

# Chapter 1

## You Already Know a Little Russian

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Getting a grip on Russian words you know
  - ▶ Understanding the Russian alphabet
  - ▶ Pronouncing words properly
  - ▶ Discovering popular expressions
  - ▶ Reading Russian with confidence
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**W**elcome 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, trust your eyes, ears, and intuition, and you quickly discover that Russian isn't that hard after all. When you're done with this chapter, you'll be able to recognize all the letters of the Russian alphabet, discover the basic rules of Russian pronunciation, and be able to say some popular Russian expressions and idioms.

### *Scoping Out Similarities between English and Russian*

You may be surprised to find out that English and Russian are very distant relatives. They both come from the same ancestor — Sanskrit — and both belong to the same family of Indo-European languages. The similarities don't stop there. If you know English, you already know many Russian words.

In this section, you discover Russian words that are already part of English, and you find out about Russian words that have the same meaning and pronunciation as their English counterparts. We also warn you about a few words that sound similar in both languages but have very different meanings.

## *Identifying Russian words in English*

As the world becomes more and more international, languages and cultures are constantly borrowing from and lending to one another, and Russian is no exception. Many Russian words that now appear in English either describe food and drinks or came into use during important historical periods.

### *Eating and drinking up*

If you drink **vodka**, then you can already speak some Russian, because the word, like the drink, came from Russia. Maybe you can even rattle off the differences between **Smirnoff** (smeer-nohf) and **Stoly**. If so, you're already on your way to sounding like a real Russian, because **Smirnoff** is a Russian person's last name, and **Stoly** is an abbreviation for the word **Stolichnaya** (stah-leech-nuh-ye), which means "metropolis" in Russian.

When you go out to eat, do you like to order a great big bowl of **borsh'** (bohrsh'; beet soup) with sour cream? Well, then you're eating one of the most famous Russian dishes, and when you order it, you're using a completely Russian word.

### *Hearing historical terms*

If you're interested in world history, then you probably know that the head of the Russian state in previous centuries was not the president or the king, but the **tsar**, which is just what they called him in Russia, too: **tsar'** (tsahr').

Some of the best-known Russian words actually came into English during the Cold War period, when the Soviet Union was competing with the United States in the areas of science, technology, military, and education. Who would've thought that a short and simple Russian word, **sputnik** (spoot-neek; traveling companion), which refers to the first Soviet artificial Earth satellite, would become a household word in English and even lead to a revolution in American space education? And if you've ever used the word **sputnik**, then you were speaking Russian. **Sputnik** means "companion" in Russian.

Maybe you followed world news in the 1980s. If so, you may remember a guy by the name of Mikhail Gorbachev, who reformed Russian Soviet society. He also added two new words to the English language: **glasnost** and **perestroika**, or in Russian: **glasnost'** (glahs-nuhst'; openness) and **pyeryestroika** (pee-ree-strohy-kuh; restructuring). These words have become part of American speech. Even Ronald Reagan, who was president during Gorbachev's era, liked to repeat the famous Russian phrase, **Dovyeryai, no provyeryai!** (duh-vee-ryahy, noh pruh-vee-ryahy; Trust but verify!), when talking about the new nuclear weapons treaties he was negotiating with the Soviet Union.

## Recognizing English words in Russian

Russian today is filled with words that came from English. Words that have a common ancestry are called *cognates*. Cognates are like foreign political refugees or immigrants. They settle down in their new country and start to adapt to their new life, and even begin to look and behave like native words of their new country.



Your ability to recognize English cognates when you read or hear Russian will be very helpful to you. Cognates are your allies, and they greatly increase your Russian vocabulary. Here are some examples of common cognates you should recognize:

