

Russian Diction Guide

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I. General Description

The contemporary Russian alphabet consists of **33 letters, 10 vowels, 21 consonants** as well as a hard sign (ъ) and a soft sign (ь); the hard and a soft sign are not pronounced but affect the pronunciation of consonants that precede them. The soft sign indicates a palatalization of the preceding consonant and hard sign cancels whatever palatalization might normally come with the consonant or be induced by the vowel that follows.

Russian is mostly a phonetic language, meaning that each written letter corresponds to a single sound. Some Russian vowel differ in pronunciation according to word stress, while others retain a singular way of pronunciation. Many Russian consonants have both the palatized and the unpalatized form. Also, Russian consonants are subject to voicing and devoicing, ruled according to their relative proximity to the stressed syllable and other parameters of consonant adjustment. The exact rules of devoicing will be discussed later in this document. Additionally, Russian has several consonant clusters where the default phonetic pronunciation of each individual consonant is altered. The most common instances of such clusters will also be discussed.

Syllabification

Russian syllabification is a really ambiguous topic due to the existence of two legitimate and contradicting theories on the subject of syllable division. Both theories agree on the basics of the definition for syllable formation: a syllable is primarily formed by the vowel and each vowel forms its own syllable. However, they disagree in their approach to the distribution of consonants between the adjacent syllables in the middle of a word. The St. Petersburg linguistic canon holds to the traditional way of syllabic division, which was prevalent during the Soviet era. The main premise of this system is that syllabification is in congruence with morphology, i.e., parts of the words such as prefix, root, suffix and ending; two consecutive consonants generally belong to separate syllables; in the case of a cluster of three or more consonants, the division occurs according to convenience and convention of pronunciation. In the early 2000s, representatives of the Moscow linguistic school raised the argument in favor of following the rules governed by the phonetic properties of the sound-component of the word such as vowels, unpaired voiced consonants, paired voice and unvoiced consonants and unpaired unvoiced consonants. With this new way of thinking, the majority of Russian syllables would end with a vowel (the strongest entity on the sonic scale).

Although both competing theories of syllabification are in active use, the old (St. Petersburg) system is mostly taught in grammar school, and the new Moscow system is learned in honors classes and at the university level. Accordingly, this document will be using the latter, even though it is less familiar to the author. Another important argument in its favor is that it

relates to the crucial idea of singing from vowel to vowel and thus is a more accurate reflection of how we sing.

Here are the basic rules of syllabification according to E. I. Litnevskaya from her book “The Russian language: A Brief Theoretical Course for School Students” (Moscow, MGU, 2006)¹.

- 1) The Russian language consists of sounds which differ in their volumes, the strongest being its vowels. Vowels form the syllables and therefore are referred to as **syllable-forming**. A syllable consists of one or several sounds spoken on a single puff of air. The number of syllables in the word **is equal** to a number of vowels.

Во-да (water) [və 'da] *на-у-ка* (science) [nə 'u kə].

- 2) A syllable can consist of a single sound (a vowel). If a syllable consists of more than one sound it starts with a consonant.

То-чка (period) ['to tʃkə] *мо-шка* (fly) ['mo skə].

- 3) Syllables which end on a vowel are called **open** syllables; syllables ending on a consonant are called **closed** syllables. The majority of Russian syllables are open.

Яма (pit) ['ja mə] – open syllable;
сон (dream) ['son] – closed syllable.

Usually, closed syllables are formed at the end of the word. In the middle of the word, syllables end with vowels most frequently, while the following consonant or group of consonants belong to the next syllable. A closed syllable in the middle of a word can only be formed when the middle vowel is followed by two or more consonants the first of which is an **unpaired voiced consonants** (from the list: “й” [j], “п” [p] or [pʲ], “л” [l] or [lʲ], “м” [m] or [mʲ], “н” [n] or [nʲ]) All of these consonants are called **sonarnt**.

Двойка (two) ['dvoj kə] — й
рам-ка (frame) ['ram kə] — м
бул-ка (bread bun) ['bul kə] — л

- 4) Silent letters ь, ъ always belong with the preceding consonant.

