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## The language shift origins of Judeo-Spanish and its impact on Sephardic self-perception

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This paper proposes that the Judeo-Spanish language of the Sephardic Jews of eastern Mediterranean lands involved at its origin a *language shift* that occurred after emigration from the Iberian Peninsula, in non-Hispanic environment; that a form of Castilian was adopted as a deliberate act and rapidly in the early period of exile, to change a prior situation of Romance language pluralism within and among the transplanted Jewish communities.

Judeo-Spanish came into existence in the sixteenth century, among the exiled Jews who had lived in the Iberian Peninsula for centuries, but were forced to leave the united kingdoms of Castile and Aragon and later Portugal and Navarre as well. Many of them settled in the eastern Adriatic, the Balkan interior, Macedonia and northern Greece, the cities and islands of the Aegean, Constantinople, and the Levant coast. These lands were then mostly under Ottoman rule, or came under it shortly afterwards. Throughout the sixteenth century, the number of Iberian transplants in the eastern Mediterranean increased by inflows of migrants from subsequent generations of exiles from northern Italian cities, Portugal, northern Africa, and the Netherlands, intermediate refuges where they had settled, sometimes after conversion to Christianity, before return to Judaism under Ottoman rule. From mid-nineteenth century until the end of the twentieth, Judeo-Spanish language had a significant print life, in periodicals, religious and homiletic books, and novel and story books or pamphlets. At present, it is a seriously endangered language, as it is no longer transmitted to new generations. Nonetheless, it found a new animated life on the internet, by the hand of enthusiastic amateurs—mostly second language learners, and in flourishing academic programs in the USA and Israel, and in some lexicographic and historical work performed in Turkey and the Balkans (Şaul and Hualde 2017).

Historical linguistics has recently been impacted by sociolinguistics, which transformed how the development of Romance languages in Iberia and the evolution of Castilian Spanish are understood. Likewise, a new light on the origins of Balkan and Levantine Jewish Spanish is thrown by greater awareness of the presence of well-defined Romance varieties and contact between their speakers under circumstances of long-distance mobility, the prestige and power differences between different registers and local dialects.

The linguistic situation in the Iberian Peninsula at the time when the Jewish exiles left, is now understood to be more complicated than the linear progression models of earlier times. During the fifteenth century different Romance languages existed side by side in Castile and Aragon, although knowledge of the Castilian variety of Romance was also spreading as a second

language and becoming a standard for communication between different Romance speech communities. A phase of Romance bilingualism or multilingualism preceded language shift to Castilian (Minervini 2006, 19; Quintana 2010). At the same time, wide dialectal differences existed between different groups of Castilian speakers (Penny 1992, 127). The Jews of Iberia shared with non-Jewish neighbors and countrymen the Romance languages of their locality (Minervini 2006, 18). However, they also participated in the surge of varieties of Castilian as translocal super language. Accordingly, the Jewish transplants of late fifteenth century spoke different Romance languages, and those who spoke Castilian spoke different dialects of it. There was also widespread Romance multilingualism among them, and most to the point, the ability to understand and with various degrees of competence to speak or write Castilian; when their place of settlement had a new dominant variety of Romance, as in Portugal, Italy or Romania, that new language was added to the community's linguistic repertoire of Romances.

No reason exists to assume that the majority of the Iberian Jewish exiles in the Levant were originally native speakers of the Castilian-Spanish variety of Romance. This supposition has been taken for granted in much earlier literature, but is unwarranted. The little actual data that exists suggests the opposite. Révah reported an Ottoman census according to which in the sixteenth century the *Lisbon* synagogue consisted of 200 households, *Kal de Evora* of 96, *Kal de los Katalanes* of 218, *Kal de Aragon* of 315, *Kal Zaragoza* of 42, and in addition there were synagogues with names of Italian cities (quoted in Quintana 2014, 68, note 4). It can be conjectured that Castilian Jews were present in all these synagogues, because by that time congregation boundaries had started to blur, but this configuration still suggests strongly that native Castilian speakers were a minority among the exiles. The mobility of Iberian Jewish exiles throughout the sixteenth century involved mixing of speakers of different Iberian Romances as well as encounter with new romance languages, creating a greater degree of Romance bilingualism. This linguistic multiplicity led first to a developing use of Castilian Spanish for communication between communities that had otherwise limited mutual understanding; eventually, for intracommunity communication as well, the other Romance languages were replaced by Castilian. Castilian also became the language of written composition. A form of Castilian took hold among Sephardic communities to become general, a *koine*, later to be dubbed Judeo-Spanish. This historical development is generally conceived as slow and gradual, a pattern like epidemiological diffusion by competition between rival dialects or languages, that is not as the result of purposeful acts or thought-out decisions.