- ✓ **aeroport** (ah-eh-rah-pohrt; airport)
- ✓ **akadyemiya** (uh-kuh-dye-mee-ye; academy)
- ✓ **algyebra** (ahl-geeb-ruh; algebra)
- ✓ **amyerykanyets** (ah-mee-ree-kah-neets; American man)
- ✓ **astronomiya** (uhs-trah-noh-mee-ye; astronomy)
- ✓ **bank** (bahnk; bank)
- ✓ **biologiya** (bee-ah-loh-gee-ye; biology)
- ✓ **biznyes** (beez-nehs; business)
- ✓ **biznyesmyen** (beez-nehs-mehn; businessman)
- ✓ **boks** (bohks; boxing)
- ✓ **dyemokrat** (dee-mah-kraht; democrat)
- ✓ **diryektor** (dee-ryek-tuhr; director)
- ✓ **doktor** (dohk-tuhr; doctor)
- ✓ **dokumyent** (duh-koo-myent; document)
- ✓ **effyektivnyi** (eh-feek-teev-nihy; effective)
- ✓ **fyermyer** (fyer-meer; farmer)
- ✓ **filarmoniya** (fee-luhr-moh-nee-ye; philharmonic)
- ✓ **futbol** (foot-bohl; football)
- ✓ **gamburgyer** (gahm-boor-geer; hamburger)
- ✓ **gyenyetika** (gee-neh-tee-kuh; genetics)
- ✓ **gyeografiya** (gee-uhg-rah-fee-ye; geography)

- ✓ **gimnastika** (*geem-nahs-tee-kuh*; gymnastics)
- ✓ **gol'f** (*gohl'f*; golf)
- ✓ **intyeryesnyj** (*een-tee-ryes-nihy*; interesting)
- ✓ **istoriya** (*ees-toh-ree-ye*; history)
- ✓ **kommunizm** (*kuh-moo-neezm*; communism)
- ✓ **kosmonavt** (*kuhs-mah-nahft*; astronaut)
- ✓ **kosmos** (*kohs-muhs*; cosmos)
- ✓ **kryedit** (*kree-deet*; credit)
- ✓ **lityeratura** (*lee-tee-ruh-too-ruh*; literature)
- ✓ **muzyka** (*moo-zih-kuh*; music)
- ✓ **nos** (*nohs*; nose)
- ✓ **profyessor** (*prah-fye-suhr*; professor)
- ✓ **sotsiologiya** (*suh-tsih-ah-loh-gee-ye*; sociology)
- ✓ **sport** (*spohrt*; sports)
- ✓ **sportsmyen** (*spahrts-myen*; sportsman or athlete)
- ✓ **stadion** (*stuh-dee-ohn*; stadium)
- ✓ **studyent** (*stoo-dyent*; student)
- ✓ **styuardyessa** (*styu-uhr-deh-suh*; stewardess)
- ✓ **tyeatr** (*tee-ahtr*; theater)
- ✓ **tyelyevizor** (*tee-lee-vee-zuhr*; TV)
- ✓ **tyennis** (*teh-nees*; tennis)
- ✓ **tyeoriya** (*tee-oh-ree-ye*; theory)
- ✓ **univyersityet** (*oo-nee-veer-see-tyet*; university)
- ✓ **viski** (*vees-kee*; whiskey)
- ✓ **viza** (*vee-zuh*; visa)
- ✓ **vollyejbol** (*vuh-leey-bohl*; volleyball)
- ✓ **zhiraf** (*zhee-rahf*; giraffe)
- ✓ **zhurnal** (*zhoor-nahl*; journal)
- ✓ **zoologiya** (*zuh-ah-loh-gee-ye*; zoology)

## Watching out for words that may seem similar but aren't



Beware of *false cognates*! These are words that look and sound like allies (cognates) but aren't. You won't find too many of them, but they can be tricky. And when used incorrectly, they can lead to some funny and even embarrassing situations. Here's a list of the false friends that trip English speakers up the most:

- ✓ **simpatichtniy** (seem-puh-*teech*-nihy; good-looking) — This word doesn't mean "sympathetic," so be careful who you say it to!
- ✓ **normal'no** (nahr-*mahl'*-nuh; okay, fine) — This word doesn't mean "normally"!
- ✓ **klass** (klahs; classroom) — This word is the room where a class takes place but doesn't refer to the academic course itself. It also indicates a group of kids in the same grade.
- ✓ **banda** (*bahn*-duh; band of gangsters) — This word has nothing to do with a musical band, so be careful when you use it!
- ✓ **magazin** (muh-guh-*zeen*; store) — This word doesn't mean "magazine," but you can buy one there!
- ✓ **familiya** (fuh-*mee*-lee-ye; last name) — This word isn't your family, but your family name.

## Talkin' the Talk



Vladimir and Irina are talking about their new university. How many English cognates can you recognize?

