

Telling Secrets:

The Creation and Survival of Secret Language

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Secrets are a vital part of the way our society maintains stability. For example, the government keeps the location of nuclear weapons secrets: divulging this information would cause major chaos. Secret languages, in particular, have been used both in wartime – as with organic languages such as Jèrriais during the German Occupation of the Channel Islands – and out of wartime – such as the use of non-organic languages and sociolects like Rotwelsch, Polari, and Lunfardo. These secret languages have kept communities alive which otherwise would be subject to legal prosecution from the government or persecution from the population at large. What engenders a person to need to speak in a language kept a secret from the majority of the world? For marginalized groups facing oppressive power dynamics and government suppression, secret languages provide a crucial forum for communication and privacy.

A Secret from the Nazis: The Rise of Jèrriais

Secret languages do not always arise entirely due to linguistic suppression by dominant institutions. Rather, many already-established languages gain significance for a community as a result of state-led violence. Jèrriais was an extremely influential “secret language” that exemplifies this peculiar model. Jèrriais is the independently developed language of Jersey Island, and it is characterized by its distinctiveness and lack of mutual intelligibility with many other spoken languages. As a result, it confused the Nazis during their occupation of the Channel Islands during World War II.^{1,2} The people of the island used Jèrriais to communicate without the Nazis knowing or understanding what they were saying. It was a particularly effective form of protest against the Nazis, giving the citizens a method of covertly fighting back that did not involve risking their lives as more direct forms of political action might have.

Although Jèrriais is an organic language, it wasn't commonly spoken within Europe and therefore could be used as a secret language for the community. With the war and the occupation of the Channel Islands, many of the men from Jersey left the island for the British Armed forces.³ This, unfortunately, meant that these men spoke English for their entire career at war, leaving them with subpar linguistic skills, and ultimately accelerating the decline of the language. The language of Jersey is currently no longer spoken as commonly as during the German occupation, with only 1% of the people of Jersey being able to speak Jèrriais today.⁴ Nevertheless, around 25% of the population of Jersey can understand common phrases,

which is a testament to the significant societal impact the language had on the population. Jèrriais is a point of pride for the people of Jersey. Indeed, some students still learn part of the language at school, such as in common songs (e.g., Christmas songs). In addition to endowing previously existing languages with a rebellious usage, this need to covertly communicate within a community without government interference has also led to the formation of new secret languages and sociolects. One such example is Rotwelsch, which has been primarily used by members of the criminal underworld but also by Carnies or Merchants.⁵ Due to its ties to Judaic languages, Rotwelsch was long suppressed across Central Europe for anti-semitic reasons.

The History of Rotwelsch

Rotwelsch is commonly referred to as a language, but the truth of the matter is that it's not a language but more so a sociolect. A sociolect is a dialect that has ties to a particular social class. Rotwelsch was a sociolect that was based heavily upon German grammar/Hebrew/Yiddish.⁶ This connection – and the widespread antisemitism in European history – ultimately is the reason why the language was suppressed. The Nazis' believed that linguistic mixing was something to be avoided at all costs, especially with a language that was used by “yiddish-inflect criminal gangs”.⁷ As such, they viewed Rotwelsch very negatively. Rotwelsch was the victim of the same aggressor as Jèrriais, both languages came under attack by the Nazi regime which ultimately helped hinder the usage of these languages within Europe.

Rotwelsch has a rich and long history in Europe, stemming back hundreds of years to its development in the High Middle Ages. It did not receive its modern name, however, until 1509 when Martin Luther dubbed it ‘Rotwelsch,’ a name which quite literally means incomprehensible beggar and which cemented the stigmatization surrounding the language.⁸ During the Thirty Years' War, Rotwelsch became more widespread, leading to its commonplace and systematic suppression by the governments of Central Europe.⁹ This linguistic suppression led Rotwelsch-speakers to develop a visual component to the language, with sigils placed outside of homes that were safe for those who spoke the language.¹⁰ The language was used by members of the lower-class/travelers along with those who had connections to the criminal community, helping allow anyone who may be passing by with the right knowledge. They could navigate unknown territory and communicate with those who would offer a helping hand or even some food.¹¹ This use of language helped

