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Sephardim and their language: *Judeo-Spanish* or *Ladino*?

Abstract

The aim of this work is to describe the most relevant features of the languages spoken by the Sephardic Jews, focusing on *Judeo-Spanish* and *Ladino*. These two languages have been treated as a single language, even though *Judeo-Spanish* was a day-to-day communication language, and *Ladino* a calque-language used to translate religious texts from Hebrew during the 16th and 17th centuries.

A brief overview of Sephardim historical background is necessary in order to understand who the Sephardim are, the development of their language and literature, and to discuss anything related to them.

Keywords: Sephardic Jews, *Judeo-Spanish*, *Ladino*

Historical background

Sephardim are the descendants of Jews who had at one time lived on the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal), and who were expelled from Spain in 1492 by the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabel, under the Alhambra Decree (Peters, 1995: 9–34), and persecuted by the Spanish Inquisition.

Jews initially settled in Spain during Roman times and endured life there during Christian rule. During the fourth century C.E. the Jewish population in the Iberian Peninsula was considerable even though life was not that easy for them. The Canons of the Council of Elvira, for example, prohibited marriages and other intercourse with Jews. However, their more serious difficulties began during the Visigothic period, especially from the conversion to Catholicism of the King Recaredo I in 589, and the oppressive anti-Jewish measures promulgated in the Councils of Toledo.

However glorious and tragic often at the same time the history of Spain was, what must be remembered is that Spain was the only place in the Western world where the three cultures the Christian, the Muslim and the Jewish coexisted in harmony and prosperity. This period called in Spanish *la convivencia*, the Coexistence, begun after the Muslim invasion in 711 and lasted for seven centuries. The Sephardic culture reached its full flourishing under Islam, enjoying a period of splendour. The Christian Reconquest of Spain though, during the twelfth century, brought them gradually back under Christian rule. The Coexistence sadly came to an end in the same year, when Columbus sailed to China and ended up in the Caribbean.

In 1492, the notorious Father Tomas de Torquemada, the grand inquisitor of the Spanish Inquisition started to pressure the Catholic Monarchs to issue a decree of expulsion of the Jewish community from Spain on the grounds of fear, that as long as the Jews remained in Spain, they would influence recent Jewish converts to Christianity to continue practicing Judaism. Once the Muslim forces in Granada have been defeated by the Spanish Army, which restored the whole of Spain to Christian rule, thus accomplishing the most important objective – country’s unification, Ferdinand and Isabella concluded that the Jews too were expendable and issued the expulsion decree on March 30.

The decree was to take effect in 4 months, a period during which the Jews were forced to liquidate their properties, business and goods at incredibly low prices. Some Jews, in the face of the menace of the exile, decided to accept Christianity in order to remain in the Iberian Peninsula. Even though some of them became real *conversos* (converts), many of the *conversos* who stayed in the country were Crypto-Jews, and kept on practising their rituals and traditions in secret.

Already in the preceding period of nearly a hundred years the Jews of Sefarad suffered injustice from the Crown due to failed promises to protect their property. The picture below is representative of the oppression that was to evolve into a truly ugly destiny of torture, execution and expulsion.

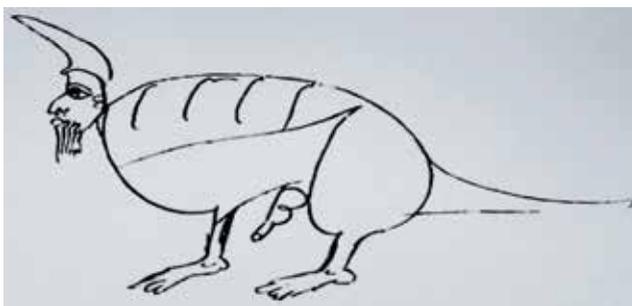


Figure 1. The caricature of a circumcised rat, with beard and hat characteristic of those worn by Jews in the fourteenth century, was discovered sketched on the blank pages in the back of a fifteenth century book from the *Justicia Civil* of Valencia. It is assumed that the unknown artist was a Christian visitor, portraying his perception of Jews as unclean animals, meriting scorn and ridicule

Source: Sloan, 2009: 137.

