

Serbian

An Essential Grammar

Lila Hammond

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Serbian

An Essential Grammar

Serbian: An Essential Grammar is an up to date and practical reference guide to the most important aspects of Serbian as used by contemporary native speakers of the language.

This book presents an accessible description of the language, focusing on real, contemporary patterns of use. The *Grammar* aims to serve as a reference source for the learner and user of Serbian irrespective of level, by setting out the complexities of the language in short, readable sections.

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- use of Cyrillic and Latin script in plentiful examples throughout
- a cultural section on the language and its dialects
- clear and detailed explanations of simple and complex grammatical concepts
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Lila Hammond has been teaching Serbian both in Serbia and the UK for over twenty-five years and presently teaches at the Defence School of Languages, Beaconsfield, UK.

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An Essential Grammar



Lila Hammond

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I dedicate this book to
Militca, Leo and Tara

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Preface

The purpose of this book is to offer the English-speaking student of Serbian a thorough and accessible overview of Serbian grammar.

Serbian is a complex and expressive language and the scope of this book is too narrow to allow for sufficient examples to facilitate a more profound comprehension and understanding of the language. It does however, strive to explain, as much as possible, the rules governing most linguistic and grammatical conditions and structures.

Serbian is not a language of simple constructions and straightforward expressions, and perhaps the most important piece of advice to the student would be to approach his or her study of this language with a curious and courageous mind.

It is a beautiful language and I compliment the student wishing to learn it.

Lila Hammond
London, 2005

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And finally, I wish to thank my editors, Sophie Oliver and James Folan for their patience, understanding, support and trust during the writing of this book.

Part I

The language and its dialects

Chapter I

Cultural, literary and linguistic background

Serbian belongs to the Slavonic group of languages, which, along with the Romance and Germanic languages, is one of the three largest groups of the Indo-European family of languages.

The Slavonic group of languages includes Polish, Czech and Slovak (belonging to the western group of Slavonic languages), Ukrainian, Belarus and Russian (belonging to the eastern group of Slavonic languages) and Slovenian, Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Bulgarian and Macedonian (belonging to the southern group of Slavonic languages).

In the sixth and seventh centuries, various Slavonic tribes, some of which were to become the Serbian nation, migrated from the north – Russia, Byelorussia and the Ukraine, where they shared the land with the eastern Slavs – and travelled to the Balkan peninsula and the region of Pannonia. At the time Bulgaria and the Byzantine Empire both wanted to occupy this region. The Slavs, themselves pagans, were also caught between the Western, Catholic, and the Eastern, Orthodox religions. In the ninth century, Serbian rulers, struggling for power, converted to Christianity and were baptised by priests from the Byzantine Empire. Different tribes joined together under the common Christian religion.

In the twelfth century, the founder of the most significant medieval Serbian dynasty, Stefan Nemanja, expanded his lands to include Kosovo and, further, to what is now the Montenegrin coast. Appointing his middle son, Stefan Nemanjić, a son-in-law of the Byzantine imperial family, to replace him, Nemanja joined his youngest son, Sava, a monk in the Orthodox faith, to become a monk himself. Stefan Nemanjić managed, through clever running of the state, to fend off Serbia's enemies. He managed to maintain good relations with both the West and the East and in the thirteenth century he received a royal crown from the Pope, which gave him the title of Stevan Prvovenčani, the 'first-crowned king' of Serbia.

His father, Stefan Nemanja, and brother, Sava, built the monastery of Hilandar on Mount Athos in Greece, which became the most prestigious

school for Serbian monks. This monastery is of great importance in the development of the Serbian church and Serbian culture.

With the appointment of Sava (who was proclaimed a saint upon his death) as archbishop in Nicaea, the centre for Greeks in Asia Minor, the links between the Serbian nation and the Orthodox tradition were further strengthened. On Sava's instruction the Byzantine code of church laws and rules for use by the clergy, as well as many medical and scientific writings, were translated. He founded the first Serbian hospitals (in Hilandar and Studenica) and was the founder of Serbian literature, having written, with his brother Stefan Nemanjić, the first original Serbian literary work, the *Vitae of St Simeon* (The Life of Stefan Nemanja, their father and founder of the dynasty). (St Sava's remains were burnt by the Turks four centuries later in Belgrade, where the temple of St Sava now stands.)

