

JUDEO-SPANISH IN STANDARD LANGUAGE CULTURES: MINORITY/DOMINATED LANGUAGES AND LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY¹*Jelena Filipović²***Abstract**

The status and sustainability of minority/dominated languages in the 21st century are very much influenced by general and language ideologies of times gone by. Namely, Eurocentric modernity-driven language policy and planning, which result in the formation of standard language culture ideologies, are at the core of the cultural, political and historical frameworks which, since the 19th century, have influenced the relationship between majority (standardized) languages and minority/dominated languages spoken in political entities recognized as nation-states in Europe. It is within this framework of *standard language cultures* (Milroy, 2001) that the history, the loss, and the possible revitalization of Judeo-Spanish can and should be understood.

Keywords: Judeo-Spanish; standard language culture; minority languages; minority language sustainability, maintenance, revitalization; nation state; language policy and planning

Introduction: language and power

Language, as understood from the critical sociolinguistic perspective, is never about linguistic structures and formal rules of language system organization independent of its users. Rather, it is viewed as a tool for the creation of communicative and cultural practices which are used to define social hierarchies, legitimize or inhibit political engagement, and allow for or obstruct educational enrichment and prosperity of a speech community (Filipović, 2015). Consequently, within the critical research paradigm, language cannot be understood without taking into consideration the “institutional processes of symbolic domination” (Heller, 1995: 373) which is allocated to certain linguistic varieties. The importance and relevance of symbolic domination is clearly visible in status language policy and planning ideologies based on European modernity (see Bauman & Briggs, 2003; Filipović, 2015; for a detailed discussion) by which certain political and scientific institutions have been given the power to decide

¹ Sections from papers I published previously in: Filipović & Vučo (2012), Filipović (forthcoming) and Filipović & Vučina Simović (2014) have been included herein.

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which language(s) and which forms of chosen language(s) should be used in a range of communicative domains relevant to the functioning of a particular society/nation/state; i.e., which linguistic varieties become standard languages with officially (politically, socially and educationally) recognized statuses and roles within given political entities. Modernity is a European and Eurocentric (or Euro-American, according to Atkinson, 2003:190) phenomenon which has made tremendous impact on social thought and the understanding of human knowledge over the last 300 years. Modernity is at the core of the *Enlightenment* period, based on the rationalist model of science and society, which set up a scene for an understanding of human language as separate from its social agents – valid only if it is purified, i.e. standardized, and of use only to those educated enough to be able to use the ‘pure’ language forms and thus claim their position on the social hierarchy (Bauman & Briggs 2003: 31 Filipović, 2015: 11). The ‘pure’ language is a standardized linguistic variety, imposed on a given speech community through top-down language policy and planning in which a handful of individuals with social and political power (induced by their privileged positions of economic and educational ranking) decide which variety (and which forms and structures within it) should appear in public, administrative and educational domains: “Only those who speak the ‘proper’ language (those who have at their disposal codified, standardized linguistic varieties with developed alphabets and written body of knowledge and literature, and those who have access, i.e., financial and other resources, to education (...) are allowed to engage in public practices and decision making to the exclusion of any possible participation of all others who do not have access to the acquisition/learning of a privileged linguistic variety”. (Filipović, 2015: 12)

The rationalist view of language was gradually expanded by the romanticist valorization of *linguistic vernacularization*, through which vernacular (folk/lower social class) varieties were raised to the level of standard languages (e.g., as in the case of Vuk Karadžić’s reform which led to the formation of the basis of the prescriptive present-day Serbian standard variety), and then associated with specific ethnic groups, identified as nations, entitled to their *national languages* within their own *nation-states*. This particular linguistic, historical, political and social shift led to the introduction of the nationalist view of language, language standardization and language policy and planning in general. The concept of the *nation-state-language* ‘holy trinity’ (Bugarski, 2005) is at the core of the cultural, political and historical framework which since the 19th century has influenced the relationship between majority (standardized) languages and minority/dominated languages spoken in political entities recognized as nation-states in Europe. It is within this framework of *standard language cultures* (Milroy, 2001) that the history, the loss, and the possible revitalization of Judeo-Spanish can and should be understood.

What is a standard language culture?

