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JUDEZMO: THE JEWISH LANGUAGE OF THE OTTOMAN SEPHARDIM

David M. Bunis*

Abstract

Judezmo, the traditional language of the Sephardic Jews of the former Ottoman Empire, is presented as a member of the group of Jewish languages, fusing elements of Ibero-Romance, Greek, Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, French, Italian and other linguistic stocks. In common with speakers of other Jewish languages, Judezmo speakers perceived their language as 'Jewish' and denoted it as such (*Djudezmo*, *Djidyó*). They wrote it in the Hebrew or 'Jewish' alphabet; used an archaizing variety of it (*Laqino*) to translate sacred Hebrew texts literally; and made frequent use in everyday language of words and phrases from Hebrew, and allusions to Hebrew texts, Jewish rituals and other facets of Judaism as a civilization. They preserved words from the pre-languages (Jewish Greek, Jewish Arabic) used by the ancestors of the Judezmo speakers in medieval Iberia, and following the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, incorporated much material from the languages spoken by ethnic groups encountered in the Ottoman Empire. Distinct from both medieval and modern Spanish, Judezmo served as a lingua franca among the Sephardim throughout the ethnically and linguistically diverse regions of the Eastern Mediterranean. A special variety functioned as a secret code among Sephardic merchants. Today, Judezmo is treasured by its speakers as the unique, independent Jewish language of the Mediterranean Sephardim. However, the number of its speakers is constantly decreasing, making Judezmo an endangered language.

Judezmo as a Member of the Jewish Language Group

According to the Midrash (Mekhilta on Exodus 12:6), the Children of Israel enslaved in Ancient Egypt practiced what sociolinguists today would call

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Hebrew language loyalty, maintaining their distinct ethnic tongue in a foreign environment for centuries and taking it with them during the Exodus. The Scroll of Esther informs us that, centuries later, Mordechai the Jew, in a letter sent 'to the Jews according to their writing, and according to their language', commanded his brethren throughout the ancient Persian Empire to stand up to their enemies (8:9). Thousands of years later, living amidst diverse peoples in Eastern Europe, North Africa and the Ottoman Empire, Jews were to continue speaking unique languages of their own, such as Yiddish, Judeo-Arabic and Judezmo (the last, also known by names such as Ladino¹ and Djudeo-Espanyol)² which were still being written 'according to their writing', i.e., in the Hebrew or 'Jewish' alphabet, into the modern era.

The principal stock components of the various Jewish languages of the Diaspora often derive from widely diverging non-Jewish languages, belonging to language groups such as Aramaic, Arabic, Persian, Romance, Germanic and others. However, all Jewish languages tend to share typological features allowing their classification as members of a single, unique language group, each individual member of which diverges from its non-Jewish correlate. The present article will outline some of the distinctively Jewish features of Judezmo – a language which arose among the Jews of medieval Spain through their everyday interaction with speakers of Old Castilian, other varieties of medieval Ibero-Romance, and Iberian Arabic, and flourished following the 1492 Expulsion of the Jews from Spain in what were to become Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania, Israel, Egypt and wherever Jews from those places immigrated.

Perception and Designation of the Language as Jewish

In Christian Spain, the Jews perhaps considered their everyday Romance vernacular to be a variant of the language spoken by their Christian neighbours – a language often referred to by Spanish speakers in Spain and Latin America as *cristiano*, or 'Christian', a reminder of the fact that the Arabs who conquered Spain in 711 spoke Arabic, while the country's Christian majority spoke Spanish. The majority of the Jews expelled from Spain found refuge in the Ottoman Empire; a smaller number settled in North Africa. At first, the Sephardim in the Ottoman regions referred to their language by names such as *espanyol* – alluding to its 'Spanish' origins, *romance* – because of its primarily 'Romance' composition, or *franko* – due to the Western European or 'Frankish' provenance of the Jewish exiles resettled in the East. But by at least the eighteenth century some Sephardim called their group language – now associated by Jews and Gentiles alike specifically with the Empire's Jews

– *djudezmo*, meaning the ‘language of Judaism’ or ‘Jewish language’ (compare Spanish *judaísmo* ‘Judaism’). Neighbouring non-Jews used similar terms for the Jews’ language, such as Turkish *Yahudice*. By the nineteenth century some Ottoman Sephardim were also referring to their language as *djudyó/djidyó*, ‘Jewish’, a parallel to the name *yidish* which arose among the Ashkenazim of Eastern Europe, for the same reason. Among the Sephardim of North Africa, another distinctive name arose: *Haketia*, probably derived from the Arabic root *h-k-y* denoting ‘speech’ (cf. *hakear*, ‘to chat’), but connected by some with *Hakito*, a nickname for (*Iş*)*hak*, or Isaac the Forefather.

