

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Identifying some familiar-looking Polish words
- » Pronouncing the alphabet and all its vowels and consonants
- » Stressing the right syllable
- » Using basic expressions

Chapter **1**

Introducing Polish

Being able to produce sounds that native speakers can recognize and understand is vital for successful communication. This chapter discusses Polish pronunciation and some of the conventions I use in this book.

Spotting the Polish You Already Know

Polish borrows a number of words from English across various domains, including politics, technology, sports, economics, and business. These borrowed words have either retained their original spelling or been adapted to the Polish spelling, but they're still easy to recognize (and to remember!) for native English speakers. You won't have much trouble working out the meaning of these words:

- » **adres** (*a-dres*) (address)
- » **biznes** (*bee-znes*) (business)
- » **hotel** (*ho-tel*) (hotel)
- » **interfejs** (*een-ter-feys*) (interface)
- » **kawa** (*ka-va*) (coffee)
- » **komputer** (*kompoo-ter*) (computer)
- » **kultura** (*kool-too-ra*) (culture)

- » **park** (*park*) (park)
- » **telefon** (*te-le-fo-n*) (telephone)



TIP

Check out the upcoming sections of this chapter for detailed pronunciation tips.

Of course, you can get into trouble when you're dealing with so-called *false friends* — words that look similar in English and Polish yet have completely different meanings:

- » **aktualnie** (*a-ktoo-al-n'ye*) means *currently* or *presently* rather than *actually*
- » **audycja** (*aw-dih-tsya*) means *a broadcast*, not *an audition*
- » **data** (*da-ta*) means *date*, not *data*
- » **ewentualnie** (*e-ven-too-al-n'ye*) is the English *possibly* rather than *eventually*
- » **fatalny** (*fa-tal-nih*) doesn't translate to *fatal* but to *abysmal*
- » **hazard** (*ha-zart*) is *gambling* (which can be hazardous to your bank balance)
- » **pensja** (*pen-sya*) is *salary* rather than *pension*, which is **renta** (*ren-ta*) in Polish
- » **sympatyczny** (*sihm-pa-tih-chnih*) is *nice* or *friendly* but not *sympathetic*
- » **szef** (*shef*) means *boss*, not *a chef*, unless you say **szef kuchni** (*shef koo-hn'ee*) (head chef)

The Polish Alphabet: Reciting Your ABCs

Alongside Polish words throughout this book, I've provided their pronunciation in parentheses. To make reading and saying the words easier for you, the pronunciations are divided into syllables with hyphens — for example, (*al-fa-bet*). Try to say the underlined syllable more strongly, because it's a stressed syllable. Make your way to the “Searching for Stress and Blending Prepositions” section later in this chapter to read more about the Polish stress.



GRAMMATICALLY
SPEAKING

When the first writings in Polish appeared, the 26 letters of the Latin alphabet couldn't accommodate the 45 sounds that somehow needed to be represented. As a result, the Polish alphabet consists of 32 letters and uses a variety of consonant clusters such as **ch**, **cz**, **dź**, **dz**, **dź**, **sz**, and **rz**. *Note:* Q, v, and x are not Polish letters and appear in foreign words only.



PLAY THIS

Table 1-1 shows all the Polish letters and how to say them in parentheses. (Listen to audio track 1 to help you with pronunciation.)

TABLE 1-1

The Polish Alphabet

a (<i>a</i>)	ą (<i>ohN</i>)	b (<i>be</i>)	c (<i>tse</i>)
ć (<i>ch'ye</i>)	d (<i>de</i>)	e (<i>e</i>)	ę (<i>ehN</i>)
f (<i>ef</i>)	g (<i>gye</i>)	h (<i>ha</i>)	i (<i>ee</i>)
j (<i>yot</i>)	k (<i>ka</i>)	l (<i>el</i>)	ł (<i>ew</i>)
m (<i>em</i>)	n (<i>en</i>)	ń (<i>en'</i>)	o (<i>o</i>)
ó (<i>o kreskovane</i>)	p (<i>pe</i>)	q (<i>koo</i>)	r (<i>er</i>)
s (<i>es</i>)	ś (<i>esh'</i>)	t (<i>te</i>)	u (<i>oo</i>)
v (<i>faw</i>)	w (<i>voo</i>)	x (<i>eeks</i>)	y (<i>eegrek</i>)
z (<i>zet</i>)	ź (<i>z'yet</i>)	ż (<i>zhet</i>)	



