



Language

Polari

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Nantee dinarly [*no money*], the omee of the carsey [*landlord*]
Says due bionc peroney [*two shillings apiece*], manjaree on the cross [*food for free*].
We'll all have to scarper the letty [*leave the lodgings*] in the morning,
Before the bonee omee of the carsey [*landlord*, lit. 'good man of the house']
shakes his doss [*gets up*, lit. 'shakes out his bed'].

– A Popular Busker Song, in 6/8 time to a guitar accompaniment¹

There are, according to Tom McArthur's *Oxford Companion to the English Language*, as many as five thousand languages spoken around the world. In the sense of person-to-person communication major languages are no longer being born (computer 'languages' of course are a different matter, and there are undoubtedly new dialects of existing languages continually emerging), but like species of flora and fauna (and in the case of many Indian languages in Amazonia even in the same places) languages are undoubtedly dying. Nor does one need wander so far afield as South America. Among recent casualties is that known variously as the *Lingua Franca*, *Parlyaree* or, most recently, *Polari*. Never a major language, it nonetheless permeated the racier fringes of English society for several centuries, especially in the worlds of entertainment and, latterly, of homosexuality. It still lingers, but as a mere shadow of its once flourishing self, and if not wholly dead, then such words as it can offer may well be its last. In the case of entertainment, it has simply faded away; in that of homosexuality, it has been consciously rejected, victim of the radical changes in gay self-perception, extending to communication, that came in with Gay Liberation.

Lingua Franca, in the original Italian, means literally 'the language of the Franks', i.e. French, and was born as a form of hybrid tongue, based on Occitan and Italian and used in the Mediterranean for trading and military purposes. From there it spread, and it is possibly this 'French tongue' (also known as 'Pedlar's French') that Chaucer has in mind when he teases the Prioress for speaking the 'French' of 'Stratforde-atte-Bow' – since 'Frensh of

Paris was to hir unknowe'. (That said, the reference may be to the generally 'provincial' character of the French spoken in England – heavily influenced by the Norman dialect.) Today's use of Lingua Franca tends to sustain this image of a trader's pidgin, referring inter alia to Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea or Krio in Sierra Leone, but in seventeenth-century Britain it began to gain an alternative role: a synonym for the language, properly a jargon or 'professional slang', used (among other vocabularies) by tramps, sailors, show people and (somewhat later) homosexuals. In this role it gained a new name, variously spelt Parlyaree, Palarie and, for the purposes of this discussion, Polari (suggested by some to be a strictly gay use of the term, but in fact one more spelling of a term that originated in the standard Italian *parlare*: to speak).

Quite how a trade pidgin came to form the basis of a language last heard by most Britons via the ostentatiously 'camp' cross-talk of 'Julian' and 'Sandy' (Hugh Paddick and Kenneth Williams), an unashamedly queeny duo – 'great bulging thews and wopping great lallies' – created for BBC Radio's *Round the Horne* and *Beyond Our Ken*, staples of the 1950s airwaves, needs some explanation. As far as show business is concerned, the link, as generally accepted, is that of the sea. It would seem that sailors, who naturally picked up Lingua Franca on their trips abroad, brought it home and thence to their on-shore jobs: typically working as pedlars, and joining travelling fairs and circuses. The link between sailors and the stage was certainly established by the nineteenth century, and can still be seen in a variety of backstage terminology; sailors, with their skills at climbing to precarious heights were much in demand. Not for nothing are such terms as 'rigging' and 'flying' common to both professions. More general, and typical of the geographical/occupational progression is a term like 'palaver': to chatter, to gossip and thence, as a noun, a noisy fuss. Ultimately taken from the Portuguese 'palabra': speech, or talk, the term was used by Portuguese traders on the west coast of Africa, where it was picked up by British sailors, incorporated into their jargon and thence rendered part of the Polari used on the mainland. From there, as with a number of slang or jargon terms, Polari or otherwise, it made its way into colloquial English.

The link to homosexual use, which emerges a good deal later than that with show business, forces one into the realm of stereotyping. The automatic union of the stage and homosexuality, and likewise of sailors ('rum, sodomy and the lash') and the gay world is clichéd, politically no doubt far from correct, but unavoidable. Where the two groups overlap is an opaque area – seaboard privations are the obvious point – and Kellow Chesney, in his *Victorian Underworld* (1970), and itself largely a distillation of

Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, 1851) suggests that the great centres of male prostitution were the nation's ports. But above all it would seem that the pre-Gay Liberation male homosexual world, like any 'secret' sub-group of society, both required and desired some form of 'secret' language, working simultaneously to affirm the secret unity of the outcast, and by 'speaking in tongues' to hide from the larger, hostile world. Polari, whether picked up from seafaring pals, or adopted from the world of the theatre, fitted the bill. It was not generated by the gay world, but came top-down as it were, a ready-made 'lingo', to use a suitably Polari term. It is, as noted, a male preserve. Given, presumably, that lesbians existed only as a 'virtual' entity in the nineteenth century, they could hardly be accorded a vocabulary. More recently it has been suggested (in a Channel 4 documentary in 1993) that contemporary London lesbians have picked up a number of terms, but the evidence is thin. Polari, in its prime, was (real) boys' only.