Конь-ки (skates) [kənʲ 'ki] *подъ-езд* (entrance) [pəd jezɔ]

- 5) Consonant clusters which are pronounced as a single sound belongs to the consequent syllable.

-зж² as [ʒ:] *у-е-зжать* (to drive away) [u je ʒ:atʲ]
-тся/-ться [ts] *ви-ться* (curl) ['vi tsə]

- 6) Double consonants belong to the consequent syllable

Да-нный (given) ['da n:ij]

- 7) The letter 'й' (short i) pronounced as [j] is a sonar or unpaired voiced consonant and cannot form a syllable. It always belongs within the syllable with the previous vowel.

Чай-ка (seagull) ['tʃaj ka]
май (May) ['maj]

¹ Litnevskaya, E. I. *Rysskij Yajik: kratkinj teoreticheskij kurs dlja shkolnikov* [The Russian Language: A Brief Theoretical Course for School sStudents (Moscow, MGU, 2006)

² This cluster sounds like a double consonant and should be prolonged in singing.

- 8) If a syllable starts with **iotated** (having an initial glide) **vowel**, the initial glide stays with the vowel.

Ста-я (pack/gang) ['sta.jə]

- 9) These rules differ from the rules for division (when at end of a line) or identifying parts of the word such as root, prefix, suffix, and ending.

Fluency

Russian language has a large number of longer (four or more syllables) words. The average sentence is often longer than a typical English sentence and the speech delivery is smooth. Smaller words such as prepositions, particles and conjunctions are spoken conjointly with the adjacent longer words. In speech, particularly in poetic rhythmic speech, smaller words sometimes lose their stress and are pronounced as part of the preceding or subsequent word.

II. Vowels

Russian has 10 vowel letters 'а' [ɑ], 'у' [u], 'о' [o], 'ы' [ɨ], 'и' [i], 'э' [ɛ], 'я' [jɑ], 'ю' [ju], 'ё' [jo], 'е' [je]. The last four, 'я', 'ю', 'ё', 'е' contain an initial [j] glide which is either pronounced or has a palatalizing effect on the preceding consonant depending on the surrounding sounds and the placement of the letter in the word. These letters are referred as **iotated** vowels. Like in German, the words starting with a stressed vowel may be pronounced with an initial glottal stop [ʔ], although this is not a universal rule and the stop may be omitted.

The ten Russian vowels create five allophonic pairs and often listed as such:

Table: Russian Vowels

Palatalizes preceding consonant	И [i]	Е [je]	Я [jɑ]	Ё [jo]	Ю [ju]
Does not palatalize	Ы [ɨ]	Э [ɛ]	А [ɑ]	О [o]	У [u]

Each pair consists of one vowel that makes a preceding consonant palatalized and one that does not. (The rules of palatalization will be discussed later in the document.)

Allophony

Russian vowels are subject to considerable allophony due to **vowel reduction**. By definition, vowel reduction refers to changes in the acoustic quality of a vowels, which are related to changes in stress, sonority, duration, loudness, articulation, or position in the word and which are perceived as "weakening." In Russian, the level of vowel reduction is determined by the vowel's stress and proximity to the stressed syllable. Russian has many longer words (words

with four or more syllables). The unstressed vowels which are adjacent to the stressed syllable are pronounced with less reduction than the vowels that are two or more syllables removed from the stressed syllable. Russian phoneticians usually identify two levels of reduction in accordance with the proximity to the stress. If, for example, the stress in a four-syllable word falls on the first vowel, the second vowel of the word (thus, in the adjacent syllable) is transcribed as semi-reduced, while the last two are close or equivalent to the *schwa*. In diction for singing, the fully reduced vowel should be avoided in order to ensure clarity of understanding and attained the highest singing quality of the vowel. Thus, this author will use the stressed and the semi-stressed pronunciation of vowels only.

Stressed Vowels

Russian frontal vowels are more closed than their Italian counterparts, although not as closed as the French bright [i] and [e]. The [u] is more closed and further back than the Italian [u]. The [o] is somewhere between the American closed and open ‘o’ sounds. The [ɑ] is darker than the American and very close to the German pronunciation of the same sound. [ɨ] is unique for Russian. In general, Russian has a bigger range of movement between the front and back vowels than Italian.

