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Revisiting Polari: the Lost LGBT Language

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ABSTRACT

Language plays the most essential role. It defines the identity of the people. A language is the backbone to a community because it represents the cultural, social, gender and all indefinable roles of its people. One of the important aspects of studying language is to understand the importance of preserving it and maintaining its elements. When a language isn't used anymore, there are two possible aspects to it: firstly, the users have diminished in number or secondly, there is a threat of using due to unpopularity, unlikeness and unacceptability. All of these factors become essential criteria's to accumulate our thoughts regarding concepts of language death, loss, endangerment along with language maintenance. Shifting generic perspectives of language usage from men and women, possibilities were noticed that there could be a different language system being used by the third gender too. The LGBT community used to communicate through a secret language called *Polari*. *Polari* started picking up popularity when homosexuality was a crime during 18th century in the United Kingdom. The language gave liberty to gay men to interact and express with the help of a specific vocabulary, their sexual interests, without fearing arrest and reprisal. It was a secret code language that people used to chat, discuss, rant about their personal issues or matters of rejoice with one another. It was not just about a language, but a set of vocabulary that is distinct from usual languages. *Polari* was a wave of freedom that blew into their lives during a phase when their existence itself was a crime, let alone living with dignity. Later in time, when homosexuality was accepted and legalized, the language fell out of use because not many people wanted a secret language anymore. Despite realising the fact that legalization of homosexuality has brought in relief to millions of the eluded individuals, it is also matter of concern that a language system in particular has fallen out of use. Would this imply language death despite having its original speakers? Can a language develop and then follow decline on its own? Are there any cues of revival seen as yet? This paper focuses on the *history, use and decline of the language* with insights on *concepts of Language and Gender*.

Keywords LGBT, language and gender, genderlect, polari, language loss

1. Introduction

Language is an important tool for communication no matter which period of time we live in. In the expression of culture in a society, language plays the most essential role because it defines the identity of the people altogether. The need of communication leads to both the occurrence and the development of a language and the need becomes stronger when one has someone else to communicate with, i.e. where there is a society. The society seeks self-awareness through communication between its members. But it is always a topic of discussion if the language development is an interpersonal or an intrapersonal function.

When we talk of language, it directs us to retrospect various aspects that link language and the society. One of the very important connecting links is Gender. Despite many speculations about the differences between Gender and Sex, language connects spontaneously to the gender roles of human beings. The concept of Language & Gender comes along two definitive facts. Firstly, gender is linked to the differences between the sexes pertaining to the social relationships. Secondly, gender is a multi-faceted concept that defines the power in communication.

As a matter of general perspective, women aren't as concerned about power or status as men are found to be. The former are more into building and maintaining relationships. The female section of the society feels that it is important to be loved and liked by the people around. The manners of communication here are different on these baselines. We see that women communicate to maintain their involvements whereas men do it to retain their status in the society and can be provoked with any misconduct in language. These supposed generalisations are usually the factors that show how communication varies among men and women.

2 Gender through the times

The common convention of the society believes that there can be typically two kinds of people – male/men and female/women. The identification happens through their genitalia. But from generation ago, various cultures and their ancients have mentioned about people who are neither men nor women, they have fiercely been debated upon the fight between body and self. Today there are many identified communities such as *Hijras* in South Asia, *Kathoeyes* in Thailand and *Muxes* in Mexico. Despite being identified, they still face violence and discriminations. The most recent generation now has been seeing the tussle of the “third-gender” in regard to their legal recognitions and respect. Gender is a construct, and people should be allowed to define it for themselves.

The transgender community is immensely varied. They are classified further as gender queer, non-binary, agender, etc. based on the spectrum they put themselves into. Some choose to undergo physical (genital) changes through surgery, some don't. Some choose to identify themselves openly in all terms while some carry out the pretension of fitting into typical gender roles. The 2012 survey by HRC Foundation of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer (LGBTQ)¹ concluded that about 10 percent of people identified themselves either as 'transgender' or 'other gender,' and wrote their identities like 'genderqueer', 'gender-fluid' or 'androgynous'. This suggests that maximum people of this generation's youth are getting identified on a broader transgender spectrum. Transgender people come from all walks of life. They are dads and moms, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters. They are our co-workers, and neighbours. Some are 7 year old children and some 70 year old grandparents.