As Christopher Columbus will remember it in his diary, in the same month when the Monarchs issued the edict that all Jews should be driven out of the kingdom and its territories, he was given the order to undertake his expedition of discovery to the Indies. On July 30 1492, some 200,000 people, nearly the entire Jewish community, was expelled from Spain.

The Jews who decided to leave the Iberian Peninsula left for the North of Africa (mostly today's Morocco and Algeria), the Ottoman Empire (mostly Salonika, Constantinople and Sarajevo), Bayonne, Italy, Northern Europe (mostly England or Flanders), and later on to Holland. Eventually, many of the Crypto-Jews who remained in Iberia, fearing Inquisition and the hard conditions they lived under, decided to move out and join the Jews who were in Exile.

The key, nostalgia of the lost land

The sudden expulsion of the Jews was undoubtedly a traumatic shock for all of them. They were given only four months to leave the country if they did not convert to Christianity. The ones who left their land behind took with them the keys of their homes and their synagogues, convinced that the exile would be temporary and they would return one day. Those keys, although most families no longer have them anymore, became a symbol of their rich Spanish heritage, of their beloved and lost land.

In 1924 Miguel Primo de Rivera enacted a law restoring Spanish citizenship to every Sephardi who claimed it, which was very useful to many Jews during World War II and the Bosnian War. In 1992, the Spanish king Juan Carlos I, wearing a skullcap in a ceremony marking the 500th anniversary of the Alhambra Decree, said: “*Sefarad* is no longer nostalgia, but a place where Jews should not be told to feel as if at home, because Hispano-Jews are at home in Spain”.

On 6th June 2014, the Spanish Government passed a law (ep00.epimg.net/descargables/2014/06/06/d2568a932335d0680fa9107ee72ef7a6.pdf), which allows descendants of Sephardic Jews to get Spanish nationality. The minister of Justice, Alberto Ruiz Gallardón, declared that “this law is a real historic reparation of, I dare say, the biggest mistake in Spanish history” (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/20/world/europe/many-seek-spanish-citizenship-offered-to-sephardic-jew-s.html>). Gallardón added: “many kept the keys of the house from which they were expelled, now they have the door open.” (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/07/us-spain-jews-idUSBREA161GQ20140207>).

Language

For many centuries Jews have lived in physical, social, cultural and even linguistic isolation. This explains why the Medieval Ibero-Romance languages used by them were not exactly the same as those used by their Christian neighbours, although they did not differ that much except for some words related to religion. Sephardim spoke what nowadays we call *Judeo-español* or *Ladino*, two different terms used in reference to the same language and the difference between which is explained below:

Judeo-español is a Romance language derived from old Spanish, a term used by Romance philologists and linguists to indicate the linguistic varieties written and spoken by the Sephardim. This language includes many components of the Old Romance languages spoken at that time in Sefarat, such as Catalan, Galician-Portuguese, Aragonese, Astur-Leones and Mozarabic, as well as some Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic words.

Ladino, on the other hand, is a calque language of Hebrew, used to translate liturgical texts into Spanish, being not a day-to-day communication language. The word *Ladino*, which comes from the Spanish *latino* [Latin], was a term used to name Moors and Jews who spoke the Christian language.

The features of this calque-language and the literal translation, according to Paloma Diaz-Mas, “produces a completely artificial language, one that is often unintelligible if the reader does not know the Hebrew source of the ‘ladinised’ passage” (Díaz-Mas, 1992: 76). As an example, we find that the Spanish term *Dios* [God] is replaced by *El Dio*, as the Spanish ending -s is normally used for plural, and saying *Dios* would indicate polytheism. On the other hand, the word *vidas* [lives] is always written in plural, as well as the word *aguas* [waters], which in Hebrew is *hayim* and *mayim* respectively; as in Hebrew these words have the plural ending, they were translated as plural nouns. Many Arabic words were used as well, as phonetically Hebrew and Arabic use similar sounds that did not exist in Spanish at the time. For example, we find the Arabic word *alhad* instead of *domingo* [Sunday]; *Domingo* was the day of God for Christians, but for the Jewish week the Holy Day is *Shabbath*. Even though *Ladino* was used in the 16th and 17th centuries in order to translate religious texts from Hebrew, nowadays *Ladino* is a term widely adopted to name the language used by Sephardim, especially used in Israel.

