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HUNGARIAN LESSON

# Hungarian Alphabet 1 · Chapter 13 · The Big Swap

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# Hungarian Alphabet 1

Chapter 13 · The Big Swap: R, S, SZ, ZS

## The Big Swap — s Says "sh" and sz Says "s"

This is the chapter English speakers remember. In Hungarian, **s** is said "**sh**" and **sz** is said "**s**", the opposite of what the letters suggest. Add the tapped **r** and the "zh" sound **zs**, and you have the four letters that make Hungarian look different from other languages. By the end, you'll be able to read *szia* ("hi") and *köszönöm* ("thank you").

## The Four Letters

# S

## S s

said "**sh**", as in *ship*

respelled **sh**

**Remember:** a lone *s* is "sh".

*sör* = SHEUR, *piros* = PIH-rosh.

# SZ

## Sz sz

said "**s**", as in *sun*

respelled **s**

**Remember:** *sz* is the plain

English "s". *szó* = SOH, *busz* = BUS.

# ZS

## Zs zs

said "**zh**", as in *measure* or  
*vision*

respelled **zh**

**Remember:** *zs* is the voiced partner of *s* (sh → zh). *zseb* = ZHEHB.

# r

## R r

a **tapped or rolled "r"**, as in  
Scottish *very*

a flick of the tongue tip

**Tip:** touch the tongue tip just  
behind the upper teeth, once

(a tap) or several times (a roll).  
Never the English curled "r".  
Scottish speakers already have  
this sound.

## ✖ The Four Sounds in a Grid

*Hungarian has two "hissing" sounds, each with a voiced and a voiceless version. Seeing them in a grid helps:*

|                                | VOICELESS (NO BUZZ)      | VOICED (BUZZ)                |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| "sh"-type (tongue pulled back) | S = "sh" ( <i>ship</i> ) | ZS = "zh" ( <i>measure</i> ) |
| "s"-type (tongue tip forward)  | SZ = "s" ( <i>sun</i> )  | Z = "z" ( <i>zoo</i> )       |

### A Memory Trick

Count the letters: **one letter, s, is the "sh" sound**, and **two letters, sz, make the plain "s"**. It feels backwards, so practise a few pairs aloud until it's automatic: *sör* (SHEUR) against *szív* (SEEV, "heart"), *sok* (SHOK) against *szó* (SOH). If you read a lone s as "s", a Hungarian listener will hear a different sound, so this is worth getting right early.

## 📖 Read It — New Words

*You can read all of these, and they include the greetings you've been waiting for. Stress is on the first syllable.*

| # | HUNGARIAN | SAY IT       | ENGLISH              | NOTE              |
|---|-----------|--------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | szia      | SIH-aw       | hi; bye (informal)   | SZ = s            |
| 2 | köszönöm  | KEU-seu-neum | thank you            | sz = s; three ö's |
| 3 | kérem     | KAY-rehm     | please; here you are | tapped r          |

| #  | HUNGARIAN | SAY IT    | ENGLISH         | NOTE                  |
|----|-----------|-----------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| 4  | szép      | SAYP      | beautiful; nice | <i>sz = s</i>         |
| 5  | szó       | SOH       | word            | <i>sz = s</i>         |
| 6  | szoba     | SO-baw    | room            | <i>sz = s</i>         |
| 7  | asztal    | AWS-tawl  | table           | <i>sz = s, then t</i> |
| 8  | busz      | BUS       | bus             | <i>sz at the end</i>  |
| 9  | sárga     | SHAHR-gaw | yellow          | <i>s = sh</i>         |
| 10 | sapka     | SHAWP-kaw | cap, hat        | <i>s = sh</i>         |
| 11 | zseb      | ZHEHB     | pocket          | <i>zs = zh</i>        |
| 12 | rózsa     | ROH-zhaw  | rose            | <i>zs = zh</i>        |