'Transgender' or 'Trans' is a cooperative term for people whose gender identity is dissimilar from the sex assigned to individuals at birth. Although the concept became functional in the 20th century, the ones who describe themselves under this category have existed in the culture throughout prior the 20th century. Transgender celebrities like *Laverne Cox* (actress) and *Janet Mock* (writer) gained popularity being in the limelight of fame. Other than them, many Americans haven't come across personally who could be a transgender. There are reports of a few researches which suggest that there would be around 700,000 trans genders in the United States but are unrecognised publicly.

¹ <https://www.hrc.org/resources/understanding-the-transgender-community>

3 A missing language: Effects on linguistic diversity

The supremacy of language stands high at shaping our perception regarding people. Words of conduct vary with the gender we communicate with. It also has a significant impact on how a language marks its impact. Polari, that has been a part of one important cultural & humanistic era, has gone to the modern vocabulary with few words like *faggot*, *pansy*, *fairy*, etc. that are now being considered offensive than they actually were². There is no universal agreement regarding the terms being categorised like this because it lacks history and research. Yet the vocabulary continues to evolve despite the misinterpretation at different levels of modernity.

However, a key issue noticed in the commotion of language communities is Language loss. Language loss starts from a personal or domestic level and the whole language may be lost if its utterance is stopped. The latter has become a threat for the indigenous communities in the United States because their language isn't operative in other parts of the world. In order to use it, the native speakers might as well use borrowed words i.e. from English. This has also resulted in the loss of communication on many levels due to a certain linguistic insecurity i.e. threat of being misunderstood. Drawing back into the older generations, the members have restricted abilities in English language but are competent with their native language which may not be a part of today's speech glossary. This results to language as well as cultural loss. In such a case where two or three people are familiar to the language, they form teams with learners for language survival. This was executed through the "Master-Apprentice Program"³. It has sponsored more than 60 teams. Whenever there isn't sufficient data for the language to be documented, such a language is considered as Sleeping Language. It doesn't have enough fluent speakers or influencers.

4 POLARI: The Lost LGBT Language

1. Evolution of Polari

Polari developed as a secret language that was seen to be widely implemented among the British Gay community in the 1900s and lasted up to 1970s. However it is seen to be originated in the early 1500s from the languages "Cant", the language used often by criminal underworlds and "Parlyaree", a pidgin language from Italy to England. Apart from normal vocabulary, it consisted of purely informal words i.e. rhyming slangs and back slangs derived from different sources. During the 18th century, the language was used by men and Merchant Seafarers around the London Dock area, Merchant Ships, theatres and in the pubs. The main reason that helped the rise of the language is that it helped gay men to talk about sexuality and personal rants with comfort in front of straight and other people. It made them feel like a part of an exclusive group that is distinct. Soon the language gained immense popularity and started to emerge in form of entertainment. A few television programmes, music shows, radio shows started up with Polari in use. Some trending shows were Channel 4's *A Storm in a Teacup* (1993), Todd Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) and Morrissey's *Bona Drag* (1990). From then, the language kept passing on to carnival workers, actors, criminals, prostitutes, etc.

This lexicon based language is an amalgamation of Italian, London slang, back-slang (rhyming a word backwards), rhyming slang, sailor slang, thieves' cant, Yiddish language and later drug subculture slang. Then on further combining with "Cockney Rhyming Slang", a poor London rhyming language used to refer daily objects, Polari came into substantial form of use.

2. Polari as a language system

Towards 1960s, BBC Radio started a comedy program named *Round the Horne* in which Hugu Paddick and Kenneth Williams appeared as characters named *Julian* and *Sandy*. They spoke a version of Polari and very rapidly the show gained around 10 million listeners. It was broadcasted every Sunday at 2.30pm. The show embarked a journey with popularity since it helped in establishing gay culture and diminish public consciousness. One typical example of the radio dialogue conversation has been noted below:

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_LGBT_slang_terms

³<https://aicls.org/master-apprentice-program-map/>

HORNE: Would I have vada'd any of them, do you think?

SANDY: Oh – he's got all the palare, hasn't he?

JULIAN: I wonder where he picks it up

SANDY: You may have vada'd one of our tiny bijou masterpiecettesheartface. We made Funny Eek, My Fair Palone...

(Took and Feldman, 1976: 18-19)

JULIAN: Divine. Sitting, sipping a tiny drinkette, vada-ing the great butch omis and dolly little palones trolling by, or disporting yourself on the sable plage getting your lallies all bronzed – your riah getting bleached by the soleil.

