

Polari:
A sociohistorical study of the life and
decline of a secret language.

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Aims & Introduction

The objective of the following investigation is to examine the history of the secret in-group language Polari from a sociolinguistic perspective. This will include looking at the history and uses of this lexicon and the factors which led to its rise, and eventually to its decline. A key question posed by this investigation is the extent to which Polari survives today and the type of presence, if any, it has in contemporary gay culture. This will be done through a critical review of the available data on the topic and also by investigating the capacity in which Polari survives today (specifically focussing on whether it is present in the media and entertainment or in the internet community).

Secret languages are fascinating to linguists' curiosity, and Polari is a particularly interesting subject because of the rich tapestry of interwoven sources which build this unique lexicon, and the fact that it has been 'off-limits' to outsiders until very recently. The variety discovered in the lexicon is indicative of the fascinating history of Polari – a story of different itinerant groups meeting and trading lexical items along the way. It is interesting to trace how a language with its origins in the cant of thieves and travelling tradesmen, used to conceal criminal activity, came to be the exuberant carrier of gay identity in the mid-twentieth century. All of these ideas will be considered in more detail in the following discussion.

Literature Review

It is only in very recent times that Polari has come to be fairly well-documented. Due to its existence as a secret language, access to – and comprehension of – the language was limited to a highly selective group, including the homosexual community, travelling entertainers and naval servicemen. This means that until the late twentieth century, there has been very little in the way of linguistic study of Polari. Following the decriminalisation and increased acceptance of homosexuality beginning in the late 1960s, Polari lost its purpose as a secret language, and (though as a lexicon it became moribund) it then became accessible to the outside world. Since this time, there has been a considerable increase in the documentation of Polari. Most of this literature is retrospective, based on accounts of a language which is no longer ‘living’, and there has been very limited investigation of Polari in use, due to the fact that (as a lexicon) it has no first language speakers and has in the last fifty years has been suffering a process similar to ‘language death’. However, some records of Polari in use have been gathered, and first hand accounts by speakers of Polari have also been obtained, for a retrospective examination of the functions and contexts of the language. In the following discussion, a number of sources have been invaluable in constructing a sociohistorical picture of Polari – considering its background as a secret language, the context of a homosexual linguistic subculture and a more specific analysis of Polari itself.

Jargons and Secret Languages

Peter Burke’s introductory chapter in *Languages and Jargons* (in Burke and Porter (eds.), 1995) gives an excellent overview of the historical and social factors in the formation of

in-group lexicons, which Burke refers to as 'jargons'. This text has proved to be particularly useful as it gives a background of the types of groups (itinerant tradesmen, entertainers and criminals) who developed their own lexicons, and explains their motivations for doing so – namely for self-protection and to exclude outsiders. This text is relevant in understanding the development of Polari because in order to study it, we must first establish that it fits the criteria of an in-group language, rather than a language proper.

Language and Sexuality

'Homosexual Slang' by Julia Stanley (1970) gives an account of the social situations in which subculture jargons arise, with particular attention to American gay communities. This article is based around the findings of a study conducted by Stanley, which involved issuing a questionnaire to gay people from various major cities in America to determine which items of 'homosexual slang' they were familiar with. From this investigation, Stanley established that there is a 'core vocabulary' and a 'fringe vocabulary' known to and used by the gay community. Although many of the terms in Stanley's investigation were a more general – and American – gay slang, there were items of overlap with Polari, such as *camp*, *butch*, *drag* and *cruise*. Also, this study indicates that there is a great deal of variation in individuals' comprehension and use of 'gay slang', which suggests that it is unlikely that any one speaker would be familiar with all items in the Polari lexicon. The article 'Gayspeak' by Joseph Hayes (1976) provides a linguistic analysis of the most commonly used items in the speech of gay men. From the findings of his study, Hayes compiled a list of the types of communication gay men use most often, and also the social

contexts in which ‘gayspeak’ is used (for secrecy, in socialising with other gay men, and also to assert a gay identity). Although these texts are not specifically focussed on Polari, they are nonetheless useful in investigating gay language.

Sexuality in context

Texts such as *Heterosexual Dictatorship* by Patrick Higgins (1996) are useful in placing Polari in a social context, and in correlating its rise and decline with the changing situation of gay rights. This text provided key developments in the history of gay rights, at the pivotal moment in the twentieth century, around the time of the Wolfenden report which led to the adoption of the Sexual Offences Act in 1967. For a sociolinguistic approach, historical context is absolutely necessary, as, in this case it gives us a greater understanding of the need for a language in which the persecuted gay community could freely communicate.

Early accounts of Polari

One of the earliest sources of information on Polari or ‘Parlyaree’, as it was sometimes known, is the work of the twentieth century lexicographer Eric Partridge, who compiled a great number of books and dictionaries on slang and the speech of ‘underworld communities. Partridge made numerous references to an early form of Polari, ‘Parlyaree’, in his slang dictionaries, and included a chapter entitled ‘Polari: Cinderella among languages’ in his book *Here, There and Everywhere: Essays Upon Language* (1950). This essay largely acts as a glossary of Polari lexicon and provides an overview of the communities in which it would be used – however, despite the article having been written

at the peak of Polari's use as a 'gay slang', Partridge notably glosses over Polari's affiliation with the homosexual community, and instead focuses on its presence in circus and traveller communities. Some of Partridge's definitions have proved to be somewhat misleading, as they at times suggest that Parlaree, Parlyaree and Parlary are separate varieties, when closer inspection (and historical perspective) suggests they are more likely the same variety, simply accessed through different sources within overlapping subcultures (such as travellers, showmen or prostitutes). However, it is certain that Partridge's accounts have been vital in the understanding of Polari we have today, and have been the basis of many of the more recent studies of Polari.

