

Polari: the lost-and-found language of gay men

“Bona to vada
your dolly eek,”



A few decades ago, gay men often used to talk to each other in a secret language – Polari – which today hardly anyone remembers. **Paul Baker** examines the reasons for its demise and assesses its chances of a comeback.

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It is October 2012 and I am in Bury (population 60,718), a market town in northern England, standing outside an imposing late-Victorian art gallery building. I am here as part of Bury Light Night – the town centre has turned into a night-time entertainment venue, with a funfair, market stalls, fireworks and street performers. As the sun sets, in the twilight I notice the words *he's nada to vada in the larder* appear in gigantic letters, projected onto the exterior walls of the building. People passing by look up and mouth the phrase silently to themselves, or rhyme the words out loud, slightly incredulously, wondering what it is all about. A few passersby seem to be in on the secret though, and smile to themselves knowingly.

The phrase is a rather unkind epithet, to be used on a fellow who is not very well endowed, and it has been projected onto the building, along with a range of other, similar phrases, as part of an ongoing art installation on Polari, an 'almost'-language used largely by gay men in the 20th century, which has been declining steadily in use since the 1960s. Polari developed out of a selective combination of secret slang lexicons, used by entertainers, circus performers, travelling Punch and Judy men and costermongers (who worked in travelling markets) so its presence during Bury's night of grass-roots street entertainment

feels appropriate – and I take some pleasure that it is still confounding and confusing ordinary people, even when an LCD projector shines the words right into the 21st century.

I am too young to have heard Polari spoken in its heyday, and my introduction to it was befitting to someone born into the middle of Generation X, where a love of retro was essential when growing up. In the 1990s a friend called Julian played me a release of a 1960s BBC radio series called *Round the Horne* which featured a regular sketch called Julian and Sandy (what is it with all these gay Julians?) where the characters enthusiastically spoke a kind of watered-down, easy-to-follow version of Polari. We found it funny, in an ironic way, and I wondered what had happened in the intervening years to mean that none of my gay friends had used it, or even heard of it. It felt like there was a great story to tell around this almost mythological language, and it led me to embark on an interesting and at times unconventional doctoral research project. Not many PhD students get to interview drag queens in hotels in Brighton, while the said drag queen is having a new beehive wig fitted.

My goal was to find out as much about Polari as I could, where it had come from, who used it, how and why, and what happened to make it go away again so quickly. Its rise and fall neatly match the treatment of

LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) people over the twentieth century. Starting with no rights whatsoever and a propensity to be blackmailed, beaten up or imprisoned, gay people had to figure out a way of communicating their existence to each other, and once contact had been made, to continue that conversation, without anyone else figuring out that they were in the presence of dangerous subversives (if you believed the newspapers).

So dropping a Polari word into a conversation with a stranger acted as a password, opening up myriad possibilities, although in the 'twilight world of the homosexual subculture', Polari would be used much more extensively and openly, sometimes as a kind of competition, as some gay men tried to out-camp each other, performing deliciously bitchy battles for the entertainment of on-lookers. With a lexicon made up mainly of nouns (largely depicting people, body parts, clothing and everyday objects), verbs (a fair number related to sex, social interaction or performance) and evaluative adjectives, it was perfect for gossiping about people while they were present. Polari doesn't have many prepositions although its most well-known one *ajax* (most likely a truncation of *adjacent to*), attests to the "in your eke" (i.e. in your face) nature of its use – *vada the naff omee-palone with the cod riah ajax* translates to *look at the awful gay*

Another strong aspect of Polari is pronoun switching, or “sheing” in current gay slang, which is still popular in some circles. At a bar in Manchester, a “she box” was recently installed, similar to a “swear box” with offenders being required to pay up for each errant she that they used. Someone’s boyfriend, new to the scene dared to express disapproval of one bar denizen who liked to use the pronoun a little too much. “She shes!” shrugged his partner, turning she into a verb. But even as a pronoun, she can transcend its status as merely third person, jumping into second (you) or even first person (I), as in the following conversation:

Barry: Oh look, she’s here.

[Enter Russell]

Barry: Hello dear. How’s she?

Russell: She’s fine dear.

For an older gay man or one who is slightly more experienced, she will no longer do, and the first person pronoun of choice is your mother as in “your mother’s gagging for a vogue ducky!” (a request for a cigarette in Polari).

man with the wig next to us.