Most of the Eurocentric world lives in what can be called standard language cultures (Milroy, 2001; Filipović, 2012; Filipović & Vučo, 2012; Filipović, 2015), which are the results of specific language policy and planning procedures in which conscious, systematic and systemic efforts are made to create linguistic forms and structures that we believe and claim to be part of ‘good’, ‘proper’, ‘educated’ standard languages. These standard languages can be understood as the results of a number of choices made on our behalf by language policy makers through top-down language management (see Spolsky, 2009; Filipović, 2015) that has for centuries managed to convince the majority of us that there exist less prestigious and more prestigious linguistic varieties, and that the latter ones should be used in public discourse, educational settings and all other domains in which we would like to be perceived as members of particular social classes associated with higher levels of formal education and certain economic and social power and influence within the societies we live in.

As already pointed out, language policy and planning that led to the creation of standard language culture ideology is very directly and closely related to European and Eurocentric nationalism. Since the *Enlightenment* period, the concept of a *unified* (standard) language becomes an extremely important factor in defining the communal/social/political (read: national) unity of a given group of speakers. It is through their differences from *other* languages that nations have formed their identities. Standard linguistic varieties and corresponding national identities are political constructs created under the given set of historical and political circumstances in which they have developed. They are thus political rather than linguistic facts which need to be examined in close correlation with their social, psychological, political, cultural and economic counterparts and not analyzed from a purely structural, formalistic point of view, completely stripped of any extralinguistic parameters, as has been the case during most of the 20th century (for further discussion, see Pennycook, 2006; Hornberger, 1998; Filipović, 2009; Filipović, 2015; etc.).

The nationalist language standardization model (Geeraerts, 2003; Bugarski, 2005; Filipović, 2009; Filipović and Vučo, 2012; Filipović, 2015) which was developed within a framework of critical sociolinguistics in order to account for the above described ‘one-language-one nation-one state’ movement that swept across Europe during the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, and which has been revitalized yet again during the last decade of the 20th century upon the fragmentation of, for instance, the former Soviet Union and the Socialist Federative Republic of

Yugoslavia, indicates that linguistic choices in practically all European countries have always been dependent on the political, social and epistemological ideologies of the policy makers who link certain linguistic forms and functions to the “true” national identity, more often than not directly correlated with the dialectal varieties spoken by the powerful elites in the newly founded nation-states. Antonio de Nebrija can be viewed as a paradigmatic precursor of such language policy and planning when in his famous 1492 grammar book of Castilian he chose the variety spoken by the then most powerful elite on the Iberian Peninsula of the newly create Kingdom of Castile and Aragon that set out to conquer the New World during that very year and that eventually became the official language of 21 countries in Europe, Central, Africa and South America³.

Standard language cultures and minority/dominated languages: Judeo-Spanish as a case study

The above outlined European and Eurocentric context of language policy and planning and language standardization has had serious and long lasting consequences on the reality and sustainability of linguistic varieties spoken by ethnolinguistic minorities, who since the late 18th century until present have found themselves living in nation-states with strongly defined standard language ideologies in which they had to learn to cope with new socio-political, cultural and educational circumstances. For instance, European nation-states in the Balkans, unlike the Ottoman empire, which was the home of many Sephardim since their arrival to the region at the beginning of the 16th century, very early on became very interested in the linguistic practices of their citizens and expressed a clear political stand toward the assimilation of all peoples living in their territories into nations represented by the corresponding states.

Furthermore, standard language culture ideology did not and does not pertain to political and scientific elites only, but also forms an integral part of the language ideology of common citizens. Native speakers of national languages who believe that the fact that they have a firmly fixed standardized language systems is of crucial importance for their national and individual existence. The fact they believe makes them intellectually and culturally superior to those who do not speak it at all or do not speak it well and/or to those who have non-standardized linguistic varieties as their mother tongue. As is to be expected, this language ideology becomes a topic of discussion among members of ethnolinguistic minorities who start challenging the traditional views on their non-standardized linguistic varieties as carriers of their ethnic and religious identity, symbols of their culture and tradition. They start questioning

³ In addition, Spanish was until 1973 an official language of the Philippines as well.

their position in the nation-states within newly defined social networks in which membership to the majority community becomes a passport to social mobility. As I have shown elsewhere (Filipović & Vučina Simović, 2012; Filipović & Vučina Simović, 2014) in the case of the Sephardim in the Orient, language ideologies among the speakers of Judeo-Spanish present a paradigmatic example of the spread of influence of standard language culture ideology. With the rise of nationalism in Europe at the end of the 18th and throughout the 19th century (which at that point in time had completely different socio-political connotations than it has today, e.g., see Belić, 1915/1991), the creation of Balkan nation-states and the formation of standard linguistic varieties directly related to national identity and unity all led to a shift from extreme traditionalism (in which Judeo-Spanish was an exclusive communicative code of the Sephardim) to calls for radical and not so radical innovations, such as proposing the abandonment of the ethnic language in favor of the majority standard language of a given state, or in favor of Hebrew or standard Spanish (Filipović & Vučina Simović, 2014; Vučina Simović 2006; 2007; 2010).

