Morphs and Allomorphs

Morpheme: a minimal unit of meaning or grammatical function (divided into free and bound morpheme, and into derivational and functional morphemes.)

Morph: an actual form used as part of a word, representing one variation of a morpheme. When we think of morphs, we also consider the phonetic representation.

Allomorph: a set of closely related morphs

In other words, if a morpheme (for example the indefinite article 'a' in English, which is a functional free morpheme signaling that what a singular countable noun), has more than one form, (in our example, there is 'a' and there is 'an'), then these different forms that have the same function are morphs of the same morpheme. When we list all the morphs (a, an) of a single morpheme, this set is called allamorph.

Examples for English Language

Plural –s is a morpheme (a bound inflectional morpheme)

It can appear as –s and –es. These are its allomorphs.

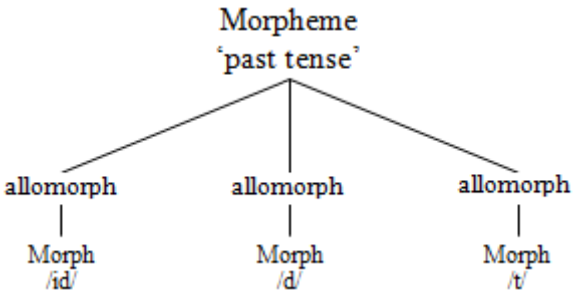
Now, plural –s and –es can be pronounced as /s/, /z/ or /əz/. So each of these are morphs.

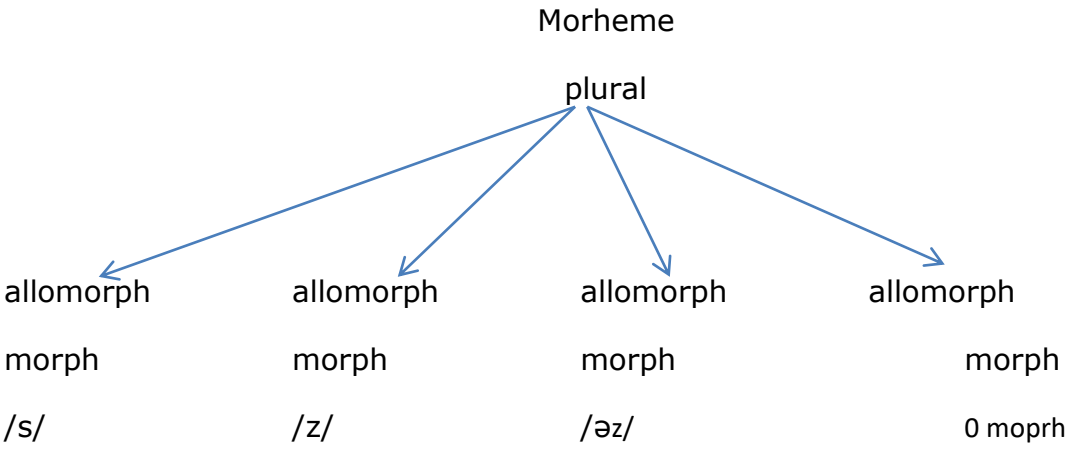
The plural of sheep is sheep, of fish is fish. If we analyse the plural, it should consist of two morphemes, one is the singular noun, and one is the plural inflectional bound morpheme that indicate that this word is plural. However, in English we cannot say sheeps* or fishes*. We cannot add –s or –es to these mophemes. But the meaning of plural is there. (Remember that morphology is working with meaning?). Thus, what we have here is a third representation of the plural moropheme but that is not written. We call it zero morph (0 morph)

This way, the plural morpheme in English has allomorphs (different representations), which consist of the following morphs

Past tense morpheme -ed in English

It has three morphs: /d/, /t/, and /ɪd/. These all allomorphes of the same morpheme


Morpheme
'past tense'
allomorph
allomorph
allomorph
Morph
/id/
Morph
/d/
Morph
/t/


Morheme
plural
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/s/
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