

Chapter 1

I Say It How? Speaking Russian

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding the Russian alphabet
 - ▶ Pronouncing words properly
 - ▶ Discovering popular expressions
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Welcome to Russian! Whether you want to read a Russian menu, enjoy Russian music, or just chat it up with your Russian friends, this is the beginning of your journey. In this chapter, you get all the letters of the Russian alphabet, discover the basic rules of Russian pronunciation, and say some popular Russian expressions and idioms.

Looking at the Russian Alphabet

If you're like most English speakers, you probably think that the Russian alphabet is the most challenging aspect of picking up the language. But not to worry. The Russian alphabet isn't as hard as you think.

From A to Ya: Making sense of Cyrillic

The Russian alphabet is based on the Cyrillic alphabet, which was named after the ninth-century Byzantine monk, Cyril. But throughout this book, we convert all the letters into familiar Latin symbols, which are the same symbols we use in the English

alphabet. This process of converting from Cyrillic to Latin letters is known as *transliteration*. We list the Cyrillic alphabet here in case you're adventurous and brave enough to prefer reading real Russian instead of being fed with the ready-to-digest Latin version of it. And even if you don't want to read the real Russian, check out Table 1-1 to find out what the whole fuss is about regarding the notorious "Russian alphabet."



Notice that, in most cases, a transliterated letter corresponds to the way it's actually pronounced. As a rule, you may assume that the transliteration fairly well represents the actual pronunciation. The biggest exceptions to this are the letter **Йй**, which is transcribed as **j** but pronounced like an English *y*, and the soft sign **Ьь**, which is transcribed as **'** but only softens the preceding consonant.



Scholars do not agree on the letter **j**. Some believe that it's a consonant; others think that it's a vowel. We don't want to take sides in this matter and are listing it both as a consonant and a vowel.



Consonants are pronounced softly if they are followed by **ye, yo, ya, or yu** (**е, ё, я, ю**). These letters (**ye, yo, ya, and yu**) preserve the *y* sound if they are at the beginning of the word (as in *yes, your, yard, and youth*).

Table 1-1 The Russian Alphabet in Cyrillic

<i>The Letter in Cyrillic</i>	<i>Transliteration (The Corresponding Letter or Sound in the English Alphabet)</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Vowel or Consonant</i>
Aa	A	<i>ah</i> if stressed as in <i>father</i> ; <i>uh</i> if appearing in any unstressed syllable, as in <i>human</i>	Vowel

<i>The Letter in Cyrillic</i>	<i>Transliteration (The Corresponding Letter or Sound in the English Alphabet)</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Vowel or Consonant</i>
Бб	B	<i>b</i> as in <u>b</u> ook; <i>p</i> if at the end of the word	Consonant
Вв	V	<i>v</i> as in <u>v</u> ictor; <i>f</i> if at the end of the word	Consonant
Гг	G	<i>g</i> as in <u>g</u> reat; <i>k</i> if at the end of the word	Consonant
Дд	D	<i>d</i> as in <u>d</u> uck; <i>t</i> if at the end of the word	Consonant
Ее	Ye	<i>ye</i> as in <u>y</u> es if at the beginning of the word; <i>eh</i> as in <u>t</u> en if preceded by any consonant, making that consonant sound soft; <i>ee</i> as in <u>s</u> ee <i>k</i> if appearing in any unstressed syllable before a stressed syllable; <i>eh</i> after a stressed syllable and at the end of the word, making the preceding consonant sound softly	Vowel
Ёё	Yo	<i>yo</i> as in <u>y</u> our	Vowel
Жж	Zh	<i>zh</i> as <u>m</u> ea <u>s</u> ure; <i>sh</i> if at the end of the word	Consonant
Зз	Z	<i>z</i> as in <u>z</u> ebra; <i>s</i> if at the end of the word	Consonant
Ии	I	<i>ee</i> as in <u>p</u> ee <i>k</i>	Vowel

(continued)

Table 1-1 (continued)