Reflections of Jewish Religion and Hebrew Culture

Even before the Sephardim began referring to their Hispano-Jewish vernacular by distinctive names alluding to the Jewishness of its speakers, the language was distinct from varieties of Ibero-Romance used by non-Jews in Iberia. This was because it reflected – in words, expressions, turns of phrase, metaphors and more – the unique beliefs, practices, habits and customs which distinguished the Jews from their neighbours as heirs to what Mordecai Kaplan called ‘Judaism as a civilization’ (Kaplan 1934:1). The earliest languages used by Jews, Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic, and allusions to the religion and culture first formulated in sacred texts in those languages, continued to reverberate in the everyday language of the Jews of Christian Spain, and their descendants in the Ottoman Empire, North Africa and elsewhere.

Transcription of the Language in the Hebrew or ‘Jewish’ Alphabet

The practice of transcribing Jewish languages in the Hebrew alphabet, identified by Jews with their most ancient and sacred texts such as the Bible and Mishnah and thus with Judaism itself, is already illustrated in the Aramaic passages in the Books of Ezra and Daniel. After the Biblical period, Jewish boys were taught the Hebrew alphabet – and often, that alphabet only – as part of their basic education so they could pray and study Torah. Thus it was natural for them to write whatever everyday vernacular they spoke in Hebrew letters as well. When writing for Jewish readers, the Jews of Spain, too, transcribed their everyday language in what came to be called *las letras djudías* (Jewish letters), developing a Hebrew letter writing system that included special characters enabling the transcription of Hispanic sounds absent from Hebrew, such as *gimal* with a diacritic representing the sounds *ch*, *dj*, *j* (as in French *jour*). Jewish manuscripts preserved from medieval Spain reveal several alphabetic styles unique to the Jews of Iberia. Following the Expulsion, the Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa continued

to write the ever-evolving forms of their 'Jewish language' in distinctive forms of the Hebrew alphabet directly descended from the scripts used by the Jews of Spain. Most books in the language were printed in what became known as *letras de Rashí* or Rashi letters; a cursive form of it – today often called *soletreo* – was used for manuscript writing.

Lashón i Ladino: Judezmo in Diglossic Co-existence with the Holy Tongue

In addition to exemplifying the use of the Hebrew alphabet to write Jewish Aramaic, the Book of Ezra illustrates some of the divergent uses of Hebrew as opposed to Aramaic among the Jews of Babylonia – foretelling the state of diglossia in which the Holy Tongue and everyday Jewish languages would co-exist in later centuries.³ In regular conversation (in this case, of course, with non-Jews, in their language rather than in his), Ezra spoke Aramaic. However, when informed by King Artaxerxes I that the Jewish exiles could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, Ezra's spontaneous praises to God were in Hebrew (Ezra 7:27) – the language that, into the present century, Jews would prefer to their everyday diaspora languages in prayers addressed to the Almighty. Among the Sephardim, too, most prayers have traditionally been recited in Hebrew; but some prayers once said in Aramaic, when that language was spoken by much of Jewry, came to be chanted in archaizing, highly literal Judezmo translation, in a variety of the language called *Ladino*, in which the word order of the original texts was preserved with great fidelity. For example, in some Sephardic synagogues, when the Torah ark in the synagogue is opened and the Torah scroll is removed for public reading, the congregation chants a prayer beginning 'Bindicho su nombre del Sinyor del Mundo' (Blessed is the Name of the Master of the World), instead of the Aramaic version of that prayer, 'Berikh shemeh demare 'alma', appearing in the kabbalistic *Book of Zohar*, most of which is attributed to the Spanish rabbi Moshe de León (c. 1240–1305). Most Sephardim did not understand Hebrew, and the rabbis considered it desirable that people understand their prayers, so the custom developed of reading certain texts – for example, the Passover *haggadah*, the *Scroll of Esther*, and *Pirke Avoth* – *en lashón (akódes)* *i en ladino*, i.e., in both Hebrew and Ladino translation. Paralleling the practice in other Jewish-language communities, Sephardic boys learned to *enladinar* or translate portions of the Torah into literal Ladino as part of their religious studies. Women, most of whom never studied Hebrew formally, were encouraged to recite their prayers and benedictions in Ladino.⁴ As among other Jewish groups, the archaizing, literal translations of Hebrew texts used by the Sephardim often diverged significantly from the kind of language used in everyday speech. For example, the Hebrew introduction to *Pirke Avoth* – 'Kol Yisra'el yesh la-hem heleq le-'olam ha-ba' (All Israel has a part in the World to Come) – was traditionally translated into Ladino literally as