SANDY: That's your actual French... 'Bona Bijou Tourettes'

(Took and Feldman, 1976: 20)

This public outlay of language indicated that the Gay men had access to their own secret language even outside the London theatres or docks where they consciously used it. The speech was mostly incomprehensible in the beginning but began to set in the mental glossary after repeated use. This is one of the instances which guaranteed the preservation of language. Many Polari words can be read & understood, for example- *aqua*, *manjaree*, *vada*, *bona*, *omi*, etc. The word 'drag' refers to woman's clothing worn by men; is a constituent of Polari. People who speak Spanish, Portuguese, French or Italian can place well the words in Polari vocabulary. Despite using popular Polari words like *vada*, *eek* & *palone*, Julia and Sandy used their own figures of speech that eventually went into the Polari language register.

Given below is a partial glossary of Polari that was being used in daily conversation:

Polari word	English word
<i>Ajax</i>	nearby, next to
<i>batt</i>	Shoe
<i>bijou</i>	Small
<i>bona to vada</i>	nice to see you
<i>Dolly</i>	nice, pleasant
<i>dry martini</i>	left hand
<i>sweet martini</i>	right hand
<i>feely omi</i>	young, under aged man
<i>b-flat omi</i>	fat man
<i>Fungus</i>	old man
<i>Lattie</i>	room, house, flat
<i>lattie on water</i>	Ship
<i>lattie on wheels</i>	Taxi
<i>ling grappling</i>	Sex
<i>meese</i>	plain, ugly
<i>Nanti</i>	no, not
<i>Ogle</i>	Eye
<i>ogle filters</i>	Sunglasses
<i>Ogleriah</i>	Eyelashes
<i>Riah</i>	Hair
<i>riah-zhoosher</i>	Hairdresser
<i>Tober</i>	Road
<i>Troll</i>	walk, wander
<i>Vadavision</i>	Television
<i>Walloper</i>	Dancer

Numbers from 1 to 10 in Polari are noted below:

1	<i>una</i>
2	<i>duey</i>
3	<i>trey</i>
4	<i>quarter</i>
5	<i>chinker</i>
6	<i>sey</i>
7	<i>setter</i>
8	<i>otto</i>
9	<i>nobber</i>
10	<i>dacha</i>

3. Should there be a revival?

In the year 2010, the World Oral Literature Project by the University of Cambridge led out a list of 3,524 dead languages which viewed Polari as one of those languages that went unheard among many respondents. It was surprising to notice that the language was considered endangered and not extinct. This marked a period of change and decline in the language use. Polari was out of use post the regulation of Sexual Offences Act 1967 which legalised homosexuality. Therefore there was no need of an alternate secret language for gay men to interact. Prior the 1967 Act, it was an offence to be a gay or to perform homosexual acts. It resulted to prison sentences up to two years or sometimes men were put through to chemical castration and aversion therapies. Paul Baker, the Polari scholar, in one of his books mentioned that the decline of Polari was rapid. In a span of three decades it seemed like the language never existed. "In the year 2000, many gay men under the age of thirty have never heard of Polari", writes Baker. Consequently the future of the language is now seen as a matter of controversy and cues revival with certain arguments in the language system.

A lot many linguists and historians question the non-existence and demand revival as it's believed that Polari was an important part of the Gay Civil Rights movement. The language needs to be remembered as it is a part of their heritage and has contributed to the present independent culture. A general survey report stated that the youngest Polari speaker is older than 60 years. In the practice of revival, a few measures were practised like:

1. A group of gay men in San Francisco, *The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*, dressed as nuns promoted awareness towards sexual intolerance. They used Polari in their acts and translated the Bible in Polari.
2. Polari scholars run monthly events that feature poems and songs in Polari and promote the endangered culture.

5 Conclusions

The nature of Polari: The conventionality of a language often interferes with its social function. The scope of Polari is seen changing in a gradient from a wide band to a narrow one. The 'pragmatic nature' of the language has been seen on many instances i.e. when Polari was abundantly used and was of due importance to a section of the society, it was not a popular language. Subsequently when the language was introduced to general public, it lost its space. It became a public entity more than what it was invented for. Media began to assimilate Polari into everyday entertainment and communication which transformed the way the language was put to use. Basically a language lost its primary characteristic; Secrecy. The question remains if the minority language will be a part of the culture or an element of exploitation.

A paradox of identity politics: The sexual nature of the language depicts the gender identity that is associated invariably to it. Though it was a 'secret language' but it asserted its dependence on the gay men only. The individuals with indefinite sexual identities struggled to find a place in the paradigm of language use. With the

extinction of Polari, there was a downfall of the sub-culture that was on the verge of developing its own path. The 'identity politics' is a double-edged sword. While grouping together may make the voice strong it may also weaken individual voices in a community.

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