The case is similar in most of the dialects, although some dialects also have /w/ in about 30 stems word-initially, but always preceding /ɑ/, e.g. /wɑɲ/ (Standard /vɑɲ/) 'be:PRS:3SG' (Csúcs 1990: 24, 1998: 279; Kel'makov 1998: 83–86; Bartens 2000: 51–52 etc.). Both its rarity and the fact that it occurs in a restricted phonemic environment are reasons for classifying /w/ as a marginal phoneme. (Although the same segment occurs in a wider set of environments in various dialects, its functional load is low everywhere; cf. Tarakanov 1964.)

However, the same phenomenon can be also described in a different way (cf. Tarakanov 1964: 75; Winkler 2001: 8–10, Edygarova 2022: 509, Suihkonen 2023: 587). According to this approach, in these words the vowels /uɑ/ (in the case of '3', /ui/) are used, of which /u/ is not syllabic, and the two vowels form a diphthong. Winkler (2001: 8) also adds that in such cases "*u* is pronounced as a bilabial semivowel". Accepting such an analysis, we should conclude that the diphthongs /u̯ɑ/ and /u̯i/ are marginal phonemes in Udmurt.

A third analysis is also possible: the supposition of a labialized velar plosive /kʷ/. However, in this case, dialectal word-initial [w] has to be analysed as a realisation of a distinct phoneme /w/.

The three cases cannot be distinguished phonetically: in all cases we expect that after the release of the stop, F1 is low and it fastly and gradually grows until it reaches the value typical for /ɑ/. (In the case of /kwiɲ/ ~ /ku̯iɲ/ ~ /kʷiɲ/, a similar process is also expected with F2.) In order to determine which analysis is the proper one, only phonological arguments can be presented. However, due to the restricted environments in which these segments can occur, no strong arguments can support any of these analyses. However, using Occam's razor, an order of preference for the possible analyses can be presented.

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