Language & Communication 31 (2011) 107–118

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Language & Communication

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

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

Marcy Brink-Danan *

*Anthropology Department/Judaic Studies Program, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912, United States*

ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*
Available online 16 September 2010

*Keywords:*
Ladino
Judeo-Spanish
Endangered languages
Virtuality
Ideology
Vernacular

ABSTRACT

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 non-standard.



## 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)

* Address: Box 1826, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912, United States. Tel.: +1 401 863 2750.
*E-mail address:* marcy_brink-danan@brown.edu

[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.

0271-5309/$ - see front matter © 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.langcom.2010.08.003

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

[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).

any discussion. I did not interview members nor did I join "actual" reunions that have taken place in Israel, the United States and Turkey. I follow anthropologist Tom Boellstorff in the assertion that: "To demand that ethnographic research always incorporate meeting residents in the actual world for 'context' presumes that virtual worlds are not themselves contexts" (2008, p. 61). However, I also recognize that the specific, offline histories and knowledge that LK members bring to Ladinoland, be they patterns of migration, education or linguistic skills, necessarily inform the kind of community they desire and are able to build through this medium. Much of the discussion that has taken place on LK challenges Boellstorff's assertion that virtual worlds can be independent contexts. I seek to understand the shape given, through metalinguistic ideologies, to a community of Ladino speakers who desire to dwell (at least part-time) in Ladinoland and how this virtual community interprets the meaning of this language.

Over a decade ago, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asked a question about cyberspace that still challenges us today: "How are locality and community established in a medium dedicated to the seamless flow of data through a network of nodes that are addresses but not places" (1996, p. 23)? This concern dovetails with questions long asked about the relationship between Jews, languages and geography (Boyarin, 1994; Bronner, 2001; Fonrobert, 2009; Glinert, 1993), including widespread assertions that Yiddish, for example, is a language without a nation, that Jewish languages are what makes the nation, and that Jews live in between languages. According to Shandler, "Yiddishland is [...] flourishing in a new venue that privileges language over landscape: the Internet. Indeed, as virtual geographies defined by means of communication, the Internet and Yiddishland would seem to have a special affinity" (2006, p. 53). As comparative work on Jewish languages in the Russian and Ottoman Empires has shown, Yiddish and Ladino's "lives," linguistically, sociologically and historically, have taken different paths (Stein, 2006); nonetheless, thinking about Ladinoland in Shandler's terms allows us to focus on the imagined communities made possible through LK and other such media.

Historical evidence suggests that Ladinoland has been "virtual" for centuries, constituted not by bytes but by bits of other ephemeral texts: novels (Borovaya, 2003), newspapers (Stein, 2004), and rabbinic literature (Goldish, 2008; Lehmann, 2005). Even so, consistent with the findings of Hiller and Franz that the "computer has a powerful role to play in overcoming the 'friction of distance'" (2004, p. 734), LK's members capitalize on communication technologies that bridge time and space in ways that seem to simulate a reversal of the dispersal of Sephardic Jewry over compounded diaspora locales. My study of LK suggests that, online, locality and community are overwhelmingly established (and managed) through language, meta-language and language ideologies.

## 2. Vanishing vernaculars and postvernaculars and the semiotics of Ladino

In the case of Sephardic Jewry, language is often described as if it were a shared substance, like blood or, more recently, genes; in fact, language and culture are often conflated under the heading "Judeo-Spanish culture." Language has been, among Sephardim, the defining symbolic register for communities of a wide range of practice across time and space: "In the tower of Babel that were the Ottoman Jewish communities it was [...] Ladino, that above all else was the main force which [...] brought the national and regional groups together" (Shaw, 1991, p. 56). In sociolinguistic terms, language is seen here to index the Sephardic community in an intimate way. However, if Ladino was once a primary vernacular of the majority of Jews in Turkey and other Ottoman successor states, over the past century its use has declined precipitously (Stein, 2006, p. 499) to the point of near extinction. Ladino among American Jews and in Israel (two primary sites of Sephardic immigration) is in decline, with its primary functions being use with the elderly, a secret language and a source of humor; it has ceased to "fill the important societal needs that it did in the Balkans and during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century wave of Sephardic immigration" (Zucker, 2001, p. 13). In the handful of sites where it is still used, such as a home for the elderly in Istanbul, or sprinkled in a synagogue newsletter in Seattle (Benor, 2009, p. 255), it is one of a number of vernaculars and rarely the primary language of communication.

Much work on Sephardic culture frames research about Ladino in the question of language death, as if Sephardim are nothing without their language. Perhaps this frame's best-known source is Tracy Harris, whose scholarship, including the book, *Death of a Language: The History of Judeo-Spanish* (1994) and an article called "The decline of Judeo-Spanish" (1982), have become primary sources for eulogizing of this sort. In her work, Harris delineates numerous characteristics that serve as a prognosis for Ladino's demise, including its loss of prestige in the face of official (or hegemonic) state languages, negative attitudes towards it, relaxed religious practices among Sephardim, lack of preservation efforts, no central academy, and, finally, assimilation (1982, pp. 72-82). Harris describes how Ladino followed its path to extinction, emphasizing the loss of its function as a "means of communication" (1982, p. 81).

A speech community's viability, however, as theorized by Shandler in his writing about "Yiddishland" (2003, 2004, 2006), hangs not only on language as a means of communication but also on its ability to symbolize cultural commonality. A language, in this sense, can be a symbolic system through which ideas can be expressed (a vernacular), as well as one through which secondary meanings can be made, contested, and undone (a postvernacular) (Shandler 2006, p. 4). Shandler describes postvernacular Yiddish as "[a] new semiotic mode for the language, every utterance is enveloped in a performative aura, freighted with significance as a speech act quite apart from the meaning of whatever words are spoken" (2004, p. 20) and offers numerous illustrations of the affective meanings attributed to Yiddish by American Jews (and non-Jews) who don't understand the language (2006). Similarly, Bronner's treatment of Yiddish language clubs distinguishes between the

signification of language as a vernacular and postvernacular (although he calls these, respectively, 'language as an "object" and a "subject"'), noting that speakers who participate in face-to-face meetings espoused an ideology of the primacy of vernacular communication and devalued Yiddish's "symbolic level" (2001).

Ideas about postvernacularity build productively on the work of Benjamin Harshav (1990), whose notion of 'Yiddish semiotics' drew attention to the connotative, or secondary, meanings of Yiddish. However, an important lesson that semiotic theory offers is that secondary meanings rely heavily on a mutable chain of indexes attached to the signifier (in this case, to a language itself). Even in its most vernacular expression, a language is never devoid of a connotative or secondary meaning. I would go so far as to suggest that to categorize some forms of a language as vernacular and others as postvernacular implies that the former has some sort of authentic or pre-symbolic meaning (which is, itself, a meaning assigned to the language above and beyond its ability to communicate!), while the later (postvernacular) has extra-symbolic meaning above and beyond its communicative value.

