

Polari

Language as a means of concealment

R. (Roel) Stroo

A.A.K. (Bram) Peute

Master *General Linguistics*, Radboud University Nijmegen

Abstract: Until the passing of the Sexual Offences Act in 1967, homosexuality was a crime in the United Kingdom. In order to be able to talk freely about their sexuality, gay men spoke Polari, a language that has much in common with English but has a lexicon that is centered around the culture of the gay community. Its purpose was to include its speakers in the gay community, while people who did not speak it were kept out. In this paper, we investigated whether Polari was successful in this endeavor. We showed that Polari likely fulfilled its purpose of concealing the sexual identity of its speech community, as Polari does not sound very exotic, while the nature of the matters discussed remain hidden. We conducted our research by employing the method of distributing questionnaires that exposed the participants to a short conversation in Polari. We subsequently analyzed their perception of Polari through the answers they provided. It can be concluded from the results that Polari enabled its speakers to discuss topics which were not only socially deemed inappropriate but illegal as well, while still blending in with other English dialect speakers.

Key words: Polari, language and homosexuality, concealing identity, anti-language

1. Introduction

“So bona to vada... oh you! Your lovely eek and your lovely riah...” is one of the lines in Morrissey’s song “Piccadilly Palare”. These words belong to Polari, a secret language spoken among homosexual men in the London area in order to conceal their identity, as homosexuality used to be a crime in the United Kingdom until the passing of the Sexual Offences Act in 1967 (Higgins, 1996, p. 115). Since then, the status of Polari has changed: gay men no longer had to hide their sexual preferences, which led to the decline of the usage of Polari among homosexuals. At the same time, the Polari lexicon became public knowledge after its original purpose of hiding a person’s homosexuality had become obsolete. Nowadays, Polari is not being taught to new members of the gay community anymore and is said to be “moribund”, despite several

attempts by the gay community to revive the language (Taylor, 2007, p. 32). As Polari was a language designed to conceal the identities of its speech community, it should be inconspicuous enough to not draw attention to its speakers but incomprehensible enough to not expose its speakers. These observations form the basis for the following research question: how did Polari fulfil its purpose of concealing the sexual identity of its speech community? And if it is the case that people recognize or understand Polari, are there any noticeable patterns in terms of age, gender, or sexuality?

Polari can be considered an example of an *anti-language*: a language spoken by an *anti-society* (Halliday, 1976), an alternative society within a society, with its own social structure and its own lexicon. These anti-societies, designed to resist the mainstream culture, are usually built around illegal activities such as drug dealing, stealing, squatting, and, in this case, acts of homosexuality. Logically, this means that anti-languages are centered around the activities of the anti-society that they are spoken by: anti-languages tend to have the same grammar as mainstream languages, but have lexicons based on their activities. For example, the Polari lexicon is characterized by varieties of terms for sex, body parts, and people (Taylor, 2007, p. 20).

Polari is not the only language that serves to distinguish groups of different sexual orientations. In fact, language and sexual orientation have always been connected. Another example of this connection is the isiNgcqumo language, spoken by gay people in the ethnic Zulu community in South Africa (Rudwick, 2010). IsiNgcqumo shows that identification through language is not exclusively used to distinguish people with the same sexual orientation, but also to identify as a member of a certain ethnographic group. It is worth noting that literature on this subject is scarce, mostly due to the fact that the number of Polari speakers has rapidly declined over the years as it does not serve its purpose anymore and, as a result, empirical research on Polari has become increasingly difficult, if not impossible.

2. Method

In order to investigate the current status of Polari, we designed a questionnaire (included in the appendix) that consisted of several questions regarding a sound fragment from the short film "*Putting on the dish*" (Fairbairn & Eccleston, 2015), in which two gay men have a conversation in Polari.

2.1 Participants

The questionnaire was spread among people from the UK through Facebook, but the gross of participants came from the forum casualUK, a forum hosted on the social media website Reddit. The 131 participants were informed to only reply if they were from the UK; this was considered a vital condition, as we were looking for native evaluations of a local dialect. The participants were also asked to fill out their age, gender, sexual orientation, and hometown, along with whether they considered their hometown to be a village, a town, or a city. This was done to be able to see if these demographic differences influenced participants' knowledge of Polari. The descriptive information about the participants is included below.

Table 1

Descriptive participant information

Variable	N	%
Age		
20-	21	16,0
21-30	58	44,3
31-40	35	26,7
41-50	10	7,6
50+	7	5,3
Total	131	≈100%
Gender		
Male	79	60,3
Female	49	37,4
Other	3	2,3
Total	131	100%
Sexual orientation		
Straight	96	73,3
Gay	5	3,8
Bisexual	15	11,5
Other	15	11,5
Total	131	≈100%
Size of hometown		
City	45	34,4%
Town	62	47,3%
Village	24	18,3%
Total	131	100%

2.2 Materials

As mentioned above, the sound fragment to which the participants were exposed, was taken from the short film *“Putting on the dish”* (Fairbairn & Eccleston, 2015), which takes place in 1962 and is more or less dedicated to the usage of Polari in that era. We chose this sound fragment as the dialogue in it is neither too obvious nor too obscure, and due to the practical reason that the fragment was readily available, which is not evident for a secret language that has been declining since the 1970s. There was no video material involved and the participants could listen to the fragment at home on their own devices; there were no advanced sound systems of any kind required.