**Vladimir:** Irina, ya schitayu, chto biologiya, astronomiya, i gyeografiya ochyen' intyeryesnyye pryedmyety. ee-ree-nuh, ya sh'ee-tah-yu shtoh bee-ah-loh-gee-ye, uhs-truh-noh-mee-ye, ee gee-uhg-rah-fee-ye oh-cheen' een-tee-ryes-nih-ee preed-mye-tih.  
Irina, I think that biology, astronomy, and geography are very interesting subjects.

- Irina:** **Nye soglasna. Samyye intyeryesnyye pryedmyety v etom universityeteye sotsiologiya, istoriya, algyebra, muzyka i tyeatr.**  
 nee-sahg-*lahs*-nuh. sah-mih-ee een-tee-ryes-nih-ee  
 preed-*mye*-tih v eh-tuhm oo-nee-veer-see-tye-tee suh-  
 tsih-ah-*loh*-gee-ye, ees-*toh*-ree-ye, ahl-geeb-ruh,  
 moo-zih-kuh ee tee-*ahtr*.  
 I disagree. The most interesting subjects at this university are sociology, history, algebra, music, and theater.
- Vladmir:** **A tvoj profyessor po lityeraturye intyeryesnyj?**  
 ah tvohy prah-*fye*-suhr puh lee-tee-ruh-too-ree een-  
 tee-ryes-nihy?  
 Is your literature professor interesting?
- Irina:** **Da, intyeryesnyj, no u nyego bol'shoj nos i on vysokij kak zhiraf.**  
 dah, een-tee-ryes-nihy, noh oo nee-*voh* bahl'-*shohy*  
 nohs i ohn vih-*soh*-keey kakh zhih-*rahf*.  
 Yes, he's interesting, but he has a big nose, and he's as tall as a giraffe.

## Words to Know

ya schitayu	ya sh'ee- <u>tah</u> -yu shtoh	I believe that
ochyen'	<u>oh</u> -cheen'	very
pryedmyety	preed- <u>mye</u> -tih	academic subjects
nye soglasna	nee sah- <u>lahs</u> -nuh	I disagree
u nyego	oo nee- <u>voh</u>	he has

## Looking at the Russian Alphabet (It's Easier than You Think)

If you're like most English speakers, you probably think that the Russian alphabet is the most challenging aspect of picking up the language. The idea of having to memorize all those letters, some of them weird-looking, can be a little bit daunting to the newcomer. But not to worry. The Russian alphabet isn't as hard as you think. In fact, compared to some other features of Russian, such as case ending and verbs (see Chapter 2 for details on those), the alphabet is a piece of cake. When you're done with this section, you'll be able to recognize and pronounce all the letters of the Russian alphabet.

### 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 (see the sidebar “Who was this Cyril guy, anyway?” later in this chapter). Throughout the centuries, Cyril's original alphabet went through many attempts to shorten it from its original 43 letters. Today the alphabet is still pretty lengthy — 33 letters in all, compared with the 26 letters in the English alphabet. But don't panic. You don't have to master every letter. 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 below for those of you who are 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 **ь**, which is transcribed as **'** but only softens the preceding consonant.



As we walk you through the Russian alphabet, pay attention to the way the alphabet is transliterated, because that's how we spell out all the Russian words throughout the rest of the book. Table 1-1 has the details on Cyrillic letters, their transliteration, and their pronunciation. You can also find a guide to pronunciation on the audio CD that comes with this book.



Scholars do not agree on the letter **ј**. 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.

