

Postvernacular Ladino at Sephardic Adventure Camp

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, thousands of Judeo-Spanish-speaking Jews immigrated from Greece and Turkey to the United States, including a sizeable contingent to Seattle. The descendants of these immigrants mostly have little knowledge of Judeo-Spanish, known in the community as “Ladino.” But they interact with the language in postvernacular (Shandler 2005) ways, forming a metalinguistic community (Avineri 2012) surrounding Ladino and its Sephardic culture. This paper analyzes postvernacular Ladino at one site important to Sephardic Jews in Seattle: Sephardic Adventure Camp, a two-week overnight summer immersion experience for dozens of children and teenagers.

Based on 4 days of ethnographic observation and several interviews with staff members, I found that counselors and campers use and speak about Ladino in ways similar to participants in postvernacular Yiddish-oriented groups and events (Avineri 2012). Despite the fact that nobody at the camp is fluent in Ladino and only a few staff members claim even modest proficiency, the camp has several metalinguistic activities oriented around the language, such as “Ladino word of the day,” teaching of Ladino songs, and extra points during color war for using Ladino words on team banners. I also found that Ladino loanwords and phrases are used in the same domains that Avineri posits are common in metalinguistic communities:

1. Greetings and responses to greetings: *Buenos días* (‘good morning’), *salud i vidas* (‘health and life’).
2. Evaluations: *muy bueno* (‘very good’).
3. Cultural terms: *yaprakis kon aróz* (‘stuffed grape leaves’), *ojo de hamsa* (‘eye of the hand decoration’).

In addition, I found that Ladino loanwords and phrases are used for three other domains that might be added to Avineri’s model of metalinguistic community, especially in timeframes far removed from an immigration:

1. Kinship terms: *nona* (‘grandma’), *papu* (‘grandpa’), *tia* (‘aunt,’ affectionate term for family friend).
2. Euphemisms: *bragas* (‘underwear’), *pantalones* (‘pants’).
3. Terms of affection: *hanum* (‘dear one’).

Like Avineri’s findings on Yiddish groups, I found conflicting ideologies surrounding Ladino. Some feel that it is important for Sephardic Jews to use words from Ladino instead of words from Yiddish, a more dominant source language in the American Jewish linguistic repertoire (Benor 2010), especially in the religious sphere. One staff member at the camp even wrote a song (to the tune of a well-known Ladino song) about Ladino words that should be used in place of their Yiddish correlates: “*kal*, not *shul* (‘synagogue’); *teva*, not *bima* (‘pulpit’); *hechal*, not *aron* (‘ark’), *Arvit*, not *Mayriv* (‘evening prayer service’); *bivaz*, not *gezuntheit* (‘bless you’); *Judezmo*, not *Yiddishkeit* (‘Jewishness’).” Others do not place so much importance on the use of Ladino words and feel comfortable using the Yiddish words mentioned in this song. The word *shul* is even used in some official camp materials. I observed this tension at the end of prayer services one day, when someone congratulated the prayer leader with the Yiddish / Ashkenazic Hebrew word of congratulations, “*Shkoyach*.” Another man looked at him with surprise and corrected him by using the Ladino / Sephardic Hebrew correlate: “*Chazak u’baruch*.”

Although Ladino is significantly more endangered than Yiddish, I did not find the same discourse of imminent language loss at SAC that Avineri found in Yiddish cultural settings. Instead, camp leaders' rationales for teaching postvernacular Ladino to campers were focused more on the joy of the language and culture and the ways they enable individuals to connect with their relatives and their community.

These findings are analyzed in comparison to my own research in progress on the use of Hebrew at Jewish summer camps in diverse American communities, as well as to broader literature about immigrant languages in the United States and elsewhere.

Bibliography:

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