General work on Polari

The major text on Polari is Paul Baker's book *Polari: The Lost Language of Gay Men* (2002). This is undoubtedly the most comprehensive account of Polari to date, with chapters detailing its origins, language system, usage, decline and revival. It also has a detailed glossary, explaining the histories of many Polari items. There is also a vast bibliography, giving a huge range of sources which can be used to further investigate Polari. In compiling this detailed overview of the subject, Baker located and interviewed some of the small number of Polari speakers remaining, he collected examples of Polari in use in the media (such as the characters 'Julian and Sandy' in the BBC radio comedy *Round The Horne*) and researched the historical journey of Polari from Lingua Franca to the underground language of the theatrical and homosexual communities. Baker's text deliberately focuses on Polari in the context of the homosexual community, whereas other texts take a purely historical standpoint, and look at Polari in the context of

travelling and theatrical communities, before it was adopted as the secret language of the gay community. One such text is Ian Hancock's essay 'Shelta and Polari' (1984). This essay provides what is perhaps the most succinct historical account of Polari, its origins and uses, appended by a short glossary of Polari terms. 'Shelta and Polari' focuses mainly on establishing Polari's Italian roots, and its presence in travelling communities. Because it pays little attention to Polari's importance to the gay community, the glossary is limited, and gives very few items specific to homosexuality. Cox and Fay's essay 'Gayspeak, the linguistic fringe: Bona polari, camp, queerspeak and beyond' (1994) gives an account of Polari's place in the language of the gay community in the 1990s. Their work is based on a study conducted through questionnaires investigating which items of Polari (and other lexical items associated with homosexual language) are still familiar to speakers. Ian Lucas' essay 'The Color of his Eyes' looks at a brief historical overview of Polari, from cant to Julian and Sandy, supplemented by a look at how it is used today – in particular in the context of 'The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence', an order of gay male 'nuns'.

Polari in use

Finally, it has been important to this investigation to look at examples of Polari in use. Some helpful resources are the scripts for the 'Julian & Sandy' sketches from the *Round the Horne* radio comedy programme, a number of which have been collected in *The Bona Book of Julian and Sandy* (1976), compiled by the *Round the Horne* writers Marty Feldman and Barry Took. This is a key text in the study of Polari, as it shows the language in use at its most high profile stage. These scripts were broadcast nationwide

throughout the 1960s, spreading Polari to the public across the United Kingdom. *Round the Horne* is still broadcast today on BBC Radio and is also available in reissued audio cassettes and CDs.

A number of television programmes, films and music also show Polari in use, and are discussed in this study, such as Channel 4's *A Storm in a Tea-Cup* (1993), Todd Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) and Morrissey's album *Bona Drag* (1990). A number of online resources have been very useful in establishing the presence of Polari in the modern world. The BBC Voices website has an excellent audio recording of a recent conversation between gay male speakers of a variety of ages, in which only the oldest speaker is able to speak Polari. There are also a number of articles online which have been featured in national newspapers, which illustrates how Polari does surface from time to time into the public consciousness.

Chapter One: Polari - A 'Secret Language'

Secret languages emerge from situations in which a community feels the need to conceal the content of their utterances from the outside world. Such communities are usually socially marginalised or 'underworld' communities, or those who are threatened by other communities. These languages are therefore often employed by travellers, gypsies, ethnic minority groups or criminals. Therefore, a secret language is a survival tactic in some cases. Polari is one such secret language which was a product of a variety of marginalised groups who used the lexicon for coded communication. Polari draws from the 'cant' of travelling showmen and criminals, Italianate Lingua Franca picked up by men serving in the navy, the Romani language of gypsies, and the jargon of the theatrical community (amongst many other potential historical sources). The most common type of secret language is that which uses the overall structure of a larger language, with a coded lexicon. Polari is an excellent example of this, as it is purely a lexicon, with the syntactic structure of English. Despite being labelled a 'secret language', Polari is more accurately described as a type of lexicon – a jargon used by a number of social groups to supplement English, 'not a constructed language, but a secret vocabulary... which uses the grammar and syntax of English as well as most of its core vocabulary' (Quinion, 1996).

Not all jargons are 'secret' (take, for example, the 'technical jargon' of computing or the medical 'jargon' of doctors) but they do all serve to allow group members to 'communicate more quickly and effectively than otherwise to the initiated' (Burke 1995: 13-14). 'Jargon' is also a more technically accurate label for Polari than 'language'.

'Jargon' has long been used to refer to 'the language of the underworld, a kind of slang...

which helped to keep the activities of beggars, thieves, confidence tricksters and so on secret from ordinary citizens... an 'anti-language' of a counter culture or a marginal language for marginal people' (Burke, 1995: 2). Furthermore, as Cox and Fay commented in their essay 'Gayspeak, the linguistic fringe: Bona polari, camp, queerspeak and beyond' (1994: 87) 'in and of itself, Polari could only be a glossary, a collection of words and phrases that could be strategically employed either to create a sense of belonging' or to exclude others (other linguists have suggested the existence of some Polari-specific grammatical rules, but it seems that for the great majority of Polari speakers, what they were using was a modified form of English, slotting in lexical items according to the syntactic rules of English). Although not a 'language' in the way that French, Chinese or Arabic would be classed, Polari could at times be as incomprehensible to outsiders as Chinese would be to a monolingual English speaker. Inherent in this exclusive language is the sense of 'mystery' the language has to outsiders, which allows the group to operate in secrecy. The purpose of such secret languages is most often to establish the boundaries of group membership - to identify fellow group members and to exclude outsiders, functions which Rijkhoff (1998) refers to as 'bystander deixis'. Secret languages can also allow speakers to defy the usual conventions of conversation – they can pass dangerous or criminal information, for example, or discuss present (uninitiated) company without their knowledge. Speakers may use the bulk of one language, replacing words with other words which come from 'one or more foreign and/or minority languages' which are known by the community of speakers but not outsiders (Bakker, 1998: 74) This is a common practice in societies around the world. In the case of Polari, English is the primary language with many borrowed words to conceal words which need

