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# ENGLISH AND ITS *LINGUA FLANCAS*
# Some systematic features of English-based cryptic anti-languages

THOMAS CHRISTIANSEN
UNIVERSITY OF SALENTO

**Abstract -** This article explores the dual nature of language as a tool for both inclusion and exclusion. It discusses the phenomenon of anti-languages distinguishing between incomprehensibility and crypticity, and highlighting how certain linguistic features can be decoded through systematic mechanisms. The study provides a comprehensive analysis of various forms of crypticity in English, including the use of cross linguistic borrowings (real or invented), reduction, transposition (e.g. backslang), and rhyming slang, illustrating how these features serve to obstruct comprehension while simultaneously offering access to the initiated few.
Inevitably, given the nature of the subject matter, some of the lexis and the expressions discussed may be obscene in nature and offensive to some readers.

**Keywords:** Crypticity; Anti-Languages; Polari; Backslang; Transposition; Rhyming Slang; Reduction; Inclusion; Exclusion

## 1. Introduction

This article explores the multifaceted role of language in both inclusion and exclusion, with a particular focus on the concept of crypticity and anti-languages, hence the invented term *lingua flanca* in our title (a pun on lingua *franca* in a kind of Dog Latin – see §5.1): varieties that exist on the flanks or fringes of English, often partially out-of-sight, and normally ignored. In §2, we discuss the historical and social contexts in which languages have been used to exclude outsiders, such as the use of French among European aristocracy and the development of Polari within the clandestine male homosexual community in 1930s to 70s UK. In §3 we introduce the key concept of crypticity, distinguishing it from simple incomprehensibility, and in §4.0 highlight its systematic nature, using cryptic crosswords as an example.

Section 5 is organized into five subsections, each exploring different aspects of crypticity and language features that contribute to exclusion and inclusion. In §5.1, the paper explores the use of cross linguistic borrowings, real or invented, drawing on Polari as a case study to illustrate how these elements contribute to the formation of anti-languages. In §5.2, we look at reduction, a fundamental feature of language that can serve as a simple form of crypticity. In §5.3, there is an examination of transposition, specifically backslang, and its effectiveness in masking meaning. Lastly, the discussion then moves in §5.4 to rhyming slang, a unique feature of English that uses rhyme as a basis for encryption.

Throughout the article, we will focus on the systematic nature of cryptic language features, demonstrating how these features can both obscure meaning and provide a sense of community and belonging to those who understand them. The paper concludes by highlighting the importance of understanding the mechanisms of crypticity in language to appreciate its full complexity and social implications, implications which are particularly interesting in the context of English, the most spoken language in the world, which has the power to unite people around the world, but also, as this article makes clear, also highly

sophisticated faculties to exclude.

## 2. Language as an excluder

Although we normally think of language and linguistic varieties as a means by which members of a given community can communicate with each other, another aspect worthy of note is how languages can be used to exclude outsiders: those who do not speak them. This is of course true to an extent of any highly specialised or technical discourse which may use terminology or jargon that requires a high degree of expertise to understand. However, unless there is a desire to deliberately dupe the non-expert or make one's specialisation seem more complicated than it really is, as in the case of the myriad charlatans and "influencers" who ply their trade among a gullible public, these are not primarily used in order to be cryptic. Among the *bone fide* experts in reputable fields, there is generally no desire to be more obtuse than strictly necessary, and indeed there is nowadays a tendency towards popularisation of concepts and the use of plain language where possible when addressing a wider audience.

Languages deliberately used to exclude can be found in many contexts. For example, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, French was used among the aristocracy across Europe to communicate with each other, especially when they did not want their servants to understand: hence the expression: "pas devant les domestiques". In a similar vein, from approximately the 1930s to 1970s, members of the then clandestine male homosexual community in UK, and particularly London, used the *anti-language* (cant, or secret language)[1] "Polari" / "Parlare" (see §5.1). This drew upon an eclectic variety of influences from various sources, including Italian, Romani (Romany / Romanes / Roma), Yiddish, and other cants such as backslang (transposition), rhyming slang (see §5.3 and §5.4), as well as other linguistic elements. Polari served as an anti-language among the anti-society of gay men, offering a sense of identity, solidarity, and initially (before its existence was advertised through popular media) protection from discrimination or from being denounced.[2]

There is of course a difference between using French to hide one's discussions from the servants and using Polari to speak about then illicit homosexual matters in public; French is not *per se* an anti-language, while Polari is. In traditional French-speaking societies, most people spoke only French, or a variety of it (e.g. *patois*), but in some areas people spoke other languages as well such as Breton or Occitan / Provencal. Using French in a monolingual context is a way of including everyone present and it becomes exclusive *only* when used outside those speech communities. There were no monolingual Polari-speaking societies as such. Most of its speakers were L1 English, and it existed within a larger English-speaking

[1] Halliday (1976, p. 570) identifies *anti-languages*, so-called because they serve as alternatives to some language, and could not exist without it: "Of the various kinds of anti-word, such as antibiotic, antibody, antinovel, antimatter, and so on, the kind that is to be understood here is that represented by anti-society. An anti-society is a society that is set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it. It is a mode of resistance, resistance which may take the form either of passive symbiosis or of active hostility and even destruction. An anti-language is not only parallel to an anti-society; it is in fact generated by it."

[2] Sometimes, as Christiansen (2021) notes, lesser studied languages have often been used by various militaries to increase operational security in the field: for example, in WW1 and WW2, the US military employed *code talkers* as telephonists and radio operators. These were typically speakers of various indigenous American languages such as Navajo or Comanche, or lesser known European ones such as Basque (*Euskara*). More recently, it has been reported that the British Army sometimes used Welsh for non-vital communications in its NATO peacekeeping operations in Ex-Yugoslavia.

community primarily as a means for a subgroup within that society to hold private conversations related to their subculture.

As Halliday states (1976, p. 571), anti-languages are not complete languages, they rely on the existence of some other language, upon which to attach themselves:

> The simplest form taken by an anti-language is that of new words for old; it is a language relexicalized. It should not be assumed that it always arises by a process of fission, splitting off from an established language; but this is one possibility, and it is easier to talk about it in these terms. Typically this relexicalization is partial, not total: not all words in the language have their equivalents in the anti-language. […] The principle is that of same grammar, different vocabulary; but different vocabulary only in certain areas, typically those that are central to the activities of the subculture and that set it off most sharply from the established society.

Partridge (1933, pp. 27-28) notes how slangs may contain words that are purposely created to afford as much secrecy as possible to the participants in the interaction,[3] while others may use similar techniques to merely "camouflage" their spoken discourse, not so much for privacy as a means of creating something which identifies them as a distinct unit, setting them apart from others:[4]

> Every group or association, from a pair of lovers to a secret society however large, feels, at some time or other, the need to defend itself against outsiders, and therefore creates a slang designed to conceal its thoughts : and the greater the need for secrecy, the more extensive and complete is the slang : *l'argot est essentiellement une arme dans la lutte pour la vie du groups qui le parle, et il est constitué par un langage spécial qui naît ou qui reste intentionnellement secret.* [Nicefero][5] This applies, with any force, only to the slang of criminals and lawless vagabonds, although lovers and children and young people often devise a system of " camouflaging " their speech, either by inventing a short and artificial vocabulary or by using deformatory prefixes and suffixes or even additional syllables or letters repetitively intercalated in the body of the words. Such deforming and grafting are, however, comparatively rare among criminals, who rely chiefly on "secret" words for all words that are significant— norms, verbs, and revelatory adjectives : they do not bother themselves with puerile disguisings of *a, the, of, for, at, when, if*, etc. Theoretically, such vocabularies are changed whenever it is suspected that they have become too generally known, but in practice one changes only the actual words that are known to be no longer secret.

When used to exclude, the fundamentals of using other languages or anti-languages are the same. Switching codes to avoid being understood by outsiders relies on the fact that, for the most part, the ability to speak a language determines who can understand it. If you have not acquired a certain language or variety, then you are excluded from its speech community and their interactions. We specify *for the most part* because some languages are *intercomprehensible*[6] (though not always completely reciprocally), and a servant who was a monolingual speaker of Italian, say, may well have been able to get the gist of an interaction in French between two aristocrats because of the underlying similarities between French and Italian. Furthermore, it goes without saying that if they were exposed to the language long enough, they would, in any case, start to acquire it if only to an elementary level. Similarly, an Italian speaker may understand some aspects of Polari, those that have drawn from Italian

[3] In this, he acknowledges his debt to George Washington Matsell, first commissioner of the New York City Police Department in 1844, and author of a book (Matsell 1859) collecting and defining the "deceptive jargon of criminals, cutpurses, and other ne'er-do-well coves" of New York City.

