The meaning of Ladino: The semiotics of an online speech community

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This article shows how the semiotics of a language, that is, what a language signifies, is a negotiated process observable by following online debates. Indeed, the adoption of new media seems to instigate, if not intensify and revitalize, these debates. I analyze an electronically mediated discussion group stating its goals as the maintenance, revitalization and standardization of Ladino (Judeo-Spanish). Employing theories from linguistic anthropology, I show how language ideologies map out the boundaries of what I call "Ladinoland" by insisting on particular meanings of Ladino. Group members assign the language these meanings through debates about Ladino's glottonym, recursive boundary marking between Ladino native and novice users, and erasures of linguistic elements perceived to be nonstandard.

1. Introduction

In their introduction to Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th–20th Centuries, historians Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue describe the construction, flourishing and eventual demise of a Sephardic Kulturbereich in the Eastern Sephardic heartland. They write, "Above all, this is a history of a world that has come to an end. [...] While a few remnant communities survive in the area today, the Judeo-Spanish collectivity as a distinct Jewish entity is, for all intents and purposes, dead" (2000, p. xxiii).[1] Although Judeo-Spanish, also known as "Ladino,"[2] once enjoyed wide vernacular use as a primary language of Sephardic Jews (Jews who claim ancestral links to the Iberian peninsula), it is estimated that today approximately 300,000 people world-wide (Alexander, 2007, p. 191) know this fusion language whose phonology, grammar and lexicon are primarily Spanish, yet, which incorporates elements of Hebrew, French, Arabic, Aramaic, Italian, Turkish and Greek.

The same year that Benbassa and Rodrigue declared the Judeo-Spanish collectivity dead, a handful of Ladino advocates created "Ladinokomunita" (hereafter LK), an online discussion group in the form of a list-serve and website.[3] According to a LK founder, this initiative was taken up not in response to historians' declaration of the end of the Judeo-Spanish world, but, rather, in light of remarks made at a 1999 conference of the Israeli National Authority for Ladino and its Culture (NALC)

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[1] In an interesting parallel, Bronner, following Harshav, highlights a discourse prevalent at the time that the late 1990s marked the "terminus for Yiddish in Jewish history" among non-pious Jews (2001, p. 131).

[2] Linguists sometimes refer to the spoken language of the Sephardic Jews of the Balkans as "Judezmo" while Hispanists call it "Judeo-Spanish" (Baker, 1994/1995, p. 50); North African Sephardim speak a regional variant called "Haketia." "Ladino" is the glottonym most often used to cite the text-based transliterations and translations of classical Jewish texts. However, given that online discussion takes the forms of written text, and following the preferred glottonym of the list-serve itself, I retain the term "Ladino" throughout this essay unless citing other sources.

[3] Although the semi-public nature of this data will make its provenance known to many scholars of Ladino, I have attempted to anonymize the group as much as possible, outside of changing its official name. In line with anthropological ethical norms, I have altered any data that would clearly reveal participants' identities (all members' names have been omitted). Messages in English are reproduced verbatim; messages in Ladino are translated by the author.

held in Jerusalem; at that conference, NALC's vice president, Moshe Shaul, touted the potential role of the Internet in "perpetuating the language" (Bortnick, 2004, p. 3).

In the decade since its establishment, LK members have posted over 26,000 messages. This group attempts to reverse the trend to eulogize Ladino through its stated goals of "maintenance, revitalization and standardization of Ladino." Early publicity for LK reads like a doctor's healthy prognosis for a long-ailing patient, as exemplified by the following message distributed to Sephardic discussion groups in 2000:

> Date: Thu, 18 May 2000
> Subject: To all Ladino-speaking Sephardim[4]
> Dear friends,
> Ladino (Judeo-Espanyol) is NOT a language that Sephardim USED TO speak! It is alive and well, and if you don't believe me subscribe to the LK list. But you have to be able to speak or understand Ladino, for all our messages are in that language. It is the most active list I've ever seen, with digests often having over 10 messages a day from people all over the world. People are writing in the most wonderful stories. If you know Ladino, want to remember it, improve it… subscribe to the list.

