

## The Linguistic Rise and Fall of Judeo-Spanish in the United States

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*Ladino, Djudeo-espanyol, Judezmo, Spanyolit, el Kasteyano Muestro*—all these terms refer to the same language variety, one which originated in Medieval Spain during a period of religious coexistence in the Iberian Peninsula. The Iberian Catholics, among other dialects, spoke Castilian; the Iberian Muslims spoke Mozárabe; and the Iberian Jews spoke Ladino. Yet, despite the long history of Ladino and its speakers, there is no doubt that the variety is currently on the path to dialect death, particularly in the United States. As is a common feature among the varieties on the path to extinction, Ladino's endangered status is the result of a lack of prestige, a lack of language standardization, and a lack of language transmission inter-generationally.

### A Brief History

Though hard to believe in light of the presently dying state of Judeo-Spanish, both in the United States and throughout the world, this language variety and its people did once enjoy prestige: During the reign of *Alfonso el Sabio*, many Iberian Jews, the *Sephardim*, were employed to keep the written records due to their skills and abilities. Yakov Malkiel (1950), in a review of a book, notes that the Sephardim were well known as “practitioners of applied scholarship, with special stress on polyglot accomplishments, astrology, surgery, and medicine; as financial experts...in the employ of kings, noblemen, religious orders, and even church dignitaries; and as royal emissaries and negotiators” (p. 331).

In addition to maintaining records for the king, the Sephardim sought to translate their scriptures in their own language. As was the case with other Hebraic blends, the calque form of the language, Ladino, was the result of translating scripture directly from Hebrew into the language of the speakers, Castilian in this case. For this reason, it is no surprise that the language

is characterized by Latinate vocabulary with Hebraic syntax (Sepiha & Nouvelle-Inalco, 2001). However, the vernacular form, Judeo-Spanish, is the focus of the present research.

### **The Flight to Eastern Europe**

The respect held for the Sephardim and their contributions in the Peninsula was not enough to prevent persecution during the Inquisition and their subsequent expulsion from Spain. Thus, as has been true time and again for the Jewish people, they were forced to leave their homes based on religious persecution. As a result of their forced departure, the Sephardim fled to various parts of Europe, establishing themselves among cultures while maintaining their own spoken and written language. Many congregated in Southeastern Europe, just to the south of a large body of the Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews.

Prolonged contact with the Eastern European culture, particularly with that of Turkey, led to the use of the Turkish Rashi script for documenting their language (Koén-Sarano, 2001). Nevertheless, this dependence on Rashi later became problematic when Turkey became Romanized, adopting the Roman alphabet in the 1920s. With Rashi now more or less obsolete, Judeo-Spanish speakers had to face life without a concretely standardized means of written communication. Even if they were to follow suit with Turkey, there were many possibilities of exactly how to transcribe everything.

Today, many European universities are seeking to reestablish Judeo-Spanish, but the professors involved still feel the effects of abandoning Judeo-Spanish such as limited sources for establishing the standard they should teach to their students. Consequentially, they sometimes even produce their own didactic materials and books. For example, Koén-Sarano (2001) has decided to use the orthographic patterns found in the Judeo-Spanish magazine *Aki Yerushalayim* and the accent system implemented in modern-day Spanish. By choosing to adopt Spanish

accentuation over creating one, she recognizes that Spanish, unlike Judeo-Spanish, is a “normalized language,” with a standard established by the *Real Academia Española* (p. 4).

### **Emigrations to America**

In addition to settling in Eastern Europe, some Sephardim dwelled in colonies in the Americas. They came more or less in two waves: one in the 1600s and one in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The earlier Sephardim were generally “Western,” coming from Western Europe, whereas the later arrivals were generally “Levantine,” coming from Eastern Europe (see Angel 1970; Ben-Ur, 2009).