[4] Partridge (1933, p. 206) talks about the adoption of slang as part of the process of initiation and assimilation into certain groups: "When boys [sic] leave school and go to a university, they tend to drop the old school slang and to mould themselves to the slang of the university."

[5] Partridge (1933, p. 28fn) gives this as "op.cit." but unfortunately we are unable to trace the precise reference.

[6] See, for example, Doyé (2005)

or other similar Romance languages, for example: 'parlare' for 'talk', 'bona' /'bəʊnə/ for 'good', or 'tray' for 'three'.

This kind of exclusion, brought about by a lack of competence in the language or variety in question, is a natural result of the fact that different languages have evolved, and of the tendency for speech communities that are distinct to develop forms over time unique to them – see for example how Latin gradually separated into Italian, French, Spanish etc. Lack of competence in a given variety or language can however be overcome fairly simply, though not without a lot of time and effort, by acquiring that language or variety: and this is true both of French and Polari, although the former is normally learnt as a first language, and the latter, being a cant, is learned on initiation into the specific community.

## 3. Incomprehensibility versus Crypticity

Between these two extremes of inclusion and exclusion, there lies another particularly interesting class of language *features*: those which, though designed to obstruct comprehension, are structured on principles that allow them to be understood, even by someone not familiar with them, without having to acquire a new language or variety. We should immediately point out that we are talking about *features* because it is a matter of phenomena that do not constitute varieties or even variations in the sense that Widdowson (2015) defined the term,[7] but which constitute elements that may occur within and across varieties or even variations.

These features, we here describe as *cryptic* because their meaning is not immediately apparent to someone unfamiliar with them. We draw a distinction between incomprehensibility (i.e. that which mostly occurs when one encounters an unfamiliar language as outlined in §1) and what we mean by *crypticity*. To be called *cryptic* in the context of linguistic features, a phenomenon's meaning must be decoded using one or more *systematic* mechanisms that can then be applied to a set of similar features in a more or less regular fashion. For example, in backslang (see §5.3), some of whose elements made their way also into Polari, words are pronounced as if they were spelled backwards, for example 'yob' deriving from 'boy', or 'doog' from 'good'. Once one has grasped the key to deciphering, depending on the complexity of the puzzle, one is in a position to decode other similarly systematic cryptic features of the same slang for example: 'ecaf' or, less politely, 'dratsab'.[8]

By contrast, features such as idioms, are often incomprehensible to anyone unfamiliar with the example in question. English is famous for such "old chestnuts" as "raining cats and dogs" or, to cite a recent addition, "catfishing". Such seemingly unfathomable expressions cannot be called cryptic, at least not in the sense we are using the term here, because there is no underlying principle (as there is in backslang or other types of transposition – see §5.3) that enables one to interpret them systematically. Rather they must be deciphered on a case-by-case basis, by understanding the specific history and rationale behind each phrase.[9]

[7] According to Widdowson (2015, p. 362) a variation is "the variable use of English as inter-community communication, as communication across communities". He goes on to state (2015, p. 353): "Variety status is achieved when variations become conventionalized and so settle into what is taken to be a systematic state, in other words, when variation is taken to be regularized to the extent that it constitutes language change."

[8] Respectively, 'face' and 'bastard'.

[9] In fact, as often as not, the roots of such bizarre expressions lie in metaphors or references to arcane practices. "Old chestnut" as in "to pull that old chestnut out of the fire" means something over-used, clichéd, or beyond its prime: like an unpalatable old chestnut forgotten in the bottom of a fire. "Raining cats and dogs" means

With crypticity, such background knowledge of etymology is not required. Rather, deciphering the meaning relies on the ability to solve some linguistic puzzle. In this way, cryptic features of a language, though potentially serving as a barrier, may also allow access to the initiated few: those who are either provided with the key or who are clever enough to have worked it out for themselves, and are thus enabled to understand more expressions formed in a similar fashion.

The process then of "acquiring" or "mastering" a cryptic feature of language is less like normal language acquisition, first or second, but contains elements of an initiation into an anti-society, and / or puzzle solving.

## 4. The nature of crypticity

Crypticity can come in a myriad variety of forms so it is not possible to provide a single set of characteristics that encapsulate its nature.[10] One can however provide a general illustration of how crypticity in communication works. One place to do this is crosswords,[11] in particular by contrasting the two main kinds: *definitional* and *cryptic*.

In a simple *definitional* crossword, the missing word in the puzzle is retrieved by a clue (as well as by the presence of other letters from other words that have been already solved): For example, (1):

1. *Across*
   4) River in Africa (4)
   5) As high as a _____ (4)

Here, the clues are normally simple definitions (4 across above) or similes[12] (5 across). In either case, a player either knows or does not know the answer (i.e. "Nile" or "kite") or has to look it up in some reference book (or nowadays, do an internet search for it, or ask an AI chatbot); there is nothing in the clue that would allow him or her to work out for themselves the answer by following any linguistic system.

Gradually, as crosswords became more popular, a demand evolved for more intellectually challenging puzzles, those that could be solved by resort to reason and rationale thinking. It is said that the first *cryptic* crossword was published in London's *The Daily Telegraph* in 1925. In these, the missing words have to be retrieved not by reading the clue literally but by a variety of complicated devices within it that may involve such phenomena as full or partial anagrams, double meanings, homophones, homographs, and a variety of

there is heavy precipitation, the violence of which, perhaps puts one in mind of cats and dogs fighting. "Catfishing", to target a specific person and present oneself as someone different (and thereby also shedding any moral obligation or sense of responsibility), was first used in the 2010 Yaniv Schulman documentary of the same name about people creating fake identities for themselves online, especially in dating apps. It is an allusion to the supposed practice (which experts in the field however doubt ever actually existed) of shipping live cod in tanks together with some catfish, on the basis that the presence of the latter kept the former agitated and active during the journey and ensured that they remained leaner and produced a better quality flesh for consumption.

[10] Wittgenstein (1953), in contrast to the Aristotelian theory of categories, popularized the idea of sets of items whose members, rather than sharing the *same* characteristic feature, all resemble each other in *different* ways, in effect drawing diverse features from a common pool of items as do members of the same biological family.

[11] Crosswords are a popular word game. Although it seems to have originated in late Victorian England, the first known published example (then called "word cross" and shaped like a diamond) appeared in the *New York World* in 1913.

[12] See Raphel (2020).

diverse linguistic phenomena, together with a deep and wide knowledge of the world on the part of the solver, as well as an ability to "think outside the box". To give just one example (and the variations are myriad and diverse) (2):[13]

2. *Across*
   6) Bird seen in the museum (3)

With cryptic crossword clues, the player has to be able to recognise indicators contained within the clues that tell him or her how the clue should be interpreted or deciphered. There are many such indicators, often depending on the individual crossword compiler (many of whom have become famous among "cruciverbalists"), but they are systematic and can be described and categorised. Indeed, it is easy to find articles explaining how to spot and follow the various indicators and solve cryptic crosswords.[14]

In the case of Example 2 above, the solver should not read the phrase "Bird seen in the museum" as a sentence representing anything (i.e. it is not asking them to name a bird that may be encountered while visiting a museum). Rather, he or she must recognise that it is a set of codes indicating how to find the solution. 'Bird' at the beginning provides the definition – saying that the missing word must be a kind of bird – and on its own functions like clue 4 cross in example 1 (i.e. "A bird (3)"). The phrase "seen in" is code for the fact that the missing word is a string of letters (not an anagram) found somewhere in the following two words: "the museum" (i.e. th**e mu**seum = *emu*).

The point is that such systematically cryptic clues might allow someone to solve the puzzle without even knowing what an emu is, or that it is a bird: indeed "seen in the museum" (i.e. a combination of letters straddling both 'the' and 'museum') only gives one other possible combination of three letters that corresponds to a word in English, but it does not denote a bird (i.e. t**he m**useum = hem).

