

## Untangling English Slang Q&A with May Pare, Waitress, author and idiom expert.

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During the day, May Pare took orders, chatted with customers and served food at a Southern California restaurant where she has been a familiar face for over two decades. While refilling coffee mugs, she would often overhear customers make puzzling expressions.

What exactly does “butt ugly” mean? What exactly did a person need to “get off their chest” or “keep tabs on”?

The Thai native started compiling a list of these strange expressions and researching the meanings of these idioms, regional speech or dialect. When she discovered that many of these expressions used body parts to convey meaning, a light bulb went off in her head.

Pare, a former English teacher at Chulalongkorn University, published “Body Idioms and More” to help learners of English like herself understand conversational English, which isn’t governed by strict grammatical rules. Her book has won her recognition from the local press, loyal customers at Shakers Restaurant in Glendale, and even native speakers who also find the book entertaining and informative.

### ***Pacific Citizen:*** Were you always a curious scholar?

I wasn’t a curious person at all when I was growing up. I’m probably more curious now because I need material for my writing. With English (I started learning it in elementary school), I always went back (and still do) to Thai and compared how we would say the same thing in Thai. I remember having so much trouble with using the right tenses in English because we don’t have such a thing in Thai. Being able to pinpoint the differences helped me learn English faster.

### ***PC:*** How would you research the meaning of the idioms?

**MP:** I usually knew pretty much the basic meanings of most idioms (partly because of my educational background and partly because I’ve been living here long enough); I just hardly used them myself. But I did sometimes have problems with slang terms or double meanings of some idioms. I didn’t have my computer when I first started, so I just went to the library and took notes on index cards. Sometimes my coworkers and customers would help me out with definitions and/or sentence samples.

I love to learn new expressions and I think I’m pretty observant. I often pay attention to the kind of language people use. If it sounds good, I try to remember it so that I can later use it myself. People who know me well can tell you right away that I always ask them questions about words or expressions. I sometimes do my research on the Internet. I do take a lot of notes when I listen to radio talk shows or when I read the newspapers.

**PC: What were the most difficult idioms to research and find the meaning of?**

**MP:** Not just one idiom that I had difficulty writing about, it's the whole section – about 'ass.' I don't use this kind of language and never really felt comfortable writing about it. I almost took it out of the second edition because I thought it might sound too offensive. My editors insisted that I keep it since it's part of the language that you can't ignore – even so vital to some people!

**PC: Which English idioms are your favorites to use?**

**MP:** I think I use them more now. The ones I use all the time at work are: 'Keep an eye on my station. I need to go to the bathroom!' and 'I'm not a mind reader; how would I know what he/she wanted if he/she didn't tell me?'

**PC: What are some examples of Thai language idioms?**

**MP:** Some Thai idioms are exactly the same as in English. Sometimes it's just a matter of different word order.

- English: Born with a silver spoon in one's mouth.
  - Thai: Born with a silver and (a) golden spoon in one's mouth.
- Others are completely different:
- English: A no-brainer.
  - Thai: As easy as peeling a banana and putting it in one's mouth (Don't ask me why we say it this way!)

**PC: You've become a celebrity at Shakers. Are your customers commenting on your success?**

**MP:** My customers, co-workers as well as my bosses tease me all the time now. [They say] is May's book on the New York Times bestseller's list yet? Would you like to sit at our celebrity's table? I never like to be the center of attention, but all the publicity does help me with my self-esteem. I feel much, much better about my work and my life in general. People also look at me differently now. They know I'm capable of doing things other than waiting on tables.

**PC: In addition to definitions, you have some quotes from Cliff Burton, the former bassist from Metallica, and football coach Vince Lombardi. How do you determine which quotes to use?**

**MP:** I'm not a Metallica fan or a football fan. I just love collecting quotes. When I first started writing this book. I didn't even think about adding all these quotes. The idea came much later. My criteria: The quote is easy to understand. It has some deep meaning or something I can agree with. It fits the topic/idioms under discussion.

**PC: What's surprised you about the idiom-defining process?**

**MP:** I'm still amazed that American people really like the book even though it is written more for those who learn English as a second language. Ninety five percent of the ones who bought the book are Americans. My husband always teases me that I seem to get better responses from English-speaking people than the people I targeted.

I'm really proud of the fact that Glendale Public Library bought six copies of my book even before all the publicity started. La Crescenta Valley High School Library also bought one.

I inspired my mother to start writing about her life (in Thai, of course). She's 86 years old now. I'm so glad she started it while she still remembers things.

I had no idea that the book is also good for autistic children as well as deaf and hard of hearing students until people wrote to me and told me about it.