## Polite Words You Can Use Today

| HUNGARIAN | SAY IT       | ENGLISH               | USE                                      |
|-----------|--------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------------|
| szia      | SIH-aw       | hi; bye               | <i>informal, with friends and family</i> |
| köszönöm  | KEU-seu-neum | thank you             | <i>the standard "thank you"</i>          |
| köszi     | KEU-sih      | thanks                | <i>casual, like "cheers"</i>             |
| kérem     | KAY-rehm     | please                | <i>when asking for something</i>         |
| tessék    | TEHSH-shayk  | here you are; pardon? | <i>double s = a long "sh"</i>            |

## HUNGARIAN

## SAY IT

## ENGLISH

## USE

igen · nem

IH-gehn · NEHM

yes · no

Chapters 4–5

**Real Hungarian Tip — "Szia" Means Both Hello and Goodbye**

**Szia** (SIH-aw) is the everyday informal greeting, and it works for *both* arriving and leaving. For one person you know well, it's all you need. It's also a little more casual than English "hello", so with a stranger or in a formal setting, you'd use a longer greeting, which you'll meet in the conversation courses.

**Real Hungarian Tip — Szabó**

**Szabó** (SAW-boh) means "tailor" and is one of the most common Hungarian surnames. It's a handy test of the swap: sz = "s", so it's SAW-boh, not "shaw-boh". Hungarians also put the surname **first**: *Szabó Anna* is "Anna Szabó".

 **Mini-Dialogs**
**① Hi and Thanks — Szia! Köszönöm!****A:**

Szia!

SIH-aw!

Hi!

**B:**

Szia! Tea?

SIH-aw! TEH-aw?

Hi! Tea?

**A:**

Nem, kávé, kérem.

NEHM, KAH-vay, KAY-rehm.

No, coffee, please.

**B:**

Tessék!

**② The Room — Hol a szoba?****A:**

Hol a szoba?

HOL aw SO-baw?

Where is the room?

**B:**

Ott.

OTT.

There.

**A:**

És az asztal?

AYSH awz AWS-tawl?

And the table?

**B:**

A szobában.

*TEHSH-shayk!*

Here you are!

**A:**

Köszönöm!

*KEU-seu-neum!*

Thank you!

*aw SO-baw-bahn.*

In the room.

### ③ A Yellow Bus? — Sárga a busz?

**A:**

Sárga a busz?

*SHAHR-gaw aw BUS?*

Is the bus yellow?

**B:**

Nem, kék!

*NEHM, KAYK!*

No, blue!

**A:**

Szép!

*SAYP!*

Nice!

### Review: Chapter 12 Words

Cover the English and read these again: fehér (white) · fekete (black) · vonat (train) · vendég (guest) · hold (moon) · tehén (cow) · mozi (cinema) · metró (metro) · ember (person) · levél (letter) · zene (music) · zöld (green).



## Try It Yourself — Gyakorlatok

*Say each answer out loud first, then click to check.*

1. What sounds do S, SZ, ZS and Z make?

▼ Show answer

s = "sh" · sz = "s" · zs = "zh" (as in *measure*) · z = "z".

2. Read aloud and translate: szia · szó · szoba

▼ Show answer

SIH-aw (hi; bye) · SOH (word) · SO-baw (room)

3. Read aloud and translate: sárga · sapka · zseb

▼ Show answer

SHAHR-gaw (yellow) · SHAWP-kaw (cap) · ZHEHB (pocket)

4. Say "thank you" and "hi / bye" (informal) in Hungarian.

▼ Show answer

Köszönöm (KEU-seu-neum) · Szia (SIH-aw).

5. Why is **asztal** said "AWS-tawl" and not "ASH-tawl"?

▼ Show answer

Because **sz** is the plain "s" sound. (A lone *s* would be "sh".)

6. Add "in" to **szoba** and **zseb**.

▼ Show answer

**szobában** (back vowels; final *a* lengthens) · **zsebben** (front vowel *e* → -ben, and the *b* doubles: zseb + ben).

### Coming Up in Chapter 14

Three more letters: **c** (said "ts"), **cs** (said "ch") and **j** (said "y"). With them you'll be able to read *jó reggelt* ("good morning"), *kicsi* (small) and *cipő* (shoe).