Despite the relative cohesion which the verse quoted at the head of this piece suggests, Polari has never really been a 'proper' language. Unlike such constructs, it had no grammar or syntax of its own, and relied without difficulty on recognised English forms. It was not a 'foreign' language in any sense. Instead, as the American academic Ian Hancock has noted,² Polari was, even at its peak, at best a lexicon, a vocabulary list of discrete words (and a few phrases). Quite how many there were is unknown, but current lists, gathered irrespective of context (i.e. circus, theatre or homosexual) count barely more than one hundred in all. But its individual words and phrases could be used with ease to formulate sentences, paragraphs and, in this case, rhymes. In that it resembles slang, or more so cant, from which an early collector such as Thomas Harman³ could similarly construct passages based on a relatively tiny lexicon – supposedly chats between sixteenth-century villains – top-heavy with the closed vocabulary of the professional malefactor.

That the show business end of Polari has gradually declined is probably no surprise. The show business that spawned, or at least popularised it, has declined too. The vocabulary of TV and movies is harder-edged, more overtly technical. The provincial rep tour may still struggle on, but few thespians would imagine describing their landlord as the 'bona omee of the carsey' (and the Londoners would wonder quite where the lavatory, another definition of 'carsey', fitted in). The decline in gay circles offers another story, one that is linked to changes in gay speech in general. Polari was never the sole repository of gay conversation. Standard English aside, there was what Leslie Cox and Richard Fay have termed 'gayspeak',⁴ a language that encompasses Polari and the camp enunciations (flourishing

from the 1940s to the 1960s) of what can be seen as a 'queen culture', where 'your mother' meant 'I', 'Lily' was an all-purpose prefix, e.g. 'Lily Law': the police, and 'queen' itself appeared in a myriad of combinations: 'dinge queen': one who liked black lovers, 'pineapple queen': an aficionado of Hawaiians, and 'kaka queen': a coprophile. They were often plucked wholesale from America, where 'Mary' as a term of address, was especially popular. They had been classified as girls, and 'girls' they would be, in spades.

The emergence of Gay Liberation in the late 1960s put paid to all that. Queen culture was too self-effacing, too meek, too hole-in-the-corner for the new self-assertiveness. 'Clone culture', which replaced it in the 1970s, with its in-your-face macho imagery, rejected Polari wholesale. There would no longer be a place for this artificial narrative, as concocted for *Gay News*:

As feely homies [young men], when we launched ourselves on the gay scene, Polari was all the rage. We would zhoosh [*fix*] our riahs [*hair*], powder our eeks [*faces*], climb into our bona [*nice*] new drag [*clothes*], don our batts [*shoes*] and troll off [*cruise*] to some bona bijou [*nice, small*] bar. In the bar, we would stand around parlyaring [*chatting*] with our sisters [*gay acquaintances*], varda [*look at*] the bona cartes [*nice genitals*] on the butch homie [*masculine male*] ajax [*nearby*] who, if we fluttered our ogeriahs [*eyelashes*], might just troll over [*wander over*] to offer a light.⁵

What counted in the new 'out' world were 'buns' and 'pecs', not 'riah' and 'lallies' (*legs*). For a veteran merchant seaman, emerging into London gay life in 1985 after fifteen years away, 'that was difficult. [I'd been in] that world of the Fifties and Sixties, and it had been a very insular, self-contained life.'⁶ For his younger peers, it was no more than kow-towing to 'the value system of a racist patriarchal culture . . . [its users] engaging in self-oppression'.⁷ Using any form of camp language, however useful it might have been to a sub-culture which accepted, even if reluctantly, the oppression it faced, was simply affirming the justice of that oppression. It was another facet of the closet, and it had to go.

Today, given the use of the once outlawed 'queer' to turn the (ironic) tables on the homophobes in the same way as young black boys, especially in the 'gangsta' environment, describe themselves as 'niggers', it has been suggested that Polari could stage an equally ironic revival. *Omi-palone*, the ur-term, lit. 'man-woman' and thus homosexual (with all the stereotyped baggage the term implies) could be revived in pride rather than abandoned in shame and disdain. Nor have the queens vanished. Contemporary America has 'green queen': one who looks for sex in public parks, while 'drama queen' has joined mainstream slang in meaning a hysteric irrespective of sexuality. But Polari, if not dead, is in its final throes.

A few terms like 'fab' (from *fabulosa*), 'charva' (to fuck) and 'camp' itself have survived as refugees in the mainstream. The rest have gone, longterm prisoners in the slang dictionaries, labelled 'obs.' for obsolete.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Eric Partridge, *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (8th edn, London: RKP, 1984).
- 2 Ian Hancock, 'Shelta and Polari', in P. Trudgill, *Language in the British Isles* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984).
- 3 Thomas Harman, 'The Upright Man canteth to the Rogue', *Caveat for Common Cursetours* (n.p., 1566).
- 4 Leslie J. Cox and Richard J. Fay, 'Gayspeak, the Linguistic Fringe: Bona Polari, Camp, Queerspeak and Beyond', in Stephen Whittle (ed.), *The Margins of the City* (Manchester: Arena, 1994).
- 5 Peter Burton, 'The gentle art of confounding naffs: some notes on Polari', *Gay News*, cxx:23.
- 6 Quoted in Jonathon Green, *It: Sex Since The Sixties* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993).
- 7 P. J. Stanley, quoted in Cox and Fay.