

## Topic 16

### MOM'S THE WORD

The Table on the right shows the word *mother* in 36 languages. A fast look reveals that, with five exceptions (Estonian, Hungarian, Japanese, Korean and Turkish), the initial position phoneme or speech sound in each word is */m/*.

#### EXPLANATION

- The phoneme or speech sound */m/*, a voiced bilabial nasal single consonant sound is one of the easiest for young (4-6 month) infants to produce.
- Young infants often produce */m/* as a consonant sequence: (*mmmmmm*) by pressing the lips together, breathing out through the nose and causing the air to be blocked from escaping the mouth.
- The production of */m/* does not require complex mouth positions, that is, the use of tongue or teeth.
- Back in 1971, the linguist Jakobson wrote the following:  
*Often the sucking activities of a child are accompanied by /mmmm/ a slight nasal murmur, the only phonation which can be produced when the lips are pressed to mother's breast or to the feeding bottle and the mouth is full.*
- When mothers hear the */m/* sound, they immediately link it to the word *mother*, repeat it over and over in their face-to-face interactions with their infants and respond with comments such as: *Did you just say mama? Yea, I'm your mama. Can you say mama again? Mama!*
- With increased vocal tract muscle control, the open vowel */a/* is added to */m/* to produce a classic (canonical) babbling (CV or consonant-vowel) sound *ma* or *mmmmaaaa*.
- This means that the production of the word *mother* follows the development of infants' oral muscle control .

Arabic*	<i>omm</i>
Bosnian	majka
Bulgarian	majka
Croatian	mati, majka
Czech	matka
Danish	mor
Dutch	moeder
English	mother, mom, mum
Estonian	<i>ema</i>
Farsi	madr
Finnish	mami mama
French	mere, maman
German	mutter mutti
Greek	māna
Hindi	maji
Hungaria*	<i>anya</i>
Icelandic	móður
Irish	mathair
Italian	madre, mamma
Japanese	<i>okaasan</i>
Korean*	<i>eomma</i>
Latin	mater
Norwegian	mamma mor
Polish	matka, mama
Portuguese	mãe
Punjabi	maa, mata
Romanian	mama,
Serbian	majka
Slovak	mama, matka
Spanish	madre, mamā, mami
Swedish	mamma, mor, morsa
Turkish	<i>anne</i>
Ukrainian	mama, matir
Urdu	maa
Vietnamese	me
Welsh	mam

## References

Jakobson, Roman, (1971). *Why Mama and Papa, in Studies on Child Language and Aphasia*. The Hague: Mouton 21-29

Why do babies around the world say “mama”

<https://www.dictionary.com/e/mama/>