As well as having its roots in various slangs of travelling or stigmatised groups, Polari has a strong antecedent in Italian, so much so that only the most linguistically unaware speaker would try to get away with using it there. On holiday, a couple of English friends decided to impress those back home with designer Italian shoes and while trying some on, began to extol the physical virtues of the male shop assistant, imagining that Polari would protect them. But the assistant understood enough to express his gratitude for the compliment, causing much embarrassment and a quick exit.

Some say that Polari reached a peak after World War II and into the early 1950s. During the war, people turned a blind eye to non-traditional or hedonistic sexuality (there were bigger issues to worry about and anyway, it might be your last chance in the blackout) and with many couples separated, relationships became opportunistic and complicated. However, after the war ended, and soldiers came home, there was a desire for a return to the status quo. Queen Elizabeth II’s Coronation in 1953 sparked a ‘clean-up’ campaign of homosexuality in London, with many more arrests and drag shows being banned. No-one, not even Alan Turing, who was instrumental in cracking the Enigma machine-codes, was safe from prosecution. In 1952, turning to the police after he was robbed, he found himself under arrest and in a remarkable display of institutional violence was chemically castrated via injections of stilboestrol which caused him to develop breasts. His death via cyanide poisoning at the age of 41 shortly afterwards has been



The Polari Bible © Jez Dolan

attributed to suicide, as some claim the half-eaten apple by his bed had been dipped in the poison. With an ending written by the Brothers Grimm, this horrific fairy tale of homophobic ingratitude still makes me angry, particularly as Turing is yet to be pardoned.

The moral panic continued into the early 1960s, having fresh life breathed into it when communist spy John Vassall was discovered to be gay. However, it was an earlier arrest and humiliation of a group of relatively high-profile men (Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, Michael Pitt-Rivers and Peter Wildeblood) in the mid-50s that was instrumental in the commission of the Wolfenden Report. In 1957 the report recommended the decriminalisation of homosexuality, and in typical speedy fashion was finally implemented 10 years later, interestingly, the same year when Round The Horne peaked, winning an award for the best radio comedy program. It seems that ordinary members of the public were happy to embrace Julian and Sandy, who were lovingly rendered by the already-popular Kenneth Williams and Hugh Paddick. Williams played the excitable, sharp-tongued Sandy while Paddick was the gentler, sometimes anguished Julian, regularly cajoled into 'unburdening' himself about some mishap or other. Round the Horne even escaped the wrath of clean-up campaigner Mary Whitehouse as the show's sexual content was screened behind a fug of Polari and innuendo. Whitehouse had to content herself with successfully prosecuting Gay News for blasphemy when it published a poem describing the sexual fantasies of a Roman centurion

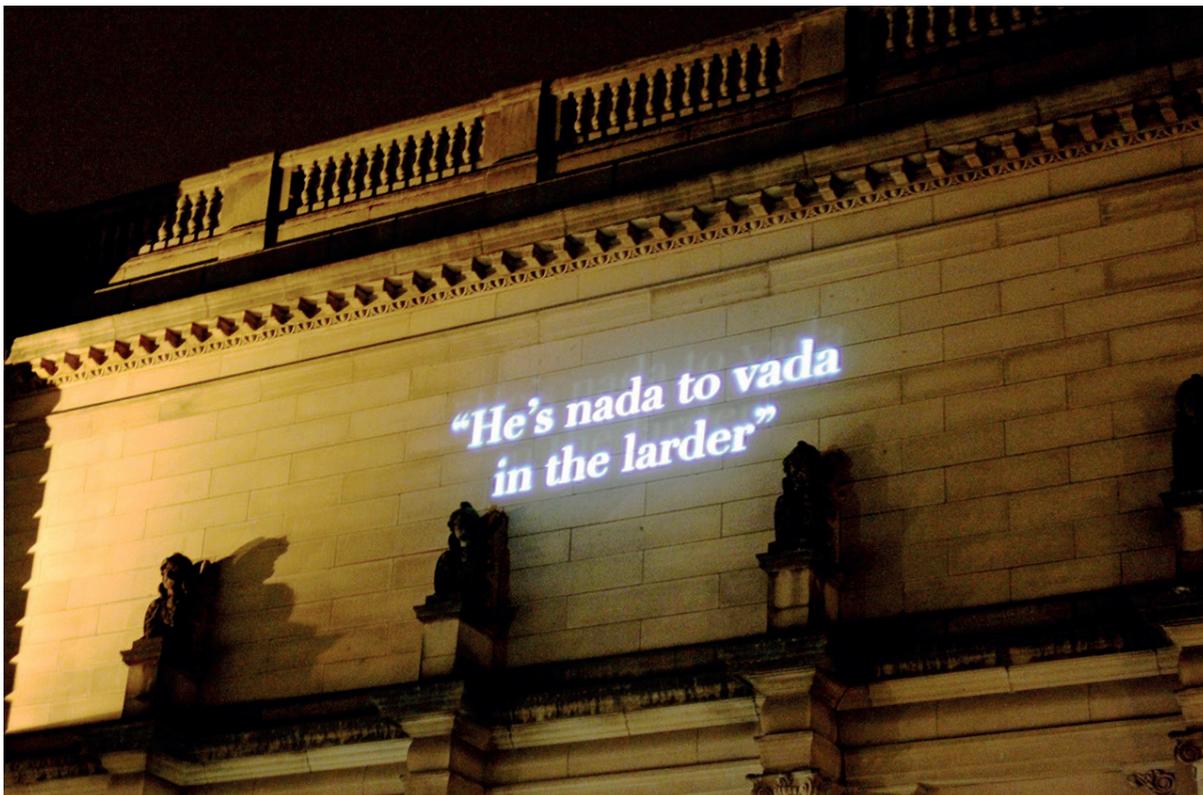
about the body of Jesus Christ (which is still illegal to publish). However, Round the Horne had a friend in the Director General of the BBC, Hugh Greene, who wasn't adverse to smutty humour and couldn't abide Mrs Whitehouse.

