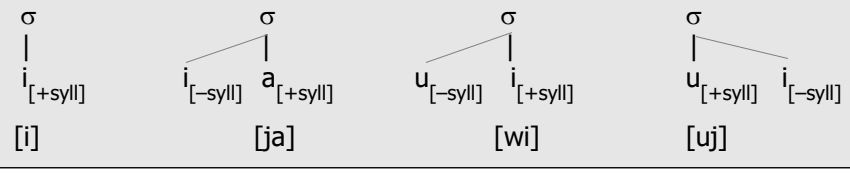
Representing glides and high vowels

In a number of languages, high vowels turn into glides or vice versa. But when we see something like [i] → [j] and [u] → [w] (in the same environment), how can we formalize a vowel-to-glide rule? If we try to write a rule to turn [+hi, -bk, -rd] into [COR, DORS], and try to write another rule to turn [+hi, +bk, +rd] into [LAB, DORS], there is no way to generalize those rules — and yet, there is a clear intuition that these are both instances of a more general process.

To address this problem, phonologists have come to view a **glide** as something that is **featurally identical to a high vowel**. That is, [i] and [j] have the *same* features (those we have been assuming for [i]), and [u] and [w] have the *same* features (those we have been assuming for [u]). The difference between [i] and [j], or between [u] and [w], is now seen as a difference in **syllable position** and the feature [±syllabic]. If these segments are syllabified as nuclei, they surface as vowels, and if they are syllabified in onset or coda position, they surface as glides.

The glide/vowel distinction as one of syllable position



This way of representing glides has a number of advantages.

- It explains why glides and vowels are so likely to turn into one another.
- It captures the articulatory similarity between "high and front" for [i] vs. "palatal" for [j], and "high, back and rounded" for [u] vs. "labio-velar" for [w].
- It even helps explain why glides sometimes seem "intermediate" between consonants and vowels.

This proposal does lead to some new questions as well.

- Are there any languages in which [j] and [w] really do pattern together with palatal or labio-velar consonants respectively (and *not* with high vowels)? If so, have we now lost the ability to state *those* natural classes?

  → This is an open question for further research!