

Pronunciation and Phonetics
Guidelines for Russian
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SECTION ONE

Basic Vowels in Russian

Keep in mind that the ten vowel letters of Russian represent five basic vowel sounds:

hard	soft	
series	series	phoneme
ы	и	/i/
э	е	/e/
а	я	/a/
о	ё	/o/
у	ю	/u/

You may sometimes hear the “soft series” vowels called “soft vowels”, but this is not really the case. Softness is a matter of a difference of pronunciation in the preceding consonant (see

below). The soft series vowels are just a way of spelling these additional consonantal sounds in Russian. Qualitatively, we are dealing with identical vowel sounds regardless of the character used to spell them with the exception¹ of и and ы, which do have a difference in quality in their pronunciation.

For endings, keep in mind that hard stems and soft stems will have the following correspondences: а/я, у/ю, ы/и, but о/е (or о/ё if stressed). And that frequently there is an alternation between е/ё when it is a matter of unstressed/stressed. This corresponds to the pronunciation rule that you only pronounce о/ё with their full sound when they are stressed, otherwise, vowel reduction takes place.

Soft series vowels and j-glides

In word initial position or after vowels or ь/ъ, the soft series vowels have a j-glide sound (like the Engl *y* in *yelp*, *yonder*, *yo*, *yule*, etc.) preceding them. The only exception is that и is not preceded by a j-glide in initial position, but does have one after vowels or ь/ъ (as in мой 'my' Npl, воин 'warrior', статья 'article' Gsg).

¹ It's very difficult to say *always* or *never* about anything in Russian. However, I can confidently say that in any domain in Russian there is *always* an exception and there is *never* a smooth, orderly, simple rule. Russian is, by and large, a very structured and orderly language, but there are always exceptions!

Consonants: Voiced/Voiceless

Voicing refers to the presence (voiced sounds) or absence (voiceless or devoiced sounds) of vocal cord vibration when you produce a particular sound. Cover your ears with your hands and pronounce the English sounds /s/ and /z/ and now pronounce /t/ and /d/. You'll notice a loud buzzing sound in your head with /z/ and /d/. These are the voiced sounds. Now, pronounce these sounds again and notice that your tongue and lips don't do anything different when pronouncing /s/ and /z/ or when pronouncing /t/ and /d/. The only (or at least the main) distinction between these two sounds is the presence or absence of vocal cord vibration. In Russian there are 6 paired voiced/voiceless sounds that work this way; only vocal cord vibration distinguishes the sounds. Try to pronounce all of them with your hands over your ears and hear the differences. In addition, there are 4 voiceless, but unpaired consonants and 4 voiced, but unpaired consonants. Also, all the vowels are voiced. Vowel sounds always use vocal cord vibration unless we whisper (try that out too!).

Paired		Unpaired
Voiced/Voiceless		Voiced/Voiceless
б	п	х
в	ф	ц
г	к	щ
д	т	ч
ж	ш	л
з	с	м
		н
		р

Keep in mind that final consonants are devoiced, so б > п (хлеб), д > т (го́род), etc. in pronunciation, but not in writing². Also, keep in mind that clusters of consonants together will either be all voiced or all voiceless depending on the quality of the final consonant in the group (футбо́л [фудбо́л], экза́мен [эгза́мен], просмо́ла [про́зьба], водо́ка [во́тка]). Prepositions are considered part of the word that follows and are also subject to these rules: в теа́тр [фтеа́тр], в шко́лу [фшко́лу]. The exception to the cluster rule is в, which will devoice in a cluster, but which will not cause voicing (в кино́ [фкино́], but до свидáния [досвидáния]).

² The only place where devoicing is spelled in Russian is when voiced prefixes combine with a voiceless root, e.g., без- becomes бес- when combined with a voiceless initial root consonant. Some examples include: бесплатно (без ‘without’ плат ‘pay’ < платить ‘pay’, but безопасный ‘safe’ < без ‘without’ + опасный ‘dangerous’ or происходит/произойти ‘take place, happen’ with prefixes про and из).

