

Contemporary Judeo-Spanish Poetry: Language in Search of a Modern Form*

Abstract: The article investigates the issue of the status of contemporary Judeo-Spanish literature, principally poetry, and advances the thesis of the postvernacular character of works written in Judeo-Spanish (Ladino). The backing for this conclusion is an analysis of dozens of volumes of poetry published during the *arrebivimiyento* period, between 1975 and the 2020s. This study analyses several characteristic features of these book editions that give evidence of the postvernacular condition of the language and its culture, primarily the multilingualism of the book, the variety of the adopted alphabets and orthographic notation in the Latin alphabet, and the presence of many paratexts. These elements are understood as aimed at supporting the reception of a book written in Ladino by its potential readers—in a situation where the Ladino language itself, classified as endangered, is not “autonomous” enough. The article concludes by offering the metaphor of a nature monument of a tree, protected and upheld in its existence by various “props,” as a figure reflecting both the material and nonmaterial aspects of contemporary Judeo-Spanish literature and books.

Keywords: Judeo-Spanish poetry; Ladino; postvernacular culture; Ladino book; contemporary Sephardic poetry.

Słowa kluczowe: poezja żydowsko-hiszpańska; ladino; kultura postvernakularna; książka w ladino; współczesna poezja sefardyjska.

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Postvernacular Judeo-Spanish

Judeo-Spanish, Ladino or Judezmo¹ literature almost disappeared with the Holocaust. Already before WWII, in various countries of the Sephardic Diaspora, its role gradually diminished as the local Sephardic community moved away from its native language in the public sphere, especially in the field of education. Consequently, Sephardim also switched to participating in culture—including literature—in the majority language of their country and in the so-called languages of prestige (French or German, depending on the place). The most serious blow, however, was the Holocaust in Europe. The death of native speakers of Judeo-Spanish meant, at the same time, the shattering of publishing and cultural institutions, which were not rebuilt after the war because the number of potential audiences was significantly shrunken.² Indeed, between 1950 and 1975, very few literary texts were released in Judeo-Spanish, and these were mainly press publications in *El Tiempo* in Tel Aviv or *Şalom* in Istanbul. In the 1970s, activists of Sephardic culture and its researchers increasingly voiced the imminent extinction of the language.³

Since that decade, however, there appeared a phenomenon of a return to Ladino in the field of literature, comprising almost exclusively the genre of poetry. Sephardic Jews who perceived a rapid decay of the language of their roots decided to write in it what they were still able to write down, with the intention of saying goodbye to their tongue or commemorating it, and sometimes with the hope that their activism might contribute to the survival of the language. Interestingly, apart from the occasional publication of poems in the press (with the leading role of the Israel-based *Aki Yerushalayim*, founded in 1979), there were authors who managed to publish their works in book editions. My article gathers the conclusions drawn from an analysis of these books. The first one was *9 Eylûl* by Esther Morguez Algrante,⁴ which was followed by several poetry collections

¹ In this article, I use the terms “Judeo-Spanish” and “Ladino” interchangeably. “Judezmo” appears only in quotes. On different names of the language see: David M. Bunis, “Native Designations of Judezmo as a ‘Jewish Language’,” in Yosef Tobi, Dennis Kurzon (eds.), *Hikrei Ma’arav u-Mizrah. Studies in Language, Literature and History Presented to Joseph Chetrit* (Jerusalem, 2011), 41–81.

² See Paloma Díaz-Mas, María Sánchez Pérez, “Los sefardíes ante los retos del mundo contemporáneo,” in Paloma Díaz-Mas, María Sánchez Pérez (eds.), *Los sefardíes ante los retos del mundo contemporáneo. Identidad y mentalidades* (Madrid, 2010), 11–29.

³ Haïm Vidal Sephiha, *L’agonie des Judéo-espagnols* (Paris 1991), 107–108.

⁴ Esther Morguez Algrante, *9 Eylûl. Poesias* (Istanbul, 1975).

published in the 1980s, 1990s and even after 2000. This cultural movement is known as *arrebivimiyento*, or the revival of Judeo-Spanish and its literature.⁵ Although original works in the twenty-first century have been very rare, the current has been enriched by a new branch, namely, literature translated into Judeo-Spanish. The Ladino activists have decided to use the means of translation to arrest the decadence of the language and to develop its hitherto weakened expressive capacities.⁶

The majority of the aspects of *arrebivimiyento* meet the markers of a postvernacular culture, as defined by Jeffrey Shandler in relation to contemporary Yiddish culture. Therefore, I consider contemporary Judeo-Spanish poetry, or broadly literature, as a postvernacular phenomenon in which the very fact of using the Sephardic language itself undoubtedly becomes at least as important, and sometimes even more important, than the content conveyed in a text. This entails that the semiotic hierarchy is inverted here when juxtaposed with vernacular uses of the language in which transmitting information, opinions, feelings, or ideas is the primary function of communication.⁷ In postvernacular uses, the secondary, “meta-level of signification” becomes paramount.⁸ The creative act itself attains a special symbolic value based on the intention of choosing this language. Moreover, the poems’ content acquires additional shades of meaning precisely because of the choice of Judeo-Spanish. Writing and publishing a poem also activates other practices in the literary polysystem that presuppose a conscious choice of Ladino at all or only some stages of interacting with the text. The repertoire of such practices comprises, for example, personal reading of poems, public performances, musical arrangements, literary criticism, translation, intertextual references in the works of subsequent authors, etc. Besides, not all of these practices require their participants to have full linguistic competence in Judeo-Spanish.

⁵ On *arrebivimiyento*, see Agnieszka August-Zarębska, “Metáforas de la lengua y la literatura sefardíes en la poesía judeoespañola contemporánea,” in David M. Bunis, Ivana Vučina Simović, Corinna Deppner (eds.), *Caminos de leche y miel: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Michael Studemund-Halévy*, vol. 2: *Language and Literature* (Barcelona, 2018), 226–245.

⁶ See Agnieszka August-Zarębska, Natalia Paprocka, “Les enjeux de la traduction littéraire en langue périphérique et post-vernaculaire. Le cas du judéo-espagnol,” *Romanica Wratislaviensia* 68 (2021), 9–26; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.19195/0557-2665.68.2> [retrieved: 5 Dec. 2023].

⁷ Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Languages & Culture* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London, 2006), 22.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

This fits in with the new definition of linguistic community reformulated in the concept of postvernacularity.⁹

Regarding the subject matter of these works, it is possible to distinguish a range of topics and motifs that are willingly chosen by the poets.¹⁰ In general terms, these include elements of the personal, family, or community past, which is perceived as central to the construction of contemporary Sephardic identity. Developed and spread in poetry, they construct a repertoire of imagery that makes up the collective identity of the post-vernacular Sephardic community. The authors' attitude to language and the experience of seeking expression in it are also reflected upon.

In this article, I want to explore several elements of contemporary Sephardic poetry books that are taken to stem from the postvernacular condition of the language and its literature. They illustrate the process of how, from the 1970s onwards, the language itself has sought its "physical" or material form, namely, a new form in which it would become accessible and readable to contemporary audiences who live in different countries and who therefore function on a daily basis in the context of other cultures and languages. Thanks to these endeavors, authors publishing their books in various countries of the Sephardic Diaspora can possibly count their works to be read not only in their own country but wherever Sephardic Jews and other *aficionados* of their culture live.

The materiality of language and the book alphabets

A general survey of the editorial design of Judeo-Spanish collections of poetry published between 1975 and the 2020s implies that the Judeo-Spanish publishing system is a fragile one. This quality is primarily suggested by the lack of any fixed editorial model regulating basic issues, such as in which direction books open, which alphabet is used for Ladino texts, what spelling rules are adopted for the Latin alphabet, and whether the titles of bilingual editions are featured on both outer cover pages in accordance with the directions of the two, or even three, alphabets.¹¹

⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰ On the main topics, see Alessia Cassani, *Una lengua llamada patria. El judeoespañol en la literatura sefardí contemporánea* (Barcelona, 2019); Shmuel Refael, *Un grito en el silencio. La poesía sobre el Holocausto en lengua sefardí: estudio y antología* (Barcelona, 2008).

¹¹ To be precise, I mention the third alphabet, namely the Cyrillic, which was used only in one book published in Bulgaria: Грация Жак Албухайре, *Поезия ен еспаньол ладино* (София, 2005) [Gracia Jak Albuhayre, *Poezia en espanyol ladino* (Sofia, 2005)].

It seems that Judeo-Spanish, which has no established models of its own in this respect today, largely depends on the dominant conventions of the country of publication.