The pair of vowels ‘y’ [y] and ‘ю’ [jy] have very similar sounds. In fact, a singer can get away with pronouncing [jy] as [ju]; yet ‘ю’ is always pronounced with more lip rounding and the tongue in slightly more forward position. The difference is distinguishable, at least to this writer, thus, [jy] will be used for ‘ю’ transcription.

Unstressed Vowels and Vowel Reduction

As in English, Russian vowels reduce their distinct quality when in the unstressed position. Russian is mostly phonetic language, which allows for high accuracy in spelling for most native speakers, it is vowel reduction that happens to be the most common cause for errors in orthography. Both [o] and [ɑ] (spelled with ‘a’ and ‘o’) and their iotated counterparts ‘я’ [ja] and ‘ё’ [jo] migrate toward the center of the mouth, to a phoneme that can be best labeled as [ɐ] or [jɐ]. Sometimes in speech, further reduction of the sound results in a neutral [ə], but, as noted above, this should be avoided in singing. Some Russian IPA specialists use the schwa to indicate any unstressed vowel; likely, they are motivated by the symbol’s familiarity to American readers. Unfortunately, the most common result is highly inaccurate, and obviously non-authentic for Russian stage speech sound. Russian reduced ‘a’ vowel is much closer to the ‘a’ allophones than version of the ‘e’ vowels which schwa represent, be it by the association of the character shape. Thus [ɐ] will be used for the purposes of this document. The symbol [ɐ] is not as familiar to the American IPA users, unless they use William Odom’s *German for Singers: A Textbook of Diction and Phonetics* (1981)³ which uses this symbol in a slightly different context. The sound which Odom indicates by using [ɐ] is very similar to what is actually used in Russian speech, despite the differences in its formation in German. On the other hand, some authors, such as Belov do not feel that the unstressed ‘a’ or ‘o’ is sufficiently different from the stressed ‘a’

³ Odom, William, and Benno Schollum. *German for Singers: A Textbook of Diction and Phonetics*. 2nd ed. New York: Schirmer Books, 1981.

form and use [a] for both the stressed and the unstressed forms of the sound. The size difference between the stressed and unstressed version of the ‘a’ used by Belov, where smaller version of the ‘a’ is used for the unstressed sounds, looks too similar and might produce really negligible difference in pronunciation. There also exists an argument for the usage of [ʌ] when indicating the unstressed ‘a’ sound. I would argue against this, because [ʌ] is in the back region of the vowel diagram, and it is essentially *not* a central vowel sound. Also, [ʌ] normally indicates a stressed sound (stressed ‘u’ in English), while the sound under discussion is an unstressed vowel. The last argument against [ʌ] is that this sound has more resemblance with the St. Petersburg dialect rather than that of Moscow, and it is the Moscow dialect that has become standard in Russian stage speech. Thus, this text will use [ɐ] for all unstressed ‘a’ and ‘o.’

In speech, other Russian vowel sounds such as [i], [e] and [ɛ] written with the letters ‘u’, ‘e’ and ‘э’ *also reduce their purity when in the unstressed position coming toward* a sound best denoted by [ɪ]. On occasion, one can hear this sound mutation in the singing of many a native singer. However, these occurrences should be not taken as a rule and the singer should strive to sing the unstressed vowel the way it would be sung in the stressed position in order to ensure understanding. An exception is when ‘u’ is preceded by a vowel, in which case it becomes the more open [ɪ] sound.

The letter ‘y’[u], when unstressed, usually migrates toward its more open allophone [ʊ]. ‘Ю’ [ju] and ‘Ы’ [ɨ] stay relatively unchanged whether stressed or unstressed and should be sung so for the clarity of understanding.

Stressed Vowels in Prepositions

As in many other languages, short prepositions are never stressed and when a one-syllable preposition contains a vowel, it is pronounced as if it were in an unstressed syllable. Other, longer prepositions retain their stressed as well as unstressed syllables. Here are some of the most common one-syllable prepositions containing the vowels ‘a’ or ‘o’ or ‘y’ (the transcription suppresses the unstressed pronunciation for each preposition).

