Contents

Introduction

Why Hungarian Pronunciation Matters

Hungarian pronunciation is unique due to several key features that set it apart from English. One of the most distinctive aspects is **phonemic length**, where the duration of vowels and consonants can change the meaning of words. For example, /tɛl/ means “winter,” while /tɛːl/ means “full.” Another crucial element is **vowel harmony**, a rule that dictates which vowels can appear together in a word, affecting suffixes and compounding. This makes Hungarian sound harmonious and rhythmic, unlike the more varied vowel patterns in English. Understanding these features will not only enhance your pronunciation but also deepen your appreciation of the language’s structure.

How This Book Is Organized

This book is structured to guide you through the intricacies of Hungarian pronunciation systematically:

- **Introduction**: You are here, learning about the importance and organization of the book.

- **Vowels**: A detailed exploration of Hungarian vowels, including their sounds, lengths, and the principles of vowel harmony.
- **Consonants**: An in-depth look at Hungarian consonants, their articulation, and how they differ from English.
- **Rules**: Coverage of phonological rules such as assimilation, palatalization, and stress patterns that are essential for accurate pronunciation.

What to Expect

As you progress through this book, expect to gain a thorough understanding of Hungarian phonetics and phonology. Each section will provide clear explanations, comparisons to English sounds, and practical examples using IPA notation. By the end, you will be equipped to pronounce Hungarian words with confidence and accuracy, whether you're a beginner or looking to refine your skills.

How to Use This Book

This book is designed to help English speakers master Hungarian pronunciation. Each section focuses on a specific aspect of Hungarian phonology, providing detailed explanations, comparisons to English sounds, and practical examples. Progress through the sections in order to build a comprehensive understanding of Hungarian pronunciation.

Reading IPA Notation

Throughout this book, we use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to accurately represent Hungarian sounds. IPA symbols help you understand the exact pronunciation of each word. Here's how to interpret them:

- **Vowels**: Hungarian vowels are represented by symbols like /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/, which are similar to their English counterparts but often more consistent in pronunciation.
- **Consonants**: Symbols like /p/, /t/, /k/ represent sounds familiar to English speakers, while others like /ʃ/ (as in "ship") or /ʒ/ (as in "measure") may require more attention.
- **Diacritics**: Marks like [ˈ] indicate primary stress, and [ː] shows a long vowel or consonant.

Familiarize yourself with these symbols to better understand the pronunciation guides provided.

Understanding Examples

Each section includes examples formatted as follows:

- *Hungarian word* - /IPA/ - meaning

For instance:

- *kutya* - /ˈkucːɒ/ - dog

This format helps you see the Hungarian spelling, hear the pronunciation through IPA, and understand the word's meaning, facilitating a deeper connection between sound and meaning.

Practice Tips

To effectively practice Hungarian pronunciation:

- **Listen and Repeat**: Use audio resources to listen to native speakers and mimic their pronunciation.
- **Record Yourself**: Record your own pronunciation and compare it to native speakers to identify areas for improvement.
- **Focus on Problematic Sounds**: Spend extra time on sounds that are difficult for you, using the comparisons to English sounds provided in this book.
- **Practice Regularly**: Consistent practice, even if just for a few minutes daily, will help reinforce new pronunciation habits.
- **Use the IPA**: Regularly refer to the IPA transcriptions to ensure accuracy in your pronunciation.

Hungarian Vowels

Hungarian has a rich vowel system that can be challenging for English speakers due to its distinct vowel qualities and the importance of vowel length. Understanding these aspects is crucial for correct pronunciation.

Vowel Length

In Hungarian, vowel length is phonemic, meaning that the length of a vowel can change the meaning of a word. Unlike in English, where vowel length often depends on the surrounding consonants, Hungarian vowels are consistently short or long regardless of their position in a word.

- Short vowels are pronounced briefly and tensely. They are similar to the short vowels in English words like “bit” (/ɪ/), “bet” (/ɛ/), or “bat” (/æ/).
- Long vowels, on the other hand, are held for a longer duration and are more relaxed. They are akin to the long vowels in English words such as “see” (/iː/), “say” (/eɪ/), or “car” (/ɑː/).

The difference in length can distinguish words, for example, *ház* (/haːz/) meaning “house” and *haz* (/haz/) meaning “home”.

Vowel Quality

Hungarian vowels are categorized by their position in the mouth (front vs. back) and by lip rounding (rounded vs. unrounded). This classification helps in understanding the nuances of Hungarian pronunciation.

- **Front vs. Back Vowels**: Front vowels are articulated with the tongue positioned forward in the mouth, similar to English “see” (/iː/) or “set” (/ɛ/). Back vowels, conversely, involve a retracted tongue position, akin to “saw” (/ɔː/) or “car” (/ɑː/).
- **Rounded vs. Unrounded Vowels**: Rounded vowels are produced with rounded lips, much like the English “go” (/oʊ/) or “blue” (/uː/). Unrounded vowels are articulated without lip rounding, similar to “see” (/iː/) or “bet” (/ɛ/).

In Hungarian, these distinctions result in a system where vowels can be front unrounded (/i/, /e/), front rounded (/y/, /ø/), back unrounded (/ɑ/), and back rounded (/o/, /u/).