Consequently, cryptic crosswords are more exercises in lateral and creative thinking than they are in basic knowledge of language, lexicography or general knowledge about the world. Revealingly, in WW2, one of the methods that the legendary code breakers at Bletchley Park used to recruit new staff was via crosswords: picking those who were the fastest to solve cryptic ones. Consequently, among and alongside the mathematicians and linguists who worked there were numerous cruciverbalists.[15]

Crypticity is then a set of indefinable mechanisms whereby a message may be hidden within a group of words and retrievable through a diverse set of moves that, though at first sight perplexing, are systematic and follow nonetheless a rationale of their own. This reasoning can not only be unravelled, but also replicated once one has understood the trick or key. This last is a point which is, to us, the most interesting feature of crypticity in language, and is the focus of our discussion of its manifestation in English.

## 5. Crypticity as manifested in English

When it comes to English, a language spoken by millions across the globe as a first and second language, the types of features that we can describe as cryptic come in many forms,

[13] This example from *The Guardian* newspaper: https://www.theguardian.com/crosswords/crosswordblog/2022/apr/25/cryptic-crosswords-for-beginners-examples-of-examples
[14] For example, *The Guardian* article cited in the previous footnote.
[15] See Christiansen (2021).

many of which are found in other languages (as in the case of transposition) or peculiar to English (e.g. rhyming slang). In this section, we shall go through the various kinds going from the simplest to the most complex (i.e. from the least to the most systematically cryptic): 5.1 cross linguistic borrowings, real or invented; 5.2 reduction; 5.3 transposition; and 5.4 rhyming slang.

### *5.1. Cross linguistic borrowings, real or invented*

As we say in §2, one of the simplest ways that a degree of incomprehensibility can be achieved is by using words from other languages, which is a phenomenon which we touched upon in §2, when we spoke about how the use of different languages (such as French among the aristocracy) may be one way that a given group can exclude outsiders from its interaction. The use of foreign terms, does not involve the use of an entirely different language, rather the substitution of English terms with those from other languages as a simple way of camouflaging their meaning. In many cases this may be a natural result of translanguaging,[16] which is a natural phenomenon in multilingual contexts, and not in itself designed as a strategy to exclude others, even if the result may be the same. For example in §5.4 we speak about the cockney rhyming slang term "Becks 'n' Posh", which is rhyming slang for 'nosh' ('food') a word that comes from the Yiddish word 'nashn' ('nibble').[17]

As we point out in §3.0, crypticity comes into play when there is some systematic process that allows the encoding and decoding of the invented elements. It does not come about merely when translanguaging occurs, i.e. when words from different languages are mixed and blended; rather, it occurs when completely new forms are invented which appear to be foreign and whose meaning can be deduced not through knowledge of any particular language, but in understanding what language, or languages, it is meant to sound like and what it might mean in that code. For example, the Polari expression 'fantabulosa' is a fairly obvious blend of the English words 'fantastic' and 'fabulous' with the addition of an Italianate affix *osa* (cf. *meravigliosa*, 'wonderful' in Italian). Comprehending such a term does not depend on familiarity with any term in Italian or French, but rather on understanding the underlying process whereby an English blend is dressed up, so to speak, as a foreign word. An additional level of crypticity is added by the fact that typically the Non-English terms, real or invented, used in Polari are pronounced in a way that matches the phonemic structure of English (i.e. they lose their original pronunciation and are anglicised).

There is then an irreconcilable dichotomy at the heart of the use of Non-English terms, real or invented, in Polari because at one level there is an effort to give the anti-language an exotic flavour with a rich multilingual lexis, while, at the other, there is an attempt to sound English and to domesticate such terms. It is here that crypticity also lies: in understanding that the code itself is not what it at first seems. It is not a simple anti-language but presents a dilemma, namely that it tries to be two mutually-exclusive things: to be at once, sophisticated and cosmopolitan; parochial and mundane. Such a linguistic tension in itself reflects the troubled nature of the homosexual experience in the first half of twentieth century Britain, where except for, the very brave or the socially privileged, members of the gay community were typically forced to live two contradictory lives and hide their true nature behind a façade of "normality" or "respectability".

[16] Translanguaging (see for example, García and Li, 2014) entails aspects of language transfer such as code mixing or switching from the perspective not of any lack of competence or confusion on the part of the speaker, but from that of it being a natural part of bi- and plurilingualism, because it: "refers to a systematic shift from one language to another for specific reasons" (Coyle *et al*. 2010:16).

[17] See www.etymonline.com.

Polari is an anti-language which originally emerged in the 1700s and 1800s perhaps originally among sailors (the evidence for this lies in the fact that it seemed to have included elements of the Mediterranean Lingua Franca, aka Sabir) and among vagrants, itinerant performers, sailors, and Roma and Irish travellers. In the twentieth century it was adopted by the increasingly marginalised and oppressed male gay community in the UK, especially London, and today is mostly associated with the latter and its struggle against oppression, and for recognition.[18] As in other anti-languages, Polari made use of transposition (see §5.3) and rhyming slang (§5.4) but is perhaps characterised mostly by its use of terms from languages other than English, in particular Italian, French, Romani, and Yiddish.

To give some idea of the flavour of Polari, so to speak, we can cite the expression "Bona to vada your dolly old eek" ("Good to see your nice old face"), a greeting which is often cited as an example of typical Polari, where: 'bona' comes from Italian or French; 'vada' reportedly from Romani;[19] 'dolly', from Irish /Scottish Gaelic; and 'eek' is an reduced form (see §5.2) of the backslang (§5.3) 'ecaf' – "face". As can be seen in this short example, Polari also contains forms unique to it that are either inaccurate transfers or perhaps new inventions that are intended to look like they come from some non-English, typically Romance, linguistic variety. In Table 1, we give some examples of foreign and pseudo-foreign terms in Polari,[20] adding our own description of the most likely etymology:

| Term | Likely etymology |
|---|---|
| Bona | Good. (Italian – *buona* / *buono*; French *bon* / *bonne*). |
| Bona nochy | Goodnight (a blend of Italian – *buona* (*notte*) and, Spanish (*buenas*) *noches*). |
| Bonaroo | Wonderful / excellent (from Italian – *buona* / *buono* plus addition of affix *roo* from Australian English cf. jackeroo, *stinkeroo*, *smackeroo*). |
| Buvare | A drink (from Italian – *bere*, *bevere* (archaic) or Lingua Franca *bevire*) |
| Camp | Extravagantly flamboyant, openly effeminate male homosexual (from French *se camper* – to pose in an exaggerated manner). |
| Capello / Capella | Hat (from Italian *capello*) |
| Carsey / Khazi | Toilet, originally an outside one (from Italian *casa* – 'house') |
| Carts / Cartso | Penis (from Italian slang – *cazzo*) |
| Charver | To have sexual intercourse with (from archaic Italian *chiavare* – literally "to lock"). |
| Dolly | Nice (from Gaelic, Irish *dóighiúil* / Scottish *dòigheil* – 'handsome') |
| Dona | Woman (from Italian *donna* or Spanish / Lingua Franca *dona*). |
| Fantabulosa | Wonderful (a blend of fantastic and fabulous with the Italian *osa* affix – cf: *meravigliosa*, 'wonderful' in Italian) |

Table 1 continues

[18] Around the world, there are a number of similar, "gay argots" or "lavender languages" (a term coined in the 1990s by sociolinguist William Leap, who is known for his work in the field of queer linguistics: the language used by LGBTQ+ communities – see Leap 1996) e.g. Gayle in Apartheid South Africa (which has direct links with Polari), Swardspeak in the Philippines, and Lóxoro in Peru.

[19] 'Vada' is given different etymologies by different commentators. Many cite a Romani form *varda* but this is difficult to find in any reference work. *Vater* ('watch', "look at" – *vaxtr* in European Romani) is given by the Romani Project Angloromani Dictionary (https://www.kratylos.org/~raphael/romani/angloromani/dictionary.html): the most comprehensive source that we have found online. Incidentally, this lists *varda* as a variant of *vardo* / *wardo* / *wardi* / *vordon* [the last, European Romani]: 'cart' / 'wagon'.