to be hidden from outsiders. This occurs most usually in domains such as crime, sex, and money. References to the outside world may also be coded, so that speakers are at liberty to voice their thoughts and opinions, no matter how unfavourable they may be to others. This can be achieved through borrowing from external language sources, and Polari borrows heavily from Italian (e.g. *bona*, 'good', is a direct loan from Italian). Another way of creating a secret language is cryptolalic language formation – disguising words by drawing on language internal resources. Cryptolalic techniques include the formation of 'backslang' (pronouncing words as if spelled backwards), productive suffixing (such as adding *-ette* to create novel diminutives), metaphorical compounding (e.g. in Polari, *ogle riah*s, literally 'eye hairs' means eyelashes), figurative and camouflaged words (these features will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters).

Chapter Two: The History of Polari

As one would expect, the very nature of secret languages means that they are elusive and often completely unattainable subjects for linguistic study. For this reason, the history of Polari, due to its covert existence and its 'slang' status, is not extensively documented. A key factor explaining the small amount of literature on Polari is the fact that the individuals who used the language in the past were not comfortable exposing their 'secret' code to outsiders. It is necessary for the survival of a secret language to keep the code secret, and only in the days since Polari has fallen out of use in the gay community have speakers co-operated with researchers and linguists to explain the way their language works. Besides the historical difficulty of obtaining first-hand evidence of Polari in use, another disadvantage for those who wish to study Polari is that (like many minority language varieties) it was perceived as a 'low-life' jargon of thieves, traditionally considered unworthy of study, and only received attention as part of underworld glossaries. Because of these reasons, and because Polari (like most in-group languages and slang) has functioned largely for oral communication, there exists very little in the way of a written record of it, pre-twentieth century, which can be used for a diachronic study of the language. Furthermore, there is a complete lack of standardisation in the spelling system of Polari, with lexicographers providing a vast variety of different spellings for single lexical items – even the name of the language itself ranges from Parlaree, Parlyaree, Polari, Palare and so on. In the absence of any detailed records, linguists have attempted to trace back to the potential beginnings of Polari through the likely etymologies of the lexical items and have found a wide range of sources for this 'linguistic mongrel' (Quinion, 1996).

2.1 Cant

Cant is believed to be one of the earliest sources from which Polari grew. This was the in-group language of travellers, vagabonds and criminals, used in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Cant was derived from Elizabethan 'pelting slang', which was 'concerned with the business of crime and its over-lexicalisation of criminal terms attests to this' (Baker, 2002: 21). Similar to Polari, Cant had a wide range of words for body parts, bodily functions, and particularly genitalia. Though there is little trace of cant vocabulary in Polari's lexical reservoir, one shared feature is the compounding process. In cant, compounds would, for example, use a noun such as *cove*, meaning 'man' and prefix it to create novel nouns such as '*cross cove, flash cove, leary cove*'. Polari uses a similar technique, which is evident in instances such as *charpering omee* 'policeman' and *charvering donna* 'prostitute'.

2.2 Lingua Franca

Hancock asserts that Polari's origins are firmly in the Mediterranean Lingua Franca, which was similar to a pidgin, in that it was a simplified 'mid-point' between languages. It emerged as a 'medium of communication between sailors and traders from widely different language groups' (Quinion: 1996) and was picked up by British sailors and enriched with 'nauticisms'. The language of sailors has traditionally been 'a semi-international one' due to the likelihood of overseas travel and also because 'crews were so often composed of men from different places' (Burke, 1995: 17). Coelho (1880, cited in Baker, 2002: 28) asserts that 'Lingua Franca was almost certainly known to sailors, who most probably brought it back to England with them'. When injured or retired sailors

returned home in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many had difficulty settling back into regular employment, and took work in travelling groups and circuses, where they came into contact with other itinerant groups. In these circumstances, the pool of Lingua Franca words were carried with the retired sailors, and then showmen's cant was added to the register. This formed an 'anti-language', which created a veil of secrecy for the group from the establishment and the outside world. This collision of sailor's slang with traveller's slang is evident in showmen's cant, which exhibits the influence of Italian, an element which is likely to have appeared through the Lingua Franca. It is through the showmen and circus groups that Polari forged its long-standing affiliation with the theatre.

2.3 Italian

The largest source of Polari lexicon is Italian in origin, with the name Polari deriving from the Italian *parlare* 'to speak'. Ian Hancock's essay on Polari gives a detailed etymological overview of this link. Polari is 'lexically Romance-based' (especially Italian) and this is evident in much of the vocabulary and even the pronunciation of many of the words (Hancock, 1984: 391). The numerals of Polari closely resemble those of Italian – there is a noticeable likeness between Polari *una, dooey, trey* and the Italian *uno, due, tre*. Also, references to money or currency: Polari *dinarly* comes from Italian *denaro* 'money'. Italian *niente* 'nothing' or 'not at all' becomes Polari *nanty* or *nantee*, as in *nanty polari* 'don't say anything', and *nanty dinarly* 'no money' (Partridge, 1950: 125). Words referring to people come from Italian, such as *omi* 'man' (from It. *uomo*) and *donah* 'girl' (from It. *donna*). Two of the most well-known Polari words are Italian in

origin: *vada* ‘see’, comes from Italian *vedere* ‘to see’, *bona* ‘good’ comes directly from the Italian also. It is believed that, besides the sailors bringing Lingua Franca, an influx of Italian immigrants in the 1840s brought much of this romance-based lexicon. Many Italians found work in England as entertainers, which is where they would have come into contact with other actors and travelling entertainers. Parlyaree probably then emerged as a lingua franca between the Italian and English speaking showmen (Baker, 2002: 27, Hancock, 1984: 395).

