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Judeo-Spanish in the United States

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Topic: Present and future of Judeo-Spanish in the United States

Abstract: Overview of the main issues related to Judeo-Spanish in the United States: socio-historical context of the arrival of the Sephardim to the United States, linguistic features of this language variety, explanations for its current status as an endangered language, and initiatives towards the revitalization of the Sephardic language and culture.

Key words: Judeo-Spanish, migrations, Sephardic culture, Spanish dialectology, endangered languages, language attitudes

Sephardic Jews are the descendants of those Jews that left the various kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula in the aftermath of the persecutions, expulsions and forced conversions that took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth

centuries. Their original ethnicity and culture are, therefore, Hispanic.¹ These exiles settled mainly in the north of Morocco and in the Ottoman Empire and continued to use the Spanish language for centuries.² The evolution of the language spoken by these exiles, isolated for centuries from Peninsular Spanish, led to the emergence of Judeo-Spanish, a language variety with distinctive features and traditionally written with Hebrew characters. During the first decades of the twentieth century, a considerable number of Sephardic Jews immigrated to the United States; consequently, the United States, along with Israel and, to a lesser extent, Turkey, is currently one of the countries with the largest number of speakers of Judeo-Spanish. However, among second and third generation Sephardim, the descendants of those Sephardic Jews that immigrated to the United States, only a small minority has maintained the language. Most of the few remaining speakers are elderly, so their language seems bound to disappear in a matter of decades.

In the following pages we will review the most important aspects of the Judeo-Spanish language in the United States: the historical circumstances that enabled the arrival and settlement of the Sephardim, the particular features of the Ladino language as spoken in the United States, the reasons that prevented the language, in most cases, from being transmitted across generations, the current

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¹ In Israel and the United States the term *Sephardic* is often used to designate all the Jews that are not of *Ashkenazi* origin, that is, Jews who are not of Central European origin, whose traditional language is *Yiddish*. This broader concept of the Sephardim includes Jews from Arab countries and also those from Persia, Armenia, Yemen and even India, i.e. Jews with no relation to the Hispanic culture that defines the Sephardim. This classification originates in the perceived similarities of the Sephardic liturgical practices and Hebrew pronunciation with those of Jews from those other countries, features which none of them share with the Ashkenazi Jews. In our case, we do distinguish between Sephardic Jews of Spanish culture, whom we will call *Sephardim*, and Jews from Islamic countries, whom we will refer to as *Oriental Jews* or *Mizrahim*.

² We use the terms *Judeo-Spanish* and *Sephardic language* to refer to the Spanish language spoken by the Sephardim. This terminology is common in academic literature, although in recent times the term *Ladino* has also gained some popularity, particularly among the speakers of the language themselves.

status of Ladino as an endangered language, and some initiatives towards the revitalization of Sephardic language and culture.³

Immigration and settlement

The arrival of Sephardic Jews in the United States and the establishment of stable communities of Ladino speakers on U.S. soil is a phenomenon directly related to the migratory waves caused by the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century. After the expulsions and forced conversions at the dawn of the early modern period, most Spanish and Portuguese Jews settled in the cities of the eastern Mediterranean, mainly in what is now Turkey and the Balkans, where they lived peacefully and even enjoyed moments of prosperity. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, a number of sociopolitical events—the dismemberment of the Empire, the Balkan wars, the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, and World War I—and several natural disasters prompted the economic situation of the Sephardim to worsen, bringing about a general climate of social and political instability. Faced with these deteriorating living conditions, many Sephardic Jews, mostly young men, emigrated in search of economic opportunities and a stable and safe environment. These migratory movements took the Sephardim to almost every corner of the world (Western Europe, Palestine, Africa, Asia, South America, Mexico) and also largely to the United States. In the case of the U.S., the bulk of Sephardic immigration appears to have occurred between 1908 and 1921 (Angel 1982: 17-18).

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Determining the exact number of Sephardim that settled in the United States is a difficult task because there are no sufficiently reliable records⁴. Stern (1926: 67-

³ The author, a scholar of historical linguistics, conducted field research within the Sephardic community of Judeo-Spanish speakers in Los Angeles, where he interviewed several speakers and collected speech samples, testimonials, songs and ballads between 1994 and 2000. Testimonies transcribed in this paper are from that time and can be listened to in the documentary film *Once Upon a time at 55th and Hoover* (www.55thandhooverfilm.info).