I want to suggest that, on the contrary, the Iberian Jewish exiles' linguistic progression toward Castilian after they left the Peninsula was less drawn out and more deliberate. For the majority of the Sephardic exiles, Castilian was not a heritage that they brought from preexilic Iberian times and passively passed on, but a language they actively shifted to after being transplanted to other places in the Mediterranean, as part of their adjustment to resettlement in new lands. The children of the Iberian Jewish exiles were deliberately trained to speak, not the parental generation's Romance variety, but a Castilian dialect. This new Castilian also became the choice

for use in writing and community affairs. What happened was not only levelling, but *language shift*. What made this shift difficult to conceptualize and detect is that it occurred in a situation that was different from the circumstances this term typically suggests today: that is, speakers of a minority language abandoning it, to adopt the official language of the state or the language of the politically dominant majority that surrounds them (Ostler 2011). We will return to this issue.

That the shift to Castilian within a Romance multiplicity involved deliberation and preference, or that it occurred at all, was also obscured because of conceptual matters internal to the Jewish world: a premodern attitude toward language and language boundaries. In the learned Jewish understanding, all Romance languages were lumped together with no distinction under the Hebrew term *la'az*. According to Aslanov, this word set Romance languages in opposition to Germanic and Slavic languages (2002, 12-13). For Iberian Jews, as for the Jews of Provence and of Italy, *la'az* was Latin and the Romance languages into which it evolved. In time, however, in the Balkans *la'az* came to mean the vernaculars spoken by the Jews versus the Sacred Language, *Lashon ha-kodesh*. Eventually the meaning of *la'az* was redirected to liturgical translations into any Romance vernacular. In medieval Jewish vernacular texts, the Biblical verb *lo'ez* (Ps. 114:1), designating 'translate', was rendered with cognates derived from *Latin* or *Romance*: *latinar* in Italy; *ladinar* in Provence, *ladinar* or *aromançar* in Iberia, *aromançer* in northern France (Banitt 1972).

The concept of *hieroglossia* helps understand this lack of interest in registering differences between the varieties of vernacular. The term was proposed by the French specialist of Buddhism, Jean-Noël Robert (2006). A language that vehicles religious learning and faith instruments, perceived to be a central and founding element by the followers of the faith. This is often a "dead language," learned after arduous apprenticeship only by a minority of religious specialists and literati. In comparison to it, the population considers the spontaneous and live tongues that they speak (*laoglosses*) as derivative, secondary, and dependent on the *hierogloss*. This feeling is not justified historically or linguistically, as scholars reconstruct it, but it is experienced powerfully as an ontological and theological reality. Naturally the hierogloss for Iberian Jews, before and after the expulsion, was the language of the sacred books, *lashon ha-kodesh*, the sacred tongue, biblical Hebrew –and also Aramaic, the language of later sacred texts and some liturgy, which was merged for that reason with Biblical Hebrew. Hebrew, and its alphabet, became "a symbolic fortress of identity" against vernacular languages, even when the latter also were used to create written works.

It is worth noting that a parallel exists in the other non-Christian faith community of Iberia, Islam. Its *hierogloss* was classical Arabic. The Muslims (*Mudejars* —who were forced to convert to Catholicism in 1502 in Castile and in 1526 in Aragon, henceforth known as *Moriscos*) created written works in Romance, written generally in Arabic script (until their final expulsion in 1609). These texts are known as *aljamía*, from *al 'ajamiyya* Ar. foreign/non-Arabic language. The Romance was generally Castilian. This development is part of a wider phenomenon in a vast

expanse of land stretching from Persia to the shores of the Atlantic, the commitment to writing of local vernaculars using the Arabic script from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The word '*ajamiyya*' is the equivalent in Arabic of *la'az* in Hebrew and of *ladino* in Romance languages. A testament to the powers for phantasmagoria of the human imagination, vernacular speech was conceived as "foreign". Like *la'az* and *ladino*, *ajamiyya* underwent semantic narrowing, to 'writing' and 'written text'.