2.4 Parlyaree

A closer relative to modern Polari was Parlyaree, the language of travelling actors, and particularly circus people, who were once such a despised and marginalised group that they would routinely be denied Christian burial (Burke, 1995: 8). Parlyaree was employed for this very reason. This variety ‘acted as a bridge between Cant and Polari’ (Baker, 2002: 23) in the historical development of Polari, and included influences from Romani gypsy lexicon, backslang and rhyming slang. Parlyaree was the first ‘close relative’ of Polari to be documented in the numerous slang dictionaries of Eric Partridge, the prolific 20th century lexicographer. His most detailed definition reads:

The ‘Lingua Francal’ – but actually as to 90% of its words, Italianate – vocabulary of C. 18-mid-19 actors and mid-C. 19-20 coster-mongers and showmen: (orig. low) coll. Verging, after ca. 1930, on S.E. (How long the word itself has existed, I do not know: prob. not before ca. 1850, when the vocabulary was much enlarged and the principal users

changed so radically, though itinerant and inferior actors supply the link.) Ex It. *Pargliare*, to speak. Cf. *palarie* and see *Slang, passim*, and at ‘Circus Slang,’ and P. Allingham’s *Cheapjack*, 1934. E.g. *donah*, *letty*, *madza*, *mungarly*, *nantee*, *omee*, *saltee*, *say tray*, qq.v.

(Partridge, 1948: 606)

This small clutch of examples shows Parlyaree’s lexicon includes words for people (*donah* ‘woman’, *omee* ‘man’), money (*saltee* ‘penny’) and food (*mungarly*). Partridge’s reference to Allingham’s *Cheapjack* (1934), a novel about the life of a travelling pedlar, was one of his recurrent sources of reference from Parlyaree. This is one of the only written records of the speech of circus people and the travelling groups they associated with. A number of Parlyaree words used by Allingham have clearly been carried into Polari, such as *munjary*, ‘food’ which is commonly spelled in modern Polari lexicons as *manjaree* (closer to *magiare*, the original Italian), *bono* ‘good’ and *deaner/dener* ‘shilling’, which widened in meaning to *dinarly*, ‘money’ (Baker 2002: 26-27). It seems that through Parlyaree, the reliance on Italianate forms in modern Polari was consolidated.

2.5 Romani

Romani ‘gypsy’ language is another source that has been cited as a contributor to Polari’s lexicon. Partridge (1950) noted instances such as *gajo* ‘stranger’, derived from the Romani *gajo* or *gaujo*, and the now widely-used *chavvie*, ‘child’, which was transmitted from Romani to Polari lexicon. The first potential account of British Romani dates back

to 1542 (Matras, 2002: 10), but it is more likely that the Romani contact with the early forms of Polari occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through Parlyaree and the circus travellers, as there are examples of Romani words such as *chavvy* ‘child’ in *Cheapjack* (1934). The Roma are another marginalised peripatetic group, traditionally of itinerant tradesmen, musicians and salesmen, and were considered by many to be part of the ‘underworld’, along with travelling actors and salesmen. It seems likely that Romani travellers would have encountered the various other groups of travellers, and according to Jan Rijkhoff, ‘many jargons, trade varieties, secret languages and other more or less non-standard speech varieties have borrowed extensively from the Romani lexicon’ (1998: 51). Burke is more specific, suggesting that ‘some of the jargons of beggars and thieves drew on Romany and Yiddish’ (1995:16), which fits in with the idea of Polari coming from the language used by travelling thieves. Like Polari, by the 20th Century, Romani existed only as a lexicon in Britain, and had become a way for the Roma to supplement English to suit their own purposes of identity and secrecy. As Matras (2002: 246) writes, the in-group lexical items used by the Roma serve the purpose of both ‘secret communication in the presence of Gadžos (non-Romani people)’, but they also act as ‘a symbol which helps consolidate and flag separate ethnic identity’. Despite the evidence of social similarities between the Roma and speakers of early Polari varieties, however, the similarities in lexicon between Polari and Romani English are ‘slight at best’ (Baker, 2002: 32).

2.6 Yiddish

Another, less prominent possible source for Polari lexicon is Yiddish, which is likely to have come into contact with Polari from the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth century, when there was a large Jewish community in East End London, and particularly in the theatre. Polari terms such as *schvartzer* 'black man' and *schinwhars* 'chinese man' (both somewhat derogatory) are from Yiddish. Once again, the Jewish community was a marginalised group, with a second language source to draw on, namely Hebrew.

2.7 Rhyming slang, Backslang, Acronyms and Compounds

Rhyming slang, is a feature present in Polari, particularly that associated with 'Cockney'. Cockney rhyming slang, according to Franklyn (1960: 7) was created by Cockney navvies in the early nineteenth century as a secret code to exclude Irishmen who were fellow dockworkers. Many of these low-status labourers would 'come into contact with the criminal underworld' through unemployment, which was the likely source of Cockney rhyming slang's integration into Polari (Baker, 2002:30). London is an area to which Polari was closely tied, and much of the Polari that has entered everyday slang has done so through Cockney slang. For example, *karsey* 'toilet', *savvy* 'to know' and *scarper* 'to run away' are more associated with Cockney than Polari, even though this is the earlier source. Rhyming slang which has come from Cockney into Polari, however, includes *barnet* 'hair', which derives from *Barnet Fair* and *minces* 'eyes' from *mince pies* (Baker, 2002: 30). Rhyme is also seen in other forms in homosexual slang particularly in 'rhyme compounds' such as *fag hag* (Stanley, 1970: 53).