Examples

- *ház* - /haːz/ - house
- *haz* - /haz/ - home
- *kör* - /kør/ - circle
- *kár* - /kaːr/ - damage
- *út* - /uːt/ - road

Short Vowel ‘a’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian short vowel ‘a’ is represented in IPA as /ɒ/. For English speakers, this sound is similar to the ‘o’ in the American English pronunciation of “hot” or “dog,” but it’s more open and rounded. Unlike

the English vowel, which can shift slightly in different accents, the Hungarian /ɒ/ is consistently pronounced in the same way, with the tongue low and the lips rounded. When pronouncing this sound, try to keep your jaw relaxed and your lips in a rounded position, similar to blowing out a candle, but without pushing the air out forcefully.

Examples

- *ház* - /haːz/ - house
- *kád* - /kaːd/ - bathtub
- *sajt* - /ʃɒjt/ - cheese
- *tavasz* - /tɒvɒs/ - spring

Short Vowel ‘e’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian short vowel ‘e’ is represented in IPA as /ɛ/. For English speakers, this sound is similar to the ‘e’ in “bet” or “let”. It is a front, open-mid vowel, meaning your tongue is positioned forward and somewhat low in your mouth. Unlike the English ‘e’ which can sometimes be pronounced as /eɪ/ (as in “late”), the Hungarian /ɛ/ is consistently short and does not glide into another vowel sound.

Examples

- *kert* - /kɛrt/ - garden
- *szép* - /sɛp/ - beautiful
- *keres* - /kɛrɛʃ/ - search
- *tegnap* - /tɛgnɒp/ - yesterday

Short Vowel ‘i’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian short vowel ‘i’ is represented as /i/ in IPA. For English speakers, this sound is similar to the ‘ee’ in “see” or the ‘i’ in “machine”. However, the Hungarian /i/ is typically shorter and more centralized than its English counterparts. It’s important to keep the sound crisp and not to let it drift towards a diphthong as can happen in English.

Examples

- *itt* - /it/ - here
- *kicsi* - /kit͡ʃi/ - small
- *híd* - /hiːd/ - bridge
- *igaz* - /igɒz/ - true

Short Vowel ‘o’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian short vowel ‘o’ is represented as /o/ in IPA. For English speakers, the sound is similar to the ‘o’ in “off” or “hot,” but it’s more rounded and pronounced with the lips more protruded. Unlike the English ‘o’, which often shifts towards an ‘ah’ sound, the Hungarian /o/ remains a pure, steady vowel sound. It is important to keep the tongue position relatively high and the vowel short and crisp.

Examples

- *orvos* - /orvoʃ/ - doctor
- *olvas* - /olvɒʃ/ - reads
- *okos* - /okoʃ/ - smart
- *otthon* - /otːhon/ - at home

Short Vowel ‘u’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian short vowel ‘u’, represented as /u/ in IPA, is a high back rounded vowel. For English speakers, it is similar to the ‘oo’ sound in “book” or “look,” but it is slightly more rounded and tense. Unlike in English, where the ‘oo’ sound can sometimes be pronounced more centrally or with less rounding, the Hungarian /u/ maintains a consistent back and rounded position in the mouth. When pronouncing it, try to keep your lips fully rounded and the sound high in your mouth.

Examples

- *kutya* - /ˈkucɒ/ - dog
- *húz* - /huːz/ - pull
- *úszik* - /ˈuːsik/ - swim
- *fut* - /fut/ - run

Short Vowel ‘ö’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian short vowel ‘ö’ is represented in IPA as /ø/. For English speakers, the closest sound to /ø/ is the ‘u’ in the word “turn” or the ‘e’ in “herd” as pronounced in some British accents, though ‘ö’ is more rounded and pronounced with the lips pushed forward. It’s important to keep the vowel short and crisp, unlike the longer vowel sounds in English. To practice, start by saying “turn” and try to round your lips more while keeping the sound short.

Examples

- *könny* - /kønː/ - tear
- *sör* - /ʃør/ - beer
- *tölgy* - /tølɟ/ - oak
- *nő* - /nøː/ - woman

Short Vowel ‘ü’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian short vowel ‘ü’ is represented in IPA as /y/. For English speakers, this sound can be challenging because it does not directly correspond to any vowel sound in standard American or British English. The closest approximation might be the sound in the German word “üben” or the French “tu”.

To produce /y/, start by saying the English ‘ee’ sound as in “see” (/i/). Keep your tongue in this position, but round your lips as if you were going to whistle or say the English ‘oo’ sound as in “food” (/u/). The resulting sound should be a high, front, rounded vowel, which is the Hungarian ‘ü’.

Examples

- *süt* - /syt/ - to bake
- *függ* - /fygː/ - to hang
- *külön* - /kyløn/ - separate
- *üt* - /yt/ - to hit

Long Vowel ‘á’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian long vowel ‘á’ is pronounced as /aː/. For English speakers, this sound is similar to the ‘a’ in “father” but significantly longer. In English, vowel length is not phonemic, meaning it doesn’t change the meaning of words, but in Hungarian, the length of vowels like ‘á’ is crucial. When pronouncing ‘á’, make sure to hold the sound for about twice as long as you would for a short ‘a’. The vowel should be open and relaxed, positioned at the back of the mouth.

Examples

- *ház* - /haːz/ - house
- *nagy* - /nɒɟ/ - big
- *tányér* - /taːɲeːr/ - plate
- *sárga* - /ʃaːrgɒ/ - yellow

Long Vowel ‘é’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian long vowel ‘é’ is pronounced as /eː/. For English speakers, this sound is similar to the ‘a’ in “day” (/deɪ/), but without the glide at the end. It is crucial to maintain the length of this vowel, as it distinguishes it from the short ‘e’ sound in Hungarian. In English, you might find a similar long, pure vowel sound in some accents in words like “they” (/ðeɪ/) when pronounced more like /ðeː/. Keep your tongue high and front in your mouth, and stretch the vowel sound longer than you would in English.

