

**MAMAW GOT RUN OVER BY A COMBINE:
GRANDPARENT NAMING PRACTICES
IN THE RURAL SOUTH**

Susie Shy Thompson
University of Louisville

ABSTRACT

This study examines grandparent names in the rural south. Many transplants to the south find southern grandparent names to be unusual because southerners typically eschew standard forms in favor of babytalk-like constructions (often reduplicated nonsense syllables). Furthermore, southern grandparent names tend to have haphazard orthographic representations. To find out how southern grandparents get their sometimes unusual names, and to discover how such "names" and their spellings are linked the author collected data by means of surveys and interviews, as well as through informal observation and conversations. These data will be presented and analyzed, indicating the three basic ways by which southern grandparents get their names, and demonstrating that those names' unusual orthographies result from individuals' applications of elementary school phonics rules to names derived from an oral tradition.

INTRODUCTION

Names and how we get them are fascinating, as evidenced by the plethora of popular books designed to help expectant parents choose names for their babies. A quick stroll through virtually any bookstore yields at least a half-dozen examples, most with rather generic titles like "What To Name Baby" or "The Complete Book of Baby Names," but others more specialized such as *The Baby Boomer Book of Names* compiled by Roger Price, Leonard Stern, and Lawrence Sloan for Publishers, Inc. in L.A. in 1985. A similar fascination among scholars and scientists led to the creation of the American Name Society in 1951. This professional organization "seeks to find out what is really in a name: and to investigate cultural

insights, settlement history, and linguistic characteristics revealed in names." (McGoff, 1998:1) Unfortunately, the arena of grandparent names has been largely overlooked in tile research by society members. Yet becoming a grandparent marks a major transition in most people's lives. Grandparents are the keepers of the family history, often a 'source of wisdom and special treats for their grandchildren, and in many parts of the country they embody the new generation's only link to local folklore and oral tradition. How such people are named is a question worthy of consideration.

Grandparent names in the rural south seem to provide a rich source of data. According to many urbanites and persons from other regions of the county, southern grandparents have funny names. If the author lay be permitted to trust the veracity of reports from colleagues in California, Iowa, Wyoming, Wisconsin, New York, Ohio, and Florida, the rest of the country *seems* to rely on the standard forms: Grandmother and Grandfather, Grandma and Grandpa, and Granny and Granddaddy.

This ethnographic study seeks to answer two basic questions about the allegedly odd names given to southern grandparents. The first of these questions is where do the names come from? The second is why is there such variation in the spelling of names that are phonologically identical. The data collected here will demonstrate that southern grandparent names are formed in three basic manners: grandparents choose what they wish to be called and teach that name to their grandchildren, grandchildren "christen" their grandparents, or a combination of the two caused by a child's missed articulation (yielding forms such as "Ganny" for a grandmother who selected the name Granny). variations in orthography will be shown to arise from the application of elementary phonics to names that descend from the oral tradition, allowing for individual interpretation of the written form's construction.

BACKGROUND

The ethnographic approach to linguistic research was adopted from anthropological fieldwork by Dell Hymes and outlined fully by Muriel Saville-Troike in *The Ethnography of Communication* (1989). The approach involves obtaining an "emic" view of linguistic phenomena by totally immersing oneself in the culture, so that the researcher is able to understand ideas as an insider. (Saville-Troike, 1989) Ethnography provides the logical approach to this study as the researcher is already an "insider," her family having resided within a fifty-mile radius of the studied area for at least four generations. In addition, comparative data has been obtained from sources that are also ethnographical: the book *Grandmother By Another Name* (1997) by mother/daughter writing team Carolyn J. Booth and Mindy B. Henderson is a collection of stories about grandmother names collected in and around Nashville and Franklin, Tennessee; and columnist Mary Ann Carroll

Gorton's piece in the 7 August 1997 *Atlanta Journal & Constitution* deals with stories of what their grandchildren call them sent by readers. Southerners writing about southern grandparent names make assumptions about their readers' cultural understanding -- some of which are illuminated in the following background information.