‘*Toḏo Yisrael ay a eyos parte a el mundo el vinyén*’ (All Israel there is to them part to the world the coming). In everyday language this would instead be expressed as ‘*Toḏo Yisrael tyene parte al mundo venidero*’.

Distinctive Structural Features of Judezmo Reflecting the Internal and External History of the Speakers

Fusion of Stock Components of Diverse Linguistic Sources

In creating new Diaspora languages, the Jews have always tended to draw their raw material from: Hebrew and Aramaic; earlier Jewish languages – which contained some elements of Hebrew-Aramaic origin; the predominant local language; and sometimes additional languages with whose speakers they interacted. During this melding process, disparate linguistic substances were fused into unified, structurally unique new entities. In the case of Judezmo before the Expulsion we are speaking of elements of Hebrew-Aramaic, Jewish Greek, and Jewish Arabic origin, and especially elements reflecting Castilian and other Romance varieties spoken in medieval Spain.

Following the Expulsion, the older fusion was enriched through borrowings from the languages encountered in the Ottoman Empire, and, especially from the nineteenth century, through elements from Western European colonialist languages such as French, Italian, German, and Castilian. The result is that, in modern Judezmo of the former Ottoman regions, it is not unusual to hear a sentence such as ‘*El haham estambolí se akaviḏa de meldar a lo manko un jurnal evropeo kádal día de alhad*’ (An Istanbul rabbi takes care to read at least one European newspaper every Sunday) – with ‘haham’ derived from Hebrew, ‘estambolí’ from Turkish, ‘se akaviḏa’ perhaps from Portuguese, ‘meldar’ from Jewish Greek, ‘a lo manko’ from Italian, ‘jurnal’ from French, ‘kádal día’ and ‘evropeo’ from Castilian and ‘alhad’ from Jewish Arabic. This kind of linguistic fusion, so characteristic of the Jewish languages of the Diaspora, seems already to be alluded to in the biblical *Book of Nehemiah* where it is stated that, after the Babylonian exile, the children of Israelites in Jerusalem ‘who had married wives of Ashdod, of ‘Ammon, and of Moa’v; [...] spoke half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak [correctly] in the language of Yehuda, but according to the language of various other peoples’ (13: 23–24).

Hebrew-Aramaic Component

As the earliest Jewish language, and the language of world Jewry’s most revered texts, in which the fundamental tenets and practices of Judaism were

formulated, Hebrew naturally provided the oldest terminology for most of the rituals, ritual objects, and concepts basic to the practice of Judaism and to the native discourse concerning it.

From the earliest period in Jewish history in which Jews began to make the transition from Ancient Hebrew to adaptations of non-Jewish languages, much of this Hebrew, and now also Aramaic, terminology was retained as a kind of substratum in the nascent Jewish languages. With the evolution of the rabbinical tradition, some Hebrew-Aramaic terms replaced older ones, e.g., Mishnaic *tefillin* – reflected in Judezmo as *tefilin* or *tefilim* – replacing Biblical *totafot* (phylacteries).

As one Jewish language was replaced by another, at least some of the Hebrew-origin lexicon was retained in the new language. Some such elements might disappear later on, but additional ones might enter, from literary or oral sources. Some forms and terms were characteristic of certain communities, reflecting their unique Hebrew-Aramaic traditions, as opposed to those of other communities. For instance, Judezmo speakers refer to ‘danger’ as *sekaná*, while Yiddish speakers use *sakone/sakune* (H. סכנה). Some Judezmo speakers refer to coins ironically as *hatahoth/hatahás* (from Hebrew *hatikhot* חתיכות, ‘pieces [of money]’), while some Yiddish speakers use *mezumen* (H. מזומן). Judezmo speakers use the exclamation *Barminán!/-m!* (Aramaic בר מן ‘outside of us’) when mentioning something unpleasant or threatening, while Yiddish speakers prefer *Loy oleynu!* (H. לא עלינו! ‘not upon us!’).