SECTION TWO

Hard and Soft Consonants

You have learned that Russian has “hard” and “soft” consonants, but you may still be at a loss as to what this means. Hard and soft are metaphors for describing these Russian sounds, so don’t be surprised you have no natural instincts about what exactly is hard or soft in a particular sound. The hardness and softness of a consonant refer to the quality of pronunciation for that consonant. We also refer to this phenomenon as *palatalization* and talk about *non-palatalized* (= hard) and *palatalized* (= soft) sounds. This description is more useful in the sense that you make the soft/palatalized sounds by raising the mid part of your tongue up to the palate in order to palatalize/soften the sound. We talk about Russian softness/palatalization as “secondary palatalization” because you still make the sound the way you do for the hard variety³, but you include an additional element of palatalization by raising the middle of your tongue to the palate.

For consonants with hard and soft varieties, there are two ways to pronounce the consonant based on the environment you find it in (what vowels or other consonants occur after it). For some consonants, there is only a hard variety or only a soft variety, but 12 consonants are paired for hardness/softness with all vowels and sometimes in word final position and 3 more

³ The sounds р/рь and л/ль are exceptions. They are quite different in the method of pronunciation, but the soft рь and ль are still made with ample palatalization with the tongue.

consonants (к, г, х) are soft when followed by и or е; but hard when followed by а/о/у, Keep in mind the spelling rules, you cannot write ы, я, ю after г, к, х.

Paired

Hard	Soft	Examples
д	дь	д, дь, да, дэ, до, ды, ду — vs. — дь, дя, де, дё, ди, дю
т	ть	etc.
з	зь	
с	сь	
н	нь	
б	бь	
п	пь	
в	вь	
ф	фь	
м	мь	
р	рь	
л	ль	

Others

г	ги, ге	г, га, го, гу — vs. — ги, ге
к	ки, ке	к, ка, ко, ку — vs. — ки, ке

х хи, хе х, ха, хо, ху — vs. — хи, хе

Keep in mind that soft consonants will be followed by a soft series vowel or the soft sign (or sometimes consonants in a cluster with the final consonant being soft). Otherwise, you may assume that a consonant is hard⁴.

Russian Cyrillic uses these 15 consonant characters with the 10 vowel characters and the hard and soft signs rather than having 27-30 consonant characters. Otherwise, you'd have about 41 letters to learn in the Russian Cyrillic alphabet rather than 33, but do keep in mind that hardness and softness is about the consonants, not about the vowels.

⁴ You may have noticed that the hard sign is fairly rarely used (съесть, подыхать). Prior to the orthographic (i.e., spelling) reforms after the Russian Revolution, there were some additional letters in use and all words ending in a consonant either had a soft sign ь or a hard sign ъ at the end. After the reforms, the decision was made to assume that consonants not marked for softness are hard. In the old system, стол and город, were written столъ and городъ and снег looked like снѣгъ with a different variety of e, the so-called *jat'*: ѣ. This e-sound is one that didn't become ё when stressed, so you can tell where this once was in words such as снег, место, хлеб, etc. (снѣгъ, мѣсто, хлѣбъ). Additionally, what we now call the твердый знак (ѣ) and the мягкий знак (ь) were short vowels, something like ĭ and ŷ.

3 Spelling Rules

In case you've forgotten them, refresh your memory regarding the three spelling rules (you need to know these rules to correctly choose endings in nouns, adjectives, and verbs)

7-letter rule

1. Don't write **ы** but **и** after г, к, х, ж, ч, ш, щ.

8-letter rule

2. Don't write **я** but **а** and not **ю** but **у** after г, к, х, ж, ч, ш, щ, ц.

5-letter rule

3. Don't write unstressed **о**, but **е** after ж, ч, ш, щ, ц.

	velar sounds	husher sounds	
7 и not ы	г к х	ж ч ш щ	
8 а not я у not ю	г к х	ж ч ш щ	ц
5 ó or е not о		ж ч ш щ	ц

Consonants that are always hard

ж, ш, ц are always hard

There is no variation in pronunciation depending on the following vowel (жи, ши are hard, so the vowel is pronounced as ы) or even the presence of the soft sign (ты-form of verbs -ешь/-ёшь/-ишь).

Consonants that are always soft

ч, щ, й are always soft

There is no variation in pronunciation depending on the following vowel (ча, ща are soft, the vowel is part of the spelling rules).

