

# Polari Talk for Proudly Kings

Wednesday 4 February 2026

Martin & Philip

## SLIDE 1 – Polari [0 mins]

Three things to start.

First, spelling is designed to match the sounds of the Polari words. So **Ow** is *How*, **yer** is *your*, *used* becomes **use**, and **ter** replaces *to*. This **Polarispell** is used on other slides, and all Polari terms are given in **purple prose**.

Second, Polari uses other languages mostly because of two world wars, which led to all kinds of language mixing. For instance, the French phrase **ca ne fait rien**, *that does nothing*, entered English as **san fairy Ann**, *it doesn't matter*.

However, the phrase, **that's yer actual French**, is a catchphrase of a Polari-speaking duo, who we will meet on the next slide.

Finally, using camp names, mostly feminised, is common in Polari.

Philip, as an old GLFer, remains uncomfortable about this usage, so I will be calling him Philip throughout.

However, I cannot resist pointing out that Philip means lover of horses.

## SLIDE 2 – Polari is not just a code

And now, Philip. He'll introduce you to the famous Polari speakers, **Hugh Paddick** and **Kenneth Williams**.

### PHILIP ON JOOLS & SAND

### SHOW VIDEO

As well as all the Polari words and phrases, this sketch shows us that:

- **Innuendo** is a vital part of Polari and even seems to be built into the code. The sound distance between English and Polari words means that English meanings cannot be predicted from the Polari – they could mean anything. And that's innuendo.
- **Sarcasm** is also vital to Polari. For instance, a **butch shriek** sounds a lot less threatening than a *deafening roar*.
- Speaking effective Polari also seems to require a **camp London accent**. The accent may be a key feature of Polari, as nasalising is to French. It's certainly easier to switch between languages if they have noticeably different sound systems.

Polari is not just a code, it's significantly different from English.

But Polari is, at base, just a way to code **queer in-group goss** [*gossip*] so the **naffs** [*heterosexuals, or people who don't speak Polari*] don't know what we're **cacklin** [*talking*] about.

If you like Jools and Sand, there are many sound recordings on YouTube. Just search for Julian and Sandy.

### SLIDE 3 – Sources of Polari [10 mins]

This slide shows how Polari emerged from other forms of language. It has many origins, but remains firmly linked to English.

Palari and Palare are alternative spellings of Polari. And, as Polari is mostly a spoken language, there have always been disputes about how words should be spelled (or spelt).

**Zhoozh** is a case in point: I spell it /z-h-o-o-z-h/, but I have seen it spelled /z-h-u-z-h/, /z-h-o-o-s-h/, even /j-e-u-j-e/, because the Polari zh-sound seems more French than English, and the French J is pronounced zh.

Spelling variants in Polari should be treated similarly to the spelling differences between USA English and proper English: all forms are correct.

As we would say in Polari: Totes is bona, ducky – but MY spellin is dowry bona.

Polari has three main influences.

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First were the working-class dialects used in London during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Here they have been swept together as **Cockney**.

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The second influence was **Sailor Slang**, also known as **Lingua Franca**, mostly used at sea and in port during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

This meaning of Lingua Franca should not be confused with its current meaning of “common language”.

The currently recognised Global common language is English – so saying *English is the lingua franca* is actually saying *English is the language of the French in Latin*.

Nobody said that code-switching was easy.

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The third, and perhaps greatest, influence on Polari was **Parlyare** or **Theatre Slang**. This was, mostly used during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Cockney, Sailor slang and Parlyaree each have their own roots.

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At base, Cockney is a **Thieves Cant** from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, with **Rhyming slang** and **Back-slang** added in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The mix is topped off with **Yiddish and Romani**, both non-English languages used by oppressed minority groups.

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**Sailor Slang** is a mixture of European languages, including Yiddish and Romani, with possible input from **Mollyhouse Cant**, spoken in the molly houses of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

As we know little about Mollyhouse Cant, so identifying inherited terminology is difficult; but Polari does have some possible descendant words.

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The most likely route from Mollyhouse Cant to Polari is not Sailor slang, it's **Parlyaree**. This was a mix of many European languages, reflecting the international role of the arts in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In etymology, nothing is certain.

But Polari words with traceable sources include the following:

- The Polari word **sharper**, *to steal*, likely links back to the Cockney word for a professional trickster, as in *card sharp*; and that, in turn, could link back to the Thieves Cant word for *needle*, a *sharp*. Card sharps used to mark their decks with tiny pinpricks.