Southern folk speech drips *as slowly as molasses in January* from the tongues of its speakers. The vernacular language of southern folk intends to call attention to itself. (Wilson and Ferris, 1984:768) At every level -- "below the word" vocalizations such as the rebel yell, word level contributions such as y'all, and creative phrases such as the one used above -- Southern speech distinguishes itself from other varieties of American English through "variations in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary." (Wilson and Ferris, 1984: 768) No discussion of southern folk speech is complete without some attention to naming practices. The names Southerners give their children reflect both the grand tradition and the folksy friendliness associated with Southern culture. Despite being referred to as the Bible Belt, *Southerners* do not use an inordinate number of biblical names; in fact, Northerners use more. Instead, Southern naming patterns tend to favor classical and historical names. However, when searching for a name for their newborn, Southern parents do not limit the possibilities to *famous* historical figures. although some, such as Henry Clay, are popular. (Wilson and Ferris, 778) often Southerners apply a smaller historical scale and name children after ancestors, carry some family name through generations, or name a child after a different branch of the family. For example, Robert Richey Long shares his father's first name and bears his mother's maiden name for his middle name. Except for official documents, he uses for his given name, Rick, derived from his mother's maiden and his middle name. Sometimes such a practice becomes habit, as in the author's husband's family. The family has given the middle name Carter to the first-born male child of the first-born male, etc. for generations. Carter was the maiden name of some ancestors' mother, but no member of the family now living can pinpoint when the tradition began.

Other facets of Southern naming practices that seem unusual in other parts of the country are Southerners' penchant for double given names, which often team one typically male name with one typically female name. Such double names may be given to either sex, but appear more commonly as women's names. (Wilson and Ferris, 778) Thus the author has a paternal grandmother named Nora Oscar and a great-aunt Mary Willie, and on the other side of the family a great-aunt Frankie. That this trend did not die with preceding generations is evidenced by the presence of Mary Allen, an unrelated classmate of the author's at the University of Louisville in Kentucky. Southerners also use more diminutives "even in formal contexts (e.g. former First Lady Lady Bird Johnson, Dr. Billy Graham, former President Jimmy Carter)." (Saville-Troike, 83)

METHOD

As unusual grandparent names in the south *seem*, from the author's lifelong observations, to be a largely rural phenomenon, a major urban area such as Louisville is not an ideal place to gather data. Instead, the author conducted formal research, by means of questionnaires and interviews, among sophomore students in her English classes at Henry County High School.

Henry County, with a population of approximately 14,581, is located about forty-five miles east and slightly north of Louisville, the state's largest city. While Henry County is a growth area, lying within the "Golden Triangle" formed by Interstates 71, 64, and 65, it still has a predominately agrarian economy. Eminence is the county's largest city and home to most of the eight industries the county supports. New Castle is the county seat, established in 1797 and incorporated as a city in 1817. The remainder of the county is comprised of far-flung agricultural communities, such as Turner's Station and Lecompte's Bottom, which were named for early settlers. Many of the county's citizens are descended from those original inhabitants. (Henry County Today, 1997)

Sophomore English students were chosen because they were easily accessible to the author, their teacher. In addition, as Henry Countians, they represent the newest generation of traditional Southern farm folk with a few newcomers mixed in for comparison. The following data also includes informal anecdotal observations about grandparent names garnered from *the* author's own experiences as a lifelong resident of rural Shelby County.

DATA

Of the thirty-three students who participated in this study, thirty-one of them belong to the middle socioeconomic class, two to the upper class. Twenty-one of the subjects come from blue-collar backgrounds, with parents and grandparents who either farm(ed) full-time or farm(ed) in addition to factory work. The majority of respondents indicated that their grandmothers had never worked outside the home.

Most of the students come from established Henry County families. Eighteen report that their families have lived in the county for three generations (including their own) or more. Eight report that their grandparents or parents moved the family to the area within the last forty years, and seven were themselves born elsewhere. Of the seven who moved to the county during their own lifetimes, three were born in Ohio, one in California.