Origins of soft consonants

The palatalized consonants have their origins in several historical sound changes over the history of Russian. The vowels sounds /i/ and /e/ made in the front part of your mouth as well as the glide sound /j/ caused these changes over several rounds during the history of Russian. In one early sound change, к, г, х gave rise to ч, ж, ш when followed by an и or е or а й. In another round of changes, к, г, х gave rise to ц, зь, сь. Another change brought about alternations of с/ш, з/ж, т/ч, д/ж, д/жд, т/щ, ст/щ, ск/щ and the labial sounds б/бл, п/пл, в/вл, ф/фл, and м/мл. Originally all of these sounds were soft, but ж, ш, and ц have hardened over time. You'll notice

that historical softenings/palatalizations are what yielded all of the sounds we call “hushers” and that these sounds are involved in all of the spelling rules. Eventually, almost all consonant sounds that occurred before и, е, and ь developed a secondary soft/palatalized pronunciation. When other changes in the language occurred that led to the loss of the vowels ь and ъ, there were new environments for hard and soft sounds to occur in and the system of paired hard/soft consonants came to the fore. As you can imagine, the full history of these changes is much longer and more involved!

Hard and Soft Consonants are Different!

We say that palatalization is *phonemic* in Russian, meaning that hard and soft consonants are significantly different and can change the meaning of words. For instance, брат with hard т is ‘brother’, but брать with soft ть is ‘take’. The word мороз with hard з is ‘frost, freezing weather’ and морозь with soft зь is the imperative of the verb ‘freeze’ as in the Russian folk song, “Ой мороз, мороз! Не морозь меня!” ‘O frost, frost! Don’t freeze me!’.

Palatalization: Theory vs. Practice

This is enough to alert you to the phenomenon of palatalization and to give you an inkling of what is involved in the soft sounds. We’ll go into more detail with each of the hard/soft groups as we continue. For now, listen to Russian recordings and listen for the differences!

SECTION THREE

Stress in Russian

There is only one stressed syllable in normal Russian words, no matter how long the words grow. The stressed syllable is the loudest, longest, most prominent syllable in the word. Volume and energy grow towards the peak of the stressed syllable and decay rapidly afterwards in preparation for the next word and the next peak. Stress movement is limited to certain patterns (see the handout on stress patterns in Russian), but the stress can occur on any syllable of a given word, so you have to learn the stress (and possible shifts if any) when you learn new words.

Some examples of Russian word stress:

1-syllable: де́нь, сто́, зря́, etc.

2-syllables: ме́сто, го́род, кни́га, ста́тья, ста́рик, окно́

3-syllables: че́модан, мо́локо, телефо́н, ва́рвары, слу́шает, же́нщина, учи́тель, оши́бка, суббо́та, etc.

4-syllables: за́втракаю, слу́шатели; францу́женка, нахо́дится, по́нравится, краси́вица; рома́нтичный, антро́полог, занима́ться, нахо́дится; преподава́ть, позавче́ра, виолонче́ль, коло́кола

Longer words with 5 (эконо́мика), 6 (зараба́тывают ‘they earn’), and 7 (преподава́тельница ‘teacher’) syllables are not uncommon though! Here are some of the most extreme examples in the language:

8-syllables: достопримеча́тельности ‘the sights (for tourists)’

10-syllables: человеконенави́стничество ‘misanthropy’

Recall that Russian prepositions are considered part of the following word for stress and voicing assimilation.

Russian Vowels

Recall that Russian has five basic vowels represented by 10 letters⁵. Keep in mind that the ten vowel letters of Russian represent five basic vowel sounds:

hard series	soft series	phoneme
ы	и	/i/
э	е	/e/
а	я	/a/
о	ё	/o/
ы	ю	/u/

	Front	Central	Back
High	и	ы	у/ю
Mid	э/е		о/ё
Low		а/я	

⁵ Really only nine if you keep in mind that ё is almost never indicated outside of dictionaries and materials for language learners.

Vowel Reduction

The high vowels do not change their overall quality when not in stressed position, although they do lack the other qualities associated with the strong word stress (loud, long, etc.). The other Russian vowel sounds reduce, i.e., change the quality of their sound, when they do not form the stressed syllable.

и and ы

The high vowels и and ы do not reduce when not stressed. Although и and ы are considered the same phoneme /i/, they do have quite a different pronunciation, ы is high but more central in the mouth than и. Russian и occurs initially and after soft consonants, ы occurs after hard consonants. Curiously, this also means that since prepositions are considered part of the following word for pronunciation, that what is written и will sound like ы after hard prepositions, e.g., в Индии [вЫ́ндии], в Ита́лии [вЫта́лии]. With prefixes you'll see this spelled out, e.g., игра́ть/сыгра́ть 'play'. Also the consonants ж and ш that are always hard will be followed by ы in pronunciation, even though и is written, e.g., переживе́т 'will survive', шить 'sew'.

y and ю

The high back vowels y and ю do not reduce. When y/ю is surrounded by soft consonants, it will have a rounded quality to it, similar to French *u* or German *ü*, but this is a finer point and is not a frequent environment. Examples: чуть ‘little bit’, люблю ‘I love’.

