

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’, *dżdżu* ‘rain’ (gen.), and their derivatives. Dropped jers are responsible—indirectly—for these clusters. *Czczy* and *dżdżu* 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<sub>≥</sub>] and [d<sub>≥</sub>] 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 *dżdżu*: 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 “dzydżu” 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 “dzydży”, not “czyczy” and “dzydżu”. To state it in derivational terms, the extra vowel in “czyczy” and “dzydżu” 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.