Rather, a language is always embedded in multiple semiotic meanings above and beyond the communication it enables. Although there might be a social-semiotic code that mythologizes *the* meaning of a language (or another symbolic system; see Barthes, 1990), Yiddish (or Ladino, in this case) does not have one meaning or semiotic "value." Rather, different people (cultures, classes, groups, generations) attach various (and contested) meanings to languages and their users. This is obvious when looking at ideologies attached to widely-used and non-endangered vernaculars, such as English varieties (Lippi-Green, 1997). In another telling example, Ayala Fader argues that, among vernacular Yiddish speakers (Hasidic Jews in New York), the semiotics of Yiddish hinge on that language's ability to signify a gendered division of piousness and worldliness (2007).

The debate about Ladino semiotics – or what Ladino means – appeared at least as early as the 1880s (if not before) when Ottoman Sephardim wrestled with the 'language question' in the pages of their Judezmo publication, *El Tyempo* (Bunis, 1996, p. 227), asking questions like: Is it a proper language? Is it modern? What should it be called? Should it be maintained? How should it be written (i.e. with what alphabet) (1996)?

Some of the discourses of old persist today. Just as the language was once denigrated as "jargon" (Borovaia, 2001, p. 164), LK members debate negative characterizations of the language, like "housewife chatter." In one discussion from 2005 on LK, members discussed why more academics did not contribute to LK. A debate ensued around a comment submitted by an academic who wrote that the forum, once a place for observing Ladino's lexicographic and other features, had turned into "un Klub de bulisas de kaza ke interkambian sus opinyones" [a housewives' club for swapping ideas]. Indignant responses followed, in which housewives – and others – defended the use of the forum for purposes "beyond the ivory tower" and for the perpetuation of a living language, writing, among other retorts, the following: "En estas komunikasiones de 'bulisas i bulisos' esta el futuro de la lingua" [In these correspondences of "housewives and house husbands" lies the future of the language].

One of the main debates among LK's participants revolves around the current status of Ladino: is Ladino a vernacular or a postvernacular? Do Ladino speakers value its affective meanings?[8] What, indeed, does Ladino mean to discussion-list members, such as one who wrote in 2005:

> Yo penso ke una lingua es mas de un modo de komunikasyon; una lingua es komo dize el refran, la sangre de un puevlo. Kuando una lingua se muere, su kultura tambyen muere poko dospues. No tenemos menester del ladino para komunikarmos; porke kaji kada sefaradi, avla a lo manko tres linguas. Mos komunikamos en el ladino porke esta lingua mos akodra de muestra chikez i de la kultura en la kuala la mayoria de mozotros mos engrandesimos. Mos komunikamos en esta lingua porke la mayoria de mozotros sentimos eskarinyo por esta lingua.
>
> [I believe that a language is more that a form of communication; a language is, as the saying goes, the blood of a people. When a language dies, its culture also dies soon thereafter. We don't need Ladino to communicate; because nearly every Sephardic person speaks at least three languages. We communicate in Ladino because this is the language we recall from our youth and the culture in which the majority of us were raised. We speak in this language because the majority of us feel nostalgia for it].

In this brief example from LK's discussions, Ladino is seen as simultaneously vernacular and postvernacular. Beyond the communicative level of Ladino use, does rallying together through this virtual community dedicated to Ladino enable members to *feel* part of a Sephardic cultural landscape that has purportedly been lost? Who defines the semiotics of language in the virtual Ladinoland created by LK's participants?

## 3. Iconization and glottonyms

A triad of concerns about Ladino and its speakers seem to recur at times of social and technological change, including the naming of the language, the writing system used to transcribe it and the linguistic elements (orthographic and lexical choices) that are considered integral and legitimate for inclusion in its repertoire (Bunis, 1996, p. 237); these arose during the modernization of educational and political landscapes of nineteenth century Ottoman Sephardim and have resurfaced in our time around the shift from print culture to Internet technologies.

[8] For comments about Ladino's meanings in the music scene, see Cohen (2004, p. 166).

The first, the naming of the language of Sephardic Jews, occupies a central debate on the LK list as well as in the academy.[9] In this sense, the act of naming a language seems to index the inherent qualities of the speakers themselves. Names of Jewish languages are as much parts of the local linguistic repertoire of which they are a part (Şaul, 1983, p. 328) as intellectual abstractions (Benor, 2009, p. 236). As Zucker has remarked, "Not even native speakers agree on what to call what, in the academic world, is generally known as Judeo-Spanish; there are those who refer to it as 'Ladino,' 'Judezmo,' 'Spanyolit,' 'El Kasteyano Muestro,' and even simply 'Espaniol'" (2001, p. 4). The negotiation for the right to name languages highlights the question of what the community sees as its essential characteristics.

A decade ago, a LK member linked Ladino to a continuum of Castilian Spanish by claiming "Judeo-Spanish" as her preferred glottonym:

Date: Fri, 3 Mar 2000

Subject: Sovre la lingua

Ya no entyendo deke ay tanta diskusyones sovre la lingua. En kazo mozos diziamos avlar en judyo. Ma yo kreyo ke la vedra es ke avlamos el Espanyol antiko. Tengo avlado kon mi judeo Espanyol a Gente de Espanya moderna y eyos estavan fasinados a ver ke mozotros preservimos la lingua de 500 anyos antes. En un artikulo meldi ke esto es una situasyon phenomenal porke puede ser uno de grupos unikos ke preservaron una lingua muy serka a la lingua original del quinzem sieclo. Esto parese al a dicussion sovre Inglez y ebonics (Lingua ke Afrikanos Amerikanos avlan- una forma del Ingles ke es riko de Slang y de sub-Cultura Americana). La verda es ke la lingua Ebonics tiene muncho Slang y serra emposible de entenderlo en munchos kavzos. Yo tomi un testo si pudo entender ekpresyones de ebonics y no pude entender nada! El Judeo- espanyol sovre mi, es una forma del Espanyol. Inglez avlado en Ingletyerra, Afrika de sud o Australia se yama Inglez, mezmo ke es differente. Lo mizmo as verdad por las formaz differentes de Espanyol avlado en Mexico, en Venezuala en Argentina... ou El Arabo avlado en Siria, Yarden o Ejipto. Diguno ne metio nombres diferentes a estas linguas. Yo esto bastante kontente kon el nombre Judeo-Espanyol!