Examples

- *kész* - /keːs/ - ready
- *tél* - /teːl/ - winter
- *kék* - /keːk/ - blue
- *szerű* - /ʃeːry/ - like, similar to

Long Vowel ‘í’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian long vowel ‘í’ is pronounced similarly to the ‘ee’ in the English word “see”, but it is longer in duration. In English, vowel length can vary depending on the context, but in Hungarian, the length of ‘í’ is consistent and distinctly long. To produce this sound, start with your tongue high and front in your mouth, lips spread, and maintain the sound for a longer duration than you would for a typical English ‘ee’. The IPA symbol for this sound is /iː/.

Examples

- *híd* - /hiːd/ - bridge
- *kíván* - /kiːvaːn/ - wish
- *írás* - /iːraːʃ/ - writing
- *víz* - /viːz/ - water

Long Vowel ‘ó’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian long vowel ‘ó’ is pronounced as /oː/. For English speakers, the closest approximation to this sound is the ‘o’ in “core” but held longer. The key difference is the length: in Hungarian, ‘ó’ is significantly longer than any vowel typically found in English words. Imagine saying the ‘o’ in “core” but extending it to about twice its normal duration. The sound should be pure and steady, without the diphthong glide that often accompanies English long vowels.

Examples

- *tó* - /toː/ - lake
- *kórház* - /koːrhaːz/ - hospital
- *óra* - /oːrɒ/ - hour, clock
- *só* - /ʃoː/ - salt

Long Vowel ‘ú’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian long vowel ‘ú’ is pronounced as /uː/. This sound is similar to the ‘oo’ in English words like “moon” or “food,” but it is longer in duration. In Hungarian, vowel length can change the meaning of words, so it’s crucial to hold the sound longer than you might in English. Try to prolong the ‘oo’ sound in “moon” to feel the difference. The lips are rounded and protruded, and the tongue is positioned at the back of the mouth, similar to the English sound but sustained.

Examples

- *új* - /uːj/ - new
- *kút* - /kuːt/ - well
- *súly* - /ʃuːj/ - weight
- *úszik* - /uːsik/ - swims

Long Vowel ‘ő’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian long vowel ‘ő’ is represented in IPA as /øː/. It is a front, rounded vowel, similar to the vowel sound in the English word “herd” but with lip rounding. To pronounce ‘ő’, start with the ‘e’ sound in “herd” and round your lips as if you were saying “oo” in “food”. The key is to maintain the tongue position of ‘e’ while rounding the lips. Additionally, ‘ő’ is a long vowel, meaning it is held for a longer duration than its short counterpart ‘ö’ (/ø/).

For English speakers, practicing ‘ő’ can be approached by saying “herd” and then rounding the lips without changing the tongue position. Keep in mind that the vowel should be held longer than a typical English vowel.

Examples

- *ősz* - /øːs/ - autumn
- *nő* - /nøː/ - woman
- *fő* - /føː/ - main
- *tőke* - /tøːkɛ/ - capital

Long Vowel ‘ű’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian long vowel ‘ű’ is represented in IPA as /yː/. This sound is a close front rounded vowel, which can be challenging for English speakers because English lacks this exact sound. To approximate ‘ű’, start by saying the English word “see” (/siː/), but round your lips as if you are saying “oo” in “food” (/fuːd/). The result should be a high-pitched, rounded sound. Importantly, ‘ű’ is a long vowel, so hold the sound longer than you would a typical English vowel. Think of it as saying the rounded “see” sound for about twice the duration of a short vowel in English.

Examples

- *űr* - /yːr/ - space
- *űző* - /yːzøː/ - chaser
- *űrlap* - /yːrlap/ - form
- *űz* - /yːz/ - to pursue

Vowel Harmony

Vowel harmony in Hungarian is a phonological rule that affects how vowels within a word or between a stem and its suffixes must agree in terms of their frontness or backness. This rule ensures that the vowels in a word are either all front or all back, creating a harmonious sound pattern.

Front vs. Back Vowels

In Hungarian, vowels are categorized as either front or back. Front vowels are articulated with the tongue positioned towards the front of the mouth, similar to the English ‘ee’ in ‘see’. Back vowels, on the other hand, are produced with the tongue positioned further back, akin to the English ‘oo’ in ‘moon’. The distinction plays a crucial role in vowel harmony, determining which vowels can coexist within a word.

Front vowels in Hungarian include /i/, /í/, /e/, /é/, and /ö/, /ő/, /ü/, /ű/. Back vowels include /a/, /á/, /o/, /ó/, /u/, /ú/. The presence of a front vowel in a stem will require any suffixes added to it to also contain front vowels, and vice versa for back vowels.

Suffix Adjustment

Suffixes in Hungarian must adapt to the vowel harmony of the stem they attach to. If a stem contains front vowels, any suffix added to it will also use front vowels. Conversely, if the stem contains back vowels, the suffix will use back vowels. This adjustment ensures the maintenance of vowel harmony across the entire word.

For example, the suffix for the plural in Hungarian is '-k', but the vowel preceding it changes based on the stem's vowels: '-ok' for back vowel stems, and '-ek' for front vowel stems. This rule applies consistently across all suffixes that have vowel alternates.