<i>The Letter in Cyrillic</i>	<i>Transliteration (The Corresponding Letter or Sound in the English Alphabet)</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Vowel or Consonant</i>
Йй	J	very short y as boy or May	Vowel or Consonant
Кк	K	k as in <u>king</u>	Consonant
Лл	L	l as in <u>lamp</u>	Consonant
Мм	M	m as in <u>mommy</u>	Consonant
Нн	N	n as in <u>note</u>	Consonant
Оо	O	oh as in as in <u>talk</u> ; ah as in <u>park</u> , if appearing one syllable before the stressed syllable; uh as in <u>Mormon</u> , if appearing in any other unstressed syllable	Vowel
Пп	P	p as in <u>port</u>	Consonant
Рр	R	flap r, similar to trilled r in Spanish, as in <u>madre</u> , for example	Consonant
Сс	S	s as in <u>sort</u>	Consonant
Тт	T	t as in <u>tie</u>	Consonant
Уу	U	oo as <u>shoot</u>	Vowel
Фф	F	f as in <u>fact</u>	Consonant
Хх	Kh	kh like you're clearing your throat, or like the German <i>ch</i>	Consonant

<i>The Letter in Cyrillic</i>	<i>Transliteration (The Corresponding Letter or Sound in the English Alphabet)</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Vowel or Consonant</i>
Цц	Ts	<i>ts</i> as in <u>cats</u>	Consonant
Чч	Ch	<i>ch</i> as in <u>chair</u>	Consonant
Шш	Sh	<i>sh</i> as in <u>shock</u>	Consonant
Щщ	Sh'	soft <i>sh</i> , as in <u>sheep</u>	Consonant
Ъ	"	hard sign (makes the preceding letter hard)	Neither
Ыы	Y	<i>ih</i> (similar to <i>i</i> in <u>big</u>)	Vowel
Ь	'	soft sign (makes the preceding letter soft)	Neither
Ээ	E	<i>e</i> as in <u>end</u>	Vowel
Юю	Yu	<i>yu</i> as in <u>use</u> if at the beginning of the word; <i>oo</i> as in <u>tooth</u> if preceded by any consonant, making that consonant sound soft	Vowel
Яя	Ya	<i>ya</i> if stressed as in <u>yard</u> ; if at the beginning of the word; <i>ah</i> if preceded by any consonant, making that consonant sound soft; <i>ee</i> if unstressed and not in the final syllable of the word; <i>uh</i> if unstressed and in the final syllable of the word	Vowel

I know you! Familiar-looking, same-sounding letters

You may notice that some of the Russian letters in the previous section look a lot like English letters. The letters that look like English and are pronounced like English letters are

- ✓ Aa
- ✓ Кк
- ✓ Мм
- ✓ Oo
- ✓ Тт

Whenever you read Russian text, you should be able to recognize and pronounce these letters right away.

Playing tricks: Familiar-looking, different-sounding letters



Some Russian letters look like English letters but are pronounced differently. You want to watch out for these:

- ✓ **Вв:** It looks like English Bb, at least the capital letter does, but it's pronounced like the sound *v* as in *victor* or *vase*.
- ✓ **Ее:** This one's a constant annoyance for English speakers, who want to pronounce it like *ee*, as in the English word *geese*. In Russian, it's pronounced that way only if it appears in an unstressed syllable. Otherwise, if it appears in a stressed syllable, it is pronounced like *ye* as in *yes*.
- ✓ **Ёё:** Don't confuse this with the letter *Ее*. When two dots appear over the *Ее*, it's considered a different letter, and it's pronounced like *yo* as in *your*.
- ✓ **Нн:** It's not the English Hh — it just looks like it. Actually, it's pronounced like *n* as in *nick*.

- ✓ **Pp:** In Russian it's pronounced like a trilled *r* and not like the English letter *p* as in *pick*.
- ✓ **Cc:** This letter is always pronounced like *s* as in *sun* and never like *k* as in *victor*.
- ✓ **Уу:** This letter is pronounced like *oo* as in *shoot* and never like *y* as in *yes*.
- ✓ **Xx:** Never pronounce this letter like *z* or *ks* as in the word *Xerox*. In Russian, the sound it represents is a coarse-sounding, guttural *kh*, similar to the German *ch*. (See “Surveying sticky sounds,” later in this chapter, for info on pronouncing this sound.)

How bizarre: Weird-looking letters

As you've probably noticed, quite a few Russian letters don't look like English letters at all:

✓ Бб

✓ Гг

✓ Дд

✓ Жж

✓ Зз

✓ Ии

✓ Йй

✓ Лл

✓ Пп

✓ Фф

✓ Цц

✓ Чч

✓ Шш

✓ Щщ

✓ Ъ

✓ Ыы

✓ Ь

✓ Ээ

✓ Юю

✓ Яя



Don't panic over these letters. Just because they look weird doesn't mean they're any harder to say than the others. It's just a matter of memorizing their proper pronunciations. (Refer to Table 1-1 for details on how to say each letter.)