Hebrew was an especially important source of terms denoting concepts and objects unique to Judaism. For example, Saturday, as the Jewish Sabbath, is sanctified and celebrated among Jews throughout the world in similar ways, such as refraining from work, reciting certain prayers, performing certain rituals, eating special foods, and so on. With respect to both its appointed day and to the modes of its observance, the Jewish ‘Sabbath’ or ‘Saturday’ is distinct from the ‘Sabbath’ or ‘Saturday’ of other religious groups such as Christians and Muslims. Just as the senses conveyed by the terms for that day do not entirely overlap in the consciousness of Jews, Christians and Muslims, it was natural that, in all Jewish languages, the Hebrew word *shabbat* – in diverse phonological variants, such as *shabbat* in Jewish Arabic, *shabes* in Yiddish, *sabá* in popular Judezmo – be preserved to denote this Biblical concept, while the corresponding term in the parallel non-Jewish language, e.g., Spanish *sábado* (also ultimately from Hebrew, through Greek), was rejected. Judezmo *sabá* very likely constitutes a variant of a Hebrew word preserved from Biblical times in all the Jewish languages spoken by the ancestors of the Judezmo speakers, while at the same time illustrating the selectivity used by speakers of Judezmo and other Jewish languages in borrowing some words from their non-Jewish neighbours, but not others.

Significant activities in the life of an observant Jew are often expressed by elements of Hebrew origin. For example, preparing vessels for Passover use is known as *kasherar* (from Hebrew *kasher* and Spanish verb-forming *-ar*), and removing leavened food from the house before that holiday is called *des.hamesar* (from Spanish negative *des-* and Hebrew *hames* ‘leavening’); inspecting a slaughtered animal for suitability for Jewish consumption is called *badkar* (from Hebrew *b-d-q* ‘to inspect’); giving a learned lecture on a religious subject is called *darsar* (from Hebrew *d-r-sh* ‘sermonize’); and excommunicating a treacherous person is known as *enheremar* (from Spanish *en-* ‘into’ and Hebrew *herem* ‘excommunication’). In addition to such synthetic verbs, constructed of Hebrew bases and Hispanic affixes, Judezmo speakers also use analytic verbs composed of the Hispanic-origin auxiliary *ser* ‘to be’ and an invariant Hebrew verbal participle, e.g., *ser zohé* ‘to be worthy’ and *ser niftar* ‘to pass away, die’ (H. זוכה, נפטר), as well as verbal idioms such as (*f*)*azer tefilá* (literally, ‘to do prayer’) ‘to pray’, *dar get* (literally, ‘to give a divorce contract’) ‘to divorce’ (H. תפילה, גט).

Because of the centrality of Hebrew in the religious and cultural life of traditional Jews, and since religion and culture were in fact the dominant factors setting the tone for all facets of traditional Jewish life before the modern era, the role of Hebrew in traditional Jewish languages extends way beyond what we might think of today as strictly religious or cultural terminology. For example, taboo concepts are often denoted by Hebraisms; e.g., a cemetery is traditionally referred to as a *bedahaim/bedahé* (literally, ‘house of the living’, Hebrew ביה חיים), and a toilet, as a *bedakavó* (‘house of honour’, Hebrew בית הכבוד). Through their secularization and broadening of meaning, terms originally referring to aspects of religious life have acquired new, metaphoric senses. For instance, the three steps backward taken upon the recitation of the words ‘*Ose shalom bimromav*’ at the end of the prayer known as the *Amidah* (Silent Devotion) are the source of the expression (*f*)*azer osé shalom* (literally, ‘to do ‘*Ose shalom*’), meaning ‘to leave, scam’. The refusal of the Purim hero, Mordechai, to bow down in acknowledgement of the approach of the evil Haman yielded the expression (*f*)*azerse del Modroháy* ‘to pretend not to notice’ (literally, ‘to make oneself Mordechai’). The long portion from *Jeremiah* (8:13–23; 9:1–23) read during the 9th of *Av* fast day (*Tisha Be-‘av*) gave rise to the simile *largo como la aftará de tesabeá* (‘long as the *haftarah* read on the 9th of *Av*’), denoting ‘something tediously long’. The Hebrew component of Judezmo includes adverbs such as *afilú* ‘even’, prepositions such as *kefi* ‘according to’, and even abstract elements of Hebrew grammar such as inflectional endings and suffixes, attached to stems of non-Hebrew origin, such as masculine plural *-im* (ים-) in the jocular plural *ladronim* ‘thieves’ (Spanish *ladrón* ‘thief’), feminine plural *-oth* (ות-) in the