Despite the obscuring effect of the sharp contrast between sacred language and vernacular, language shift is adumbrated in the beginnings of Judeo-Spanish, by sixteenth century practices recorded in a widely dispersed area of Iberian Jewish diaspora. Inquisition records indicate that in Pisa it was common practice for Jews of Iberian origin to hire tutors to teach their children to read and write Castilian in Hebrew characters (Ray 2013, 138). The Portuguese Jewish community in Ancona spoke Castilian, and in Bucharest, too, Portuguese and Catalan Jews abandoned their language and adopted Castilian (further sources in Şaul and Hualde 2017, 14). Quintana (2002) posits that Castilian first imposed itself in the Mediterranean diaspora as the language for communication between communities originating in different Iberian localities, while internally the communities continued to use their particular non-Castilian language or dialect. Deliberate educational strategies suggest that the competition between Romance varieties did not last long, and among the exiled communities as in the Iberian Peninsula, it was tilted toward Castilian Spanish, which was also the rising language in the international political realm.

The process of language shift is documented most clearly in the case of literary production. According to Révah, during the sixteenth century in their lands of resettlement the Sephardic authors wrote in the Toledo variety of Castilian the works that they composed in the vernacular, even though they were often rabbis originating in non-Castilian speaking Iberian regions (Quintana 2002, 132). This was different from the situation in the preceding two centuries among the pre-expulsion Jewish communities of Iberia. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries texts in Aragonese and Navarran varieties of Romance, as well as Castilian, had proliferated—scribed in Hebrew letters like all Romance varieties written by the Jews, and they were on juridical, administrative, poetic or religious matters (Minervini 2005, 15).

The glowing illustration to the shift to Castilian is provided by Moshe Almosnino, sixteenth century rabbi born in Salonica from Catalan and Aragonese parents. In 1551 Almosnino became the rabbi of the Catalan congregation in the city, to which his family belonged, and in 1560 assumed the same function in the congregation of former Portuguese marranos in Salonica, under the patronage of the Mendes family of Constantinople. Yet, next to works in Hebrew, he composed two treatises in clear and eloquent Castilian written in Hebrew characters, which now receive much scholarly attention (Quintana 2002 referencing I. Révah's 1954 EPHE, Section V, dissertation; Borovaia 2017; Zemke 2004). Almosnino has parallels in Iberia. In the sixteenth century Boscán, a famous Spanish author who wrote in Castilian and was regarded as a model in

prose, was also a Catalan by birth (Pountain 2001, 142). The eastern Mediterranean development in Jewish Castilian during the sixteenth century mirrored the development of Castilian in Iberia.

Another example might be David Attias' *La guarta de oro* published in Livorno in 1778. By that time the printing of Judeo-Spanish vernacular works had already taken off in Ottoman cities, but the book remains relevant because it emerged in a community of well-attested non-Castilian origin. Attias was a merchant born in Sarajevo but spent most of his life in Livorno. This Tuscan port city had attracted a large Jewish community from among Portuguese converts, after the Grand Duke Ferdinand's 1593 proclamation promising freedom from religious persecution and commercial privileges (Lehmann 2005, 53-54). Nonetheless, the official language of the Livorno Jewish community was Castilian Spanish and Portuguese (not Italian) and at the end of the eighteenth century a foreign observer wrote "they speak the vernacular tongue as lucidly and elegantly as their rhetoricians". Livorno became a center for Hebrew publication (prayer books and homiletic works) and also, as Attias' book indicates, books in Spanish printed in Hebrew characters.

The language shift from different varieties of Romance to Castilian as a basis for the vernacular left traces in Judeo-Spanish. For example, even in the instances when we know where in Iberia significant components of Balkan Sephardic communities originated, a genealogical relation between Judeo-Spanish varieties and specific dialects or languages of Iberia cannot be established. Some non-Castilian features are present, but they are randomly distributed in the vast Judeo-Spanish domain and do not indicate continuity of local Judeo-Spanish varieties with Iberian regional varieties. This observation was made in Révah's pioneering study (1965) on the basis of interviews conducted with a large sample of Judeo-Spanish speakers from multiple communities. It corrected the widespread earlier view going in the opposite direction, as the principal earlier Judeo-Spanish language studies were conducted in specific local communities. Révah's observation was not fully digested and its import recognized, until a new generation of researchers confirmed it in the 1990s. It suggests a linguistic break after resettlement in the Eastern Mediterranean lands, rather than gradual evolution by mutual adjustment following contact between separate speech forms.