Although Sava's brother, Stefan Nemanjić, had been crowned by the Pope, he was under the influence of his brother and father and wanted to unify the Serbian state under the Orthodox religion. The Nemanja dynasty gradually succeeded in uniting all the Serbian lands and gave to their country a strong and united church, the Serbian Orthodox Church. Culturally very active, the kingdom and church had their own Slavonic liturgy and language (based on Old Slavonic). The translation of important Byzantine scrolls, liturgies, church laws, literary and architectural works was pursued and highly respected.

The Nemanja dynasty continued to rule the state, and under the rule of Stefan Dušan (1331–1355), its boundaries expanded southward to include not only Macedonia and Albania, but regions of the Byzantine Empire too. It covered the area from the Sava and Danube rivers down to the Gulf of Corinth, and became the leading power of the Balkan peninsula. And as Dušan elevated the Serbian archbishopric to the level of a Patriarchate, he was crowned the 'Emperor of the Serbs and Greeks'.

Dušan ruled the state and set up all the major state systems and judiciary based on the Byzantine model. And since some of his territories were under the rule of custom and had never been under Byzantine law, he adopted an entire code of laws, under the name of *Dušan's Code*, in an attempt to unify the territories and bridge the gap between the impoverished and the wealthy.

And, as had the rulers before him, Dušan also emulated Byzantine architecture and art, and the many monasteries and churches built in the Serbian state at the time are examples of a distinct Serbian Byzantine style in both these fields.

The Serbs were eventually conquered by the Turks in the fifteenth century. An event in history that is taken to mark the fall of the great Serbian Empire was the battle at Kosovo Polje in 1389. The lands were divided between the Turkish warlords, who recognised each religious

group as an administratively separate community, even though, in many ways, the Serbian nation was placed under pressure to abide by Muslim social order. From the middle of the fifteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century, during the Ottoman rule, great migrations of Serbs took place. Throughout this time, the Serbian Orthodox Church did much to give the Serbs a sense of unity and continuity. In two of the most important migrations that took place during this period the people were led by their patriarchs. When the Turkish government dissolved the Patriarchate of Peć in 1766, church authority was re-established with the Greek archbishops, thus gaining an international position. In 1832, the Serbian Church became autonomous. It did not unify into a Serbian Patriarchate until 1920 when the Serbs were united into one state.

After the elimination of the Patriarchate of Peć, the Turkish pashalic of Belgrade became the centre of Serbian culture and tradition. In 1804 the Serbs there rebelled against the janissaries and Turkish landowners. Led by Đorđe Petrović, known as Karađorđe, the rebels liberated the whole pashalic.

However, the war with the Turks continued, and in 1815 the new Serbian leader, Miloš Obrenović, signed a peace treaty with the Turks that brought an end to the struggle against the Turks in that area. The Serbs organised a state with a legal structure and a strong army, and, though still a client state of the Ottoman Empire, it had its autonomy.

The state expanded to include territories already liberated by Karađorđe.

While the Serbian people were fighting for an independent state from 1835 to 1878, their rulers were aware that they needed a massive action plan in order to recover their people and culture from the backwardness caused by centuries of slavery under the Turks. By the end of the 1830s the principality had its own constitution, followed by a *Civil Code* as Prince Miloš laid down the foundations of democracy by distributing land to the peasants. State management, culture and education were institutionalised, and in 1882, elementary education became obligatory. The Serbian Association of Scholars was founded as well as the National Museum and the Academy of Arts and Sciences. The Great School, founded in 1863, became a university in 1905. The economy and trade developed and the beginnings of industrialisation and banking also appeared. Talented people were sent to universities throughout Europe, returning as knowledgeable and well-educated Europeans. This striving for scientific and scholarly advancement continued later in the Republic of Yugoslavia. Among the scholars of these times was Nikola Tesla (the late nineteenth–early twentieth-century inventor in the field of electricity, a Serb originally from Croatia who later moved to the United States), and other experts in their field.

In 1918 the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was created. From 1929 it was called Yugoslavia.

Yugoslavia emerged from the Second World War with a completely new social structure. Led by the president of the state, Josip Broz Tito, it was initially a 'people's republic' and then a 'socialist republic', consisting of six republics (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia) and two autonomous provinces, Vojvodina and Kosovo. In the Yugoslavia prior to the war, the Serb, Croat and Slovene people were free to express and share their culture and faith. Postwar Yugoslavia saw a suppression of freedom in culture, also open expression of religious practice was not looked upon favourably.

Following Tito's death in 1980 and under pressure from the autonomous provinces (particularly Kosovo, which sought to be granted the status of a republic) Yugoslavia began to disintegrate into its constituent republics. A bloody civil war broke out in 1991, and the country was divided into separate states, with many Serbs living outside Serbia and Montenegro, the two states which remained together.