[20] Taken from the "Polari: The Lost Language of Gay Men" available at www.lancaster.ac.uk/staff/bakerjp/polari/home.htm, and "Polari Dictionary" available at https://peteford.wordpress.com/polari-dictionary/

Table 1 continued

| **Term** | **Likely etymology** |
|---|---|
| Mangarie | Food (from archaic French, *mangerie* – "to feast", cf. Italian *mangerìa* [pl. *mangerie*] – "embezzling public funds") |
| Meese | Plain, ugly (from Yiddish *myes*). |
| Meshigener | Crazy (from Yiddish *meshugah*) |
| Nanti | None, no, nothing, don't, beware (from Italian *niente* – 'nothing' / 'none') |
| Nishta | Nothing, no (from Yiddish *gornisht* – "nothing") |
| Ogle | Look (Yiddish *ogle*) |
| Polari / Parlare / Parlary / Palare / Palarie / Palari | Speak, chat, talk (from Italian *parlare*, French *parler*) |
| Palone / Polone / Polony | Woman (Italian *paglione* – "straw mattress" cf. archaic slang "hay-bag" – woman). |
| Scarper | To run off (from Italian *scappare*, perhaps also from rhyming slang "Scarpa Flow" – 'go'). |
| Vada/Varda | Look / look at / look after / watch (from Romani *vater* – and / or Italian *guardare* "look (at)") |

Table 1
Examples and possible origins of foreign and pseudo-foreign terms in Polari.

As can be seen from Table 1, which represents a mere sample, the most common sources for Non-English terms, real or invented, in Polari are Italian (in somewhere between 12 and 14 of the 23 terms), Yiddish (4 out of 23) French (2-4 out of 23), Spanish (2/23), Irish / Scottish Gaelic (1/23), and Romani (1/23). The preponderance of Italian or at least Italianate terms may be explained by Polari's historical links to Sabir (which contained many Italian- and Spanish-derived terms, as well as some from Arabic) and by the geography of London and the location of the male gay community within it. While Yiddish and Romani have long been present in London, they are perhaps closely associated with the predominantly working class East End. Both Italian and French are perhaps more connected with contexts of "the better things in life": the arts, gastronomy, café culture, etc. and thus the more prosperous West End. It is also to be remembered that in post war period many men may have served in the army in Italy or France and may have picked up some of the language, and also that many Italian and French speakers will have been working in retail or hospitality in London. Indeed, it was in the immediate post war period that the first espresso bars and the like were opening in the backstreets of Soho, the part of London where the male homosexual community, once fairly visible in many parts of the city, not least areas like Piccadilly and the Strand, was being forced to seek refuge.[21]

It is generally agreed that it was the pressure on the homosexual community to go increasingly underground, so-to-speak, in the first half of the twentieth century and the immediate post war period[22] that led to the need for some kind of anti-language and thus their

[21] See for example, "A History Of Soho's LGBTQ+ Bars", https://londonist.com/london/history/lgbt-soho-history (29/02/2024).

[22] The trial, conviction and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde in 1895 was indicative of this gathering storm of repression against homosexual males following the so-called Labouchere Amendment (Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885): a piece of legislation that criminalized male homosexual acts. This period of intolerance culminated in the 1940s and 1950s, which saw high-profile trails of prominent figures, such as Alan Turing in 1952, who agreed to be chemically castrated following his conviction for "gross indecency". The situation began to improve slowly with publication of the Wolfenden Report in 1957, which recommended the legalisation of homosexual acts between consenting adults in private. Male homosexual

adoption of Polari. In the 19th century, Polari was being used by circus and theatrical performers.[23] It is then conceivable, that the wider male gay community, increasingly centred on Soho which borders onto Leicester Square and the West End theatre district, picked up Polari from contact with actors, entertainers and the like, many of whom may have been homosexual or non-binary.

The foreign terms, real or made up, in Polari were often given an exaggeratedly English pronunciation,[24] which lent an element of irony, or even mockery to their use. Both these aspects are a feature of the schoolboy / schoolgirl tradition of speaking certain languages deliberately poorly, maybe as a nationalistic way of disparaging that language, its culture and its speakers, or perhaps as an act of rebellion against teachers and their efforts to make the student learn something in which they are not interested. In schools, this tendency led to such things as Dog Latin (not to be confused with Pig Latin – see §5.3): an umbrella term which can mean various ways of deliberately mixing Latin with English (in imitation perhaps of a struggling student), including taking English words and altering them to sound like Latin by adding Latinate endings, e.g. the immortal character "Biggus Dickus" in the Monty Python film "Life of Brain", or interpreting Latin words by their closest sound resemblance to English (e.g. "Caesar adsum jam forte" = "Caesar 'ad [had] some jam for tea").[25]

Slightly more recently, there is "Franglais", a kind of mock French, made popular by the humourist Miles Kingston in his column in *Punch* magazine entitled "Let's parler Franglais".[26] This tradition has also been found in the armed forces, where troops stationed abroad may invent their own denigrating versions of local terms. For example, in WWI, British troops on the Western Front developed their own slang with terms derived from French. For example: "San fairy Ann" ("ça ne faire rien" – "no worries") or "toot sweet" ("tout suite" or "right now").[27] In some quarters, this phenomenon has been described as *homophonic translation* (or *traduscon* in the modern French tradition) where the emphasis is on preserving sounds, not meanings as such: one notable example being the controversial, some would say courageous, translation by the Zukofskys (1969) of Catullus 70: "NULLI SE DICIT MULIER MEA NUBERE MALLE" ("my woman says there's no one she'd rather marry") being rendered into English as "Newly say dickered my love air my own would marry me all."[28] The potential for a note of disparagement to sometimes creep into such sound-based transformations is put into clear evidence in the term 'Hobson-Jobson', a careless corruption

activity was decriminalised, for the first time partially in 1967 (in England and Wales), 1980 (Scotland) and 1982 (Northern Ireland), when sexual activity between consenting males over 21 was finally allowed. In 1994, the age of consent for gay men was lowered from 21 to 18 (England and Wales, and Scotland), and in 2001 it was further lowered to 16 (in parity with the age of consent for heterosexuals). Northern Ireland followed suit in 2008.

[23] One notable example being by "Punch and Judy" puppeteers.

[24] In the specific context of Spanglish in the US, this phenomenon has been described as *hyperanglicization* (see Galván Torres and Flores Dueñas 2022).

[25] See the classic Wilans and Searle children's book "Down With Skool!" (1953).

[26] In recent years, the term, in analogy to the similar term 'Spanglish', has been used variously to describe among other things the French in France that shows signs of transfer from English, or a kind of French / English mix used in some areas of Canada, and the north eastern USA, neighbouring or in the general vicinity of Quebec: see Rowlett (2010).

[27] See Walker (2021).

[28] See: Venuti (1995, p. 215).

by British soldiers stationed in 19th century India of the expression "Yā Ḥasan! Yā Ḥosain!" chanted by Shia Muslims during the procession of the mourning of Muharram.[29]

Interestingly, given its primary function as an anti-language or cant, in the 1960s, some elements of Polari also made its way into popular culture (for example, it seems to have been a major inspiration for Anthony Burgess youth slang Nadsat in "Clockwork Orange" 1962). Eventually, Polari speakers were featured in mainstream popular culture, namely, the obviously gay characters Julian and Sandy in the hugely successful BBC radio comedy programme starring Kenneth Horne "Round the Horne" (the title, not merely a pun, but also a fairly obvious innuendo to those in the know), which aired originally from 1965 to 1968. In this specific case, Polari's links to homosexuality were never spelt out and Julian and Sandy were presented merely as comical characters who spoke in a way that, even if they could not understand, the majority of the audience found nonetheless hilarious (due in no small part to the comic geniuses of Hugh Paddick, the legendary Kenneth Williams, and the straight man Kenneth Horne).

In contrast with what was to happen from the 1970s onwards, most gay entertainers of the pre-baby boomer generation, such as Williams never "came out".[30] Their motives in sending up gay men using Polari, whether it was meant as a mere parody for cheap laughs or something more subtle such as a silent homage, are unclear. Nonetheless their popularisation of Polari, meant that its existence, and some of its elements, became public knowledge, thus reducing its effectiveness as a cant; as Philip Hensher writes in an article published in *The Spectator*:[31]

> The truth of the matter is that *Round the Horne*, with its huge audience, played a large part in killing off Polari. After Julian and Sandy, the man behind you on the bus might not follow exactly what you were saying but he would understand very well what you were. After the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967, Gay Liberation had no time for concealment and dissembling; many gay men in the 1970s took the view that it was best to behave exactly as the heterosexual world. The argot fell largely into desuetude.

