



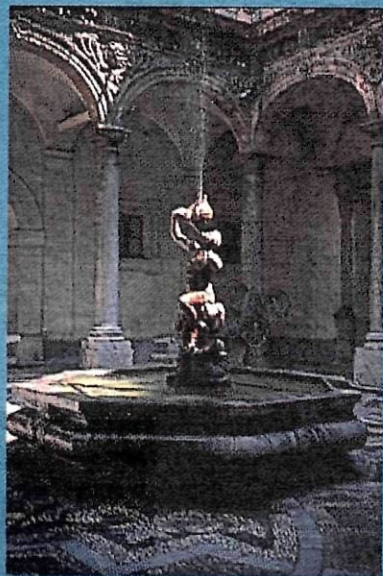
A retired U.S. Foreign Service Officer and former university professor, Dr. Joseph F. Privitera has devoted a lifetime to language study and research. His *Basic Sicilian* is the only reference grammar of the Sicilian dialect to be published in this century, since a compilation of folklore in 1905.

Edmond Mellen

BASIC SICILIAN

A BRIEF REFERENCE GRAMMAR

BY JOSEPH F. PRIVITERA



BASIC SICILIAN

Cover:

**Beautiful fountain in Monreale,
the historic city which lies above Palermo,
the capital of Sicily.**

Photo by Joseph F. Privitera

BASIC SICILIAN

A Brief Reference Grammar

Joseph F. Privitera

The Edwin Mellen Press
Lewiston•Queenston•Lampeter

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Privitera, Joseph Frederic, 1914-

Basic Sicilian / a brief reference grammar / Joseph F. Privitera.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-7734-8335-7 (hc.)

1. Italian language--Dialects--Italy--Sicily--Grammar. I. Title.

PC1801.P75 1998

457'.8--dc21

98-24106

CIP

A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Copyright © 1998 Joseph F. Privitera

All rights reserved. For information contact

The Edwin Mellen Press

Box 450

Lewiston, New York

USA 14092-0450

The Edwin Mellen Press

Box 67

Queenston, Ontario

CANADA L0S 1L0

The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd.
Lampeter, Ceredigion, Wales
UNITED KINGDOM SA48 8LT

Printed in the United States of America

TO THE MEMORY OF LUIGI PIRANDELLO

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication	i
Preface	ii
Abbreviations	vi
Pronunciation	vii
Articles	1
Definite Article	1
Indefinite Article	4
Nouns	5
Gender	5
Number	6
Adjectives	10
Gender and Number	10
Comparison	13
Augmentatives and Diminutives; Numerals	16
Augmentatives	16
Diminutives	17
Numerals	19
Cardinals	19
Ordinals	20
Pronouns	22
Personal	22

Disjunctive	22
Conjunctive	23
Demonstrative, Interrogative, Relative, Possessive, and Indefinite Adjectives & Pronouns	26
Demonstrative	26
Interrogatives	27
Relative	28
Possessives	30
Indefinite	31
Conjunctions and Prepositions	34
Conjunctions	34
Prepositions	35
Adverbs	38
Conjunctive	38
Disjunctive	38
Comparison	41
The Verb System	42
Auxiliary verb	42
Regular Verbs	44
Irregular Verbs	50
Uses of verbs	55

Sicilian-English Vocabulary

57

Index

66

PREFACE

Sicilian is not a dialect. Like Italian, it is a language derived directly from Latin. For political reasons, like some 450 other tongues spoken throughout Italy, also derived from Latin, it is called a dialect. Since there can be only one official language in a country; all other idioms are relegated to the status of dialect.

Because Italian has served as the country's official language since the thirteenth century, when it was first used as the *lingua nova* by Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, it has been refined and bound by a set of grammatical rules. Honed down to beauty of sound and sight, it has become the favorite language of music.

Italy's other Latin "languages," however, have not been accorded the same respect and deference as has the official tongue, for, as dialects, they have remained the undisciplined *lingua franca* of the people, without the blessing and acceptance of the *literati*. Dictator Benito Mussolini dreamed of creating a Greater Italy in the shadow of Rome, and, with utter scorn for Italy's dialects, made every effort to suppress and eliminate them. But he failed, because no one, neither government nor individual, can ever shackle the *vox populi*, a people's very life blood.

However, he need never have tried, for what he failed to accomplish, with official decree and political pressure, has come about through education, radio, TV, a higher standard of living, and almost total literacy. Now that Italian is universally used, the dialects are fast disappearing.

In a frantic effort to salvage some aspect of this rich language treasure, scholars are busy writing dictionaries and grammars of their regional dialects. Dialectology, a new language discipline, is now flourishing throughout Italy and is responsible for learned studies tracing a dialect's emergence and development from Latin, anthologies of its scant writings, the poetry of native sons, dictionaries, regional word lists and grammars.