Angel (1970) reports that the newly developing communities of (Western) Sephardim and Ashkenazim in Colonial America cooperated well, even to the point of intermarrying. He mentions that the Ashkenazim looked up to the Sephardim due to their cultural pride, social abilities, and commercial skills. The Ashkenazi’s admiration, according to Angel, is the only reason why the Sephardi synagogue in New York survived so long. Despite this high esteem for the Sephardi culture, the intermarriages eventually resulted in the smaller Sephardi community’s Judeo-Spanish losing ground in the presence of the larger Ashkenazi Yiddish.

Angel (1970) further describes the Jewish situation in America: By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ashkenazim were the predominant culture. Later, the generally less-educated, poorer Levantine Sephardim arrived, speaking Spanish, Greek, and Arabic. In order to ease immigration relief organizations, some Sephardim were scattered throughout the US, and some were even sent to Latin America where they would supposedly be able to adjust better because of language similarities between Spanish and Judeo-Spanish. However, the majority settled in New York.

## **New York**

In New York, the many groups defined by the umbrella term “Sephardim” found themselves in a new land among strangers; even other Jews seemed foreign because they came from different places, spoke different languages, and had developed different practices and cultures. Consequently, they tended to group themselves into what Angel (1970) refers to as “insular” communities. In an effort to unify these groups, Sephardi leaders established the Federation of Oriental Jews in 1912. Unfortunately, it failed shortly thereafter, only to be followed by other failed attempts at unity, such as one designed to create a Sephardi democracy as well as other unions and “communities”. Disunity was also perpetuated by the more affluent, earlier established Sephardim; “the irony was that many of the immigrants who were pure-blooded Spanish-speaking Sephardim were called Orientals, while Shearith Israel members who were Ashkenazi and of mixed blood were considered the true Sephardim” (p. 101).

Though divided culturally, the community as a whole did unite linguistically by publishing Judeo-Spanish newspapers. *La America* lasted 13 years, from 1910-1923, and it was followed by other newspapers. Of them, *La Vara* was the last to circulate, ceasing publication in 1948 (see Angel, 1970; Ben-Ur, 2009). Consequently, Judeo-Spanish lost any literary ground it may have gained, allowing for a more rapid language deterioration over time, until its complete decay into language death.

### ***Steps to Language Death***

O’Grady, Archibald, Aronoff, Rees-Miller (2010) define language death as simply when all the speakers of a language die out. They say that language death is actually quite common, explaining that many languages “are currently at risk, with few, if any, children learning them” (p. 299). Although they merely hint at it, it is true that language survival is dependent on trans-

generational language acquisition. If the children do not learn, the language dies with the parents. “Languages die because their speakers gradually use them less and less in favor of a language that appears to offer greater economic or educational opportunities” (p. 300). This gradual disuse in the face of another, more dominant language is the essence of superstratum influence. Basically, superstratum influence is first realized linguistically in the form of borrowing as a result of another physically close language enjoying political or cultural dominance (O’Grady et al., 2010). For Judeo-Spanish Sephardim in the United States, the superstratal language is English. For those in New York, the high numbers of Spanish speakers has caused Spanish to become a second superstratum. Harris (1983) investigated the specific influences these superstrata have had on the disappearance of Judeo-Spanish.

Despite the potential presence of superstratum influence, languages have open and closed categories to which borrowed words can or cannot be added (see O’Grady et al., 2010). Of these, nouns and verbs are among the most frequently and easily borrowed and morphologically adapted into a language. Though speakers can alter syntax via syntactic calques as occurred with the French *Il n’y a pas de quoi* being transferred to Spanish as *No hay de qué*, it is less frequent than lexical borrowings and adaptations (see Lipski, 2008). Moreover, language transference becomes increasingly more difficult the deeper ones delves into the linguistic fields, moving from easiest to most difficult: Semantics is easiest to add to and adjust (due to lexical gaps), while syntax and morphology are more difficult to affect, and phonetics and phonology are the most impermeable of the categories (O’Grady et al., 2010).

There are a number of motivations for adding words to a language, and O’Grady et al. (2010) point out that “the addition of loss of words often reflects cultural changes that introduce novel objects and notions, and that eliminate outmoded ones” (p. 266). Most often, an addition is

needed due to a lexical gap in the native language that is filled in some respect by an outside language. Such addition can be beneficial in the sense that speakers are better able to express themselves clearly, but if language transferences become so extensive that they affect the deeper linguistic levels, the language becomes endangered. According to Harris (1983), this is exactly what has occurred in the New York variety of Judeo-Spanish; the language is dying out and is being overtaken by Spanish and English influences.