### *5.2. Reduction*

The tendency to shorten words is a common feature found in most languages and may not at first sight seem cryptic. Indeed, we class it among the simplest forms of crypticity. Abbreviation (the shortening of a word in some way) may be considered a fundamental feature of language and is common. See for example 'prof' in English, Italian and French for respectively: 'professor'; 'professore' or 'professeur'. Christiansen (2024) discusses in depth reduced noun phrase forms in English, classifying them into two main categories: reduction to key letters and reduction to key elements.

Reduction to key letters of the full form is a category that includes three types of reductions: abbreviations: shortened written forms that do not necessarily change the

[29] See Nagle (2010) – This 19th century expression features in the title of the first dictionary of Anglo-English (Yule and Burnell 1903) and is the name of an eponymous linguistic law – "The Law of Hobson-Jobson" – relating to the way that loanwords may be distorted in strange, humorous, or derogatory ways.

[30] This expression is often qualified with the phrase "of the closet", which can have negative connotations, because in other contexts we speak of "skeletons in the closets", i.e. have guilty secrets. This sense only came about, in America, after the oppression of the Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village, New York (1969). Originally, the expression "to come out (into)" had emerged among gays in the early twentieth century as an analogy to a debutante "coming out" in her first season as a young adult woman as a sign of her being eligible for marriage (see Chauncey 1994).

[31] "Bona to vada your dolly old eek" *The Spectator*, 22 June 2019: https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/bona-to-vada-your-dolly-old-eek/

pronunciation, such as ‘Mr.’ for ‘Mister’; initialisms, which retain the initial letters of the component parts of a word or phrase, pronounced separately, like ‘USA’ for “United States of America”; and finally acronyms, which are similar to initialisms but pronounced as a single word, like ‘NATO’ /ˈneɪtəʊ/ for “North Atlantic Treaty Organization.”

Reduction to key *elements* of the full form is further subdivided into several types of reductions based, in Christiansen’s analysis on the part of the word or phrase that is retained. [32] We summarise these in Table 2:

| Type | Example | Mechanism |
|---|---|---|
| 1. **Front-remnant** | ‘doc’ from ‘doctor.’ | Deletion of all but the front of the word |
| 2. **End-remnant** | ‘net’ from ‘internet.’ | Deletion of all but the end of the word |
| 3. **Mid-remnant** | ‘flu’ from ‘influenza.’ | Deletion of all but some part of the middle of the word |
| 4. **Extremity-remnant** | ‘Hallowe'en’ from ‘(All) Hallow Even.’ | Deletion of the middle of the word |
| 5. **Complex remnant** | ‘bike’ from ‘bicycle.’ | Reductions that involve other changes or a combination of reduction types |
| **6. Compound remnant** | ‘hi-fi’ from ‘high fidelity.’ | Combinations of different remnants. Pronounced like compound words with separate stress on each element. |
| **7. Blending** | ‘edutainment’ from ‘education’ and ‘entertainment’ | Combining and blending two separate forms to create a new word. Pronounced as a single word. |
| **8. Expanded remnants** | ‘footy’ from ‘foot’ (from ‘football’), plus *y* | Remnants that are expanded by the addition of affixes to form diminutives |

Table 2
Categorisation of types of Reduction to Key Elements according to Christiansen 2024.

Typically these forms evolve from slang or colloquial language to standard language and are influenced by economy and crypticity, or both. Sometimes an abbreviation may, like a euphemism, serve as a way of avoiding saying something unpleasant; for example, DOA is less striking than “dead on arrival”. Furthermore, by their very nature, euphemisms are cryptic and when euphemistic phrases such as “Collateral Damage” (unintended, or so one hopes, civilian casualties during a military strike or operation) are in turn abbreviated (“CD”) then the abbreviation can be seen as doubly cryptic.

Christiansen (2024) discusses the stylistic conventions in English that favour reduced forms, particularly in technical and scientific discourse, and their role in creating anti-languages or jargon (i.e. cryptic expressions) within certain communities. To give one context, doctors may use reduced forms in front of their patients, or their families, to hide what they are saying (and, perhaps as a psychological coping mechanism given the stressful nature of the job and the working environment, what they say may even not be entirely

[32] But for an alternative, more traditional approach, see Marchand (1969), where the ‘clipping’ is classified according to what is reduced (or deleted). See for example Bauer (1983, p. 234) who, like most scholars does the former and uses the terms back-clipping, fore-clipping, middle-clipping to describe what Christiansen (2024) calls respectively, back remnants, front remnants and extremity remnants. He does this because he argues that the term *clipping* is ambiguous and that the focus in his research should be on what is retained, not what is reduced. In even more traditional approaches, those based on stylistics and phonetics, the terms used are: *aphaeresis* (weak syllables deleted from the beginning of words)*; apocope* (from the end); and *syncope* (from within).

professionally appropriate).[33] For example, they may refer to a subject as a 'beemer' for example (an expanded remnant according to Christiansen's 2024 classification, itself from the initialism 'BMI' (body mass index), meaning that the person in question is overweight. Use of such a form is not governed merely by economy (a traditional slur such as 'fat' is even shorter) but also by the desire to cover up and mask an instance of stigmatization.[34]

The fact that users of such a slang may in theory be able to speak about such things within earshot of their victims, so-to-speak, not only reinforces a sense of camaraderie and group identity, but must also foster a sense of superiority. Lastly, as is so often the case with such slang terms, their formation entails a degree of humour which in itself, given the specific context, must be seen as therapeutic to those typically overworked and stressed professionals who are in on the joke.[35]

### *5.3. Transposition*

This kind of crypticity involves the rearranging of the order of elements in a word, letters, phonemes or syllables to create new words. As a system of coding, it is both simple and effective, because the new transposed form (e.g. 'yob') may look nothing like the original ('boy') and thus effectively mask its meaning. However, unlike something more complex such as a shift cypher (where different letters are substituted for each other, an ancient technique in cryptography),[36] it does not require a specific key, but rather just an understanding of the mechanism behind the transposition.

The best known type of rearrangement in the English-speaking world is *backslang*, which as the name suggests, involves the simple reverse spelling of the word, which often requires some phonetic remodelling to render the finished product pronounceable. To cite some examples, Table 3:

[33] The stigmatisation of patients, and colleagues, by medical staff is an issue which has attracted increasing attention within the healthcare professions – see Himmelstein *et al.* (2022), Cox and Fritz 2022.

[34] Indeed, the practice was once widespread even in medical notes but has declined because doctors are increasingly worried about litigation. See for example Fox *et al* (2002).

[35] In the 2000s, the British physician, Adam Fox MD, would draw up an annual list of medical slang terms, mainly as entertainment for his peers it would seem. Many of the items on such lists had clearly been coined with humour in mind. For example, 'NFN' ("Normal for Norfolk"), 'FLK' ("Funny looking kid") or 'GROLIES' ("Guardian reader of low intelligence in ethnic skirt"). See "Doctor slang is a dying art", BBC co.uk: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/3159813.stm

[36] See Christiansen (2021).

| Backslang | Original |
|---|---|
| beemal | lamb |
| deelo nam | old man |
| doog | good |
| dunop | pound |
| eefink | knife |
| eevach a kool | have a look |
| emag | game |
| erif | fire |
| esroch | horse |
| exobs | boxes |
| helpa | apple |
| kaynab | bank |
| kirp | prick |

| Backslang | Original |
|---|---|
| nam | man |
| namow | woman |
| nosper | person |
| owt | two |
| retchtub | butcher |
| rouf | four |
| slabs | balls |
| sresworts | trousers |
| taff | fat |
| torrac | carrot |
| worrab | barrow |
| yellib | belly |
| zeb | best |

Table 3
Examples of backslang (source: "Back Slang: Butchering the Language" Florida State University website).[37]

In its purest form, backslang involves merely reversing the order of letters so that 'good' /gʊd/ becomes 'doog' /dʊg/. Spelling seems to take precedence over pronunciation and typically backslang forms are pronounced as they are spelt, not as simple reversal of the original phonemes, which might in any case prove problematic especially in the case of diphthongs, so emag /i:mæg / ɪmæg/ not /meɪg/ from game /geɪm/.