The language of the Slavs who migrated to the Balkans in the sixth and seventh centuries also underwent changes. As the Slavonic tribes migrated, the language of the southern Slavs changed from that spoken by the eastern Slavs. Though the languages remained essentially similar, the differences became distinctive when the south Slavs reached the Balkans and the Pannonia region, at which time some tribes travelled southeast, while others moved southwest. The differences in the interrogative pronoun 'What?' is a handy label for laying down the basic differences in what were to become the different languages and dialects spoken in the region today. Those who travelled southwest used **kaj/ kaj** or **ѡа/ѡа** to say 'What?' Those Slavs travelling southeast used the interrogative **што-шта/što-šta**.

When in the ninth century the Moravian ruler asked the Byzantine Emperor to send missionaries to convert the Slavs of the region to the Christian faith, the latter responded by sending the brothers Constantine (later called Cyril when he became a monk) and Methodius. They were asked to translate, on the basis of their knowledge of the Slavonic language spoken by a Macedonian tribe in the Salonika area, the most important Byzantine religious books. The language had no written form and the brothers had to invent one. The language which they created and translated into, Old Church Slavonic, was the first of the Slavonic languages to be used in literary and liturgical spheres.

In order to translate the works, the brothers used the Greek alphabet as the basis on which they invented letters to represent the sounds of the Slavonic language. Glagolitic, the alphabet invented by Cyril, had forty letters, a letter for each of the sounds. This alphabet was soon replaced by the Cyrillic alphabet, consisting of the Greek alphabet of

the period with fourteen letters added. In cultural terms, the invention of the alphabet was of great significance.

Slavic monasteries on Athos were among the main centres of translation. Translation constantly developed and enriched the literary Serbian Church Slavonic as many Slavic authors developed and practised the art of creating new words to express the abstract concepts they were translating into literary works.

Church Slavonic, with its local variants, facilitated further dissemination of the Orthodox faith. The works translated from Greek were quickly shared by all the countries of the Orthodox Slavic world and the languages of these countries, particularly Russian Church Slavonic, had a strong influence on Serbian Church Slavonic at the end of the eighteenth century.

During the rule of Karađorđe, many educated Serbs from Austria moved into Serbia. Among them was Dositej Obradović, a great scholar who spoke Latin, Greek, German, French, Italian and Russian. As soon as he heard of the liberation from the Turks, he returned to Serbia and met with Karađorđe. He believed that people had to be educated and enlightened. As Church Slavonic, which was interspersed with Russian, was too far removed from the living language of the people (most of whom were not able to understand the texts) Dositej wanted to bridge the gap between this church language and the people's language. Having been exposed to the European Enlightenment, he insisted that the written language be understood by everybody, including the uneducated. Soon the Russian literary language was no longer used by Serbian authors and Church Slavonic was used only in theological and liturgical books. Dositej became the minister of culture and fought to have schools built and for both men and women to attend.

The great Serbian philologist Vuk Karadžić (1787–1864) played a crucial role in the development of the alphabet. He travelled around the country, collecting folk stories and sayings, and incorporated this spoken language into the written literary form. He attempted to create a completely phonetic alphabet, where one sound of the spoken language was represented by one symbol in the written form. With this in mind, he discarded some symbols he felt did not correspond to a particular sound, and introduced six new ones, in accordance with the principle, 'a letter for every sound':

ђ њ љ ћ ђ џ ј

џ љ њ џ џ ј

In 1818 he wrote the Serbian dictionary in the language spoken by the people. However, Karadžić's own language was of the Ijekavian dialect, spoken in western Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina,

and Montenegro and among Serbs in Croatia and Dalmatia. The literary language until then was the Ekavian Štokavian dialect, spoken in the northeastern regions, as that was where the most significant cultural, political and economic centres of the Serbs were located. The Serbs from these areas were not prepared to give up their Ekavian for an Ijekavian dialect, and Serbia and Vojvodina retained their dialect. The Croats and Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina, on the other hand, accepted his reforms completely, as did the Serbs living in Montenegro.

In spite of these differences, Karadžić's reforms paved the way for a spontaneous development of the literary language through its relationship with the spoken word. The language expanded as new words were created from existing roots and nuances of meaning acquired. Words of Latin and Greek origin were adopted as the Serbian language became increasingly cosmopolitan. During the twentieth century, many French and English words were also adopted.