Reduction of a and o

When stressed, Russian a and o have their full quality [a] and [o]. Russian stressed o is highly rounded, i.e., pronounced with rounded lips. Immediately before the stressed syllable, a and o sound like [a]⁶. After the stress and more than one syllable before the stress, a and o sound like the schwa sound [ə] (like Engl *uh*, *nut*, and the second vowel in *senate*).

The tonic syllable is another term for the stressed syllable. Note the reduction of a and o in pretonic, tonic, and posttonic positions.

vowel	pre-pretonic, etc.	pretonic	tonic	posttonic, etc.
a	ə	a	a	ə
o	ə	a	o	ə

⁶ Sometimes this is indicated with [ʌ] in phonetic transcription to distinguish pretonic a from tonic a, which is longer, louder, more prominent when stressed.

An exception to the pre-pretonic pronunciation is when a or o occurs in initial position, where it is not reduced any further than to [a]: ананáс [ананáс], олигарх [алигáрх].

Try these examples:

арбу́з, антра́кт, глаза́, сканда́л, ка́кой, аванга́рд, катастро́фа, карава́н, парадóкс, бараба́н, колокола́, она́, оно́, окно́, о́кна, один, рома́н, вокза́л, гото́в, вопро́с, молоко, таракан, го́род, городá, города́, голова́, го́лову, космона́вт, о́стров, острова́

Reduction of э and е

The reduction of э/е is less complicated than for а and о. Stressed э/е is pronounced [ɛ]. Both pretonic and posttonic э/е reduces to и. Stressed э/е followed by a soft consonant is pronounced [e], e.g. е́ст [jést] vs. е́сть [jés'tʲ], э́то [étə] vs. э́ти [ét'i], Ле́на [l'ɛnə] vs. о Ле́не [al'én'i]

Try these examples:

телефо́н, отве́т, отве́тите, бе́рег, на берегу́, берега́, не́бо, небеса́, сентя́брь, в сентя́бре, снег, рестора́н

Reduction of ě

When ě is stressed, it is the vowel sound o, preceded by a soft consonant. Just as with o, it only receives the full pronunciation when stressed. When unstressed, ě becomes e and reduces as e does. When ě is written, it serves to mark the stressed syllable, rather than ě́.

Try these examples:

несёт, живёт, читает, о́зеро, озёра, жена́, жёны

Reduction of Russian я

When fully stressed, я is pronounced like a, with a preceding soft consonant or a j sound if in initial position or preceded by another vowel or а ъ/ъ. When not under stress, я reduces like e/э before the stress and after the stress it reduces like e/э unless it is in a standard ending (nouns, adjectives, verbs), where it reduces like a/o.

When surrounded by palatalized consonants and under stress⁷, the [a] sound will raise up to become an [æ] (as in Engl *cat*, *adder*, *snap*, etc.).

⁷ You'd be under stress too if you were all surrounded by palatalized consonants.

So, this all means...

мя́со [m'ásə], говоря́т [gəvar'át], статья́ [stat'já], моя́ [majá] [Full stress, pronounced like a.]
мясник [m'is'n'ík] [Before the stress, reduces like e/э.]
язы́к [jizýk] [Before the stress, reduces like e/э.]
ме́сяц [m'és'its] [This is just after the stress, not part of an ending, so reduces like e/э.]
неде́ля [n'id'él'ə] [Part of a grammatical ending, so reduces like o/a.]
про́сят [prós'ət] [Part of a grammatical ending, so reduces like o/a.]
пя́ть [p'æt'] [Stressed and surrounded by soft consonants.]
vs. пяты́й [p'átyj] [Stressed, but not surrounded by soft consonants.]
vs. без пяти́ [b'isp'iti] [Surrounded by soft consonants, but not stressed.]

So, how would you pronounce я in the following words from Картина?