106) estimates that between 1899 and 1925, 25,591 Sephardic men, women and children from Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro and Greece arrived in the United States. Angel (1982: 17-18) surmises that 30,000 immigrants arrived between 1890 and 1924, while Bernardete states that, in the early 1920s, New York had a population of about 25,000 Sephardim (Armistead and Silverman 1981: vii). In 1923, the newspaper *La Vara* calculated the U.S. population of Judeo-Spanish speakers at 50,000, with 35,000 of them living in the city of New York. For Ben-Ur (2009: 35), the Sephardic population of the United States in 1934 was around 75,000 individuals.

During the period with the greatest influx of Sephardic immigrants into the United States, New York City became the main point of arrival and the preferred place of settlement as well. The Lower East Side soon became the center of the Sephardic population. Nevertheless, small contingents of newcomers ended up in other locations, either on their own initiative or redirected by Jewish immigrant aid organizations, which would send newcomers to other areas of the country, intent on reducing overcrowding in the New York community (Ben-Ur, 2009: 118-20). In this way other Sephardic communities were established throughout the country, in New Brunswick (New Jersey), Chicago, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Atlanta, Montgomery (Alabama), Miami, Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. New York, Los Angeles and Seattle currently host the largest communities of Sephardic Jews (for a brief review of the history and status of the different communities and their approximate numbers, see Elazar 1989, Chapter 7).

The creation of Sephardic communities follows a well-known pattern in the establishment of immigrant populations. A first pioneer group typically consists of young single males, who arrive at a town attracted by work or business

⁴ Ben-Ur (2009: 33-36) explains in some detail several problems raised by the analysis of immigration records, in particular the lack of accurate information regarding language and religion, which makes it difficult to identify the Sephardim and to distinguish them from other ethno-linguistic groups.

opportunities. Once this first group has settled, it facilitates the arrival of relatives and acquaintances from their place of origin who in turn invite other relatives. These early communities are characterized by strong cohesion: immigrants cluster around ethnic neighborhoods where they build businesses and recreational spaces. Because of the large number of single males among the first waves of Sephardic immigrants, cafes became an important gathering place where the Sephardim enjoyed food, a glass of *raki* (an anise-flavored alcoholic drink), or a cup of Turkish coffee, and where they played cards after work (Ben-Ur 2009: 154). One of the community's priorities was to build a synagogue as soon as possible. Charities were also established to help newcomers and those in need. Social, cultural and religious life revolved around the synagogue where, in addition to religious rites, all sorts of celebrations and banquets, Hebrew and Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparatory classes, English courses, and many other cultural and recreational activities were organized. The central role of the synagogue in the social life of the community is made clear in the testimony of a Sephardic man from Los Angeles:

The synagogue was to us a social center and a cultural center. All of our friends and relatives belonged and that's where we saw them and that was the center of the community life. And that's another thing about our social affairs is all the generations were together. The teenagers, the young adults, their grandparents, little kids, all together, dancing together. Something that you hardly see anymore today.

Among the first generation of immigrants, marriage between individuals of the same place of origin was the norm: it was quite common to arrange marriages by mail or to make a return trip in order to find a wife. In some cases, such as in Los Angeles, there was an association, known as the *Maccabean Knights*, that organized activities for single people in the community in order to facilitate courtships and the marriage of Sephardic couples.

Newspapers written in Judeo-Spanish played an important cultural role during the first decades of Sephardic presence in the United States, as they did in the communities of origin in the Ottoman Empire. Not only in New York, but also in other cities, several newspapers and newsletters were founded (cf. Angel 1998: 107-108; Harris 1994: 129-30). Among them, we should highlight *La Vara* for being the newspaper that lasted the longest (from 1922 to 1948).