Harris (1983), a specialist in Judeo-Spanish, analyzes the influence of Spanish and English on native Judeo-Spanish speakers in her article *Foreign Interference and Code-Switching in the Contemporary Judeo-Spanish of New York*. She recognizes the fact that Judeo-Spanish is a dialect in decline, on the verge of extinction, which is evident in the overwhelming presence of lexical borrowings. She prefaces the entire article with the comment, "It is in the lexicon that the process of disintegration of a language is seen with greater clarity," (p. 57). In the case of Judeo-Spanish, the lexicon has become so inundated with borrowings that the native-speaker participants often forgot the "proper" term in their language, reverting to English or Spanish to supplement their lexis. She interviewed a number of Sephardim adults who were 40 years old or older, most of whom were immigrants to New York, and she found that lexically, the variety evident in their speech experienced a heavy interference from English and Spanish. Regarding phonologic patterns, the greatest interference came from Spanish, partly because speakers seemed to deem it as close enough to Judeo-Spanish that they hardly noticed when they had used a Spanish replacement. Moreover, the participants considered both Spanish and English to be more prestigious and useful, to the extent that their own native Judeo-Spanish tongue was an impure form of Spanish. Accordingly, the participants' speech displayed a preponderance of lexical borrowings from English and Spanish as well as phonological interference from Spanish.

The resultant code-switching evident in their speech was so extensive and common that none of the speakers demonstrated language selection consistently.

The question of prestige can account for the native Judeo-Spanish speakers' inability to remember words and replace them with borrowings. Even though Judeo-Spanish Sephardim had a religious tie with the Ashkenazi and a linguistic tie of sorts with the Spanish speakers, they appear to have been rejected on both accounts. For example, Ben-Ur (2009) notes that the Levantine Sephardim were frequently looked down upon by the Ashkenazi for not speaking Yiddish, and that there was a distinction between “Jewish Music” and “Sephardic music” (p. 189). Furthermore, Spanish speakers appeared to consider Judeo-Spanish not as its own language, but as a primitive Spanish dialect needing to be “modernized” (p. 170). Contrary to this belief, Judeo-Spanish is a language distinct from (though intelligible with) Spanish. When the Jews were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, they came from all parts of the country, speaking their own dialects. However, their joint exodus necessitated a common language, which they had because their dialects were mutually intelligible and which became solidified as a language through use. Penny (1992) expounds upon this occurrence: Because they were forced to move and sometimes leave friends, the Sephardim needed to be more open linguistically than is typical in order to communicate with those around them in their new environments. After their expulsion from Spain in 1492, the Sephardic Jews' language no doubt experienced more internal change linguistically at a quicker pace so as to enable communication with other Sephardim.

### **Trans-generational Language Transfer**

“The classic pattern of language loss involves three generations: the parents are monolingual, their children become bilingual by adopting a new language, and their children's children grow up monolingual in the new language” (O'Grady et al., 2010, p. 300). It is not

difficult to see that Judeo-Spanish fits this trend of displacement, which bilingual literature sometimes refers to as the “1, 2, 3, and out” model.

Villa and Rivera-Mills (2009) refute this “1, 2, 3, and out” model regarding language displacement, and insist that some adjustments be made. Due to the continual influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants, the authors’ preference to allow for circularity is completely reasonable and justified in the case of Spanish. In the case of Judeo-Spanish, however, it appears that the 1, 2, 3, and out model is a better fit because the Judeo-Spanish Sephardi do not have new immigrants replenishing the language, nor are they reproducing and passing on the language to future generations.