Examples

- *ház* - /haːz/ - house; *házak* - /haːzɒk/ - houses
- *kéz* - /keːz/ - hand; *kezek* - /kɛzɛk/ - hands
- *szív* - /siːv/ - heart; *szívek* - /siːvɛk/ - hearts
- *út* - /uːt/ - road; *utak* - /utɒk/ - roads

Hungarian Consonants

Hungarian consonants can be quite different from those in English, but understanding their categories and specific sounds can help you master Hungarian pronunciation. Hungarian has a rich set of consonants that can be categorized into several groups, each with unique characteristics.

Categories

Hungarian consonants are divided into the following categories:

- **Stops**: These are sounds produced by completely blocking the airflow in the mouth and then releasing it. Hungarian has both voiced and voiceless stops. Voiced stops are similar to English 'b', 'd', 'g', while voiceless stops are like 'p', 't', 'k'. For example, /b/ as in *baba* (doll) and /p/ as in *papa* (father).
- **Fricatives**: These sounds are produced by forcing air through a narrow channel, causing friction. Hungarian fricatives include sounds like /s/ and /ʃ/, which are similar to English 's' in *see* and 'sh' in *shoe*. For example, /s/ as in *szép* (beautiful) and /ʃ/ as in *sajt* (cheese).
- **Affricates**: These are a combination of a stop followed immediately by a fricative. Hungarian has affricates like /ts/ and /tʃ/,

which can be compared to English ‘ts’ in *cats* and ‘ch’ in *church*. For example, /ts/ as in *cica* (kitty) and /tʃ/ as in *csiga* (snail).

- **Nasals**: These are sounds produced by lowering the soft palate to allow air to escape through the nose. Hungarian nasals include /m/, /n/, and /ɲ/, which are similar to English ‘m’, ‘n’, and ‘ny’ in *canyon*. For example, /m/ as in *mama* (mom) and /ɲ/ as in *nyúl* (rabbit).
- **Laterals**: These sounds are produced by directing air along the sides of the tongue. Hungarian has the lateral /l/, similar to English ‘l’ in *love*. For example, /l/ as in *lány* (girl).
- **Approximants**: These are sounds produced by bringing one articulator close to another without creating turbulent airflow. Hungarian approximants include /j/ and /r/, which are similar to English ‘y’ in *yes* and ‘r’ in *red*. For example, /j/ as in *jó* (good) and /r/ as in *róka* (fox).

Digraphs

In Hungarian, digraphs play a crucial role in representing sounds that are not represented by single letters. A digraph is a pair of letters used to write one sound or a combination of sounds that do not correspond to the individual letters’ sounds.

- **sz** represents the sound /s/, as in *szép* (beautiful).
- **zs** represents the sound /ʒ/, similar to the ‘s’ in English *measure*, as in *zsír* (fat).
- **cs** represents the sound /tʃ/, as in *csiga* (snail).
- **gy** represents the sound /ɟ/, similar to a soft ‘g’ in some English dialects, as in *gyümölcs* (fruit).
- **ly** represents the sound /j/, as in *lyuk* (hole).
- **ny** represents the sound /ɲ/, as in *nyúl* (rabbit).
- **ty** represents the sound /c/, similar to the ‘ch’ in English *church* but softer, as in *tyúk* (hen).

Understanding these digraphs is essential for accurate pronunciation and reading in Hungarian. They are unique to the language and often cause confusion for English speakers due to their unfamiliar combinations and sounds.

Examples

- *szép* - /seːp/ - beautiful
- *zsír* - /ʒiːr/ - fat
- *csiga* - /tʃigɒ/ - snail

- *gyümölcs* - /ɟymølʧ/ - fruit
- *nyúl* - /ɲuːl/ - rabbit

Consonant ‘b’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian consonant ‘b’ is pronounced similarly to the English ‘b’. It is a voiced bilabial stop, meaning you use both lips to block the airflow and then release it, and your vocal cords vibrate during its production. In English, you can find this sound at the beginning of words like “boy” or “bat”. In Hungarian, ‘b’ maintains its sound in all positions within a word, unlike English where ‘b’ can be silent or pronounced differently (e.g., “debt”, “subtle”).

Examples

- *barát* - /bɒraːt/ - friend
- *baba* - /bɒbɒ/ - baby
- *bútor* - /buːtor/ - furniture
- *beszél* - /bɛseːl/ - to speak

Consonant ‘p’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian consonant ‘p’ is a voiceless bilabial stop, similar to the ‘p’ in English words like “pat” or “top.” In Hungarian, it is pronounced with a complete closure of the lips, followed by a release that produces a sharp sound. Unlike in English, where ‘p’ can be aspirated (followed by a puff of air), the Hungarian ‘p’ is typically unaspirated. This means it sounds somewhat softer compared to the English ‘p’ at the beginning of words.

Examples

- *pénz* - /peːnʒ/ - money
- *piros* - /piroʃ/ - red
- *papír* - /papiːr/ - paper
- *pálya* - /paːjɒ/ - track, field

Consonant ‘d’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian ‘d’ is a voiced alveolar stop, similar to the English ‘d’ in “dog” (/d/). It is produced by stopping the airflow with the tongue against the alveolar ridge and then releasing it. The key difference from English is that Hungarian ‘d’ is always pronounced the same way, without the variations that occur in English due to surrounding sounds or positions in words.

