

Catch Word #37 – Mum's the word

Transcript

- Maura: Hello, everyone out there, this is Maura ...
- Jessie: And Jessie.
- Maura: And this is your Catch Word podcast with Culips.com.
- Jessie: That's C-u-l-i-p-s.com.
- Maura: And today we're looking at the Catch Word podcast. What do we do in the Catch Word podcast?
- Jessie: Well, in the Catch Word, we take a word or a phrase and we look at it really closely. We break it down, give you some synonyms—things that mean the same thing—and some examples of how we use it in everyday life.
- Maura: Right. Sounds good. So, don't forget to go to our website if you want to see the transcript or more explanations for this episode. You can become a member and then you have access to all of that great stuff.
- Jessie: Yeah, it's all there at Culips.com.
- Maura: OK, now, let's start today's episode. What is the expression for today?
- Jessie: Today's expression is ***mum's the word***.
- Maura: ***Mum's the word?***
- Jessie: Yeah, it's kind of an interesting one.
- Maura: Yeah, it's a funny little expression: ***Mum's the word***. What does it mean?
- Jessie: Well, you know what a **mum** is? Your mother.
- Maura: Yeah.
- Jessie: Well, it actually doesn't mean the same thing as that. It actually has **nothing to do with** a mother.
- Maura: OK, so it's **nothing to do with** a real **mom**. OK.

- Jessie: So ***mum's the word*** actually means *don't say anything* or *don't tell anyone this*.
- Maura: Right, so you use it when there's a secret.
- Jessie: Right. And the reason that we say ***mum's the word*** when we want to say *don't tell anyone my secret* is because if you close your mouth, and you're keeping a secret, imagine how you would sound if you tried to talk while you were closing your mouth.
- Maura: Mmm mum mmm.
- Jessie: Right, exactly. If your lips are close together you can't make any words, all you can make is a kind of a *mum* sound.
- Maura: Right, exactly. OK, so you can't tell the secret because your mouth is closed.
- Jessie: And they think that the first time that was ever used was in a **Shakespeare** play.
- Maura: Oh, really?
- Jessie: Yeah they said, "Seal up your lips and give no words but **mum**."
- Maura: Oh, so it's a very old expression then.
- Jessie: Yeah, a very old English expression. It's interesting because it can mean *don't say anything*, if you're telling someone else not to say anything, but it could also mean *I won't say anything*, if you're telling someone else that you won't tell their secret.
- Maura: OK.
- Jessie: So, for instance, I could tell you Harp doesn't know about the surprise **party we're throwing** for her, so ***mum's the word*** if you see her.
- Maura: OK, so in that example, you tell me not to talk about it. You tell me not to tell Harp about the party.
- Jessie: Exactly. But if I said to you, "My friend is pregnant, but she isn't telling anyone about it yet, so don't say anything about it."
- Maura: And then I say "**Mum's the word**."

- Jessie: Right. So in that case, you're telling me that you won't tell anyone about it.
- Maura: Right. I'm promising to keep it a secret.
- Jessie: And speaking of secrets, you won't tell anyone that big secret that I told you yesterday, will you?
- Maura: **Mum's the word.**
- Jessie: Perfect.
- Maura: So, what are some other similar expressions to ***mum's the word***?
- Jessie: Well, we could say "**Don't say a word**," "**I won't say a word**."
- Maura: Right. So it means you won't even say anything at all related to that secret.
- Jessie: Right. You'll just **keep your mouth shut**. So I might say "My friend will be mad if she finds out that I went to the concert without her, so **don't say a word** about it."
- Maura: Right. So ***don't say a word*** means *keep it a secret*.
- Jessie: Exactly. And we can also say "**My lips are sealed**."
- Maura: Right. When your lips are sealed they're closed so you can't speak.
- Jessie: It's almost like they're glued together.
- Maura: Right. I could say, "I won't tell your secret, Jessie; **my lips are sealed**."
- Jessie: Perfect. And another thing that's a little bit more modern is we can say, "**Keep it on the down low**."
- Maura: "**Keep it on the down low**."
- Jessie: "**Keep it on the down low**."
- Maura: Yeah, I like this one. I use it sometimes: ***keep it on the down low***. An example could be "I bought a guitar for my boyfriend's birthday, but I want it to be a surprise, so **keep it on the down low**."
- Jessie: Right. And then you could say "Sure, I'll **keep it on the down low**."