The Sephardic Jews who arrived in the early decades of the twentieth century were mostly self-employed small businessmen, usually from very humble backgrounds. They would typically arrive with almost no financial means and thus start to make a living by selling flowers, fruits and vegetables on the streets. They also worked as shoeshine boys, waiters, or wardrobe managers for cinemas and theaters. In many cases, these peddlers, showing persistence and skill, established their own businesses: vegetable vendors opened grocery stores, street shoe-cleaners created shoe-repair workshops and shoe stores (Angel 1998: 94, Donnell 1987: 123-24), and so on. Over time, many of them would take a leap into real estate and financial activities, enabling them to accumulate some wealth.

Sephardic communities in large cities like New York or Los Angeles tended to cluster based on their place of origin in the Old World, continuing a tradition that already existed in the sixteenth century: the Sephardim who settled in the Ottoman Empire after the expulsion gathered in synagogues named after their place of origin in the Iberian Peninsula, such as *kal de Córdoba*, *kal de Barcelona*, *kal de Granada*, etc. This pattern was repeated in the United States: synagogues and charitable societies to help newcomers organized themselves by place of origin. For example, Hacker (1926) states that in New York, around 1920, there were 36 different benevolent societies from Thessaloniki, Monastir (Bitola), Istanbul, Adrianople, Silivri, Gallipoli, Dardanelles, Ankara, Izmir, Chios, Rhodes, etc. Similarly, in Los Angeles the Sephardim from Rhodes, for example, tried to maintain an independent synagogue, even though efforts had been made since the 1920s to have them join other Sephardic communities. Finally in 1993,

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unable to maintain an autonomous congregation, they joined the Tifereth Israel synagogue. The following statement by a Sephardic woman from Rhodes living in Los Angeles, where she laments her community's forced merger with other congregations of diverse provenance, well exemplifies the strong attachment of these immigrants to their original places of origin:

When we merged together we were lost, we were no longer a family. Because we used to be a family: siblings, cousins, brothers and sisters in law, parents in law... all together, all just one people. Then we got here; there are people from Turkey, Thessaloniki, Bulgaria... from all over. So, we finally joined them, we got all together, but it will never be the same as it was before. [Translated from Ladino]

The strong cohesion of these newly settled communities was largely motivated by the challenge of integration into the new country. The fact that they did not know the language or the culture made community support essential. It is also noteworthy that Jews already settled in the United States, who were mostly Ashkenazi, and their immigrant aid organizations did not recognize the Sephardim as Jews because their language, customs, manner of worship, and even their physical appearance were foreign to them (cf. Ben-Ur 2009: 108-17). Therefore newcomers needed the support of other Sephardim in order to be able to function in their new country.

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Judeo-Spanish in the United States

Judeo-Spanish is often portrayed as an archaic variety of Spanish. This characterization is due to the preservation of some features of medieval Spanish that have been lost in other varieties of the language. The truth is that Judeo-Spanish, as any other dialect of Spanish, has incorporated throughout history a large number of linguistic innovations, and thus should not be characterized as a particularly conservative variety of Spanish. Indeed, certain aspects of Judeo-

Spanish have evolved further than their counterparts in the northern peninsular variety of Spanish. For example, Judeo-Spanish has eliminated certain consonant distinctions, so that the alveolar sibilant /s/ and the interdental /θ/ are not distinguished (sounds that differentiate the words *caso* ‘case’ and *cazo* ‘pot’ in northern peninsular Spanish); Judeo-Spanish also does not distinguish between the trilled or rolled *r* /r/ and the simple flap *r* /r/ sounds (which differentiate the words *caro* ‘expensive’ and *carro* ‘car’ in standard Spanish). At the lexical level, Judeo-Spanish has incorporated a large number of words from the languages with which it has been in contact (Hebrew, French, Italian, Greek, Turkish, etc.); examples include the word *karpuz* ‘watermelon,’ borrowed from Turkish, or the Greek-derived term *fasulada* for ‘dish made with beans.’ There are also many innovations that affect verb conjugation, pronouns, prepositions and virtually all areas of grammar (for a detailed repertoire of innovations in the history of Judeo-Spanish, see Penny 2004: 271-274).