Во (in) [vɐ]	ко (to) [kɐ]	под (under) [pɐd(t)]*
до (till) [dɐ]	на (on)[nɐ]	про (about) [prɐ]
за (over) [zɐ]	над (above) [nɐd(t)]*	по-над [pɐ nɐd (t)]*
из-за (because of) [iz:zɐ]	об (about) [ɐb(p)]*	у [ʊ]
из-под (from under) [iz-pɐd(t)]*.	от (from) [ɐt(d)]*	
о (about) [ɐ]	по (on) [pɐ]	

*The final paired consonance is determined by the initial consonant of the following word. See the rules of voicing and devoicing later in the chapter.

Exception: сквозь [skvozʲ]

Diphthongs

The Russian language forms two sonorities that can be qualified as diphthongs. Both involve the glide [j]: one in the first and the other in the second position. The first type is formed by each of the four iotated vowels ‘я’ [ja], ‘е’ [je], ‘ё’ [jo], ‘ю’ [ju], which are combinations of a glide [j] and a vowel sound. They are pronounced with the glide, when initial in the word, when after ‘ь,’ ‘ъ’ or after another vowel. In this case they can be considered diphthongs.

Ясень (ash-tree) [ˈjasʲenʲ]

However, when these letters are preceded by a palatalized consonant (any consonant in the same syllable that has a palatalized form) the glide should completely disappear. In fact, the presence of glides between a palatalized consonant and an iotated vowel is the most noticeable indication of an accent and foreignness for a non-Russian speaker.

There are a few borrowed words that start with the letter й [j].

Йога (joga) [ˈjogə]
йогурт (yogurt) [jogʊrt]

The second type of diphthong is formed by adding a semi-glide -й [j] after other vowels.

Ай (interjection) [aj]
ой (interjection) [oj]
эй (interjection) [ej]

However, Russian phoneticians identify ‘й’ as a consonant and therefore do not recognize the vowel+й sonority as a diphthong. In our understanding of the diphthong’s they might be labeled as such. In all other cases, stand-alone Russian vowels are never pronounced as diphthongs. Thus, the ability to pronounce Russian words without superfluous diphthongs (as with Italian) is a crucial topic in learning Russian diction and should be addressed very thoroughly.

Hiatus

A hiatus exists when two vowels are pronounced back-to-back. In Russian, each vowel creates its own syllable and none of the vowels combinations merge into a single sound. Thus, the normal rules of stressed or unstressed vowel pronunciation apply.

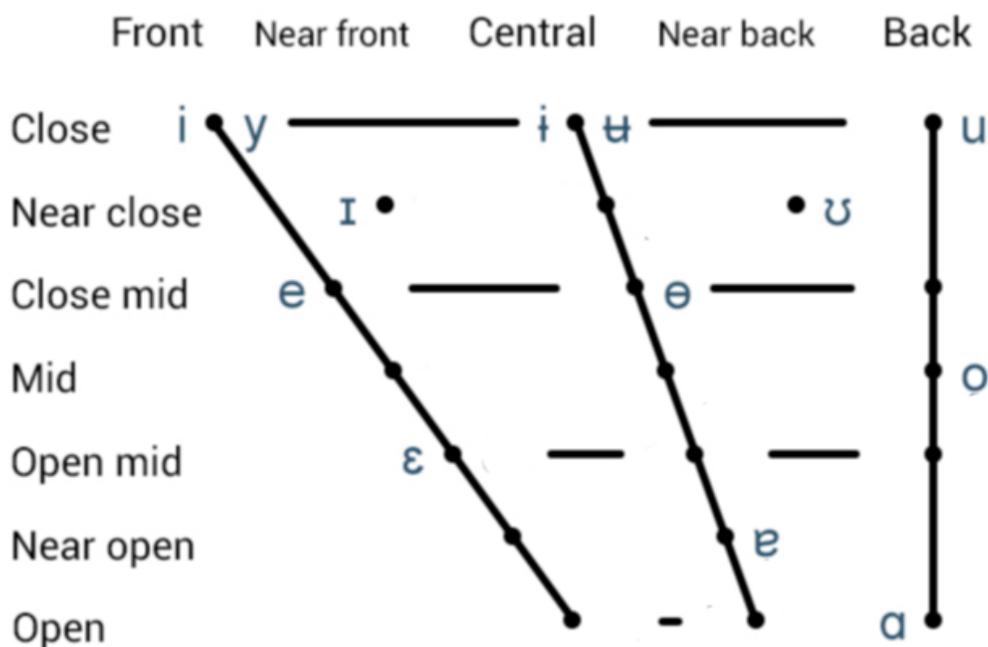
Аэропорт (airport) [ɐ ɛ rɐ ˈport]
поэт (poet) [pɐ ˈet]