For example, only two out of about fifty collections use Hebrew letters for their Ladino text; these two are bilingual Hebrew/Judeo-Spanish volumes: *En los Kampos de la muerte / Bemahanot hamavet* by Moshe 'Ha-Elion (2000) and *Klaster kol veteruf / Cara Boz i Locura* by Clarisse Nicoïdski (2006).¹² The former employs the traditional Rashi fonts and the latter relies on the square script, but with the typeface different from that of the equivalent Hebrew translations of the poems. Both books open in line with today's Hebrew editorial conventions, resulting from the direction of Hebrew writing. The pages are accordingly numbered. In 'Ha-Elion's book, the title and the author's name appear on both outer cover pages, though such information is, as a rule, only provided on the front cover. In this case, the first page (as determined by the direction of Hebrew writing) includes the Judeo-Spanish title in the Rashi fonts, with the Hebrew title in the square script underneath, and the fourth, back cover page gives the author's name in Latin letters. Interestingly, the text itself in both language versions is printed following the pagination from 13 to 87 rather than, as the structure of the cover might suggest, having the text in the Hebrew alphabet run from the book's right side to its left side while the Latin transcription from the left to the right. Nonetheless, on opening the book in line with either alphabet, readers find the appropriate title and copyright pages along with the translator's preface. The table of contents is only placed on the right-hand side.

Although Nicoïdski's book was also published on the basis of this system, the poet's and the translator's names and the title only feature on the first cover page. The fourth cover page offers biographical notes on the author and the translator in Hebrew. The title and copyright pages are to be found on either side of the book, corresponding to its assigned alphabet. The half-title page and paratexts (specifically, a short preface and a longer introduction) only appear in the right-hand part of the book.

Both poetry collections were developed by the same publisher—Avner Perez, a translator into Hebrew. The structure outlined above does not seem to have been a random choice; rather, it was employed with the

¹² Moshe 'Ha-Elion, *En los Kampos de la muerte / Bemahanot hamavet*, trans. into Hebrew Avner Perez (Maale Adumim, 2000); Clarisse Nicoïdski, *Klaster kol veteruf / Cara Boz i Locura*, trans. into Hebrew Avner Perez (Maale Adumim, 2006).

types of target readerships in mind. ‘Ha Elion’s poetry in book form was supposed to be read both by people versed in the Hebrew alphabet and those unfamiliar with it. Although the Hebrew order is dominant, as shown by page numbering, each of the two reader-groups obtains the fundamental information about the content and publishing details of the book, adjusted to its distinctive alphabet. In Nicoïdski’s poetry collection, Hebrew clearly prevails, which is likely linked to the fact that her poems have already been published in the Latin alphabet (and several times, too); consequently, Perez’s edition is mainly intended for the Hebrew-reading public, offering them a Hebrew translation of Nicoïdski’s verses coupled with their original versions. ‘Ha-Elion’s volume rather represents a Judeo-Spanish edition of his poems together with their translation into Hebrew. This difference, though slight, speaks to a significant shift of emphasis.

Titles put on the front and back covers, along with title and copyright pages placed on either side of the book, can also be found in the bilingual Judeo-Spanish/Hebrew editions of poems by Margalit Matitiahū (e.g., *Kurtijo kemado*, *Alegrika*, and *Despertar el selencio*) and by Avner Perez (*Siniza i Fumo* and *Verdjel de Mansanas*) published in Israel.¹³ In the Matitiahū volumes, the pages are numbered from right to left, while, in the Perez collection, they are numbered from left to right. As a rule, the two versions of each poem are placed on the opposite pages, but Matitiahū’s *Alegrika* adheres to this model up to page 51, which is followed by a Hebrew part (pp. 53–61) and then a Judeo-Spanish part (pp. 63–68), which is not the exact equivalent of the preceding one. The last of the poems is succeeded, on page 69, by a note telling the readers who use the Latin alphabet that the reading of the book should commence from the right side.¹⁴ The latest bilingual edition of Matitiahū’s verse, *Luz cortada / Or hatsui* (2015), is particularly interesting.¹⁵ First of all, it comprises a selection of twenty-two Judeo-Spanish poems and thirty-six entirely different Hebrew pieces. Each of the language groups follows the order of its alphabet, with the Ladino poems distributed over pages 11 to 44 and the Hebrew poems occupying page-range 3–51. This time, the pagination is consistent with the direction of the corresponding alphabet, and page 45 (as counted from the left) is followed by page 57, after which the numbers decrease.

¹³ Margalit Matitiahū, *Kurtijo kemado* (Tel Aviv, 1988); ead., *Alegrika* (Tel Aviv, 1992); ead., *Despertar el selencio* (Tel Aviv, 2003); Avner Perez, *Siniza i Fumo* (Yerushalayim, 1986); id., *Verdjel de Mansanas* (Maale Adumim, 1996).

¹⁴ Matitiahū, *Alegrika*, 69.

¹⁵ Margalit Matitiahū, *Luz cortada / Or hatsui* (Madrid, 2015).

Nonetheless, a considerable majority of Judeo-Spanish poetry collections published over the last four decades open from left to right, in line with the vector of the Latin alphabet, and the front cover and front matter are arranged in conformity with this system. Some of these publications contain paratextual components, such as prefaces and introductions. *La ija i la madre komo la unya i la karne* by Matilda Gini Barnatán and Viviana Rajel Barnatán (2008) and *Ansina* by Myriam Moscona (2015) are interesting cases as they are furnished with Judeo-Spanish/Hebrew glossaries.¹⁶ These editions are primarily dedicated to Spanish-speaking readers. The poets and the publishers expected the texts to be fully comprehensible to readers only if they could avail themselves of relevant, in-built word-lists since, presumably, not all readers possess or have easy access to Ladino dictionaries.

Monolingualism vs. bi(multi/trans)lingualism

Judeo-Spanish is the sole language only in some books; more often than not, it is coupled with (an)other language/s—Hebrew, Spanish, English, and/or French—in various configurations. This co-existence does not necessarily entail a perfect equivalence or a complete overlap of the Judeo-Spanish text and the text in the accompanying language. Languages may be present together either in peritexts, or in the main text, or in both these types. I draw on Gérard Genette's definition and understand peritexts as encompassing a range of elements that come together with the main text, such as titles and subtitles, epigraphs and dedications, tables of content, glossaries, prefaces and afterwords, notes about the author/s, endorsements, and other editorial and commercial information.¹⁷ Peritexts may be produced by authors, publishers, and other people, for example, specialists in a relevant discipline. They are an important factor in streamlining the distribution process and, more importantly, in channelling the reception of the work. Below, I will discuss the content of prefaces and afterwords in more detail, but, before doing so, I will focus on the co-existence of

¹⁶ Matilda Gini Barnatán, Viviana Rajel Barnatán, *La ija i la madre komo la unya i la karne. Poesía sefardí contemporánea* (Madrid, 2008); Myriam Moscona, *Ansina* (Madrid, 2015).

¹⁷ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane Lewin (Cambridge, 1997 [1987]); Marie Maclean, "Pretexts and Paratexts: The Art of the Peripheral," *New Literary History* 22 (1991), 2:273–279.

languages within one book. The issue is salient in peritexts, as one function they serve is to help identify the text, announce its themes, specify its genre, and gesture at the intended readership. On this level, an additional language assists Judeo-Spanish, itself a depleted language, and facilitates the inclusion of the book in commercial and library catalogues, helping it find its way to the reading public. The presence of another language in the main text is geared to enhancing the comprehension of the work and making it accessible to readers with no knowledge of Ladino. Besides, it may also work as a trace or a sign of identity, as well as segmenting hybrid-structured works.

As already mentioned, bilingual poetry collections fall into two main kinds: in one, each poem appears in two language versions, and, in the other, a part in Judeo-Spanish is combined with a separate part in another language. Besides Matitiahú's *Luz cortada*, the latter species is represented by *Poemas de Estambul* (2008) and *El saco de Douglas* (2011) by Denise León.¹⁸ *Poemas de Estambul* is divided into the Spanish part titled "La isla de Alicia" and the Judeo-Spanish/Spanish part, whose title overlaps with the title of the collection as a whole. Basically, that second part—"Poemas de Estambul"—is written in Judeo-Spanish, but the author believed that translation would be helpful, if not indispensable, in the reception of her texts. The title is the most liminal of paratexts. This can be seen here in the subheadings, which, though not devised to help identify the book itself, mark internal divisions of the volume for the reader. The subheading "Poemas de Estambul" demarcates a physical area (on the pages of the book) and a symbolic territory (within the universe the collection conjures up) in which Judeo-Spanish exists or, rather, co-exists. *El saco de Douglas* has Spanish as its central language. The collection consists of three parts, each titled with a woman's name and a year, probably referring to the woman's date of birth: "Luisa (1914)," "Klara (1939)," and "Alegre (1971)." Like in the previously described volume, the subheadings introduce internal divisions, which call for interpretation. Judeo-Spanish only appears in the first part, placed on the same page beneath the Spanish text and italicized. This arrangement suggests that the poet expects the poems to be read in Spanish with the Sephardic language working as a sign—a symbolic expression and commemoration of identity. Even the readers who do not venture beyond the Spanish version of "Luisa

¹⁸ Denise León, *Poemas de Estambul* (Córdoba, 2008); id., *El saco de Douglas* (Buenos Aires, 2011).