This nationalist view of languages and standard language cultures is still very much present in modern-day Europe. The status and the future of many European minority/dominated languages at the beginning of the 21st century can also be analyzed from the same epistemological perspective. In other words, the sustainability of minority languages in Europe, such as Judeo-Spanish, can only be successfully assured if a complex relationship of different factors and conclusions is taken into consideration and applied within one overarching transdisciplinary critical paradigm of linguistic research.

Judeo-Spanish in modern-day standard language cultures

The status and the future of Judeo-Spanish in the 21st century is further complicated by the fact that there are layperson Jews and scientists alike (e.g., Myhill, 2004) who believe that Jews across the world have built and kept their identity through race and religion rather than through languages they have used for everyday communication. Myhill (2004) even claims that Judeo-Spanish (just like Yiddish) should not be treated as a Jewish language, ‘suggesting that scholarly interest in these languages stems from various political and cultural agendas, rather than their inherent linguistic distinctiveness’ (Krohn, 2006: 3).

According to this view, due to the fact that they have lived in the Diaspora for centuries, the Jews have used a number of languages they have been exposed to, and the only authentic linguistic variety they can associate with is Hebrew, the national language of the nation-state of Israel. Of course, there are other more positive (and in

my opinion, less discriminative) scientific attitudes about Judeo-Spanish and its relationship with the Sephardim, who are descendants of Spanish Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 (e.g., see Bunis, 2011).

As pointed out almost two decades ago by Harris (1999: 443), the future of Judeo-Spanish is rather bleak due to the fact that at the present moment there are no speakers of Judeo-Spanish living in a unified geographic space, which means that the transgenerational transfer of the language is rather unlikely.

Despite the pessimistic prognosis made at the end of the previous century, over the last two decades the situation regarding the sustainability, the maintenance and the revitalization of this particular linguistic variety has improved. Twelve years later, Harris herself assures us that “attitudes concerning Ladino and its perpetuation have improved greatly in the last fifteen or twenty years, especially due to the acceptance and endorsement of ethnicity the world over” (Harris, 2011: 52). Academic interest in Sephardic studies in Europe, Israel and North America has been further intensified since the 1992 Quincentennial commemoration of the Edict of Expulsion (Stillman & Stillman, 1999: xiii). Not only theoretical Sephardic studies have been on the increase, but applied linguistic research has also been initiated which recognizes the need for the introduction of Judeo-Spanish in formal academic contexts in an attempt to bridge the gap between “scholarly research and academic presentations and the communities that could nurture and benefit from them” (Frank, 1999: 533). According to Navon (2011), Judeo-Spanish is presently taught at five Israeli universities in Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, Haifa, Beer-Sheva and Ramat-Gan. Furthermore, steps in the area of language policy and language documentation have been taken by the Israeli government which set up the National Authority for Ladino (*Autoridad Nacional del Ladino – ANL*) in 1997 (Harris, 2011). Periodicals, newspapers, textbooks to study Judeo-Spanish, together with other media content that have been kept active in different parts of the world (Israel, Spain, United States, Bulgaria, Turkey, etc.) where somewhat identifiable⁴ Sephardic communities are still to be found, have also contributed to this increased interest in revitalizing Judeo-Spanish (see Harris, 2011, for an extensive list of media resources and publications in Judeo-Spanish).

All the above illustrates the heightened academic curiosity about Judeo-Spanish, which has, to the largest extent, resulted in an increased number of academic publications and international conferences on the topic of Sephardic language literature and culture.

⁴ This is by no means meant in a derogatory sense. It simply implies that wherever there are Sephardim living in the same geographic space, they are either completely assimilated into general Jewish or majority communities (Gold, 1987).

Is there a chance for revitalization of Judeo-Spanish in the 21st century?

The most honest answer at this point is: nobody really knows. Should we or shouldn't we 'leave the Judeo-Spanish language alone', to paraphrase the title of Fishman's (2006) book on language policy and planning? As Fishman (2010: 141) effectively presents, all Jewish languages, Judeo-Spanish included, served a very important multifaceted function of helping Jews in the Diaspora maintain their ethnic identity and, at the same time, adapt to the cultural models of the regions they inhabited. In the case of the Sephardim, that was obvious both in Spain and in the Orient. The question should be raised whether their ethnicity and cultural identity today is directly and irreversibly connected to Hebrew and the state of Israel. Myhill (2004) for instance, claims that the development of written traditions in both Ladino and in Yiddish at the end of the 19th century presents a clear consequence of European modernity and nation-state Westernization of the Jews living in Europe (see Fishman, 2010 for further discussion).