Another characteristic pointing in the same direction is that Judeo-Spanish seems to possess features that are more recent than late fifteenth century Castilian, or traits that at the end of the fifteenth century were not yet dominant in it. One of them is the word-initial aspirated /h/. In late medieval Castilian this phoneme replaced the word initial /f/ in Latin words, but eventually it disappeared to produce the modern Castilian forms (now preserved in orthography). Judeo-Spanish has no trace of this aspirated /h/. It has many words that preserved the initial /f/ of Latin, and these must be intrusions from Portuguese or other Romance varieties, but the yet unsettled situation of aspirated /h/ versus 0 at the time of exile (as I understand it), finds no reflection whatsoever in Judeo-Spanish (for the fricatives and affricates in Judeo-Spanish, see Hualde and Şaul 2011, pp. 97-100). This would be hard to account for without considering that the a late-

sixteenth century variety of Castilian, rather than a fifteenth century one, formed the basis of Judeo-Spanish.

Now we return to the circumstances of and motivations for language shift. Modern situations of language shift generally involve a linguistic community that forms a minority overwhelmed by an engulfing majority. To ease the tension, it assumes the language of this majority, which is also favored by the state. This was not the situation with Castilian that existed for Iberian exiles in Ottoman lands or elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean. Yet a parallel exists in more recent Sephardic history, to language shift undertaken, not under pressure from the engulfing majority or from the state, but because of the promise of incorporation into a wider world. This is the case of the turn toward French of the Ottoman Sephardic communities in the early decades of the twentieth century. One catalyzer in that situation was the creation of dozens of elementary schools by the Alliance Israélite society, which dispensed a shallow but massive education to boys and also a large number of girls, a total novelty, and made them capable of speaking and reading French. Naturally, French also presents a parallel to sixteenth century Castilian, in being a variety of Romance confronting another variety of Romance that was Judeo-Spanish. The attraction for the Ottoman Sephardim was the perception of greater employment opportunities in changing economic circumstances and the prestige value of a West European tongue (Şaul 2001; for a general description, Benbassa and Rodrigue 1995). The development was cut short before it was completed, because of strong opposition inspired by linguistic nationalism in the Turkish republic, and also a new set of educational and economic institutions that necessitated competency in Turkish. These constraints and alternative opportunities did not exist in the sixteenth century. Similarly, we can point out briefly other language shift situations in our day as outcome of international migration, like Filipinos or African migration communities quickly becoming English-speaking, by not transmitting the native tongue to their new generation, after prolonged residence in host societies that are not English speaking.

The experience of language shift in the origins of Judeo-Spanish may account for some enduring features of Sephardic culture, some of which are linguistic while others are not. The propensity of this vernacular to adopt new forms, for example, the disposition that contemporary historical linguists consider the “innovativeness” of Judeo-Spanish, in vocabulary and syntactic forms, but also in phonetic development, can be due to the sense of constructedness and arbitrary that results from adopting for daily usage a medium learned as a foreign language. Concomitantly, the susceptibility to thinking that Judeo-Spanish is “mixed”, impure, that somewhere else there are standards constituting proper norms, the popular sense of *Espanyol halis de Espanya* (‘the unadulterated Spanish of Spain’), the feeling that the changes, borrowings or innovations of daily usage constitutes creolization or bastardization, this entire complex that surfaced time and again in multiple strata of Judeo-Spanish speaking Sephardim has probably roots in the residual inadequacy or resentment due ultimately to the subliminal memory of foundational language shift of the sixteenth century.

As to the non-linguistic domain, this “*lingua espanyola ke nozotros praktikamos en Turkia*”, words that Rafael Uziel wrote in 1845 in his opening editorial for the first ever Judeo-Spanish newspaper *Sha’are Mizrah o Puerta de Oriente* (29 December)—even blemished with “*la erida de la mestura*” ‘the wound of mixing’—provided the sense of “Spain” as geographic and historical origin. This mythical realm that constituted a basic element of identity and fixed boundaries against the *Lehlis* (Ashkenazic Jews of Germanic speech), *Romanos* (Byzantine Jews of Greek speech), *Gurdjis* or *Arabos* (Georgian Jews, mustarab Jews, or the Aramean speakers of the eastern provinces) was a construction projecting the reality of Judeo-Spanish language. This was the case with Balkan, Ottoman, and Levantine Jews, who did not have direct contact with Spain, Portugal, or Latin America for the last few centuries, as opposed to North African Sephardim who experienced Spain as a real kingdom with an imperial and colonial agenda. In the eastern Mediterranean, Spain was a neverland that vaguely maintained its medieval contours of Iberia, the vernacular counterpart of Sepharad, as spoken Judeo-Spanish was the specification of Ladino, the *la’az* of the hierogloss.

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