I was lucky enough to interview one of the surviving writers of the sketches, Barry Took, just before his own death, who told me that much of the Polari in RTH was authentic, coming direct from Williams' own knowledge of British gay culture. Took confessed that some of Williams' Polari was too confusing, even for them, such as the phrase *lau your loppers on the strillers bona* (play something nice on the piano), but everyone was too embarrassed to admit their ignorance so Williams was given free rein. Williams has described in his diaries how there was sometimes artistic conflict during the recording of the programme, with Took becoming overly concerned that the program was becoming too rude. Williams impishly took advantage of his superior knowledge of Polari to introduce not only double but triple entendres, which would have sailed over the heads of both Mary Whitehouse and Barry Took, although would have been understood by the most ardent Polari speakers. For example, in one sketch Julian and Sandy are being employed as reluctant cleaners and Julian complains 'We couldn't wash up in here, all the dishes are dirty!' Sandy (Kenneth Williams) ad libs "Speak for yourself!" The audience laugh – *dish* was commonly known slang for an attractive man ("isn't he dishy!"). But *dish* had a third, somewhat ruder, Polari meaning – referring to one's back quarters. The ad lib did not find its way into the

published, officially sanctioned version of the scripts.

But just as Julian and Sandy helped to educate the British public that gay men were not communist spies after all, they also killed Polari's golden goose, exposing the secret and making it less viable to be used, say, in the public setting of a crowded tube carriage. And in any case, decriminalisation meant there was less need for a secret language. The tortured, cardigan-wearing, 1950s queen was about to be replaced by the late 60s/early 70s gay liberationist – younger, earnest, politically radical yet sharing something in common with sworn enemy Mrs Whitehouse – that very British love of complaining.

The liberationists HATED Polari, viewing it as a symbol of the old gay world that they were desperate to get away from. They wanted the opposite of secrecy and Polari was subjected to a searing critique in the gay magazines of the day (which were somewhat more esoteric than today's offerings). When held up against a feminist perspective, Polari was found to be severely lacking. In 1972, in the magazine Lunch, Mary McIntosh wrote "...camp is a form of minstrellisation... parlare is a product of a culture that is deeply ambivalent and even while it celebrates effeminacy, 'obviousness' and casual promiscuous sexuality (precisely the elements that the straight world most abhors) can never really accept that these are good... The terms of address that are distinctively gay are always used in a negative mocking way: 'Ooh, get you Duchess'". In a follow-up article, Jonathan Raban wrote "the obvious trap facing any member of a recognisable minority is that



Bury Light Night in October 2012: A Polari projection confounds most passersby.

his symbols will consume him; that his identity will disappear into the narrow funnel of his clothes and slang. He will become no more than a shrill mouthpiece for a sectarian lobby, determined, in the case of the homosexual, by a language of body parts and fucking... Isn't it time for everybody to tidy their toys away, to put the old uniforms in the trunk in the attic, or donate them to Oxfam, and to take a few, at least, of the bricks out of the walls of the ghetto?"

