

Rude Rhythms: Trills, Roughness, and the Sound Symbolism of Profanity in West Slavic Languages

Recent studies on the sound symbolism of profanity highlight features such as short closed syllables, plosives, and the absence of approximants (Bergen 2016; Lev-Ari & McKay 2023). While these features are common across languages, specific languages may exhibit additional traits. In Slavic languages, for instance, alveolar trills are suggested to play a role in swear words (Machač 2017), though not yet verified. Furthermore, recent findings show that alveolar trills are robustly associated with rough surfaces (Ćwiek et al. 2024), raising the question of whether there is a metaphorical link between alveolar trills, profanity, and the concept of haptic roughness. This potential association reflects the ability of certain phonological features to evoke multiple semantic associations depending on context—i.e., pluripotentiality of sound symbolism (Akita et al. 2024). This paper presents preliminary findings from a phonological analysis of forty swear words and forty neutral words of similar length in Czech, Polish, and Slovak—three geographically and socio-culturally close West Slavic languages. Words were extracted from lexicons and Swadesh lists, automatically transcribed into IPA, and analysed for phonological patterns and sonority—i.e., a measure proposed by Aryani et al. (2018) as indicative of a swear word's emotional intensity and (un)pleasantness based on its phonemic structure. Phonological and sonority patterns were then compared to terms for haptic roughness in the respective languages. Preliminary findings suggest that swear words in the sample indeed favour alveolar trilled [r] and exhibit low sonority, aligning with "unpleasant" sound qualities. Interestingly, similar patterns are observed in terms for surface roughness in Czech, Polish, and Slovak. These results hint at a potential connection between haptic and verbal roughness regarding alveolar trills, offering insights into the interplay between sound and both abstract and sensory concepts. This analysis lays the foundation for future experimental research on the perception of pseudowords resembling the sound structure of swear words and aims to discuss possible approaches to uncover the pluripotentiality of sound symbolism and its origins.

References
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