However, despite the name backslang, as can be seen, only some of the examples on Table 3 constitute pure reversals: 'doog', 'emag', 'erif', 'kirp' (granted, the silent *c* is dropped), 'nam', 'namow', 'owt', 'rouf', 'torrac', 'worrab'. That is 10 items out of our sample of 26, equal to only 38.46%. Indeed, while some of the other examples just display some minor variations, e.g. 'eefink' instead of 'efink' for 'knife', others show rearrangement of a kind that cannot be simply classed as reversal, for example 'nosper' from 'person', which involves reversal of the syllables *per* and *son*, and then backslang proper only on the latter element *son*. Other examples, such as 'retchtub' and 'zeb', show that rearrangement may not follow a strict reversal pattern and that certain elements may be placed out of order, or replaced by other items. The example of 'sresworts' is interesting in that it is marked as plural twice, with the original plural *s* that, in reverse order comes first, and with the addition of another plural s at the end of the new form *sresworts*. In fact, generally, so-called backslang forms, take final plural *s* like other words, e.g. *yob* - *yobs*, *emag* – *emags*.

The term *backslang* is associated mainly with Eric Partridge who showed a lifelong interest in slang, even when such matters were considered below serious scholars. Even he however recognises in his classic work *Slang To-day and Yesterday* (1933) that the term was, as we have pointed out, only approximate. In particular he noted that some instances of backslang involved far more complex processes than mere reversal, one of which he categorised as *centre* or *medial slang*.

> Closely akin to such examples as *nosper*, which might fairly be considered as a transposition, is centre or medial slang, which, from its very nature, degenerates often into approximations that are best called transposition.
>
> It is generally considered to have arisen later than, and as if prompted by, back slang, which, like the letter *h*, is occasionally added as a desirable mystification. Central slang is applied only to significant words, and in these words the sole vowel, the former vowel of two, or the middle vowel of three — or a double vowel sounding as one in any of these three positions — becomes

[37] https://people.sc.fsu.edu/~jburkardt/fun/wordplay/back_slang.html

> the initial letter ; that initial vowel is followed by the consonant that originally followed it, thus forming the first syllable of the new word ; then one or two syllables, e.g., *-mer* or *-erfer* or *-ee*, are added. Hotten exemplifies with these six words : mug becomes (*h*)*ugmefy* fool (*h*)*oolerfer*, flat (*h*)*atfler*, thief (*h*)*evethee* (euphony here playing a very necessary part), welcher (h)elcherwer or (h)elchwer, a sticker-up (esp. of skittles) (*h*)*ickitserpu*.
>
> Partridge (1933, pp. 277-278)

The origins of backslang in English can be traced back to the early 19th century, primarily among costermongers (street vendors), and market traders in London, who sought to communicate secretly to protect their trade secrets from customers and competitors. The fact that, as we say above, it is reversal of spelling, not pronunciation, shows that its inventors and users were literate which lends weight to the theory that it evolved in situations of retail and trade. According to Partridge (1933, 1937), tradespeople, including greengrocers, and butchers (some of who had a reputation for being "a 'tough lot': great fighters and great boasters, cleavin' becoming a synonym for braggart.")[38] would reverse words to create an anti-language which they could use in front of customers and outsiders, maybe as with medical slang (see §5.2) partly to be derogatory about their subjects, partly to hoodwink them in some way, without being understood. Backslang eventually came to be used by the criminal underworld, including petty criminals such as pick pockets, who may themselves have had experience working in retail or in markets. As Partridge notes in the citation above, it started to evolve into something more complex (no doubt a necessary step once it was adopted by criminals who were constantly having to make their encryption techniques more secure), but seemed to be eventually eclipsed at least by rhyming slang (§5.4), which Partridge (1933, p. 277) attributes to the influence of WWI when the latter gained popularity with troops in the trenches: something that the New Zealand-born lexicographer, serving in the First Australian Imperial Force in Egypt, Gallipoli and on the Western Front, had a chance to witness first hand.

Forms of transposition, often simplistically referred to as types of backslang are not restricted to English, showing that the principles involved are applicable in many contexts. *Pig* or *Hog Latin*,[39] *Chindebhe* aka *Shona Back Slang* in Zimbabwe (see Nyambo 2023) or the Serbo-Croat slang *Šatrovački* (Rizzolo 2004). In the French-speaking world, a similar phenomenon has long existed in argot or slang, perhaps most famously with *verlan* (a rearrangement of the form *l'envers* – "the reverse"). With this, the reversal often takes place at the level of syllables: 'bonjour' becomes 'jourbon' and 'bizarre' becomes a 'zarbi' (see Valdman 2000). In Šatrovački, ("tented" in the sense of concealed), either phonemes or syllables may be switched around so that, for example, 'Policija' ("Police") becomes 'Cipolija' and 'pivo' ("beer") 'vopi'. Whether all these transposition slangs evolved separately or were all influenced by some common ancestor is difficult to ascertain. However, if this simple system of encryption evolved spontaneously in one context, it is not impossible that it did so again in other similar contexts, i.e. among those on the fringes of society who wanted a simple and effective means of encrypting their interaction.

Backslang, like rhyming slang, which we discuss in §5.4, has come to be associated with criminality, not perhaps because it is the only way of achieving crypticity in these contexts: criminals may also use reductions (see §5.2) of one sort of another, e.g. 'fed' in USE for "Federal or FBI agent" or 'undies' in BrE for a prisoner believed to be working undercover for the police. Reductions are however so common among all parts of the

[38] Partridge (1933, p. 165)

[39] A kind of language game played by children, a version of which Shakespeare mentions, with many variations. One common type of Pig Latin involves moving the initial consonant to the back of the word, and then add an affix such as *ay* to the end. In this way, 'hello' becomes 'ellohay'.

population that perhaps their use among criminals does not stand out. Backslang and rhyming slang are less used in other contexts – for instance, examples of either in medical slang are comparatively very rare.

### *5.4. Rhyming Slang*

Rhyming slang is perhaps the most well-known form of crypticity in English. It is widely associated with London (which explains why many call it *Cockney* rhyming slang), but in fact there are examples from elsewhere in Britain, Ireland, Australia and also the USA, notably in California (where it appears to have been brought by Australian prospectors during the gold rush 1848-1855)[40] and on the east coast, where presumably it came directly from Britain.

Rhyming slang would appear to be unique to English (see Görlach 2000 who actively looked for comparisons in other languages), and no similar phenomenon can be found in other languages, as they can with transposition (see §5.3). However, as Partridge (1933, p. 272) points out:

> It is well known that a tendency to rhyme, assonance, and alliteration is inherent in the human race : the average man likes a jingle ; many an educated man alliteration and assonance. Many idiomatic phrases are based on either rhyme or assonance, a few on both, and this trait is found in Romantic as well as Teutonic languages : Niceforo and Bauche give some curious examples in French.

In fact, it can be seen that many forms and expressions do involve an element of rhyme or assonance, for example: 'never ever', 'hanky-panky' or 'nitty gritty' (in English) and similarly 'pêle-mêle' ("jumble" in French) or 'Kuddelmuddel' ("confusion") in German.[41]

Rhyming slang in English then has its roots in a phenomenon found in all languages but uses this feature as a basis for a sophisticated encryption mechanism. It seems to originate among criminals and was designed for secrecy rather than mere camouflage (see §2):

> The beginnings of rhyming slang are obscure. In colloquialism and slang and cant there are scattered traces of it in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but there existed no body of rhyming slang before about 1840, and until the War [WWI] it was confined to Cockneys, to a few poor dealers and newsvendors in the provinces, and to these as emigrants in the Colonies. It may well have originated as rhyming synonym, and not until there was a considerable aggregate of such synonyms did those alertest of people, the Cockneys, perceive the possibility of a rhyming-slang vocabulary : probably the criminal Cockney saw it first and their fellows soon heard of and adopted it. (Partridge 1933: 273)

The simplest form of rhyming slang may involve the use of what Partridge refers to in the quote above as a *rhyming synonym* that is a simple replacement of a word by another that

[40] Up until at least the 1940s, rhyming slang in the argots of the US criminal underworld was often referred to as 'Australian' (see Maurer 1944). Maurer was an expert on the methods and language of criminal gangs and author the "the Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man" (1940), which was based on his research with criminals. It was an inspiration and major source for the novel and Oscar-winning film "The Sting" (1973).