In the meantime, the Croats, who had during the fourteenth century, while under the influence of the western world and Catholicism, adopted the Latin alphabet, had in the nineteenth century, added letters for palatal and palatalised consonants from Czech and Polish. Now this alphabet, too, was phonetic (with the exception of *lj*, *nj* and *dž*, where two letters represent one sound).

By the nineteenth century, realising that their languages had a lot in common, the Croats and Serbs unified their languages under the name of Serbo-Croatian. However, wanting secession from Yugoslavia, during the twentieth century, Croatian linguists began to emphasise the differences between the languages, proclaiming Croatian as a separate language. New words were coined to prove that differences existed. With the break-up of Yugoslavia at the end of the twentieth century came the fragmentation of the unified language, Serbo-Croatian. The Croatian language quickly developed as a separate language in relation to Serbian, with new words speedily introduced to mark its differences. Serbian, on the other hand, remained unchanged.

Chapter 2

Dialects

Three distinctive dialects are spoken in the various regions of former Yugoslavia. The dialects refer to the different ways the word ‘what’ is spoken:

- 1 **кајкавски/kajkavski** – the Kajkavian dialect – **кај/kaj** (what)
This dialect is mostly spoken in Slavonia and northwestern Croatia and near the Slovenian border where it closely resembles the Slovenian language.
- 2 **чакавски/čakavski** – the Čakavian dialect – **ча/ča** (what)
This dialect is spoken in northern parts of Croatia and Istria, and along the Adriatic coast and its islands.
- 3 **штокавски/štokavski** – the Štokavian dialect – **што/što** or **шта/šta** (what)
This is the most widely spoken dialect in the region. It is spoken by all Serbs, Croats, Bosnians and Montenegrins, except in those regions already mentioned.

The Štokavian dialect has three sub-dialects that developed from three different pronunciations of the Old Slavonic **јат**, the long vowel **ě** (distinct from the ordinary vowel **e**, which still exists as the **e** sound).

The three sub-dialects are:

- 1 **икавски/ikavski** (Ikavian)
Spoken in western Vojvodina, western Bosnia and Herzegovina, western Croatia and northwestern parts of the Adriatic.
- 2 **ијекавски/ijekavski** (Ijekavian)
Spoken in western Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, the southern Adriatic coast and eastern Bosnia. The Croatian and Bosnian languages are of the Ijekavian dialect, written in the Latin alphabet.
- 3 **екавски/ekavski** (Ekavian)
Spoken in Serbia and Vojvodina, this is the dialect of the Serbian language which generally uses the Cyrillic alphabet.

The vowel **ě** is pronounced as follows in each dialect:

Ikavian – **и/i**

млеко **mleko** milk

вриме **vrimе** time

Ijekavian – **је, ије/ije**

млијеко **mlijeko** milk

вријеме **vrijeme** time

Ekavian – **е/e**

млеко **mleko** milk

време **vreme** time

The above differences in pronunciation apply only to words where the original **јat** sound existed and not whenever the vowel **e** appears. The word **пет/pet** (five), for example, is pronounced the same in all three sub-dialects.

Part II

Alphabet, pronunciation and stress

Chapter 3

Alphabet

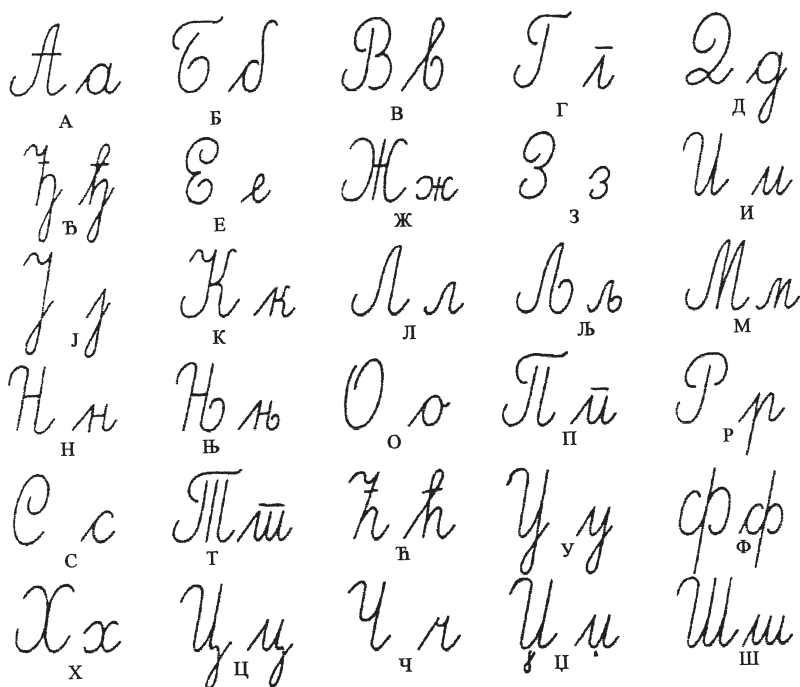
The Cyrillic alphabet, **ћирилица/ćirilica**, and the Latin alphabet, **латиница/latinica**, are the two alphabets in use in Serbian. They both contain the same thirty letters, though not in the same order.