вре́мя, гляде́ть, го́ря, грязы́ (cf. грязь), грязным, кры́льями, маля́р, моя́, наду́лся,
обваля́лась, по́днял, сви́нья, я

SECTION FOUR

Hard and Soft Consonants Revisited

Keeping in mind that the soft consonants arose in the environment followed by a front vowel (/i/, /e/) or a /j/ (called *jot*, the *j* here sounds like English consonant *y* in *yelp*⁸). You can kind of think of this as the front vowel or *j* rubbing off on the consonant and forcing it to adapt to the conditions of the front vowel or *j*. Some groups of consonants succumb to these demands better than others, based on where you make these sounds in your mouth. The dental sounds (you make them with the blade⁹ of the tongue against the teeth) are the most compatible with palatalization because they are very close to the palate in your mouth. The labials (you make them with your lips) include bilabials (you make them with both upper and lower lips) and labiodentals (you make them with your lower lip and top teeth) and can be palatalized in Russian, but the acoustics

⁸ The consonants /j/ and /w/ are called glides. You might notice they are not the most consonantal of consonants. They are somewhere between vowels and consonants. On the vowel-y side of things, /j/ becomes the vowel /i/ and /w/ becomes the vowel /u/. Historically, the /w/ side of things became /v/ in Russian, so you'll sometimes see alternations like in the *ова* verbs where *ова~y* alternate.

⁹ The blade of the tongue is just behind the tip of the tongue.

of labials and labiodentals is not very compatible with the notion of palatalization. Likewise, velar sounds (you make them at the back of your mouth with the back of your tongue against the velum) are further away from the palate and don't deal well with palatalization (so you'll notice that *г/к/х* don't occur with the vowels *o, a, y* in Russian, only with *и* and *е*¹⁰).

Sometimes beginners are encouraged to distinguish the hard consonants from the soft consonants by pronouncing the soft consonants with a following *y*-sound¹¹, so *тог* would be [tót] and *тѣря* would be [tyotyə], but you really don't want to get into a habit of this. Russian *ть* is a distinct, soft consonant, not *т + ѣ*. We do sometimes have sequences of consonant plus [j]¹² and we'll see how to deal with that below. When you make most of the soft consonants, think of positioning your tongue/teeth/lips as for the hard consonant, but at the same time raise the middle part of your tongue towards the roof of your mouth (the palate) and broaden your lips into a smile. If you think of smiling when you say soft consonants, this will help you.

¹⁰ This statement is almost true. There is a verb *ткать* 'weave' conjugated *тку, ткѣшь, ткут*.

¹¹ I'm going to use Engl *y* here because I want to make sure you don't confuse [j] with the sound in English *judge* and also I don't want to dignify this approach by using proper phonetic symbols! :)

¹² Now I'm back to the real symbols.

Here is a guide to the dentals, labials, and velars with some notes where these sounds differ from their English counterparts.

Dentals				
Hard	Soft	Description	Hard Notes	Soft Notes
д	дь	voiced dental stop	blade of tongue against teeth	blade of tongue against teeth, mid tongue to palate, smile
т	ть	voiceless dental stop	blade of tongue against teeth; no puff of air when you release	blade of tongue against teeth, mid tongue to palate, smile; no puff of air when you release
з	зь	voiced dental fricative	blade of tongue against teeth	blade of tongue against teeth, mid tongue to palate, smile
ц	ць	voiceless dental fricative	blade of tongue against teeth	blade of tongue against teeth, mid tongue to palate, smile
н	нь	voiced dental nasal stop	blade of tongue against teeth	blade of tongue against teeth, mid tongue to palate, smile

Labials				
Hard	Soft	Description	Hard Notes	Soft Notes
б	бь	voiced bilabial stop		mid tongue to palate, smile
п	пь	voiceless bilabial stop	no puff of air when you release	no puff of air when you release
в	вь	voiced labiodental stop		mid tongue to palate, smile
ф	фь	voiceless labiodental stop		mid tongue to palate, smile
м	мь	voiced bilabial nasal stop		mid tongue to palate, smile

Velars				
Hard	Soft	Description	Hard Notes	Soft Notes
г	ги, ге	voiced velar stop		mid tongue to palate, smile
к	ки, ке	voiceless velar stop	no puff of air when you release	mid tongue to palate, smile; no puff of air when you release
х	хи, хе	voiceless velar fricative	make sure you get the clearing your throat sound	make sure you get the clearing your throat sound; mid tongue to palate, smile

Distinctions of the type та—тя—тья¹³

When a soft consonant is followed by *jot* (the й-sound), then we can hear a third distinction between a hard consonant, a soft consonant, and a consonant cluster consisting of soft consonant plus *jot*.