REMEMBER

Although the Polish pronunciation may seem rather daunting, it is in fact regular, and after you memorize a couple of patterns, you'll soon notice that you can easily pronounce every word you come across.

Native speakers find working out how to spell a word from its pronunciation easy (with some exceptions, they simply learn by heart). And if in doubt, they simply ask for clarification. However, as a foreigner, you may be asked to spell your name or need someone to spell a street name for you, so the following phrases may come in handy:

- » **Czy może pan/pani przeliterować?** (*chih mo-zhe pan/pa-n'ee pshe-lee-te-ro-vach'?*) (Can you spell it, please?) — speaking formally to a man/woman
- » **Proszę przeliterować.** (*pro-she pshe-lee-te-ro-vach'.*) (Please spell it.) — formal
- » **Czy mam przeliterować?** (*chih mam pshe-lee-te-ro-vach'?*) (Do you want me to spell it?)
- » **Proszę mi to napisać?** (*pro-she mee to na-pee-sach'?*) (Can you please write it for me?)



CULTURAL WISDOM

When spelling, unlike the English habit of saying, *A for Alpha, B for Bravo*, and so on, Polish people often use first names. So you'll hear something like the following: **A jak Anna** (*a yak an-na*), **Be jak Barbara** (*be yag bar-ba-ra*), **Ce jak Celina** (*tse yak tse-lee-na*), and so on.



TIP

If you're going to Poland, prepare a list of first names (ideally Polish ones) that you can use to spell your own name so that you don't panic when you need to spell it in Polish.

Checking Out Consonant Pronunciation

Some consonants are pronounced the same way in both Polish and English: **b, d, f, g, k, l, m, n, p, s, t,** and **z**. In words with double letters, such as **Anna** and **lekki**, each letter is pronounced separately as in *an-na* and *lek-kee*.



TIP

For the sake of simplicity, in pronunciations, I use **n** before *k* or *g*. But think of how you pronounce **nk** in the English word *bank*. Polish people say *nk* and *ng* in the exact same way.

The following sections cover the consonants for which pronunciation is different from English.

C

In Polish, **c** is pronounced as *ts* in *tsetse fly* or *Betsy*. Don't confuse it with the English *k* sound as in *car*. In the pronunciations, you see the symbol *ts* to indicate letter **c**, as in these examples:

- » **co** (*tso*) (what)
- » **centrum** (*tseⁿ-troom*) (city center)

Ć and Ci

These consonants represent exactly the same sound. Unfortunately, that sound doesn't have a direct equivalent in English. You need to think of the word *cheese* and try to say the *chee* part just a touch more softly. Yes, you're in business! In the pronunciations, *ch'* indicates **ć** and **ci**.



REMEMBER

The ' in a pronunciation reminds you that it's a soft sound. I add an extra *y* to help you pronounce **ci** when followed by a vowel and *ee* when **ci** forms a syllable.

Now, try the sound of these words:

- » **ciepło** (*ch'ye-pwo*) (warm)
- » **cicho** (*ch'ee-ho*) (quietly)
- » **mówić** (*mo^o-veech'*) (to speak, say)



GRAMMATICALLY
SPEAKING

Ć and **ci** are used in different situations. You write **ć** when it appears at the end of a word, as in **pić** (*peech'*) (to drink) or before another consonant as in **ćma** (*ch'ma*) (moth). The **ci** form is written before a vowel as in **ciocia** (*ch'yo-ch'ya*) (auntie). However, you'll see a number of words where **ci** appears before a consonant or at the end of a word. This situation happens only when **ci** actually forms a syllable, as in **ci-cho** (*ch'ee-ho*) (quiet) and **ni-ci** (*n'ee-ch'ee*) (sewing threads). Identical rules apply to soft pairs such as **ś** and **si**, **ź** and **zi**, **dź** and **dzi**, and **ń** and **ni**, which I cover in upcoming sections.