The Judeo-Spanish spoken in the U.S. has not received much attention from researchers in comparison with other varieties of Spanish spoken by immigrant communities. Still, we have some detailed studies on various aspects of Judeo-Spanish for a number of communities: Los Angeles and New York (Harris 1994, 2006), Indianapolis (Nemer 1981), and Atlanta and Montgomery (Bar-Lewaw 1968). These studies give us an idea of the main traits of the varieties in those communities. Main features of the Judeo-Spanish spoken in the United States include: the blurring of dialectal differences as a result of contact between Sephardim of different geographical origins, strong interference from English and American Spanish at all linguistic levels, and several structural symptoms of language decay (individual variation, large lexical gaps, hesitation and insecurity when speaking).

Given the dominant status of English in the U.S., it is not surprising that there has been massive vocabulary transfer from it (in fact, lexical borrowing from English is a common trend in all the Spanish-speaking immigrant communities). Angel (1998: 121) provides some striking examples, such as *parquear* ‘to park’, *drivear*

'to drive' or *abetchar* 'to bet' (from the colloquial English expression *Betcha!*, from *I bet you*). Likewise, Bar-Lewaw (2116-17) finds several English loanwords in the variety spoken in Atlanta and Montgomery: *cheiken* 'shake hands', *muvi* 'movie', *norsa* 'nurse', *storiko* 'store', among others. In the same vein Harris (1994: 173) points out the frequent use of English words among the speakers that she studied. The following are some representative examples:

Traditional Judeo-Spanish	US variety
<i>bet hayim</i>	<i>cemetery</i>
<i>tutun</i>	<i>tobacco</i>
<i>tejado</i>	<i>roof</i>
<i>tabaka, piano</i>	<i>floor</i>
<i>kibrites, parlakes</i>	<i>matches</i>

The frequent use of discourse markers and connectors borrowed from English, such as *but* or *so*, is also proof of the strong influence of the English language on US Judeo-Spanish.

Another common characteristic of the Judeo-Spanish spoken in the United States is the borrowing of words from Latin American Spanish, a phenomenon facilitated by the presence of large Spanish-speaking communities in the cities where the Sephardim have traditionally settled. In fact, many Sephardim felt a stronger cultural and linguistic affinity with Latin Americans than with their Ashkenazi fellow Jews and preferred to settle in Hispanic neighborhoods or to work with people of Hispanic origin (Ben-Ur 2009: 155). School and college, where formal instruction in Spanish was provided, was another way for Sephardic speakers, and especially those of the second and third generation, to establish linguistic contact with other varieties of Spanish. As a result of this contact, they assimilated into their speech many elements of standard Spanish that were not part of the traditional Sephardic language. In particular, Judeo-Spanish speakers in the U.S. replaced traditional words, which they perceived as very specific to

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their own variety, with other forms used in standard Spanish, as the following examples show:

Traditional Judeo-Spanish	US variety
<i>hazino</i>	<i>enfermo</i> ‘sick’
<i>laborar</i>	<i>trabajar</i> ‘to work’
<i>chapines, kalsados</i>	<i>zapatos</i> ‘shoes’
<i>merkar</i>	<i>comprar</i> ‘to purchase’

A native Ladino speaker, a gynecologist from Istanbul, provides an illustrative case of the replacement of genuine Judeo-Spanish words with standard Spanish terms. He explains how in Los Angeles he soon realized that, in order to avoid expressions deemed inappropriate by his Latin American patients, he had to replace the words *preñada* ‘pregnant’ or *parir* ‘to give birth’, which are part of the traditional Sephardic lexicon, with synonyms such as *encinta* and *dar a luz*, which are unknown in traditional Judeo-Spanish:

Researcher: In Ladino, you say *preñada* [‘pregnant’]

Speaker: But Latin Americans say that *preñada* is only used for animals: they say ‘estamos *encinta*’ [‘we are expecting’] and they also say ‘vamos *dar a luz*’ [‘we are going to give birth’], instead of ‘vamos *parir*’ [‘we are going to give birth’]. *Parir* is Spanish, isn’t it? [...] Central Americans, Latinos... we cannot convince them: OK. I will do the same. I will say *encinta*, and I will say *dar a luz*.