[Subject: About the language

I still don't understand why there is so much discussion about the language. At home we would say we were speaking Jewish. (But.) I believe that the truth is that we speak old Spanish. I have spoken using my Judeo-Spanish with people in Modern Spain and they were fascinated to see that we had preserved the language for 500 years. In an article I read that this is a phenomenal situation because it could be that it is one of the only groups that preserved a language very close to the language of the fifteenth century. This seems to resemble a conversation about English and Ebonics (the language that African–Americans speak – a form of English rich in slang and American sub-culture. The truth is, the language of Ebonics has a lot of Slang and in many cases it would be impossible to understand it. I took a test to see if I could understand expressions in Ebonics and I couldn't understand anything! According to me, Judeo-Spanish is a form of Spanish. English spoken in England, South Africa or Australia is called English, despite the fact that it is different. The same is true for the different forms of Spanish as they are spoken in Mexico, in Venezuela in Argentina...or Arabic spoken in Syria, Jordan or Egypt. Nobody gave these languages different names. I am fairly happy with the name Judeo-Spanish!]

This LK member argues for a unity of origins in spite of local variations. This embrace of Ladino as a kind of Spanish builds on the iconic relationship between the two varieties, but also points to "Spanishness" as a valued quality of the language and also of Sephardic identity. As chronicled by Jane Gerber in her popular history of Sephardic Jewry, the "Spanish element in the Sephardic identity [...] continued long after the ties with the country were severed" and "Retention of the Spanish language served to unite the Sephardic diaspora until the eve of its destruction" (1992, p. xv).

Unlike some Yiddishists who disavow that language's deep structural similarity to German (Shandler, 2006, p.6), proponents of Ladinoland overwhelmingly see Ladino as intrinsically tied to Castilian Spanish. Although some LK participants speak a form of Modern Spanish as their primary language (especially those living in Central and South America or Spain), most reside outside of a Spanish hegemonic cultural context. Why, then, must Spanishness (rather than Turkishness, Israeliness or Moroccanness) be the preferred icon in this group? I would posit that the emphasis on "Spanishness" among LK participants, to the exclusion of all the other influences evident in the fusion language, reflects a number of social and historical phenomena, some of which are ongoing and others of which seem to stem from the site presently under consideration. Given the range of compounded "homelands" that LK participants might claim (see Levy and Weingrod, 2005) – including the "Holy Land," Spain, the Ottoman Empire, and their current places of residence – the commonality that unites a wide swath of participants is the source of Sephardi-ness, i.e., claim to Spanish origins. As described by Gerber: "Sephardic Jews pride themselves on their noble bearing and illustrious ancestry. Their sense of localism and 'pedigree' is often reflected in meticulously detailed marriage contracts and family trees that trace generations of ancestors back to the medieval cities of Spain" (1992, p. xvi). As recently as 2010, a LK member wrote a message claiming that Jews were "authentic" Iberians (Sephardim) and that Modern Spain was just one part of that legacy, adding: "Mi famiya fue 1400 anyos espagnola, 450 anios turka, i 90 anyos franseza. Komo muchas otras." [My family was Spanish for 1400 years, Turkish for 450 years and French for 90. Like many others.] Spanishness is an integral part of a number of the community's preferred glottonyms, reflecting the way "linguistic practices that *index* social groups or activities appear to be *iconic* representations

[9] Although there have been tensions around the role academics play on the list, these two are not mutually independent, as some of LK's correspondents are themselves scholars, and participants cite scholarly sources regularly (see also Hill, 2002).

of them – as if a linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a social group's inherent nature or essence" (Gal and Irvine, 1995, p. 973).

In 2001, LK's moderators conducted an online survey about the preferred glottonym for their community, offering the options of "Ladino" (52%), "Djudeo-Espanyol" (20%) and "Djudezmo" (0%). In line with this preference, an argument for the use of the glottonym "Ladino" (from October, 2009) expressed distaste for "Judezmo," in which the LK member wrote "Nunka me tyene agradado por varyas razones. La primera es porke al oido mio, sona komo ke le estamos atribuyendo relijiozidad a esta vyeja "lingua latina", i yo personalmente no kreo ke es buena idea mesklar linguas kon relijiones." [I never liked [the name] Judezmo for various reasons. The first being that, to my ear, it sounds as if we are attributing religiosity to the old "Latinate language," and I, personally, don't think it is a good idea to mix languages with religions]. "Judezmo," for this participant, is too Jewish, indexing Jewishness above Spanishness and highlighting a different semiotic of the language in which religion is iconically conveyed by a choice of glottonym rather than Iberian-ness. The recognition of many discussants that Ladino was called "Jewish" when spoken at home reveals the relative flexibility of glottonyms to index essential identities, depending on context and speakers' ideologies about the meaning of Ladino. It also echoes the observation that Turkish Jews regularly called Ladino 'Judio' "Jewish" as opposed to 'Turko' "Turkish," but only in speech and never in formal contexts or in writing (Şaul, 1983, p.328).

The fight for the right to name a language highlights the boundary-work inherent in definitions of what a language, such as Ladino, means for the community. Who do LK's discussion members perceive as belonging to their community? Who should be allowed to dictate the terms of Ladino's meaning in LK's Ladinoland?

## 4. Recursivity: qualifying "los muestros"

The question of group belonging is not a simple one. As Hymes suggested: "To participate in a speech community is not quite the same as to be a member of it" (1974, p. 50). Linguistic unity breaks down with reference to competence among participants in LK's discussion group. While all members purportedly join together to promote Ladino, the recursive differentiations made between native speakers (or readers) of Ladino, speakers of modern Castilian, and students of Ladino stand out in the decade of LK data analyzed for this essay. Recursivity, as understood in linguistic anthropology, "involves the projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level. For example, intragroup oppositions might be projected outward onto intergroup relations, or vice versa" (Gal and Irvine, 1995, p. 974). Thus, divisions made between Ladino and non-Ladino users are also made, recursively, between different kinds of Ladino users.