Examples

- *dolog* - /dolog/ - thing
- *dél* - /deːl/ - south, noon
- *diák* - /diaːk/ - student
- *dönt* - /dønt/ - decides

Consonant ‘t’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian ‘t’ is a voiceless alveolar stop, similar to the English ‘t’ as in “top” /tɒp/. In Hungarian, this sound is always pronounced clearly and distinctly, without the aspiration that often accompanies the English ‘t’ at the beginning of words. It is produced by stopping the airflow with the tongue against the alveolar ridge and then releasing it abruptly.

Examples

- *tíz* - /tiːz/ - ten
- *tavasz* - /ˈtɒvɒs/ - spring
- *tükör* - /ˈtykør/ - mirror
- *tanár* - /ˈtɒnaːr/ - teacher

Consonant ‘g’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian consonant ‘g’ is a voiced velar stop, similar to the ‘g’ sound in English words like “go” or “give.” In both languages, it is produced by stopping the airflow at the back of the mouth with the

back of the tongue against the soft palate, then releasing it. However, in Hungarian, the ‘g’ sound is always hard, never softening to a sound like the ‘j’ in “gem” as it might in some English dialects.

Examples

- *gép* - /ɡeːp/ - machine
- *gond* - /ɡond/ - care, concern
- *gyümölcs* - /ɟymølʧ/ - fruit
- *garázs* - /ɡɒraːʒ/ - garage

Consonant ‘k’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian ‘k’ is a voiceless velar stop, similar to the ‘k’ sound in English words like “kite” or “cool”. In Hungarian, this sound is always pronounced at the back of the throat, with the tongue making contact with the soft palate. Unlike in English, where ‘k’ can sometimes be softened or aspirated (as in “kin” vs. “can”), the Hungarian ‘k’ is consistently hard and unaspirated, meaning there’s no puff of air following the sound. This makes it more akin to the ‘k’ in “ski” in English.

Examples

- *kutya* - /kuʲtʲɒ/ - dog
- *kék* - /keːk/ - blue
- *könyv* - /køɲv/ - book
- *kör* - /kør/ - circle

Consonant ‘f’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian consonant ‘f’ is a voiceless labiodental fricative, similar to the ‘f’ sound in English words like “fish” or “fun”. It is produced by directing air flow between the lower lip and the upper teeth, creating a friction sound. This sound is categorized as a fricative, specifically a labiodental fricative, because of the way it is articulated. English speakers should find this sound very familiar and easy to pronounce as it is identical to the English ‘f’.

Examples

- *fény* - /feːɲ/ - light
- *férfi* - /feːrfi/ - man
- *folyó* - /foʎoː/ - river
- *fű* - /fyː/ - grass

Consonant ‘v’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian consonant ‘v’ is a voiced labiodental fricative, represented in IPA as /v/. For English speakers, this sound is very familiar, as it is identical to the ‘v’ sound in English words like “very” or “love.” It is produced by placing the upper teeth on the lower lip and allowing air to flow through, creating a fricative sound.

Examples

- *víz* - /viːz/ - water
- *vár* - /vaːr/ - castle
- *vagy* - /vɒɟ/ - or
- *vonal* - /vonɒl/ - line

Consonant ‘sz’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian consonant ‘sz’ is pronounced as a voiceless alveolar fricative, represented in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) as /s/. For English speakers, this sound is very similar to the ‘s’ sound in words like “see” or “bus”. It is produced by directing air through a narrow channel between the tongue and the alveolar ridge (just behind the upper front teeth), creating a hissing sound. Unlike some English ‘s’ sounds which can be voiced (like in “is”), ‘sz’ in Hungarian is always voiceless.

Examples

- *szép* - /seːp/ - beautiful
- *szó* - /soː/ - word
- *szem* - /sɛm/ - eye
- *szív* - /siːv/ - heart

Consonant ‘z’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian ‘z’ is a voiced alveolar fricative, represented in IPA as /z/. For English speakers, this sound is quite familiar as it is identical to the ‘z’ sound in English words like “zoo” or “zebra.” It’s produced by directing air through a narrow channel between the tongue and the alveolar ridge, causing friction. The vocal cords vibrate during its articulation, which is why it’s classified as a voiced fricative.

Examples

- *zaj* - /zɒj/ - noise
- *zene* - /zɛnɛ/ - music
- *zöld* - /zøld/ - green
- *zseb* - /ʒɛb/ - pocket

Consonant ‘s’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian ‘s’ is pronounced as a voiceless alveolar fricative, similar to the ‘s’ sound in English words like “see” or “bus”. It is represented in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) as /s/. This sound is produced by directing air through a narrow channel between the tongue and the alveolar ridge, creating a hissing sound. Unlike in English, where ‘s’ can be voiced in certain positions (e.g., in “dogs” as /z/), the Hungarian ‘s’ remains voiceless in all contexts.

Examples

- *szép* - /seːp/ - beautiful
- *sok* - /sok/ - many
- *sajt* - /ʃɒjt/ - cheese
- *sárga* - /ʃaːrgɒ/ - yellow

Consonant ‘zs’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian consonant ‘zs’ represents a voiced postalveolar fricative, similar to the ‘s’ sound in English “measure” or “treasure”. This

sound is produced by directing air flow along the central line of the tongue, which is positioned close to the palate behind the alveolar ridge. The vocal cords vibrate during its production, classifying it as a voiced fricative. For English speakers, the ‘zs’ sound is akin to the ‘zh’ in “vision” or “decision”.