- Maura: Right. And it means the same: you won't say anything, you will keep it a secret.
- Jessie: Right. **Mum's the word.**
- Maura: Yeah. OK, great. So today's focus expression was ***mum's the word***, and what were the synonyms we looked at?
- Jessie: The synonyms we looked at are ***don't say a word*** and ***I won't say a word***, ***my lips are sealed***, and ***keep it on the down low***.
- Maura: Yeah, all useful expressions if you're telling secrets.
- Jessie: But we don't want Culips.com to be a secret, so **feel free to** tell all your friends about that.
- Maura: OK, great. So remember if you want to learn more about these expressions, or any of the expressions from our other episodes, go to our website, Culips.com, become a member and check us out.
- Jessie: And we'll talk to you again soon.
- Maura: This has been Maura ...
- Jessie: And Jessie ...
- Maura: Bye.
- Jessie: Bye.

Detailed Explanation

Mum's the word

The expression *mum's the word* means that something is a secret. When you say the phrase *mum's the word* it means the story or information that comes before or after it is a secret. It literally means *don't tell anyone what I said*.

It can be said by the person telling the secret or the person listening to the secret. We give this example in the episode too. If one person tells another person a secret, the second person can say *mum's the word* to mean that he or she promises to keep it a secret. In this case it means *I won't say anything*.

Here are two examples in both of the above ways:

Lynne: The party is this Friday, but remember, mum's the word.

Geoff: I wasn't sure if what I just told you was a secret, so please don't tell anyone.

Terry: No problem. Mum's the word.

Of course, *mum's* is a contraction of *mum is*, but this expression is always said as a contraction: *mum's the word*. And the sound /mum/ is the sound made when someone's lips are closed, like Maura said during the podcast as an example.

Another related verb is *mumble*. *To mumble* is to not speak clearly. Someone who does this a lot can be called a mumbler. A mumbler is someone who is very difficult to understand.

Shakespeare

Jessie mentions Shakespeare. The possible origin of the expression *mum's the word* comes from a Shakespeare play. Do you know Shakespeare?

William Shakespeare is the most famous writer in the English language and his works have been translated into every other major language. Shakespeare lived from the late 16th century until the early 17th, so the English he uses to write is very traditional. In fact, most native English speakers today have trouble understanding it.



The quote which is connected to the expression *mum's the word* is, "Seal up your lips and give no words but mum," from the play *Henry VI*. This phrase also means *to keep something a secret*.

Nothing to do with

Just to be clear, in this episode Jessie says that the expression *mum's the word* is not connected to the words *mum* or *mom*, which is the short form for *mother*. The spelling and pronunciation are the same, but as we have already discussed, *mum* in this expression has the meaning of *not saying anything*.

Mum/mom

Mum or *mom* are both short, informal versions of *mother*. *Mum* is generally used in the United Kingdom and Australia, and *mom* is more popular in Canada and the United States.

Smaller children can also say *mummy* or *mommy*.

These words are capitalized if they are being used for a specific person. Here are two examples:

Cara: If you are a mum and want to put your child in day care, it is a good idea to apply as soon as possible.

Dean: My Mom is the best the world!

To throw a party

Jessie gives the example of keeping Harp's surprise party a secret. Jessie says that we are throwing a party for her. *To throw a party* and *to have a party* mean the same thing.

We can say that we are having a party for Harp or that we are throwing a party for Harp.

Don't say a word / I won't say a word

These are synonyms for *mum's the word*. You can say "Don't say a word" because you want someone to keep a secret, or you can say "I won't say a word" to promise that you will not tell the secret.

More accurate, full expressions would be "Don't say a word about the secret," or "I won't say a word about the secret."

Here are a couple examples:

Helen: I bought Jen a perfect present for her birthday, but don't tell her.

Jack: I won't say a word.

Carol: Don't say a word about what happened to Jared.

Shawn: Don't worry. I won't say anything.

We can also say, “Don’t say anything,” or “I won’t say anything.”

We can also use this expression to talk about someone else like, “She won’t say a word.”

