

Chapter 1

Introducing Polish

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

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

Spotting the Polish You Already Know

Polish borrows a number of words from English in many different areas, such as computer science, politics, technology, sport, economics and business. The borrowed words have either retained their original spelling or been adapted to the Polish spelling, but they're still easy to recognise (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)
- ✓ **budżet** (*bood-zhet*) (budget)
- ✓ **establishment** (*e-sta-blee-shment*) (establishment)
- ✓ **hotel** (*ho-tel*) (hotel)
- ✓ **interfejs** (*een-ter-feys*) (interface)
- ✓ **kawa** (*ka-va*) (coffee)
- ✓ **komputer** (*kom-poo-ter*) (computer)
- ✓ **kultura** (*kool-too-ra*) (culture)
- ✓ **marketing** (*mar-ke-teenk*) (marketing)

- ✓ **mecz** (*mech*) ([football] match)
- ✓ **menadżer** (*me-n̩-djer*) (manager)
- ✓ **park** (*park*) (park)
- ✓ **telefon** (*te-le-fon*) (telephone)

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-kt̩o-al-n'ye*) means *currently* or *presently* rather than *actually*
- ✓ **Data** (*da-ta*) means *date* not *data*
- ✓ **Ewentualnie** (*e-ven-too-al-n'ye*) is the English *possibly* rather than *eventually*
- ✓ **Hazard** (*ha-zart*) is *gambling* (which can be hazardous to your bank balance)
- ✓ **Konfident** (*kon-fee-dent*) doesn't translate to *confident* but rather to *an informer*
- ✓ **Ordynarny** (*or-dih-nar-nih*) is *vulgar* rather than *ordinary*
- ✓ Someone who is **sympatyczny** (*sihm-pa-tih-chnih*) in Polish is actually *nice* or *friendly*, but not *sympathetic*
- ✓ The Polish word **szef** (*shef*) means *boss*, not a *chef*, unless you say **szef kuchni** (*shef koo-hn'ee*) (head chef)
- ✓ And the one that can cause you quite a lot of embarrassment if misused: **klozet** (*kl̩o-zet*) is not the English *closet* but colloquially . . . *a toilet*

The Polish Alphabet: Reciting Your ABCs

Next to Polish words throughout this book, you can see their pronunciation in brackets. To make it easier for you to read and say the words, the pronunciations are split into syllables with a hyphen, such as (*al-fa-bet*). Try to say the underlined syllable more strongly, as it is 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.



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.

Table 1-1 shows all the Polish letters and how to say them in brackets (listen to audio track 1 to help you).

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>)	ż (<i>z'yet</i>)	ź (<i>zhet</i>)	



Although the Polish pronunciation may seem pretty daunting, it is in fact regular and once you memorise a couple of patterns, you'll soon notice that you can 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 just 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?) – formal, 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?)



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 yak bar-ba-ra*), **Ce jak Celina** (*tse yak tse-lee-na*) and so on.



If you're going to Poland, prepare a list of first names you can use to spell your own name so that you won'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*.



For the sake of simplicity, in pronunciation brackets I use **n** before *k* or *g*. Think of how you pronounce **nk** in the English word *bank*. Polish people say *nk* and *ng* in the exactly same way.

The following sections cover the consonants whose 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 pronunciation brackets, you'll see the symbol **ts** to indicate letter **c**, as in these examples:

- ✓ **cebula** (*tse-boQ-la*) (onion)
- ✓ **co** (*tso*) (what)
- ✓ **centrum** (*tseN-troom*) (city centre)

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 pronunciation brackets, *ch'* indicates **ć** and **ci**.



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.

Now, try the sound of these words:

- ✓ **ciepło** (*ch'ye-pwo*) (warm)
- ✓ **mówić** (*moQ-veech'*) (to speak, say)



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 will see a number of words where **ci** appears before a consonant or at the end of a word. This only happens 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**, **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 pronunciation brackets you'll see **ch** to represent **cz**. Here are some examples:

- ✓ **czarny** (*char-nih*) (black)
- ✓ **czas** (*chas*) (time)
- ✓ **wieczór** (*vye-choor*) (evening)

Dz

The pronunciation of **dz** is like the *ds* in *Leeds* or *goods* and is indicated by **dz** in the phonetic script. Practise the following words:

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

Dź and Dzi

Again, the English tongue is unfamiliar with the soft **dź** and **dzi**. Their pronunciation is softer than *je* in *jeans*. To represent them, you'll see **dj'** in the pronunciation brackets. 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.

Dź

When saying **dź**, think of both of the *g* sounds in the English word *Georgia* and you're in business. To represent **dź**, you'll see **dj** in the pronunciation brackets. You're now ready to practise 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*. Since you say both **h** and **ch** in the same way, in the pronunciation brackets you'll see **h** to indicate them both. Now, when practising this sound remember to breathe out gently:

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



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 pronunciation brackets, 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 pronunciation brackets – **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** will be marked as **w** in the phonetic script, as in these examples:

- ✓ **szkoła** (*shko-wa*) (school)
- ✓ **mały** (*ma-wih*) (small)
- ✓ **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 and, despite different spellings, they sound exactly the same. Again, they are 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* is 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 pronunciation brackets. 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 practise your *r*:

- ✓ **rok** (*rok*) (year)
- ✓ **rower** (*ro-ver*) (bike)
- ✓ **park** (*park*) (park)

Ś and Si

Ś and **si** sound exactly the same, despite their different spelling. Again, 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. I add an extra **y** to help you pronounce **ś** and **si** when followed by a vowel. Here are some examples:

- ✓ **siedem** (*sh'yē-dem*) (seven)
- ✓ **środa** (*sh'ro-da*) (Wednesday)
- ✓ **coś** (*tsosh'*) (something)
- ✓ **silny** (*sh'eel-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 pronunciation brackets, as in these examples:

- ✓ **szansa** (*shan-sa*) (chance)
- ✓ **szkoda** (*shko-da*) (shame, pity)
- ✓ **wasz** (*vash*) (your [plural])

W

The **w** is pronounced as *v* in *visa* and you'll see *v* in the pronunciation brackets to represent **w**, as in these examples:

- ✓ **Warszawa** (*var-sha-va*) (Warsaw)
- ✓ **woda** (*vo-da*) (water)
- ✓ **nazywam się** (*na-zih-vam sh'ye*) (My name is)

Ż and Zi

This is yet another pair of soft sounds that don'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 pronunciation brackets 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. Practise these examples:

- ✓ **żle** (*z'le*) (wrongly, badly, incorrectly)
- ✓ **zima** (*z'ee-ma*) (winter)
- ✓ **późno** (*poo-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 pronunciation brackets to indicate **ż** and **rz**. Practise with:

- ✓ **żart** (*zhart*) (joke)
- ✓ **rzeka** (*zhe-ka*) (river)
- ✓ **marzec** (*ma-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, you learned that *w* is pronounced as *v* as in **w Gdańsku** (*vgdan'-skoo*) (in Gdansk). However:

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.



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 wesoly**, is happy, as *yez d ve-so-wih*). You won't be surprised to know that in some 'special' situations these rules don't quite work.

Instead of going into too much detail (too much theory never helps!), 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* (*voo-tka*) and the *z* in **już ide**, *yoosh ee-de* (I'm just coming) as *sh* but as *zh* in **już dzwonię** (*yoozh dzvo-n'ye*) (I'm just calling) because doing so is just easier. In the pronunciation brackets throughout this book, you'll see many examples like this.



Instead of trying to memorise 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'll get. Watch Polish native speakers when they speak and you'll soon notice that they do not move their mouths as much as English speakers.

Here are all of the voiced consonants: **b, d, g, w, z, ź, dz, dź, ż/rz, dż**; and their silent equivalents are: **p, t, k, f, s, ś, c, ć, sz, 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* in *cat* and *Kate* is pronounced very differently. Polish vowels, on the other hand, are very pure and 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 phonetic script.

<i>Letter</i>	<i>Symbol</i>	<i>As in English</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Polish Example</i>
A a	A	apple		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	organisation	a short sound <i>o</i>	organizacja (<i>or-ga-n'ee-za-tsya</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 pretty 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 is somewhat complex and 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.

<i>Letter</i>	<i>Symbol</i>	<i>As in English</i>	<i>Polish Example</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Translation</i>
<i>ą</i>	<i>om</i>	tomato	kąpać	<i>kom-pač</i>	to bathe
			ząb	<i>zomp</i>	tooth
	<i>on</i>	bond	mądry	<i>mon-drih</i>	wise
			paćzek	<i>pon-chek</i>	doughnut
	<i>oń</i>		wziąć	<i>vz'yon'ch'</i>	to take
			<i>ohN</i>	as in French bon	wąski
wąchać	<i>vohN-hach'</i>	to sniff			
<i>ę</i>	<i>em</i>	member	zęby	<i>zem-bih</i>	teeth
			tępy	<i>tem-pih</i>	blunt
	<i>en</i>	rent	ręce	<i>ren-tse</i>	hands
			ręka	<i>ren-ka</i>	hand
	<i>eń</i>		dziesięć	<i>dj'ye-sh'yen'ch'</i>	ten
			<i>ehN</i>	as in French vin	często
gęsty	<i>gehN-stih</i>	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 pronunciation brackets. Here are some examples:

- ✓ *sa* (*sohN*) (they are)
- ✓ *ida* (*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'll see *e* in the pronunciation brackets. Here are some examples:

- ✓ *imie* (*ee-mye*) (first name)
- ✓ *ide* (*ee-de*) (I go/am going)

Searching for Stress and Blending Prepositions

Stress is the accent 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 emphasise the second from 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 tsu-kroo*) (without sugar): Three syllables in total hence you emphasise *tsu*, 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)



In the pronunciation brackets, longer prepositions (consisting of more than just one letter) such as **dla**, **na**, **bez**, **ot** and so on are spelt separately from the words they join, as in: **od Marty** (*ot mar-tih*) (from Marta) and **na lotnisku** (*na lot-n'ee-sko*) (at the airport). However, short prepositions like **z** and **w** are merged with the next word, as in **w pracy** (*fpra-tsh*) (at work) and **z Anglii** (*zan-gee*) (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:
 - **gramatyka** (*gra-ma-tih-ka*) (grammar)
 - **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-vye'n'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)



Emphasising 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 as it 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-glee-bihsh'-ch'ye*) (you [plural] could)

Some Basic Phrases to Know

These are a couple of 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-koo-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?)