2.3 Procedure

After filling out a questionnaire about their personal information, the participants were exposed to the Polari sound fragment. Then, the participants rated their own comprehension of the dialogue on a scale from 1-10, with 1 being completely incomprehensible and 10 being completely comprehensible, and listed the words that came to mind while listening to the fragment in a think-aloud task. Finally, the participants were asked what they thought the dialogue was about and whether they recognized the language variety.

2.4 Analysis

The 131 participants were first organized in three groups: people who recognized Polari and identified it as such, people who thought they recognized it but misidentified the language variety, and people who did not recognize it. The results of the think-aloud test were then qualitatively analyzed per group. Several quantitative analyses were conducted as well. A one-way ANOVA was used to see if there was a significant effect of age on the recognition of Polari. A second one-way ANOVA was used to see if there was a significant effect of the self-evaluated comprehensibility scores on the recognition of Polari. The effects of sexuality, gender, and town size on the recognition of Polari were all analyzed with likelihood ratios.

3. Results

3.1 Qualitative analysis

The group of participants ($n = 20$, 15.3%) that understood the dialogue and recognized it as Polari agreed more or less on the content of the dialogue, while also giving similar responses to the think-aloud part: many participants associated the fragment with the Cockney dialect, sexual acts, and popular comedian Kenneth Williams, who played an important role in the integration of Polari in the UK after the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1967 (Higgins, 1967, p. 86). Most participants in this group were able to (fairly) accurately describe the dialogue, even the heterosexual participants.

More interesting is the large group of participants who reported that they understood the dialogue ($n = 58$, 44.3%), but could not tell that Polari was the language variety in question. Some participants were actually able to accurately retell the story, however, they often reported the dialogue being about a woman who was detained for performing a sexual act, while the characters are actually talking about a man; this is because Polari uses female pronouns to refer to men. These participants usually rated their own comprehension highly and gave extensive descriptions of the dialogue, however, they still missed the important detail that the dialogue was about a man, which shows that Polari still has the ability to conceal certain aspects of the topic discussed. In the think-aloud part, the participants in this group frequently associated the fragment with sex and the Cockney dialect, which is not surprising considering that Polari is derived from this dialect and the lexicon is centered around sexual activity, which was also a topic of conversation in the dialogue.

The last group consisted of participants that answered that they did not understand the conversation at all ($n = 53$, 40.5%). When asked about the content of the dialogue, many of the participants reported that the dialogue was about a woman and that it involved sexual acts, but could not put the pieces of the story together. As for the think-aloud part, this group provided a large variety of answers, but very few of them related to Polari itself. Most of these answers are rather broad and relate to everyday concepts, such as pub, banter and casual conversations.

3.2 Quantitative analysis

From a one-way ANOVA it was shown that there is a significant effect of age on correctly identifying the language fragment as Polari ($F(2, 43) = 7.37$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .13$). The average age of participants who identified Polari correctly was 39.30 ($SD = 13.96$),

the average age of people who misidentified Polari was 29.19 ($SD = 8.37$), and the average age of people who did not recognize it was 28.38 ($SD = 9.32$).

On grounds of Hochberg's GT2 it can be concluded that participants who recognized Polari were significantly older than participants who misidentified it ($p = .00$), as well as participants who did not recognize it ($p = 0.00$). There was no significant age difference between participants who misidentified it and those who did not recognize it ($p = .96$).

From a One-way ANOVA it was shown that there was no significant effect of the self-evaluated comprehensibility score on correctly identifying the language fragment as Polari ($F(2, 128), p = .098, \eta^2 = .04$). The average comprehensibility score of participants who identified Polari correctly was 5.30 ($SD = 2.23$), the average comprehensibility score of people who misidentified Polari was 5.50 ($SD = 2.31$), and the average comprehensibility score of people who did not recognize it was 5.64 ($SD = 1.83$).

On grounds of Hochberg's GT2 it can be concluded that participants who recognized Polari had on average no significantly higher comprehensibility scores than participants who misidentified it ($p = .98$). This was also found when compared to participants who did not recognize Polari ($p = .56$). There was no significant difference between the comprehensibility scores of participants who misidentified and those who did not recognize the language variety ($p = .10$) either.