(1914)” come across this sign. I construe it as indicating that the experience conveyed in these pieces could or should be rendered in Judeo-Spanish, which was likely the language in which the eponymous character did think. This is particularly important because this arrangement does not recur in “Klara” or “Alegre.” Assuming that the dates paired with the names designate the years when the women were born, the three characters belong to and represent three consecutive generations. If so, Alegre stands for the generation of the poet’s peers and Klara and Luisa correspond to the generations of, respectively, her parents and grandparents. Notably, the lineage highlighted in this composition is feminine, strongly suggesting that the women are a grandmother, a mother, and a daughter. The major theme in the part devoted to Luisa is her husband’s emigration, followed by her own journey with her child from the Old to the New World. Luisa is thus part of the first generation of newcomers to America. The passage from the “Luisa” section to the “Klara” section is heralded by the second subheading and marks the crossing of a threshold between two geographical territories and two historical, cultural, and linguistic realities, which have come to be referred to as Sepharad-2 and Sepharad-3.¹⁹ For most of its history, Sepharad-2 was intertwined with the central position of Judeo-Spanish. It was terminated by the Holocaust and mass Jewish migrations to Sepharad-3. In the collection, Klara is the figure that binds the two worlds, as her childhood memories go back to the life from before the emigration and encompass the post-emigration developments as well. She tells the story of her mother, Luisa, witnesses the departure from the Old World and the arrival at a new place, and experiences the challenges of accommodating to it. Presumably, if Alegre has any image of the country of her roots, it was likely transmitted to her by Klara. In *El saco de Douglas*, Judeo-Spanish is braided into the story of women’s lives and this connection resonates with the fact that, particularly in the twentieth century, Ladino was longest used by women in private settings, while the loss of the language and the fading of Ladino language skills between generations could thwart the effective expression of women’s experiences and their intergenerational transfer.

¹⁹ Sepharad I denotes Jewish civilization in medieval Spain, while Sepharad-2 encompasses the post-exile world of Spanish Jews. The term Sepharad-3 was coined to refer to the new places where Sephardim settled after the migratory waves of the second half of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the so-called Secondary Diaspora. See Iacob M. Hassán, “Los sefardíes: concepto y esbozo histórico,” in Paloma Díaz-Mas (ed.), *Los sefardíes. Cultura y literatura* (San Sebastián, 1987), 11–22.

León's gesture of bringing in Judeo-Spanish next to Spanish in "Luisa" exemplifies, in my view, the performative quality of postvernacular language use, as depicted by Shandler, where the very fact that a given language is used is more relevant than the meaning of the words. In this poetry collection, the meaning is available to those who know Judeo-Spanish or undertake to read and decipher this version. All other readers have the meaning of the words offered in Spanish. Irrespective of which variant they read, all readers inevitably encounter the very presence of Judeo-Spanish in this part of the volume as an indisputable and indelible fact.²⁰ It works as a trace of the past and of the old identity.

A different set of languages appears in *Lus ojus las manus la boca* by Nicoïdski (1978), one of the first Sephardic poetry collections published in the late 1970s.²¹ Written in the Latin alphabet, the Judeo-Spanish text is accompanied by an English translation, even though the volume was released in France. The poems were translated by Kevin Power, and not by Nicoïdski, whose first language as a writer (mainly of fiction) was French. This raises the question why she did not translate her poetry into French, while other poets predominantly chose their first language of communication and artistic expression as a companion to Judeo-Spanish. If any motives behind Nicoïdski's decision are to be conjectured, there was every reason for her to believe at the end of the 1970s that English would enhance the accessibility of her poems to readers in the Sephardic Diaspora. As a matter of fact, Nicoïdski's poetry was later published in translation into other languages: Hebrew and Spanish (both books contain the original and the translated versions of her poems).

In Salamon Bicerano's bilingual collection of poems *Kantes de maturidad*, published in Turkey in 1991, Judeo-Spanish is, logically, the central language.²² The express purpose of that edition was to publish poetry in this language, with the acknowledgements and the dedication to Bicerano's wife and daughters also phrased in Judeo-Spanish. Surprisingly enough, the Spanish preface is placed before the Judeo-Spanish preface and the

²⁰ The interpretation of the distribution of languages in relation to each other on the pages of León's and Moscona's poetry books was undertaken by Cynthia Gabbay, "Neodjudezmo en la lírica latinoamericana disidente: la construcción de registros intersticiales entre la autotraducción y el glosario," *Mutatis Mutandis. Revista Latinoamericana de Traducción* 15 (2022), 1:79–80; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.mut.v15n1a05> [retrieved: 1 Dec. 2023].

²¹ Clarisse Nicoïdski, *Lus ojus las manus la boca / Eyes, Hands, Mouth*, trans. into English by Kevin Power (Loubressac Bretenoux, 1978).

²² Salamon Bicerano, *Kantes de maturidad / Cantos de madurez. Poemas* (Istanbul, 2003).

Spanish translation precedes the original Judeo-Spanish version of each poem. As the texts are known to have been translated into Spanish not by the poet himself but by Turkish Spanish scholar Efrén Blanco, the translation may be assumed to be derivative of the primary Judeo-Spanish text. This makes their mutual arrangement in the volume all the more puzzling, but I will not try to attribute any particular meaning to that here.

In Isaac Habib's collection *La Djudería de Rhodes* (2010), Judeo-Spanish is the central language and the text is given in the Latin alphabet.²³ This is indicated by the inscription on the cover, reading *Escrito en djudeo-español* (written in Judeo-Spanish). The original poems are paired with their French and English translations, with the latter somewhat untypically coming before the former, printed on the pages preceding those with the Judeo-Spanish originals. The book was published in Cape Town and publishing details are only supplied in English. The title page contains the Judeo-Spanish title with the subtitle—*An Anthology of Writings by Isaac Habib*—in three other language versions placed directly underneath. This configuration of three parallel columns recurs in the dedication (to the poet's parents), the acknowledgements for the supporters of the project, and the table of contents. The book concludes with photos of the Holocaust survivors from the Jewish community of Rhodes; on this page, the photo captions and commentaries are given in French only. The following page contains two versions of a short account of Habib's work, first in French and below in English. The back cover features passages from reviews of Habib's poems, extracted from three different sources in three different languages: English, modern Spanish, and French. It seems that the mobilization of as many as three languages currently spoken in the Sephardic Diaspora aimed to make Habib's poetry accessible to as broad a reading public as possible. Offering it in the Judeo-Spanish version alone would have considerably restricted the target readership.

As can be seen, combining Judeo-Spanish with other languages is a frequent strategy in book editions of contemporary poetry. In fact, this is becoming a regular principle that seeks to make the texts accessible to potential readers in the postvernacular stage of the language. The publishers are aware that their potential readership may only have a poor command of the language and, accordingly, furnish books with tools that support both the comprehension of the text and the distribution of these

²³ Isaac Habib, *La Djoudería de Rhodes* (Cape Town, 2010).

publications. The tools can also make this literature more suited to teaching Judeo-Spanish. As a matter of fact, poetry is an additional authentic material used in language instruction and learning both by teachers and by learners. The configurations of languages tend to vary, with Judeo-Spanish most frequently being paired with modern Spanish, Hebrew, English, and French. Despite this pronounced tendency, there are some monolingual publications as well, as exemplified by Gracia Albuhayre's verse collections published in Bulgaria. These are cheap editions, typed on home computers by volunteers helping Albuhayre, as her advanced age made her unable to do that on her own. At the time, she lived in a care home and grappled with financial difficulties. Including translations into Bulgarian or another language would considerably have increased the cost of printing her work. Consequently, the editorial design of Albuhayre's poems is far more modest than in the case of other writers and front matter and commercial information are scant to the utmost. These formal features of the books were probably determined by economic factors.

The co-existence of languages, alphabets and typefaces within one volume may come as a surprise to readers today or at least disrupt their entrenched reading habits. Bringing these features together may be deciphered as expressive of the helplessness and amorphousness of the weakened Judeo-Spanish language system. At the same time, this phenomenon conspicuously resembles the practices previously observable in Judaism. Benjamin Harshav notes that combining different languages and fonts within one book, or even on one page, has long been part of Jewish culture.²⁴ This as a rule did not concern alphabets because Hebrew letters, divergent from the script systems of neighbor cultures, were for centuries a factor that unified and determined the identity of Judaic writing. The linguistic and typographic co-presence is a sign of the internal translanguaging of Jewish culture. Harshav cites the Talmud as his arch-example:

On one page of the Talmud you encounter separate texts in Biblical Hebrew, Mishnaic Hebrew, Ashkenazi Rabbinical Hebrew, classical Aramaic and Talmudic dialogical Aramaic, all organized as a highly controlled, graphically deployed and canonized mosaic. On a stratified page of a later-day family Torah, you encounter Biblical Hebrew, two Aramaic translations, Rashi and Rabbinical Hebrew of the major commentaries, and Yiddish translations of both the Bible and commentaries.²⁵

²⁴ Benjamin Harshav, *The Polyphony of Jewish Culture* (Stanford, 2007), 35–37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

Orthography

When discussing the materiality of the book, we would be well advised to examine the spelling choices made for the Latin alphabet, as there is no single and commonly binding system regarding this matter. The authors' and/or publishers' orthographic choices for the collections of poems might be affected by a range of factors, but some tendencies, patterns, and peculiarities deserve some special attention. In this article, I will address only a few selected examples, which nevertheless illustrate the complexity that can be observed in this field. The place of publication, to a degree, influenced the spelling systems adopted in the volumes.