The language spoken by Sephardim, besides being called *Ladino* and *Judeo-español*, is also known as *Judezmo* (used mostly by linguists and in the academic field), Sefardi, *Spanyol* or *Español nuestro* (making a distinction between this language and the *Español* (Spanish) spoken in Spain and Latin America), Judio or Jidio, and Haketia (the variety of Judeo-Spanish spoken in Northern Africa). Quoting Diaz-Mas, the Sephardim regularly called their spoken language *Judezmo* or *Español* to distinguish it from *Ladino*, the calque-language. However, *Ladino* has lately come to be used as a synonym for *Judezmo*. The name Judeo-Spanish is a recent scholarly creation (Díaz-Mas, 1992: 77).

Ladino was written in the Hebrew alphabet, in Rashi script, or in Solitro for most of its lifetime, and it was not until recent times that it has been written using Latin alphabet. When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, they took with them different varieties of Iberian-Romance languages, depending on their region of origin. In their new homes, Spanish-speaking Jews found themselves pretty isolated in places where their new neighbours were using Greek, Italian, Arabic, Turkish, French or Flemish as a communication language, but this allowed the Jews to keep their own language. Nevertheless, we have to point out that in countries like Italy, England, France and the Low Countries, Sephardim ended up adopting the language of their neighbours and stopped using their own.

Judeo-español, then, cut off from the influence of the Spanish spoken in Spain, which became modernised, kept its 15th century roots, and evolved in a different way. It borrowed many words from Hebrew, such as *anav* [obedient] or *atakanear* [to arrange]; Arabic, such as *atamar* [termi-

nate] or *alforria* [freedom]; Turkish, such as *kolay* [easy] or *parás* [money]; Italian, such as *ma* [but] or *libero* [free]; French, such as *roló* [role] or *jugador* [actor]; and Greek. It also included hundreds of old Spanish words which do not exist anymore in the current Spanish. The different changes of the language were influenced by the countries and cultures where Sephardim settled.

Literature

Literature written in *Ladino* started in Spain before the expulsion, where the Jewish intellectual elite was involved in the Spanish culture. One of the best known authors during the 14th century was Rab Don Santob de Carrión, who wrote the book “*Proverbios morales*”. This book, found in the Cairo Geniza, was ladinised during the 15th century and copied in Hebrew characters, as found in these few verses below:

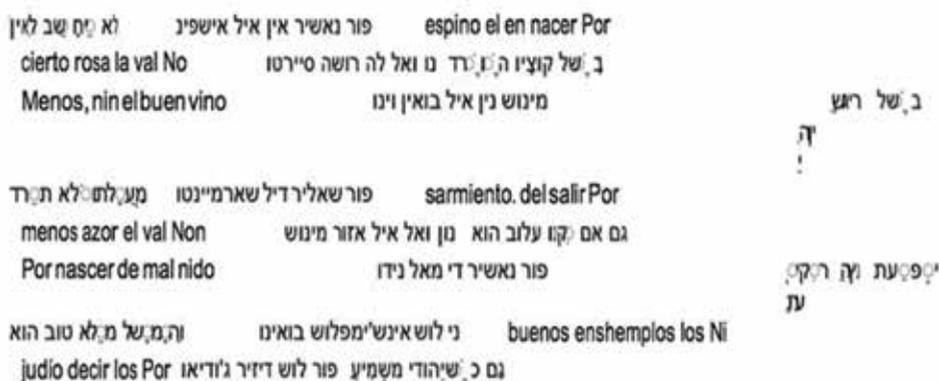


Figure 2. *Proverbios morales*, by Rab Don Santob de Carrión, XIV century

Source: <http://btjerusalem.com/aspamiac.htm>.