<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>
Аа	<b>A</b>	<i>ah</i> if stressed as in <b>father</b> ; <i>uh</i> if appearing in any unstressed syllable, as in <b>human</b>	Vowel
Бб	<b>B</b>	<i>b</i> as in <b>book</b> ; <i>p</i> if at the end of the word	Consonant
Вв	<b>V</b>	<i>v</i> as in <b>Victor</b> ; <i>f</i> if at the end of the word	Consonant
Гг	<b>G</b>	<i>g</i> as in <b>great</b> ; <i>k</i> if at the end of the word	Consonant
Дд	<b>D</b>	<i>d</i> as in <b>duck</b> ; <i>t</i> if at the end of the word	Consonant
Ее	<b>Ye</b>	<i>ye</i> as in <b>yes</b> ; <i>ee</i> as in <b>seek</b> if appearing in any unstressed syllable	Vowel
Ёё	<b>Yo</b>	<i>yo</i> as in <b>yoke</b>	Vowel
Жж	<b>Zh</b>	<i>zh</i> as <b>measure</b> ; <i>sh</i> if at the end of the word	Consonant
Зз	<b>Z</b>	<i>z</i> as in <b>zebra</b> ; <i>s</i> if at the end of the word	Consonant
Ии	<b>I</b>	<i>ee</i> as in <b>peek</b>	Vowel
Йй	<b>J</b>	very short <i>y</i> as <b>boy</b> or <b>May</b>	Vowel or Consonant
Кк	<b>K</b>	<i>k</i> as in <b>Kate</b>	Consonant
Лл	<b>L</b>	<i>l</i> as in <b>lamp</b>	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>
Мм	<b>M</b>	<i>m</i> as in <b>mommy</b>	Consonant
Нн	<b>N</b>	<i>n</i> as in <b>note</b>	Consonant
Оо	<b>O</b>	<i>oh</i> as in <b>as</b> in <b>talk</b> ; <i>ah</i> as in <b>park</b> , if appearing one syllable before the stressed syllable; <i>uh</i> as in <b>Mormon</b> , if appearing in any other unstressed syllable	Vowel
Пп	<b>P</b>	<i>p</i> as in <b>port</b>	Consonant
Рр	<b>R</b>	flap <i>r</i> , similar to trilled <i>r</i> in Spanish, as in “ <b>madre</b> ,” for example	Consonant
Сс	<b>S</b>	<i>s</i> as in <b>sort</b>	Consonant
Тт	<b>T</b>	<i>t</i> as in <b>tie</b>	Consonant
Уу	<b>U</b>	<i>oo</i> as <b>shoot</b>	Vowel
Фф	<b>F</b>	<i>f</i> as in <b>fact</b>	Consonant
Хх	<b>Kh</b>	<i>kh</i> like you’re clearing your throat, or like the German “ <b>ch</b> ”	Consonant
Цц	<b>Ts</b>	<i>ts</i> as in <b>cats</b>	Consonant
Чч	<b>Ch</b>	<i>ch</i> as in <b>chair</b>	Consonant
Шш	<b>Sh</b>	<i>sh</i> as in <b>shock</b>	Consonant
Щщ	<b>Sh’</b>	soft <i>sh</i> , as in <b>sheep</b>	Consonant
ь	”	hard sign (makes the preceding letter hard)	Neither
Ыы	<b>Y</b>	<i>ih</i>	Vowel
ъ	’	soft sign (makes the preceding letter soft)	Neither
Ээ	<b>E</b>	<i>e</i> as in <b>end</b>	Vowel
Юю	<b>Yu</b>	<i>yu</i> as in <b>use</b>	Vowel
Яя	<b>Ya</b>	<i>ya</i> if stressed as in <b>yard</b> ; <i>ee</i> if unstressed and not in the final syllable of the word; <i>ye</i> if unstressed and in the final syllable of the word	Vowel



## Who was this Cyril guy, anyway?

Picture this: The year is sometime around AD 863. Two Byzantine monks and brothers, Cyril and Methodius, were commissioned by their emperor to Christianize the East European pagan tribes. To carry out the emperor's order, the two brothers had to transcribe the Bible into Slavic. This task was very daunting because the Slavs didn't have any written language at the time and the Slavic dialect they were working with contained a lot of bizarre sounds not found in any other language.

One of the brothers, Cyril, came up with an ingenious idea: create a Slavic alphabet from a mishmash of Greek, Hebrew, and old Latin

words and sounds. That was a clever solution because by drawing on different languages, Cyril's alphabet contained practically every sound necessary for the correct pronunciation of Russian.

In honor of Cyril's clever idea, the alphabet became known as the Cyrillic alphabet. The Cyrillic script is now used by more than 70 languages, ranging from Eastern Europe's Slavic languages (Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Bulgarian, Serbian, and Macedonian) to Central Asia's Altaic languages (Turkmen, Uzbek, Kazakh, and Kirghiz).