Examples

- *zsír* - /ʒiːr/ - fat
- *zsák* - /ʒaːk/ - sack
- *zseb* - /ʒɛb/ - pocket
- *zsúr* - /ʒuːr/ - party

Consonant ‘h’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian ‘h’ is a voiceless glottal fricative, represented in IPA as /h/. For English speakers, this sound is quite familiar as it is similar to the ‘h’ sound at the beginning of words like “hat” or “house.” In Hungarian, ‘h’ is always pronounced as this sound, without variation, and it is categorized as a fricative, meaning it’s produced by forcing air through a narrow channel in the vocal tract, in this case, the glottis.

Examples

- *ház* - /haːz/ - house
- *híd* - /hiːd/ - bridge
- *haj* - /hɒj/ - hair
- *hónap* - /hoːnɒp/ - month

Consonant ‘c’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian consonant ‘c’ is pronounced as /ts/, which is a voiceless alveolar affricate. For English speakers, this sound is similar to the ‘ts’ sound found in words like “cats” or “its.” It starts with a stop similar to the ‘t’ in “stop,” followed immediately by a fricative like the ‘s’ in “see.” This sound is a single, quick unit in Hungarian, not a blend of two separate sounds as it might be in English.

Examples

- *cél* - /tseːl/ - goal
- *cukor* - /tsukor/ - sugar
- *cica* - /tsitsɒ/ - kitty
- *cipő* - /tsipoː/ - shoe

Consonant ‘dz’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian consonant ‘dz’ is an affricate, which means it starts as a stop and releases into a fricative. For English speakers, it’s similar to the ‘ds’ sound in “odds” or “buds,” but voiced. In ‘dz’, the tongue tip touches the alveolar ridge, blocking the airflow completely, and then releases it into a ‘z’ sound. The key is to ensure both the stop and the fricative are voiced, unlike the English ‘ts’ sound in “cats,” which is unvoiced.

Examples

- *adzó* - /ɒdzoː/ - tax collector
- *edző* - /ɛdző/ - coach
- *dzsem* - /dʒɛm/ - jam
- *dzsungel* - /dʒuŋgɛl/ - jungle

Consonant ‘cs’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian ‘cs’ represents a voiceless palato-alveolar affricate, similar to the ‘ch’ in English “church”. It is produced by first stopping the airflow with the tongue against the palate, then releasing it to create a fricative sound. This sound is categorized as an affricate, which means it starts as a stop and ends as a fricative. For English speakers, the ‘cs’ sound is quite familiar, as it is identical to the ‘ch’ in “cheese” or “chocolate”.

Examples

- *család* - /tʃɒlaːd/ - family
- *csak* - /tʃɒk/ - only
- *csinos* - /tʃinoʃ/ - pretty

- *csokoládé* - /tʃokoladeː/ - chocolate

Consonant ‘dzs’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian ‘dzs’ is an affricate, which means it starts as a stop and releases into a fricative. For English speakers, ‘dzs’ can be thought of as the sound in the middle of “hedge” (/hɛdʒ/) but voiced, similar to the ‘j’ in “jam” (/dʒæm/) but with a more pronounced ‘d’ at the start. In IPA, ‘dzs’ is represented as /dʒ/. To articulate it, start with your tongue against the alveolar ridge (like the ‘d’ in “dog”), then release it into the ‘zh’ sound (like the ‘s’ in “measure”).

Examples

- *dzsungel* - /dʒuŋgɛl/ - jungle
- *dzsem* - /dʒɛm/ - jam
- *dzsúdó* - /dʒuːdoː/ - judo
- *dzsessz* - /dʒɛs/ - jazz

Consonant ‘m’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian ‘m’ is a nasal consonant, pronounced similarly to the English ‘m’ as in “man” /mæn/. It is produced by closing the lips and allowing air to escape through the nose. Like its English counterpart, the Hungarian ‘m’ can appear at the beginning, middle, or end of words.

Examples

- *mama* - /ˈmɒmɒ/ - mother
- *mi* - /mi/ - what
- *ember* - /ˈɛmbɛr/ - person
- *minden* - /ˈmindɛn/ - everything

Consonant ‘n’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian ‘n’ is a nasal consonant, similar to the English ‘n’ as in “no” or “new”. It is articulated by allowing air to escape through the nose while the tongue tip touches the alveolar ridge, just behind the upper front teeth. In Hungarian, the ‘n’ sound remains consistent across different positions in a word, unlike in English where it might change slightly depending on the surrounding sounds.

Examples

- *nagy* - /nɒɟ/ - big
- *név* - /neːv/ - name
- *nem* - /nɛm/ - no/not
- *nő* - /nøː/ - woman

Consonant ‘ny’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian consonant ‘ny’ is represented in the International Phonetic Alphabet as /ɲ/. This sound falls into the category of nasals, similar to English ‘n’ and ‘m’. For English speakers, the closest approximation to /ɲ/ is the ‘ni’ sound in “canyon” or the ‘ny’ in the Spanish word “señor”. To produce /ɲ/, start by making the ‘n’ sound, but position your tongue against the roof of your mouth, just behind your front teeth, and allow the air to escape through your nose. It is a single, distinct sound in Hungarian, not a combination of ‘n’ and ‘y’.

Examples

- *nyár* - /ɲaːr/ - summer
- *enyém* - /ɛɲeːm/ - mine
- *nyugalom* - /ɲugɒlom/ - peace
- *nyolc* - /ɲolʦ/ - eight

Consonant ‘l’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian consonant ‘l’ is represented in IPA as /l/. It is categorized as a liquid, similar to its English counterpart. For English speakers, the Hungarian /l/ sounds very much like the ‘l’ in “light” or “love”. It is an alveolar lateral approximant, meaning the tip of the tongue touches the alveolar ridge, and air flows around the sides of the tongue. The key difference from English is that Hungarian ‘l’ is always clear, even when it comes after a vowel, whereas in English, ‘l’ can become dark (velarized) in positions like the end of “ball”.