LK's members aim to promote a sense of community that revolves around the distinction between Ladino users and non-Ladino users, rallying around words such as "los muestros" ("ours") or "muestra lingua" ("our language"). Within Ladinoland's virtual walls, the us/them barrier shifts (recursively) according to proficiency, willingness to standardize, and identification with the moderators' views on language maintenance. The following LK message expresses concern about proficiency in writing Ladino, although the author claims to understand the messages shared by the group:

> Date: Mon, 06 Mar 2000
> Subject: Escribir
> Yo leo el Djudeo Espanyol pero no le escribo. ¿como me comunico con ustedes?
> Suguiero dar clases en la red para principiantes.
> Repuesta: Kerido [name omitted]. Serkamente vamos a meter el sistema de eskrivir.
> Ten un poko de pasensia. Grasias.
> [Subject: Writing
> I can read Judeo-Spanish but I don't write it. How can I communicate with you?
> I suggest giving classes on the net for beginners.
> Answer: Dear [name omitted]. Soon we are going to establish (post) a writing system. Have a bit of patience. Thanks]

At several points in the decade of correspondence (especially in the early years), "novices" attempt entries in the discussion log. In line with the goals of the group, the editors encourage the students to keep practicing and note the corrections provided, such as the following from 2000:

> Buenos dias a todos. Esto en la klasa de [name omitted] at [name omitted] University, i muestro examen final es el djueves. Agora vo a meldar [estudiar?] por [para] el examen, pero [ma] kero dizir "Hola" a [name omitted]. Asta amanyana! –[name omitted]
> Bienvenida [name omitted],
> Te felisitamos por tu inisiativa en aziendote sosia de muestra Ladinokomunita. Te izimos unas sujerensias para el uzo del Ladino, eskriviendolas entre los simbolos [ ] arriento de tu teksto. Te esperamos mazal bueno en tu "eksamen" (no tenemos x en el Ladino)i ke sigas en tus estudios.
> [Hello to all. I am in [name omitted]'s class at [name omitted] university and our final exam is Thursday. Now I am going to study for the exam, but I wanted to say "Hello" to [the teacher.] Until tomorrow, [name omitted]

Dear [name omitted],
I congratulate you on taking the initiative to join our Ladinokomunita. We have offered you some suggestions for Ladino use, writing them between the symbols [] around your text. We wish you good luck in your "exam" (we don't have [the letter] 'x' in Ladino) and that you will continue your studies.]

However, other members expressed frustration with the ongoing pedagogical tone of the discussion:

Date: Tue, 9 May 2000 02:26:53–0400 (EDT)
Subject: lisiones del ladino
Ya me esto enfastiando de meldar demandas sovre muestra lingua. Kreiya ke se formo muestro grupo para koresponder entre mozotros ke avlamos la lingua. Los ke se keren ambezar la lingua ke konsulten livros komo el de Tracy Harris, DEATH OF A LANGUAGE.
[Subject: Ladino lessons
I am getting fed up reading demands about our language. I thought that our group was formed to correspond between those of us who speak the language. Those who want to learn (about?) the language should consult books like Tracy Harris' DEATH OF A LANGUAGE.]

This LK participant expresses exasperation with non-native speakers' requests to learn a language that is supposed to be the exclusive vernacular of the community she hoped to find online. It also offers an alternative discourse to that of Ladino's morbidity: Ladinoland as a place of refuge from the ravages of time and history. The invocation of Harris' work returns us to the question of Ladino's viability; if language is so central to an understanding of Sephardic identity, how might we expect Sephardic Jews themselves to react to announcements of Ladino's "death," especially in the virtual Ladinoland that LK members are attempting to create?

This complaint about non-native speakers is reminiscent of Bronner's description of how members of his mother's Yiddish culture clubs (*vinkln*) were "suspicious" about his attendance, given that the presence of a novice, or "boychick," might disrupt the "total experience they had imagined" (2001, p. 145). Bronner also found a distinction between concerns of the "greena" (American greenhorns and native Yiddish speakers) and the "children of immigrants recovering Yiddish literacy"; the latter, non-native speakers, expressed "great concerns for standards of Yiddish and understanding of Yiddish terminology. [...] the Holocaust survivors (e.g. the 'greena') had little patience for the linguistic discussion and agitated for a cultural or conversational outlet centered on their Old World connections" (2001, p. 141).

Interestingly, the qualitative fervor of the so-called "native speakers" that dominates discussions seems to contradict the (self-reported) percentages of LK members who themselves learned Ladino as a first language. Responding to an online survey, also from 2001, that asked if participants "avla el Djudio komo lingua materna?" (speak "Jewish," i.e., Ladino, as a mother-tongue), only 11% answered "yes." The sample of respondents is likely a small selection of the members who access and contribute to LK. Nonetheless, the disparity between narratives and numbers reminds us that some LK members are vocal about their ideological "preference" for native Ladino users.

By delimiting the possible topics for discussion, as well as the language to be used online, LK's members do boundary work that otherwise would leave blurred edges and an undefined community, or, alternately, a group of postvernacular Ladino aficionados. In a similar vein, a live online Ladino "chat," sponsored by the Ladino Preservation Council in 2002, held forth the same expectations of exclusivity: "It is very easy, please do all you can to join us in this Ladino audio chat. There will be a little English spoken for administrative purposes but this is a Ladino only room, non-Ladino speakers can participating by listening, and typing, but not speaking."[10]

This Ladino-only policy is distinct from the open policies of a Facebook page that describes its raison d'être as "A page for the people who feel passionate about the language, songs, culture, traditions, food and history of Judeo-Spanish communities" and overwhelmingly features messages about the language but not in it. It also differs from the Yiddish discussion listserve, *Mendele*, chronicled by Shandler, in which a heteroglossic reality is embraced as part of an overall strategy to promote Yiddish culture, and in which "as is typical of Yiddish postvernacular culture, discussions *about* Yiddish, rather than *in* Yiddish, are foremost [...]" (2006, p. 55; see also Sadan, this volume). Despite the regular occurrence of discussions *about* Ladino, which seem to echo the postvernacularity of a site such as *Mendele*, LK's Ladino-only policy insists on vernacular primacy and, thereby, a semiotics of Ladino as a means of communication.

## 5. Writing Ladino "right"

In addition to iconic naming and recursive boundary work between different kinds of Ladino users, efforts to define Ladinoland's domain emerge through erasure, defined as:

> the process in which ideology, in simplifying the field of linguistic practices, renders some persons or activities or sociolinguistic phenomena invisible. Facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme may go unnoticed or get explained away. So, for example, a social group, or a language, may be imagined as homogeneous, its internal variation disregarded. Because a linguistic ideology is a totalizing vision, elements that do not fit its interpretive structure—that cannot be seen to fit—must either be ignored or be transformed (Gal and Irvine, 1995, pp. 974–975).

[10] http://www.sephardicstudies.org/chat.html, accessed 11.06.10.

Community members project a "totalizing picture" that attempts to claim linguistic purity over time (i.e., history) and across space (i.e., geographic locales). LK members do so through discussions about orthography and lexical purity.

The Ladino verb "eskrivir" (to write) occurs nearly three thousand times over the decade of LK's existence, and over three hundred messages mention the word "ortografia" (orthography). Unlike Yiddishland, which Shandler defines as primarily (but not exclusively) oral (2004, p. 33), LK's virtual Ladinoland is a kind of spoken-text that aims to transcribe the way people really talk (i.e., emphasizing that the language is still "alive") into computer-based texts (see Collot and Belmore, 1996; Davis and Brewer, 1997; Ferrara et al., 1991). As Sadan shows in the case of Yiddish online (this issue), debates about a language's orthographic expression are also potential sites of ideological expression about the "real" nature of a language. With this shift comes a heavy emphasis on the issue of writing Ladino "right,"[11] a goal that the list moderators emphasize as critical to the group's success.