- The Polari word **scotch**, meaning *leg*, is borrowed from Cockney rhyming slang, *Scotch egg*; while Polari **EEK** /e-e-k/, meaning *face*, is a shortened form of *ecaf*, Cockney back-slang.
- Polari **dooe** /d-o-o-e-e/, meaning *two*, is related to the Cockney word *douce*, which comes from the French *deux*.
- Polari **bugle**, *nose*, is likely a variant of Cockney *hooter*, which seems to be derived from French *hauteur* – having your **nose in the air**, or being **stuck up**.
- Polari **lau** /l-a-u/, meaning *efficiently*, probably came from the Sailor Slang word *lee*, the side of the ship protected from the wind (and therefore the best place to work). For the origin of the Naval **lee**, we have to go back a thousand years to Old English *hlēow*, *a shelter*.
- Polari **bona** /b-o-n-a/, which means *good*, came into **Parlyaree** from a Latinate language (possibly Church Latin), and then into **Polari** without changing meaning. Polari **schmutter** /s-c-h-m-u-t-t-e-r/, *clothing*, made a similar journey from Yiddish via Parlyaree.
- Polari **chavvie**, a *young child*, comes from Romani *chav* via **Parlyaree**, without changing meaning; while Polari **cruise**, *seek sexual encounters*, comes from Sailor Slang **cruiser**, *a powered pleasure craft*, which in turn comes from Dutch, **Kruis**, meaning *crotch*.

So, basically, Polari is a hotchpotch of terms from multiple sources – just like English, or many other languages.

## SLIDE 4 – Dialects of Polari [20 mins]

### PHILIP ON DIALECTS

Dowry taas, Philip.

Let's look at some of the Polari dialects.

First is **Scouser Polari**, used in Liverpool. It has given us several Polari terms, such as **nosh**, meaning *fellate*, and **jarry**, a diminution of **manjarie**, which is food.

Next is **Manchester Polari**, often called **Manky Polari**. Here, *Manky* is a Manchester dialect word meaning *Mancunian*. It's not related to the Polari word **manky**, which means *dirty* or *damaged*.

Polari **manky** is probably derived from French *manquer*, to *miss* or *undershoot*.

Two Manky Polari words are **mint**, which means *excellent*, and **ginnel**, a lane running between the backs of houses, known in London as a *back passage*; **back passage** is also a Polari term for ... well, I think you get the idea.

**Brizzle Polari** is Bristolian. And includes many local terms, including **goin' Egypt**. This is supposedly sourced from Amelia Edwards, a famous lesbian Egyptologist who lived in Bristol, and means *experimentation in lesbian matters*.

Another Brizzle word is **lush**, meaning *nice*, or **gert lush**, *very nice*. **Lush** was recently popularised by Ruth Jones, who played Nessa Jenkins in *Gavin & Stacey*.

Bristol is also the city where the first successful medical transition from female to male was completed, when Laurence Michael Dillon became the World's first Trans Man in 1946.

**Siarad hoyw** [*speaking gay*] was my own term for South Wales Polari when I was at Cardiff University, 1971-74.

Although I haven't noticed any South Wales expressions in London Polari, I do remember two phrases used in the local queer community: **cwtsh cwn** [*calm down bitches*], and **clecs rhyw** [*sex gossip* or *dishing the dirt*].

South Wales in the seventies was still dominated by English. However, I was lucky to spend one year in Halls on Barry Island, away from Cardiff, one with a Welsh-speaking family in Cathays, and my third year in a queer household in Roath.

**Pink Triangle Scots** is another of my terms.

The Pink Triangle is an area in North Edinburgh which is very queer.

The community still uses a Polari heavily influenced by Scots and Gallic, and which is largely a separate code from London Polari.

However, some terms have crossed the border.

For instance, **buftie** [*queen*] was known to Polari speakers in North London, along with the Polari word **gey** – from Gallic *ghèidh* [*very*]. This was used in the phrase, **er's gey gay**.

**Oxford Polari** is not really a code, it's more an accolade. When queer phrases enter the Oxford English Dictionary, they no longer have coded meanings – they are in common parlance. Several Polari terms have made this transition, one of the most recent being **enby** /e-n-b-y/ meaning *non-binary*. Older Polari terms that have passed their **Oxford entrance exam** include **drag**, **gaydar**, **down-low**, **butch** and **naff**.