plural *kasaboth* ‘towns’ (Turkish *kasaba* ‘town’), and the abstract suffix *-uth* in *xaraganuth* ‘laziness’ (Spanish *haragán* ‘lazy’).

Legacy of the Pre-Languages (Substrata)

Following the decline of Hebrew as the primary spoken language of the Jews, the linguistic evolution of the Jews into the modern era may be seen as a series of transitions from one Jewish language to another. When one language was abandoned for another as part of the strategy of survival in new places or as a result of shifting social or political conditions, the old language generally did not disappear entirely, but left traces as a substratum in the nascent Jewish language. For example, as Jewish speakers of Greek or perhaps Greek-influenced Latin began adopting Ibero-Romance during their early settlement in Spain, they preserved the Greek-origin verb *meldar* in the sense of ‘to contemplate, study, read Jewish texts’. When much of Spain fell under Muslim domination, the Jews there adopted distinctive varieties of Arabic. When the Christians reconquered Spain and Romance again became pre-eminent in the Iberian peninsula, Jews returned to Ibero-Romance, but felt uncomfortable using certain Hispanic words. One such word was *domingo*, used by Christians to denote ‘Sunday’. Since the Jews understood that it reflected Latin *dominicus*, designating Sunday as the day dedicated to the ‘Lord’ as perceived by Christians, they continued to denote the day by means of the religiously neutral Arabic-origin word *alhad* ‘first day’ which had been used by earlier generations of Jewish Arabic speakers in Islamic Spain.

Superstrata

As is true of many languages, Jewish languages have often been open to influence from the languages of neighbouring peoples, as well as regional or international languages of prestige and commercial importance. Such influences have led to the creation of significant superstrata in some of the languages. For instance, prolonged, intensive contact with speakers of Ottoman Turkish in the Ottoman Empire resulted in the borrowing of thousands of lexical items. Some items were borrowed in ready-made form, e.g., *konushmá* ‘talk, chat’ (Tk. *konuşma*); others resulted from Turkish stems combined with Hispanic-origin derivational affixes, e.g., *konushear* ‘to talk, chat’ (Sp. *-ear*), or Turkish suffixes added to stems of non-Turkish origin, e.g., *palavradjí* ‘braggart’ (adapting the Turkish-origin agent-like suffix *-ci*), *purinlik* ‘Purim gift’ (with the suffix *-lik*, meaning ‘something intended for’). Loan translations were also created based on Turkish idioms, e.g., *salir en medyo* (literally, ‘to go out into the middle’) meaning ‘to be revealed, come to light’, based on Turkish *meydana çıkmak* (‘to go out into the open square’, i.e., ‘be revealed’). On the other hand, contact with Yiddish speakers and their

Hebrew texts led to borrowing of terms such as *yortsayt* ‘memorial’ (becoming *yarsáy*), and more recently, *meshige* ‘crazy’.

Especially from the nineteenth century, interaction with speakers of European languages enjoying prestige in the Ottoman Empire such as Italian and French led to considerable borrowing into Judezmo from those languages as well. An acknowledgment of thanks, for example, is often expressed through French-origin *mersí* (Fr. *merci*); while the verb denoting the giving of thanks tends to be Italian-origin *rengrasyar* (It. *ringraziare*). Numerous loan translations of French and Italian idioms also became incorporated into Judezmo, e.g., *ser del avizo* (to be of the opinion), reminiscent of French *être d’avis*.

Judezmo as an Independent Linguistic System

From the late fifteenth century, the amalgamation of linguistic elements derived from Castilian, Portuguese, Aragonese, Leonese, Catalan and other Ibero-Romance varieties brought to the Ottoman Empire by the Jewish exiles from Iberia, along with internal trends and innovations arising among Judezmo speakers and the speakers’ exposure to multiple external influences, gave birth to a *koiné* that became the basis of Judezmo as used throughout the regions of the former Ottoman Empire. Ottoman Judezmo developed into a single, independent, self-contained linguistic system characterized by some phonological, morphological, lexical and semantic features shared by all of its regional varieties, in opposition to the complex linguistic system constituted by the diverse dialects of Spanish in all of its regional diversity.