With its gender swapping and some negative terms for black people and women, Polari was seen as terminally racist and sexist (as is much of 1970s society by today's standards). So rather than embracing its role in enabling gay people to keep on going during darker decades, it was decided to throw out the baby with the bathwater and concentrate instead on picketing John Inman who played a lovably camp shop assistant in the style of Julian

and Sandy in the popular sitcom *Are You Being Served*. The liberationists objected to the camp stereotypes. I guess they had a point – there wasn't exactly a glut of three-dimensional, complicated gay characters in the media at the time – but their protests reflect an impatience with a society that was clearly decades behind them in terms of attitudes to homosexuality and was more likely to respond better to cheerful, resolute education than them turning on each other. The final nail in Polari's coffin came in the form of a cultural cringe – with America providing a new template for British gay culture, excitedly discovered via cheap flights to San Francisco and New York. Britons imported the 'clone' look consisting of leather jackets, moustaches and muscles. But clones didn't speak Polari, instead they showed you a coloured handkerchief to let you know what sexual position and activity they preferred.

And that explains why by the end of the 20th century, Polari had pretty much died out. In 2010, the World Oral Literature Project at the University of Cambridge included Polari on a list of about three and a half thousand endangered languages. While its status as a language is somewhat debatable (I'm not sure it can be used to communicate in every context – like, say, giving a science lesson), I wasn't surprised to hear that it was officially endangered. Very few people have used it in the last thirty years and even its main group of speakers are often clueless to its existence. When I carried out a poll of about 800 gay men over a decade ago, half the respondents had never heard of it, and of those who did know about it, a good proportion of them believed that it was outdated and best left forgotten. I subsequently named my book on the topic *Polari: The Lost Language of Gay Men*.

And when I was carrying out my research into Polari in the 1990s and early 2000s, I often felt that I was racing against time, with so few speakers left to find and fewer every year. Not everyone wished me well either. An advert I placed in a local newspaper asking for older gay men to contact me resulted in an angry message left on my answer-phone “What I think you are doing is DISGUSTING!” Fortunately, I had more helpful responses, including a number of speakers who had used Polari extensively in the Merchant Navy, where a kind of holiday atmosphere had prevailed and crew and passengers turned a blind eye to camp goings-on. In “the merch” speakers devised new words to reflect their own situation – a *lattie on water* was a ship (literally a house on water), a *sea-queen* was a gay man at sea and a *trade curtain* was a curtain hung down the middle of cabin which separated two bunks and could be pulled across for privacy if one had company. There was so much to discover about life at sea for gay men, that I co-authored a book on the subject (Hello Sailor) with Jo Stanley, which went on to be a travelling museum exhibit.

But apart from small clutches of older speakers who used it occasionally and are probably better characterised as ‘rememberers’, it proved to be difficult to locate many people who used Polari regularly and consistently. However, I did find another group of people who were starting to emerge – the ‘revivers’. The revivalist movement began in earnest in the 1990s, emerging carefully through the new field of Queer Theory. With many of the battles over gay liberation starting to be won, now peering through

the fog into earlier decades, Polari began to be reappraised by academics in a rather kinder light, seen as an important aspect of gay cultural history, a testament to the fortitude and creativity of those who lived through much more difficult times, and also as camp fun. Andy Medhurst has argued that despite the efforts of liberationists, camp has proven difficult to banish: “Camp... was weaned on surviving disdain – she’s a tenacious old tigress of a discourse well versed in defending her corner. If decades of homophobic pressure had failed to defeat camp, what chance did a mere reorganization of subcultural priorities stand?”

In one of the more interesting examples of Polari’s revival, British branches of a global organisation called the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence picked up Polari and gave it a modern makeover. The Sisters are a worldwide organisation which started in San Francisco and produced the first safer sex pamphlet and the first AIDS candlelight vigil. They combine camp with activism and the British branches of the organisation adopted Polari as a form of religious language, similar to the way that Catholics use Latin, incorporating it into their blessings and other ceremonies. Ian Lucas has described how they canonised the film-maker Sir Derek Jarman (in a rather hands-on ceremony), with the following words: “Sissies and Omies and palonies of the Gathered Faithful, we’re now getting to the kernel, the nub, the very thrust of why we’re gathered here today at Derek’s bona bijoux lattie. The reason being that Dezzie, bless his heart-face, is very dear to our heart. Look at

him, his little lallies trembling with anticipation, heart of gold, feet of lead, and a knob of butter. So, perhaps we could take a little time to reach out and touch, to handle for a moment Dezzie’s collective parts.”