The Cyrillic alphabet, **ћирилица/ćirilica**, is based on Greek and was adopted by the Serbs during the Byzantine era. The Latin alphabet, **латиница/latinica**, adopted by the Serbs living in the western parts of the country, in what was to become Croatia, in the fourteenth century, is the same as the one used in English, with the addition of five new letters and eight new sounds.

The Cyrillic alphabet:

Italics			Latin equivalent	
А	а	<i>A, a</i>	A	Assam
Б	б	<i>Б, б</i>	B	bench
В	в	<i>В, в</i>	V	victim
Г	г	<i>Г, г</i>	G	good
Д	д	<i>Д, д</i>	D	desk
Ђ	ђ	<i>Ђ, ђ</i>	Đ	due
Е	е	<i>Е, е</i>	E	let
Ж	ж	<i>Ж, ж</i>	Ž	pleasure
З	з	<i>З, э</i>	Z	Zen
И	и	<i>И, и</i>	I	he
Ј	ј	<i>Ј, ј</i>	J	yoyo
К	к	<i>К, к</i>	K	club
Л	л	<i>Л, л</i>	L	liver
Љ	љ	<i>Љ, љ</i>	Lj	million
М	м	<i>М, м</i>	M	man
Н	н	<i>Н, н</i>	N	no
Њ	њ	<i>Њ, њ</i>	Nj	minion
О	о	<i>О, о</i>	O	operate
П	п	<i>П, п</i>	P	pen
Р	р	<i>Р, р</i>	R	Ferrero
С	с	<i>С, с</i>	S	stop
Т	т	<i>Т, т</i>	T	top
Ћ	ћ	<i>Ћ, ћ</i>	Ć	tube
У	у	<i>У, у</i>	U	room
Ф	ф	<i>Ф, ф</i>	F	futon
Х	х	<i>Х, х</i>	H	Henry
Ц	ц	<i>Ц, ц</i>	C	lots
Ч	ч	<i>Ч, ч</i>	Č	chocolate
Џ	џ	<i>Џ, џ</i>	Dž	juke-box
Ш	ш	<i>Ш, ш</i>	Š	shoulder

Note: There are two possible forms of Cyrillic **г** (the letter g) – one with a crossbar, one without. There are also two possible forms of Cyrillic **д** (the letter d) – one with a 'tail' going up: *ђ*, and one with a 'tail' going down: *g*.



Нашао сам пса.

Нашао сам пса./Našao sam psa.

I found the dog.

It is important that the cursive or hand-written Cyrillic form is learnt properly. The letters are distinctive in form, and each is connected to another in an elaborate manner. Note the crossbar above Г (G), П (P), Т (T). A horizontal bar is often written under Ш (Š) as well.

The Latin alphabet:

		Cyrillic equivalent	
A	a	А	Assam
B	b	Б	bench
C	c	Ц	lots
Č	č	Ч	chocolate
Ć	ć	Ћ	tube
D	d	Д	desk
Dž	dž	Џ	juke-box
Đ	đ	Ђ	due
E	e	Е	let
F	f	Ф	futon
G	g	Г	good
H	h	Х	Henry
I	i	И	He
J	j	Ј	yoyo
K	k	К	club
L	l	Л	liver
Lj	lj	Љ	million
M	m	М	man
N	n	Н	no
Nj	nj	Њ	minion
O	o	О	operate
P	p	П	pen
R	r	Р	Ferrero
S	s	С	stop
Š	š	Ш	shoulder
T	t	Т	top
U	u	У	room
V	v	В	victim
Z	z	З	Zen
Ž	ž	Ж	pleasure

Note: The hand-written forms of the Latin letters, with the addition of **Ž ž, Đ đ, Ć ć, Č č** and **Š š**, are the same as those used in English. The English letters **q, w, x** and **y** do not exist in the Serbian alphabet.