One wonders why, despite a fairly active dialectology, no modern Sicilian grammar has yet been published on the island since the one written by folklorist Pitrè appeared in the first decade of the twentieth century. But that sole attempt at a reasoned grammar soon disappeared from sight for lack of interest and, since then, none has seen the light of day anywhere.

The grammar we now publish, the only one in this century since Pitrè, is meant to fill that need and to serve as a record of the dialect when, in the very near future, it will have disappeared completely. We trust it will also serve as a guide to linguists interested in the sight and sound of Sicilian.

What we offer in this compilation is not a set of rules and exercises, designed for the learning of Sicilian in the classroom, but a brief compendium of the basic tenets of its grammar to which Sicilian-Americans, scholars and others may refer for the correct speech forms. It is arranged, therefore, in a classical, grammatical form, easy of access and handy to use.

We must underscore the fact that the present study offers a "pure" version of Sicilian, which eliminates, to the greatest extent possible, the borrowings from current Italian, as found in the classroom, on TV and radio, the press, and the printed word, in general. Thus, to cite but one example, our grammar does not have

the future or conditional tenses, for these are Sicilian's false friends, on loan from Italian. As the reader will see, we revert to the original vivid present for the future, and the imperfect subjunctive, for the conditional.

To be sure, the Sicilian dialect is made up of scores of different sub-dialects, whose expressions, grammatical forms and idioms differ from one town, village or province to another. Because Sicilian, like all other dialects, has never been reined in and standardized by a set of rules, it has developed at random from east to west and north to south. A citizen of Messina and one from Palermo will understand each other perfectly, but each will pronounce the dialect with the accent and local expressions used by his neighbors. Yet, both will acknowledge that each is speaking Sicilian, in his own way.

Since, in effect, there is no General Sicilian, we must compromise and settle on a format which is understood by all throughout the island and spoken by most. It is generally agreed that Corleone's dialect best fits that description. According to Professor Gaetano de Gregorio, one of the island's early language scholars, "the fact is that the purest form of Sicilian is spoken in Corleone." (*certo è... che a Corleone si parla il pretto siciliano.*)

In the Preface to his *Phonology of the Sicilian Dialects*, (Catholic University, 1934), Dr. Ducibella accepts this opinion and adds that "in each... category we have treated first the development of *General Sicilian* [that is, Corleonese]. By *General Sicilian* we understand that speech which is predominant in the popular Sicilian literature and which is commonly understood, if not spoken, in the greatest part of the island." Dr. Ducibella covers the regional variants in a sub-section to each heading.

*

Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936), the 1934 Nobel Laureate for Literature, was a Sicilian who spoke of his dialect as *meine süsse Muttersprache*, my sweet mother tongue. He used the German expression while doing graduate work at the University of Bonn, where he was awarded a Ph.D. for writing a dissertation on the phonological development, from Latin, of the dialect of Girgenti, his native city.

Though his major work was written in Italian, he remained a Sicilian at heart. In the belief that a dialect can properly serve as a literary medium, Pirandello wrote twelve of his early plays, some, true masterpieces, in Sicilian. As it happens, this has come to be a last gasp as the curtain slowly falls on the dialect.

We are pleased to dedicate this study to the proud Sicilian and pre-eminent Italian, Luigi Pirandello

ABBREVIATIONS

adj.	adjective
adv.	adverb
conj.	conjunction
def. art.	definite article
indef.art.	indefinite article
f.	feminine
m.	masculine
n.	noun
pl.	plural
prep.	preposition
pret.	preterite
pron.	pronoun
sing.	singular
vb.	verb

PRONUNCIATION

We have adopted the pronunciation of the Corleone area, which, as noted earlier, Dr. Ducibella observed is the most representative of General Sicilian. Widely used alternate lexicons are given in brackets [].

VOWELS

The spelling of words (the orthography) is the same as in Italian: **chiù**, **iddu**, **me patri**. The stress falls on the next to the last syllable (penult): **parru**, *I speak*. Otherwise, stress is indicated by a bolderized, italicized vowel, **parranu**, *they speak*.

a like *a* in 'father': as in **patri**, **matri**, **favi**.

e like *e* in 'best': as in **bedda**. Phonetically, this is an open *e*.

i like *ea* in 'beast': as in **kiddu**.

ĩ like *i* in 'fit,': as in **fíc ĩnu**

This short *i* appears in unstressed syllables. It is not found in Italian.

j is pronounced like *i*, as in **ju**, *I*.

o like *aw* in 'claw': as in **tò**, **sò**. Phonetically, this is an open *o*.

u almost like *o* in Eng. 'to': as in **tuttu**, **unu**.