[41] In Italian, Alfredo Niceforo's native language, we can offer one example of a rhyme used as the basis of an expression: the phrase used when giving someone something while reminding them that you want it returned "si chiama Pietro e torna indietro" (to which the English equivalent would be something like "His name is Jack and he comes back"). There are other variations of this basic expression using other names with slightly different meanings, which are all used in the limited context of lending something to someone (see for example: https://www.scuolissima.com/2022/08/si-chiama-pietro-torna-indietro.html).

rhymes with it, for example "Can't you take an *oak*?" i.e. "Can't you take a *joke*?"[42], or 'giraffe' for 'laugh' as in "Are you having a giraffe?". This system became sophisticated when rhymes were achieved through linguistic expressions, usually couplets, but very occasionally, three or more items, as Partridge (1933, p. 276) states:

> The rhymed form consists rarely of one, generally of two, rarely of more than three words, the last of which rhymes or nearly rhymes with the word in question : as in *Chalk Farm* for arm, *engineers and stokers* for brokers, *gooseberry puddin'* for old woman (i.e., wife). When the rhymed form is abbreviated, it is always the first word which is retained : for instance, *china plate* (a mate) becomes *china*, *plates of meat* (feet) becomes *plates*, *tumble down the sink* (drink) becomes *tumble* ; if, however, of three or four words, two are significant, the first two are occasionally retained, as in *beggar's boy's* short for *beggar's boy's ass* (Bass).

In Table 4, we list some representative examples of traditional rhyming slang drawing from the list of over 100 given on the Rice University site.

| Rhyming Slang | Meaning |
|---|---|
| Adam and Eve | to believe |
| Almond Rocks | socks |
| apples and pears | stairs |
| (Aunt) Joanna | piano |
| baked bean | queen |
| Barnet (Fair) | hair |
| brown bread | dead |
| boat (race) | face |
| Brahms (and Liszt) [composers] | pissed (i.e. drunk) |
| brass tacks | facts |
| bread (and honey) | money |
| Bristols (Bristol Cities) [the football team: Bristol City] | titties (i.e. breasts) |
| bubble (and squeak) | Greek |
| butcher's (hook) | to look |
| China (plate) | mate (i.e. friend) |
| cobbler's (awls) | balls (i.e. nonsense.) |
| creamed (cream crackered) | knackered (i.e. exhausted) |
| daisies (daisy roots) | boots |
| dog (and bone) | phone |
| Duke of Kent | rent |
| frog (and toad) | road |
| ginger (beer) | queer (i.e. homosexual) |

| Rhyming Slang | Meaning |
|---|---|
| Jack (Jones) [a character in a popular musical hall song] | alone |
| jam jar | car |
| jugs (of beer) | ears |
| Khyber (Pass) | arse |
| kick and prance | dance |
| Lady Godiva [historical figure] | fiver (i.e. £5 note) |
| Lionels (Lionel Blairs) [popular entertainer] | flares (i.e. flared trousers) |
| loaf of bread | head |
| Mickey (Bliss) [unidentified] | piss (as in "take the Mickey") |
| minces (or mincers) / mince pies | eyes |
| north and south | mouth |
| oily rag | fag (i.e. cigarette) |
| ones and twos | shoes |
| porky (pie) | to lie |
| rabbit (and pork) | to talk |
| Rosie (Lee) | tea |
| rub-a-dub-dub | pub (public house) |
| sceptic (tank) | Yank (American) |
| skin (and blister) | sister |
| sky (rocket) | pocket |
| tea leaf | thief |

[42] 'Oak' and 'joke', which has since fallen out of use, is an example the Partridge (1933, p. 275) cites from Hotten (1859).

| | |
|---|---|
| Gypsy's (kiss) | piss |
| Hampsteads (Hampstead Heath) | teeth |
| half-inch | pinch (i.e. steal) |

| | |
|---|---|
| trouble (and strife) | wife |
| whistle (and flute) | suit |

Table 4
Examples of rhyming slang (source: "Cockney Rhyming Slang" Rice University website.[43]

The rhyming expression acts a token or cryptic substitute replacing the original phrase in the syntactic structure e.g. "Would you believe it?" – "Would you Adam and Eve it?"; "Telling lies" – "Telling porkies / porky pies"; or "How much did you pay for the suit?" – "How much did you pay for the whistle / whistle and flute?"

As can be seen from Table 4, sometimes the rhyming word is dropped, e.g. 'Bubble' for 'Bubble and squeak' (Greek). However, in some cases (9 out of the 38, or just over a quarter, of the examples listed on Table 4), rhyming slang expressions remain in their full form. At least sometimes, this may be for reasons of clarity or disambiguation, for example the expression "raspberry tart" is usually shortened to "raspberry", but "a tea leaf" (a "thief") or "to half inch" ("to pinch" [steal]) are usually kept in their full forms.

In most cases, however, the general system is to put the rhyming synonym within another expression, and then go a stage further and to abbreviate it, by deleting the same rhyming synonym: in cryptographic terms, concealing the key. In this way, one may say something like "I'm going to take a butcher's", leaving any uninitiated listener or addressee perplexed as to one's intended meaning. To cite a short extract from the 1999 Steven Soderbergh film "The Limey", where a veteran English gangster is speaking to a younger US counterpart at an LA party:

> WILSON: I'll have a butcher's around the house.
> ED: Who you gonna butcher?
> *WILSON*: "Butcher's hook." "Look."

As regards the words that may serve as rhyming synonyms for other words, they would mostly seem to be chosen arbitrarily, which from the point of view of encryption makes perfect sense,[44] however as Partridge (1933, p. 276) documents, sometimes the irresistible urge to be humorous or have a dig at the referent trumps concerns of security, especially when the referent can be seen as something mundane and not sensitive:

> As a rule, there is no clear reason why a certain rhyme should be used, but occasionally there is wit or humour or pointed allusiveness. There seems no sense in *cock sparrow* for a barrow, but there is sense in *trouble and strife* for a wife, or in *typewriter* for a fighter, or in *Gawd* [God] *forbids* for kids (children) . And in certain rhymed-slang terms there is decided cleverness, as in the genesis of *hand — fingers = forks = Duke of Yorks* = Duke, duke, *dook* ; nor is that an isolated example.

[43] https://www.ruf.rice.edu/~kemmer/Words04/usage/slang_cockney.html

[44] In military contexts, code names, and passwords are normally chosen at random. See, for example the code names of the beaches assaulted by the Allies on D-Day: 'Utah', 'Omaha', 'Gold', 'Juno' and 'Sword'. Such words give no hint of what the referent is or if it has any relationship with the other codenames, or their number. If, for example, the beaches had been codenamed: 'Huron', 'Ontario', 'Michigan', 'Erie' and 'Superior' (The Great Lakes), then the enemy might have realised that they were a) related and b) that they formed a group of five.

The last example, "Duke of Yorks" is an interesting case which shows how rhyming slang can be combined with other processes to produce slang terms that have meanings which seem randomly selected and far removed their original uses. 'Fork' is not a rhyming synonym for hand – fingers and must be classed as a mental association or conceptual metaphor:[45] hands and fingers, like forks, are used for eating, or perhaps forks (especially those with many prongs) look like hands with fingers. This is further encoded by means of rhyme into 'Yorks' which is then embedded in the phrase "Duke of Yorks", at which stage it becomes rhyming slang. Finally, this phrase, in a process of reduction (see §5.2) is abbreviated to the first item, 'Duke', which, like other kinds of front-remnant (see Christiansen 2024), takes the plural *s* from the reduced head, *York*. Sometimes, one finds rhyming slang expressions derived from other rhyming slang expressions in a process of multi-stage rhymes, so-to speak, e.g. "plaster (of Paris)" meaning 'arse' (backside), from 'Aris' an abbreviation of 'Aristotle', itself rhyming slang for 'bottle' as in "bottle and glass", rhyming slang for 'arse'. This shows how the basic system producing the rhyming slang can be elaborated upon, with a mechanism not unlike embedding and recursion which are important features of Chomsky's universal grammar (1965), which allows the generation of even more complex structures using the same simple rules.