Cz

Cz shouldn't cause too many pronunciation difficulties. The sound is like the *ch* in *cheddar*, only a touch harder. In the pronunciations, you see *ch* to represent **cz**. Here are some examples:

- » **czarny** (*char-nih*) (black)
- » **czas** (*chas*) (time)

Dz

The pronunciation of **dz** is like the *ds* in *reeds* or *goods* and is indicated by *dz* in the pronunciations. Practice the following words:

- » **dzwon** (*dzvon*) (bell)
- » **bardzo** (*bar-dzo*) (very)

Dź and Dzi

The English tongue is unfamiliar with the soft **dź** and **dzi**. Their pronunciation is softer than *je* in *jeans*. To represent them, you see *dj'* in the pronunciations. I add an extra *y* to help you pronounce **dzi** when followed by a vowel and *ee* when **dzi** forms a syllable. Here are some Polish examples:

- » **dzień** (*dj'yen'*) (day)
- » **godzina** (*go-dj'ee-na*) (hour, time)

You can read about the rules of the **dź** and **dzi** spelling in the “Ć and Ci” section earlier in this chapter.

Dż

When saying **dż**, think of both of the *g* sounds in the English word *Georgia*, and you're in business. To represent **dż**, you see *dj* in the pronunciations. You're now ready to practice it:

- » **dżungla** (*djoon-gla*) (jungle)
- » **dżem** (*djem*) (jam)

H and Ch

H and **ch** are identical twins as far as pronunciation is concerned. Think of the *h* in *hat*. Because you say both **h** and **ch** in the same way, you see *h* to indicate them both in the pronunciations. Remember to breathe out gently when practicing this sound:

- » **historia** (*hee-sto-rya*) (history)
- » **hotel** (*ho-tel*) (hotel)
- » **chleb** (*hlep*) (bread)
- » **ucho** (*oo-ho*) (ear)



TIP

Be aware that the **y** sound is represented as *ih* — the *i* sound in *pity* — throughout this book, so when you see the *ih* combination in the pronunciations, as in **mily** (*mee-wih*), remember that the *h* is barely breathed. The sound certainly isn't the same as the *h* in the word *hat*. Go to the “Saying Polish Vowels” section later in this chapter for guidance on pronouncing vowels.

J

The letter **j** is pronounced like the *y* in *yes*, and that's how it appears in the pronunciations — *y*:

- » **jeden** (*ye-den*) (one)
- » **projekt** (*pro-yekt*) (project)

Ł

This letter may look a bit exotic to you — printed capital Ł, small ł, and handwritten as in Figure 1-1. Luckily, its pronunciation is exactly the same as the English *w* in *water*. Ł is marked as *w* in the pronunciations, as in these examples:

» **szkoła** (*shko-wa*) (school)

» **łatwy** (*wa-tfih*) (easy)

FIGURE 1-1:
The written
capital
and small ł.



Ń and Ni

These two consonants, similarly to *ć* and *ci*, are soft; despite different spellings, they sound exactly the same. They're unfamiliar to the English tongue. When pronouncing *ń* and *ni*, think of the English words *onion* or *new*. Throughout this book, the soft *ń* and *ni* are presented as *n'*. I add an extra *y* to help you pronounce *ni* before a vowel and *ee* when *ni* forms a separate syllable. Read these examples:

» **nie** (*n'ye*) (no)

» **koń** (*kon'*) (horse)

» **hiszpański** (*heesh-pan'-skee*) (Spanish)

» **nisko** (*n'ee-sko*) (low, down)

You can read about the spelling rules for *ń* and *ni* in the “*Ć and Ci*” section earlier in this chapter.

