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previously responded to a question from a reader of this column concerning the pronunciation of *straight* as *shtraight*.

The same correspondent also asked about two aspects of the pronunciation of the word *text*: specifically, when it is used as noun, why do many speakers pronounce the plural form *texts* as *textes*, and when it is used as a verb, why do some speakers fail to add the past tense ending *ed*, and just say *text* as the past tense, rather than *texted*?

With the plural form of the noun, and also the third person singular present tense of the verb (eg, *she texts*), we meet a relatively unusual cluster of consonants at the end of the word: /ksts/ (letters between two slashes show pronunciations).

Across languages, long sequences of consonant sounds are rare – for example, te reo Māori allows only single consonants (remembering that the spellings *ng* and *wh* represent single sounds). English is unusual in allowing up to three consonant sounds at the beginning of a word (*splice*, *street*) and up



The sound of texts

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to four at the end (*adjuncts*, *twelfths*). However, sequences this long are not found in many words.

The /ksts/ at the end of *texts* is a particularly uncomfortable sequence because it has an alternation between sounds with types of articulation: stop consonants (/k/, /t/) and fricative consonants (the two /s/ sounds).

Indeed, a search of one of the dictionaries that I often access in my research gives only three English words

that end in such a sequence – *texts* and the related words *contexts* and *pretexts*.

So why do speakers cope with this unusual sequence by adding a vowel? Researchers have looked at how English speakers deal with unfamiliar consonant sequences found in words from other languages, such as /zv/ at the beginning of a word, which is unusual in English, but not in Czech.

One strategy is to insert a short unstressed vowel between the consonants. This seems to be the case in *textes*. A plural ending spoken in this way already exists in English, in words like

dishes, *churches*, or *garages* (and note that in this last case, while the spelling adds -s, the pronunciation adds a vowel too).

It is interesting, though, that while this plural *es* form in *dishes*, etc, involves a vowel and a /z/ sound, the *es* in *textes* tends to have a vowel and an /s/ sound. This supports the idea that speakers are not just applying the plural found in *dishes* to make a plural form of *text*, but are using the strategy of adding a short vowel to break an awkward sequence of consonants.

An alternative explanation might be that *texts* with a short vowel and a final /z/ might be confusable with *texters*. These two explanations are not mutually exclusive.

Although *texted* as the past tense of *text* should not cause any pronunciation problems, pronunciation might nevertheless be part of the explanation as to why speakers sometimes drop the *-ed*.

First, the final /t/ of *text* is frequently dropped in speech, especially when the next word starts with a consonant. For instance, *text me* might be said as if it were spelled *tex me*. Second, /t/ is a possible pronunciation for the *ed* ending. This includes the past tense of verbs ending in /ks/, and usually spelled with a final -x, such as *fix* or *annex* – so *fixed* has a final /kst/ sequence.

For a combination of these reasons, perhaps the /kst/ sequence at the end of *text* already makes this word sound like a past tense form that needs no additional *ed*.

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THE IRISH TIMES

China tightens grip on HK press

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

Apple Daily, the vibrant tabloid that is probably the last effective voice of the free press in Hong Kong, has spoken its last, shut down its press, and closed its website. It published what the staff referred to as the “obituary edition” shortly after police froze its accounts, raided its offices, trawling through reporters’ notebooks and computers, and arrested senior editors.

The closure confirms all the fears of human rights and opposition campaigners about the extensive reach of the national security law imposed on Hong Kong by Beijing last year. Freedom is being extinguished in the former British colony step by step, betraying the promises

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made when China took it back in 1997. “One country, two systems” is what Beijing promised Hong Kong. One country, one system – one totalitarian system – is what is being delivered.

Apple Daily founder Jimmy Lai is in jail and in last week’s newsroom raid two executives and three editors were arrested. In an editorial last week the paper warned that Beijing was in effect killing off the golden goose, the essence of what made Hong Kong precious. “Under the chaos it is in, Hong Kong still needs the truth, and freedom of speech of the press. Without freedom of the press, Hong Kong will lose its greatest institutional edge, which is also the greatest appeal to investors.”