Polari also involves a number of phrases formed through ‘backslang’. Backslang is the creation of coded lexical items by reversing the sound or spelling of words. This practice is also found in Shelta, the cant of Irish travellers (Hancock: 1984). The most commonly used items of Polari backslang are *riah*, ‘hair’ and *ecaf*, meaning ‘face’. *Ecaf* is usually coded even further, truncated (after Julian and Sandy – see Chapter Four) to *eke* (or *EEK*). Backslang, or ‘reverse talk’ was ‘very popular between the late 19th century and the end of the second world war’ (Rijkhoff, 1998: 55), particularly in marginal groups, but it has since gone into decline.

Other common in-group slang techniques include the formation of acronyms, which are used in Polari to classify different types of potential sexual partner. The most commonly used acronyms in Polari are *TBH*, ‘to be had’ and the polar opposite *NAFF*, meaning ‘not available for fucking’.

In order to extend their range of lexical items, secret language speakers sometimes use compounding to create novel phrases, Burke confirms that ‘jargons are rich in figures of speech, notably metaphor and euphemism’ (1995: 15). Polari is productive in this way, and uses metaphorical compounding, such as *ogle riahs* for ‘eyelashes’ (literally ‘eye hairs’) and *Bevvy omee*, meaning ‘drunkard’ is literally ‘drink man’. Hayes (1974: 259) and Stanley (1970: 53) discuss the tendency of speakers in the Gay community to use compounding to delineate subgroups within gay culture, such as the ‘noun plus *queen*’ compound formation (Stanley, 1970: 53), which yields labels such as *drag queen*, *drama queen*, *dinge queen*, amongst many others.

Chapter Three: The Uses of Polari

As previously discussed, Polari is a jargon which has functioned for the secret communication of groups such as thieves, gypsies and homosexuals. Hancock (1984: 393) defines Polari as an 'anti-language' for secrecy, because it functions as a barrier between people (1984: 396), suggesting that not only does the language mean outsiders do not understand certain messages, it in fact symbolically distances the in-group and the outside world. Cox and Fay extend this definition, showing how Polari functions for inclusion and exclusion, and they summarise the functions of Polari in the homosexual community as 'self-protection, secrecy, and statement of common identity' (1994: 118). This 'self-protection' element was vitally important as not only was homosexuality a criminal offence, the general public were also extremely hostile towards homosexuals. A 1949 survey claimed that 'most British people were horrified and disgusted by homosexuality in England' (Baker, 2002: 64), therefore jargon was acting as a valuable defence mechanism. The idea of Polari being used as a 'statement of common identity' is echoed by Baker's assertion that some gay men would speak in Polari to tentatively identify fellow homosexuals (Baker, 2002: 68-69), and some to flaunt their sexuality. This illustrates how Polari's functions were flexible – from concealing one's identity to revealing it. In the Channel 4 documentary *Storm in a Teacup* (1993), one of the Polari speakers, Dudley Cave, explained how Polari words were used as 'secret passwords'. By dropping an innocent-sounding Polari word into conversation, a gay man could establish if their interlocutor was a member of the in-group (a fellow homosexual) or an outsider, to whom the utterance would have probably been meaningless. As Colin Richardson writes, Polari 'enabled one gay man to identify another... and provided a vocabulary for

talking about gay sex and sexuality’ (Richardson, 2005). Considering the specific linguistic functions Polari served between speakers *within* the gay community, Hayes (1972:259) proposed what he believed to be the five key lexical areas of Gay speech:

- 1) physical appearance
- 2) sexual preference
- 3) intimacy of relationship
- 4) rank within the subculture
- 5) eccentricities within the subculture

Physical attributes are expressed with a wide range of adjectives, such as *bona* ‘good’, *bijou* ‘small’, *fabulosa* ‘wonderful’ and *zhoozy* ‘showy’. Many of the adjectives have negative connotations, and are most often used as put-downs, to ‘bitch’ about people who were present – creating the ‘bitchy queen’ image – or to ‘cruise’ (Baker, 2002: 73) for men, evaluating their physical appearance, usually opened with ‘*Vada the homie...*’ (‘Look at the man...’). However, there are also several terms of endearment such as *heartface*, *dear*, *ducky*. These examples show that the uses of Polari, like those of most secret languages, related to areas of life which were culture-specific and which needed to be concealed from the majority. Thus, we find over-lexicalisation of terms for sex, body parts, people and illegal activity.

Chapter Four: The Rise of Polari

Polari rose in usage due to the growing gay community and their need for secrecy. Many gay men would move to the larger cities such as London, Manchester and Birmingham, as these metropolitan settings afforded them increased anonymity and a more close-knit gay community. However, despite the acceptance that gay men could find within their own community, the legal situation towards homosexuality in Britain meant that it was still very dangerous to be publicly known as a homosexual. In 1950s and 1960s London, plain-clothes policemen would 'advertise their virtue' by waiting in recognised gay meeting places, or 'cottaging sites' (usually Underground stations or public parks) to arrest homosexuals who would meet there for sex (Higgins, 1996: 163). The combination of a growing gay 'scene' and the continuing need for secrecy led to a rise in the use of Polari, and the mid-twentieth century saw Polari consolidate its status as the secret language of gay men. Polari was utilised because it allowed gay men to speak freely about their lives and their sexuality in the company of non-homosexuals, without being persecuted. However, not only did the coded vocabulary of Polari serve as a form of protection, it also became a part of the flamboyant and theatrical 'camp' gay identity. Although in relation to the outside world Polari symbolises concealment of gay identity, within the gay community, it became a way to flaunt and celebrate sexual identity. The 1960s saw an explosion of 'camp' which lasted well into the 1970s, as evidenced by cinema (such as the 'Carry On' films), literature (such as Quentin Crisp's 1968 book *The Naked Civil Servant*) and light entertainment (through television hosts such as Larry Grayson, Frankie Howerd and Dick Emery). The major exponent of this was the gay community, a community in which 'high status' was 'awarded to verbal performance'