In another context when you want someone to be quiet, we can also use these expressions (but not *mum’s the word*). *Don’t say a word* or *I won’t say a word* can also mean to be quiet at the moment. Here are a couple examples of the expressions being used in this way:

Hannah: The baby is sleeping so we need to be quiet. We don’t want to wake her up.
Neil: I won’t say a word.

Bonnie: Hey, what was that sound? Shh ... don’t say a word.

My lips are sealed

This synonym was also part of the Shakespeare quote that we saw above, “Seal up your lips and give no words but mum.” To seal your lips is to close them tight, so to say “My lips are sealed,” means my lips are closed and so I will not tell the secret.

This expression is different from *mum’s the word*, *don’t say a word* and *I won’t say a word* because it cannot be used to ask someone to keep a secret. To say *my lips are sealed* means that you will keep the secret, so this expression can only be used to promise to keep a secret.

Here are some examples to show you the difference:

CORRECT:

Helen: I bought Jen a perfect present for her birthday, but don’t tell her.
Jack: My lips are sealed.

INCORRECT:

Carol: Your lips are sealed about what happened to Jared.
Shawn: Don’t worry. I won’t say anything.

The verb *to seal* is also often used to talk about closing an envelope like, “Did you already seal the envelope?”

Keep it on the down low

The possible origin of this expression is really interesting. *The low down* is an expression for an interesting secret or story that has been told. Here is one example of how it can be used:

Todd: Give me the low down on Eric.

In this case, the words get switched around for *down low* and this is then for a secret that is still a secret and hasn't been told.

So, *keep it on the down low* means *keep it a secret*. Saying only *keep it on the down low* means that you are telling someone to keep it a secret. You can also use it to promise to keep a secret by saying "I'll keep it on the down low."

Here are the examples of that:

Cathy: OK, I'm going to tell you what happened with Craig that night, but you've got to keep it on the down low.

Brian: Don't tell anyone what I just told you.

Doug: Don't worry. I'll keep it on the down low.

This expression has its origins as recently as the 1990s in the United States. The expression *keep it on the down low* has been used in many R&B and hip hop songs.

Keep your mouth shut

This is yet another way that we can tell someone to keep a secret. In this case though, *keep your mouth shut* is usually a very rude and harsh way to tell someone to not tell a secret. Someone might say *keep your mouth shut* to someone who often tells secrets that they are not suppose to.

Because it is often rude and very impolite, it is probably best to not use this expression.

Feel free to ...

At the end of this episode, Jessie uses this expression and says that you should feel free to tell all your friends about Culips. When one person tells other people to feel free to do something this means that you can do it, that it is fine to do it, but there is no obligation to do it. Really, it means that you are free to make the choice for yourself.

Here are a couple of examples:

Sylvia: Thanks for inviting me over. You have a really nice place.

Lee Ann: No problem. Feel free to leave your shoes on in the house.

Peter: Feel free to stop by my office whenever you like.
Matthew: Thanks. Maybe I will.

Quiz (see the answers at the end of this Lipservice)

1. There are two spelling for the short form of *mother*. They are *mom* and *mum*. Which spelling is used in Canada?

- a) mom
- b) mum

2. Where does the expression *mum's the word* come from?

- a) It was something mums said to their children.
- b) It is a line from a play by Shakespeare.
- c) It comes from Shakespeare because he mumbled a lot.
- d) Mums often told secrets.

3. What is another way to say *to have a party*?

- a) to throw out a party
- b) to throw a party
- c) to go through a party
- d) to thoroughly party

4. Harriet: I can't believe what happened to Jim. Don't worry,
_____.

Please fill in the blank.

- a) no word
- b) he won't say a word
- c) don't say a word
- d) I won't say a word

5. What is a generally rude way to ask someone to keep a secret?

- a) keep it on the down low
- b) keep your mouth shut
- c) don't say a word
- d) mum's the word

6. *To seal as in my lips are sealed*, is often used to talk about closing what items?

- a) envelopes, jars
- b) cars, houses
- c) beds, drawers
- d) books, magazines

7. **Boss:** **Welcome to the company!** _____ **ask me any questions.**

Please fill in the blank.

- a) Feel available to
- b) Feel funny to
- c) Feel free to
- d) Feel to

Answers: 1.a 2.b 3.b 4.d 5.b 6.a 7. c

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