Like advocates of other endangered languages, Ladino speakers and promoters have increasingly taken up new technologies, specifically electronic mediation, to revitalize their speech communities and, concomitantly, the collective identities for which language is seen to be an integral element (Eisenlohr, 2004). Language, in this case Ladino, is one locus of identity work communicable over space via the technology of Internet discussion media. Many see Ladino promotion as a tool to reconstruct Sephardic community not in a local geographic entity with still-existing concentrations of remaining – largely elderly – vernacular speakers (such as Istanbul, Bat Yam or Seattle, for example) but, rather, virtually across the globe. LK's publicity message marvels, in fact, at how a community of Ladino speakers spanning the globe could hardly have been realized without the virtual real estate offered by the Internet:

> News of the death of Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) has been greatly exaggerated. This beautiful Sephardic language is not only used daily, but it is the only acceptable language of communication in our virtual community [. . .]. The members of this Internet chat group, who may reside hundreds and thousands of miles from each other on earth, have discussions with each other daily via e-mail in the language they all understand. In other words, here, Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) is indeed very much alive! (2001)

Though LK's stated goals are the revitalization and maintenance of language, the forum is also replete with family memories, nostalgia and regained connections once assumed to be lost. Although critiques of virtuality produced through new media often focus on the imitative, dystopian, fractured and individualistic kinds of identity they produce (see, especially, Turkle, 1995), LK's members see the Internet as functioning rather to bring together a diasporic collective, one previously scattered by expulsions and migrations around the globe and now reunited through the aid of Internet technology. While the medium might be virtual (rather than face-to-face), as I show below, participants attempt to (re)construct "actual" relations and speech, and they make claims to authentic (i.e., non-virtual) Sephardic identity vis-à-vis the deployment of Ladino qua vernacular.[5]

This article shows how the semiotics of a language, that is, what a language signifies, is a negotiated process observable by following online debates. Employing theoretical tools from linguistic anthropology, I aim to increase our understanding of how the Internet contributes to the formation of community based around an endangered language and how that community is constructed via metalinguistic discourse and language ideologies. I show how language ideologies delimit the multiple meanings assigned to a language with the apparent goal of bounding a potentially unbounded speech community.[6] Discussions about Ladino's meaning center on debates about Ladino's glottonym, recursive boundary marking between Ladino natives and novices and, finally, erasures of linguistic elements perceived to be non-standard. Drawing on a decade of LK's discussion logs, I examine how membership in this online community is discursively constituted and debated. Following the suggestive position that meaning is "distributed along the boundaries" (Bakhtin in Stolow, 2005, p. 136), a main goal of this paper is to examine the discursive strategies employed online by LK's members for maintaining, challenging and imagining the boundaries of what I will call "Ladinoland."[7]

LK now exists as but one of many Internet venues created for the promotion and revival of Ladino, but it stands out as an early forerunner in the use of the electronic medium. Since the group's beginnings in 2000, I have been a list observer, with the explicit permission of the moderator. Throughout the ten years, I read and collected messages yet did not contribute to

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[4] Although linguists have distinguished between the spoken and written versions of this language, list-members blur these qualifications in a way that mirrors the ambiguity of online communication itself. Is it more "like talking" or "like writing?" I sometimes call LK's members Ladino "users" to address this issue.

[5] See Gruber (2009), on virtual Judaism, especially her discussion of authenticity and cultural appropriation (p. 489).

[6] I call these ideas about language "ideology," following Silverstein (1979), Schieffelin et al. (1998) and other linguistic anthropologists, especially because LK's discursive domain is, as Gal and Irvine write, "suffused with the political and moral issues pervading the particular sociolinguistic field [. . .] and subject to the interests of their bearers' social position" (1995, p. 971).

[7] Here I borrow from Shandler's "Yiddishland" (2003).