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Shamis, *halebis* and *shajatos*: Labels and the dynamics of Syrian Jewishness in Mexico City

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ABSTRACT

Jews in Mexico City have long organized themselves into ethnic sub-groups. Various labels circulate to refer to their members, including *halebi* (Aleppan), *shami* (Damascene), *idish* (Ashkenazi), and *turco* (Sephardi). Given recent demographic and religious changes, what is the contemporary role and relevance of these ethnic distinctions in Mexican Jewish identities? I explore this question through a focus on labeling practices, with special attention to terms applied to Jews of Syrian ancestry. I first consider the influence of ultra-Orthodox movements on these labels: While always important, notions of religiosity have come to trump other indexical values in distinguishing the social types they denote. I then discuss *shajato*, a derisive slur for most, but occasionally used to express pride in being shami or halebi. I argue that this more recent, ameliorated usage is made possible in part by shifts in relations between Syrian and Ashkenazi sectors. By analyzing metasemantic talk about these labels, as well their use in interaction, we see the fundamental interrelationships between social and semantic change in this immigrant-descendent community in Mexico.

1. Introduction

When Mexican Jews ask "what are you?" they are usually looking for one of four answers: shami, halebi, idish or turco.[1] These words stand for members of the four main ethnic sub-communities of Mexico City Jews (Damascene, Aleppan, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, respectively). They are also part of a "distinctly Jewish linguistic repertoire" (Benor, 2008, p. 1068) that distinguishes the Spanish spoken by Jews from that of their non-Jewish neighbors. Most non-Jews are unfamiliar with these labels, even if their social networks include Jewish friends and colleagues. To use them, then, is to demonstrate familiarity with the Mexican Jewish universe. Each term is loaded with indexical values (Silverstein, 2003), including an institutional structure, value system, cuisine and other customs. Each carries with it a homeland and a migration story that continues through the present. To identify as *shami*, *halebi*, *turco* or *idish* is to place oneself within this narrative.

Yet since the inception of these communal institutions in the early 20th century, the Mexican Jewish social landscape has changed significantly. There are now more friendships, marriages, and other domains of interaction that cross ethnic lines. Once economically and demographically marginalized, the two Syrian Jewish sectors now constitute a dominant presence in inter-communal Jewish relations. Shami and halebi young people are increasingly attending university and entering professions outside of traditional family businesses, further enhancing their status among Ashkenazim. Finally, a surge in ultra-Orthodox sectors, especially among halebis, has laid a layer of religious distinction upon longstanding ethnic ones. In this

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[1] Remark by Argentine sociologist and Dean of Mexico's *Universidad Hebraica* Daniel Fainstein (personal communication, December 12, 2008).

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article, I explore Mexican Jewish labels and categories in light of these shifts. I first demonstrate how religiosity can trump other qualities in defining the categories of shami, halebi, idish/ashkenazí and turco/sefaradí, which I relate to the growth of ultra-Orthodoxy. I then consider the word shajato, traditionally a derisive slur for Syrian Jews, but now sometimes used with a sense of ironic pride. I argue that this more recent, ameliorated use of *shajato* is made possible in part by shifts in relations between Syrian and Ashkenazi sectors. By analyzing metasemantic talk about these labels, as well as how they are used in interaction, we see the fundamental interrelationships between social and semantic change in this immigrant-descendent community in Mexico City.

2. Labels and stereotypes in language and culture

As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet emphasize, social labeling "is not simply a matter of fitting a word to a pre-existing category," but is rather "a socially significant and contested practice. . .and is part of the continual construction of the categories it designates" (1995, p. 478). These social categories index "constellations of. . .attributes and activities" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1995, p. 471) that can become reified or naturalized as stereotypes (Agha, 1998; Reyes, 2009). Irvine and Gal's (1995) notion of iconicity describes much the same process: behaviors and qualities come to be seen as inherent to a group of people. Labels and stereotypes serve to "mediate between two pragmatic orders" (Agha, 1998, p. 151) as people use them to guide their own behavior and interpret that of others. They are also rendered discursive objects of conscious reflection:

> They become reportable, discussable, open to dispute; they can be invoked as social standards, or institutionalized as such; they allow (and sometimes require) conscious strategies of self-presentation; they serve as models for some individuals, counter-models for others (Agha, 1998, p. 152).

