

# ADJECTIVES DESCRIBING SURFACE TEXTURE: TOWARDS LEXICAL TYPOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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Theme session: Lexical typology of qualitative concepts

Egor Kashkin (Lomonosov Moscow State University, Faculty of Philology, Post-graduate Student)

Olga Vinogradova (Research University Higher School of Economics, Department of Philology, Associate Professor)

This paper deals with adjectives describing surface texture ('slippery', 'smooth', 'level', 'rough', etc.). The language sample comprises Russian, English, Chinese, Spanish, Korean, and a set of the Uralic languages (Finnish, Estonian, Erzya, Mari, Komi, Udmurt, Hungarian, Khanty, Nenets, Selkup). Their in-depth study was aimed at exploring the dependence between the genetic proximity of languages and the similarity of their lexical systems in the domain concerned.

Adjectives referring to **absence of roughness** are basically opposed by the way a surface is perceived, which may be visual (the prototype is a level field) or tactile (the prototype is a stone slipping out of one's hands). The latter comprises slippery surfaces and also smooth surfaces, like a well shaven wooden board. Languages adopt different strategies here (Russian *skol'zkij* 'slippery', *gladkij* 'smooth', *rovnyj* 'level' vs. Erzya *nolaža* 'slippery', *valan'a* 'smooth, level' vs. Shuryshkary Khanty *wõł'ək* 'smooth, slippery', *pajli* 'level'). However, no system opposition of lexeme '*slippery, level*' vs. lexeme '*smooth*' has been attested, neither is there a system with one lexeme dominant over all the frames. Slippery surfaces are further divided into those one walks on and those of the objects dropping out of one's hands. Among smooth surfaces, the surface of body parts is sometimes categorized as a special frame. Besides, adjectives meaning 'smooth' often have a secondary visual feature, conveying the idea of shining or glittering (which presents interest for cognitive studies, cf. [Viberg 1984]). The subdomain of level surfaces opposes artifacts (sometimes differentiated by their horizontal vs. vertical orientation) and landscapes (vast areas, roads, intentionally levelled places, water surfaces).

Adjectives denoting **roughness** also distinguish between surfaces perceived visually vs. by touch. The former subdomain includes many items with a narrow meaning ('hilly', 'potholed', etc.), but also tends to specify a broader class of wrinkled surfaces. As regards the subdomain of tactile perception, what is consistently brought out is the frame of surfaces with regular rigid roughness perceived by touch, further opposed with the size of roughness, the rigidity/flexibility of an object, and the effect on a contacted object (Udmurt *tšogyr'es* 'rough and scratching').

The **metaphoric uses** of the surface texture lexemes show typologically consistent patterns: (1) 'slippery' → unsteadiness; (2) 'smooth' → absence of defects or difficulties; (3) 'level' → regularity, uniformity; (4) 'rough' → defects, difficulties.

Along with the typological data, our research provides more general **theoretical implications**. Firstly, the two antonymic semantic zones (roughness vs. absence of roughness) are structured according to different patterns. This contributes to the study of the asymmetry shown by antonyms in their semantics and combinability (see [Apresjan 1995]), which has not been systematically investigated from a typological perspective.

Secondly, our study has proved the benefits of including genetically close languages into a lexical typology research. As argued in [Kibrik 1998] with respect to grammatical typology, studying closely related languages shows many subtle typological distinctions. As follows from our data obtained from the Uralic languages, the same holds true for lexical typology. Moreover, working with the Uralic material has enabled us to establish the general structure of the domain in question, as well as the basic polysemy patterns – which all have proved to be present outside the Uralic family.

## References

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