Beginning in 2000, LK's moderators issued a statement regarding the approved orthography of the list. The standard, from that time on, has been emblazoned at the bottom of each digest like a political slogan:

> THE ORTHOGRAPHY that we are using is that of "Aki Yerushalayim".[12] We don't use C or W (aside from proper names.) If the sound of C is [s], we use s, if it is [k] we use k. The letter Y is only (used as a) consonant (yerno, yorar, etc.). It is not used alone.

The constant reiteration of the preferred orthography for the discussion list aims to erase, or at least minimize, the variety of *actual* orthographic choices made by members of the group. Given that Ladino users have lived – and continue to do so – under various regimes with their own orthographic politics, it should not be surprising that some of LK's members prefer to write, to take Zucker's example (2001, p. 13), "shalom" as "chalom" (French) or "şalom" (Turkish).

However, again recalling Gal and Irvine's definition, "Erasure in ideological representation does not necessarily mean actual eradication of the awkward element, whose very existence may be unobserved or unattended" (1995, p. 975). Despite their constant pleading for standardization, the list moderators themselves spell words with varying orthographic styles; for example, one will write "grasyas" (thank you), the other "grasias." This instance of "do as I say, not as I do" recalls the ironic urging, in Ladino, of newspaper editors in the Ottoman Empire for Jews to adopt French, Hebrew or Turkish (Borovaia, 2001, p. 164).[13]

The process of implementing an orthographic standard on LK occurs against the historical background described by Stein, in which

> no language academy or central organization that would oversee the standardization or promotion of Ladino was ever created. Thus when Turkish was Romanized in the 1920s, nearly all writers of Ladino followed suit, abandoning Rashi script in favor of the Roman alphabet. In the absence of a linguistic authority to oversee this process, speakers and writers of Ladino were now more than ever inclined towards linguistic borrowing. (2006, p. 506)

In light of this history, in 2010 a LK correspondent rejected another member's suggestion that, as a Jewish language, Ladino should be written in a Hebraicized alphabet. She argued that "Para mi es retornar al sieklo de antes... NO LA MATAREMOS en trokando la eskriturya de LADINO" [For me this would be a return to the last century...LET US NOT KILL IT (Ladino) by changing Ladino's script].

A medium-specific effect here is that so much communication software (including the platform used for LK), operates with English-standard orthography, not including the characters and diacritics needed to transcribe Hebrew, French or Turkish. This issue came into stark relief when list moderators discussed the question of accents and other diacritics:

> Los Aksentos – Siendo ke es difisil de meter aksentos en eskriviendo en el Internet, porke no salen bien en todas las komputadoras de diferentes payises, no los uzamos en los mesajes. Ma ya los uzamos en los livros de ensenyensa i en los diksionaryos."
> [Accents – Given that it is difficult to employ accents when writing on the Internet, because they don't come out well on all the various countries' computers, we don't use them in messages. But we do use them in educational manuals and dictionaries.]

The question of Ladino's meanings in light of the orthographic choices made by its users appears in LK's earliest messages and continues to the present. These messages debate the meaning of the language by tying its content to its form, in comments such as: "Is a language Jewish without being written in Hebrew" and "It is true that today we aren't going to return to writing in Solitreo [Ladino cursive] or Rashi, but why can't we teach them to those who are interested? It is a shame to allow these alphabets (Solitreo and Rashi) to be forgotten."

This discussion has changed its tone over the decade of LK's existence in line with technological advances. Messages from 2003 to 2004 were notable for an expressed interest in writing in Solitreo but an absence of technological know-how and ability, with one participant writing "mi seria un plazer de ambezarte el Solitreo ma ke no lo savia azer por la komputadora" [I would be happy to teach you Solitreo but I didn't know how to do it on the computer]. Another participant attempted to

[11] See Mary Bucholtz (2000) for a deeper discussion on the "politics of transcription."

[12] Aki Yerushalayim, published since 1979, began under the auspices of the Judeo-Spanish program of Kol Israel (Radio Israel) and is now under the auspices of the National Authority of Ladino.

[13] It is also reminiscent of Iranian debates about standardization and formality in the language of blogging (Doostdar, 2004, p. 652).

get around the problem of fonts by using "painting" software to simulate handwriting, saying "Se podia eskrivir en solitreo direktamente, uzando el "paint" o "paintbrash" o kual si keri otro program de pintar. . ." [One could write directly in Solitreo, using "paint" or "paintbrush" or any other painting program].

The question of Romanization and its meanings reflects not only the Internet's technological limitations in this aspect, but also the preferences and skills that LK members possess for transcribing their oral proficiency into a largely text-based domain. In online surveys conducted by LK and ongoing discussions, list members weighed in about the value of writing Ladino in various scripts. One of the arguments in a recent LK post (2010) against the adoption of a newly-invented orthographic system (Hebreísmo) – whose creator claims is an ideal form of transcription of Castillian Spanish in "Hebrew" style letters[14] – is that the global participation in LK's forum would be alienated by the adoption of a non-standard system: "Por lo ke es de la eskritura hebreismo, tyene menester de un klavyer kon estas letras, klavyer ke no egziste en dinguna parte del mundo, mismo en Israel. LK es un sityo mundyal, no seriya posivle de eskrivir entre mozotros por internet kon esta eskritura." [Regarding this Hebreísmo script, one would need a keyboard with these letters, a keyboard that does not exist anywhere in the world, even in Israel. LK is a global site, it wouldn't be possible to write to each other with this script.]