When compared with Modern Castilian, Judezmo sometimes appears linguistically conservative. Examples may be seen in the preservation by Judezmo speakers of medieval Hispanic phonemes such as *b* in *abasteser*, ‘to provide’, vs. *v* in *avansar*, ‘to save’ (in modern Spanish *b* and *v* are not distinctive sounds), *sh* in *abashar*, ‘to descend’, vs. *j* in *abajur*, ‘lampshade’ (the medieval Spanish sounds *sh* and *j* correspond in modern Spanish to *jota*, similar to the German sound *ch*), and lexemes still conveying their medieval senses, such as *topar* meaning ‘to find’ and *fragwar* meaning ‘to build’, vs. modern Spanish *toparse*, ‘to bump into’, and *fraguar*, ‘to forge, plot’.

On the other hand, Judezmo, like other Jewish languages, has an innovative side. For instance, in all modern varieties, the singular and plural forms of the preterite indicative tense of *tapar* (to cover), are *tapí* (I covered) and *tapimos/-imus* (we covered), and the second person plural form is *tapátesh/-átish* (you [pl.] covered); the lexeme used to denote ‘God’ is *el Dyo*, and ‘to read’, *meldar* (or phonological variants); and the primary meaning of *la Ley* is ‘the Torah’. Spanish instead uses *tapé*, *tapamos*, *tapasteis*; *Dios*, *leer*. *La ley* simply means ‘the law’.

This is not to imply that Judezmo was identical in all of the regions in which it was spoken. Like Yiddish, before the Second World War Judezmo was characterized by its own regional dialectology, independent of the dialect geography of its principal stock language, Spanish. Many of its features are preserved among today's speakers. For example, among Sephardim in Istanbul 'to be late' is *tadrar*; in Bucharest, *tadrar*; and in Sarajevo, *tardar* – the differences between the forms bearing no direct connection to the inner workings of Spanish dialectology (Spanish only knows *tardar[se]*). The differences instead illustrate certain phonological tendencies specific to Judezmo speakers in various regions of the language's speech territory, such as a resistance to the word-medial consonant cluster *-rd-* and its replacement by metathesized *-dr-*, and the substitution of the dental fricative *d* (*th*) by occlusive *d*, probably as a result of interaction with speakers of Balkan languages lacking the sound *d*.

Like speakers of other languages, Judezmo speakers have attempted to institute a measure of standardization in spelling, pronunciation and grammar. For example, in traditional Hebrew letter spelling, words beginning with an initial *w* had to be preceded by a *gimal*, e.g., 'Washington' was written גואשינגטון, as if pronounced *Gwashington*. Public chanters of Judezmo translations of sacred texts such as the Bible tried to pronounce nonstressed front and back vowels as in the large communities of Turkey and Greece rather than as in the smaller ones of Yugoslavia and Romania; e.g., nonstressed *de* (from), *en* (in), *ke* (that), instead of *di*, *in*, *ki*. In light of the use in major population centres such as Istanbul, Salonika and Izmir of metathesized *-dr-* corresponding to Castilian *-rd-*, as already mentioned, speakers from smaller communities such as Sarajevo have been known to express the opinion that the metathesized *-dr-* form is more 'correct' than their native non-metathesized *-rd-*, although the latter is in fact identical with Castilian.

Judezmo as a lingua franca

Judezmo speakers were dispersed over a large territory, living amongst peoples speaking diverse languages. Sephardic merchants travelling from one part of the Ottoman Empire to another did not always know the language(s) of the local non-Jews but so long as they made contact with other Sephardim they could easily make their needs known, since Judezmo served as a kind of Sephardic international language. Before the modern era, in Ottoman cities such as Jerusalem and Hebron, Judezmo – the language of the principal Jewish group recognized by the Ottoman government – also functioned as an intercommunal language among speakers of varied Jewish languages such as Yiddish, Judeo-Arabic, and Jewish Neo-Aramaic.

