

Chapter 1

Say It How? Speaking Portuguese

In This Chapter

- ▶ Recognizing what English and Portuguese have in common
 - ▶ Spell it out: Saying the alphabet
 - ▶ Looking at vowels and consonants: Basic Portuguese sounds
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Believe it or not, the Portuguese language comes in different versions. Pronunciation of Brazilian Portuguese and Portuguese from Portugal, say, is totally different. Some Brazilian tourists in Portugal report that they don't understand a word! I think it's a little more of a stretch than the differences between American and British English, just to give you an idea. But if a group of people from Texas, South Africa, and Scotland got together, they'd probably scratch their heads when trying to understand each other, too!

Written Portuguese, on the other hand, is very standard, especially when it's in a newspaper or some formal publication that doesn't use slang. A Brazilian can understand a Portuguese newspaper or read the works of Portugal's Nobel Prize-winning author José Saramago, no problem.

In this book, I focus on Brazilian Portuguese, as opposed to the Portuguese spoken in Portugal and countries in Africa — Cape Verde (islands off northwestern Africa), Mozambique (on the coast of southeast Africa), Guinea-Bissau (in western Africa), Angola (in southwestern Africa), and São Tomé and Príncipe (islands off western Africa).

Exploring the Roots of Portuguese

The beautiful Portuguese language belongs to a linguistic family known as the Romance languages. Back when the Roman Empire was around, Rome was in the center of a wide swath of Europe, northern Africa, and parts of Asia. With Rome's influence came its language — Latin.

And the closer a place was to Rome, the more likely it was to absorb Latin into its language. This was the case with Portugal — where the Portuguese language originates — as well as with places like France, Spain, and even Romania.

So how did Portuguese get all the way to Brazil? A Portuguese conquistador named Pedro Álvares Cabral landed in modern-day Brazil on April 22, 1500, and is the person credited for having “discovered” Brazil. Many indigenous people were already living in the area, of course, many of whom spoke a language that's part of a language family today called **Tupi-Guarani** (too-pee gwah-dah-nee).

Brazilian Portuguese uses some Tupi-Guarani words. Mostly the words appear as names of towns in Brazil — for example, **Ubatuba** (ooh-bah-too-bah) is a pretty beach town in São Paulo state (it's nicknamed **Uba-Chuva** because **chuva** [*shoo-vah*] means *rain* and it rains there a lot!). Tupi-Guarani words also name native plants and animals. “Armadillo,” for example, is **tatu** (tah-too). After you get used to speaking Portuguese, telling whether a word is Latin-based or Tupi-Guarani-based is pretty easy.

Still other words in Brazilian Portuguese are based on African languages, from the vast influence that African slaves had on creating modern-day Brazil and its culture.

What you may not realize is that the English language has a lot of Latin influence. Linguists consider English to be a Germanic language, and it technically is. But due to the on-and-off French occupations of the British Isles, some of those French (Latin-based) words rubbed off on English. Some people say as much as 40 percent of English is Latin-based.

That's great news for you. It means many Portuguese words have the same root as English words. The *root* of a word is usually the middle of the word — those few sounds that really define what the word means. Some examples of Portuguese words that resemble English include **experimento** (eh-speh-dee-men-toh; experiment), **presidente** (pdeh-zee-dang-chee; president), **economia** (eh-koh-noh-mee-ah; economy), **decisão** (ah deh-see-zah-ooh; decision), **computador** (kom-poo-tah-doh; computer), **liberdade** (lee-beh-dah-jee; liberty), and **banana** (bah-nah-nah). And that's only to name a few!

Another benefit: **O português** (ooh poh-too-geh-z; Portuguese), like all Latin languages, uses the English alphabet. Some funny accent marks appear on some of the vowels, but they just add to the mystique of Portuguese. Learning Portuguese isn't the same as learning Japanese or Arabic, which use totally different alphabets.

Finally, due to the influence the United States has had on the world recently — in some ways greater than Rome's ancient influence — many English words are used commonly in Portuguese, with no adaptation in the way they're written. These words include modern-technology words like **e-mail** (ee-may-oh) and also basic words like **shopping** (shoh-ping) or **show** (shoh; show/performance).

Reciting Your ABCs

Brazilian Portuguese sounds very strange at first. I myself thought it sounded Russian, back when I didn't understand a **palavra** (pah-lahv-dah; word)! A few of the sounds are a little hard to imitate, because people don't use them in English. But Brazilians often understand you even if you don't say words perfectly. Many think a foreign **sotaque** (soh-tah-kee; accent) is charming, so don't worry about it.