(Cox and Fay, 1994: 116), such as verbal puns, sexually suggestive language and witty turns of phrase – all of which are staples of camp humour. Two of the most famous camp entertainers were Hugh Paddick and Kenneth Williams, who were to bring Polari into the consciousness of the British public. Most British people in the 1960s were unaware they were being exposed to the secret language of gay men through a BBC radio comedy programme. *Round the Horne* showcased Polari through the language of two out-of-work actors named Julian and Sandy. Julian and Sandy, played by Kenneth Williams and Hugh Paddick, were effeminate characters who spoke in a mixture of double entendres, euphemisms, innuendo and Polari. It is surprising that at a time of such animosity towards homosexuals, two flamboyant, effeminate characters could be so popular – *Round the Horne* was attracting around nine million listeners per week (Took and Feldman, 1976: 1) – but this took advantage of Polari's equal associations with the gay community and the theatrical world. By characterising Julian and Sandy as actors, the writers could play on ideas of sexuality whilst having the characters' theatrical backgrounds to fall back on as an explanation of their use of Polari. The writers themselves were surprised at Julian and Sandy's popularity, and, as Barry Took and Marty Feldman wrote in the foreword to *The Bona Book of Julian & Sandy*, 'we'd no idea how popular they'd become, or how their fey but knowing camp chat would spread from a limited circle of aficionados in show business to become a national institution, not to say menace' (Took and Feldman, 1976:9). They believed that the public accepted Julian and Sandy because they were figures of gentle, ambiguous humour within a 'safe' heterosexual environment - 'such innuendo as there was in the dialogue seemed acceptable with the benign Horne, representing the rest of us, to referee' (Took and

Feldman, 1976:9). The Polari element came into *Round the Horne* through the writer Barry Took's experience as a musical comic in the West End, where Took found Polari through a choreographer friend. He also commented on BBC Radio 4 in 1998 that Kenneth Williams and Hugh Paddick would frequently speak Polari to one another, and the writers 'thought it would be a good idea to incorporate what they did in their private lives into the script'. Kenneth Williams, who had a background in both the homosexual and theatrical communities, reportedly explained much of the Polari vocabulary to the writers (Baker, 2002: 96). A typical example of Julian and Sandy's dialogue is from the sketch *Bona Prods.*, which sees the characters running a production company, and telling Kenneth Horne about their films:

HORNE Would I have vada'd any of them, do you think?

SANDY Oh – he's got all the palare, hasn't he?

JULIAN I wonder where he picks it up

SANDY You may have vada'd one of our tiny bijou masterpiecettes
heartface. We made *Funny Eek, My Fair Palone...*

(Took and Feldman, 1976: 18-19)

As well as using the most well-known Polari words (*vada, eek, palone*), Julian and Sandy introduced their own idiosyncratic figures of speech into the Polari register, perhaps the most frequently used is '*your actual...*'. This phrase was sometimes used to mean 'genuine/real', but was often fairly empty of meaning, and more of an affectation. The following examples show how it was used by Julian and Sandy:

JULIAN Divine. Sitting, sipping a tiny drinkette, vada-ing the great butch omis and dolly little palones trolling by, or disporting yourself on the sable plage getting your lallies all bronzed – your riah getting bleached by the soleil.

SANDY That's your actual French...

'Bona Bijou Tourettes' (Took and Feldman, 1976:20)

JULIAN Then how about corn on your actual cob?

'La Casserole De Bona Gourmet' (Took and Feldman, 1976: 34)

Another feature of Polari used frequently in the speech of Julian and Sandy is suffixing – using *like* and *-ette* (which is used to create diminutives of nouns):

SANDY: ...very butch-like

'Ballet Bona' (Tooke and Feldman, 1976: 59)

SANDY: Welcome to our bijou restaurantette

'La Casserole de Bona Gourmet' (Tooke and Feldman, 1976: 32)

SANDY: Well, to start with – artichoke, with perhaps your mini glassette of Chablis.

'La Casserole de Bona Gourmet' (Tooke and Feldman, 1976: 34)

Polari was also present in the titles of the Julian and Sandy sketches, such as *Bona Pets*, *Bona Male Models*, *Lazy Bona Ranch*. The national broadcasting of this language meant that gay men outside of the London theatrical circles had access to the secret gay language. Julian and Sandy's Polari speech was 'virtually incomprehensible to anyone hearing it for the first time, though by repetition week by week a mental glossary could be constructed' (Quinion: 1996). This undoubtedly helped to promote and preserve Polari as part of homosexual identity, and the lexical items used by Julian and Sandy are those which have spread the furthest and reached the largest audience. However, at this pivotal time in gay history, and the cusp of great change, *Round the Horne* 'was both Polari's apotheosis and its last hurrah' (Richardson, 2005) as a language for the gay community.