In Turkey, the Latin alphabet was adopted for writing Judeo-Spanish in 1928, so the authors publishing in or hailing from Turkey could rely on a previously instituted publishing tradition. An examination of poetry collections published in Turkey—chronologically: *9 Eylûl* by Morguez Algrante (1975), *87 años lo ke tengo* by Lina Kohen Albukrek (1985),²⁶ and *Kantes de maturidad* by Bicerano (1991)—suggests that, despite the time lapse between them, they are remarkably consistent in using the characters that come from the Turkish alphabet with its diacritics. However, there are some inconsistencies or variations that differentiate these three authors or that appear even within the work of one author. In Greece, two collections of poetry by Rita Gabbai-Simantov—*Quinientos Años Despues* (1992) and *Fuente de mi tradision* (1999)—were published.²⁷ The orthography they use is different in that there are no letters with diacritics typical of the Turkish alphabet, which is an obvious consequence of the place of publication. In Greece and Macedonia, publishers used Hebrew Rashi semi-cursive until the Second World War, as a result of which no local tradition of language transliteration developed there. *Lus ojus las manus la boca* by Nicoïdski (1978) published in France uses an entirely different system, which makes it singular among the whole of modern work in some respects. As a major difference from most other poetry volumes, the vowels are written in it the way that reflects the original Judeo-Spanish pronunciation in the area of former Yugoslavia. Specifically, it uses 'i' for unstressed 'e,' 'u' for unstressed 'o,' and 'a' for 'e' in

²⁶ Lina Kohen Albukrek, *87 años lo ke tengo* (Istanbul, 1985).

²⁷ Rita Gabbai-Simantov, *Quinientos Años Despues* (Athens, 1992); Rita Simantov, *Fuente de mi tradision* (Athens, 1999).

diphthongs and some other stressed syllables (*curiladu* – vs. *korelado*, red; *fambri* – vs. *fambre*, hunger).

The first collections of Judeo-Spanish poetry published in Israel—*Siniza i Fumo* and *Verdjel de Mansanas* by Avner Perez and *Kurtijo kemado* and *Alegrika* by Margalit Matitiahū—use a spelling that is quite similar to the one proposed by the so-called *Aki Yerushalayim* system. Importantly, however, the transcription rules recommended by this journal have evolved, with problematic cases triggering new solutions. At the moment, the system is clear and specific enough to be increasingly often selected for texts published in the Latin alphabet. The books published in Israel from 1980s on usually conform with it (e.g., ‘Ha-Elion’s volume *En los Kampos de la muerte* edited by Perez).

The subsequent collections of poems by Matitiahū are perhaps most captivating because the writing conventions in them underwent a radical and deliberate change. The alterations were prompted by Matitiahū’s exchanges with Spanish researchers of Judeo-Spanish, affiliated with the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, especially with Jacob M. Hassán, whose position was that Spanish and Judeo-Spanish had grown from the same stem and who therefore supported transcribing Judeo-Spanish in ways aligned with the Spanish orthography.²⁸ Matitiahū’s first poetry volume to be published in Spain—*Vela de la luz* (1997)—contains a note that explains some of the modifications used in it:

In *Vela de la luz*, an attempt was made to bring the way of writing in Judeo-Spanish—that is, in Ladino—closer to the orthography of today’s Spanish. The prior editions of these poems used a simplified version of international phonetic transcription.²⁹

The note lists deviations from Spanish to help Spanish-speaking readers understand when the phonetic version of a given letter differs from that in their native language and explains how foreign characters should be pronounced. Consequently, the most radical departure from the first two editions of the collections published in Israel, that is, the replacement of

²⁸ I obtained this piece of information in conversation with the poet, but this circumstance was also mentioned in a panel discussion, a transcription of which can be found in: José Antonio Pascual, “La lengua sefardí hoy y mañana (mesa redonda),” in Iacob M. Hassán, Ricardo Izquierdo Benito, Elena Romero (eds.), *Sefardíes: literatura y lengua de una nación dispersa* (Cuenca, 2008), 148.

²⁹ Margalit Matitiahū, *Vela de la luz* (León, 1997); [El editor], “Notas a la transcripción del Texto ladino,” in Matitiahū, *Vela de la luz*, 11. If I do not indicate the translator’s name, the translation is mine.

'k' with 'c' for /k/, is not mentioned because this does not beg commentary for Spaniards. The following volumes, both those with new poems and the re-editions of previous works, generally relied on the orthography that approximated today's Spanish orthography. While no single, consistently applied system can be identified in them, Matitiahú's intention can be recognized as making this poetry intelligible to Spanish-speaking readers and, at the same time, retaining some of its features that refer to the phonetics and vocabulary of the Sephardic language.

The awareness that the Judeo-Spanish spelling is far from obvious today and that it calls for explanations is mostly there, as suggested by having some collections equipped with a special note on the system of writing used in them or with relevant guidelines in the preface. Notes of this kind can be found in Kohen Albukrek, Matitiahú's *Vela de la luz*, and in Myriam Moscona whereas an explanatory passage is included in the preface to Haim Vitali Sadacca's volume. The prefaces to Matitiahú's *Vagabondo eternal* and *Asiguiendo al esfuenio* do not spell out orthographic details, but they contain statements that the poet chose the orthography approximating modern Spanish for her poems.³⁰ The former announces that:

Whoever peruses these pages will discover a peculiar language. The poet and the publisher decided to approach this book by means of 'Castilianized' orthography, which veers from the traditional Judeo-Spanish one in order to make this poetry more readily accessible to readers accustomed to contemporary Spanish. This is a bold and generous decision which should be warmly welcomed because it speaks to the dedication to keep the language alive in service of communication with a broad readership.³¹

Notably, the statement primarily concerns the motivation behind the choice of orthography resembling that of Spanish, rather than individual characters, which Spanish-speaking readers find quite obvious to interpret. In his preface to *Asiguiendo al esfuenio*, Carlos Morales highlights the evolution observable across the volumes of Matitiahú's poems and addresses it in the context of the lack of standardization in Judeo-Spanish and the consequent search for the forms suited to this language.

When examined as a whole, this series of volumes displays an estimation of and ongoing experimentation with the language whose rules are yet to be standardized.

³⁰ Margalit Matitiahú, *Vagabundo eterno / Vagabondo eternal* (León, 2001); ead., *Asiguiendo al esfuenio* (Ourense, 2005).

³¹ Raúl Fuentes Milani, "La cuna de un idioma," in Matitiahú, *Vagabundo eterno (Vagabondo eternal)*, 11.

Her [Matitiahu's] evolution was clear and accurate in this respect: if in her first collections, the poetic writing was adjusted to universal phonetics, through which some Sephardic literary movements sought to separate Ladino from its Spanish stem. Margalit, having studied the language used in nineteenth- and twentieth-century newspapers published in Thessaloniki, eventually opted for the risky and almost complete 'Castilianization' of the graphic form. In doing this, her assumption was that syntactic peculiarities and often lexical archaisms will be sufficient signs to distinguish Ladino from contemporary Spanish.³²

Collections of poems by Juan Gelman (1994), Matilda Gini Barnatán and Viviana Rajel Barnatán (2008), Denise León (2008, 2011), Yacob Nahmias (2012), and Myriam Moscona (2015) have been published in Spanish-speaking countries.³³ A slightly different system was adopted in each of these books. Gelman used the model from Nicoïdski's *Lus ojus las manus la boca*; Nahmias's volume slightly diverges from today's Spanish orthography; León's collection, like Matitiahu's, shifts between typical Spanish writing and the letters or letter sequences unknown in Spanish; and Gini Barnatán, Barnatán, and Moscona are unmistakably more committed to making a distinction between the graphic form of their texts and modern Spanish. In León and Moscona, we come across some inconsistencies concerning the use of 'k,' 'qu,' and 'c.' Cynthia Gabbay sees them as a kind of contamination that betokens opening up communication between the two languages and that highlights both the similarities and the differences between them, which are obvious to Spanish-speaking readers.³⁴

Clearly, the modern orthographic diversity of editions of Judeo-Spanish poetry results from an interplay of factors. It may be construed as revealing the weakness of the system that was not standardized either before WWII or in its aftermath. Over the last four decades, no institution has been established to codify the rules of writing and to have its system commonly accepted and followed. *Aki Yerushalayim* stands out as the principles the journal has developed tend to be increasingly adopted, including outside Israel. Besides, some cases of instability and inconsistency, outlined above, indicate the shortcomings of the publishing process, where no copy editing or proofreading is practised, in many cases writers are left to their own devices in revising their texts, and publishing budgets are very

³² Carlos Morales, "Margalit Matitiahu y el encuentro con la 'luz'," in: Matitiahu, *Asi-guiendo al esfuenio*, 13.