A fairly wide range of names was obtained. The eighty-six living grandparents of study participants yielded forty different names, twenty-two for grandmothers and eighteen for grandfathers. (NOTE: The frequency numbers in the data tables add up to more than 86 because deceased grandparents are included in the

frequency count. None of the deceased grandparents has a one-of-a-kind name.) The students supplied names for their deceased grandparents providing that the individual was living when his or her oldest grandchild was born. Deceased grandmothers appear to be named more frequently than deceased grandfathers. This may relate to the female's longer life span or, possibly, to grandmothers' being closer to their grandchildren during the earliest stages of the babies' lives. Informal observation indicates that grandmothers are more likely to choose their own grandparent name and to begin referring to themselves by that name immediately following the first grandchild's birth, or before. However, more formal research would be required to substantiate this possible gender difference in naming practices.

The following tables represent the raw data obtained during this investigation. The grandparent names have been organized according to gender and frequency by their established spellings. Phonetic representation of each name is indicated in the tables. Note that many of the names have more than one phonetic representation. This is because some students spelled their grandparents' names the same as other students but pronounced them differently.

GRANDMOTHER NAMES: HENRY COUNTY SAMPLE			GRANDFATHER NAMES HENRY COUNTY SAMPLE		
Spelling	Pronunciation	Frequency	Spelling	Pronunciation	Frequency
Grandma	[grænmo], [grænma]	18	Papa	[papə]	12
Granny	[gr æ ni]	11	Papaw	pəpə, [pæpə]	9
Mama	[momo], [mamo], [mæmo]	7	Grandpa	[grænpo], [grænpa]	8
Mamaw	[momo], [mamo]	3	Granddaddy	[grænpo], [grænpa]	4
Nanny	[n æ ni]	3	Poppa	[pæpə], [pəpə]	2
Grandmother	[gr æ maðər]	2	Grandad	[grændæd]	2
Mom		2	Poppie	papi]	1
mam]	mam]	2	Pop	[pap]	2
mam]	yaya]	1	Popaw	[papə]	1
Mother	[mad]	2	Paupa	[pəpə]	1
Grandmom	[gr ænmam]	1	Pappa	[pəpə]	1
Momma	mamo]	1	Daddy (Name)	[dædi]	1
Ganny	[g æ ni]	1	Popal	[pipa]	1
Bobbie	[babi]	1	Pepa	[pipə]	1
Nenaw	[nino]	1	Pa	[pə]	1
Mommaw	[momo]	1	Dad	[dæd]	1

Gramsy	[gr æ msi]	1	PawPaw	pɔpɔ]	1
Nana	[n a n a]	1			

None of the students who participated in the formal survey and interviews reported having siblings or cousins who call their common grandparents by different names except in the case of step-siblings who call the respondents' grandparents by their given names. However, in some large families this situation does arise. The author's mother-in-law selected for her grandmother name "Nanny", but when her first grandchild began to talk he could not pronounce it. She became "Nana" [n æ n æ] and his grandfather "Dada" [d æ d æ]. Some twelve years later grandson number eight insisted on "Nanny" [n æ ni] and could not say "Dada" at all. When his grandparents urged him to try "Papa" [papɔ] instead, he produced "Papoo" [pæpu]. Thus the author's in-laws have two sets of grandparent names. The offspring of their first three children call them Nana and Dada, while those grandchildren by the three youngest call them Nanny and Papoo. A similar situation occurred in the family of a friend, Eloise Austin, who reports that her in-laws parented nine children and now answer to *three* different sets of grandparent names. Evidently, the differing ages of a couples' children can lead to different age-grouped sets grandchildren who may "christen" their grandparents by new names.

The following list of the top ten most common grandmother names comes from *Grandmother By Another* (1997) by Carolyn J. Booth and Mindy B. Henderson. This mother/daughter pair from Tennessee solicited stories from grandmothers about what their grandchildren call them and how they got those names. The resulting collection includes the stories of the origins of unusual grandmother names. Unfortunately, the authors do not provide phonemic transcriptions of the names, nor do they indicate the geographic area of their solicitations.