If the second vowel in the pair is и a j-glide may occur, but is not required.

Мои (my, mine) [mɐ ˈi] or [mɐ ˈji]
Украина (fringe border) [ɐ ˈkraɪnɐ] or [ɐ ˈkrajinɐ]

Russian Vowel Chart and Summary Tables

The following chart has vowel sounds that are used in Russian Singing Language. Notice that conversational speech has a wider variety of sounds, particularly when vowels are in unstressed position. These vowel sounds would appear in the mid-central region of the vowel diagram. The following chart reflects sounds that are suitable for stage and singing diction and clarity of understanding. Notice a few differences between this figure and the original IPA chart above. There is no bright [a] sound. The [o] is moved toward the mid-back region between what would be the traditional placement of [o] and [ɔ]. Graph for [ɐ] is on the back side of the central line. The most central vowel of this diagram [ə] often accrue when native speakers pronounced letter 'ѐ' [jə] which at the onset of the vowel pronunciation is indeed a mix between 'o' and 'e.' However, while this sound is prolonged it becomes [o]. Thus, I chose not to use this graph in my IPA transcription, but put it on the vowel diagram.



Russian IPA Vowels Chart

The table below summaries general rules of pronunciation of Russian vowels.

Russian Vowels

Letter/Pronunciation in alphabet	Stressed	Unstressed	Exceptions
И, и [i]	[i] – usually [ɨ] – when following a hard/not palatalized consonant ж, ш, and ц	[i] – usually [ɨ] – when following a hard/not palatalized consonant ж, ш, and ц after another vowel stressed becomes [ɪ]	[ɪ] –in speech sometimes unstressed in all cases
Ы [ɨ] (never initial in the word except foreign names)	[ɨ] – front of the tongue behind lower teeth, sides of the tongue touching the molars	[ɨ] – no difference	
Е, е [jɛ]*	[je] – initial in the word, after another vowel/initial in the syllable, after a soft sign (ь), after a prefix ending with (ь) [e] – after palatalized consonants [ɛ] – between or following a hard/non-palatal consonants ж, ш, and ц.	[e] – in most cases [ɛ] – between or following a hard/non-palatal consonants Ж, Ш, and Ц. [ɪ] – after a stressed vowel [ɪ] in speech	[ɛ] in some borrowed words without palatalization of the previous consonant
Э, э [ɛ]	[ɛ] – always	[ɛ] – in speech [ɪ]	
А, а [ɑ]	[ɑ] – always	[ɐ] – always	sometimes one-syllable prepositions ending on ‘a’ pronounced as [ɐ]
Я, я [jɑ]*	[jɑ] – initial in the word, after another vowel/initial in the syllable, after a soft sign (ь), after a prefix ending with (ь)	[jɐ] – initial in the word, after another vowel/initial in the syllable, after a soft sign (ь), after a a prefix ending with (ь)	