³³ Juan Gelman, *Dibaxu* (Buenos Aires, 1994); Yacob Nahmias, *Poemas / Shirim* (Barcelona, 2012).

³⁴ Gabbay, "Neodjudezmo en la lírica latinoamericana disidente," 78–79.

modest. Without dismissing this factor, it would anyway be a simplification to attribute the decisive role to it. Rather, Morales' insight concerning Matitiahú's poetry should be heeded in order to recognize that efforts to revitalize writing in a language whose continuity has been ruptured are by default experimental and entail looking for new ways and modes of the poetic word, complete with its graphic form. Instead of lamenting inaccurate editing or the lack of linguistic education, we should perhaps appreciate the constantly reiterated attempts to develop new principles for writing and cater to the needs of today's readers. Certainly, we should also acknowledge the intentionality of these pursuits as revealed in the choices informed by the identification of the target readership and by the authors' wish to take advantage of the kinship between Spanish and Judeo-Spanish on the graphic level or, inversely, to emphasize the singularity of Judeo-Spanish at its contemporary developmental stage and its difference from Spanish, which is ever less visible especially if the Hebrew alphabet is relinquished.

At the same time, it should not come as a surprise that, in conference discussions, judgments are voiced stating that, as the Hebrew alphabet is abandoned and many Sephardic writers replace some of the previously common vocabulary stemming from Hebrew, Turkish, Greek, and South-Slavonic languages with words of Roman origin, their texts are in fact no longer Judeo-Spanish but only resemble this language. As such, they would be more of a stylization, meaning a deliberate imitation of selected characteristic features of Judeo-Spanish, where other features are purposefully omitted or even not known anymore.

The paratextual frame

Modern Judeo-Spanish poetry collections have a rich paratextual frame in respect of peritexts but include relatively few epitexts as compared with poetry in entrenched languages. Some recurrent features and patterns are observable in this regard. Firstly, the books are expressly multilingual. Multiple languages are used, for example, in the peritexts, such as the title, copyright, and commercial information and notes on the authors, with the data occasionally being provided in different alphabets as well. I will examine in more detail the issue of languages used in front matter because the choices in this regard indicate the intended target audience and sometimes reveal attitudes to Judeo-Spanish as well. There are books

in which the information on the copyright page is given in the language of the country of publication. This seems a fairly natural choice, suggesting that the book is an integral part of a given publishing system. This pattern recurs in all the collections published in Spain and in South America (e.g., books by Gelman, Moscona, León, Gini Barnatán and Barnatán, and Matitiahú); it is also found in *Un Ramo de Poemas* by Sadacca (published in the US), in Gabbai's (Tazartès) collected verse published in France, in *9 Eylûl* by Morguez Algrante released in Turkey, and in *La Djuderia de Rhodes* by Habib.³⁵ The earliest of them, *9 Eylûl*, was published in 1975, when no particular international interest in the Sephardic language was yet discernible; given this, supplying the editorial details in Turkish was probably prompted by the fact that the volume was primarily intended for the members of the country's Turkish-speaking Jewish community, with the international reading public being a secondary concern at best. The situation was different for the poetry collections published in the 1990s and later as the poets more clearly realized that their potential readers were dispersed over many countries and, consequently, chose one of the languages commonly understood in the modern Sephardic Diaspora, that is, English, Spanish, or French. This tendency is to be seen in the volumes by writers listed with Morguez Algrante. The place of publication of their works is closely bound up with the language of editorial information. However, the publisher of Gabbai-Simantov's *Fuente de mi tradision*, which was released in Greece in 1999, gave up on the Greek language (and alphabet) for the sake of English. This move may suggest opening up to readers unfamiliar with Greek, a language whose different alphabet makes it hardly legible to people with no links to its culture.

In the books published in Israel, their copyright pages mostly employ Hebrew; this is the case for the collections of poems by Perez and 'Ha-Elion's and Matitiahú's books published in Israel. Yet because they are bilingual, they also have the copyright page in Judeo-Spanish written in the Latin alphabet. This is a very interesting choice, since it restores to Judeo-Spanish the function that the language fulfilled in its vernacular community—a tool for information about the book. Despite its current diminished status, Judeo-Spanish was not assessed as useless in this respect, though it was supported by Hebrew, employed in its dedicated pages.

³⁵ Haim Vitali Sadacca, *Un Ramo de Poemas / A Bouquet of Poems*, trans. into English David Fintz Altabe (New York, 2009); Rita Gabbai-Tazartès, *Poezias de mi vida* (Paris, 2007).

The title is among the most important peritexts in books. Editions of contemporary Judeo-Spanish poetry exhibit some patterns and even peculiarities in this respect. For example, there are collections with distinct thematic titles, such as *Siniza i Fumo* [Ash and Smoke] by Perez, *Kurtijo kemado* [A Burned Courtyard] by Matitiah, *La ija i la madre komo la unya i la karne* [The Mother and the Daughter as Nail and Flesh] by Gini Barnatán and Barnatán, and *Quinientos Anios Despues* [Five Hundred Years Later] by Gabbai-Simantov.³⁶ A separate thematic title is one of the most frequent practices in literature because it gives the book an individual and unique quality. The title is a tool of communication that enjoys a strong and prominent position, resulting from the fact that it is the most liminal and commencing of all peritexts.³⁷ Among its multiple functions, the title enables the author to communicate what they consider central to a given book or even essential to their work as a whole. All these features make the title an impulse that stimulates readers' and researchers' interpretations. The thematic title is sometimes supplemented with a generic specification in the subtitle. Relevant examples of this arrangement include *Verdjel de Mansanas. Poemas* [Apple Orchard: Poems] by Perez, *9 Eylúl. Poesias* [9 Elul: Poems] by Morguez Algrante, *Kurtijo kemado. Poezias* [A Burned Courtyard: Poems] by Matitiah, *87 anios lo ke tengo (Poemas)* [87 Years, That's My Age (Poems)] by Kohen Albukrek and *Ritmo antiko. Poezias i kantigas* [In the Old Rhythm: Poems and Songs] by Matilda Koén-Sarano.³⁸ Two titles conspicuously combine the thematic component with the rhematic one, which defines the generic classification. These are *Kantes de maturidad* [Songs of Maturity] by Bicerano and *Poemas de Estambul* [The Poems of Istanbul] by León.

Danuta Szajnert notes that rhematic titles are more conventional and make a far lesser contribution to the manner the text is interpreted.³⁹ The rhematic model of designating their collections was only chosen by few writers. For example, Gracia Jak Albuhayre titled her first volume and its subsequent re-editions (or, rather, additional printings) *Поезия ен еспаньол ладино* [Poezia en espanyol ladino, Poetry in Spanish Ladino,

³⁶ In this paragraph, contrary to the principle adopted in this article, I translate the titles into English because I refer to their meaning. This in turn is related to the classification of titles that I use.

³⁷ Maclean, "Pretexts and Paratexts," 275.

³⁸ Matilda Koén-Sarano, *Ritmo antiko. Poezias i kantigas* (Jeruzolima, 2005).

³⁹ Danuta Szajnert, *Intencja autora i interpretacja – między inwencją a atencją. Teksty i parateksty* (Łódź, 2011), 220.

2005, in Cyrillic!], where the generic definition comes with the specification of the language.⁴⁰ Albuhayre's later collections have similar titles and are consecutively numbered from 2 to 5 to facilitate identification (e.g., *Poesia en djudeo-espanyol. Livro No. 2*; Poetry in Judeo-Spanish. Book no. 2, 2010).⁴¹ A similar strategy, with some variations, was adopted by Nahmias in *Poemas* [Poems, 2012], Sadacca in *Un Ramo de Poemas* [A Bouquet of Poems, 2009], and David Isaac Menassé in *Seleccion de poesias en el idioma de nuestros abuelos – ladino* [Selected Poems in the Language of Our Grandparents: Ladino, 1995].⁴² It is noteworthy that the generic category is usually accompanied by information on the language of the texts. An analogous approach is encountered in some poetry collections with thematic titles, where the name of the language is woven into the title or added in the subtitle (e.g., Gini Barnatán and Barnatán, *La ija i la madre komo la unya i la karne. Poesía sefardí contemporánea*; Habib, *La Djoudería de Rhodes. Escrito en djudeo-español*; Matitiah, *Alegrika. Hebreo-djudeo-español*).