Chapter Five: The Decline of Polari

Polari, by the 1960s, existed largely as a language of the homosexual community, used because they needed to hide their sexuality for fear of being arrested. However, the Wolfenden report, published in Britain in September 1957, recommended that homosexuality, 'between consenting adults over the age of twenty one in private' (Higgins, 1996: 115), should no longer be an illegal act. These recommendations were passed as part of the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, which meant that gay men did not have to conceal their sexual identities for fear of criminalisation. This did not mark an end to public hostility towards homosexuality – though many national newspapers reported the charter positively, some corners of the press reinforced traditional attitudes, even referring to the Wolfenden report as 'The Pansies Charter' (Higgins, 1996: 116). However, after 1967, as one would predict, the need for a secret language to conceal homosexual identity became less necessary, and therefore, Polari went into decline.

The 'gay pride' movement emerged in the 1970s and gained momentum throughout following decades. Polari had developed negative associations of concealment of homosexuality; of puns, sexual innuendo and the camp humour of 'queens'. Polari was perceived as part of the image of a shamed or stereotyped homosexuality which gay rights campaigners wanted to shake off. An example of how Polari gathered negative associations is shown in a dialogue from the Channel 4 (1993) documentary *A Storm in a Tea-cup*:

D Honestly Tony you are so self-oppressed. All this camp, bitchy chat is so sexist like. It really puts down women and Gay men.

Tony Its called Polari. Words like *camp* and *gay*, *fab* and *groovy* – they've entered the language.

D Just listen to yourself. 'Entered' – that is a revolting metaphor. You are a slave to phallogentric discourse without even realising it.

Tony Oh that's just the madcap fun-loving Stalinist in you ducky.

Further to this rejection of all that was symbolic of repression, was the embracing of new homosexual identities. The 1970s and 1980s saw a new, hyper-masculine 'butch' aesthetic emerging in the gay community, and subsequently the effeminate 'camp' image became anathema. Because Polari had become inextricably linked with campness, it was quickly rejected by the new breed of liberated young gay men. If a gay man was to use Polari in the post-Wolfenden years, it was a matter of choice rather than necessity: 'the need for secrecy' write Cox and Fay (1994:118), became 'a matter of personal conviction rather than legal sanction', and it seems that very few gay men felt this 'personal conviction', thus leading Polari into decline.

Chapter Six: Polari Today

In 1950, Eric Partridge concluded his chapter on Polari, 'Cinderella among languages', by stating that 'Parlyaree... is a glossary, a vocabulary, not a complete language. Little remains'. He then forecasted that 'even that little may disappear' (Partridge, 1950: 125), which seems curiously at odds with the fact that the 1960s would prove to be Polari's most high-profile decade. Linguists were continually predicting Polari's decline, and Hancock wrote in 1984 that Polari 'survives only as a lexicon of 80-100 words', therefore it is unlikely that anyone knows all of them (Hancock, 1984: 391). The ethnologue report for Polari lists it as a language of the United Kingdom, but does not estimate a speaker population or classify it as part of any language family. It also lists the alternate names of Polari (Parlare, Parlary, Palarie, Palari, Parlyaree). The report also says that Polari is 'an in-group language among theatrical and circus people. Speakers are gays. Some observers trace its roots to sailors and seafarers, alleging that it derived from a maritime lingua franca. Second language only.' This report suggests that Polari still exists, though it is not a well-established language.

Despite these bleak forecasts, traces of Polari have made it into widely-used slang (such as *ponce*, *scarper*, *bevvy* and *carsey*) (Hancock, 1984: 391), particularly that associated with London 'Cockney' slang, probably due to the higher concentration of Polari speakers around the capital, historically.

6.1 In what capacity does Polari survive today?

To investigate how much Polari survives, a study by Cox and Fay (1994) was conducted to determine the kinds of items of Polari, or 'Gayspeak', people are familiar with. Their

survey was in two parts – the first was a questionnaire which created a profile of the participants' age, gender, sexuality and such other traits. The second part of the survey was a word list of what Cox and Fay divided into 'older items' (such as *Bona*, *Lallies*, *Palone*), 'cross-over items between Gay culture and mainstream culture' (*Bevvy*, *Palaver*, *Scarper*) and 'newer items' (*Butch*, *Fag Hag*, *Swish*) (Cox and Fay, 1994: 112).

Their findings showed that some Polari does indeed survive in modern speech. Older lexical items tended to be restricted to older men in the urban Gay community, cross-over items are known by many city dwellers and newer items are well-known by many young urban speakers, particularly those involved in or affiliated with the Gay community.

From this, Cox and Fay propose that Polari is 'the historical origins' for an even newer in-group language: the modern sociolect they call 'Gayspeak' (Cox and Fay, 1994: 105).

Polari has had a continued presence in the entertainment industry, and various outlets of the arts. In the early 1990s, Morrissey released an album entitled *Bona Drag* (a much-used Polari phrase, and also the title of a Julian and Sandy sketch), and a song called *Piccadilly Palare* which alludes to the underground community of gay prostitution and includes lyrics such as '*so bona to vada... your lovely eek and your lovely riah*'.