If early messages (2000–2003/4) advised toward adoption and promotion of Romanization, later messages seem to recognize the increasing potential for the vernacular to be expressed online in Solitreo or Rashi or other "Hebraic" scripts. In the case of bridging this orthographic gap in Ladino expression, one technological advance came in the form of the technology offered on the website http://www.solitreo.com/ladinotype/ where users type in Roman characters and the software transliterates the text into Solitreo, Meruba or Rashi scripts. The website was introduced on LK's list-serve in early 2007 as the work of "dos mansevos de 23 anyos" (two 23-year old youths). The creator describes his efforts in parallel to those of his audience on LK:

> I started thinking about how the Ladino language, and the use of Solitreo in particular, could be integrated with the Internet– the ultimate platform of communication. I wanted to create a tool that would help to preserve and promote the endangered Ladino language. For almost a year now, I have spent countless hours developing LadinoType™. The basis of LadinoType™ is a transliteration system that allows you to type Ladino in roman characters and convert it to various Hebrew scripts, including Solitreo, Rashi, and Meruba.[15]

This debate is especially pronounced around those who believe that Jewish languages should be written in a form of Hebrew and others for whom the "Hebrew connection" presents a challenge (they would have to learn another script) or appears irrelevant. Although Romanized scripts dominate the Internet, of late there have been increasing efforts to offer Hebrew-based options.[16]

Yet another contributor to LK explains that insistence on uniform orthography comes from an interest in establishing phonetic standards in order for people around the world (especially non-native speakers) to read Ladino in a consistent way. She complains, for example, of Ladino music sung with a "bad" accent, which she attributes to a lack of standard orthography, without which the community lacks cohesion. In arguing for this standard, LK moderators have invited questions and opposing ideas, but "plead with you (the members) to accept this system for our 'community'." The choice to put "community" in quotes indicates the weariness of the task of standardization and the near-impossibility that a global community – separated by space and time, and historically immersed in other orthographic systems – will agree to cooperate about Ladino's form and its concomitant meanings.

## 6. Ladino purity and lexical borrowing

Although Ladino speakers experienced multilingualism and linguistic fusion throughout their history, their LK discussion is rife with purifying attempts. Standardization attempts among LK members regularly prescribe the erasure of "improper" foreign elements, as a member writes:

> Date: Thu, 11 May 2000
> Subject: La Evolusion del Ladino
> Keridos Amigos,
> [. . .] Si mozotros keremos ke el Ladino
> sovrebiva lo tenemos ke avlar, i estimular a otros a avlarlo,
> uzando todos los mezos disponibles. I kualo mezo mejor ke muestro
> kazaliko elektroniko, LK? Ma, en avlandolo, si no
> observamos siertas normas, sierta reglas, la linga ke se perpetua
> devendra una mezkolansa de korrupsiones.
> Por esto kreo ke devemos de esforzarmos por evitar el uzo de palavras
> de otras linguas, a menos ke estas sean valutozas por reprezentar
> konseptos muevos (espesialmente importante en la teknolojia) i ke

[14] http://www.omniglot.com/writing/hebreismo.htm, accessed 20.07.10.
[15] http://www.solitreo.com/ladinotype/abouttheauthor.php, accessed 19.07.10.
[16] See, for example, http://www.tapuz.co.il/tapuzforum/main/forumpage.asp?id = 420, a Ladino culture forum with messages in Hebrew and Ladino.

por amor del futuro de muestra lingua mos tomemos la pena de apanyar el diksionario i bushkar una palavra apropida del Ladino en vez de meter en la korrespondensia una palavra ingleza o franseza. Kreo yo ke kuando la palavra dezeada no se topa, se deve tomarla emprestada del Kasteyano, la madre de la lingua muestra. De este modo se mantendra el karakter i savor espanyoles de eya. I, viendo lo ke eskriven los otros sosios de LK, i las korreksions de ortografia i gramatika ke se azen, kada uno deve de azer un esforso espesial por mejorar su Ladino. Dinguno es perfekto i azeremos muestros yerros, ma iremos mejorando, aziendo ke el Ladino se evolusione en forma ermoza. Me parese ke esto deve de ser un buto fundamental de muestra LK.

Unos enshemplos de este proseso se enkontran en korrespondensia resiente: Uzimos el termino "attachements" a propozito porke komo palavra teknika ke aparese mundialmente en "programas" de "komputadora," se rekonose mejor ke una palavra komo "adjuntos". I una sosia mueva, eleva universitaria del Ladino mos avlo de su "examen." Dudo ke muestros parientes uvieran konosido esta palavra. Posiblemente uvieran dicho "prova," ken save, ma una prova no es un "eksamen" universitaria. Porke, entonses, no dezir "eksamen," una palavra lejitima espanyola?

[Subject: The evolution of Ladino
Dear Friends,
[...] If we want Ladino to survive we have to speak it, and interest others in speaking it, using all available means. And what better way than our little electronic community, LK? But, in speaking it, if we don't observe certain norms, certain rules, the language that survives will become a mixture of corruptions.
For this reason I believe that we should enforce [our norms] by avoiding the use of words from other languages, despite the fact that they might be valuable in representing new concepts (especially important in technology) and that out of love for the future of our language it is worth our time to expand the dictionary and look for an appropriate word in Ladino rather than putting a French or English word in its place. I think that when the desired word can't be found, one should borrow it from Castellano, the mother of our language. In this manner, one maintains the Spanish character and flavor of it [the language.] And, seeing that which other members of LK write, and the orthographic and grammatical corrections that are made, each person should make an effort to improve his Ladino. Nobody is perfect and we will make our errors, but if we continue improving, we ensure that Ladino will evolve in a lovely way. It seems to me that this should be a fundamental goal of our group.
Some examples of this process can be encountered in recent correspondence: we used the term "attachments" casually because as a technical word that appears worldwide in "computer programs," it can be recognized better than a word like "adjuntos (attachments)." And a new member, a student of Ladino, spoke to us of an "examen" (exam). I doubt if our families would have known this word. Maybe they would have said, "prova" (test), who knows, but a "test" isn't a university "exam." Why, therefore, shouldn't one say "examen", a legitimate Spanish word?]

As this post demonstrates, some LK members insist on the preservation of the Spanish characteristics of Ladino, calling Spanish "the mother of our language." Interestingly, while LK members largely abhor new English loanwords, old ones (culled from French, Turkish and Hebrew) go seemingly unnoticed, revealing that fusion languages are more than the sum of their syncretic parts. Anxiety about the introduction of technical loanwords from English is exacerbated by the specific medium of an Internet discussion list, where English is a hegemonic "must-language" (El-Or, 2004).

The irony of a purifying project is evident in the very name of the discussion group, Ladino + Komunita. According to Bunis (in Baker, 1994/1995), the word 'komunita' became prevalent in the Modern Judezmo period (ca. 1811–present), reflecting a preference for the Italian "comunità" over the Castilian "komunidad" or the Hebrew "kolel." In this period, prestige languages (such as French and Italian) heavily influenced Ottoman Ladino. It is striking, therefore, that words for technology (a clear marker of prestige) should be translated into Ladino equivalents. Although moderators have publicly recognized that one person's "correct" Ladino might appear sloppy or incorrect to another (Bortnick, 2004, p. 7), the question of legitimacy is regularly tied to the preference of a Spanish-sounding word over one that appears to be a borrowing from another language.