To define the language of a book in its title is quite a singular device that is basically not used in entrenched literatures, where information on the language is at most given in translations, to specify from which language they were made, or in bilingual editions. However, in a literature in the postvernacular phase, such a gesture acquires a particular meaningfulness and prominence. Firstly, it communicates the intention of the writer and the publisher who, within a respective publishing market, or more broadly in the international context, address a readership interested in Judeo-Spanish and pointedly let them know that this language can be found in a given volume. Secondly, this sign also has performative power because it names the language of the text. At this point, a question arises whether this act in and of itself is enough to warrant that the verses are indeed in Judeo-Spanish. The question is all the more valid that the language of some of these publications only slightly differs from modern Spanish: in spelling and archaized lexical items, far more rarely by the vocabulary that entered Judeo-Spanish through language contact,⁴³ sometimes merely in syntax or morphology, etc. It would take a thorough linguistic analysis to

⁴⁰ Жак Албухайре, *Поезия ен еспаньол ладино*.

⁴¹ Gracia Jak Albuhayre, *Poesia en djudeo-espanyol. Livro No. 2* (Sofia, 2010).

⁴² David Issac Menassé, *Seleccion de poesias en el idioma de nuestros abuelos – ladino* (Atena, 1995).

⁴³ Words stemming from Turkish, Hebrew, Serbian, Bosnian, and even French used to account for a far greater proportion of vocabulary in the Sephardic texts of old.

determine the criteria for demarcating precise lines in this regard. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of postvernacular considerations, all such gestures of naming should be taken into account and interpreted since they express writers' intentions to have their texts read as Judeo-Spanish. It matters insofar that the repertory of postvernacular practices depicted by Shandler for Yiddish permits usages that lack proficiency or continuity and are fragmentary and incomplete. Shandler emphatically argues that:

Contrary to established definitions of its legitimacy as the equal of other languages, *Yiddish in its postvernacular mode is not necessarily thought of, or even valued, as a separate, complete language.* Its partial, restricted use, including frequent atomization into a limited inventory of individual idioms and words (and even fragments of words), suggests that Yiddish is esteemed for its difference from, rather than its similarity to, other languages. This notion can be understood as enriching rather than impoverishing Yiddish culture by opening up its linguistic boundaries, thereby enabling a variety of engagements with the language other than conventional fluency. . . . Indeed, as the value of Yiddish as a whole language declines, the esteem of its fragments increases.⁴⁴

Although the current situation of Judeo-Spanish is not identical with that of Yiddish, this perspective helps us examine and make sense of practices that fall outside the compass of other research approaches.

The data provided on the cover and the title page are the most effective of peritexts at the stage of book promotion and helping books find their way to readers. The reception process itself and the comprehension of the work can be more affected by the information and views conveyed in prefaces or afterwords by writers, publishers, authorities on Sephardic studies, or activists for the preservation of Judeo-Spanish. As in this article, I have already referenced prefatory texts addressing the way the Latin alphabet is used to write Judeo-Spanish, here I will only cite the examples that state that the poems in the book are in Judeo-Spanish. Such statements, like subtitles specifying the language of the poetry, also have a performative function and can make the verses be read as Judeo-Spanish. Notably, the so-called allographic prefaces,⁴⁵ that is, those provided by individuals other than the poet or the publisher, as a rule cite the function or "rank" of such individuals, which authorizes them as entitled to discuss Sephardic culture or poetry in general. This is supposed, firstly, to lend credibility to the preface and, secondly, to legitimize the poet and incorporate their

⁴⁴ Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, 194 [italics mine].

⁴⁵ See Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, 263–275.

work into contemporary Ladino literature, whose demarcating lines are vague, with some instances of classification easily disputable.

Interesting prefatory matter is included in the books of Matitiah, who has published about ten collections of Ladino or bilingual poetry. Some of those contain prefaces or afterwords. In his preface to Matitiah's *Kurtijo kemado*, Shmuel Refael, who lectures at the Department of Literature of the Jewish People, Bar-Ilan University, at the time, presented the volume as evincing the revival of Judeo-Spanish in poetry. He also assessed the collection as a significant achievement of Israeli literature, without binding it to the Sephardic context alone.⁴⁶ Refael also wrote a preface to *Alegrika*, where he deemed it equal to the preceding book, which the Sephardic community welcomed with considerable interest and later read with respect and appreciation.⁴⁷ Written, interestingly, in Ladino, both texts were later reprinted in Matitiah's collection *Vela de la luz* published in Spain (1997). Another preface by Refael, tellingly titled "Modernism in the Judeo-Spanish Way," opens *Vagabundo eterno* (2001), portraying Matitiah as a poet committed to enhancing the relevance of renewed Judeo-Spanish verse in Israel and beyond. This act appears very important in the context of Israeli literature, which is by nature multi-ethnic: "The diversity of ethnic groups is one of the salient features of Israeli society, which consists of innumerable cultures that come together and merge into one in a melting pot or form a multi-colored mosaic."⁴⁸ Refael also stresses that Matitiah's poems stand out for their innovative poetic devices, unprecedented in Sephardic lyrical poetry. This effect largely ensues from the fusion of traditional Judeo-Spanish models and modern developments in new Hebrew poetry. Refael lauds Matitiah's courage in embracing such explorations without knowing how the reading public would respond to them.⁴⁹ Matitiah's poetic diction is also analyzed by Carlos Morales in his introduction "Margalit Matitiah, y el encuentro con la 'luz'" [Margalit Matitiah and an Encounter with "Light"]. Morales examines her work both against the backdrop of Israeli and Jewish cultures and in the context of the poet's personal experiences

⁴⁶ Shmuel Refael, "A la entrada del *Kurtijo kemado*," in Matitiah, *Kurtijo kemado*, 32–35.

⁴⁷ Shmuel Refael, "Del kurtijo kemado al kurtijo de la vida," in Matitiah, *Alegrika*, 70–71.

⁴⁸ Shmuel Refael, "Modernismo en el Judeo-español. Acerca del nuevo libro de poemas de Margalit Matitiah," in Matitiah, *Vagabundo eterno / Vagabondo eternal*, 12.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 12–15.

to trace the Spanishness (*españolidad*) of her identity and roots. Besides, he comments on her orthographic choices and their evolution.⁵⁰ In a short foreword to *Vagabundo eterno*, titled “La cuna de un idioma” [The Cradle of Language], Raúl Fuentes Milani, the secretary of the Embassy of Spain in Tel Aviv, talks of how the phrases of this poetry sound to and what associations they may trigger in Spanish-speaking people because, though the orthography seems familiar,

the vocabulary and the pristine and calm cadences are undoubtedly like in Judesmo. To a Spanish-speaking reader, it is a source of feelings recovered: a territory that is sometimes startling, sometimes unknown, sometimes redolent of something and on other occasions a new encounter.⁵¹

Although Avner Perez’s collections *Siniza i Fumo* and *Verdjel de Mansanas* were published without prefaces, he himself produced introductions to a range of Sephardic literature published both in the original form and in translation. First, he wrote a prologue to a bilingual (Judeo-Spanish/Hebrew) edition of children’s poems penned by himself and Ada Gattegno-Saltiel (respectively, *Una Torre en Yerushalayim* and *Multikolor*).⁵² In this prologue, he names the language of the poems, resorting to the Ladino label, and underscores the experimental quality of the project, with its objective to fuel the development of modern literary Sephardic language: “Creating children’s poems in Ladino is yet another attempt to test the limits of the potential inherent in this language and face up to the challenge posed by the genre.”⁵³ Perez foregrounds the experimental approach to Judeo-Spanish in its current stage. It can even be construed as linguistic engineering underpinned by a sound knowledge of Sephardic literary sources and of modern European and Hebrew cultures. Such ideas spring to one’s mind when one examines the totality of Perez’s work as a researcher, writer, translator, and publisher. His pronouncements authorize the inclusion of a given work into Ladino literature. This happens in particular in editions he has published. The very fact of selecting a writer, a translator, or a text for publication works in and of itself as a certificate

⁵⁰ Morales, “Margalit Matitiahú y el encuentro con la ‘luz’,” 9–16.

⁵¹ Fuentes Milani, “La cuna de un idioma,” 11.

⁵² Ada Gattegno-Saltiel, *Multikolor. Poemas Para Chikos i Grandes* (Maale Adumim, 2010); Avner Perez, *Una Torre en Yerushalayim* (Maale Adumim, 2010).