people to persist, even in times when the vast majority of people wouldn't help the travelers coming through towns. This visual element of Rotwelsch makes it a bit more unique in comparison to other secret languages, and as such has helped the survival of the language. Because it is still in use today, there is less information available about the language. The usage of Rotwelsch along with the overall lack of understanding of the language has led to its villainization and suppression by several governments. To nationalize a country in theory and create unity, a government will sometimes try to encourage a national language.¹² The use of Rotwelsch was an issue because of its connotation of Jewishness along with its usage across borders—both characteristics which were antithetical to the society that the Nazis sought to create. The Nazis would often investigate their own citizens and go on to seek help from neighbors who might be able to discover someone using Rotwelsch in a more unofficial capacity. This violation of privacy between the government and the citizens led to Rotwelsch being prosecuted at the same time as the Jewish community.¹³

Polari: The Secret Protector of the LGBTQ+

Secret languages can also be created as a form of covert communication among marginalized identity groups for whom publicly revealing their identity presents a threat. In the United Kingdom, the Polari language was developed as a communication tool among members of the LGBTQ+ community. This language aided in the survival of LGBTQ+ individuals in a time when knowledge of their identity would have otherwise resulted in imprisonment under the nation's anti-LGBTQ+ decency laws. In addition to the legal prohibitions on homosexuality, the widespread social stigmatization that accompanied being gay made the secrecy inherent to Polari a vital tool in LGBTQ+ individuals' survival.

The creation of Polari led to the preservation of LGBTQ+ culture because it allowed people to talk amongst undercover police officers who couldn't understand the information being conveyed. Because it was illegal to be gay until 1967 in the UK, this language was one of the only ways someone could communicate their identity in the LGBTQ+ community without fear of imprisonment. It was protection, it was the ability to survive and be yourself, it was a way to be alive. And with this secret language, came a whole culture that was able to survive until homosexuality finally became legal. Importantly, even after the "legalization" of LGBTQ+ identities, there were estimated to be more than 15,000 gay men still convicted in the following decades – evidence of the continued necessity of the language as a protection mechanism. Later, Polari would also become integrated into mainstream culture. BBC developed a comedy program in which two members have their own show speaking in Polari, and Polari has even been used for the Punch and Judy Street puppet show.¹⁴ Polari developed from pressures to maintain com-

munication within a community and therefore, survival of the LGBTQ+ community.

Lunfardo: A Language of Criminality

Finally, in Argentina, the secret language of Lunfardo was developed as a method of internal communication among the criminal community. At first, this language was spoken by porteno (port city) criminals but has since become so incorporated into mainstream society that the current meaning of the term simply refers to the slang of Argentina.¹⁵ This language is similar to other forms of slang that have been formed throughout history: it is created through the reversing of syllables. Café would become féca, other things have separated Lunfardo farther from any spoken form of Spanish, such as the usage of words for different meanings as well as the abundance of metaphors that aren't intuitive to non-speakers.

The term 'Lunfardo' originated with the criminologist Luis Maria Drago in his study on imprisoned Argentine men in 1888, though this study introduced lunfardo as an adjective, and not the name of a language. Within "Los hombres de presa" by Drago, there is a chapter devoted to the argot, explaining how it is employed by thieves and criminals who need to disguise what they were saying to avoid repercussions for their criminal activities.¹⁶ Without this protection, there was more of a chance that police could overhear and ultimately take the individual to prison. Lunfardo was originally used by thieves of the River Plate Region of South America after all.^{17,18} The usage of Lunfardo would decrease due to the coup of 1943 when the Argentine military sought to purify Argentine Spanish so it was more Castilian without the vulgar typically associated with the dialect.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the use of the language within Tango kept Lunfardo alive, so that, after the coup, Lunfardo is now so integrated within the mainstream culture that it ultimately binds all of the people from the Rios Platas region of South America. It's a point of pride for speakers, and although is typically regarded as informal by the vast majority of people within the region, the integration has ultimately achieved the status of slang within this region rather than what would be a dying secret language.

Conclusion

Secret languages have arisen for various reasons and have united communities behind them, whether as a way of survival with Polari or as a point of passive resistance in the case of Jèrriais. These languages are still used today, with Rotwelsch still being a secret language that the majority of humanity doesn't know much about. Lunfardo has gone on to being so integrated into modern Argentine/Uruguayan culture that it has forgone its roots. These secret languages were all used as a form of secret communication protection, and for these marginalized groups, the way that they have survived in one way or another.