

On Slavic syllabic /r̥/: phonetics and representation in CVCV phonology

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This paper discusses the representation of syllabic /r̥/ in Slavic, taking into account the phonetic characteristics of its [r̥] realization. Starting from Savu (2012), a study which shows that [r̥] is a segment made up of a brief constricted interval with a vocalic element on each side, I investigate how this ‘vocoid-constriction-vocoid’ aligns with syllabic /r̥/’s representation in CVCV phonology (Scheer 2004 and related work).

In the Slavic languages Czech, Slovak, Macedonian, and Serbo-Croatian, /r̥/ can be a syllabic nucleus, and even bear length and pitch distinctions, on par with vowels. In CVCV, it is agreed that long syllabic /r̥/ should be represented as a segment that branches to the left and the right of its home C slot, to occupy both adjacent V slots. This is in line with [r̥]’s own "VCV" phonetic structure. Short syllabic consonants have been represented as linked to a C and a V slot, but which of the two Vs on either side of C is occupied is still debated in the literature. I review arguments for both left- and right-branching, and suggest the possibility that short /r̥/ can branch either to its left or to its right V even within the same language, depending on where it is needed in the structure. This picture suggests that, while phonology can utilize what the segment’s phonetics has to offer, it does not always make use of the entire structure. The rhotic’s two vocoids are behind its ability to be syllabic, but one vocoid is enough for a short syllabic /r̥/.