	[ɑ] – after a palatalized consonant	[ɐ] – after a palatalized consonant	
О, о [o]	[o] – usually a more accurate symbol is [ɔ̞] (lowered), which is in between English open and closed [o].	[ɐ] – usually [o] – in dialects and for expressive emphases	
Ё, ё [jo]*	[jo] – initial in the word, after another vowel/initial in the syllable, after a soft sign (ь), after a prefix ending with (ъ) [o] – after a palatalized consonant [o]; sometimes transcribed as [ø] to show slightly more forward position of the tongue	Always stressed	
У, у [u]	[u] – usually [u] – before palatalized consonant 'ч,' 'щ' [tʃ] ex. чуть ['tʃutʃ], чувство ['tʃʉstvø] or 'ш' [ʃ]	[o] – usually	
Ю, ю [ju]*	very similar to [u], but with tongue in a more forward position [ju] – initial in the word, after another vowel/initial in the syllable, after a soft sign (ь), after a prefix ending with (ъ)	[u], in speech sometimes [ɪ], in singing it should retain the stressed vowel definition	
<p>Ѣѣ – the old Russian letter ‘ять’ [jatʲ]; sometimes used in sheet music printed up until early 20th century. It is pronounced as closed [je] or [e].</p> <p>ѣ - old Russian letter called decimal or dotted i. Sounded like [i] sometimes used in sheet music printed up until early 20th century.</p> <p>* The consonant preceding these vowels is subject to palatalization.</p>			

Russian Vowel Sounds

The following table summarizes the vowel sounds used in Russian singing language and lists their possible spelling.

IPA Symbol	Description	Stressed/ Unstressed	Letter of the alphabet	American English Comparison
[i]*	closed front unrounded vowel	Stressed	и	as in the English "feet" [fi:t], except shorter in length
[ɪ]	near-close near-front unrounded vowel	'и', 'е' unstressed in conversational speech 'и' after another vowel	и, е	More closed in Russian
[e]**	close-mid front unrounded vowel	stressed and unstressed	е	more closed in Russian
[ɛ]	open-mid front unrounded vowel	stressed and unstressed	е, э	more closed in Russian
[ɨ]	close central unrounded vowel	stressed and unstressed	ы, и	no equivalent
[ʉ]	close central rounded vowel "barred u".	stressed and unstressed	ю, у	very similar to [u] slightly rounder and more forward with a little mix of [ɨ]
[ɑ]	open/low back unrounded vowel	stressed	а, я	close to English 'ah,' but shorter
[ɐ]	near-open central vowel	unstressed	а, о, ё я	similar to [ʌ] but more forward more open; comparable to German suffix '-er'
[u]	closed-back vowel	stressed	у	pronounced with round slightly forward lips and space between molars; slightly more closed and back than Italian
[ʊ]	closed-back less rounded vowel	unstressed	у	the lips are more rounded in Russian version of the sound; there is less difference between the open and closed version of "y"; this sound is always unstressed
[o]	closed back rounded vowel	stressed	о	between open and closed 'o'

*The Vowel sounds are listed in order from front to back and from closed to open.
 The initial glide of the **iotated vowels is omitted in this table.

III. Consonants

Consonants Classification

Consonant phonemes										
		Labial		Dental, Alveolar		Post-alveolar	Palatal		Velar	
		hard	soft	hard	soft	hard	soft	Hard	soft	
Nasal		m	m ^j	n	n ^j					
Stop	voiced	b	b ^j	d	d ^j				g	g ^j
	voiceless	p	p ^j	t	t ^j				K	k ^j
Affricate				ts				tʃ ^j (tɕ)		
Fricative	voiced	f	f ^j	s	s ^j	ʃ (ʂ)		ʃ ^j (ɕ)*	h (x)*	h ^j
		v	v ^j	z	z ^j	ʒ (ʒ)*				
Approximant				l (ɭ)*	l ^j			j		
Trill					r ^j	r				

*Alternative graphs used in some sources on Russian IPA

Several Russian consonants, particularly sibilants, are pronounced in a slightly different manner from their English counterparts. Russian phonetics specialists use distinct symbols to identify these differences. Native Russian speaker will easily hear these differences as a foreign accent. Thus, it is important to identify and explain them. Yet, several of the symbols used by IPA phoneticians are unfamiliar to American singers versed in Italian, German and French IPA. Thus, the familiar substitutions will be used were it possible to avoid confusion with an adequate explanation.