Polari has also been used in recent film and television productions. The 1998 film 'Velvet Goldmine', includes a scene where Polari is used by three gay men in a Soho club in the 1960s (Haynes, 1998: 34-6):

Friend 1: Ooo, varda Mistress Bona! ('Look as Miss Beautiful')

Friend 2: Vada the omie palome! ('Look at the homosexual')

Friend 1: A tart, my dears, a tart in gildy clobber! ('A slut, mate, a slut in fancy clothes')

A biographical television film about the life of Kenneth Williams, was recently broadcast (BBC, 2006), and was titled with the Polari word 'Fantabulosa' in reference to Williams' part in Julian and Sandy. There were also instances of Polari within the programme. These examples show that Polari has come to be recognised as an important reference point in gay culture. Another environment in which Polari can be found today is the internet. Some niches of the online community try to maintain Polari through websites or blogs. There are numerous sources detailing Polari, providing examples of its use, and resources such as transcripts and glossaries. Polari has found a place as a 'part of the extraordinary, the fabulous' in the exuberant language of *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence* (Lucas, 1997: 88). This order of gay male 'nuns' conducts services in a mix of English, Polari and innuendo. *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence* have a presence on the internet, and their site includes translations of famous texts into Polari. They have even posted a Polari version of the Bible (*The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*: 2003). However, the Sisters' efforts to revive Polari are fairly superficial, as it acts only as a ceremonial language (much as Latin has been the language of religious ceremony in the Catholic Church) (Lucas, 1997: 89). This does seem to be a deliberate attempt to preserve a part of Gay cultural history, rather than a concerted effort to revitalise the language for widespread use.

Polari has traditionally had a strong presence in the drag community, a famous exponent of which is Paul O'Grady, through his fictional dragqueen character Lily Savage. O'Grady has also been known to occasionally slip Polari items into his speech whilst presenting his daytime chat show, an example of which shows how Polari is

comprehended by the guest (perhaps because *eek* has made the cross-over into widely known slang, or perhaps because of a shared background in the entertainment industry):

Paul: “Now, Vanessa, who does my eek...”

Harry Enfield: “Yeah, she did our make-up as well...”

(Channel 4: 2007)

Thusfar, the examples indicate that Polari survives only as a clutch of lexical items in most cases, but in terms of speakers with an extensive Polari vocabulary (and who use the lexicon on a daily basis), very few speakers still survive today. For this small number of Polari speakers though, opportunities to use the language are ever-decreasing. A recent interview with a group of gay men in Nottingham conducted by the BBC Voices project highlighted the generational difference in Polari usage. A speaker (Raymond Wilson, born 1944) in his sixties says “Vada the eek on that dolly young thing over there”, “look at the riahry lallies on that one over there” and “that’s a nice bona homie standing over there with the polone”. The younger gay men, who were born in the sixties and did not grow up in an environment where Polari was perceived to be necessary, said they have “never heard of it” and that it “sounds like a foreign language” (BBC Online: 2007). This generation gap illustrates just how far removed Polari has now become from the modern gay identity. To investigate whether this ignorance of Polari is common in the modern gay community, I have informally investigated (through conversations with a small number of acquaintances in the Manchester gay community) if they have any knowledge of Polari. The individuals (all aged 20s to mid-30s) were all ignorant of Polari except

two, one of whom who had heard of Polari, but knew none of the language, the second replied to the question “Have you heard of Polari?” with the following:

Jon C: “Oh, ‘bona eek’ ... ‘naff’ and all that? That’s only used by
dreadful old queens.”

This evidence suggests that Polari has been out of everyday use for so long now that it has not been transmitted to the younger members of the gay community, and in terms of language endangerment, can be said to be moribund, in that it is surviving only in a small number of aging speakers. The potential for a large scale revival of Polari seems unlikely, as an audience who would wish to (or feel the need to) adopt the lexicon is not evident. However, small-scale attempts, perhaps in the name of posterity have been made to bring Polari back into use. An article by Colin Richardson (a former editor of *Gay Times*) in 2005, published in *The Guardian*, reported that Polari is being revived in some communities:

‘Madame Jo Jo's, the Soho cabaret venue which specialises in drag spectaculars, has adopted Polari as its lingua franca. A list of words and phrases, chosen by linguistics lecturer and Polari expert Dr Paul Baker, has been given to staff for them to use in their conversations with each other and with the punters.’ As Paris Tkaczyk, owner of Madame Jo Jo's, explains: “By offering staff the option of learning and using Polari to refer to familiar aspects and objects of their work, we

are offering a fun, yet practical, way of bridging any language gaps, as well as celebrating the cultural history and diversity of Soho”

(Richardson, 2005).

The Polari that survives in today’s society is found in the small number of items that have crossed over to mainstream slang, and the nostalgic traces held onto by older members of the gay community. There are no known communities in which Polari is still spoken as an everyday language.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

The preceding study of Polari, past and present, illustrates the great many contributing sources and stages in the development of Polari. Evidence indicates that, though it began as a jargon of numerous itinerant groups, Polari's social domain has narrowed, and become inextricably associated with the gay community, which began during a period of particularly strong persecution, some time around the early twentieth century. As the study shows, since the decriminalisation of homosexuality, Polari underwent a fairly rapid decline, which led many linguists to suggest that the language had died out. However, it seems that Polari has not been entirely lost, as a very small number of the original speakers survive, and isolated groups of younger generations have also found use for the language. Polari still survives in camp humour, and though it 'may no longer exist in its original form... its metaphorical practice, once symbolic of its fugitive status, has in camp become a potent means of social critique' (Wicker, 2004). This is not to say, however, that Polari can be viewed as an in-group language in the way that it has been in the past. It seems that it is no longer used as an important part of any subculture group – it is increasingly less recognised by the general public or the gay community (despite recent publications on the subject) and attempts to revive the language have been very small-scale. Unlike endangered languages, endangered jargons do not receive governmental support, and simply have to move with the needs of the communities in which they are used.

The fact that Polari seems to have been lost by the wayside in gay culture may be unfortunate, in that it was such an important part of the gay community at a time of great persecution. However, the 'casting off' of Polari is symbolic of a much greater liberation:

a transition for gay men from having to live in fear of being 'exposed' as homosexuals to being free to express and embrace their identities, and claim legal rights equal to the heterosexual culture. Surely, in this sense, the sacrifice of losing a part of the culture's linguistic heritage has been justified.

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