Hard and Soft Consonants

Why do we need to classify consonants as “hard” or “soft”? Which consonants are “soft”? Which consonants can be either “hard” or “soft”?

In Czech, some consonants are classified as “hard” and others as “soft”. Since declensional patterns split into so-called “hard” and “soft” varieties, it is necessary to remember which consonants count as “soft”.

Almost all the soft consonants are written with a diacritic mark — called a háček — over them. The háček consonants are: Č č, Ř ř, Š š, Ž ž, Ň ň, Ń ř, Ť ť, ř. The other two consonants that count as “soft” are c and j. From a naïve English perspective, then, the “soft” consonants are the funny consonants (plus c and j).

All other consonants are classified as “hard”. There are, however, some consonants that can be ambiguous with regard to hardness or softness — that is, they are mostly “hard”, but they can be “soft” in certain words. Some of the most common consonants that can be “soft” are l (almost always soft when part of the agentive suffix -tel: učitel, podnikatel) and s (as an ending in a proper name: Klaus, Gates).

Summary of consonants

“Soft”: č, ř, š, ž, ň, ř, ň, t, c, j
Sometimes “soft”: l, s