

Two Varieties of Stromboli

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In the course of doing field work in the Lipari Islands, I came across two varieties of Stromboli, a prison argot spoken in neighboring penal colonies. The two differ chiefly in their number systems, the common parts of which are shown below:

<i>pi</i>	‘uno’	<i>pipi</i>	‘due’
<i>pipipi</i>	‘tre’	<i>mu</i>	‘cinque’
<i>mupi</i>	‘sei’	<i>mupipi</i>	‘sette’
<i>mupipipi</i>	‘otto’	<i>ka</i>	‘dieci’
<i>kapi</i>	‘undici’	<i>kapiipi</i>	‘dodici’
<i>kapiipi</i>	‘tredici’	<i>kamu</i>	‘quindici’
<i>kamupi</i>	‘sedici’	<i>kamupipi</i>	‘diciasette’
<i>kamupipipi</i>	‘diciotto’	<i>kaka</i>	‘venti’

The gaps in the above system are filled as follows in the two varieties, Purgatorio and Inferno:

P	I	
<i>pimu</i>	<i>pipipipi</i>	‘quattro’
<i>pika</i>	<i>mupipipipi</i>	‘nove’
<i>kapimu</i>	<i>kapiipipipi</i>	‘quattordici’
<i>kapika</i>	<i>kamupipipipi</i>	‘diciannove’

Since no sentence longer than twenty years is ever imposed on the inhabitants of Purgatorio, none of my informants from that colony could give me a form for ‘ventuno’ or higher. Pressed to tell me how long Infernensi stayed there, one finally gave me *pito*, probably a nonce form. I then asked my Inferno informants about this form, but they claimed not to know it; instead they used the form *nikakakaka*, which in turn caused the Purgatorensi even more mirth than forms like *kapiipiipi*, a form they use (in an obvious dig at their less fortunate colleagues) for ‘emissione frequente di feci quasi liquide’.

At first, this number system beggared description. It didn’t seem learnable, yet every new inmate seemed to get it within a matter of hours, while I struggled constantly with it, my attempts at using it being met with either blank incomprehension or gales of laughter. The warden, whose guest I was, claimed no knowledge, and dismissed it as a mere instance of thieves’ cant. It was only at the end of my stay on Stromboli, as I was about to leave, that I stumbled on the solution. Stricken by an attack of ‘quattordici’, as the amused Purgatorensi called my predicament, I had to make my way quickly to the nearest latrine. There, on the wall, was the solution, in the form of a graffito:

MARCO FA XX COLLA BOCCA

These criminals transmitted their patois through its writing system! They had made an ideographic system for their numbers, glyphs that could easily be scratched into the limestone walls of their latrines (and, for all I know, of their miserable hovels). No wonder I couldn’t learn the system orally, in the luxury of the warden’s hospitality, complete with indoor plumbing. Here are the ideograms for each of the morphemes:

I pi V mu X ka

Now you understand the system as well as I do.