## *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
- ✓ Kk
- ✓ Mm
- ✓ Oo
- ✓ Tt

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 is pronounced like *yo* as in *yoke*.
- ✓ **Нн:** It's not the English Hh. It just looks like it. Actually, it's pronounced like *n* as in *Nick*.
- ✓ **Рр:** In Russian it's pronounced like a trilled *r* and not like the English letter *p* as in *Peter*.
- ✓ **Сс:** 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*.
- ✓ **Хх:** 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  $\Phi$ ,  $\Gamma$ ,  $\mathfrak{Z}$ ,  $\mathfrak{J}$ ,  $\Pi$ , 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. In this section, you discover some of the basic rules and patterns of Russian pronunciation and find out about important irregularities with vowels and consonants. In addition, we show you how to say some of the more difficult letters and sounds.

### *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*. This pattern is different from English, where a letter can be pronounced in different ways depending on where it shows up in a word. For instance, consider the two different pronunciations for the letter *c* in the words *cat* and *race*. This difference almost never happens in Russian.

### *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. (To avoid such flubs, though, check out "Enunciating consonants correctly," later in this chapter.) 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, which we cover in the following sections.

***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**, or **u**, 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. Stress in Russian is unpredictable and erratic, though you begin to recognize some patterns as you learn more. The harsh truth, however, is that each word has its own stress pattern. What happens if you stress the vowel in the wrong place? Certainly, nothing terrible: the earth will continue to rotate around its axis. What may happen, however, is that your interlocutor will have a hard time understanding you and take longer to grasp what you really mean. 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 замо́к, 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. Not knowing it is like a double-edged sword: not only does it take other people longer to understand you (they simply won't recognize the words you're saying), but you also may find it hard to recognize the words you think you already know (but unfortunately store in your own memory with the wrong stress).

➤ **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, even though we realize that some persnickety Russian language phonologists (pronunciation specialists) may take issue. 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; formal singular and plural), or after another vowel, as in **chayepitiye** (*chah-ee-pee-tee-ee*; tea drinking), an unstressed **ye** is actually pronounced somewhere between *ee* and *ye*. Russian phonologists (pronunciation experts) still debate which sound it's closer to. So for the sake of simplicity, we always render an unstressed **ye** as *ee*. If you say it that way, any Russian will understand you.

- ✔ An unstressed **ya** sounds either like *ee* (as in *peek*) if it's unstressed (but not in the word's final syllable) or like *ye* (as in *yet*) if it's unstressed and also in the final syllable of the word.

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 *khuh-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 *ee-poh-nee-ye*. Notice how the unstressed letter **ya** sounds like *ee* 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**. Take, for example, the words **mashina** (muh-shih-nuh; car) and **bol'shye** (bohl'-shih; bigger).

## *Enunciating consonants correctly*

Like Russian vowels (see the previous section), 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 other words, say it, don't spray it! In fact, you should totally relax your tongue and lips before saying Russian **p**, **t**, or **k**. For example, imagine somebody who's just had a stroke. She won't be able to put too much effort into her consonants. Believe it or not, that's almost the way you should say your Russian consonants. Relax your speech organs as much as possible, and you'll say it correctly. 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. Practice saying them out loud and you'll see it's true.

But when voiced consonants appear at the end of a word, a strange thing happens to them: 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 — **zdravstvujtye** (*zdrah-stvooy-tee*), which has two difficult consonant combinations (**zdr** and **vstv**). 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-teel'-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 from *Fear Factor*, 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 **ъ**. While 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**

Without the hard sign, these consonants would normally palatalize (or soften). When a hard sign **ъ** 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?

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.

## *Using Popular Expressions*

Using popular expressions is one way to make a great first impression when speaking Russian. We recommend that you memorize the phrases in the following sections because they can come in handy in almost any situation.

## Speaking courteously

The way to say “please” and “you’re welcome” in Russian is **pozhalujsta** (pah-zhahl-stuh). You often use the word **pozhalujsta** just after the verb when making a polite request, as in the following sentences:

- ✓ **Povtoritye, pozhalujsta.** (puhf-tah-ree-tee pah-zhahl-stuh; Please repeat what you said.)
- ✓ **Govoritye, pozhalujsta, pomyedlyennyeye.** (guh-vah-ree-tee pah-zhahl-stuh pah-myed-lye-nee-ee; Please speak a little more slowly.)
- ✓ **Skazhitye, pozhalujsta, kak proiti do myetro?** (skah-zhah-tee pah-zhahl-stuh kahk prahy-tee duh meet-roh; Please tell me how to get to the subway station.)