R

The letter *r*, although pronounced a bit differently than in English — it's a trilled *r* — is presented as *r* in the pronunciations. In fact, it's not a big problem if you pronounce it the English way. Polish native speakers will certainly understand you. However, if you want to perfect it, take a deep breath, oscillate the tip of your tongue just behind your teeth in an up and down motion and say the *r* sound very loudly. Check out audio track 1 for how it actually sounds.

Here are some examples you can use to practice your r:

- » **rok** (*rok*) (year)
- » **park** (*park*) (park)

Ś and Si

Ś and si sound exactly the same, despite their different spelling. You won't find a direct equivalent in English, but if you think of the *shee* part of the English word *sheep*, which you say with a bit of softness, that's it! Throughout this book, these sounds are represented by *sh'*. I add an extra *y* to help you pronounce **si** when followed by a vowel and *ee* when **si** forms a separate syllable. Here are some examples:

- » **siedem** (*sh'ye-dem*) (seven)
- » **środa** (*sh'ro-da*) (Wednesday)
- » **coś** (*tsosh'*) (something)
- » **silny** (*sh'ee-nih*) (strong)

For the rules of spelling, refer to the “Ć and Ci” section earlier in this chapter.

Sz

Sz is pronounced as the *sh* in *shop*, only a bit harder. And, naturally, it appears as *sh* in the pronunciations, as in these examples:

- » **szansa** (*shan-sa*) (chance)
- » **szkoda** (*shko-da*) (shame, pity)

W

The **w** is pronounced as *v* in *visa*, and you see *v* in the pronunciations to represent **w**, as in these examples:

- » **woda** (*vo-da*) (water)
- » **Nazywam się . . .** (*na-zih-vam sh'ye*) (My name is. . .)

Ż and Zi

This pair of soft sounds doesn't exist in English. However, if you pronounce the *s* in the word *Asia* but very, very softly, you'll have a perfect *ż*. In the pronunciations, it's indicated as *z'*. I add an extra *y* to help you pronounce *zi* when followed by a vowel and *ee* when *zi* forms a separate syllable. Practice these examples:

- » **żle** (*z'le*) (wrongly, badly, incorrectly)
- » **zima** (*z'ee-ma*) (winter)
- » **późno** (*poQ-z'no*) (late)

For the rules of the *ż* and *zi* spelling, refer to the “*Ć and Ci*” section earlier in this chapter.

Ż and Rz

The somehow exotic looking *ż* and *rz* are easy to say — as *s* in the English words *pleasure* or *vision*. You'll see *zh* in the pronunciations to indicate *ż* and *rz*. Practice with the following examples:

- » **żart** (*zhart*) (joke)
- » **marzec** (*mq-zhets*) (March)

Pronouncing Voiced and Silent Consonants

Sometimes some letters are pronounced differently than as described in the previous sections. Welcome to Polish! The difference in pronunciation is because consonants slightly change their personality when surrounded by other consonants. For instance, *w* is pronounced as *v* as in **w Gdańsku** (*vqdan'-skoo*) (in Gdansk). However, take a look at this example:

w Polsce (*fpol-stse*) (in Poland)

Notice that *w* is pronounced here as its silent equivalent, *f*. What you're dealing with here are voiced and silent consonants.



REMEMBER

The general rule says that a voiced consonant changes to its silent form at the end of a word (chleb, bread, is pronounced as *hlep*) or before a silent consonant (podpisać, to sign, is pronounced *pot-pee-sach'*), both within one word or two words as in **w Polsce** (*fpol-stse*). However, consonant clusters are voiced if the last consonant of the cluster is voiced (you pronounce **jest wesóły**, is happy, as *yezdvē-sō-wih*). You won't be surprised to know that in some special situations these rules don't quite work.

I'm not going to go into too much detail (too much theory never helps!); just bear in mind the fact that, for the sake of simplicity, words and groups of words are pronounced in a way that doesn't require too much effort from the speaker. For example, say the *dk* in **wódka** (vodka) as *tk* (*voō-tka*) and the *ż* in **już piszę** (*yoosh pee-she*) (I'm already writing/typing) as *sh* but as *zh* in **już dzwonię** (*yoosh dzvo-n'ye*) (I'm just calling) because doing so is just easier. In the pronunciations throughout this book, you see many examples like this.



