Semivowels – Glides – Approximants

Let’s start by reviewing our concepts of VOWEL and CONSONANT, shall we?

**VOWEL**

**PHONETICALLY**

Sound that involves NO closure or narrowing sufficient to cause audible friction, and which has a CENTRAL passage of the air stream.

**PHONOLOGICALLY**

Unit carrying the NUCLEUS of a syllable.

**CONSONANT**

A sound INVOLVING a closure or narrowing sufficient to produce audible friction.

Unit acting as the margin of a syllable.

‘Semi-vowels’, ‘glides’, or ‘approximants’ are sounds that, phonetically, have a vowel-like articulation, but, phonologically, have a consonant role in the syllable structure.

They are rapid independent vocalic glides, where the speech organs produce a weakly articulated close vowel and move immediately to another sound of equal or greater prominence.
SEMI-VOWELS

In English there are two semi-vowels [j] and [w] and although they are vocalic phonetically, they have traditionally been grouped with consonants because of the following reasons:

a. Phonetic reasons:
1. They are shorter than vowels.
2. They are devoiced when they occur after a [-voiced] C*
3. There is a certain degree of friction when they occur after a [-voiced] C*
4. Their lack of stress compared to the following vowel.
   *Cue [ˈkjuː]
   *Quick [ˈkwɪk]

b. Phonological reasons:
1. The articles ‘the’ and ‘a’ take their pre-consonantal form in front of semivowels, as in the following examples:
   - a car [əˈkaː]
   - an orange [ənˈɒrɪndʒ]
   - the car [ðəˈkaː]
   - the orange [ðɪˈɒrɪndʒ]
   - a door [əˈdaː]
   - an apple [əˈæpl]
   - the door [ðəˈdaː]
   - the apple [ðɪˈæpl]
   - a window [əˈwɪndəʊ]
   - the window [ðəˈwɪndəʊ]
   - a youth [əˈjuːθ]
   - the youth [ðəˈjuːθ]

2. The preposition ‘to’ takes its preconsonantal form in front of semivowels, as in the following examples:
   - to see [təˈsiː]
   - to Eric [təˈɛrɪk]
   - to Peter [təˈpətə]
   - to Alice [təˈælɪs]
   - to earn [təˈɛrn]
   - to win [tə ˈwin]
   - to yawn [tə ˈjɔn]
   - give it to William

3. As is the case of the other consonants, in British English dialect, we do not use a “linking r” in front of semivowels e.g.
   - letter C [ˈleɪtəˈsiː]
   - letter A [ˈleɪtəˈeɪ]
   - letter P [ˈleɪtəˈpiː]
   - letter I [ˈleɪtəˈaɪ]
   - letter Y [ˈleɪtəˈweɪ]
   - letter O [ˈleɪtəˈəʊ]

Phonotactics:
Both of them occur in the same kind of environment:

a. Syllable initial as in: yes, win, away.

b. As the second member of a syllable – initial cluster as in: pew, tune, queen, mule, dune, Gwen, beauty, nude, etc.

c. As the third member of a syllable – initial cluster [s]+[stop]+ [l, r, j, w] approximant) as in: stew, spurious, askew, square, squash, squirrel.