We find three categories of *Ladino* literature: translations of sacred texts (such as the Hebrew Bible, the High Holiday prayerbook and the Passover Haggadah); rabbinic literature; and folk tales, fables, proverbs, poems, and short stories.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, many Crypto-Jews emigrated to Holland, enriching economically and culturally the communities they joined. Therefore, Diaz-Mas states, “it is not surprising that the Low Countries, together with Italy, would become an important centre of Jewish publication where numerous books were printed in Spanish” (Díaz-Mas, 1992: 37). While Portuguese was the language used in daily basis communication, Spanish remained as the language of publication and study. Among those intellectuals, Baruch Spinoza, Shelomo ben Verga and David Pardo are worth mentioning. On the other hand, the expelled Jews who arrived in the Ottoman Empire started printing books in Hebrew and *Ladino*. One of the first books printed in *Ladino* was *Rejimiento de la vida* by Rabbi Moshé Almosnino, published in Salonika in 1564, and written as a guide for his son about how a man should live this life without neglecting his duties.



Figure 4. *Libro de mantenimiento de la alma: en el qual se contiene el modo con que se a de regir el Iudio en todas sus acciones*, Italy 1609

Source: <http://fondosdigitales.us.es/fondos/libros/4255/8/libro-de-mantenimiento-de-la-alma-en-el-qual-se-contiene-el-modo-con-que-se-de-regir-el-iudio-en-todas-sus-acciones/>.



Figure 5. Manuscript in Ladino of Dialoghi di Amore

Source: bjerusalem.com/aspamiac.html.

The tradition of translating the Bible literally (calque-language) starts before the Jews were expelled from Spain. During the 16th century two translations of the Bible into *Ladino* appeared: *Pentateuco*, published in Constantinople in 1547, in Hebrew characters; and Ferrara Bible, published in Italy in 1553, in Latin letters. Both of them were followed by more Bible translations during the next centuries.

In 1855, also in Constantinople, a Hebrew-*Ladino* Biblical Dictionary was also published. The publication of *Dictionnaire du Judéo-Espagnol* in Madrid in 1977 was important as well. It was written by Joseph Nehama (ca. 1880–1971), Greek educator and historian, and published six years after his death, in 1977, thanks to the collaboration of Jesus Cantera.



Figure 7. Psalms (salmos) with *Ladino* language, translated by Abraham Asa, Constantino-
ple 1745

Source: Nehama, Cantera Ortiz de Urbina, 1977.

We have to mention Me'am Lo'ez, which, in words of Tamar Alexander-Frizer, “is the most important work written in *Ladino*”. (T. Alexander-Frizer, 2002: 45) The curious aspect of this book is that it was written by different authors between 1730 and 1864, as if it were an encyclopaedia. AlexanderFrizer adds that Me'am Lo'ez was “a bridge between Hebrew sources and the *Ladino* reader, between written and oral literatures” (Ibidem: 64) which was “aimed at making Hebrew sources available to the Sephardic ethnic group in their own language, *Ladino*.” (Ibidem: 45)

According to Samuel G. Armistead, Hispanic Jews took into exile and cultivated a large amount of oral literature, which included “narrative ballads (*romansas*), lyric songs (*cantigas*), cumulative songs, prayers and medicinal charms, riddles (*endevinas*), proverbs (*refranes*), and folktales (*consejas*)” (www.sephardifolklit.org/flsj/OLSJ). Armistead adds two partially oral genres, such as “*complas* (paraliturgical poetry: popular, sometimes traditionalised, religious or didactic songs) and plays, originally staged to commemorate

important holidays”. (Ibidem) Although we can find a large number of songs in Ladino, we should highlight the folk song *Coplas de Purim*, dated around 1700 its lyrics can be found below, and also *Coplas Nuevas*, published in Salonica in 1868.

COPLAS DE PURIM

Esta noche de Purim
no duermen los *alhajuin*
haziendo *alhajuinadas*
para las desposadas.

Chorus:

"Vivas tu, viva yo,
Vivan todos los judios,

Viva la reina Esther,
que tanto plazer mos dio".
Haman antes que morir
reunio su parentela,
los puso a su cabeçera
un día antes de Purim.

(chorus)

Calla tu, Zeres "la loca",
que a ti avlar no te toca,
que por ti hizieron la horca
y me la estrené en Purim.

(chorus)

Amparo-te con tus manos,
aproves muestros hermanos
ha turcos y ha cristianos
aunque no mos pueden veer.

(chorus)

Indianas muy bien assadas,
Pinyonada y almendras,

Lombos, elguengas ahumadas,
Porque hazen bien beber.