⁵³ [Avner Perez], “Dos livros de poezias para ninyos en ladino,” 2009 [date of the on-line edition], <http://folkmasa.org/av/migdall.htm> [retrieved: 10 Nov. 2023]. Neither the printed edition nor the Internet text is officially signed by Perez, who as the director of the Maale Adumim Institute is at the same time the publisher of the volume.

of quality. For example, in his preface to ‘Ha-Elion’s *En los Campos de la muerte*, Perez writes:

Having fulfilled his obligation of bearing witness to the events [of the Holocaust], Moshe ‘Ha-Elion adopts a new role—one of a writer who gives an artistic aspect to his experiences; a poet using the language he sucked with the mother’s milk—the rich, supple and fluent Judeo-Spanish tongue—to write a work that, while deeply personal, rises to the level of a universal epic poem, rendering the history of a community and extraordinary in its powerful appeal.⁵⁴

Perez dwells on ‘Ha-Elion’s ties with Judeo-Spanish and his mastery of the language as a literary medium. In turn, in an extensive preface to the collected poems of Nicoïdski, Perez primarily aims to portray her as one of the first modernist writers in Ladino and to discuss the themes of her poetry. Before offering detailed analyses, Perez depicts the general relevance of Nicoïdski’s work:

Clarisse Nicoïdski, who appeared on the Ladino writing scene more than fifty years later [than Moshe David Gaon], was also a ‘lone rider,’ with no roots in any Ladino art and no kinship to it, is firmly grounded with her two feet in modernism. She draws on other European languages and is herself part of Europe’s poetic landscape. In this way, she continues the common Ladino tendency, commenced in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, to modernize and turn again toward the West.⁵⁵

To comprehend Nicoïdski’s work, one can usefully rely on her authorial preface in a booklet that accompanies *Una manu tumó l’otra*, a CD with recordings of selected poems by herself and Gelman performed by Dina Rot; the text was later reprinted in the volume of Nicoïdski’s collected poetry, *El color del tiempo*.⁵⁶ The preface recounts her language experience, which was marked by a division of spheres into French, Judeo-Spanish, and, to a lesser degree, other languages. Nicoïdski writes that French belongs to her and she to French more than to any other language. She remembers Judeo-Spanish from childhood and conversations with parents, with the language long remaining the medium of intimate communication

⁵⁴ Avner Perez, “Moshe ‘Ha-Elion – Kontinuador de la tradision de las koplak en ladino,” in ‘Ha-Elion, *En los Campos de la muerte / Bemahanot hamavet*, 94.

⁵⁵ Avner Perez, “Shira kauva,” in Nicoïdski, *Klaster kol veteruf / Cara Boz i Locura*, 14.

⁵⁶ Clarisse Nicoïdsky, [untitled], in Juan Gelman, Clarisse Nicoïdsky, Dina Rot, *Una manu tumó l’otra. Cantando poemas de Juan Gelman y Clarisse Nicoïdsky en lengua sefardí*, music by Eduardo Laguillo (CD edition) (Madrid, 1997), 34–37; Clarisse Nicoïdski, “Introducción,” in ead., *El color del tiempo. Poemas completos*, trans. into Spanish Ernesto Kavi (Madrid, 2014), 11–13.

with her mother. She calls it “our Spanish” (*spaniol muestru*) and, referring to her poetry, confesses: “And so I ventured to create these pieces so as to preserve her [mother’s] voice. Whenever I completed a book in French, I went on to write something in the semblance of songs *in our Spanish*.”⁵⁷ This passage brings into relief the name of the language—not the official one, but as referred to when talking with the poet’s loved ones with whom she bonded through it. Importantly, this language is linked here to the mother’s voice, which offers an interpretive key to the poetry of Nicoidski and of some other Sephardic writers as well.

The introduction to Haim Vitali Sadacca’s collection *Un Ramo de Poemas* was written by Rachel Amado Bortnick, the founder of the *Ladinokomunita* discussion forum and one of today’s eminent authorities on the use of Judeo-Spanish as a living language. While not connected to academia, she is an expert as a native Judeo-Spanish speaker and a campaigner for its preservation and even revitalization with decades’ worth of activist experience. In one of the first sentences, she emphasizes that Sadacca, a poet who has published in Turkish since his early years, now writes in Judeo-Spanish—in “his beloved ancestral language.”⁵⁸ Concluding, she assesses his verses as “an outstanding example of poetry in Ladino.”⁵⁹ *La ija i la madre komo la unya i la karne* by Gini Barnatán and Barnatán opens with a preface authored by Haïm Vidal Sephiha, an emblematic figure both in Sephardic studies and in activism for the preservation of the language, who is directly introduced as a professor of Judeo-Spanish at the Sorbonne. His text is a grandiloquent eulogy, meaningfully titled “Muestro mundo i muestra lingua salvados kon las poesiyas de Matilda i Rahel, madre i ija ke van refraguando nuestro mundo undido por la Shoá” [Our World and Our Language, Saved in the Poems by Matilda and Rajel, Mother and Daughter Who Rebuild Our World Drowned by the Shoah]. Sephiha extols the poems for an array of qualities, not least for their emphatically referenced exemplary use of Judeo-Spanish:

Let [the two poets] bask in the well-deserved praise for giving us these charming and resonant verses . . . and for coming to crown our beautiful language with their marvellous poetry: a true hymn glorifying Our [sic] language, ‘the memory of our

⁵⁷ Nicoidsky, [untitled], 37 [italics mine].

⁵⁸ Rachel Amado Bortnick, “Introduction,” in Sadacca, *Un Ramo de Poemas / A Bouquet of Poems*, iv.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, vi.

community' (*poevlo*). This and many other works by Matilda and Rahel should be taught and inscribed in every single Judeo-Spanish textbook and every copybook so that whatever is ours may live eternally. Amen!⁶⁰

Yacob Nahmias furnished his poetry volume with a first-person preface, which relates the major events in his life and references to the language of his poems:

Today, I am a student at the Bar Ilana University's Naime y Yehoshua Salti de Estudios de Ladino Centre, headed by Professor Shmuel Refael. This is where I rediscovered my roots and again began to speak Ladino as spoken at my home before the war. Having now more free time on my hands, I have written poems in this language to leave this legacy to the following generations in a language that I once did not like but that was the language of my childhood.⁶¹

This declaration clearly indicates that Nahmias believes to be writing in Ladino whereas linguistic analysis suggests that his idiom only slightly departs from modern Spanish, with the orthography he adopted reducing the distance even more. It is not my task to determine whether Nahmias is a so-called semi-speaker or perhaps merely a rememberer of the Sephardic language from his youth, with some command of the language renewed as a result of studies he undertook in retirement superimposed on this foundation. In terms of my argument, what matters more is Nahmias's intention to produce poems in Judeo-Spanish, together with the motivation that had driven him and that he shared in the passage above. Significantly, the controversial language issue was addressed in the volume by its publisher, Pilar Romeu Ferré, herself a researcher and editor of numerous original texts in and studies on Judeo-Spanish, familiar with literature produced at the various stages of the development of the language. In a concluding note, she honestly and competently pre-empted the doubts the collection might stir:

In recognition of the poet's uniqueness as a very late-bloomer and his courage in expressing himself in the mother tongue he has learned anew and taken for his own, we respected his sometimes very uncommon and creative Judeo-Spanish phrases, Castilianized expressions and words resulting from his hectic search in

⁶⁰ Haïm Vidal Sephiha, "Muestro mundo i muestra lingua salvados kon las poesiyas de Matilda i Rahel, madre i ija ke van refraguando nuestro mundo undido por la Shoá," in Matilda Gini Barnatán, Viviana Rajel Barnatán, *La ija i la madre komo la unya i la karne. Poesía sefardí contemporánea* (Madrid, 2008), 10.

⁶¹ Nahmias, [untitled], in id., *Poemas / Shirim*, 7.

dictionaries and the effort, nothing short of titanic, that he put into finding the right words to convey his feelings.⁶²

It is customary in the Sephardic literature publishing series under Romeu Ferré's general editorship to have books appended with, sometimes quite extensive, glossaries including terms incomprehensible to average Spanish-speaking readers. In this case, she explained that such a list of terms did not seem necessary because the texts were basically intelligible both to specialists and to the general public. Even if her note is only an addition to the main text, her statement is crucial to understanding Nahmias's work. In his writings, Judeo-Spanish has transformed, but the poet's intention, combined with a certain contract inscribed in the peritext, makes it this very language, or perhaps its metonymy, as for the lack of any other Judeo-Spanish accessible to him, it fulfils this very function. It is the function of the language of the roots, remembered, excavated years later, dusted and carefully repaired, found at a time of acute nostalgia for the past and a yearning for origins.

Equally, or even more, performative is Juan Gelman's confession that he wrote his poems in Sephardic. Probably, his choice of this, rather than any other, term was not random:

I wrote the pieces in *dibaxo* in Sephardic, from 1983 to 1985. I am of Jewish origin, but not Sephardic, and I suppose that that had something to do with the matter. I think, however, that these poems are, above all, the culmination or rather the embouchement of *Quotes and Commentaries*, two books I put together while in exile, in 1978 and 1979, and whose texts communicate with sixteenth-century Castilian. As if searching for the substratum of that Castilian, foundation in turn of our own, had been my obsession. . . . I accompany the texts with present day Castilian not because of any distrust in reader's intelligence. Whom I beg to read them out loud in one Castilian and then the other, in order to listen, perhaps, among the two sounds, to something of the time which trembles and which provides us with a past way back from el Cid.⁶³

When the two language versions of the poems are directly juxtaposed, the words and grammatical forms untypical of Judeo-Spanish become visible. The fact that Gelman attributes his own meanings to many of the forms he uses is particularly clear in translations. At the same time,

⁶² Pilar Romeu Ferré, "Nota de la editora," in Nahmias, *Poemas / Shirim*, 138.