TIP

Instead of trying to memorize these rules, try to read aloud or converse with a native speaker so that you get used to the sound of Polish. *Remember:* The less effort you put into pronouncing separate letters, the better result you get. Watch Polish native speakers when they speak, and you soon notice that they don't move their mouths as much as English speakers.

Here are the voiced consonants: **b, d, g, w, z, ź, dz, dź, ż/rz,** and **dź**; their silent equivalents are **p, t, k, f, s, ś, c, ć, sz,** and **cz**, respectively. Just in case you're terribly interested in what they are!

Saying Polish Vowels

As an English speaker, you know that vowels can have more than one sound. For instance, the *a* is pronounced very differently in *cat* and in *Kate*. Polish vowels, on the other hand, are very pure; they have one and only one pronunciation. Big relief! (The nasal vowels *-ę* and *-ą* are a bit different; I address them in the next sections.)

Table 1-2 presents Polish vowels with examples in both Polish and English, together with pronunciations.

TABLE 1-2

Polish Vowels (excluding -ą, -ę)

Letter	Symbol	As in English	Comments	Polish Example
A a	a	cut		start (<i>start</i>)
E e	e	yes		element (<i>e-le-ment</i>)
I i	ee	meet		idol (<i>ee-dol</i>)
O o	o	organization	a short sound o	organizacja (<i>or-ga-n'ee-za-tsy-a</i>)
Ó ó	oo	too	Polish ó and u are pronounced the same	mój (<i>mooy</i>)
U u	oo	too	the same as ó	tu (<i>too</i>) (here)
Y y	ih	pity		syn (<i>sihn</i>) (son)

Nasal vowels

Nasal sounds don't exist in English, but Polish has two: **-ą** and **-ę**. They're quite easy to pronounce. When saying them, you just need to imagine you have a cold and your nose is a bit blocked.

The pronunciation of these vowels depends on their position in a word; in other words, what consonants they're followed by. This point is somewhat complex; the best way to understand it is to learn one example and, if you come across a word that looks similar, follow that pattern.

Generally speaking, the nasal **ą** can be pronounced as **ohN**, **om**, **on**, and **oń**. The other nasal vowel, **ę**, can be pronounced as **ehN**, **em**, **en**, and **eń**. Table 1-3 shows some examples.

TABLE 1-3

Nasal Vowels ą and ę before Consonants

Letter	Symbol	As in English	Polish Example	Pronunciation	Translation
ą	om	tomato	kąpać ząb	<i>kom-pac</i> <i>zomp</i>	to bathe tooth
	on	bond	mądry pączek	<i>mon-drih</i> <i>pon-chek</i>	wise doughnut
	oń		wziąć	<i>vzyon'ch'</i>	to take
	ohN	as in French bon	wąski wachać	<i>vohN-skee</i> <i>vohN-hach'</i>	narrow to niff

(continued)

TABLE 1-3 (continued)

Letter	Symbol	As in English	Polish Example	Pronunciation	Translation
ę	em	member	zęby tępy	<i>zem-bih</i> <i>tem-pih</i>	teeth blunt
	en	rent	ręce ręka	<i>ren-tse</i> <i>ren-ka</i>	hands hand
	eń		dziesięć	<i>dj'ye-sh'yen'ch'</i>	ten
	ehN	as in French vin	często gęsty	<i>czehN-sto</i> <i>gehN-stih</i>	often thick

The nasal ą and ę in the final position

At the end of a word, the nasal vowel **-ą** is pronounced close to the *an* in *fiance*. If you happen to speak French, the word *bon* as in *bon voyage* is very close as well. Remember not to say *n* at the end. In this book, **-ą** is presented as **ohN** in the pronunciations. Here are some examples:

- » **są** (*sohN*) (they are)
- » **idą** (*ee-dohN*) (they go/are going)

