

Plurals and Past Tenses

Nouns to which you add <i>-z</i>		Nouns to which you add <i>-iz</i>	Nouns to which you add <i>-s</i>
<i>day</i>	<i>room</i>	<i>lunch</i>	<i>cat</i>
<i>bug</i>	<i>law</i>	<i>judge</i>	<i>rat</i>
<i>pear</i>	<i>hen</i>	<i>dish</i>	<i>shape</i>
<i>bird</i>	<i>bell</i>	<i>horse</i>	<i>rock</i>
<i>pig</i>	<i>tree</i>	<i>bus</i>	<i>cup</i>
<i>cloud</i>	<i>lie</i>	<i>bush</i>	<i>goat</i>
<i>star</i>	<i>dove</i>	<i>wish</i>	<i>graph</i>
<i>spoon</i>	<i>crew</i>	<i>kiss</i>	<i>myth</i>
<i>cow</i>	<i>toe</i>	<i>watch</i>	<i>snake</i>
<i>rib</i>		<i>breeze</i>	
		<i>box</i>	
		<i>fuse</i>	

Verbs to which you add <i>-d</i>	Verbs to which you add <i>-id</i>	Verbs to which you add <i>-t</i>
<i>cry</i>	<i>sound</i>	<i>stomp</i>
<i>climb</i>	<i>wait</i>	<i>jump</i>
<i>play</i>	<i>shout</i>	<i>walk</i>
<i>smile</i>	<i>raid</i>	<i>flip</i>
<i>rob</i>	<i>treat</i>	<i>laugh</i>
<i>hug</i>	<i>knead</i>	

How do English speakers “know” this? Consider the following four hypotheses.

- Hypothesis A. They memorize the plural form for every noun they come across, and the past tense form for every verb they come across.
- Hypothesis B. They learn the plural form of a noun and the past tense form of a verb on the basis of spelling. For instance, they learn that nouns that end with the letter *p* form the plural by adding *-s*, and they learn that verbs that end with the letter *b* form the past tense by adding *-d*.
- Hypothesis C. They know that the sound (rather than the letter) in which the noun or verb ends determines the pronunciation of the plural or past tense ending. They have thus memorized a list of English speech sounds that will be followed by the plural ending *-s*, another list that will be followed by *-z*, and a third list that will be followed by *-iz*. Similarly, they have memorized a list of sounds that will be followed by the past tense ending *-t*, another list that will be followed by *-d*, and a third list that will be followed by *-id*.
- Hypothesis D. They know that if the noun ends in a sound of a certain type, the plural ending will be *-s*, that if it ends in another type of sound it will be *-z*, and that if it ends in a sound of a third type it will be *-iz*. Similarly, they know that if the verb ends in a sound of a certain type, the past tense ending will be *-t*, that if it ends in another type of sound it will be *-d*, and that if it ends in a sound of a third type it will be *-id*. The speakers have not memorized three arbitrary lists of speech sounds for these purposes; rather, they learn which sound types (or classes) are relevant.

Hypothesis A seems reasonable — good enough for government work, as they say. After all, you have to memorize such “irregular” plurals and past tenses as *children*, *feet*, *moose*, *went*, *drank*, and *flew*. So what’s wrong with it?

Hypothesis B seems to do the trick — at first. It should be easy to figure out what’s wrong with this one. Here’s a hint: what about nouns that end in *e* or *h*?

Hypothesis C looks more like the real deal. But there are a few subtle things wrong with it.

This leaves us with Hypothesis D. But it’s not just the process of elimination that makes it the correct choice; after all, we could have come up with a whole bunch of crazy hypotheses to add to our list. So what’s right about this one? Anything wrong with it? (Hint: there is.)