The 21 consonant letters of the Russian alphabet are ‘б’, ‘в’, ‘г’, ‘д’, ‘ж’, ‘з’, ‘й’, ‘к’, ‘л’, ‘м’, ‘н’, ‘п’, ‘р’, ‘с’, ‘т’, ‘ф’, ‘х’, ‘ц’, ‘ч’, ‘ш’, ‘щ’, ‘м’, ‘н’, ‘п’, ‘р’, ‘с’, ‘т’, ‘ф’, ‘х’, ‘ц’, ‘ч’, ‘ш’, ‘щ’ and ‘у’. Russian distinguishes **soft** (palatalized) and **hard** (unpalatalized or plain) consonants, thus majority of the consonants form two allophonic sounds.

The following table lists all the consonants in alphabetical order. Since some of the Russian consonants are unfamiliar or misleading for the English-language reader, the top line of the table list consonants in capital letters, and the third line in italics.

	Б	В	Г	Д	Ж	З	Й	К	Л	М	Н	П	Р	С	Т	Ф	Х	Ц	Ч	Ш	Щ
	б	в	г	д	ж	з	й	к	л	м	н	п	р	с	т	ф	х	ц	ч	ш	щ
	<i>б</i>	<i>в</i>	<i>г</i>	<i>д</i>	<i>ж</i>	<i>з</i>	<i>й</i>	<i>к</i>	<i>л</i>	<i>м</i>	<i>н</i>	<i>п</i>	<i>р</i>	<i>с</i>	<i>т</i>	<i>ф</i>	<i>х</i>	<i>ц</i>	<i>ч</i>	<i>ш</i>	<i>щ</i>
I P A	[b]	[v]	[g]	[d]	[ʒ]	[z]	[j]	[k]	[l]	[m]	[n]	[p]	[r]	[s]	[t]	[f]	[h]	[ts]	[tʃ ^j]	[ʃ]	[ʃ ^j]

Palatalization

The majority of Russian consonants can be palatalized. Palatalized, or soft, consonants, most of which are denoted by the superscript 'j', [j], are pronounced with the body of the tongue raised toward the hard palate. Palatalization or lack thereof is determined by the vowel or denoted by the soft and hard sign 'ь' 'Ь' following the consonant. The consonants 'б', 'в', 'г', 'д', 'з', 'к', 'л', 'м', 'н', 'п', 'р', 'с', 'т', 'ф', and 'х', become palatalized when they are followed by an iotated vowel (vowel sound containing a glide), 'е,' 'я,' 'ё,' 'ю,' vowel 'и,' or the soft sign 'ь'. The hard sign 'ь' is usually inserted between a consonant capable of palatalization and an iotated vowel in order to cancel palatalization.

б	в	г	д	з	к	л	м	н	п	р	с	т	ф	х
[b]	[v]	[g]	[d]	[z]	[k]	[l]	[m]	[n]	[p]	[r]	[s]	[t]	[f]	[h]
[bʲ]	[vʲ]	[gʲ]	[dʲ]	[zʲ]	[kʲ]	[lʲ]	[mʲ]	[nʲ]	[pʲ]	[rʲ]	[sʲ]	[tʲ]	[fʲ]	[hʲ]

Effect of the Vowels on Palatalization

The following table lists Russian allophonic vowel pairs and shows their effect on the preceding consonant's palatalization. Each pair of examples shows the contrast in pronunciation and can be used as an exercise for students learning Russian Diction.

Consonant is unpalatalized	Consonant is palatalized	Examples
Ы	и	мы [mɨ:], мир [mʲir]
Э	е	тэ [tɛ:], те [tʲe]
А	я	мал [mal], мял [mʲal]
О	ё	мол [mol], мёл [mʲol]
У	ю	пну [pnu:], пню [pʲnʲu]
Ь	ь	въезд [ˈvʲezd], кровь [krɔvʲ]

Below is the table with examples for each palatalized/unpalatalized pairs of consonants:

Paired	Hard		Soft	
Before 'а', 'о', 'у', 'ы', 'э' 'ь'– unpalatalized/hard. 'и,' 'е,' 'ё', 'ю', 'я,' 'ь' – palatalized/soft.	бук (beech) [buk]	б [b]	[bʲ]	бег (run) [bʲeg]
	вол (ox) [vol]	в [v]	[vʲ]	висок (temple) [vʲisok]
	год (year) [got]	г [g]	[gʲ]	гид (guide) [gʲid]
	дом (house) [dom]	д [d]	[dʲ]	день (day) [dʲenʲ]
	зал (hall) [zal]	з [z]	[zʲ]	земля (earth) [zʲemʲlʲa]
	кот (cat) [kot]	к [k]	[kʲ]	кит (whale) [kʲit]
	лом (crowbar) [lom]	л [l]	[lʲ]	лис (fox) [lʲis]
	мак (poppy) [mak]	м [m]	[mʲ]	мера (measure) [mʲerɐ]
	нос (nose) [nos]	н [n]	[nʲ]	нёс (carried) [nʲos]
	парк (park) [park]	п [p]	[pʲ]	пир (feast) [pʲir]
	рубль (rouble) [rubʲ]	р [r]	[rʲ]	рис (rice) [rʲis]
	сом (catfish) [som]	с [s]	[sʲ]	сено (hay) [ˈsʲe nɐ]
	тон (tone) [ton]	т [t]	[tʲ]	тень (shade) [tʲenʲ]
	фон (background) [fon]	ф [f]	[fʲ]	фен (blow dryer) [fʲen]
	халва halva [həl'va]	х [h]	[xʲ]	химия (chemistry) [hʲimʲija]
Unpaired	ж [ʒ], ш [ʃ], ц [ts]		ч [tʃ], щ [ʃʲ], й [j]	

The palatalized version of each consonant is pronounced with the middle of the tongue slightly raised and more forward compared with the unpalatalized position. The resulting sound is slightly softer in regular speech and, therefore, sometimes referred to as **soft (soft consonant)**. Some singers and Russian IPA specialist choose to use the underneath comma [ˌ] to show palatalization rather than the superscript ‘j’ [ʲ], more the norm among phoneticians. This is probably done in effort to avoid a glide substitution of the palatalization between the palatalized consonant and the following vowel, which many English speakers do. **It is important to understand that the superscript ‘j’ [ʲ] is a sign of consonant placement (palate) and NOT a glide.** The trick here is to practice saying the palatalized consonant separately without a vowel, find the correct placement of the tongue and only then add the vowel, thus avoiding the glide.

Palatalized and unpalatalized consonant sounds come in pairs. The consonant letter itself does not receive any distinction with regard to palatalization. The correct pronunciation is determined by the letter that follows the consonant in question. There are 15 consonants that can change palatalization. The remaining six consonants of the Russian language exist only in palatalized form *й* [j], *й* [ʲ], *ч* [tʃ] or unpalatalized *и* [ɪ], *ц* [ts], *ж* [ʒ].

Voicing and Devoicing

One of the features of Russian language is voicing and devoicing of the consonants. This is a manner of sound assimilation, in the process of which a consonant sonority is substituted with its voiced/unvoiced counterpart. This feature also exists in German in very similar instances.

Bellow, the voiced and unvoiced consonants are listed in pairs. In Russian language manuals they are referred as paired consonants.

Voiced	Voiceless
б [b]	п [p]
в [v]	ф [f]
г [g]	к [k] (rarely h) [h]
д [d]	т [t]
ж [ʒ]	ш [ʃ]
з [z]	с [s]

A voiced consonant is pronounced as its voiceless pair when it is ultimate in the word, or when it is followed by another voiceless consonant. It is also pronounced as its voiceless pair when the subsequent word starts with a voiceless consonant and the two words are pronounced without a pause. A voiceless consonant is pronounced as its voiced pair, when it is followed by a voiced consonant.

Double Consonant Clusters

Double consonants occur relatively rarely. Many of the words with double consonants have foreign origin or are personal pronouns. The rule of pronunciation for double consonants is similar to German: the consonant sound is prolonged. At the same time, the doubling is not as imperative as it is in Italian for it will not differentiate the word’s meaning.