TOP TEN GRANDMOTHER NAMES

1. Grandmother	2. Grandma	3. Granny	4. mawMaw	5. Nana
6. MiMi	7. Nannie	8. Me-Maw	9. Mama	10. grandmommy

ANALYSIS

People being ever unique individuals, there will always be some one-of-a-kind names, whether for children or grandparents or both. However, some patterns in grandparent names do emerge from the above data. Grandmother names tend to fall into three broad categories identified by the initial letter of their orthographic forms. "G" names include Grandmother, Grandmom, Grandma, Gramsy, Granny, and Ganny – which, as previously noted, is a missed articulation of the established form

Granny. "N" names include Nanny, Nana, and Nenaw. "M" names are the most interesting category, including Mother, Mom, Mema, and Mama, Mamaw, Mamma, Momma, and Mommaw. The three students who indicated grandmothers called by mothers' names (Mother and Moms) explained during their interviews that those names occurred because each of the women named *became* a grandmother at a young age. One of the students specifically noted, "My cousin (the first grandchild) just grew up calling her what he heard his mom call her."

Mema and Nenaw seem to bear some relation to each other differing as they do in the consonant sound only: [mimɔ] and [ninɔ]. Nana would appear to be a partial articulation of the established form Nanny. The one-of-a-kind forms were each explained by the students who reported them. Bobbie is the grandparent name of another woman who became a grandmother at a young age. She determined that her grandchild should rail her by her given name, Barbara. When he first uttered it, the name came out [babi], and remained so for subsequent grandchildren. Omie and Yaya are both approximations of the German word for grandmother, "Oma".

The most interesting grouping of names are the remaining "M" names: Mama, Mamaw, Mamma, Momma, and Momaw. These are the *same* name, and counted together represent the second most common grandmother name in the data, after grandma. The name is at times pronounced [mamɔ], [mɔmɔ], or [mæmɔ]. The first two forms are unquestionably allomorphs as students used the two interchangeably throughout their interviews. The distribution seems to be a function of the speed of speech, as the slightly quicker spoken form [mamɔ] occurred more frequently when it was almost time for the bell. (NOTE: After each session of individual interviews the class(es) typically concluded with a general discussion to which most participants contributed.) The other pronunciation [mæmɔ] was directly addressed by one student: "Sometimes I say [mɔmɔ] and [pæpɔ] and *sometimes* I say [mæmɔ] and [pæpɔ]. They answer either way; they know their names. This statement seems to indicate that the three possible pronunciations are all allomorphs, at least in some families.

One interesting question emerges when one considers the most popular spelling of the name discussed above. "Mama" would likely be pronounced [mama] by most educated, adult Americans and taken to refer to one's mother. , adult Americans and taken to refer to one's mother. Could what a person calls one's parents affect grandparent names? The answer would certainly seem to be yes, but only two students in this study reported calling their parents by any names other than Mom and Dad/Daddy. Those two stated that they called their mothers "Mother" because they were too old to say "Mommy" and their mothers did not like the name "Mom." Perhaps the answer lies in what one's parents called their parents.

The author's mother called her mother *Mama* [mama]. When the first grandchild was born, this woman was asked by her daughter what she wished the grandchild to call her. Her reply was to wonder why he could not just call her [mama] also. He did, although the pronunciation changed through his mother's effort to distinguish the grandparent name from the parent name.

Grandfather names show much less diversity. Two begin with "D", *Dad* and *Daddy* ____, the student who calls his grandfather *Dad* has never known his own father. He grew up with his mother, living in his maternal grandparents' home; he called the resident adult male what he heard his mother call him. *Daddy* __'s granddaughter was taught to call him that by her grandmother and older siblings. Three others begin with "G"; these are the standard forms *Grandpa*, *Granddaddy*, and *Granddad*.

The remaining grandfather names all begin with the letter "P," -- and except for four -- *Poppie*, *Pop*, *Popal*, and *Pepa* -- all fall into a category that corresponds with the "M" names for grandmothers. For the allomorphic names [papɔ], [pɔpɔ], and [pæpɔ] the data sample provides seven different spellings: *Papa*, *Papaw*, *Poppa*, *Popaw*, *Paupa*, *Pappa*, and *Pawpaw*. Two of these renderings, *Papa* and *Papaw*: topped the frequencies of reported grandfather names; taken as multiple spellings of the same allomorphic name, [papɔ], [pɔpɔ], [pæpɔ] accounts for more than half (23 out of 42) of the grandfather names reported by survey participants.