Research on language maintenance and revitalization (e.g., Fishman, 1991; 2001; 2006; Flores Farfán & Córdova Hernández, 2012; Flores Farfán, 2009; Filipović, 2015; Filipović, forthcoming, etc.) clearly indicates that the sustainability of dominated minority languages cannot be assured without a direct action geared towards challenging negative language ideologies among the members of minority communities. In other words, grassroots activities are a necessary prerequisite for any attempt at reversing language shift or assuring language maintenance of minority/endangered languages. However, they are never successful unless coupled with institutionalized support from national and supranational language policy and planning institutions. And, despite the fact that, in the eyes of some authors and a large number of international institutions (such as the Council of Europe, UNESCO, etc.), the nationalist model of language standardization and language ideology of standard language cultures was being replaced by a post-modern interpretation of reality as fragmented, multifaceted and, by default, plurilingual, the fact still remains that in many parts of the world there still exists a strong nationalist tendency, supported by standard language culture ideology which puts one linguistic variety on a pedestal to the exclusion of all other communicative codes present in a given ethnic group/society/nation. One nation can have ONLY one language which is identified with the state, thus (implicitly or explicitly) placing high value on different kinds of official monolingualism (Cummins, 1981; 1984; 2001; Filipović et al., 2007; Filipović, 2009; Filipović et al., 2010).

That has been the case of Judeo-Spanish in the state which is nowadays the homeland of many Sephardim from all over the world, the state of Israel. According to

Spolsky & Shohamy (1999), there are thirty-two languages spoken in Israel, but only three of them are recognized as the dominant languages in all communicative domains: Hebrew, Arabic and English (Ben Rafael et al., 2006). Furthermore, the state of Israel has been defined by political scientists as an ethnic democracy, which is “propelled by an ideology or a movement of ethnic nationalism that declares a certain population as an ethnic nation sharing a common descent (blood ties), a common language and a common culture“ (Smootha, 2002:477), in which “Zionism is de facto the state ideology. Its central objective is to make Israel Jewish in demography, language, culture, institutions, identity and symbols, and to protect Jewish lives and interests all over the world” (Smootha, 2002:485). As the same author claims, “Hebrew is Israel’s official and dominant language (...). It is dominant in all areas of life (home, media, economy, government, science, etc.). It is the only official language in Hebrew education, displacing foreign languages and cultures in the Israeli-born generations.” (Smootha, 2002: 485)

Without entering into a discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of the Western-type liberal, multicultural democracy vs. ethnic democracy, which is the main topic of the above cited article, it is quite obvious that there is not much room left for the maintenance and revitalization of Judeo-Spanish (or any other Jewish languages, aside from Hebrew for that matter). As a matter of fact, Spolsky and Shohamy (1999: 15) provide an excellent illustration of the revitalization of Hebrew as a clear case of nationalist language policy and planning action, whose political ideology of Zionism goes hand in hand with the ideology of standard language cultures: “The establishment of Hebrew, as well as of Zionist nationalism, was a paradigm case of what Hobsbawm (1983) called the invention of tradition. Its transformation into an ideologically bolstered standard language followed a pattern not different from most of the other national languages that achieved their status in similar conditions.”

In academic circles, issues have been raised about Judeo-Spanish being a truly European minority language (Filipović & Vučina Simović, 2014), rather than a language of Israeli Jews, which should be revitalized in accordance with the 21st century language ecology movement. However, I have heard Sephardic scholars, on several occasions at international academic conferences on Sephardic studies, expressing their doubt regarding the need for Ladino/Djudezmo/Judeo-Spanish⁵ revitalization. Very often, it is viewed by those who research it as a dead language which ignites intellectual curiosity in the same way as Classical Latin or Classical Greek have done over the centuries.

In my opinion, one key issue has been lacking until very recently in any

⁵ Judeo-Spanish is a neologism applied in scholarly discourse. Other commonly used names of this linguistic variety among the speakers themselves are Djudezmo and Ladino (see Bunis, 2011, for further elaboration).

discussion regarding the future of Judeo-Spanish, and that is the attitude of Judeo-Spanish speakers themselves toward their linguistic and cultural traditions. As Benor (2009) points out, “in much research on Jewish languages, contemporary Jews have not been included”. And, as recent research indicates, there are still speakers who use the language actively, mostly in virtual environment and thanks to the expansion and accessibility of information technologies.