You may recognize several of these weird letters, such as **Ф**, **Г**, **Э**, **Л**, **П**, from learning the Greek alphabet during your fraternity or sorority days.

Sounding Like a Real Russian with Proper Pronunciation

Compared to English pronunciation, which often has more exceptions than rules, Russian rules of pronunciation are fairly clear and consistent.

Understanding the one-letter/ one-sound principle



Russian is a *phonetic language*, which means that for the most part one Russian letter corresponds to one sound. For example, the letter **K** is always pronounced like *k*, and the letter **M** is always pronounced like *m*.

Giving voice to vowels

Vowels are the musical building blocks of every Russian word. If you flub a consonant or two, you'll probably still be understood. But if you don't pronounce your vowels correctly, there's a good chance you won't be understood at all. So it's a good idea to get down the basic principles of saying Russian vowels.

That's stretching it: Lengthening out vowels



If you want to sound more Russian, don't shorten your vowels like English speakers often do. When you say **a**, **o**, open your mouth wider and purposefully stretch out the sounds to make them a little bit longer. Imagine, for example, that you're in your room on the second floor, and your mom is downstairs in the kitchen. You call her by saying "Mo-o-o-m!" That's the way Russians say their vowels (except for the shouting part!).

Some stress is good: Accenting the right vowels

Stress is an important concept in Russian. Putting a stress in the wrong place isn't just a formal mistake. It can hinder communication, because the meaning of a word can change based on where the stress is. For example, the word **zamok** (*zah-muhk*) means "castle." However, if you shift the stress from the first syllable to the last, the word **zamok** (*zuh-mohk*) now means "lock."



Unfortunately, no hard-and-fast rules about stress exist. Before learning a new Russian word, find out which vowel to stress. Look in any Russian-English dictionary, which usually marks stress by putting the sign ´ over the stressed syllable. In a dictionary, **zamok** (*zah-muhk*; castle) is written за́мок, and zamok (*zuh-mohk*; lock) is written замо́к.

Vowels misbehavin': Reduction

Some Russian letters change their behavior depending on whether they're in a stressed or an unstressed syllable. The vowels **a**, **o**, **ye**, and **ya** do this a lot. When stressed, they behave normally and are pronounced in the usual way, but when they're in an unstressed position, they go through a process called *reduction*. This deviation in the vowels' behavior is a very important linguistic phenomenon that deserves your special attention:

- ✓ **O**, which is normally pronounced like *oh*, sounds like *ah* (like the letter **a** in the word *father*) if it occurs exactly one syllable before the stressed syllable, and like a neutral *uh* (like the letter **a** in the word *about*) if it appears in any other unstressed syllable.
- ✓ **A**, which is pronounced like *ah* when it's stressed, is pronounced like a neutral *uh* (like the letter **a** in the word *about*) if it appears in any unstressed syllable.

The honest-to-goodness truth is that when the letter **a** appears in the syllable preceding the stressed syllable, its pronunciation is somewhere between *uh* and *ah*. We don't, however, want to burden you with excessive linguistic information, so we indicate the letter **a** as *uh* in all unstressed positions. Moreover, in conversational speech, catching the distinction is nearly impossible. If you say an unstressed **a** as *uh*, people will fully understand you.

- ✓ **Ye**, which is pronounced like *ye* (as in *yet*) in a stressed syllable, sounds like *ee* (as in *seek*) in any unstressed syllable.

When it appears at the end of a word, as in **viditye** (*vee-dee-tee*; [you] see [plural and formal singular]), or after another vowel, as in **chayepitiye** (*chee-ee-pee-tee-eh*; tea drinking), unstressed **ye** sounds like *eh* after another vowel at the end of the word.

- ✓ An unstressed **ya** sounds either like *ee* (as in *peek*) if it's unstressed (but not in the word's final syllable) or like *yuh* if it's unstressed in the final syllable of the word and also preceded by another vowel or **ь**; if it is preceded by a consonant, it is pronounced as *uh* and the preceding consonant is pronounced softly.

Here are some examples of how vowel reduction affects word pronunciation:

- ✓ You write **Kolorado** (Colorado) but say *kuh-lah-rah-duh*. Notice how the first **o** is reduced to a neutral *uh* and the next **o** is reduced to an *ah* sound (because it's exactly one syllable before the stressed syllable), and it's reduced again to a neutral *uh* sound in the final unstressed syllable.
- ✓ You write **khorosho** (good, well) but say *kuh-rah-shoh*. Notice how the first **o** is reduced to a neutral *uh*, the next **o** is reduced to *ah* (it precedes the stressed syllable), and **o** in the last syllable is pronounced as *oh* because it's stressed.