Transfer from Spanish also occurs at the phonetic level, in the incorporation of sounds unknown in traditional Judeo-Spanish. For example, the use of the voiceless velar fricative /x/ in standard Spanish (/ixo/ *hijo* ‘son’ or /muxer/ *mujer* ‘wife’) is found instead of the traditional Sephardic pronunciation (/iʒo/, /muʒer/), where /ʒ/ is pronounced as the initial sound of the French *je* ‘I’. There are also frequent cases of morpho-syntactic transfer, for example the use of the

pronoun *usted* ('formal you'), which does not exist in traditional Sephardic Spanish.

The incorporation of foreign elements into the Judeo-Spanish of the United States is further facilitated by the fact that almost all Sephardim are fluent in several languages. This trend is also accentuated by the lack of any regulatory pressure on the language and the absence of purist attitudes against linguistic borrowing. In fact, there is a widespread conviction among many speakers that Ladino is a "bastard" language, a kind of slang made from the mixture of other languages, without any rules or grammar. Trying to define Ladino, a speaker from Los Angeles offers the following reflection:

Ladino is a little mixed up. As Jews were coming from *all over the world* [originally in English] they took words from every country, and we mixed them with Spanish, and that is why it is called Ladino. [...] So we mix a little Mexican, a little Turkish, Spanish, and French: this is Ladino.

Finally, some features of the Judeo-Spanish found in the United States show the state of decline of the language. Most speakers have a limited command of the language. The dearth of vocabulary or language structures is revealed by the continuing recourse to code switching or by an extreme degree of individual linguistic variation. A large number of linguistic structures subject to variation across individual speakers is symptomatic of a pathological state in any language. Such widespread variation typically stems from the speakers' limited knowledge of correct language usage, which leads to a high degree of linguistic insecurity on their part. In her study of Judeo-Spanish speakers in Los Angeles and New York, Harris (1994: 179-182) found, by means of a lexical elicitation task with a list of 125 words, that participants showed wide individual variation on a large number of items (50 words, or 40%). For example, for the word *buçukes* 'twins', formed from the Turkish word *buçuk* 'half' and the Spanish plural morpheme *-es*, speakers provided several variants (*buçukis*, *buçok*, *buçiki*, *biçuk* and even the Spanish word *medios*). This kind of variation is usually caused

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by a high degree of insecurity among speakers without a solid grasp of the language.

The decline of Judeo-Spanish

The survival of Judeo-Spanish for five centuries in the lands of the Ottoman Empire, far from the territory where the language was originally spoken and surrounded by communities of speakers of non-Romance languages, is an extraordinary phenomenon that has attracted the attention of many linguists. Such persistence in the use and transmission of the language only seems to make sense in response to very particular circumstances. The following are some of the factors that have been adduced to explain the continuity of the language (for a detailed discussion, see Harris 1994: 121-137): the tolerance of the Ottoman authorities towards ethnic minorities, a strongly cohesive community life, the sharp ethnic and religious identity that distinguished Jews from nearby communities, the social prestige of the Sephardim, and their conservative and traditional character.

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Typically, when a language is taken to a new land in which it holds minority status, this language is rarely maintained beyond the third generation. This is what happened to the children and grandchildren of the Sephardim who came to the United States in the early twentieth century. They did not learn the language of their ancestors, and the vast majority of them now have English as their native language. Something similar happened to the Latin American Hispanic population that migrated to the United States, but in this case, the continuous arrival of new immigrants from various Spanish-speaking countries has made it possible for the language to endure (Hudson, Hernández-Chávez y Bills 1995). In the case of Judeo-Spanish, however, there have not been new immigration waves: the communities in their places of origin, Turkey and the Balkans, vanished with the massive emigrations in the early twentieth century, the genocidal extermination during World War II, and the subsequent and final migration of the survivors. The

few remaining Sephardic Turks have mostly migrated to Israel, and in any case they represent a very small group of immigrants, unable to forestall the declining demographics of the Judeo-Spanish speaking population.