Judeo-Spanish is actually actively present on the Internet, especially in the form of discussion groups⁶. This seems to be marking a new era for minority/dominated languages maintenance and revitalization. In a world where social and geographic mobility significantly reshapes the structure, the quality and the density of even majority speech communities, virtual space becomes a new region of interactions which enables speakers of both majority and minority languages to create a sense of proximity, identity and solidarity leading to a formation of a completely new type of communities of practice and interest. Some authors call this new space a virtual agora, a “common name for places, networks and institutions which influence on knowledge” (Frederiksen et al, 2001: 4, cit. in Filipović, Jovan, 2012: 122). This virtual venue “has to be as inclusive and as accessible as possible, to use stakeholders’ life experiences for contextualization of knowledge which is *NOT* expert dominated.” (Filipović, Jovan, 2012: 122, emphasis mine)

This is precisely the type of language practice which Sephardic scholars interested in the sustainability of Judeo-Spanish need to take into consideration. Namely, it is the best way to make the voices of the speakers heard, and provides the context in which academic expertise and the needs of virtual Sephardic communities can be successfully joined together; a context in which it would be possible to make use of the existing online social practices, activities and their results to create an overarching virtual closeness among speakers of Judeo-Spanish. Active participation in discussion group debates, critical ethnographic research based on observation, analysis and interpretations of the speakers’ ideologies, communicative needs and their suggestions regarding future uses of Judeo-Spanish and possible expansion of its communicative domains all come together to create a powerful tool to support the revitalization process (see Filipović, 2015, for further discussion).

⁶ E. g., *Ladinokomunita* (<http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/Ladinokomunita/info>) or *Sefardimuestro* (<http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/sefaradimuestro/info>). Furthermore, there are numerous websites dedicated to culture and education in Judeo-Spanish (Pierson, 2010: 2), as well as academic networks such as *Sefardiweb* (<http://www.proyectos.cchs.csic.es/sefardiweb/>), administered by the *Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas* (CSIC) or multimedia collection of Sephardic folklore (<http://www.sephardifolklit.org/>), gathered by Samuel Armistaed (University of California, Davis) and Joseph H. Silverman (University of California, Santa Cruz) between 1957 and 1993.

Conclusions

As can be clearly seen from the above sections, I strongly believe that we most certainly ‘do not want to leave the Judeo-Spanish language alone’. “(W)e should never forget that there are speakers out there (counted in thousands) who are still competent users of Judeo-Spanish (in either spoken or written medium, or in both), and who use it in purposeful communicative actions as they “attempt to create a sense of shared linguistic identity”, rather than focus on the notion of the “moribund (language) discourse” (Brink-Danan, 2011: 116)” (Filipović, 2015: 69).

There seem to be hands extended in the positive direction from a number of agents interested in the revitalization of Judeo-Spanish. On one hand, there are speakers all over the world who use it in online communication on a daily basis – according to Pierson (2010) there are more than 1500 active members of the *Ladinocomunita* forum. On the other hand, the above mentioned *Israel National Authority for Ladino and its Culture* has made it a part of its official agenda not only to document this language (as has been the case in the past) but also to introduce the teaching of Judeo-Spanish/Ladino into the mainstream higher education in Israel, which makes it available to a wide range of interested audiences⁷ (see Navon, 2011, for further information). And finally, European scholars, who see Judeo-Spanish as a European minority language, and who are ready to take part in transdisciplinary, multilateral research through engaged and prolonged dialogue with native speakers of the language and language planners in Israel and other countries where Sephardic Jews live, can contribute to restore and expand different communicative domains of this language in order to satisfy the needs of a number of academic and layperson communities of interest across the world.

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⁷ “Since the foundation of the Authority by the *Knesset*, a fresh breeze has entered the field of Sephardi culture. Unfortunately, we are all well aware of the natural process of the passing away of the elders who spoke Ladino naturally and the absence of new Ladino speakers. In order to learn a language, one has to hear it *de la faja a la mortaja* (from diapers to shrouds), i.e., from infancy to old age. Nevertheless, there is also a new generation showing interest in Ladino, and the different university courses offer hope of the continuity of the language not only in research, but also in popular gatherings. Beautiful is the Spanish Jewry heritage; let us wish it a long and fruitful life” (Navon, 2011: 7-8).

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