The variety of spellings available for grandparent names can be explained by examining the phonetic rules used to teach young readers to "sound-out" English words. Each vowel has two sounds, one short and one long. Long vowels "say their names," while short ones' sounds are taught by association with some key word; thus:

A = [ey]	E = [iy]	I = [ay]	O = [ow]	U = [ew] or [yew]
a = apple	e = egg	i = igloo	o = octopus	u = umbrella

presents a feasible system for teaching reading, although it differs from true phonemic/phonetic representation in English. As students progress through the early grades, they are taught more rules to help them make the correct verbal forms when encountering written words. Some of these rules include the following examples: "ow" = [æw] or [o]; "aw" and "au" = [ɔ]; and "oo" = [u]. Finally, they are taught the ultimate rule of English spelling: *for every rule there is an exception.*

Given these rules -- typically the only ones available to laypersons -- it becomes easy to see how a variety of spellings for a single name might arise. In most cases, the grandparent is the first person to attempt to render his or her name in written form (signing a first birthday card for example). Which spelling-to-sound

rules that person remembers and/or chooses to apply will obviously effect the name's written form.

DISCUSSION / CONCLUSION

Names are fascinating to many individuals. What do names really mean? Beyond their etymological histories, the commonly held assumption is that names signify nothing beyond the specific individual named. But what about other types of names besides family and given names? Do they carry any extra information about the person to whom they are applied? Sobriquets and nicknames imply closeness and affection, which adds a further dimension to the individual's identity. The question of who names whom is frequently dismissed after noting that those with power bestow names on those without power. (Nuessel, 1-7) The equation may not be that simple. In his treatise on onomastic topics, Dr. Frank Nuessel notes: "To be named by someone else means that that person can and will exert control over our existence." (Nuessel, 3) Such an observation allows one to consider naming practices as being influenced by the total power distribution, rather than as a simple power/no power contrast between the namer and the named. In other words, grandchildren are allowed to *name* their grandparents because the grandchildren do have some power in that relationship. Grandchildren by their births *create* grandparents. Grandchildren foist upon the parents of their parents a new role that marks them as no longer young. The stereotyped doting grandparent of fairy tales is, perhaps, an American reality. Grandparents accept the role that has been created for them by modeling the stereotype, to the extent that they relinquish the power of naming – at least partially – to that first perfect and adorable grandchild whose approximation of their chosen grandparent name is too darling to correct.

The author thinks it unlikely that many contemporary Americans in the rural south would insist that *their* relationships with grandparents follow(ed) a power/no power model. Grandparents are authority figures, but grandchildren *do* exert influence upon them. Grandchildren, by their very arrival, create a new role for *the* parents of their parents.

Mary Ann Carroll Gordon's column in *The Atlanta Journal & Constitution* (7 AUG 1997) acknowledged unusual Southern grandparent names such as Gimmy, Lala, Gammy, Gunby, BonBon, Doolie, Bambo, Nannie, "and lots of Memaws, MawMaws, and MaMaws." One unusual grandfather name, Granda, appeared. The majority of grandparents who contributed their stories to Ms. Gordon's column indicate that their grandparent names were *given to them* by their grandchildren. (Gordon, 1997) Who among us does not have some fond memories of that unique relationship in which a powerful adult could be bent from his or her will by nothing more than a sad face? Grandparents and grandchildren share reciprocity of power.

Grandchildren *create* grandparents, but grandparents also have power by virtue of their *hyperadult* status -- as the author's son often argues when his Granny has granted an off-limits treat: "But *she's your* Mommy!" As the child is taught to obey his parent, so his parent must obey hers.

Grandparent names in the rural south are a function of this give-and-take relationship. When the grandparent's power as an adult is the focus, the grandchild learns the name by which that grandparent prefers to be called. The form chosen is likely to be a standard form or the name by which he or she called a favorite grandparent. If the new grandparent does not select a name and begin teaching it, the grandchild will christen the grandparent according to his/her associations with that individual. Of course, in the most obvious representation of the reciprocal power between grandparent and grandchild, each accommodates towards the other. When this happens, the grandparent chooses a name, but is happy to be "christened" by an approximation. NOTE: The above discussion is not intended to imply any information about the closeness or quality of grandparent/grandchild relationships based on how the grandparent name is achieved. Many variables affect the naming process -- including how soon a name is chosen by the grandparent, the child's age at first speech attempts, the child's articulatory proficiency, and particular family traditions related to naming -- to make such an assertion. The above discussion should only demonstrate that with regard to grandparent names the common assumptions about naming power cannot be realistically applied.

