

Screeving Queens: Polari, Performance, and Concealment

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How did queer performers' use of Polari impact power dynamics between the performers & their audiences?

What is Polari?

A lexicon of slang used primarily by working-class, white gay men in England.

The four decades following WW2 were Polari's heyday. Rich with capricious meanings & sly innuendo, it allowed its queer users to communicate with one another without heterosexual passerby cottoning on to the conversation's full meaning. Polari accompanied & served a complex system of sexual negotiation & gendered performance. Beginning in the 1960s, knowledge of Polari's existence was more widespread & Polari was used in entertainment such as radio skits & drag acts. The average heterosexual audience member would have understood, at most, only a handful of Polari words (Baker 2019).



Hugh Paddick & Kenneth Williams, voice actors for Julian & Sandy on BBC's *Round the Horne* (via Lancaster University)



Cover of Lee Sutton's 1971 drag album *Drag for Camp Followers*

Polari Performed

Polari-speaking characters Julian & Sandy (played by Hugh Paddick & Kenneth Williams) on BBC radio program *Round the Horne* (1956–1968)

From the 1966 sketch "Bona Performers": "He's a great butch omee, he's got these thewes like an oak, and bulging lallies." ("He's a big, masculine man, he's got these thighs like an oak, and bulging legs")

Lee Sutton's "Bona Eek," a Polari parody song on 1971 album *Drag for Camp Followers*

Sutton sings the song in Polari, then deliberately mistranslates it for the audience. For example, "My heart starts a racket every time I see your packet" becomes "I get so excited when I look at your wages." A more accurate translation is "I get so excited when I see the bulge in your pants."

Signpost & Concealment

Paddick & Williams' use of Polari signalled to audience members that their characters should be read as gay. At the same time, it concealed the full extent of their expressions of queer desire, allowing them to slip past censor boards.

Subject & Object

Sutton's use of Polari allows him to control heterosexual audience members' access to his queer sexual desire by choosing what & how to translate for non-Polari-speaking audiences.

Inclusion & Exclusion

Sutton ostensibly opens up queer culture to heterosexual audiences while, perhaps unbeknownst to those audiences, continuing to exclude them with his false translations. The true meaning of "Bona Eek" is fully accessible only to Polari speakers.

Significance

This research helps us understand the politics of inclusion & exclusion in queer code-switching. It is also an example of how queer rhetoric both breaks and works across binaries simultaneously.

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