Judezmo as a Secret Code

In addition to their use of everyday spoken Judezmo, as well as of various literary and social-level styles of the language (rabbinical Judezmo, westernized Judezmo, tradesmen's jargons), some Judezmo speakers – especially merchants – used special varieties of the language as a secret jargon incomprehensible to non-Jews, even those who, through constant interaction with Jews, had some familiarity with their everyday language. The key elements in these jargons were words of Hebrew and Aramaic origin ordinarily absent from everyday speech. For example, to warn a fellow Jew against revealing a business secret in the presence of a Gentile who could understand Judezmo, a merchant in Salonika might say '*No diburees, ke yodéah lashón!*' (Don't speak, because he knows the language!); *diburear* 'to speak', derived from Hebrew *dibbur* (דיבור) 'speech', and *yodéah* (יודע) 'knows', are ordinarily not used in everyday Judezmo. To caution against a potential shoplifter one might say '*Los enáim en las yadáim!*' (Your eyes on his hands!) – the Hebrew-origin words for 'eyes' and 'hands' here replacing the everyday Hispanic-origin words, *ojos* and *manos*. When discussing prices in front of non-Jewish customers, Jewish shopkeepers and their employees sometimes used Hebrew rather than the more usual Hispanic-origin numbers.

Speakers' Attitudes toward Judezmo

In a manner not unlike the attitudes of speakers of other Jewish languages toward their native tongues, the attitudes of Judezmo speakers toward their language and its distinctive characteristics and divergences from Spanish have varied from period to period, and among the various Sephardic subgroups. A negative attitude toward certain Jewish-language features known among the Jews of medieval Spain and maintained among their descendants in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa was expressed by crypto-Jews of Spain, or their descendants, who returned to Judaism in Western Europe after having assimilated to their Christian Spanish neighbours linguistically and, ostensibly, in religion.

When publishing for fellow New Jews Roman-letter Ladino-like Bible translations, such as the *Ferrara Bible* of 1553, in the traditional archaizing, calque style imitating Hebrew syntax, the former crypto-Jews felt compelled to apologize. Although that style was always considered an integral part of Judaic tradition by Sephardim who insisted on maintaining their Judaism, the former *conversos* viewed it as a 'barbarous and strange language, very different from the polite one used [among Christians and former crypto-Jews]

in our times' (Atias and Usque 1553:[ii]a), accusing it of being a 'language derived from two languages' ("לשון משתי לשונות") (Lombroso 1639:11b) – i.e., a characteristic Jewish fusion language – as opposed to what they called their own 'pure' or 'real' Spanish.

A more positive attitude to Judezmo and its distinctive characteristics is to be found in the writings of the Judezmo speakers themselves, most of them descendants of Jews who had been forced to leave Spain with the Expulsion because of their refusal to convert. For example, in his preface to the Judezmo rabbinical tract *Sefer me-'am lo'ez* on *Exodus* (Constantinople 1733), exhibiting extensive Hebrew-Aramaic and Turkish components, Refa'el Yişhaq Yerushalmi nevertheless described the language of its author, Ya'aqov Khulí (c. 1685–1732), as 'pure, very broad La'az [i.e., Judezmo]' (בלע"ז צה רח"ב) (Khulí 1733:2a). 'Avraham ben Yişhaq 'Asa, a prolific writer and translator in eighteenth-century Constantinople who wrote in a similar style, remarked that his own writings were 'in clean, clear La'az' ("בלשון לעז נקי ובר") ('Asa 1749:2a). The Sarajevo-born *maskil* David ben Moshe 'Atias, who settled in Livorno and in 1778 published a Judezmo educational manual there entitled *La gwerta de oro* (The Golden Garden), noted that he purposely wrote his book – rich in popular Hebraisms, Balkanisms, and other features typical of popular Judezmo – 'in accord with the true taste of Levantine [Sephardic] speech, so that his readers would not get bored' ('Atias 1778:2a). On page 5 of the booklet *Las eleksyones para el Medjlis Umumi* (Elections for the Ottoman General Council of the Jewish Community), published by the Chief Rabbinate in Constantinople in 1911, it was stipulated that: 'Son aptos a ser kandidatos [...] los mas notavles del lugar [...] ke saven avlar i eskvirir el djudesmo' (Worthy of consideration as candidates [...] are the most notable members of the community, [...] who know how to speak and write Judezmo).