Chapter 4

Pronunciation

Every letter is pronounced.

Consonants are pronounced similarly to English, with the following exceptions:

- 1 The four consonants written as in English but with only one pronunciation as compared to several in English, are:

ц/c is never pronounced as in 'carry' but always as in 'Tzar'

г/g is never pronounced as in 'giant', but always as in 'good'

й is never pronounced as in 'jade' but always as in 'yes'

с/s is never pronounced as in 'season' or 'shower', but always as in 'see'

- 2 The eight consonants which do not appear in English are:

ђ đ due

ж ž pleasure

љ lj million
(The two sounds which form this letter are pronounced simultaneously, and not separately.)

њ nj minion
(The two sounds which form this letter are pronounced simultaneously, and not separately.)

ћ ć chase

ч č chocolate

џ dž juke-box

ш š champagne

- 3 The *dental* sounds, where the tongue is pressed against the back of the teeth, are **т/т**, **д/д**, **з/з**, **с/с**, **ц/ц**, **р/р**, **л/л** and **н/н**.
- 4 The letter **т/т** is dropped before the letter **ц/ц** – **отац/отас** (nominative) – **оца/оса** (genitive). Both **т/т** and **д/д** are usually dropped when they occur between two consonants of which the first may be **с/с**, **ш/ш**, **з/з**, **ж/ж**, followed by **б/б**, **к/к**, **л/л**, **љ/љ**, **м/м**, **н/н** or **њ/њ**.

болестан (m) – **болесна** (f) **bolestan** (m) – **bolesna** (f) ill
жалостан (m) – **жалосна** (f) **žalostan** (m) – **žalosna** (f) sad

- 5 The consonant **р/р** can occur:
- on its own: **оркестар/orkestar** (orchestra), **осигурати/osigurati** (to insure), **Оливера/Olivera** (female name, Olivera);
 - before or after another consonant: **наградити/nagraditi** (to award), **преглед/pregled** (review, examination);
 - between two consonants: **мртав/mrtav** (dead), **пргав/prgav** (short-tempered), etc., where it acts as a vowel.
- 6 The following are some of the consonant clusters that can stand together at the end of a word in modern Serbian. The first four of these are considered in traditional Serbian to be the only consonant clusters with which a word can end:

-ст	-st	храст/hrast	oak
-шт	-št	плашт/plašt	sheet
-зд	-zd	грозд/grozd	grape
-жд	-žd	вожд/vožd	duke
-рк	-rk	парк/park	park
-нц	-nc	принц/princ	prince
-нт	-nt	матурант/maturant	graduate
-ск	-sk	диск/disk	disc

- 7 All vowels are pronounced:

а	a	Assam
е	e	set
и	i	she
о	o	occult
у	u	room

4.1 Consonants

Consonants are divided into two basic categories depending on the degree of obstruction or restriction in the airflow during articulation of the consonant within the mouth cavity:

- (a) Obstruent consonants – formed with restricted air flow:
all consonants excluding those under (b)
- (b) Resonant consonants – formed with the air flowing uninterruptedly from the vocal cords to the mouth or nose in a continuous sound, similar to vowels:

в/v, р/r, ј/j, л/l, љ/lj, н/n, њ/nj, м/m

Further classification is based on the movement of the lips or the position of the tongue inside the mouth in relation to the teeth and the palate when air flows into the mouth and through the throat:

- 1 Labial consonants: **б/b, п/p, ф/f** are formed with the lips pressed against each other or the upper teeth pressed against the lower lip.
- 2 Dental consonants: **д/d, т/t, з/z, с/s, ц/c, н/n, р/r, л/l** are formed with the tongue pressing against the teeth.
- 3 Palatal consonants: **ђ/đ, ђ/đ, ч/č, ђ/đž, ж/ž, ш/š** are formed with the tongue pressed against the palate.
- 4 Velar consonants: **г/g, к/k, х/h** are formed with the tongue pressed further back against the palate, creating a more guttural sound.

The twenty-five consonants are classified in the following groups:

- 1 Voiced and unvoiced.
- 2 Soft (palatal and palatalised) and hard (non-palatal and non-palatalised).

Not all consonants can stand next to each other and there are certain rules applicable to the clustering of consonants. In such instances, either consonants mutate or a fleeting *a* is introduced to separate them. Mutation of consonants occurs through consonantal assimilation or contraction.

4.1.1 Voiced and unvoiced consonants

When in pronouncing a consonant, the vocal cords are tense and vibrating, the consonant is said to be *voiced*. When the vocal cords are