

Assimilation in English

An interesting observation of assimilation rules is evidenced in the formation of plurals and the past tense in English. When pluralizing nouns, the last letter is pronounced as either [s], [z], or [ɪz]. When forming past tenses of verbs, the -ed ending is pronounced as either [t], [d], [ɪd], or [ə]. If you were to sort words into three columns, you would be able to tell why certain words are followed by certain sounds:

| Plural nouns | | |
|--------------|--------|----------|
| /s/ | /z/ | /ɪz/ |
| cats | dads | churches |
| tips | bibs | kisses |
| laughs | dogs | judges |
| Past Tense | | |
| /t/ | /d/ | /ɪd/ |
| kissed | loved | patted |
| washed | jogged | waded |
| coughed | teased | seeded |

Hopefully, you can determine which consonants produce which sounds. In the nouns, /s/ is added after voiceless consonants, and /z/ is added after voiced consonants. /ɪz/ is added after sibilants. For the verbs, /t/ is added after voiceless consonants, and /d/ is added after voiced consonants. /ɪd/ is added after alveolar stops. The great thing about this is that no one ever taught you this in school. But thanks to linguistics, you now know why there are different sounds (because of assimilation rules, the consonants become more like their neighboring consonants.)