But the way the sounds correspond to the written letters is very systematic in Brazilian Portuguese — more so than in English. After you get used to the way a letter or combination of letters sounds, you get the hang of pronunciations pretty quickly. There are few surprises in a **pronúncia** (ah pdoh-noon-see-ah; pronunciation) after you get the basics down.

At the beginning of this chapter, did you notice how the pronunciation is shown in parentheses after the Portuguese word? That's how this book shows the pronunciation of all new words. The italicized part is where you put the emphasis on the word. In “Words to Know” lists, the part you emphasize is underlined rather than italicized.

Are you ready to learn the basics of **português**? You can start with the alphabet. Practice spelling out your name:

- ✓ **a** (ah)
- ✓ **b** (beh)
- ✓ **c** (seh)
- ✓ **d** (deh)
- ✓ **e** (eh)
- ✓ **f** (eh-fee)
- ✓ **g** (zheh)
- ✓ **h** (ah-gah)
- ✓ **i** (ee)

- ✓ **j** (*zhoh-tah*)
- ✓ **k** (*kah*)
- ✓ **l** (*eh-lee*)
- ✓ **m** (*eh-mee*)
- ✓ **n** (*eh-nee*)
- ✓ **o** (*awe*)
- ✓ **p** (*peh*)
- ✓ **q** (*keh*)
- ✓ **r** (*eh-hee*)
- ✓ **s** (*eh-see*)
- ✓ **t** (*teh*)
- ✓ **u** (*ooh*)
- ✓ **v** (*veh*)
- ✓ **w** (*dah-blee-ooh*)
- ✓ **x** (*sheez*)
- ✓ **y** (*eep-see-long*)
- ✓ **z** (*zeh*)

When the book uses the sound *zh* as part of the phonetic transcription (the pronunciation guide in parentheses), think of the sound in Hungarian actress Zsa-Zsa Gabor's name. That's the *zh* sound I'm talking about.

Conquering Consonants

Getting through this book will be a cinch after you go through the basic pronunciation guide in this section. Skipping the guide is okay, too — you can get the gist by reading aloud the pronunciations of words in other chapters. But if you want to get a general idea of how to pronounce words that don't show up in this book, this is a great place to begin. I start with the consonants first — you know, all those letters in the alphabet that aren't vowels.

The most hilarious aspect of Brazilian Portuguese pronunciation occurs when a word ends in a consonant. In most cases, these are foreign (and mostly English) words that Brazilians have adopted. They add an *ee* sound to the end of the word when there isn't one. Here are some examples: **club** (*kloo-bee*); **laptop** (*lahp-ee-top-ee*); **hip-hop** (*heep-ee-hoh-pee*); **rap** (*hah-pee*); and **rock** (*hoh-kee*).

Most consonants in Brazilian Portuguese have the same sound as in English. In the following sections, I go over the exceptions.

The letter C

A *c* that begins a word sounds usually like a *k*.

✓ **casa** (*kah-zah*; house)

✓ **café** (*kah-feh*; coffee)

If the *c* has a hook-shaped mark under it, like this — *ç* — it makes an *s* sound.

✓ **serviço** (*seh-vee-soo*; service)

✓ **França** (*fdahn-sah*; France)

The most common appearance of what Brazilians call the **c-cedilha** (*seh seh-deel-yah*; *ç*/cedilla) is at the end of a word, followed by **-ão**. It's the Brazilian equivalent of the English *-tion* ending.

✓ **promoção** (*pdoh-moh-sah-ooh*; sale/discount/sales promotion)

✓ **evolução** (*eh-voh-loo-sah-ooh*; evolution)

The letter D

If the word begins with a *d*, the sound is usually a hard *d*, like in English.

✓ **dançar** (*dahn-sah*; to dance)

✓ **data** (*dah-tah*; date)

The word **de** (jee), which means *of*, is an exception.

If the *d* comes in the middle of a word, before a vowel, it can have either a hard *d* sound or a *j* sound — like in the English word *jelly*.

- ✓ **modelo** (moh-deh-loh; model)
- ✓ **estado** (eh-stah-doh; state)
- ✓ **advogado** (ahj-voh-gah-doh; lawyer)
- ✓ **pedir** (peh-jee; to ask for)
- ✓ **liberdade** (lee-beh-dah-jee; freedom)

The letter G

The *g* in Portuguese usually is a hard *g*, like in the English word *go*.