- ✓ You write **napravo** (to the right) but say nuh-prah-vuh. Notice that the first **a** is reduced to a neutral *uh* (because it's not in the stressed syllable), the second **a** is pronounced normally (like *ah*) and the final **o** is pronounced like a neutral *uh*, because it follows the stressed syllable.
- ✓ You write **Pyetyerburg** (Petersburg) but say pee-teer-boork. Notice how **ye** is reduced to the sound *ee* in each case, because it's not stressed.
- ✓ You write **Yaponiya** (Japan) but say yee-poh-nee-uh. Notice how the unstressed letter **ya** sounds like *yee* at the beginning of the word and like *ye* at the end of the word (because it's unstressed and in the final syllable).

Saying sibilants with vowels

The letters **zh**, **ts**, **ch**, **sh**, and **sh'** are called *sibilants*, because they emit a hissing sound. When certain vowels appear after these letters, those vowels are pronounced slightly differently than normal. After a sibilant, **ye** is pronounced like *eh* (as in *end*) and **yo** is pronounced like *oh* (as in *talk*). Examples are the words **tsyentr** (tsehntr; center) and **shyol** (shohl; went by foot [masculine]). The sound *ee* always becomes *ih* after one of these sibilants, regardless of whether the *ee* sound comes from the letter **i** or from an unstressed **ye** before the stressed syllable. Take, for example, the words **mashina** (muh-shih-nuh; car) and **shyestoy** (shih-stohy; the sixth).

Enunciating consonants correctly

Like Russian vowels, Russian consonants follow certain patterns and rules of pronunciation. If you want to sound like a real Russian, you need to keep the basics in the following sections in mind.

Say it, don't spray it! Relaxing with consonants

When pronouncing the letters **p**, **t**, or **k**, English speakers are used to straining their tongue and lips. This strain results in what linguists call *aspiration* — a burst of air that comes out of your mouth as you say

these sounds. To see what we're talking about, put your hand in front of your mouth and say the word *top*. You should feel air against your hand as you pronounce the word.



In Russian, however, aspiration shouldn't happen because consonants are pronounced without aspiration. In fact, you should totally relax your tongue and lips before saying Russian **p**, **t**, or **k**. To practice saying consonants without unnecessary aspiration, again put your hand in front of your mouth and say Russian cognates **park** (pahrk), **lampa** (lahm-puh), and **tank** (tahnk). Practice until you don't produce a puff of air with these words!

Cat got your tongue? Consonants losing their voice

Some consonants (**b**, **v**, **g**, **d**, **zh**, and **z**) are called *voiced consonants* because they're pronounced with the voice. But when voiced consonants appear at the end of a word, they actually lose their voice. This process is called *devoicing*. They're still spelled the same, but in their pronunciation, they transform into their devoiced counterparts:

- ✓ **B** is pronounced like *p*.
- ✓ **V** is pronounced like *f*.
- ✓ **G** is pronounced like *k*.
- ✓ **D** is pronounced like *t*.
- ✓ **Zh** is pronounced like *sh*.
- ✓ **Z** is pronounced like *s*.

Here are some examples:

- ✓ You write **Smirnov** but pronounce it as *smeer-nohf* because **v** at the end of the word is pronounced like *f*.
- ✓ You write **garazh** (garage) but say *guh-rahsh*, because at the end of the word, **zh** loses its voice and is pronounced like *sh*.

Nutty clusters: Pronouncing consonant combinations

Russian speech often sounds like an endless flow of consonant clusters. Combinations of two, three, and even four consonants are quite common. Take, for example, the common word for *hello* in Russian — **zdravstvuyte** (*zdrah-stvooy-teh*), which has two difficult consonant combinations (**zdr** and **stv**). Or take the word for *opinion* in Russian — **vzglyad** (*vzglyat*). The word contains four consonants following one another: **vzgl**.



How in the world do Russians say these words without choking? They practice, and so should you. Here are some words that contain consonant clusters you may want to repeat at leisure:

- ✓ **obstoyatyl'stvo** (*uhp-stah-ya-tehl'-stvih*; circumstance)
- ✓ **pozdravlyat'** (*puh-zdruhv-lyat'*; to congratulate)
- ✓ **prestuplyeniye** (*pree-stoo-plyen-ee-ye*; crime)
- ✓ **Rozhdyestvo** (*ruzh-deest-voh*; Christmas)
- ✓ **vzdor** (*vzdohr*; nonsense)
- ✓ **vzglyanut'** (*vzglee-noot'*; to look/glance)

Surveying sticky sounds

Some Russian letters and sounds are hard for speakers of English. Take a look at some of them and find out how to pronounce them.

