

When Slavic speakers a millennium ago dropped high lax vowels (jers), the variety of consonant clusters increased sharply. In the Polish area, jers were dropped with particular consistency, and this has given Polish a reputation for unusual and difficult consonant clusters. I will argue that this reputation is exaggerated. Limiting our attention to noncontinuant obstruents in syllable onsets, we find Polish words beginning various combinations of obstruent stops, e.g., *kpić* ‘mock’, *dbać* ‘take care’, *ptak* ‘bird’, *kto* ‘who’, *gdakać* ‘cackle’, *tkać* ‘weave’, and *gbur* ‘boor’. But such clusters occur also in other Slavic languages. What is unique to Polish are onset clusters consisting of geminate affricates, instanced by *czczy* ‘vain’, *dźdźu* ‘rain’ (gen.), and their derivatives. Dropped jers are responsible—indirectly—for these clusters. *Czczy* and *dźdźu* derive from earlier *tščy* and *džžŷu*. The jer dropped, resulting in *tščy*, and *džžŷu*. This sequence of articulations, stop–fricative–stop, is the same as in *kształt* ‘shape’ and *pszczola* ‘bee’, and the fact that *pszczola* replaced OPo. *pczola* suggests that Polish speakers find stop–fricative–stop more pronounceable than stop–stop. But *tšč-* and *džžŷ-* differ from *ksz-* and *pszc-* in being entirely coronal, perhaps homorganic. “Perhaps”, because coronal stops may differ among themselves in being either dental (+anterior) or alveolar (-anterior), and dental [t] and [d] may or not assimilate to alveolar [t_≥] and [d_≥] before alveolar [š] and [ž]. The issue here is how stop-fricative clusters as in *trzech* ‘three’ and *drzemka* ‘nap’ contrast with affricates as in *Czech* ‘Czech person’ and *dżem* ‘jam’. Zagorska-Brooks (1964) argues that they contrast primarily by the length of the fricative element, which she found to be 65% longer in the cluster than in the affricate. But a dental/alveolar contrast in the initial occlusion is also possible. *Trz* and *drz* contrasting with *cz* and *dż* mainly by the length of the fricative is consistent with this contrast being neutralized in positions not before a vowel, where, for example, *wietrzny* ‘windy’ is homophonous with *wieczny* ‘eternal’ and *rozpatrz* ‘examine’ with *rozpacz* ‘despair’. This neutralization would explain why ‘vain’ with original *tsz* came to be spelled *cz* (for ‘rain’ there was no spelling change because the *d-ż* cluster and *dż* affricate are spelled the same). But did in fact the /tš/ and /dž/ clusters in these forms change into /č/ and /ž/ affricates in Old Polish? Why would Polish speakers replace pronounceable clusters with less pronounceable ones? For Tytus Benni (1877–1935) this was a spelling change that did not reflect a change in pronunciation. He wrote, “We in fact pronounce *džžŷu* and *tščy*.” But spelling plays an important role in the speech habits of literate speakers, and spelling pronunciations have a way of displacing traditional pronunciations. This seems to have happened with *czczy* and *dźdźu*: my ten subjects all pronounced these forms with two affricates separated by a release, which was a voiceless vowel following voiceless *cz* but a voiced one following voiced *dż*. Polish speakers can pronounce “*czyczy*” and “*dźydźu*” and deny there is a vowel between the two affricates because Polish has penultimate accent, and if there were a vowel there, it would be accented. They say “*czyczy*” and “*dźydźu*”, not “*czyczy*” and “*dźydźu*”. To state it in derivational terms, the extra vowel in “*czyczy*” and “*dźydźu*” is introduced by what may be called a phonetic implementation rule, which applies later in the phonological derivation than the rule which assigns the accent.

Polish inherited one other root with the same problematic combination of a jer and multiple coronal consonants: *čbšć*- ‘honor’, as in the verb form ‘I honor’, which is spelled *czczę*. It too will be commented on, time permitting.