Angel (1970) investigated the Judeo-Spanish Sephardi and found a number of notable contributors to their decline, including trans-generational factors. One such contributor is that they have experienced an increasingly low birth rate, which has resulted in a smaller population speaking Judeo-Spanish. Furthermore, as the remaining Sephardim have become more affluent and Americanized, they have moved out of tight-knit neighborhoods and lost contact with what was once a cultural stronghold. The consequence of these two phenomena has been low language transference across and within generations.

First-generation Sephardim spoke their language regularly because they lived in closely knit communities. They even Hispanicized some English words and used them in conversation. Thus "parkear" meant to park, "drivear" to drive. One of the most peculiar words to enter the language was "abetchar," meaning to bet, which derived from the English slang phrase "I betcha." But when their children began to go to public school, English became the dominant language. For the third and fourth generations it has become, for all practical purposes, the only language. Responses from third- and fourth-

generation Sephardim indicated that 73.6 per cent could not speak Judeo-Spanish at all. Roughly half of the second-generation respondents thought the disappearance of Judeo-Spanish as a spoken language would be a cultural tragedy; the other half felt that its disappearance was inevitable. About 9 per cent did not care whether or not the language survived.

The third generation of American Sephardim marks a transition in Sephardi history. Many still have nostalgic memories of their Judeo-Spanish heritage. But while most can remember hearing parents, grandparents, and older relatives chattering, singing, and cursing in Judeo-Spanish, they hardly speak it well enough—if at all—to transmit the language to the next generation. (Angel 1970, pp.123-124)

As can be seen in Angel's (1970) observations, some members of the Judeo-Spanish community do not even care about the language's survival. He reported his observations 40 years ago, and the trend has no doubt continued and worsened, which corresponds to what Harris (1983) reported 13 years later. At that point, the language had more or less already died out; by now, the New York variety is probably little more than a memory.

In fact, Judeo-Spanish is in such decline in the United States that Zucker (2001) goes so far as to claim that it only has three contemporary uses: "1) for use with the elderly; 2) as a secret language; and 3) for entertainment purposes" (p. 13). The individuals who should be most connected with the language and the most concerned with its preservation no longer find it useful in everyday life and therefore have little to no motivation to maintain it cross-generationally for the sake of future generations.

Further contributing to the current near-extinction of Judeo-Spanish is a lack of transmission to the rising generation. In other words, Judeo-Spanish is mainly preserved in the

speech of the elderly Sephardim, whereas their children are growing up with an understanding of the language, but without the ability to produce it fluently. In contrast with Yiddish, Stein (2006) looks at Judeo-Spanish and notes that, although Yiddish is also a dying breed, it has a firmer hold in the people because more of the younger generation can speak it. Even in the context of Eastern Europe with all its emigration, the Ashkenazi were able to better sustain the language through its young despite the death of the elderly, unlike the Sephardim. She also makes the conjecture that outside of the Ottoman Empire in Eastern Europe, the “lively Ladino culture” in New York was even allowing the language to dwindle, perhaps due to pressure to assimilate with the American ideal of speaking English and advancing from rags to riches, “enough to render impossible the reversal of Ladino’s devolving status” (p. 506). She further attributes Judeo-Spanish’s language death to the lack of books in the language; Yiddish accounted for more than 60 percent of the books in Eastern European Jewish libraries between World War I and World War II (p. 503).

### **Conclusion**

All the history behind Judeo-Spanish as a language and the Sephardim as Jews serves as a preface to its current situation today, helping us to more completely understand its decadence. For example, Jews have maintained their identity via oral and written traditions, but many periods in history have no doubt caused some Jews to be hesitant in making their origins blatantly obvious, such as during both World Wars. If the children do not feel pride in their language as well as their heritage, they will feel less inclined to maintain the more salient features that distinguish them from other people in their community. In this case, the youth likely felt most inclined to assimilate particularly in regards to language. For this reason, the New York-dwelling Sephardim have adopted more English, and Yiddish has come to be more

“standard” as the language of Jewish records than Judeo-Spanish. This almost goes without saying, because Judeo-Spanish does lack a language standard, which some academics are trying to reverse. As prestige dwindles, standardization struggles, and the language speakers die out, it is little wonder that Judeo-Spanish is on the path to language death.

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