And after Polari was rediscovered first by academics, and then male nuns, as usual it was next the turn of big business, or rather, it began to be used in commercial concerns – cropping up in the names of gay, gay-run or gay-friendly cafes, bars or other establishments in places as diverse as Brighton, Margate, Stoke on Trent and Australia. A few years ago I was contacted by a Cabaret club in London’s Soho called Madame JoJos, and asked to help provide a training sheet in Polari for the staff, so they could use the language as part of recreating an old-school music hall experience. There is now a Polari iphone app, an online magazine called Polari and a London literary salon with the same name. A group of Manchester-based artists called The Ultimate Holding Company have continued this redefinition of Polari as camp political performance. In 2010, the group designed an exam around subjects like maths, history and science, all with questions from an LGBT perspective, in order to highlight how LGBT issues and people tend to be erased from education. The language portion of the exam was comprised of questions on Polari, and as part of the project, volunteers took the exam under strict conditions, receiving certificates if they passed. Joseph Richardson (also from The Ultimate Holding Company) and Jez Dolan have collaborated with Tim Greening-Jackson (a computer scientist and one of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence) who had created a Polari version of the Bible

Nanti Polari?

Then here are a few words to get you started:

riah – hair. Quite a few Polari words were formed through the practice of backslang – i.e. pronouncing a word as if it was spelt backwards. Other examples include **esong, ecaf, doog gels**.

Count up to twelve in Polari – **una, dewey, tray, quattro, chinqua, say, setter, otter, nobber, daiture, lepta, kenza**.

matlocks – teeth. Polari speakers were adept at extending the meaning of words by using combinations. A **matlock mender** is therefore a dentist. **Polari pipes** means telephone and **lattie on wheels** is a car or taxi.

Betty Bracelets, Hilda Handcuffs, Lily Law – the police. Nobody escaped Polari's imperative to blur and confuse gender roles.

nanti – a general negator used in various phrases: **nanty handbag** (I've got no money), **nanti Polari** (don't speak), **nanti pots in the cupboard** (no teeth), **nanti that** (forget it).

omees and palones – men and women. A gay man was an **omee-palone**. You can probably guess what a lesbian was.

-ette – a general suffix to 'Polarify' any noun. A **glassette of wine** implies quite a small quantity, although this phrase could be used ironically to refer to an enormous glass.

“it's a bona day”. If Polari has found its way onto Twitter, then perhaps rumours of its demise are exaggerated or at least should be postponed. While Polari can't and shouldn't fulfil the same function that it did in the 20th century, its evolution, reappraisal and rediscovery by newer generations of gay men ensures that it will continue to play an ongoing, if small role, in British gay culture. And I think that's healthy. ¶

using computer algorithms, in order to get a version of the Bible installed at the Cathedral-like John Rylands Library in Manchester. As part of a larger exhibition on Polari, it currently resides there on a lectern, and visitors are required to put on a pair of white gloves before inspecting it so the Bible is not forever stained by damaging oil secretions from their fingers (a nice nod to high camp). It is these artists who are also responsible for projecting Polari words onto Bury Art Gallery.

In September 2012 yet another gay Julian, this time the comedian Julian Clary, won the British version of *Celebrity Big Brother*, through a combination of dignity, wry observational wit and support to another contestant, Julie Goodyear, herself a gay icon (minor second class). Julian made her cups of tea, physically supported her while she walked around, gently

cajoled her to eat something and entertained her with rude jokes (“I stayed in a gay hotel once, called The White Swallow”). The public, who had been expecting Julian to be a swishing diva, were second-footed to find a quiet, introspective and kind man behind the outrageous stage act. A few days later, on his Twitter account, Clary tweeted

Paul Baker is Professor of English Language at Lancaster University where he teaches and researches in the areas of corpus linguistics, language and gender/sexual identities and critical discourse analysis. His work on Polari has generated significant media interest and his research has recently been used as the basis of an exhibition on Polari at the John Rylands Library in Manchester.

Find out more

Books

Polari: The Lost Language of Gay Men by Paul Baker (Routledge, 2002)

Fantabulosa: A Dictionary of Polari and Gay Slang by Paul Baker (Continuum, 2002).

Chapters

‘The color of his eyes: Polari and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence’ by Ian Lucas. In *Queerly Phrased*, edited by Anna Livia and Kira Hall (Oxford University Press, 1997: pages 85-94).

‘Camp’ by Andy Medhurst. In *Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Critical Introduction*, edited by Andy Medhurst and Sally Munt (Cassell, 1997: pages 274-293).

Online

The Polari Bible: www.thesisters.demon.co.uk/bible

Polari Mission, a website detailing exhibitions, performances and visual artwork aimed at preserving Polari: <http://polarimission.com>