Perhaps Southerners' willingness to choose (or have chosen for them) unusual grandparent names can be tied to the folksiness of our naming patterns in general. As stated in the background material at the beginning of this paper, "southern folk speech *intends* to call attention to itself." our whole naming tradition follows this rule: we want to be recognizable as southerners. One must only extend that rule a bit to explain our allegedly funny grandparent names: when we reach that pinnacle, most of us want to be recognized as southern grandparents.

APPENDIX

Comments on kinship in today's rural south:

A Bagdadian's perspective.

For as far back as I can remember, initial meetings with any new acquaintance have included the question, "are you kin to ____?" Who one's relatives are represents a defining characteristic for rural southerners. This importance of family is reflected in an expanded catalogue of familial vocatives which are rarely employed in more urban areas.

"Standard" American English kinship vocatives—the forms for *naming* relatives that we see represented most frequently in various media — include the following:

Mother, with its diminutives *Mom* and *Mommy*, *Father*, with its diminutives *Dad* and *Daddy*, *Grandmother*, with its diminutives *Grandma* and *Granny*, *Grandfather*, with its diminutives *Grandpa* and *Granddad*.

Siblings and cousins are typically called by their given names and aunts and uncles may be called by either their given names alone or by their kinship titles plus their given names.

This naming system clearly identifies parental and grandparental kinship to an individual while all other relatives can be named in the same manner as one would call a casual acquaintance. (i.e. if person X calls another person "Robin," the name does not convey any information about "Robin's" connection to X. "Robin" may be male or female, kin, or friend, or mere acquaintance to X.) Conversely, naming practices in my part of the agrarian south tend to highlight relationships among the speakers.

In the rural south reside a plethora of kinship vocatives that do not exist elsewhere—as well as some unique naming patterns relative to the science of kinship. For example, we have the well-established forms "Bubba" and "Sissy" which are given by children to their siblings. These forms can evolve with the maturity of the referents into "Brother" and "Sister." During my maternal uncle's entire life he never called my mother by her given name; she was always "Sister" to him. Sometimes these sibling names take on expanded usage. One elderly man I know consistently refers to his two sons as "Steve" and "Brother." Of course, there are also scores of adult "Bubba's" (with the variants "Buddy" and "Bubby") throughout rural areas of the south whose childhood sibling names grew to become lifelong nicknames.

Another unusual kinship vocative available in southern lexicon is "Auntie," which can be applied to any aunt or great-aunt without including her given name. While this form is probably most frequently associated with African-American southern usage, it is also used by white southerners in rural areas. Typically, southerners identify aunts and uncles (both consanguineous and affinate) by the formula: kinship title + given name (or nickname), and in some instances follow the same formula for naming cousins. Grandparent names are discussed in detail following the data sample in this paper. The significant factor which distinguishes southern rural vocatives from their mainstream, urban counterparts is the information conveyed about the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. Southern familial names overtly acknowledge kinship, because, of course, who one's relatives are represents a defining characteristic for rural southerners.

The first settlers in my part of the rural south were subsistence farmers. They

followed Squire Boone to parts of what are now Shelby, Henry, and Franklin Counties in Kentucky; they filed claims on hundreds of acres of cheap land, and produced large families to help them work their farms and to defend their lands from attacks by Indians. Keeping track of kinship ties was important for avoiding too-close marriages that could weaken the gene pool, and for facilitating the exchange of work as needed. Interestingly, as family farms—and the large and/or extended families needed to operate them – disappear from our landscape, fictive kinships grow to replace the large number of consanguineous relatives common to previous generations. Thus my son has an “Aunt Thesia,” (my best friend) and by his own extrapolation he calls her daughter “Cousin Jessie.” This construction of fictive kinships lets each new generation place those people who counted on in any emergency; they are family. The extended family has always been important in rural cultures. As the availability of that resource decreases, we in the rural south feel compelled to recreate it from our networks of friends.

A Yankee poet best expressed the feeling rural southerners have about familial relationships. Robert Frost wrote in “Death of the Hired Man”: “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in.” In the rural south “home” is with your kin—real or imagined.

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