On the eve of the First World War a Judezmo journalist in Salonika complained against fellow Jews in his city who printed their names on their prayer-shawl bags in the Latin alphabet: 'It is not proper to write their names in European fashion, when we have our own letters, our Jewish language'.⁵ Protesting against the suggestion that Judezmo be brought closer to Castilian, Hizqiyya Franko, editor of the periodical *El komersyal* of Izmir (1907–10), wrote of his native tongue: 'Judeo-Spanish is the barometer of our intellect, the mirror of our civilization. I do not believe anyone can accuse of infidelity this interpreter who says who we are, this artist who paints our portrait, perhaps quite admirably[...] I consider the movement to Castilianize our language a sterile effort'.⁶ On the eve of the Second World War a journalist in Salonika stated bluntly: 'Halvá ke koman los ke dizen ke mwestra lingwa es prove!' (Let those who say our language is poor eat garbage!).⁷

Resisting the temptation to accept the non-Jewish correlate of a Jewish language as the normative model for their own tongue, some Judezmo speakers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries even began to view Castilian as a kind of anti-model, giving rise to the warning that ‘On the day even a single Judeo-Spanish author writes a single word in Latin characters, Judeo-Spanish will be dead and buried’.⁸

For the past eighty years or so, Judezmo has been written mostly in the Latin alphabet – and this has not caused the language to die. During the past century, however, Judezmo has experienced a serious decline, the result of more language-threatening factors than a shift in alphabet. These include pressure to assimilate to the dominant language and culture in the nation-states carved out of the Ottoman Empire, as well as in centres of immigration in Europe, the Americas and Israel, and the ravages of the Second World War which destroyed the Judezmo-speaking communities of Greece and Yugoslavia. The future of Judezmo does not appear to be very bright. And yet, its surviving speakers insist on maintaining a distinctive linguistic identity – using the letter *k* instead of Spanish *c* in their unique romanization, calling ‘God’ *El Dyo*, ‘Saturday’ *shabá* and ‘Sunday’ *alhaḡ*, referring to themselves as *Estambolis*, *Selaniklis*, and so on. Let us hope these traditions will survive among future generations, adding their precious threads to the rich weave of Jewish culture.

Notes

1. In Judezmo the term *laḡino* generally denotes ‘Judezmo’ or ‘meaning, explanation (of a word)’ in the specific context of translation, especially literal translation from Hebrew in archaizing Judezmo style, or ‘Judezmo in opposition to Hebrew’ (cf. Nehama 1977: 321). However, since that word appears on the title pages of many books translated into Judezmo from Hebrew – e.g., ‘Sefer me-‘am lo‘ez es deklaró en laḡino’ (The Book *From A People of Strange Language* is a commentary [on the Hebrew *Book of Exodus*] in Judezmo) [Khuli 1733:[i]a] – in recent years the word has been understood by some, unfamiliar with the language, to denote Judezmo in general. Thus Ladino has gained currency as a popular name used to designate Judezmo by speakers of other languages, and is sometimes used in that sense even by scholars.
2. The values of the symbols used in this article to transcribe Judezmo: *d* = *d* in English *doll*; *ḡ* = *th* in English *bother*; *dj* = *dg* in English *bridge*; *g* = *g* in English *gone*; *ḡ* = *g* in Greek *gamma*; *h* = *ch* in German *ach*; *j* = *g* in English *rouge*; *r* = *r* in Spanish *para*; *rr* = *rr* in Spanish *parra*; *s.h* = English *s* followed by German *ch*; *th* = *th* in English *both*. The other symbols are pronounced roughly as in English. Unless otherwise indicated by an accent mark, the stress in words ending in a vowel or *n* or *s* is on the next to last syllable, and in words ending in other consonants, on the last syllable.
3. *Diglossia*: the coexistence of two languages or dialects among a certain population, one of which is sometimes regarded to be more prestigious than the other.

4. For a detailed examination of prayer books written in Ladino, specifically for women, see the article by Ora Schwarzwald in *European Judaism* 43(2): 37–51.
5. *El kirbač* (The Whip) 1:29 (Salonika 1910), p. 2.
6. *El Tyempo* (Time) 51:53 (Istanbul 1923), p. 69.
7. *Aksyón* 10:2847 (Salonika 1938), p. 3.
8. Samuel Levy, *La epoka* (The Epoch) 28:1367 (Salonika 1902), p. 9.

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