

A Museum of Numbers

by stephen hastings-king

The Museum At street level there is a small arrow on which is printed “Museum of Numbers” that points up a long narrow staircase. There is a restaurant on the first floor. All the way up the stairs, the air is permeated with smell of fried foods. The museum a collection of sentences about the ways numbers are understood by hypothetical groups of people each of which lives in a hypothetical elsewhere.

When you enter, you are in an empty room except for the sentences on small strips of paper which are arrayed on the walls.

The Collection For the people of A, numbers are intensifiers. They are printed on little round white signs glued to sticks. In the course of communication, people hold up numbers. Sometimes they are used in the midst of words to emphasize different syllables and the way in which they scan; other times in the midst of sentences to emphasize aspects of a story.

In B, numbers are names or substantives; 2 of something is different in kind than 5 of something. In B, things change continually. Identity is a fluid idea.

Here, numbers express the underlying rhythms of an utterance and in so doing integrates it into the conception held by the inhabitants of C that the world is as a form of dance.

For the people of D, numbers are the names of the mythical beings who preside over words. Each being has a very small sphere of influence and is both powerful and jealous. Sometimes numbers invoke or ask for favors; other times they assuage hurt feelings in the hope of preventing malign events. Negative numbers are sometimes used to express the ways in which it is vexing to deal with jealous mythical beings each of which is associated with a small

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territory.

In E, words are translations of numbers. The real language of this people is written and in base 12. Words are conveniences that facilitate face-to-face interactions when writing does not serve and they cannot be avoided.

Here, the use of numbers in verbal interactions is an aspect of the ongoing repetition of the story of a fall from regional domination which the inhabitants of G still cannot accept but life continues anyway.

For the people of H, what is said is imagined as written on a white ribbon. It can be pitched at different angles, each of which inflects meaning. Numbers are held up to indicate the angle. Among the people of H, listening is an intricate play of noting the various changes in the position of the ribbon and listening with eyes closed so meanings can be read.

In I, numbers indicate the physical weight of words based on an idea that each is a compound or precipitate with a particular composition and density. This enables more than one register of emphasis.

Here, numbers reflect the relation between utterances and the balances of energies that shape community life. Among the inhabitants of J, each interlocutor in a communicative situation also delivers a kind of weather report.

For the people of K, numbers are introduced into verbal situations as a way to formalize shifting status relations as they unfold across interactions which are largely, though not exclusively, contentious

In L, numbers refer to a cosmology that is based mostly around stories of getting lost. They are co-ordinates that track the positions implied by an interaction against a shared imaginary map of the 4-dimensional world. The people here approach communication like surveyors.

Here is a community that bets on everything. For them, the numbers that are used in communicative situations indicate probabilities: the odds that a particular word will follow; odds that the subject of conversation will remain consistent and so on. Bets are placed using a system of hand signals. All communication happens in public spaces, monitored by referees and other officials connected with the betting system. Currency changes hands continually. They say that the overall distribution of wins and losses makes the socio-economic structure of M quite static.

For the members of the learned society of N, numbers are footnotes, a system of cross-reference. These people value conversation dense with allusion. The use of numbers to signal the information beyond the sentence surface is a training technique and an act of politeness shown to visitors.

The Gift Shop The Museum of Numbers does not draw many visitors. Those who come are generally puzzled. But most are quite taken with the gift shop where they can purchase merchandise the design of which involves florid variations on numbers.

Outside The Museum is a peculiar little island in town.

Here, people like paintings that reproduce sight-lines across the marsh that they would occupy themselves but for the misery of ticks and green heads and mosquitoes which are pestilent when the wind dies.

They like to be reminded to look. They like paintings that say: "This is what you see if you turn your head to the right."

“O yes,” they will say, turning their heads to the right. “There it is.”

