

Made-up words and coded sweet-talk

Rosy Hall is an ESRC-funded PhD student from Oxford University working with the BL's Spoken English collections. She writes:

When cataloguing the [Evolving English WordBank](#), we often come across speakers donating words which they have invented themselves. This privileged access to speakers' privately meaningful coinages is not only fun, but also a great reminder of how creative we can be with language when words fail us.

Usually, made-up words come from children's early experiments with speaking; words invented at home – often to name new and unfamiliar objects – which have stuck as humorous and often quite useful family vocab. In the following recording, one visitor to the exhibition describes some of her own family terms:

[C1442 Nonce-Words \(female b.1960\)](#)

Another speaker discusses a personal nonsense word 'amaluvaya,' which she explains is used solely between herself and her partner in order to express affection secretly, meaning 'I'm in love with you.'

[C1442 Amaluvaya \(female b.1953\)](#)

Like a lot of home-grown linguistic innovations, the idea behind 'amaluvaya' is to allow the speaker and hearer to communicate a message in public, but privately. Another example of a coded speech strategy is 'Pig Latin,' a pseudo-language with rules for re-arranging syllables, often used by school-children to conspire without their parents overhearing – or sometimes the other way around!

Occasionally, secret languages are needed for more serious purposes; being able to communicate covertly can of course be a matter of life and death, freedom and persecution. Polari, a form of cant slang used in gay sub-culture at the turn of the century, offered gay men a means of conversing without running the risk of arrest or abuse. A number of our Spoken English collections include fascinating discussions of Polari; you can listen to them [here](#) and [here](#).

You can find out more about Polari at the current [Gay UK exhibition](#), and in Paul Baker's *Fantabulosa: A Dictionary of Polari and Gay Slang* (2002)

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