Examples

- *lány* - /laːɲ/ - girl
- *levél* - /ˈlɛveːl/ - letter
- *lila* - /ˈlilɒ/ - purple
- *láb* - /laːb/ - leg
- *levegő* - /ˈlɛvɛgøː/ - air

Consonant ‘r’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian ‘r’ is a voiced alveolar trill, categorized as a liquid consonant. For English speakers, this sound can be compared to the ‘r’ in Spanish words like “pero” or the rolled ‘r’ some English speakers use in words like “red” when emphasizing the sound. Unlike the typical English ‘r’, which is often an approximant, the Hungarian ‘r’ involves the tip of the tongue vibrating against the alveolar ridge. To produce this sound, try to make your tongue tip flutter rapidly against the ridge just behind your upper front teeth.

Examples

- *rá* - /raː/ - onto
- *régi* - /reːgi/ - old
- *róka* - /roːkɒ/ - fox
- *rohan* - /rohɒn/ - rush

Consonant ‘j’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian consonant ‘j’ is a palatal approximant, categorized as a glide. For English speakers, the sound is similar to the ‘y’ in “yes” or “yellow.” It is articulated by raising the front of the tongue close to the hard palate without creating friction, allowing the air to flow freely. In IPA, it is represented as /j/.

Examples

- *jó* - /joː/ - good
- *jön* - /jøn/ - comes
- *játék* - /jaːteːk/ - game
- *jég* - /jeːg/ - ice

Consonant ‘ly’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian ‘ly’ is pronounced as /j/, which is a glide. For English speakers, this sound is very familiar; it’s the same sound as the ‘y’ in “yes” or the ‘j’ in “job”. It’s produced by directing air over the front part of the tongue without causing any friction, similar to how you would start the word “you”.

Examples

- *lyuk* - /juk/ - hole
- *lyány* - /jaːɲ/ - girl
- *hely* - /hɛj/ - place
- *folyó* - /fojoː/ - river

Consonant ‘gy’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian consonant ‘gy’ is a digraph, meaning it consists of two letters representing a single sound. It is pronounced as a palatal stop, similar to the ‘d’ sound in English ‘duty’ but with the tongue positioned further back towards the palate. The sound is voiced, and in IPA, it is represented as /ɟ/. English speakers might find it helpful to start with

the ‘d’ sound and then try to articulate it more towards the middle of the mouth, close to where you would say ‘y’ in ‘yes’.

Examples

- *gyümölcs* - /ɟyməltʃ/ - fruit
- *gyors* - /ɟorʃ/ - fast
- *gyerek* - /ɟɛrɛk/ - child
- *gyakran* - /ɟɒkrɒn/ - often

Consonant ‘ty’

Pronunciation

The Hungarian consonant ‘ty’ is a digraph, meaning it is represented by two letters but functions as a single sound. It is pronounced as a palatal stop, similar to the ‘t’ sound in English but articulated with the tongue against the hard palate, closer to where you would say ‘y’ in ‘yes’. For English speakers, it can be approximated by trying to say ‘t’ while the tongue is in the position to say ‘y’. The IPA transcription for ‘ty’ is /c/.

Examples

- *tyúk* - /cuːk/ - chicken
- *tyű* - /cyː/ - needle
- *tyúkól* - /cuːkoːl/ - henhouse
- *tyúktojás* - /cuːktojaːʃ/ - hen’s egg

Pronunciation Rules

Why Rules Matter

Understanding pronunciation rules is crucial for achieving fluency in Hungarian. These rules help you predict how words sound based on their spelling, which is especially important in Hungarian due to its consistent orthography. By mastering these rules, you can speak more naturally and be understood more easily, as your pronunciation will closely match that of native speakers.

Key Concepts

Stress

In Hungarian, stress is always on the first syllable of a word. This is a significant difference from English, where stress can vary and often affects meaning. For example, in the word *szótár* (dictionary), the stress falls on *szó*. This consistent stress pattern simplifies pronunciation for learners.

Length

Hungarian distinguishes between short and long vowels and consonants, which can change the meaning of words. Long vowels are indicated by an acute accent (e.g., *á*, *é*) and are held about twice as long as their short counterparts. For consonants, doubling a letter indicates length (e.g., *tt*, *ss*). For example, *ház* (house) has a long *á*, while *haz* (home) has a short *a*. This is similar to the difference between English *bit* and *beat*.

Assimilation

Assimilation in Hungarian involves sounds changing to become more similar to neighboring sounds, a process familiar to English speakers in words like *impossible* (where the *n* of *in-* becomes an *m* before *p*). In Hungarian, this often occurs with consonants at word boundaries. For example, *egy* (a, an) before *kutya* (dog) becomes *egy kutya*, but the *g* assimilates to *k*, sounding like *ek kutya*.

Examples

- *szótár* - /ˈsoːtaːr/ - dictionary
- *ház* - /haːz/ - house
- *haz* - /haz/ - home
- *egy kutya* - /ɛk ˈkucɒ/ - a dog

Stress Rules

First Syllable Stress

In Hungarian, stress is consistently placed on the first syllable of a word. This rule is almost exceptionless, making Hungarian stress patterns highly predictable. Unlike English, where stress can fall on any syllable and often changes the meaning of words, Hungarian stress does not affect word meaning. For English speakers, this might feel

unusual because English often stresses the root or a significant syllable, which can be anywhere in the word.