Try pronouncing these:

да	дя	дья
та	тя	тья
за	зя	зья
са	ся	сья
на	ня	нья
ба	бя	бья
па	пя	пья
ва	вя	вья
фа	фя	фья
ма	мя	мья
ра	ря	рья

¹³ Here, т is used as an example of any hard and soft consonant and а/я as an example of any vowel.

Try pronouncing these sets of words:

па́т, пя́ть, пья́н — по́т, Пе́тр, пьём — пэ́т, пёть, пьёса — то́пот, то́пят, хло́пья — труба́
труба́ воро́бья — бу́лка, вестибу́ль, быю́т — черта́, чертя́, статья́ — дым, еди́м, судьи́ —
води́, води, лады́ — дом, иди́м, подьём — вал, вя́л, соловья́ — вол, вёл, вьёт — ве́хи,
въеха́л — зове́т, завьёт, заво́д — са, ся, сья — сад, сядь — суда́, сю́дя — носы́, носи́, ли́сьи
— сэ́р, се́р — все́м, съём — се́сть, съе́сть — Сёмка, съёмка — за́, зя́, зья́ — нельзя́, друзья́

The liquid sounds р/л and рь/ль

The liquid sounds /r/ and /l/, as the name liquid suggests, are not well defined in the mouth, so description of what you do with your tongue and teeth lacks precision. The hard р/л and the soft рь/ль are very prominent in Russian and differ quite a bit from each other (more than merely the addition of tongue to palate and a smile as with the consonants discussed above). I might go so far as to say that the hard л and the soft рь are the two hardest sounds to pronounce in Russian.

л and ль

The closest we get in English to the Russian hard л is to make the *l* in *girl* and hold onto that *l*, feel where it is in your mouth, and try to repeat that when you encounter a Russian hard л. You should be able to feel that the tip of the tongue is against the top teeth and the body of the tongue drops down to make a valley between the tip and the back of the tongue. The soft ль is quite a bit

easier. Mash your tongue (from tip to blade to mid) up to the roof of your mouth (tip and blade to the teeth, mid to the palate), smile, and make and release the лъ.

p and pʙ

Russian p is trilled, but not very much. You basically get 1-2 flaps. It's really more of what is usually called a tap or flap than a trill and the good thing is, we have taps/flaps in English. The closest we have to the Russian p is the sound of Engl -tt- or -dd- in words like *latter*, *ladder*, *better*, *butter*, etc. The problem is that we then have our Engl r right after that, which confuses things, but if you think of pronouncing Russian words with p as if they were an English sequence of -tt- or -dd-, this might help you. If you're having trouble trilling your Russian p, I can suggest some other exercises as well. Once you've gotten the regular hard p down, then you have to figure out how to palatalize it and this is quite tricky. You do want to raise the mid part of your tongue to the palate and smile, but you still need to leave enough tip of your tongue to flap. It's quite awkward.

SECTION FIVE

Consonants that are always hard

ж, ш, ц are always hard

The Russian ц is a combination of т+с, but this sound is always hard, it doesn't soften.

The Russian ж and ш are made very low in the mouth, distinct from the English versions we have in words like *shall* and *vision*. The closest approximation Russian has to English /j/ as in *jeans* is дж, which also has this same sound following д: джинсы 'jeans', джунгли 'jungle'.

There is no variation in pronunciation depending on the following vowel (жи, ши are hard, so the vowel is pronounced as ы) or even the presence of the soft sign (ты-form of verbs -ешь/-ёшь/-ишь).

Consonants that are always soft

ч, щ, й are always soft

Russian ч is pronounced with the mid tongue to the palate and a smile, making it soft sounding, unlike the rather plain ch-sound in English *chips*.

The contemporary standard is to pronounce this as a longer, soft version of щ. Think of щ as [š'š'] and smile broadly with mid tongue raised to the palate. However, you may see щ described as a similar to the sequence *shch* in Engl. *fresh cheese* and you may hear this in some older styles of pronunciation.

There is no variation in pronunciation depending on the following vowel (ча, ща are soft, the vowel is part of the spelling rules).

Russian й can hardly help being soft, but we do need to remember to raise our mid tongue to the palate and smile broadly when pronouncing it in Russian.

The good news

If you know these rules well, aside from a few exceptions, you'll be able to pronounce any Russian word for which you know the position of the stress.

Поздравляю вас! ('Congratulations!')