Sometimes rhyming slang expressions have then been exported to other contexts, e.g. the USA "put up your dukes / dooks", from "Dukes of York", where their origins in rhyming slang are probably unknown to the user.[46] Another example of US slang that seems to have its origins in imported rhyming slang is 'dough' for 'money'. In cockney rhyming slang, this was 'bread' (also used in the US) as in ("bread and honey"). It would appear that, again by a process of conceptual metaphor, 'bread' became 'dough'. It is of course possible that people in the USA adopted the term 'bread' for money in total ignorance of its origins in rhyming slang, after all 'bread' like 'money' is one of the essentials in life, and of course in biblical discourse the term is often used in that general sense "Give us this day our daily bread" (The Lord's Prayer). Nonetheless, many slang words still used today on both sides of the Atlantic have long forgotten origins in rhyming slang: 'berk' ('Berkley Hunt'); 'raspberry' ("raspberry tart").

Interestingly, the modern slang word is often considerably less vulgar than the original rhyming slang. 'Berk' is a generalised insult to imply that the referent is an unpleasant person in some way, whereas "Berkeley Hunt" (a famous foxhound pack)[47] stood for 'cunt' a term that is still almost too obscene to put into print. Similarly, 'raspberry' as in "to blow a raspberry' describes the sound one makes by vibrating one's lips and making an unpleasant sound as a mark of disrespect (in the USA sometimes called a "Brooklyn cheer"), while in Cockney rhyming slang, it stood for 'fart'.

It is also interesting to note that with rhyming slang, as often also happens with reduction (see §5.2), pronunciation follows the spelling not the pronunciation of the original

[45] Where one conceptual domain is perceived, interpreted and expressed in terms of another – see Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003), Kővecses (2010).

[46] Wiktionary (https://en.wiktionary.org) cites the origins of 'Dukes' in rhyming slang as just the second option among three, the other two being in our estimation rather fanciful: "Possibly by analogy to a king or other ruler summoning his dukes, and by extension the duke's knights or other soldiers, to battle an enemy. Another possibility is Cockney rhyming slang as explained at *duke*. It could also be a convoluted--though erroneous--reference to the 9th Marquis of Queensbury (after whom the rules for modern boxing were initially named)."

[47] This is often also given as Berkshire Hunt, presumably from a pack known as the Old Berkshire Hunt. Although Berkshire is closer to London, the Berkeley family and the eponymous castle, where the Berkeley Hunt is based, have close relations with London: e.g. Berkeley Square in Mayfair. The Berkeley Hunt is also better known.

word. In this way 'berk' is pronounced /bɜːk/ whereas 'Berkeley' or 'Berkshire', in Cockney, as in British Received Pronunciation, are pronounced /ˈbɑːkli/ and /ˈbɑːkʃə/. [48]

Part of the continuing popularity of rhyming slang and its wider spread among the general populace is that it continues to evolve, incorporating new references and cultural elements, often with an element of humour. In this way, "cream crackered" stands for 'knackered' (exhausted, literally slaughtered like an animal in an abattoir) or 'titfer' ('hat' – from "tit for tat") or "merchant banker" (an unpopular profession especially after the financial crises of the 1990s and 2000s) for "wanker".

A final notable use of rhyming slang also illustrated on Table 4, which can be even seen in its origins is the use of the names of famous people and celebrities as elements of rhymes. An early example of this, but one which does not involve rhyming is "Sweet Fanny Adams" as in "Sweet FA" (nothing): Fanny Adams being a 6-year-old murder victim of 1867.[49] Rhyming slang provides fertile ground for use of the names of famous people, as we have already seen with "dukes" or "Duke of Yorks". In the modern era, where celebrities and popular culture play perhaps a much larger part in peoples' lives than they did in the 19th century, then the possibilities are magnified, for example: "Britney Spears" – 'beers'; "Becks 'n' Posh" (the power couple David "Becks" Beckham and Victoria "Posh Spice" Beckham) – 'nosh' (i.e. 'food'); "Posh 'n' Becks" – 'sex'; "Bob Hope" – 'soap'. This principle can also extend to cartoon characters: "Barney Rubble" – 'trouble'; "Scooby-doo" – 'clue'. Often, given the ephemeral nature of fame, different celebrity names can be substituted for each other to achieve the same rhyme, e.g. "Eartha Kitt" or "Brad Pitt" – 'shit'; or similarly, "Thora Hird", "Douglas Hurd", or "Amber Heard" – 'turd'.[50]

## 6. Conclusions

In this article, we have explored the concept of crypticity, which can be broadly defined as the way that people can obscure the meaning of what they are saying through systemic mechanisms known only to the initiated. Such exclusive uses of anti-languages (or lingua *flancas* as we refer to them in our title) are particularly interesting in the context of English as a Lingua Franca: the latter a set of inherently inclusive variations of English which exist to unite people all over the world. There is thus a stark contrast to be made between ELF and the "lingua flancas" of English.

[48] In USE, it is pronounced /ˈbɜːkli/ as in "University of California, Berkeley".

[49] The poor child's body was dismembered and parts of it were never recovered. Shortly afterwards (1869), so the story goes, the Royal Navy issued tinned mutton as part of its rations to sailors. Such food proved unpopular and seaman joked that the unpalatable meat was in fact the missing body parts. "Fanny Adams" then spread outside the navy and became the slang term for any unpleasant meat dish, and by extension anything below standard. The expression "sweet FA" ("sweet fuck all"), meaning nothing, came to be associated with Fanny Adams, perhaps because her initials provided a convenient cover story, so-to-speak, for anyone caught in the act of swearing.

[50] The latter is an example about how topical and fertile slang can be. It emerged recently, when in her trial for defamation brought by her ex-husband, Johnny Depp, it came out in evidence that Ms. Heard had once allegedly deliberately defecated on his side of their marital bed. Apparently, Johnny Depp gave her the nickname "Amber Turd" as a result, which, with or without his encouragement, was picked up by her online detractors. During the trial, one of her lawyers unwisely brought this humorous moniker up in court, in effect ensuring its wider publicity. Indeed, recently this unflattering rhyme and word association has also been referenced in the Eminem song "Lucifer": "We squashed the beef like a hamburger patty / Or should I say gigantic turd, 'cause I put that shit to bed like Amber Heard at a mattress firm".

We have examined the systematic nature of specific cryptic language features, namely, the use of: cross linguistic borrowings, real or invented; reduction; transposition (backslang); and rhyming slang as they are manifested in English. As it happens, English because of its history, has developed, and continues to develop, sophisticated mechanisms that allow the creation of anti-languages. Though peripheral to the various standards of English or its ELF variations, these continue to be important, because, even while the ranks of English speakers, whether native sor non-native speaker, are relentlessly expanding, and English becomes more and more inclusive, at its heart, there remain recesses and niches that still remain reserved to the few. Given time, expressions from such cryptic anti-languages occasionally spill over into the general language and provide the source for many of the more perplexing expressions that make up English's rich and varied lexis.

By examining the various forms of crypticity in English, from the simplest to the most complex, this paper has provided a comprehensive analysis of how the acquisition of a language or variety can involve not only gaining more and more linguistic competence of the kind outlined in such documents as the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001, 2020), but, above and beyond this, nurturing the ability to decipher cryptic linguistic features which may require a deeper level of understanding, akin to puzzle-solving or an initiation into a secret society.

In conclusion, the appreciation of crypticity in language enriches our understanding of how language shapes and defines social groups and interactions. It also highlights the need to recognize and address the potential for exclusion embedded within linguistic practices even in a language as widespread as English, particularly in a globalized world where communication across diverse linguistic backgrounds is increasingly common.

**Bionote:** Thomas Christiansen is a full professor in English Language and Translation at the Università del Salento (Italy) and past Director of the University Language Centre. He has taught in various positions at various universities in Apulia (Italy), the UK, and Poland. He completed his PhD in textual linguistics at Salford (UK). He has researched into various areas of linguistics including systemic linguistics and functional grammar, varieties of English, ELF, teaching English, language testing, and analysis of different corpora, including spoken discourse. He is a qualified teacher trainer and has also worked as an expert consultant for Cambridge Assessment English for many years.

**Author's Adress:** thomas.christiansen@unisalento.it

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