CONSONANTS

b, f, l, m, n, p, q, t, v are pronounced as in English.

c, before *e* or *i*, sounds like *ch* in 'choose', as in **duci**, *sweet.*; elsewhere it is always like English *k*: as in **cicara**, *cup*; **comu**, *how*.

d, like *d* in Italian 'dove': as in **dannu**. But, at times, it will also sound like a softly trilled *r* both in initial position and between vowels; it is formed by the vibration of the tongue against the hard palate: as in **dumani**, *tomorrow*, **pedi**, *foot*. Double **dd** is soft when it appears between two vowels (intervocalic): as in **iddu**, *he*.

g, before *e* or *i*, sounds like *g* in 'George'; **gelu**, *frost*; **già**, *already*. Otherwise it is always like *g* in 'gone': as in **gattu**, *cat*.

h is always silent: as in **hannu**, *they have*. It was pronounced in

Latin (aspirate), but was dropped in its offspring languages, which may retain the spelling, but not the sound.

i, unaccented, before a vowel, is pronounced like English *y*: as **aiu**, *help*; **chiù**, *more*. Also pronounced like Eng. *y* when between two vowels (intervocalic), **vaiu**, *I go*.

n before a **q** or a hard **c** or **g** sounds like English *ng* (*wing*): as **bancu** (*bang-ku*), *bench*; **longu** (*long-gu*), *long*; **cinquanta** (*cing-kwanta*), *fifty*.

r, when single, is formed with a quick flip of the tongue on the palate behind the front teeth: as **caru**, *dear*; **puru**, *pure*.

When **r** is double, or when it is the first letter in a word, the tongue is suspended between the roof and the bottom of the mouth, not touching either; its sides are curved against the

sides of the mouth, while the tip is rounded to let the air escape: as in **rota**, *wheel*; **carru**, *cart*.
s is pronounced like English *s* in 'soon,' but with a much sharper sound: as **sulu**, *alone*; **spina**, *thorn*.

s before a sonant (**b, d, g, l, m, n, r, v**) sounds like English *z*: as **sbirru**, *cop*; **sdegnu**, *scorn*; **sgranari**, *to shell*; **slitta**, *sleigh*; **smaltu**, *enamel*; **snellu**, *slender*; **sradicari**, *to uproot*; **sveltu**, *quick, alert*.

Double **s** is pronounced like English *s* in 'see': as in **chissu**, *that one*.

u, unaccented, before a vowel, sounds like English *w*.: as in **quannu** (*kwannu*), *when*; **quattru**, *four*.

z and **zz** are generally pronounced like a long and vigorous *ts*: as in **ziu**, *uncle*, **prezzu**, *price*.

In the following words, however, **z** and **zz** are pronounced like a prolonged *dz*, **azzurru**, **duzzina**, **menzu**,

Note these combinations:

ch (used only before an **e** or **i**) is like English *k*: as **chi**, *what*; **chianu**, *flat, plain*.

gghi, when followed by a consonant, is like English *g* in 'go': as **agghicari**, *to arrive*.
When followed by a vowel, it has a **g** (as in Eng. *go*) and **y** (as in English *you*): as **agghiu**, *garlic*; **figghia**, *daughter*.

gn is like the *ni* in 'onion': as **ogni**, *every*.

qu, as in Italian, is always like *kw*: as **quattro**, *four*; **quinnici**, *fifteen*.

sc before **e** and **i** is nearly like *sh* in 'ship': as **sciallu**, *shawl*; **scemu**, *silly*.

In the **str** cluster, the **t** is not pronounced. The **s** and **r** are pronounced together as air is forced through the slightly open teeth and lips, forming a sound close to the **sh** in Eng. *shame*: as in **finestra**, *window*, **strata**, *street*.

t, in the **nt** cluster, is pronounced as **d** (in General Sicilian); as **nendi**, *nothing*. In some parts of Sicily, it retains the **t** sound, as **nenti**.

The **tr** cluster is formed with the tip of the tongue touching the hard palate. The tongue is flat against the sides to permit the simultaneous pronunciation of the **r**: as **tri**, *three*.

In double consonants, both letters must be sounded, the first, at the end of the preceding, the second at the beginning of the following syllable:

annu, *year* **chiddu**, *that*
fattu, *fact* **pazzu**, *insane*

m, **n** and **r**, when preceded by an accented vowel and followed by another consonant, are prolonged: **sempri** (semm-pri), *always*; **tantu** (tann-tu), *so much*; **parti** (parr-ti) *part*..

Sicilian words are divided in such a way that, if possible, every syllable shall begin with a consonant.

men-zu, *half*; **no-ta**, *note*;
nor-du, *north*

In the clusters noted above, **st**, **tr**, **gn**, **gghi**, the consonants belong to the following syllable.

fe-sta **o-gni** **au-tru**
a-gghiu