- ✓ **gato** (gah-toh; cat)
- ✓ **governo** (goh-veh-noh; government)
- ✓ **segundo** (seh-goona-doh; second)

But it takes a *zh* sound, as in the famous Zsa-Zsa Gabor, when followed by an *e* or an *i*.

- ✓ **gente** (zhang-chee; people)
- ✓ **biologia** (bee-oh-loh-zhee-ah; biology)

The letter H

The Brazilian Portuguese *h* is one of the most versatile consonants around. If the word begins with an *h*, the letter is silent.

- ✓ **honesto** (oh-neh-stoh; honest)
- ✓ **hora** (oh-dah; hour)

If the *h* follows an *l* (*lh*) or an *n* (*nh*), the *h* sounds like a *y*.

- ✓ **maravilhoso** (mah-dah-veel-yoh-zoo; marvellous/amazing)
- ✓ **palhaço** (pahl-yah-soh; clown)
- ✓ **companhia** (kohm-pahn-yee-ah; company)
- ✓ **Espanha** (eh-spahn-yah; Spain)

The letter J

The *j* in Portuguese sounds like the *zh* in Zsa-Zsa.

- ✓ **julho** (zhool-yoh; July)
- ✓ **Jorge** (zhoh-zhee; George)
- ✓ **loja** (loh-zhah; store)
- ✓ **joelho** (zhoh-el-yoh; knee)

The letter L

The *l* in Portuguese normally sounds like the *l* in English.

- ✓ **líder** (lee-deh; leader)
- ✓ **gelo** (zheh-loo; ice)

But if it comes at the end of a word, the *l* sounds like *ooh*.

- ✓ **mil** (mee-ooh; one thousand)
- ✓ **Natal** (nah-tah-ooh; Christmas)

The letters M and N

The *m* and *n* in Portuguese generally sound like *m* and *n* in English.

- ✓ **mel** (meh-ooh; honey)
- ✓ **medo** (meh-doo; fear)
- ✓ **janela** (zhah-neh-lah; window)
- ✓ **não** (nah-ooh; no)

But at the end of a word, an *m* or *n* takes on an *ng* sound.

- ✓ **homem** (*oh-mang*; man)
- ✓ **cem** (*sang*; one hundred)

The letter Q

The *q* in Portuguese has a *k* sound.

- ✓ **quilo** (*kee-loo*; kilo)
- ✓ **quilômetro** (*kee-loh-meh-tdoh*; kilometer)

The letter R

If the word begins or ends with an *r*, the *r* sounds like an *h*.

- ✓ **Roberto** (*hoh-beh-too*; Robert)
- ✓ **rosa** (*hoh-zah*; pink)

If the *r* comes in the middle of a word, on the accented syllable, it sounds like an even stronger *h*. In the words **porta** and **carta** that follow, push air out of your mouth as you say the *h*. It's a breathy *h*, not a guttural sound like you'd hear in Hebrew or German.

- ✓ **porta** (*poh-tah*; door)
- ✓ **carta** (*kah-tah*; letter)

If the *r* comes in the middle of a word, on an unaccented syllable, it sounds like a soft *d*. Feel what your mouth does when you read the pronunciation for **Brasil**. The way you say the *d* in *bdah* is how you should say it in the *dah* of *koh-dah-sah-ooh*, too. It's not a hard *d* like in English.

- ✓ **Brasil** (*bdah-zeeh-ooh*; Brazil)
- ✓ **coração** (*koh-dah-sah-ooh*; heart)

If a word has two *rs* (*rr*), they make an *h* sound, as in **burro** (*boo-hoh*; dumb).

If the *r* comes at the end of a word, it's silent.

- ✓ **caminhar** (kah-ming-yah; to walk)
- ✓ **gostar** (goh-stah; to like)

The letter S

The *s* is the same as the English *s*, except it becomes a *z* sound at the end of a word.

- ✓ **olhos** (ohl-yooz; eyes)
- ✓ **dedos** (deh-dooz; fingers)

The letter T

The *t* in Portuguese has a soft *t* sound in general. In English, you don't use the soft *t* sound very often. Say *ta, ta, ta* in a quiet voice, as if you're marking a rhythm. That's the soft *t* of Portuguese.