⁶³ Juan Gelman, "Escolio," in Gelman, *Dibaxu*, 9. Here I quote its English version from: Juan Gelman, "Escolio" [English version by Stephen Ritson], in Gelman, Nicoidsky, Rot, *Una manu tumó l'otra. Cantando poemas de Juan Gelman y Clarisse Nicoidsky en lengua sefardí*, 24.

he achieves a similarity to an old text in the layer of sound. By imitating Bosnian pronunciation, as inspired by Nicoidski's poems, which "awoke that need that slept within [him] deaf ready to awake,"⁶⁴ he creates an imaginary space of creative freedom—a world of sounds and meanings aligned with Judeo-Spanish and connoting it, at a time when the language itself only rarely speaks in its own voice. Gelman seems to have predominantly aimed for an auditory effect, archaization and greater autonomy. His verse comes across as a game that he plays with himself, readers, and the language. If we play along and accept the rules the poet has set, new meanings will emerge for us.

I believe that Gelman's choice of the term with which to refer to the language he uses is much-telling as well. The point is that the name is linked to a cultural development of some relevance in Latin America, specifically to Sephardism (*sefardismo*) or Neo-Sephardism (*neosefardismo*), which built on the history and legacy of *Sepharad* to legitimize the presence of Jewish newcomers in Ibero-American societies. While, in the first generation, the movement focused on their ways of integration, in the following generations, it evolved toward celebrating their difference. An inclusive phenomenon, it encompassed Jews of all descents rather than only the Sephardim, whose integration in Latin America was facilitated by the Judeo-Spanish background most of them had brought there, making things easier for them than for the Ashkenazim. For this reason, the latter were in greater need for justifying and supporting their choice of that new land and that new culture as their living space. Neo-Sephardism highlighted the splendid medieval Jewish heritage of the Iberian Peninsula as a constitutive factor of Judaic culture. The relevance of this legacy lay not only in that various branches within Judaism had assimilated the thought of grand Iberian personages but also in that it comprised the experience of socially, economically, and artistically productive co-existence with other groups in a multicultural community of which Jews had been an inalienable and precious part. Without seeking to discuss this complex issue in detail, I evoke it to show that Gelman's remarks in "Escolio" and the *Dibaxu* collection itself should be read against this meaningful background. The Sephardic language, which the preface pairs with "our Spanish," treating it as an embodiment of a particular era, variety, or developmental stage of Spanish, is used by an Argentinian of Ashkenazi

⁶⁴ Ibid., 24.

descent to compose poetry; this breeds associations with the idea of the Jewish place in American culture as rooted in Sepharad.⁶⁵

The creative act Gelman performed in *Dibaxu* has been a point of reference for later Ibero-American writers, such as Myriam Moscona. In her preface to *Ansina*, she cites Gelman's concept of publishing poems in two language versions. While appreciating the advantages of this solution, she decided to put her collection together from poems in Judeo-Spanish only and add a glossary at the end to help readers understand them. The preface explains her choice:

I believe that my reasons are connected to what Judeo-Spanish is for me. I mean, there are things that can only be said in one language, but not in any other. . . . I trust that readers will be able to steep themselves in their musical structure and in the traces that modern Spanish has preserved of those old footsteps.⁶⁶

Symptomatically, Moscona, like Gelman, ascribes the power of poetry to its sound, which is a vehicle for "traces" and an avenue to another dimension.

The passages from peritexts (titles, subtitles, and prefatory writings) discussed above show that editions of modern Sephardic poetry indisputably contain information about the language of the verses they contain, with this language named in various ways. Introductory texts sometimes include a short depiction and history of the language and also spell out the ideas behind the writing system adopted by the poets. The need to define the language of the book is rather uncommon as compared with poetry volumes in entrenched languages. The poets sometimes explain why they opt for a bi- or monolingual edition or suggest what can help readers without the firm command of the language to understand the text (e.g., a glossary). Of course, paratexts are also used to present the poets' biographies, explain their relationship with Judeo-Spanish, and elucidate their intentions and inspirations; allographic prefaces and cover notes authorize the poets' use of Judeo-Spanish and emphasize the significance of their publications to recent Sephardic culture.

⁶⁵ For more details on Neo-Sephardism, see Edna Aizenberg, *Books and Bombs in Buenos Aires: Borges, Gerchunoff and Argentine-Jewish Writing* (Hanover-London, 2002).

⁶⁶ Myriam Moscona, "Exordio," in ead., *Ansina*, 11-12.

Conclusion: Metaphors rendering the present status of the literature

In exploring the various facets of today's Judeo-Spanish literature, we might better understand its distinctive nature by relying on an image that, by analogy, will help us capture its essential features. To my mind, an apt visual metaphor for the current condition of Judeo-Spanish literature is provided by the Bartek Oak (see Fig. 1), an oak tree in the vicinity of the village of Zagnańsk in central Poland. Estimated to be about 680 years old, the Bartek Oak was announced a natural monument in 1954 for its unique value as a natural and historical feature, falling under legal protection and conservation. It is one of the touristic attractions of the region, with a lot of people travelling to see this rarity. The Bartek Oak is enveloped in a narrative mesh woven of truths, myths, legends, and anecdotes. It is surrounded by a fence to keep both animals and human visitors at a distance and prevent the latter from climbing the tree, cutting inscriptions in its bark, and making bonfires under it. To prolong the tree's life, a number of supports were installed around to prop its leaning trunk and branches. The forest conservation services regularly perform a range of preserving and reinforcing interventions on the oak, such as nourishing it and eliminating parasites, because without such aid the tree would be unable to survive in the natural conditions typical of this climate zone. These concerted efforts are far greater than in case of other forest trees.

If we take this image as a metaphor for modern Ladino literature, the complex support system represents the apparatus that must underpin texts in this language to make them understandable to readers and available to the reading public, whether they will read them or only exhibit them in their libraries for their symbolic value. In such publications, the role of frames and props can be performed by languages other than Judeo-Spanish across the levels of text organization: in translations of the poems, on the covers, on title and copyright pages, in notes, prefaces, tables of content, etc. Auxiliary functions are fulfilled by introductory texts that address the very language of this poetry by naming it, outlining its history, linking it to Sephardic culture, explaining its current status, and depicting the challenge of writing in Judeo-Spanish today. Support is additionally provided by glossaries appended to books, explanations of the orthographic rules adopted in a given volume and spelling out the motives behind a given poet's decision to offer readers texts with translations to readers or, inversely, to include verses in Judeo-Spanish alone.



Fig. 1. The Bartek Oak, photo by Mirosława Mielczarek⁶⁷

The Bartek Oak is surrounded by young trees that have sprung from it. In Sephardic literature, similarly, there are authors whose connection to the language is not fully continuous. They return to it after a long time-lapse, boasting no proficiency in it or even learning it anew on the basis of their childhood memories of its other speakers. There are poets for whom Judeo-Spanish is a language they have learned as a foreign one. The literary continuity of Judeo-Spanish has been particularly ruptured, including severe disruptions in the knowledge of literary language and literary codes within Judeo-Spanish culture. Also, the young trees around the Bartek Oak bring to mind the authors who feel Sephardi but choose to write in other languages, in this way basically becoming part of the literary system of another tongue.

To render modern Sephardic literature in natural metaphors is not unwarranted, given that we often use the terminology of the natural sciences to describe the developmental stages of languages and thus of literatures and cultures. Our relevant lexicon comprises notions of the

⁶⁷ The Bartek Oak, photo by Mirosława Mielczarek, CC by 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/02/D%C4%85b_Bartek_1.jpg [retrieved: 8 Mar. 2023].

“family,” “kinship,” “birth,” “maturity,” “evolution,” “extinction,” “dying out,” and “death” of languages. We also find it useful to talk of “vitality,” “fertility,” “regeneration,” “Creolization,” and the like, when depicting languages. If so, our explorations of literary and language processes can be supported by images informed by analogies between those and phylo- and ontogenetic life cycles. This is, however, far from being unambiguous, as we can employ multiple available models. The Bartek Oak was my first association when thinking of the current state of Judeo-Spanish. Yet, later, I had an opportunity to see another Polish natural monument known as the Woliner Oak in the village of Wapnica in Wolin National Park. The tree is also a protected specimen even though it has already collapsed. Left exactly as and where it fell, the oak is supposed to rot and decompose at its natural pace. Nothing is being done to stop or reverse the natural biological processes. A part of the oak’s trunk is still in one piece and a few of its branches come out in leaves in spring, while its dead parts are being colonized by mosses, lichens and other species, with young trees deriving from it growing nearby.

The analogy that I can see here is that, even though the Woliner Oak represents decline, it still has a few fecund branches. Likewise, contemporary Judeo-Spanish literature still persists, mainly in poetry or translation. For their part, the various postvernacular, more or less visible practices of engagement with the language and literature, albeit vestigial, discontinuous, fragmentary, and simply differing from a mature linguistic and literary system, resemble these new forms of life that begin to thrive on the remains of the tree and around it. They would not have come into being, had it been not for that earlier fertile substrate. Basically, only a further development of postvernacular Sephardic culture in years to come will show us which of these images more accurately registers the current condition of Judeo-Spanish and its literature.

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