

MOTHERS AND THEIR VOWELS

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Born into the Scottish nobility in the first year of the twentieth century, Lady Elizabeth Angela Marguerite Bowes-Lyon became the Queen Consort on the accession of her husband Prince Albert to the throne (as King George VI) in 1936. When she became a widow in 1952 and her daughter became Queen Elizabeth II, she was formally known as the Queen Mother but more informally and affectionately by the general public as the "Queen Mum". Her children Elizabeth and Margaret, though grown, continued to call her "Mummy".

From the linguistic point of view it is interesting to note that the informal term for a mother varies in its vowel from culture to culture with the three operative vowels being A, O and U. The Mom in the United States is Mum in England and Mam in Wales. It would seem that there is no Mem, Mim or Mym! How this all came about is something that probably resides in linguistic history and is beyond the powers of this writer to explain. Research might be able to throw light on which of the three vowels was used by those who came over to populate Jamestown and Plymouth.

Obviously in England the favored vowel is the U—Mum, Mummy and even more hypocoristically Mummsie. In Wales the A dominates—Mam and Mammy. The largest island of that principality for example is known in the Welsh language as "Mon Mam Cymry" which translates as Anglesey, Mother of Wales.

Here in the United States, of course, the operative vowel is the O. We are all familiar with Mom and Pop stores. We have movies such as *Mommie Dearest*, *Throw Momma From the Train*, etc., and songs such as *I Saw Mommie Kissing Santa Claus*, *My Yiddishe Momme*, etc. This is hardly an important awareness and does not prevent us from getting the point of a joke such as "Do we know how King Tut got his name?" "Yes, he got it from his mummy."

As always in such situations, it isn't a matter of correctness because what is the generally accepted term in any culture is the one that is considered normal and standard. However, of the three vowels being discussed it's probably true to say that etymologically speaking the "most correct vowel" is the A (Mam) in view of the fact that maternal terms derive originally from the fact of the mammary glands. We could go on and on, but I suppose that when all is said and done, it doesn't really Mater!