Although stereotypes are usually construed as negative in folk definitions, even the most disparaging can be used creatively as "resource(s) for accomplishing new social actions" (Reyes, 2009, p. 44). The same holds true for slurs (by definition derogatory labels that index a group's perceived negative qualities (Rappoport, 2005, p. 46)): they are often reappropriated to express pride and solidarity. Slurs are thus inherently polysemous, contested and multifunctional. As such, they are also extremely dynamic and sensitive to changing sociopolitical climes. Close attention to their use provides a window into social processes occurring in the societies in which they circulate. Baugh (1991) and King and Clarke (2002) do this kind of analysis of the political and economic stakes inherent in ethnic labeling among African Americans and Newfoundlers, respectively. Issues of labeling arise time and again in Jewish histories, especially in contexts of encounters of different Jewish immigrant groups. Stakes often involve status and treatment by broader society and distribution of scarce communal resources (see Lehmann (2009) and Ben-Ur (2009) on labeling of Sephardi Jews in 18th-19th century Palestine and 20th century New York, respectively).

In the United States and more generally, Jews are popularly grouped into two ethnic categories: *Ashkenazim* (sing. *Ashkenazi* or *Ashkenazic*), or Jews with origins in Eastern and Central Europe; and *Sephardim* (sing. *Sephardi* or *Sephardic*), which ranges from denoting only those who trace descent to the Iberian Peninsula, to encompassing all non-Ashkenazi Jews, including groups indigenous to the Middle East. This latter, inclusive sense is the product of a long and contested process of erasure (Irvine and Gal, 1995) in which internal differences are subsumed, often for the purpose of counterbalancing Ashkenazi dominance in many diaspora communities (e.g. Ben-Ur, 2009) and in the State of Israel (where Sephardi/Middle Eastern Jews are numerically equivalent to Ashkenazim but economically and politically marginalized (Massad, 1996)). Mexico City is one of the few examples in which ethno-geographical differences among non-Ashkenazim have been preserved and institutionalized. Like recent work by Mendoza-Denton (2008) on Latina gang girls and Shankar (2008) on South-Asian teens in the US, I attempt to shed light on these distinctions within a minority group that is often seen as homogeneous by outsiders.

3. Ethnic labels in Mexican Jewish Spanish

As mentioned above, Mexican Jewish labels constitute part of a "distinctly Jewish linguistic repertoire" (Benor, 2008, p. 1068) within broader Mexico City Spanish. Overall, the Spanish spoken by Mexican Jews is very similar to that of their non-Jewish, middle-to-upper class neighbors. Some of the most salient qualities of Jewish speech are associated with wealthier social strata of Mexico City, including heavy use of English loanwords and certain intonational patterns. Nonetheless, as in Jewish communities everywhere, there are linguistic (in this case, primarily lexical) elements unique to Jewish speakers. The ethnic labels under discussion are part of a repertoire shared by all Mexican Jews. With regards to other items, however, it is more appropriate to speak of Jewish repertoires in the plural. For example, while a certain subset of Hebrew loanwords is known and used by most Jews (for example, names of holidays), others are restricted to more religiously observant speakers. There are also systematic differences in use of Hebrew loanwords between Jews of different ethnic backgrounds. Use of Ashkenazi versus Sephardi/Mizrahi Hebrew phonology can serve as an ethnic marker; for example, using the Ashkenazi pronunciation *kosher* ('conforming to Jewish dietary laws') versus the Sephardi/Mizrahi pronunciation *kashér*. Finally, loanwords from ancestral languages – Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Spanish and Yiddish – are part of the repertoires of shami/halebi, turco, and idish speakers, respectively. The role of these and other linguistic and discursive phenomena in Mexican Jewish social life is the topic of the larger project from which this article is drawn.