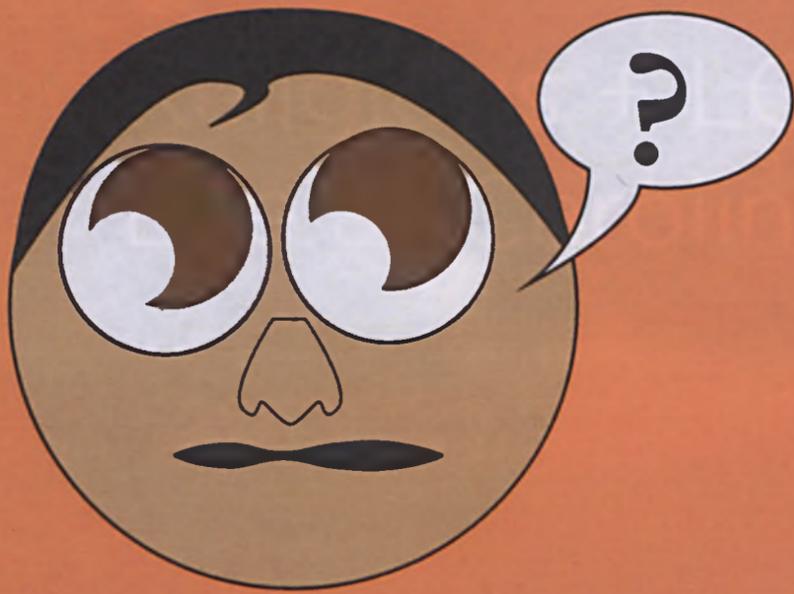


Can You Speak Gay?



Boyno! Oh how bona to varda your ecaf, dolly! Are those your new ogale fakes? You can varda all the bona vardering omee palonees here! Though they have nanti taste in lally-drags.

[Translation: Hello! Oh how lovely to see your face, dear! Are those your new glasses? You can see all the attractive men here! Though they have no taste in clothing.]

No, you didn't miss a memo, but you might not be familiar with a time period in LGBTQ history around the 20th century. It was a period when gay men in London began using a lexicon unique to the LGBTQ community known as Polari (also spelled Palare, Polaree). Polari stemmed from a combination of different languages and preexisting slangs and was used primarily by lower, working-class gay men. However occasionally masculine, 'low-key' men would sometimes include a few words in passing conversation as a way to subtly out themselves if they suspected someone of being "part of the family." Although they avoided it for the most part.

When Polari initially arose, homosexuality was a crime in Britain, which caused many to face blackmail, extortion, public humiliation, and harsh prison sentences if they were caught. Due to this atmosphere, Polari was a way for gay men to communicate in public without anyone being able to listen in. However as the Gay Rights/Liberation movement made advances and the atmosphere in England changed, the language

started to fall into disuse. The final nail in the coffin of Polari's use as a covert communication method was the inclusion of two very campy queens on a British radio broadcast called Round the Horn, where the two characters used bits of Polari every week, some of which made the jump into mainstream slang.

However, the driving reason that Polari fell into disuse was a change in attitudes towards the lexicon and during the mid 1960's was seen as a mark of shame. At the time there was increased pressure for gays to be masculine, so anything that was seen as immasculine or campy was shunned. The Gay Liberation Movement saw it as a symbol of oppression and criticized it as being racist, sexist, and, most importantly, full of internalized homophobia. However, since the 1990's feelings towards Polari have softened and it is now seen as a part of gay cultural history and as a tool that was used to fight oppression.

With that said, it has to be taken into consideration that Polari was used pretty much exclusively by males. This raises the question, did women and non-male identified individuals have a separate lexicon? From what I could find, there is little to no evidence that separate lexicons existed. In some there is the mention that women also used Polari, but for the most part it is only gay men that are mentioned at all.

So, why is that? Well, one possible explanation is that, because of the patriarchal society that existed then and still exists today. Little attention was paid to any lexicons of women and non-male identified people, ergo nothing was recorded about them or, even more simply, they didn't exist. It's possible that, due to the male-dominated nature of the gay rights movement and the timing of women's rights and liberation movements; the environment that created Polari never materialized, allowing for the creation of other lexicons.

In spite of the lack of lexicon, the influence of Polari on modern gay slang as well as slang in general, is profound. Such words as 'butch,' 'drag queen,' 'cruise,' 'glory hole,' 'on the team,' 'dish the dirt,' and so many more come from Polari. Even the controversy that surrounded Polari in the later years has been passed on to today; some say that gay slang is a cultural element that promotes a common group and group identity while others believe that it is a cultural factor dividing the community more than bringing people together. They believe that if we call into question the language people use, we call into question so many other things, that eventually it will lead to the bigger issues and then things will start to change. ■