(chorus)

Y los novios a las novias
envien dulces y rosas

Y joyas y algunas cosas
que les queden a dever.

(chorus)

Figure 8. *Coplas de Purim*, 1700

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVYE10U4SNc>.

Sephardim provide us with many proverbs as well, many of which are still being used currently in Spain, such as:

Ladino:	Dime con con quén andas; te diré quén sos. Dime kon kién fueres i diréte kién eres
Spanish:	Dime con quién andas y te diré quien eres
English:	Tell me who you go around with and I'll tell you who you are.
Ladino:	Aqueyos polvos truxeron estos lodos. Kon esos polvos se hizieron estos lodos.
Spanish:	De aquellos polvos, vinieron estos lodos
English:	That dust brought, or made, this mud.
Ladino:	Antes que te cazes, mira lo que hazes. Antes ke te kases, mira lo ke hazes . . .
Spanish:	Antes de que te cases, mira lo que haces.
English:	Watch what you do before you get married
Ladino:	A gran' a grano, hinche la gayina el papo. Grano a grano, hinche la gallina el papo.
Spanish:	Grano a grano, hincha la gallina el papo.
English:	One seed at a time, a hen fills its craw.

Figure 9. Judeo-Spanish Proverbs

Source: Tamar, 2004: p. 17–19, p. 20–22, 25. See also: Lévy, 1969.

Language in the Holocaust and the current situation

Nowadays, though, the reality that *Judeo-español* or *Ladino* is facing is very different, and its future unknown, as it is considered an endangered language which may become extinct in the near future. The Holocaust, besides the terrible human loss, represented the loss of 90% of *Ladino*-speaking Jews and a major crisis for this language. The systematic annihilation of the European Jewry in the concentration and extermination camps is the hardest and cruellest historic event suffered by Jewish communities since the expulsion from Spain in 1492. One of the purposes of the Nazi policy was a crusade against Judaism, which culminated in approximately six million Jews being killed by Nazi Germany throughout the German Reich and on the German – occupied territories. The magnitude of the tragedy of Greek Sephardim, for example, is more than obvious, as shown in the following figures:

Table 1. Comparison of the Greek Sephardim Population in 1941 and 1945

Community	Population in 1941	Population in 1945
Salonica	56,200	1,240
Cavala	2,100	42
Corfu	2,000	185
Rodas	1,701	40
Jannina	1,850	163
Drama	1,200	39

Source: www.um.es/tonosdigital/znum5/estudios/J-infierno.htm.

We should not forget that Salonica became the largest centre of the Sephardic Jews in Europe until the German occupation and consequent annihilation of most of this population.

The concentration camps became a melting pot of cultures and languages, and Jews (both *Ashkenazim* and Sephardim) were the largest ethnic group. Despite the dire living conditions in the camps, Dr. Salvador Santa Puche states that Sephardim kept their cultural tradition through music: many deportees used Sephardic songs to please the guards in order to get a bit more food¹. Puche affirms that, among all the songs, one became a hymn among the deportees, called *Arvoles yoran por luyas*:

ARVOLES YORAN POR LUYAS

Arvoles yoran por luyas
I muntanyas por ayres
Ansi yoran los mis ojos
Por ti, kerida amante

Torno i digo: ke va ser de mi?
En tierras ajenas yo me vo murir

Enfrente de mi ay un andjelo
kon sus ojos me mira
Yorar kero I no puedo
mi korason suspira

Torno i digo: ke va ser de mi
En tierras ajenas yo me vo murir

TREES WEEP FOR RAIN

Trees weep for rain
And mountains for air
Thus my eyes weep
For you, dear beloved.

I turn and I ask: what will become of me?
In foreign lands I am destined to die.

There is an angel in front of me
with your eyes he looks at me
I want to cry, but cannot
My heart sighs

I turn and I ask: what will become of me?
In foreign lands I am destined to die.

Figure 10. *Arvoles yoran por luyas*

Source: www.um.es/tonosdigital/znum5/estudios/J-infierno.htm.

