My Son Won't Call Me Mommy

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"Da da da da da da," chants my toddler from the moment he wakes up until the moment he closes his eyes — or until he spies a monkey. Or a bus. Or a book. Then he chants "monkey monkey," "bus bus," "book book book."

"Varoom" is his word for motorcycle, "put-put" his word for tractor. He says "baaaa" for sheep and goats, "screech" for taxis, "shoes" for shoes. He's crazy for bubbles, both the word and the effervescent spheres. As for me — the person who gave him life *and* controls the supply of Cheerios — I am nameless.

I don't get a "Ma," let alone a "Mama." I'm not "Mummy" or "Mother," "Mami," or "Amma." I'd be fine with Jess, which is what my friends call me, or some child-specific mash-up like "Jesma" (Jess + Mama) or "Moss" (Mom + Jess). But, nope, he's not interested in giving me a matronymic of any kind. According to language experts, my young son needs to hear some 30 million words in the next few years to be prepared for school and beyond. I only need to hear one.

Baby mastered "Dada" at around 8 months, right on schedule. A few months later came words like "ball," "more," and "eat." At daycare, he learned "uh-oh," a phrase he now utters both before and after throwing a forkful of peas on the floor.

At 21 months, he continues to babble a bunch. Much of it is delightful and intelligible, from "moon" to "wawa" to "bowl." Despite the fact that we don't own a TV, he knows "Elmo." Despite the fact that his maternal grandmother lives 1,200 miles away, he knows "Mimi." But not "Mommy."

Having agreed upon terms means we can be a part of someone's experience of the world. Anyone who's ever struggled in another language can attest to the sense of accomplishment that comes from making yourself understood, even if it's only to order a *café au lait* or find *el baño*. And anyone who's ever been in love knows how deliciously isolating it can be to have a shared lingo.

Perhaps Baby doesn't have a word for me because he doesn't yet know we're separate beings. He doesn't name me because he doesn't have to. I'm just there, like air. I am choosing to see this as a sign of my aptitude in meeting his needs, rather than as a sign that his ego is becoming bigger than North America.

Another explanation? He says "Dada" and not "Mama" because he loves his dad more. A daddy's boy through and through. I can't say I blame him; his dad is great. But it makes me sad that my kid would rather "moo" like a cow than let out a "Mom." As a writer, I spend all day, and a good chunk of the night, thinking about language. So it feels especially odd that my very own offspring knows words like "broom" and "hot" and "baby" but doesn't have a way of describing the person who breastfeeds him.

Speaking of breast milk, lately he's taken to referring to mine as "manna." I believe this term to be a corruption of "Mommy snack," which is what I call my breast milk, as opposed to a precocious allusion to the Bible. Really, though, who can say?

Sometimes it's clear that my son has no idea what he's talking about. "Do you like banana?" I'll ask, as I peel one and hand it to him. "No," he'll say, shaking his head slowly, sadly, while shoveling in bite after bite. He often says "bye-bye" to himself when we walk into the house or when he sees his friends at daycare in the morning.

If I haven't affected his speech too much, he has nevertheless affected mine. "Cool," I say when he tugs at my pant leg to show me how he put his crayons inside his dump truck. "That's so cool," I say when I notice how he aligned his plastic farm animals along the bookcase. "Isn't this cool?" I ask when we go to the children's museum and play with the water table. I sound like an eighth grader.

Toddler vocabulary generally expands at an alarming rate, doubling and tripling in a matter of months — a phenomenon called the "naming explosion." This morning my kid noted our bathroom's "white door." A trip to Amsterdam a few weeks ago gave him the word "tram," and a snowstorm taught him "boot." I trust that eventually "Mom" will make it into the rotation along with "eventually" and "rotation."

Until then, I'll have to settle for exchanges like this:

Me: "Do you know that I love you?"

Him: "I know."

Me: "Do you know who I am?"