

Vowel inventories, syllable structure and rhythm types in the Romance languages: Are there typological generalizations regarding diphthongs?

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Phonological typology has been concerned, among other things, with the size of stressed vowel inventories and the occurrence of marked features such as front rounded vowels, nasal vowels, or vowel quantity. Regarding unstressed vowels, patterns of vowel reduction have been related to syllable structure complexity, in line with the so-called ‘rhythm class hypothesis’. Both approaches have been applied to Romance varieties, mostly in the Italo-Romance domain (cf. Schmid 2014, 2024), but for the time being typological generalizations regarding diphthongs seem to be lacking.

As is well-known, diphthongization constitutes instead a classical topic in (diachronic) Romance linguistics (e.g., Schür 1956; Sánchez Miret 1988; Maiden 2016; Recasens 2022, 2013, Filipponio 2025). On the one hand, the diphthongization of lat. ĕ, ě → /je/, /wɔ/ has been a matter of debate: while some scholars see it as a reflex of open syllable lengthening, others relate it to metaphony; note that metaphonetic diphthongization is still a synchronically active morphological process in several Romance varieties (e.g., Neapolitan). On the other hand, some northern Romance varieties also show the diphthongization of lat. ĭ in open syllables (e.g., lat. NĪVE(M) > engad. *naiv* [naɪf] ‘snow’).

The current contribution undertakes the first steps towards an examination of Romance diphthongs from the point of view of the above-mentioned rhythm class hypothesis. Inherent diphthong properties such as dynamics (rising vs. falling) and quality (opening vs. closing) will be related to possible conditioning factors such as syllable structure (open vs. closed) and prosodic structure (oxytone vs. paroxytone words). At this point, it should be stressed that the goal of the contribution is mainly to raise new research questions, rather than to provide a coherent typology of Romance diphthongs.

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