As a result of all of these factors, the number of Ladino speakers is progressively diminishing. Harris (2006: 129) estimates that in the United States there are between 5,000 and 10,000 speakers at the most, and many of them are 70 years old or older. Angel (1998: 124) provides data from a survey among third and fourth generation Sephardim; he found that 73.6% declared they do not speak any Judeo-Spanish at all. Furthermore, the level of linguistic competence of the remaining 26.4% is not such that they can use it fluently in all communicative contexts or that they will be able to pass it on to the next generation. Data provided by Harris (1994: 225-226) make this point clear: only 42% of all fluent speakers that were interviewed claimed that their children knew or were able to understand Judeo-Spanish, and none of them had grandchildren who had any knowledge of the language.

Another indicator of language decline is the reduction in contexts of use (Harris 2006: 120-121). Currently, Judeo-Spanish usage in the United States is restricted to very few situations: 1) addressing older speakers for whom Judeo-Spanish is the dominant language (but as this older generation disappears, Judeo-Spanish is no longer needed in this context); 2) the use of Judeo-Spanish as a secret language, when speakers want to have a private conversation; 3) as an expressive resource for jokes, obscenities, stories, proverbs and songs; 4) communicating with Spanish-speaking employees in the workplace (in these situations there is usually a high degree of accommodation to standard Spanish and an avoidance of the use of genuine Judeo-Spanish expressions, which are unintelligible to speakers of other varieties).

The principal factor contributing to the erosion of Judeo-Spanish is assimilation to American culture. In contrast with the current tolerance regarding the expression of different ethnic identities, during most of the twentieth century mass culture,

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the education system and the institutions of the United States promoted cultural homogenization, the elimination of differences, and the adoption of the identity, language and values of the Anglo-American majority (Harris 1994: 201-202). English proficiency was also seen as a means to achieve social and economic success. This attitude was reinforced by the perceived superiority of American culture—insofar as it embodies the positive values of progress and modernity—over that of immigrant communities and their countries of provenance. Therefore, the Sephardim and their descendants sought to integrate fully into the main culture of their new country. A Los Angeles second generation Sephardic Jew declares his strong rejection of his parents' culture and his desire to hide his immigrant background when he was younger:

We would go out shopping and our parents always spoke in an accent and other people's parents spoke proper English. And we were a little embarrassed so we turned against it. We had a prejudice against it. Now that we're older we realize that we should have been preserving it at that time. That was an age different than today: today everybody tends to amplify their ethnicity. In those days everybody tried to assimilate, so as young kids we were always a little embarrassed by our parents speaking Ladino to each other in public.

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In many cases the refusal of young people to learn Judeo-Spanish went hand in hand with their parents' unwillingness to transmit the language to them, as a Sephardic second-generation informant explains:

My parents always spoke to us in English. They spoke to each other in Ladino. My parents were very intent on becoming Americanized. So they spoke English; as soon as they came here they went to school to learn English. We learned Ladino more because my grandmother, some of my older aunts, could speak hardly any English. We learned Ladino from them. Plus we picked it up from when my parents were talking back and forth.

The urgency in integrating into American culture came not only from the political and educational authorities but also from the institutions and associations of the American Sephardim themselves. For example, Samuel Berro, the treasurer of the Sephardic community of Rhodes in Los Angeles, wrote an article in 1933 in *El mensajero*, the newsletter of the synagogue, in which he argued that, in order to be good citizens of the United States, the Sephardim have to make every effort to learn English (Stern 1977: 82). Berro lamented that, unlike the Ashkenazi Jews, Sephardic Jews were not making adequate progress in the mastery of the language. The same type of regrets can be found in the newspaper *La America* (1910-1925) whose editor, Moise Gadol, made continued calls to adopt English. As these publications encouraged the community to learn the language of the host country, Sephardic organizations were offering English classes. However, none of these institutions promoted or valued in any way the maintenance of Judeo-Spanish. The lack of commitment to the maintenance of the language can be measured by the declining usage of Judeo-Spanish for official communications within the community. The foundation charter of the Sephardic Community of Los Angeles, dated 1920, specified that:

Attendants demanded that it should not be forgotten [...] that the official language must be Spanish, as it had been previously voted.

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But this directive must not have been very strong or lasted long, for soon thereafter someone wrote in the margin, in small letters, “and English optional.” The reality is that, as time passed, English was used more and more for official documents and in the community newsletters, until it ended up being used almost exclusively.