After somebody answers your polite request or does you a favor, you say **spasibo** (spuh-see-buh; thank you) or **spasibo bol’shoye** (spuh-see-buh bahl’-shoy-ee; thank you very much).

When you want to say “you’re welcome,” you simply use the word **pozhalujsta** by itself.

## Excusing yourself

The most common way to say “excuse me” in Russian is **izvinitye** (eez-vee-nee-tee). To be even more polite, you can add the word **pozhalujsta** (pah-zhahl-stuh; please), as in the following sentences:

- ✓ **Izvinitye, pozhalujsta, mnye pora.** (eez-vee-nee-tee pah-zhahl-stuh mnye pah-rah; Excuse me, it’s time for me to go.)
- ✓ **Izvinitye, pozhalujsta, ya vas nye ponimayu.** (eez-vee-nee-tee pah-zhahl-stuh yah vahs nee puh-nee-mah-yu; Excuse me, I didn’t understand what you said.)

## Arming yourself with other handy phrases

You can also put the following phrases to good use in Russian:

- ✓ **Dobro pozhalovat’!** (dahb-roh pah-zhah-luh-vuht’; Welcome!)
- ✓ **Pozdravlyayu vas!** (puhz-druhv-la-yu vahs; Congratulations!)

- ✓ **Zhyelayu udachi!** (zhih-lah-yu oo-dah-chee; Good luck!)
- ✓ **Nichyego.** (nee-chee-voh; It's all right/no problem.)
- ✓ **Vsyego khoroshyego!** (vsee-voh khah-roh-shih-vuh; All the best!)
- ✓ **Priyatnogo appyetita!** (pree-yat-nuh-vuh uh-pee-tee-tuh; Bon appetit!)
- ✓ **Zhal'!** (zhahl'; Too bad!)
- ✓ **Khorosho.** (khuh-rah-shoh; It's all right.)

## Reading Russian with Ease

Reading in Russian is an important skill to have. If you want to read a Russian magazine, menu, or train schedule, or if you want find your way around Russian-speaking places, you have to know how to read some Russian.

Suppose that you're walking in the Russian district of an American city and are suddenly in the mood for food. Being able to read Russian is a big help when you see a building with the sign **PECTOPAH** (ree-stah-rah'n) on it. You'll understand that the building is exactly what you're looking for — a restaurant! (We give you the lowdown on talking about food in Chapter 5.)

Or imagine that you booked a trip to Moscow with your favorite travel agent and you've just gotten off the plane. The big sign on the airport building reads **Санкт-Петербург**. If you know how to read some Russian, you're able to understand that the sign says **Sankt-Peterburg** (sahnk pee-teer-boork; St. Petersburg) and not **Москва/Moskva** (mahs-kvah; Moscow), which means you've come to the wrong place, and it's time to find a new travel agent! (You can find out all about planning a trip to Russia and navigating the airport in Chapters 11 and 12.)



The first step to reading Russian is recognizing Cyrillic letters (see “From A to Ya: Making sense of Cyrillic,” earlier in this chapter, for info on these letters). Try sounding out each word, and you may be surprised that you recognize quite a few of them because they're similar to words you know in English or other languages. Then you can look up the ones you're unsure of in the Russian-English dictionary. You don't need to know every word in a sentence to get the sense of what you're reading. At least try to locate and understand the nouns and the verbs, and you'll be off to a good start (see Chapter 2 for info on nouns and verbs).



## Fun & Games

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Match the Russian letters in the first column with the sounds they correspond to in the second column. You can find the answers in Appendix C.

- |             |       |
|-------------|-------|
| 1. <b>Н</b> | a. r  |
| 2. <b>Р</b> | b. n  |
| 3. <b>Г</b> | c. ee |
| 4. <b>Я</b> | d. ya |
| 5. <b>И</b> | e. g  |

Below are Russian cognates used in English. Sound out each word and see whether you can recognize its meaning. The answers are in Appendix C.

1. **Водка**
  2. **Борщ**
  3. **Перестройка**
  4. **Гласность**
  5. **Спутник**
  6. **Царь**
- .....

