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How to wreck a nice beach, and other tales of ESL

By [Ruth Walker](#)

Every once in a while I run across something that makes me profoundly grateful to be a native speaker of English.

Reading the saga of May Pare, the [queen of body-parts idioms](#), in the Los Angeles Times, was just such an occasion.

Not to disparage Ms. Pare's achievements for a moment. This university professor-turned-coffee-shop waitress-turned-author has carved out a distinctive niche for herself in popular linguistics. She's published a book called "Body Idioms and More," intended to enlighten speakers of English as a second (or third or fourth or whatever) language by explaining such baffling turns of phrase as "keeping your eyes peeled" or "using elbow grease."

See what I mean about being grateful to be a native speaker? I'm so glad I already know this stuff.

Pare (pronounced Paray) has been waitressing off and on for the better part of 30 years at Shakers, in Glendale, Calif., but in her native Thailand, she was an English specialist, even teaching at the university level. More recently, she's earned a master's degree in English as a second language (ESL) from the University of California at Los Angeles.

"She never bandied that talent around at the coffee shop. She just took notes," the Times reports, quoting her: "'I've learned a lot from just being here at the restaurant.'"

About 10 years ago, she had a light-bulb moment. Now a light bulb is not a body part, but in the spirit of this piece I should probably explain that that's the moment of "the light coming on," when a creative thinker has the new idea, sees the new solution, or whatever. It's a moment of inspiration, that sharp intake of breath (which is what inspiration is literally) associated with the "aha!" It's interesting to see that we seem to have shifted from metaphors

of respiration to metaphors of illumination. This may have to do with thinkers getting stuck on a problem and seeking solace in the fridge – where they open the door and the light comes on, if only to illuminate that last piece of pie left over from dinner. But I digress.

As I was saying, the genesis of Pare's book came when she was telling her cousin a joke with an idiomatic punch line. He looked baffled. (You might say the joke went right over his head. I'm really seeing the need for this book, aren't you?) She then told him she was just pulling his leg.

That only got them in deeper.

"He didn't get it," she told the Times. "I told him this is the way people talk."

She started taking notes, and soon the book was under way. The self-published tome is in its second edition, with some revisions from coffee-shop regulars-turned-editorial consultants, and it's attracting attention from local educators.

Of course, application of elbow grease and a habit of keeping one's eyes peeled suffice not to make an English speaker fluent enough to cope amid the verbal torrents of commercial American English.

There's the matter of the right accent and pronunciation.

"Jlaik smore?"

What do you mean, you don't speak Czech? That's not Czech; it's standard American English – according to an outfit called [American Accent Training](#): "Would you like some more?"

American Accent, which offers online and in-person training for such people such as call-center employees, introduces on its website the racy-sounding concept of "[liaisons](#)": "In American English, words are not pronounced one by one. Usually, the end of one word attaches to the beginning of the next word."

Thus, the pronunciation of "How to wreck a nice beach" is supposedly identical with that of "How to recognize speech." I'm not sure I buy it completely – I think I pronounce the hard "g" of "recognize," unless I've got a bagel in my mouth or something. But it was an eye-opener (arrghh! more body parts!) to realize that this concept I first learned in seventh-grade

French ("lay zay LEV") applies to English, too.

It's another reminder of how, as speakers of our mother tongue, we are musicians who play by ear.

For those who resist the frankly commercial blandishments of companies like American Accent Training (that's the American way, no?) there are many other online resources. There is the "[Pronunciation Poem](#)," which seems to be part of ESL folklore at this point. It begins:

Dearest creature in creation, study English pronunciation.
I will teach you in my verse sounds like corpse, corps, horse, and worse.

And there's Dave Sperling's [ESL Cafe](#). Dave's offers a student discussion forum for such issues as how to ask – idiomatically and correctly – about having a [tennis racket](#) restrung. Another recent post was on which question is correct: "How long did you have your dog?" and "How long have you had your dog?" A grammarian would say this is the difference between the simple past tense and the present perfect tense. A more practical approach to this one may be to ask, "Does the person you're asking still have [the dog](#)?"

As I said – I'm so glad I already know this. Hats off to those struggling to learn it!

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