Another factor in the decline of the language was the dispersion of the Judeo-Spanish speaking communities because of the economic prosperity of many Sephardim: wealthy individuals, with a full command of the English language and fully integrated into American society, no longer needed the support of the Sephardic immigrant aid associations. This newly gained personal independence,

coupled with the desire to move into more upscale neighborhoods, prompted many Sephardic Jews to leave their tightly knit communities and move to other neighborhoods with no other Sephardim. In New York, for example, as they became wealthy, individuals from the poor Sephardic neighborhood of the Lower East Side moved to Brooklyn or the Bronx, and from there to the more elegant areas of Queens and Forest Hills, and finally to the luxury suburbs of Long Island. In Los Angeles, a similar process occurred: the Sephardic community from Rhodes, initially concentrated south of Exposition Park, started moving west, first to Leimert Park, then to Ladera Heights, and finally its members scattered into the most prosperous areas of metropolitan Los Angeles, such as Beverly Hills, Westwood, Long Beach, or San Fernando Valley. This demographic movement resulted in the loss of all of the predominantly Sephardic neighborhoods where Judeo-Spanish served as the main language of communication.

This gradual dispersal of the Sephardic population and the concomitant decrease in community members went hand in hand from the late fifties onwards with the arrival of a great number of Jews from Arab lands. Many of the latter joined the communities that had been established by Sephardic Jews from the former Ottoman Empire. In most of these synagogues (for example, those in Seattle, Chicago or Los Angeles), Oriental Jews came to represent a substantial part of their membership, if not the majority, which gradually led to the abandonment of Judeo-Spanish as their liturgical language and in their social and cultural events.

The large number of mixed marriages with non-Sephardic Jews was another factor that affected the gradual loss of Judeo-Spanish. Intermarriage implies that both spouses have to make compromises regarding the language and customs within the family. As Ashkenazi Jews are an overwhelming majority among American Jews –it is estimated that only 2.8% of all American Jews are Sephardim (Elazar 1989: 166)— it is not surprising that intermarriage among third generation Sephardim was very common (this contrasts with the first generation of immigrants, who, as we have seen, made every effort to marry other Sephardic Jews, preferably from the same place of origin). Angel (1998:

178) reports that 75% of young Sephardim, from families with Judeo-Spanish as their traditional language, married Ashkenazi Jews. Children of these marriages had English as their home language.

The fact that the Sephardim were slow in founding institutions representing their interests has also been adduced as an adverse factor in language maintenance. Elazar (1989: 165) explains that, unlike the Ashkenazim, who had a long history of group organizing, Sephardic immigrants were never able to create a national organization that would unite their local communities. Finally, in the 1970s, the American Sephardi Federation was created, promoting cultural activities and, particularly, awareness of the Sephardic Jewish heritage among young people. Being a partnership that also includes Oriental or Mizrahi Jews, their activities do not, however, focus on the use of the Judeo-Spanish language.⁵

Finally, it should be mentioned that many Sephardim have negative attitudes toward Judeo-Spanish, a fact that is obviously a challenge to its survival. For example, many believe that Judeo-Spanish is a “bastard,” “corrupt,” “ugly,” or “mixed” language (Harris 2006: 117), as opposed to other “pure” languages like English, French, Hebrew or the “authentic” Spanish spoken in Spain or Latin America (Bar-Lewaw 1968: 2118). Also, many second-generation Judeo-Spanish speakers feel that their command of the language is more limited than their parents’ and grandparents’, and so they feel insecure and embarrassed when using it. Other negative attitudes have derived from the belief that, being a dying language with very few speakers, Judeo-Spanish is irrelevant as a means of communication. For example in the already-mentioned study by Harris (1994: 240), 86% of all respondents believed that Judeo-Spanish was on the verge of extinction. As a consequence of these negative attitudes, speakers feel that it is not worth their effort to transmit a language that has no relevance for social and economic promotion and that, in any case, will disappear very soon.

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⁵ In Israel, since 1997, the *Autoridad Nacional del Ladino* / National Authority for Ladino, organizes activities to promote the language and also encourages language normalization. However, such efforts have also come too late, when the language was already in a very precarious state, and its scope is mainly restricted to Israel.

