



She's Watching Your Language

She still uses words like "neat" and "nifty," but Pamela Munro is very much a slang expert. As a professor of linguistics at UCLA, Munro's primary research actually focuses on American Indian languages. But while teaching a historical linguistics class in the early '80s, she asked each student to write down three current slang words—an assignment that proved so popular that Munro now offers a class just in slang. "U.C.L.A. Slang 4," the latest edition of a compendium by Munro and her students, is scheduled for publication in June and will be sold in the UCLA bookstore. It will feature new entries such as: "Hanging chad (an unwelcome follower)." —RACHEL ZIENTS

Why compile dictionaries?

I really love making dictionaries. Dictionaries are such a wonderful way for people to have something where they can say, "This is a record of my language." Most people feel very attached to their language. Their language helps define who they are and what their culture is.

What's special about Southern California speech?

Slang is vivid. It uses very fresh metaphors. Slang expressions often originate here and then they travel eastward. The spread is probably faster now that we have the Internet. There are two big historical influences on UCLA college slang and California slang as a whole—surfer language and the African American community. There are three things that have helped African American slang spread into the mainstream commu-

nity: black comedians like Eddie Murphy, who did videos with extensive comedy routines with language people had to think about and had never heard before; youth-oriented black-themed TV shows; and rap music. Lots of people don't realize a lot of slang words that they know and use originated in the black community.

Do people develop languages to feel part of a group?

Oh, absolutely. Particular groups have their own way of talking. You can recognize another group member by the fact that they know the right things to say. It's like a badge, an invisible badge, that you belong to that group. Certainly the industry in Hollywood has its own.

What surprises you the most about slang?

It's just so fun. People say these terrible things about slang. But slang follows grammar rules just as much as regular language does. It's just different. People who take my slang seminars are typically students who think they're really interested in slang but don't know much about grammar, and they find out grammar can be fun. And that's neat.

What word most defines Southern California?

I don't think there's just one word. But I think I'd probably say "cool." I know that cool is a word that everyone in the country knows, but cool so perfectly applies. Yeah. You know, L.A. is cool ["good, unusual, impressive, hip," per "U.C.L.A. Slang 4"].

Do you let your students call you "Dude Munro"?

No.

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To see them going away and it happening in front of me makes me think, 'Why am I uproar about this?'"

Irving Holloway has directed three productions and was the principal writer on the most recent, *Weren't Mentioned*. During the writing of *Weren't Mentioned*, he learned something about the writer's power.

"When you're the main writer, all the other guys are saying, 'Make me the main guy, you've got to got a different idea.'" Holloway says.

Doing a play in a university is fraught with special uncertainties. Principal participants kept getting dispatched to their assignments in the midst of rehearsals. In the second play, Holloway's reluctant actor, had to take the main role because the actor who'd been rehearsing abruptly sent away.

Holloway is no romantic about the transformative effect of theater. Unusual Suspects. "You have to change yourself," he says. "You think other people are watching you." Yet the experience has taught participants a new respect for the other, racial and gender notwithstanding. "You have joy on everybody's face and Latino, when guys are talking about the play, trying to get it right," he says.

I know a mother whose small daughter asked, "Do people use guns?" repeatedly because they can't use words like this may be good. Holloway's case. It's been demonstrated in several instances that a significant percentage of even case-hardened adult inmates change after being introduced into making art.

"Art shows them ways to and reflect on why they're in prison," says Paul Minner, former head of California Arts in Corrections program, deputy director of the California Arts Council. "It's real in art."

Even if Holloway is confined to an entire adulthood in bars, he can take a little of this: Significant art projects exist in every one of the prisons. Wherever he spends ensuing years, he, and the reason to hope his work is still flowing.