Scholars of Yiddish have found that trends toward purification were mainly counterproductive, or simply not relevant, to efforts to promote the language. Yiddish speakers who are most heavily engaged in ongoing use of the language – mostly Hasidim – are the most unconcerned with standardization, purification and structural/grammatical forms in general (Prager, 1981, p. 537). As Isaacs writes, "While linguistic laxity by Haredim may be criticized by purists, there is reason to conjecture that it is this very quality about the language that is key to its survival against unlikely odds" (1999, p. 27). Vernacular Yiddish speech is characterized by syncretism (language mixing), although this may be coded along an ideological range

of what is considered "appropriate" or "inappropriate" borrowings (Fader, 2007). Unlike the syncretic Yiddish spoken by Hasidic women in New York, in which Fader found no linguistic purism (2007, pp. 10–11) many members of LK express a desire to erase (new) "foreign" elements.

Of course, the situations of Hasidic Yiddish and Ladino differ greatly. As Fader has described, "The very fluidity of Hasidic linguistic boundaries is critical to the way that this kind of religious community flourishes. Members simultaneously participate in social, economic, and political realms, while remaining separate ideologically, if not physically, from secular society" (2007, p. 17). Since non-pious Sephardic Jews are not ideologically, physically or otherwise separate from secular society, the one boundary they can police is the linguistic difference between themselves and non-Ladino speakers.

Another major difference between Yiddish and Ladino is that while Yiddish remains a vernacular for significant portions of the (Ashkenazi) Haredi world, no major equivalent Sephardic faction exists anywhere in the world in which Ladino is the current vernacular for everyday communication. This heightens concern among those Sephardim, especially in Israel and the United States, who already fear an encroachment of Ashkenazi or other hegemonic cultural forms on what they perceive as their unique forms of Jewish expression.[17]

By focusing so heavily on standardization, LK members seem to argue that the community is not ready to enter a postvernacular period. This debate centers on the distinction between what the language means and what it is imagined to do in the world. As a vernacular, Ladino should allow people to communicate; as a postvernacular, it might be expected to do work beyond denotation and communication, acting also to preserve culture, promote identity or stand for the past. The speakers of thriving vernaculars take for granted, perhaps, the hegemonic meanings of their languages. The shift to the open format of the Internet highlights, especially in the case of endangered languages, the absence of agreement about established meanings of a vernacular; as such, an endangered language's semiotics are necessarily tied to an unstable social code that must be constantly renegotiated.

## 7. Conclusions

Ethnography of communication, as defined by Hymes, understands "communities [to be] organized as systems of communicative events" (1974, p. 17). This article has suggested that one such way to understand the meanings attributed to Ladino is to study the communicative events that create conditions of belonging and exclusion in Ladinoland and other virtual spaces. LK members participate in communicative events that attempt to create a sense of shared linguistic identity. They imagine, despite the travels across the chronotope taken by speakers of the language, that the language remains (or might yet rejoin) the realm of the "real" or authentic, pointing to a particular semiotics of Ladino that is driven by a desire for vernacular expression. Even as LK's existence and discussions point to members' understanding of Ladino as a vernacular, members regularly debate whether a present (and future) Ladinoland, as constituted by the discussion-list members, should be populated by vernacular or postvernacular Ladino users. Through iconization, recursivity, and erasure, list members negotiate community boundaries and the meanings of Ladino, debating what to call the language and how much foreign influence to allow.

My analysis highlights the potential of the Internet to foster community and serve other functions among enthusiasts of endangered languages. As Dorian (1987) argued through the case of Gaelic, revival movements, though they are not always successful in the promulgation of the language for future generations, provide a counter-hegemonic position in which minority languages gain prestige not only among their speakers but also in official attitudes toward the minority culture and/or language. In addition, participants in revivals may particularly value the process of language maintenance, even over promotion of the spoken language, because the process of working together for the linguistic cause breeds cultural commonality (Chumaciero, 1982).

This article has implications for theories of postvernacularity. Ladino does not have (indeed, no language has) an inherent semiotic meaning devoid of secondary connotations. It has always been embedded in a web of meanings. For a language to be considered a postvernacular, those interpreting its meaning must necessarily seize upon its vernacular significations; as such, the distinction between the two (vernacular/postvernacular) is not one of opposition but of inclusion: the signification of a postvernacular relies on an established chain of meaning but extends it for its own use (see Parmentier, 2007, p. 273).

LK's members embrace a new medium in order to prove that Ladino is "part of the contemporary world and ... relevant for the future" (Eisenlohr, 2004, p. 24), explicitly counteracting the morbidity discourse. Rather than debating whether Ladino is viable or extinct, as many before me have done, this article has focused on the semiotics of Ladinoland, what its speakers imagine it to mean today and wish it to be tomorrow. It is within this "little electronic community," as LK members have called it, that individuals build, deconstruct and fortify what so many see as a moribund language.

## Acknowledgments

The following fellowships and institutions supported research for this article: Fulbright-Hays, National Foundation for Jewish Culture, Maurice Amado Foundation for Sephardic Studies, the Eastern Consortium of Persian and Turkish, the Mellon Foundation, and the Anthropology and Judaic Studies departments at Stanford and Brown Universities. Extra thanks to

[17] As Benor notes, among Sephardic Jews in the United States (Jewish–English) speech is often marked with Yiddishisms rather than Ladino loan-words, reflecting the influence of Ashkenazi Jewish speech on their linguistic practices (Benor, 2009, pp. 254–256).

Shirley Brice Heath, Sarah Bunin Benor, Tsvi Sadan, Daveeda Goldberg and *Language & Communication*'s anonymous reviewers for thoughtful readings of earlier drafts of this article.