The bug sound zh

This sound corresponds to the letter **Жж**. It looks kind of like a bug, doesn't it? It sounds like a bug, too! In pronouncing it, try to imitate the noise produced by a bug flying over your ear — *zh-zh-zh* . . . The sound is similar to the sound in the words *pleasure* or *measure*.

The very short i sound

This sound corresponds to the letter **Йй**. This letter's name is *i kratkoye*, which literally means "a very short i," but it actually sounds like the very short English *y*. This sound is what you hear when you say the word *boy*. You should notice your tongue touching the roof of your mouth when you say this sound.

The rolled sound r

This sound corresponds to the letter **Рр** in the Russian alphabet. To say it correctly, begin by saying an English *r* and notice that your tongue is rolled back. Now begin moving your tongue back, closer to your upper teeth and try to say this sound with your tongue in this new position. You'll hear how the quality of the sound changes. This is the way the Russians say it.

The guttural sound kh

The corresponding Russian letter is **Хх**. To say it, imagine that you're eating and a piece of food just got stuck in your throat. What's the first reflex your body responds with? Correct! You will try to cough it up. Remember the sound your throat produces? This is the Russian sound *kh*. It's similar to the German *ch*.

The revolting sound y

To say this sound correctly, imagine that you're watching something really revolting, like an episode of *Survivor*, where the participants are gorging on a plate of swarming bugs. Now recall the sound you make in response to this. This sound is pronounced something like *ih*, and that's how you pronounce the Russian **ы** (the transliteration is *y*). Because this letter appears in some of the most commonly used words, including **ты** (*tih*; you [informal]), **вы** (*vih*; you [formal singular and plural]), and **мы** (*mih*; we), it's important to say it as best you can.

The hard sign

This is the letter **Ѣ**. Although the soft sign makes the preceding sound soft (see the next section), the hard

sign makes it — yes, you guessed it — hard. The good news is that this letter (which transliterates to ’’) is rarely ever used in contemporary Russian. And even when it is, it doesn’t change the pronunciation of the word. So, why does Russian have this sign? For two purposes:

- ✓ To harden the previous consonant
- ✓ To retain the hardness of the consonant before the vowels **ye**, **yo**, **yu**, and **ya**, which must be pronounced like at the beginning of the word.

Without the hard sign, these consonants would normally *palatalize* (soften). When a hard sign ь separates a consonant and one of these vowels, the consonant is pronounced without palatalization, as in the word **pod’’yezd** (pahd-yezd; porch), for example. However, don’t worry too much about this one if your native language is English. Native speakers of English rarely tend to palatalize their Russian consonants the way Russians do it. In other words, if you’re a native English speaker and you come across the situation described here, you probably make your consonant hard and, therefore, pronounce it correctly by default!

The soft sign

This is the letter ь (transliterated to ’), and it doesn’t have a sound. Its only mission in life is to make the preceding consonant soft. This sound is very important in Russian because it can change the meaning of a word. For example, without the soft sign, the word **mat’** (maht’; mother) becomes **mat**, which means “obscene language.” And when you add a soft sign at the end of the word **von** (vohn; over there), it becomes **von’** (vohn’) and means “stench.” See how important the soft sign is?

It is also used retain the softness of the consonant before the vowels **ye**, **yo**, **yu**, and **ya**, which must be pronounced as at the beginning of the word — for example, **v’yuga** (v’yoo-guh; blizzard). Another very important function of ь is that it shows the grammatical gender (feminine) if it follows a sibilant at the end

of the word; in this case, **ь** does not affect pronunciation. Compare **myech** (mehch; sword [masculine]) and **noch'** (nohch; night [feminine]).

So, here's how you can make consonants soft:

1. Say the consonant — for example, l, t, or d.

Note where your tongue is. What you should feel is that the tip of your tongue is touching the ridge of your upper teeth and the rest of the tongue is hanging in the mouth like a hammock in the garden on a nice summer day.

2. While you're still pronouncing the consonant, raise the body of your tongue and press it against the hard palate.

Can you hear how the quality of the consonant has changed? It sounds much softer now, doesn't it? That's how you make your consonants soft.