The second one-way ANOVA showed that the demographic distinctions made in the data had no effect on whether participants recognized the language fragment as Polari. There is no significant relation between the sexuality of the participants and the recognition of Polari ($\chi^2(10, n = 131) = 11.80, p > 0.05$). There is also no significant relation between the gender of participants and the recognition of Polari ($\chi^2(4, n = 131) = 6.01, p > .05$), and, finally, there was no significant relation found between the size of the participants' hometown and the recognition of Polari ($\chi^2(4, n = 131) = 2.97, p > .05$).

4. Conclusion

Twenty out of 131 participants recognized and correctly identified Polari. They are significantly older than the participants who misidentified or did not recognize the language variety. Several participants pointed out that they know it from Kenneth Williams, who hosted the radio show *Round the Horne* with Hugh Paddick, which aired in the 1960s, where they would play the Polari-speaking characters Julian and Sandy. This might explain the effect of age on recognizing Polari, as older people have probably listened to this radio show. Interestingly, the self-evaluated

comprehensibility scores of this group did not significantly differ from people who misidentified or did not recognize Polari.

There were 8 out of 131 participants who claimed they recognized the language variety but misidentified it. They often compared it to the Cockney dialect, which is related to Polari, and could tell what large parts of the dialogue were about. However, they were still fooled by the pronoun use of Polari, as they all thought the dialogue was about a woman.

The remaining participants, 53 out of 131, did not recognize the language variety. They could sometimes tell it was about a woman and sexual activities, but that was the extent of their comprehension. They associated the language variety with pub talk, banter, and other everyday concepts.

This clearly illustrates the concealing power of Polari: Polari is often seen as a related language variety, which makes its users blend in with other English dialect speakers, while it is still able to conceal the identity of its speakers from people who think they understand it. When homosexuality became legal, Polari went extinct and has no speakers left. Nowadays, knowing about Polari is not tied to sexuality, gender, or the size of one's hometown, but rather to having listened to an old radio show. In the heyday of Polari it probably fulfilled its role perfectly: it allowed its speakers to inconspicuously discuss their sexual exploits, deemed illegal by close-minded rulers.

References

- Fairbairn, B. & Eccleston, K. [Brian and Karl]. (2015, June 24). *Putting on the Dish: How gay men used to speak - A short film in Polari*. [Video file]. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8yEH8TZUsk>
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotic: The social interpretation of language and meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Higgins, P. (1996). *Heterosexual Dictatorship: Male Homosexuality in Postwar Britain*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Rudwick, S. (2010). 'Gay and Zulu, we speak isiNgqumo': Ethnolinguistic identity constructions. *Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa*, 74(1), 112-134. <https://doi.org/10.1353/trn.2010.0016>
- Taylor, H. (2007). *Polari: A sociohistorical study of the life and decline of a secret language*. Bachelor Thesis, University of Manchester.
- Parliament, U. K. (1967). Sexual offences act 1967. doi: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1967/60/pdfs/ukpga_19670060_en.pdf

Appendix

Questionnaire

Section 1

Language Evaluation Task

!PLEASE ONLY REPLY IF YOU ARE FROM THE UK!

You need to listen to a soundfile, so please make sure you are in an environment where this is possible

If you feel uncomfortable answering a question, please fill in a backslash \

Section 2

About you

What is your age?

...

What gender do you identify with most?

- Male
- Female
- Other

What is your sexual orientation?

...

What is your hometown generally considered to be?

- Village
- Town
- City

What is the name of your hometown?

...

Section 3

Sound fragment

This is the important part

Please listen to the following sound fragment, and write down all the words that come to mind while listening to it

-Transcript of sound file-

- > I was seeing this HP from Sheffield once. Plates the size of bowling pins, I thought I was in for a real bona charvering.
- < Nada to varda in the larder?
- > Oh, bijou. 'You needn't put the brandy on for that,' I said when I saw it. Mind you, she was heavy on the letch water. I had to use the Daz to get her Maria out my libbage.
- < Oh, vile. Has she always been that way then, Phyllis?
- > She's a walking meat rack. Real fantabulosa bit of hard. We used to act dicky together at the croaker's chovey. Noshed me off once while I was giving a fungus his drabs.
- < That's skill, that.
- > Oh she used to do it all the time. When we were at the exchange together she'd one lill on my colin and the other on the switch. She didn't even get off the palare pipe. Sad to think of her in the queer ken really.
- < What do you mean?
- > Well she'd a run in with the lily law, didn't she?
- < Oh dear.
- > Sharpie flashed his cartso in the carsey.
- < I hope she kept her ogles front.
- > Well she's got amblyopia, hasn't she? She can practically only vada sideways.
- < What did the beak say?
- > He was ever so harsh. Asked if she was sorry.
- < Was she?
- > Only that it wasn't worth the look she got.

Section 4

Final questions

How much of the dialogue were you able to comprehend?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Completely incomprehensible Completely comprehensible

What do you think the dialogue was about?

...

Did you recognize the language variety?

- Yes
- No

If you recognized it, what do you think it was?

...

Thank you for filling in this questionnaire!