## SLIDE 5 – Some Polari Utterances [25 mins]

Here you see some of the heroes of Polari:

**Kenneth Williams** and **Hugh Paddick** – actors, raconteurs and Polari champions;

**Betty Bourne** – actor, drag queen, activist and Polari champion;

**Olly Alexander** – actor, singer, activist and Polari champion;

And **Paul Baker** – academic, linguist, activist and Polari champion.

Now for some Polari utterances.

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### Bona to vaada yer, heartface

For greeting friends [*Good to see you, dear*].

Jools & Sand used the longer **Bona to vaada your dolly old eek** [*Good to see your pretty face*], and this has become more common than the simpler greeting.

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### Where does ee spend is evenins?

Another Jools & Sand utterance, used to imply Kenneth Horne must **loll around** queer venues and queer people to pick up so much Polari. It shows that you do not need Polari terms to be talking Polari.

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### We've all got your number, ducky

A Jools & Sand extension of the Polari way of recognising other queers: **I've got your number, ducky**.

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### Seems like a nice boy

A catchphrase used by Larry Grayson, a queer TV comedian, who also hosted TV quiz shows during the 1970s and 1980s.

It indicated that the person being talked about may be queer, or perhaps could be persuaded to experiment.

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### Strides for the naff syrup omi

[*trousers for the man with the bad wig*]. Polari was often used in the tailoring trade to secretly disrespect customers within hearing; and this utterance became a conversational phrase used to say, *I recognise you are talking Polari* – nothing to do with trousers or bad wigs.

A version, **some strides for the omi with the naff riah** [*some trousers for the man with the bad hair*] was used in a 1977 episode of *Are You Being Served*, a TV sitcom set on the clothing sales floor of a department store.

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**I vaada'd** [*saw*] **er mince** [*his walk*] **at the sweat chovey** [*gym*], **an clocked** [*noticed*] **she's mauve** [*he's queer*]

Unlike the other utterances here, this illustrates Polari as a code. You need to know quite a lot of Polari to **savvy** this one.

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### Shorts weather

This is one of our *dear old couple* set phrases, used to draw attention to something or someone. Its meaning is highly contextual: it can refer to the weather, or the failure of a person to dress for the weather, or an attractive person regardless of the weather, or just a note of gratitude for the effect of the weather on clothing. I have even used it to direct Philip's attention to something noteworthy, unrelated to either shorts or weather. Polari is still a living language – it hasn't had its Dolly Pentreath moment yet! [Dolly Pentreath was the last person to speak Cornish as a first language. She died in 1777.]

Philip will now take you through a longer piece of Polari.

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### **PHILIP READS THE PETER BURTON EXTRACT**

**Any road up**, (and that's yer actual Brummagem Polari, meaning *anyway*, or *let's change the subject*).

Let's think about Polari as more than a coding system.

To be a language, a code must have its own lexis [*words*] and grammar, as well as its own community, and it should not be too reliant upon any other language.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, several dialects have become languages as political reality took hold: Serbo-Croat, a single language in Yugoslavia, has become at least three different languages: Serbian, Croatian and Bosniak.

In Ukraine, Ukrainian is no longer treated as a dialect of Russian; and this revision has been treated as a casus belli by Russia (or at least a casus SMO).

More peaceably, Scots has now been recognised as more than a dialect of English, being given full language status only two months ago.

## SLIDE 6 – A Bijou Notette about Polari Grammar [35 mins]

Polari still relies upon English for much of its form. However, some grammatical features indicate it's more a dialect than a code.

For instance, there are at least two counting systems: one resembles English, while the other is closer to French.

The Englishlike system has ten names for the first ten digits, [**wonee dooee Trey, quarter chinker say, setter otter nobber dacha**] while the Frenchlike system uses composite names for numbers seven to nine [**oona dooee Trey, quarter chinker say, say-oona say-dooee say-tray, dacha**].

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Some linguists pay particular attention to word order for language typology, and we can see that Polari mostly uses the same **adjective-before-noun order** of English. This is known as **pre-positioning**. French mostly uses **adjective-after-noun order**, or **post-positioning**.

English sometimes uses post-positioning, too, in phrases derived from French or Latin (for example, it's *Astronomer Royal* not *Royal Astronomer*).