Identity revival and language recovery initiatives

As we have seen, Judeo-Spanish is clearly in a state of irreversible loss as the few remaining speakers are very old and have limited competence in the language. In addition, there are no community spaces where Judeo-Spanish can be used for daily communication, and there is not a generation of children acquiring Judeo-Spanish as their first language. A renewed interest in Sephardic culture, both among older and younger people, has, however, started to develop (Harris 2006: 131). This renewed appreciation of Sephardic identity is not always focused on the language as it is largely motivated by a desire to counteract the Ashkenazi majority and to provide some visibility to the minority cultures of both Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews.

The main exponent of this cultural renaissance comes in the form of a wide range of activities reflective of the Sephardic world: lectures, cooking demonstrations, concerts, film festivals, etc. These activities are, however, of little use for the revitalization of the language itself since they are not held in Judeo-Spanish and in many cases the participants are not even speakers of Ladino. Besides, the contents of these cultural manifestations tend to merge Hispanic traditions with those of the Oriental or Mizrahi Jews.

In recent decades, college-level courses on Sephardic culture have also gained popularity (some universities offering such courses are Columbia, New York University, Yeshiva University, the University of Judaism (adult section) in Los Angeles, and the University of Miami in Coral Gables, among others). Nevertheless, their approach focuses on the study of Sephardic history and literature and on the analysis of linguistic features rather than in providing language skills to be used in communicative situations.

More relevant for the recovery of the Judeo-Spanish language are other initiatives to promote the use of the language in communicative situations. For instance,

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Daisy Braverman of the University of Pennsylvania and Gloria Ascher of Tufts University, two university professors who are also Judeo-Spanish native speakers, have been teaching language courses for a number of years. Of special relevance are those initiatives that include the Sephardic community. The Stroum Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Washington in Seattle participates in the cultural revitalization of the city, whose Sephardic community, one of the largest and most active in the country, has best preserved the language (Quintana 1997). It is worth mentioning their Seattle Sephardic Treasures Initiative, in which community members are invited to bring documents, newspapers, personal letters, pamphlets, or any other literary artifacts from their family archives. The materials are digitized and made available to the general public via the Internet. Also, Professor David Bunis, from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, taught several courses on Sephardic culture at the University of Washington in Seattle during the academic year 2013-14, including a course on the Judeo-Spanish language.

Another important initiative comes from the work of *ucLADINO*, a group of students at the University of California Los Angeles that organizes cultural activities in Ladino. Of particular relevance are Judeo-Spanish classes in which the development of communication skills is emphasized. These classes are open to students from outside the university and include native speakers of Judeo-Spanish as guest speakers. They also promote activities to recover aspects of the Sephardic culture which seem to be practically lost, such as a *solitreo* writing workshop (*solitreo* is a traditional Sephardic cursive script in Hebrew letters).

The Internet is also an effective tool for language revitalization efforts. Since community dispersion is one of the factors that has affected the continuity and viability of Judeo-Spanish, the creation of virtual communities and meeting places in the digital network facilitates communication between older native speakers and younger students interested in learning the language. For example, the *Ladinokomunita* online forum, active since December 1999 (<http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/Ladinokomunita/info>), is an online forum

open to everyone (registration is required) where users write exclusively in Ladino, using the transcription system of the newspaper *Aki Yerushalayim*. The goals and rules of the forum, as stated by its own founders, are the following:

In this forum, we communicate in our beloved language, so we will forget neither the language nor our Sephardic heritage. All posts must be written in Judeo-Spanish.

As Angel points out (1998: 134), a real revitalization of the Judeo-Spanish language would require the development of good Sephardic schools, or at least that existing schools be willing to teach Judeo-Spanish language and Sephardic culture. Strong cultural institutions such as newspapers, theaters and libraries would also be required. The initiatives for language recovery that we have described above can hardly prevent the irreversible decline of Judeo-Spanish. However, these efforts should be valued as means to bring the language into such prestigious domains as the academy and new digital technologies. Such efforts could serve as well to bring together active speakers with the increasing number of youth who are eager to know more about their Sephardic roots and even to learn the language.

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