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Contact, Assimilation and Language Endangerment: The Case of Judeo-Spanish in the
United States

An estimated thirty-thousand Jews from the Ottoman Empire (Turkey and the Balkans) came to the United States between 1890 and 1924 (Ben-Ur 1998). These Jews, the Sephardim, traced their roots to the Iberian Peninsula pre-1492, and spoke a language, Judeo-Spanish (Ladino), that developed in their diaspora. Sephardic Jews grew in number in cities throughout the United States including Los Angeles, New York and Seattle. However, the Sephardim have been faced with a variety of linguistic challenges as a new immigrant community. In cities with large Spanish-speaking populations such as those aforementioned, the Sephardim have been actively encouraged within their own communities to speak a more modern variety of Spanish (as opposed to their “fossilized” Judeo-Spanish). As a result, Judeo-Spanish is presently considered a highly endangered language, Stage 7, according to Fishman’s (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale.

In this paper, we review the linguistic challenges that the Sephardim have faced in the United States from two distinct angles. First, an initial review of periodicals in Judeo-Spanish from Los Angeles (*El Mesajero*, 1931) and New York (*La Amerika*, 1928) demonstrates a historic desire to “purify” Judeo-Spanish “jargon” in order to assimilate and prosper in the United States. This desire is confirmed in a series of sociolinguistic interviews that we personally conducted with Judeo-Spanish speakers in New York and Los Angeles in order to assess the issues of language endangerment, maintenance and contact. In addition to the information provided by our speakers, their varying proficiency in Judeo-Spanish attests first-hand to the endangered status of this language.

Second, we use the linguistic data collected in the sociolinguistic interviews to analyze a specific phonological phenomenon that is presently occurring in Judeo-Spanish as a result of dialectal leveling with Modern Spanish. While Judeo-Spanish phonemically maintains the palatals /ʒ/, /dʒ/, and /ʃ/ as in medieval Castilian, many of our speakers velarize these sounds, pronouncing them as [x] as is typical of Modern Spanish (Romero 2013). As a result, these speakers sometimes pronounce Judeo-Spanish words such as

/iʒo/, /dʒente/ and /leʒos/ as [ixo], [xente] and [lexos], respectively. The present study explores the frequency with which Judeo-Spanish speakers velarize these palatals in an effort to evaluate the situation of dialectal leveling in Judeo-Spanish communities in Los Angeles and New York.

Preliminary results of this analysis, paired with the information we obtained in the sociolinguistic interviews, suggest assimilation among the Sephardim in the United States in an attempt to speak a modern variety of the language. These results are consistent with those of Harris (1994, 2006) in which she notes that Judeo-Spanish speakers both in and outside of the U.S. often decide to standardize their language in an attempt to communicate effectively with speakers of modern varieties of Spanish.

Selected References

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