- ✓ **motocicleta** (moh-too-see-kleh-tah; motorcycle)
- ✓ **atuar** (ah-too-ah; to act)
- ✓ **Tailândia** (tah-ee-lahn-jee-ah; Thailand)

But *t* sounds like *ch* when followed by an *e* or an *i*.

- ✓ **passaporte** (pah-sah-poh-chee; passport)
- ✓ **forte** (foh-chee; strong)
- ✓ **notícia** (noh-chee-see-ah; news)
- ✓ **time** (chee-mee; team)

The letter W

The *w* doesn't naturally occur in Portuguese, but when it does, it sounds like a *v*. The only places you really see a *w* is in someone's name.

- ✓ **Wanderlei** (vahn-deh-lay)
- ✓ **Wanessa** (vah-neh-sah)

The letter *X*

The *x* generally has a *sh* sound in Portuguese.

- ✓ **axé** (ah-sheh; a popular Brazilian type of dance)
- ✓ **lixo** (lee-shoo; garbage)
- ✓ **taxa** (tah-shah; rate)
- ✓ **bruxa** (bdoo-shah; witch)

But it can also have a *ks* sound, like in English: **tóxico** (tohk-see-koh; toxic).

Exercising Your Jowls with Vowels

In this section, I go over all five vowels in Portuguese, including the ones with the weird accents on top of them.

The letters *A* and *Ã*

The *a* normally has an *ah* sound.

- ✓ **amigo** (ah-mee-goo; friend)
- ✓ **ajuda** (ah-zhoo-dah; help)
- ✓ **Tatiana** (tah-chee-ah-nah)

If the *a* has a squiggly mark, or **til** (chee-ooh; ~/tilde), on top of it (*ã*), the letter makes a nasal sound. Instead of opening your mouth to say *a*, as in the English word *at*, try closing your mouth almost completely while you make the same sound. Do you hear that? It becomes more of an *uh* than an *ah*. Then try to open your mouth (making the same sound) without bringing your lips farther apart. And voilà! You have the *ã* sound!

The *ã* is a very common sound in Brazilian Portuguese. But to be honest, I took more than a year to be able to say it like a Brazilian. Don't sweat it — most Brazilians will probably understand you either way.

The *ã* occasionally comes at the end of a word.

- ✓ **maçã** (mah-sah; apple)
- ✓ **Maracanã** (mah-dah-kah-nah; a soccer stadium in Rio)

However, *ã* is usually followed by an *o* (*ão*). Together, these letters make an *ah-oo*h sound. But say it fast, and you say *Ow!* like you've hurt yourself. Brazilians say the *ã* like the English *ow*, only with the nasal sound you just practiced.

- ✓ **não** (nah-oo; no)
- ✓ **informação** (een-foh-mah-sah-oo; information)

The letters *E* and *Ê*

In general, the *e* sounds like *eh*, as in *egg* or *ten*.

- ✓ **elefante** (eh-leh-fahn-chee; elephant)
- ✓ **dedo** (deh-doo; finger)

If it comes at the end of a word, though, *e* usually has an *ee* sound.

- ✓ **dificuldade** (jee-fee-kool-dah-jee; difficulty)
- ✓ **boate** (boh-ah-chee; nightclub)

If the *e* has a hat on it (*ê*), don't worry. It has the same *eh* sound as normal.

- ✓ **três** (tdehz; three)

The letter *I*

The *i* has an *ee* sound, pretty much without exception.

- ✓ **inglês** (eeng-gleh; English)
- ✓ **livro** (leev-doh; book)

The letters *O* and *Ô*

The *o* by itself has an easy-to-make *oh* sound.

✓ **ontem** (*ohn-tang*; yesterday)

✓ **onda** (*ohn-dah*; wave)

At the end of a word, though, it usually sounds like *ooh*.

✓ **tudo** (*too-doo*; everything/all)

✓ **Gramado** (*gdah-mah-doo*; a city in Rio Grande do Sul, famous for its film festival)

The *o* also comes with a hat on it (*ô*). Don't fear the weirdness — it takes an *oh* sound, like normal.

✓ **ônibus** (*oh-nee-boos*; bus)

The letter *U*

The *u* has an *ooh* sound.

✓ **urso** (*ooh-soo*; bear)

✓ **útil** (*ooh-chee-ooh*; useful)

✓ **ou** (*oh*; or)