## References

Alexander, T., 2007. Review of sephardic identity: essays on a vanishing Jewish culture. In: Zucker, George K. (Ed.). Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies 25 (4), 189–191.
Baker, Z., 1994/1995. (5755). Some problems of Ladino/Judezmo Romanization. Judaica Librarianship, 9 (1–2).
Barthes, R., 1990. The Fashion System. University of California Press, Berkeley.
Benbassa, E., Rodrigue, A., 2000. Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th–20th Centuries. University of California, Berkeley.
Benor, S.B., 2009. Do American Jews speak a "Jewish language"? A model of Jewish linguistic distinctiveness. Jewish Quarterly Review 99 (2), 230–269.
Boellstorff, T., 2008. Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
Borovaia, O., 2001. Translation and Westernization: "Gulliver's Travels" in Ladino. Jewish Social Studies 7 (2), 149–168.
Borovaya, O., 2003. The serialized novel as rewriting: the case of Ladino belles lettres. Jewish Social Studies 10 (1), 30–68.
Bortnick, R.A., 2004. The Internet and Judeo-Spanish: impact and implication of a virtual community. In: Pomeroy, H., Alpert, M. (Eds.), Proceedings of the Twelfth British Conference on Judeo-Spanish Studies, 24–26 June 2001 (Sephardic Language, Literature and History). Brill, Leiden, pp. 3–12.
Boyarin, J., 1994. Jewish geography goes on-line. Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review 16 (1), 3–5.
Bronner, S., 2001. From landsmanshaften to vinkln: mediating community among Yiddish speakers in America. Jewish History 15 (2), 131–148.
Bucholtz, M., 2000. The politics of transcription. Journal of Pragmatics 32, 1439–1465.
Bunis, D., 1996. Modernization and the language question among Judezmo-speaking Sephardim of the Ottoman Empire. In: Goldberg, H. (Ed.), Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries: History and Culture in the Modern Era. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, pp. 226–239.
Chumaciero, R., 1982. Language maintenance and shift among Jerusalem Sephardim. International Journal of the Sociology of Language 37, 25–39.
Cohen, J., 2004. 'E COM RAZÕES DE LADINO': Judeo-Spanish song as identity marker, from Iberian Neo-Sephardic activities to the Internet. In: Pomeroy, H., Alpert, M. (Eds.), Proceedings of the Twelfth British Conference on Judeo-Spanish Studies, 24–26 June 2001 (Sephardic Language, Literature and History). Brill, Leiden, pp. 159–167.
Collot, M., Belmore, N., 1996. Electronic language: a new variety of English. In: Herring, S.C. (Ed.), Computer-mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-cultural Perspectives. John Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 13–28.
Davis, B.H., Brewer, J.P., 1997. Electronic Discourse: Linguistic Individuals in Virtual Space. State University of New York Press, New York.
Doostdar, A., 2004. The vulgar spirit of blogging: On language, culture, and power in Persian Weblogestan. American Anthropologist 106 (4), 651–662.
Dorian, N., 1987. The value of language maintenance efforts which are unlikely to succeed. International Journal of the Sociology of Language 68, 57–67.
Eisenlohr, P., 2004. Language revitalization and new technologies: cultures of electronic mediation and the refiguring of communities. Annual Review of Anthropology 33, 21–45.
El-Or, T., 2004. Tickets to the opera: a negotiation of western knowledge-beyond resistance or reproduction. Anthropology & Education Quarterly 35 (2), 189–211.
Fader, A., 2007. Redeeming sacred sparks: syncretism and gendered language shift among Hasidic Jews in New York. Journal of Linguistic Anthropology 17 (1), 1–23.
Ferrara, K. et al, 1991. Interactive written discourse as an emergent register. Written Communication 8 (1), 8–34.
Fonrobert, C., 2009. The new spatial turn in Jewish studies. AJS Review 33, 155–164.
Gal, S., Irvine, J., 1995. The boundaries of languages and disciplines: how ideologies construct difference. Social Research 62 (4), 967–1001.
Gerber, J., 1992. Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience. Free Press, New York.
Glinert, L. (Ed.), 1993. Hebrew in Ashkenaz: A Language in Exile. Oxford University Press, New York.
Goldish, M., 2008. Jewish Questions: Responsa on Sephardic Life in the Early Modern Period. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
Gruber, R., 2009. Beyond virtually Jewish: new authenticities and real imaginary spaces in Europe. Jewish Quarterly Review 99 (4), 487–504.
Harris, T., 1982. Reasons for the decline of Judeo-Spanish. International Journal of the Sociology of Language 37, 71–97.
Harris, T., 1994. Death of a Language: The History of Judeo-Spanish. University of Delaware Press, Newark.
Harshav, B., 1990. The Meaning of Yiddish. University of California Press, Berkeley.
Hill, J., 2002. "Expert rhetorics" in advocacy for endangered languages: who is listening, and what do they hear? Journal of Linguistic Anthropology 12 (2), 119–133.
Hymes, D., 1974. Foundations in Sociolinguistics: an Enthnographic Approach. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.
Isaacs, M., 1999. Haredi, haymish and frim: Yiddish vitality and language choice in a multilingual community. International Journal of the Sociology of Language 138, 9–30.
Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B., 1996. The electronic vernacular. In: Marcus, G.E. (Ed.), Connected: Engagements with Media. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 21–65.
Lehmann, M.B., 2005. Ladino Rabbinic Literature and Ottoman Sephardic Culture. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
Levy, A., Weingrod, A. (Eds.), 2005. Homelands and Diasporas: Holy Lands and Other Places. Stanford University Press, Stanford.
Lippi-Green, R., 1997. English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States. Routledge, London.
Parmentier, R., 2007. It's about time: on the semiotics of temporality. Language and Communication 27 (3), 272–277.
Prager, L., 1981. Yiddish in the university. In: Fishman, J.A. (Ed.), Never Say Die: A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life. Mouton, The Hague, pp. 529–545.
Şaul, M., 1983. The mother tongue of the polyglot: cosmopolitism and nationalism among the Sepharadim of Istanbul. Anthropological Linguistics 25 (3), 326–358.
Schieffelin, B. et al. (Eds.), 1998. Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
Shandler, J., 2003. Imagining Yiddishland: language, place and memory. History & Memory 15 (1), 123–149.
Shandler, J., 2004. Postvernacular Yiddish: language as a performance art. TDR/The Drama Review 48 (1), 19–43.
Shandler, J., 2006. Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Langauge & Culture. University of California Press, Berkeley.
Shaw, S., 1991. Jews of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. New York University Press, New York.
Silverstein, M., 1979. Language structure and linguistic ideology. In: Clyne, P. (Ed.), The Elements: A Parasession on Linguistic Units and Levels. Chicago Linguistic Society, Chicago, pp. 193–247.
Stein, S.A., 2004. Making Jews Modern: The Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
Stein, S.A., 2006. Asymmetric fates: secular Yiddish and Ladino culture in comparison. Jewish Quarterly Review 96 (4), 498–509.
Stolow, J., 2005. Religion and/as media. Theory Culture Society 22, 119–145.
Turkle, S., 1995. Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet. Simon and Schuster, New York.
Zucker, G., 2001. Ladino, Judezmo, Spanyolit, el Kasteyano Muestro. Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies 19, 4–14.

**Marcy Brink-Danan** is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Judaic Studies at Brown University. A socio-cultural anthropologist specializing in minority issues, her publications include "Exhibiting Tolerance: Difference & Doubt in a Turkish Museum" in Benbassa (Ed.), *Itinéraires sépharades: Complexité et diversité des identités*. Presses Universitaires Paris Sorbonne (2010), "'I Vote, Therefore I Am': Rituals of Democracy and the Turkish Chief Rabbi" in *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* (2009) and "Names that show time: Turkish Jews as "strangers" and the semiotics of reclassification" in *American Anthropologist*, (2010). Brink-Danan's ethnographic study of contemporary Turkish Jewry is forthcoming with Indiana University Press.