



Towards the Anatomy of Prison Language: The Greek Inmates Case

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Background of the study

2005 - 2008: Doctoral Dissertation at the Department of Communication and Media - University of Athens

Conducted by Dr. Kardara A. & Supervised by Professor Panousis G. at Avlonas Detention Centre and Korydallos Prison in Greece

April 2018 - present: Follow up research at "Onissimos" Prisoners' Support Association

By the Scientific team of the Centre for the Study of Crime, Supervised by Dr. Kardara A.

Research Aims

- **Language as an integral and structural part of the 21st c. prison's microsociety**
- Examination of the special linguistic communication within the context of the closed and restrictive environment of the prison
- A comparative study of the linguistic communication of socially marginalised people groups within and outside the prison institution



Research Questions

Do prisoners of the modern era use their own linguistic code?

What are the characteristics of the particular form of linguistic communication that developed in the prison environment between prisoners?

Where and when and how was it created?

Why was it acquired?

Is it also used outside the prison context?

All the time or only in specific situations?

Does it vary according to gender, age, length of stay in prison?

What are the effects of the correctional officers' group on the effects of the prisoner group and, on their language communication?

What are the effects of the language of the prisoners on the prisoner's speech?

- What are the elements of differentiation between the language of the prison?

Past - Present language differences

Does the language of prisoners influence other actors involved? (police, criminal lawyers, journalists)



Population

130 prisoners at Korydallos and Avlona Prisons of Attica

- 30 women from the Korydallos Prison
- 70 men from Korydallos Prison
- 30 minors from the Special Detention Centre of Avlonas

30 penitentiary officers

- prison staff, social workers, criminologists, psychologists

30 penal experts, including the President of the Bar Association

30 policemen.

15 journalists in the judicial report

Research Methods

- **Closed Type Questionnaires**

Focus on type of questions, drafting and order of submission

Cooperation with the prison psychologist

YES/NO and suggested answers

- **Structured Interviews**

without the intervention of third parties

individual

- **On-site Observation**

discussions with fellow prisoners and prison officers





Questionnaire Example

- **Closed Type Question e.g.:**

"Have you learned new words and slang phrases from the day you entered prison to this day?"

a) YES

b) NO

c) I don't know / No Answer "

- **Question with Suggested Answers e.g.:**

" Lower it with an X where you first used slang:

α) In prison

b) Outside the prison "

Main Findings

1. **Difficulty in defining** prison language and its basic characteristics, adopted in the vocabulary of the prisoners and have acquired a special meaning and content due to the peculiar living conditions, e.g. "he is a chicken", he is "pantsless" = he is male, etc.
2. **Evolutionary course** of prison language
3. **Age - Offence - Length of stay** as Determinants of its formation
4. Unconscious, mechanical use and dissemination of the prison language → **A HABIT**
5. **3 Main Reasons** for using the prison language: **Mimicry - For fun - To avoid misunderstandings**

Main Findings



6. **First-time** use of *slang* **outside** prison (reasons related to subculture)

7. **NO** use of the prison language in communicating with people **outside the prison**

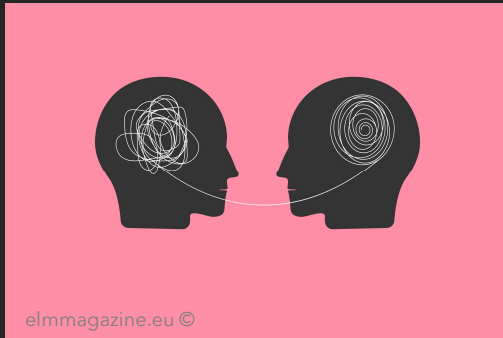
8. Determining role of **foreign prisoners in shaping the prison language**, used by foreigners for survival

9. **The prison language as a vehicle for cognition and expression of the emotional world of prisoners: values, feelings, solidarity, complicity, social criticism, questioning**

Linguistic Examples

Words	Meaning	Phrases	Meaning
"Jody" / "Sancho"	a prisoner who has extramarital relations with the spouse/partner of his/her fellow prisoner	"Με πας βόλτα" = "You're taking me for a walk"	Addressed to the inmate who speaks misleadingly
"Diaper Sniper"	inmate convicted of child molestation	"ανοίγω κάρτα" = "opening card"	Causing problems and unrest
"Δαγκώνω" = "I bite"	I use underhanded means to extract things from inmates, such as cigarettes and telecards.	"Έσκασε το ρομπότ" = "The robot came up"	Addressed to a prisoner in the appearance of a convicted snitch to emphasize the absence of a human element
"ποντικός" / "αρουραίος" = "rat"	an inmate who steals property and other material possessions of his inmates at night when they are asleep.	"ρόμπα χωρίς κουμπιά" = buttonless robe	Parable on the garment for the statement of the dishonest housing received by the partner with the prison officials
"Γιάννης Αγιάνης" = "John Saint John"	incarcerated in direct breach with the prison administration in the defense of the interests of other criminals;	Dipping in the Kool Aid"	Attempt of an inmate to enter into a conversation of his fellow inmates, in which he has no reason to enter, nor has he been invited to do so.

Conclusions



it is **a means of communication** but also of expressing feelings, opinions, ideas and attitudes towards persons and situations

it is **a powerful symbol** that ensures the prisoners' participation in the group and thus their harmonious coexistence and survival in the harsh prison environment

it is **constantly renewed** and enriched with new words and phrases, reflecting the spirit of each era and society

it has been **transformed from a cryptic code** to a **way of communication at a symbolic level** acquired as a **habit** from the inmates

Discussion

- We have managed to understand the deeper essence and content of the language of prison and, to a large extent, to penetrate the **multidimensional psyche** of the inmates of the "totalitarian" prison system in Greece
- **First study** to show the Symbolic, Survival and Psychological Function within the restrictive environment of the prison in Greece



Follow up Research



2018 -
present
ongoing
project

Onessimos
Association
for the
Assistance of
Prisoners

50 parolees,
12 structured
interviews

Philosophical,
criminological
/
psychological,
literal and
linguistic
approach

Main Conclusions

- The special language of communication code used by the incarcerated population can be further divided into **two large branches**:
 - the **hard cryptographic** slang used **solely by prisoners** inside and outside prison in order to operate their illegal activities → collective identity
 - the slang used **to a larger extent** within the closed and restrictive context of the prison, even **in front of the correction officers** for imitation but also for communication, as a getaway in their attempt to reduce the pains of imprisonment. → means of reaction to social powers, differentiation

Suggestions for future research

- Construction of a **Prison Language Glossary**, with constantly renewed words, phrases and their respective meanings aiming at
 1. *New prisoners' adaptation*
 2. *Unity*
 3. *Shaping of prison officers' understanding of slang*
 4. *Improvement of Scientific Research in prison environments*

Based on the present research



Thank you!



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