The nasal **-ę** in the final position of a word loses its nasal sound and is pronounced like the *e* in *yes*; you see *e* in the pronunciations. Here are some examples:

- » **imię** (*ee-mye*) (first name)
- » **idę** (*ee-de*) (I go/am going)

Searching for Stress and Blending Prepositions

Stress is the accent or emphasis you put on a syllable as you speak — you say that syllable more strongly or loudly than the rest of the word. When pronouncing most Polish words, you emphasize the second-to-last syllable in a word. Here are some examples:

- » **Polska** (*pol-ska*) (Poland)

- » **aparat** (*a-pa-rat*) (camera)
- » **dyskoteka** (*dih-sko-te-ka*) (disco)

Counting prepositions

Prepositions count as syllables of the words they join with, as if they were one word, so you place the stress accordingly:

- » **bez cukru** (*bes tsoo-kroo*) (without sugar): Three syllables in total, so you emphasize *tsoo*, which is the next-to-last one.
- » **dla nas** (*dla nas*) (for us): Here, you can see two syllables in total and, if you count from the end, the stress falls on *dla*, which is the second-to-last syllable.

A similar situation happens in the case of negative verbs. If you have **nie** followed by a one-syllable verb, the **nie** part is stressed:

- » **nie mam** (*n'ye mam*) (I don't have)
- » **nie spał** (*n'ye spaw*) (he wasn't asleep)



TIP

In the pronunciations, longer prepositions (consisting of more than just one letter) such as **dla**, **na**, **bez**, **ot**, and so on are spelled separately from the words they join, as in **od Marty** (*ot mar-tih*) (from Marta) and **na lotnisku** (*na lot-n'ee-skoo*) (at the airport). However, short prepositions like **z** and **w** are merged with the next word, as in **w pracy** (*fpra-tsih*) (at work) and **z Anglii** (*zan-glee*) (from England).

Placing unusual stress

The stress is placed on an unusual syllable — the third from last — in the following situations:

- » Nouns ending in **-yka** or **-ika**, which were originally taken from Latin or Greek:
 - **muzyka** (*moo-zih-ka*) (music)
 - **botanika** (*bo-ta-n'ee-ka*) (botany)
- » Numbers:
 - **czterysta** (*chte-rih-sta*) (400)
 - **siedemset** (*sh'ye-dem-set*) (700)



- **osiemset** (*o-sh'yem-set*) (800)
- **dziewięćset** (*dj'ye-vyen'ch'-set*) (900)
- » The first- and second-person plural in the past tense:
 - **lubiliśmy** (*loo-bee-lee-sh'mih*) (we liked)
 - **robiliście** (*ro-bee-lee-sh'ch'ye*) (you [plural, informal] did)

Emphasizing the second-to-last syllable in these verbs accounts for one of the most common sins against Polish grammar, and you may hear numerous native speakers stressing the wrong syllable because doing so has now become acceptable. Be aware that it still doesn't sound good, and don't let your ear pick up that habit! Read more about verb tenses in Chapter 2.

For verbs in *we* and *you* (plural) forms of the conditional mood, the stress falls on the fourth-from-last syllable:

- » **chcielibyśmy** (*hch'ye-lee-bihsh'-mih*) (we would like)
- » **moglibyście** (*mo-gee-bihsh'-ch'ye*) (you [plural] could)

Some Basic Phrases to Know

These are a few very basic phrases useful when taking your first steps into Polish:

- » **Nie rozumiem.** (*n'ye ro-zoo-myem.*) (I don't understand.)
- » **Słucham?** (*swoo-ham?*) (Pardon?/Excuse me?)
- » **Dziękuję.** (*dj'yen-koq-ye.*) (Thank you.)
- » **Przepraszam.** (*pshe-pra-sham.*) (I'm sorry/Excuse me.)
- » **Co to znaczy?** (*tso to zna-chih*) (What does it mean?)
- » **Jak się mówi po polsku . . . ?** (*yak sh'ye moo-vee po pol-skoo . . . ?*) (How do you say . . . in Polish?)