It's also used in some specific English forms – *something special* and *best world possible* are used interchangeably with *a special something* and *best possible world*. In Polari, post-positioned adjectives are used to indicate higher quality; so a **bona strillers** becomes a **strillers bona** if it's a *grand piano*, not just a *good piano*. Word order can also influence meaning: a **meshigener karsey** is a church, while a **dowry karsey meshigener** is a cathedral – because a **dowry meshigener karsey** is something completely different.

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**Lau** /l-a-u/ as an adverb [*well; efficiently; properly; etc.*] is unusual in that it doesn't have **positional freedom** like other adverbs; it comes after the verb and sounds odd in any other place. So, **er medzered lau the manjarie** [*they shared out fairly the food*] works in Polari but not English, while **er medzered the manjarie lau** [*they shared out the food fairly*] works in English but not Polari.

Hence when Sand tells Jools in several sketches to **Order lau yer luppens on the strillers bona**, he's telling Jools to *get ready to play the piano*.

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Negatives are a minefield, because Polari has at least three negators: **nanti**, **nishta** and **nix**.

There are four if you count **nantoise**, and Philip does.

**Nanti** tends to be more adjectival, (e.g. **nanti barney**, *no war*) while **nishta** is more nounlike – hence **nishta on the oglefakes**.

**Nix** is the newest of the negators and more verblike (e.g. **nix the boyno**, *forget the social niceties*).

**Nantoise** is mostly used as a holophrase, a one-word response (e.g. **Did er dhobie the crockery?**

**Nantoise**, meaning *did he do the washing up? No*).

There is even some indication that, in their adjectival roles, **nanti** is used for count nouns while **nishta** is used for non-count nouns – as in **nanti omis an nishta fabularity** (*no men and no gorgeousness*). However, this effect has been emerging since the 1970s, and still is not fully established as a grammar rule.

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**Er's a dry martini** shows how personal attributes are often described with nouns rather than adjectives: the attribute defines the person. This is an interesting feature of Polari, giving it a rather objectifying effect.

The **-ette** suffix is a useful shorthand, indicating not just size but significance. A **filmette** is not just small, it is probably also inconsequential. While **-ette** can be used to indicate either of the two attributes by itself, it usually carries both meanings. The suffix seems to have entered Polari from French in the late 1800s, when **maisonette** became a popular name for a small town house with more than one storey. In contrast, **Laundrette** is an Oxford Polari word that escaped into general usage –adding an extra significance to the queer film *My Beautiful Laundrette*.

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**Sharda** is an interesting Polari word because it represents a full phrase of English [*it's sad that, it's a pity that, it's a shame that, etc.*].

In the Jools & Sand clip, after Sand's speech about Jools playing Sampson, Jools said, "**Pity; I saw miself as Delilah.**"

*Pity* could have been replaced here with **sharda**; but the script editor likely thought it too obscure for the **naffs** in the audience.

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The final utterance, **Nanti ter vaada in the larder**, is mostly used in the form given here. However, an alternative, **naada ter vaada in the larder**, is also popular. As this form introduces a fifth negator, **naada**, presumably from Spanish, we will quietly draw a veil over it.

## **SLIDE 7 – Putting on the Dish [45 mins]**

It's film time again! This time a film in Polari. Listen to what they are saying and try to understand the conversation.

If you get it right, you will understand the ending. As the slide says, watch the short film and write down any language you don't understand. I will attempt to answer questions at the end.

**SHOW VIDEO**

## **SLIDE 8 – Any Questions?**

One book translated into Polari is the Holy Bible. In its seventh edition, and you can get a free copy by googling “Polari Bible”. The picture shows Jessica Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-48 [[Matthew; chinker, quarter-dacha-otter](#)].

Right, any questions?

## **ANSWER QUESTIONS**

Philip now has a short test for you. There will be prizes.

## **PHILIP READS THE TEST AND TAKES THE AUDIENCE THROUGH IT**

## **SLIDE 9 – And Finally ...**

In the private language of the Tiny-handed Tangerine Tyrant, *thank you for your attention to this matter.*

## **SLIDE 10 – And Finally Finally ...**

And finally finally, an email address if you want more information or just want to discuss Polari. And the resources for this lecture are available at the website shown. I think they will also be available on the Proudly Kings web area.

**Taaras, totes!**