For example, while an English word like “photograph” (/ˈfoʊ.tə.græf/) stresses the first syllable, “photography” (/fəˈtɑː.grə.fi/) stresses the second, and “photographic” (/ˌfoʊ.təˈgræf.ɪk/) the third. In contrast, Hungarian would stress the first syllable in all equivalent forms.

Examples

- *asztal* - /ˈɒstɒl/ - table
- *szerelem* - /ˈsɛrɛlɛm/ - love
- *kertész* - /ˈkɛrteːs/ - gardener
- *tanulás* - /ˈtɒnulɑːʃ/ - learning

Phonemic Length

In Hungarian, phonemic length plays a crucial role in distinguishing meaning. This feature affects both vowels and consonants, where the duration of the sound can change the word’s meaning entirely. For English speakers, understanding this aspect can be challenging as English does not use length contrastively to the same extent.

Vowels and Consonants

Vowels

Hungarian vowels can be either short or long, and this distinction is phonemic. Long vowels are approximately twice as long as their short counterparts. The English vowel in “see” (/iː/) can serve as a reference for a long vowel, while the vowel in “sit” (/ɪ/) is akin to a short vowel. However, in Hungarian, these lengths are more consistently applied across all vowels.

- Short vowels: /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/, /ö/, /ü/
- Long vowels: /aː/, /eː/, /iː/, /oː/, /uː/, /øː/, /yː/

Consonants

Similarly, certain consonants in Hungarian can also exhibit a length distinction. This primarily affects stops and fricatives. For example, the difference between a short /p/ and a long /pː/ is akin to the difference between the ‘p’ in “spin” and a prolonged version of that sound, although English does not use this for meaning differentiation.

- Short consonants: /p/, /t/, /k/, /b/, /d/, /g/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /f/, /v/

- Long consonants: /pː/, /tː/, /kː/, /bː/, /dː/, /gː/, /sː/, /zː/, /ʃː/, /ʒː/, /fː/, /vː/

Examples

- *ház* - /haːz/ - house
- *haz* - /haz/ - nation
- *itt* - /itː/ - here
- *it* - /it/ - drank
- *kár* - /kaːr/ - damage
- *kar* - /kar/ - arm

Digraphs

Consistent Sounds

In Hungarian, digraphs are combinations of two letters that represent a single sound. Understanding these is crucial for accurate pronunciation. Here's how to pronounce the common Hungarian digraphs:

- **cs**: Pronounced as /tʃ/, similar to the 'ch' in English "church". It's a voiceless palato-alveolar affricate.
- **dz**: This is /dz/, like the 'ds' in "adds". It's a voiced alveolar affricate.
- **dzs**: Pronounced /dʒ/, akin to the 'j' in "jam". It's a voiced palato-alveolar affricate.
- **gy**: This sound is /ɟ/, which does not exist in English. It's similar to the 'd' in "dude" but with the tongue positioned further back, close to the palate.
- **ly**: Pronounced /j/, like the 'y' in "yes". It's a palatal approximant.
- **ny**: This is /ɲ/, similar to the 'ny' in Spanish "señor". It's a palatal nasal, where the tongue touches the hard palate.
- **sz**: Pronounced /s/, like the 's' in "see". It's a voiceless alveolar fricative.
- **ty**: This sound is /c/, which does not exist in English. It's similar to the 't' in "tea" but with the tongue positioned further back, close to the palate.
- **zs**: Pronounced /ʒ/, like the 's' in "measure". It's a voiced postalveolar fricative.

Examples

- *csak* - /tʃɒk/ - only
- *dzsem* - /dzɛm/ - jam

- *gyümölcs* - /ɟymøltʃ/ - fruit
- *szép* - /seːp/ - beautiful
- *zsák* - /ʒaːk/ - sack

Assimilation

Assimilation in Hungarian involves one sound changing to become more like a neighboring sound. This process is common in spoken language and can affect both consonants and vowels, though we'll focus on consonants here.

Voicing Rules

In Hungarian, consonant assimilation often involves voicing. Voicing assimilation occurs when a voiceless consonant becomes voiced or vice versa, influenced by the voicing of an adjacent consonant. This typically happens across word boundaries or within compound words.

For English speakers, think of how "cats" /kæts/ becomes "dogs" /dɔgz/; the /s/ in "cats" is voiceless, while the /z/ in "dogs" is voiced. In Hungarian, this assimilation is more systematic:

- When a voiceless consonant precedes a voiced consonant, it may become voiced. For example, /t/ before /b/ might become /d/.
- Conversely, a voiced consonant may become voiceless before a voiceless consonant. For example, /d/ before /p/ might become /t/.

This rule applies particularly to the stops and fricatives, affecting sounds like /p, t, k, b, d, g/ and /f, s, ʃ, v, z, ʒ/.

Examples

- *házba* - /haːzba/ - into the house (voicing: /z/ remains voiced before /b/)
- *hatvan* - /hɒtvɒn/ - sixty (voicing: /t/ becomes voiceless before /v/)
- *szép kert* - /seːp kɛrt/ - beautiful garden (voicing: /p/ remains voiceless before /k/)
- *dob pont* - /dob pont/ - drum point (voicing: /b/ becomes voiceless before /p/)