It is very difficult to know how many people speak *Ladino* today but, according to Isaac Navón, in one way or another it seems that around 220,000 speak this language (www.tarbutsefarad.com/en/recortes-de-prensa/860-el-ladino-renace-de-sus-cenizas-y-cauti-va-a-generaciones-jovenes.html). This fact is really worrying as when a community loses

¹ One of the Sephardic Jews who survived thanks to his amazing voice was Estrongo Nachama, nicknamed “the singer of Auschwitz”. In Berlin he became the chief cantor for the Jewish community, and was awarded by the German Government for his community work. One of his achievements was a symbiosis of Sephardic and Ashkenazi elements in synagogue music.

its language, a great part of its cultural identity is lost. A series of actions is being taken to keep this language alive, as most of the *Ladino*-speakers are over 50 years of age. Currently there are study centres, book-collection efforts and teacher-training programs, departments of Sephardic studies in some Universities (in Israel and abroad), and *Ladino* songs are getting more popular and are attracting a wider audience. In Israel, Europe and the United States, writers are struggling to keep *Ladino* literature alive.

In contemporary writing, we can still find the sentiment of Sephardim towards Spain, which, in the words of Alexander-Frizer, comprises “a mixture of nostalgic longing for a glorious past and the painful historical and collective memory of the great expulsion”. (Alexander-Fritz, 71) Below we find an extract of a Romance written by Matilda Koen-Sarano, where this feeling becomes very clear:

ESpanya POR SIEMPRE

Espanya por siempre
 Espanya, tierra de mis abuelos,
 Espanya, tierra de mis dolores,
 Espanys, tierra de mis amores,
 Tengo siempre en el korason.
 Tus flamas ardientes
 Tus streyas briyantes
 Ke no pudi apuntar.
 Tus lindas sivdades
 Ke por siempre vo sonyar,
 Tus dulses kansiones
 Ke no kedo de kantar.

SPAIN FOREVER

Spain forever
 Spain, oh Spain, my father's land,
 Spain, oh Spain, my sorrows' land,
 Spain, oh Spain, my passion's land,
 You'll stay forever in my heart.
 Your ardent flames ablaze,
 Your ever-shining stars,
 Countless in my gaze.
 Your cities in their beauty
 Are in my dreams for aye,
 Your honeyed songs so sweet
 I'll never cease to sing.

Figure 11. Romance, by Matilda Koen-Sarano

Source: www.um.es/tonosdigital/znum5/estudios/J-infierno.htm.

La Autoridad Nasionala del Ladino i su Kultura was founded in Israel in 1997 in order to preserve, safeguard and promote the *Ladino* language, propagate the culture and publish books written in *Ladino* by contemporary authors, among other things. The magazine *Aki Yerushalayim*, published jointly by the Sefarad Association and the *Autoridad Nasionala del Ladino i su Kultura*, is the most important newspaper published in *Ladino*. In Turkey, a *Ladino* newspaper, *Şalom*, is published once a week for *Ladino* Reader.

It is worth mentioning that in 1999 a worldwide online community of *Ladino*-speakers called *Ladinokomunita* was founded. More than 500 people participate actively, discussing topics such as Sephardic culture, history and language, using only *Ladino* as a communication language. These kinds of initiatives are the key to promote the use of the language and the knowledge of Sephardic History and culture. With the continuous passionate work of scholars and activists, as well as with the help of the Israeli government in language preservation, there is still hope that new generations will use *Ladino* as a communication language in the future.

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Streszczenie

Żydzi sefardyjscy i ich język: judeo-hiszpański czy ladino?

Tekst opisuje najważniejsze aspekty języków, jakimi posługiwali się Żydzi sefardyjscy, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem judeo-hiszpańskiego oraz ladino.

Cechy i etymologia języków, jak i subtelne różnice między nimi zostały ukazane na przykładach najważniejszych tekstów literackich, takich jak: *Proverbios morales* Santoba de Carrión, *Regimiento de la vida* rabiego Moshé Almosnino, *Libro de mantenimiento de la alma* Josepha Qaro, *Dialoghi di Amore* Guedaliá Ibn Yahía, *Pentateuco*, *Psalmy* w tłumaczeniu Abrahama Asy czy *Edykt z Alhambry o wygnaniu Żydów z 1492 roku*.

Słowa kluczowe: Żydzi sefardyjscy, judeo-hiszpański, ladino