

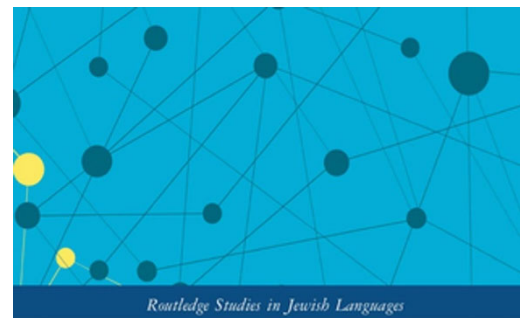


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Ladino on the Internet: Sepharad 4 is the product of (almost) 11 years of research, with Dr Carlos Yebara López beginning his preliminary research in 2014, when he first encountered the Ladino language whilst in Israel. Now an established authority in the field of Ladino, not only teaching Judezmo but also Haketia, he published *A Simplified Guide to Reading and Writing Ladino in Rashi and Solitreo* (2023), the first of its kind, making the language learning process, the revitalisation of Ladino, and the research of archival documents more accessible and possible in a manner in which it had not been previously. Not forgetting his glossary of *Terminología LGBTQIA+ en ladino* (2024) (inspired by Yiddish scholar Dr Sima Beeri) and his bringing Ladino into the 21st Century along with his public interest company/digital archive *Ladino 21*.

This book is a coalescence of Dr Yebara López's expertise, all of which must be considered when approaching *Ladino on the Internet: Sepharad 4*, as it is much more than an observation of an endangered minority language's evolution on the Internet. It is a surprising and challenging examination of prescriptivism, diasporic identity, and generational divides.

Dr Yebara López's research is broken down into three parts.



LADINO ON THE INTERNET
SEPHARAD 4

Carlos Yebara López



PART 1 WEB 1.0: THE MOSTLY-READ STAGE (1990s)

Chapter One

We are introduced to *Correspondence Circles*, in particular, *Ladinokomunita*, a forum and email list established by Rachel Bortnick at the turn of the 21st Century. Due to the technological limitations of the time, these were focused on the written word, privileging the geolect of Istanbul, Turkey, adopting the French-Ottoman Romanisation orthography promoted by Journalist and Editor of *Aki Yerushalayim*, Moshe Shaul (Z"l) with the intention of bringing together and emboldening Ladino speakers around the globe. It must also be noted however, that the Hebraic scripts Rashi and Solitreo which Judezmo has been written in are not readily available on devices even to this day. This, however, as Dr Yebra López points out, perpetuates Language Standardisation Ideology, which oppressed Ladino to begin with.

LK is then compared to other Ladino email lists: The *Ladino Culture Forum* and *SefaradiMuestro*. The former derailed into cyber-postvernacular with most contributors communicating exclusively in Hebrew, before shutting down in 2012. The latter, however, is still active, though in contrast to *LK*, posts are not moderated.

Whilst the prescriptivist attitudes permeating *LK* and *Los Ladinadores* (a Facebook group which Dr Yebra López delves into in Chapter Three) are held to account. Due to the standardisation employed, and the heavy moderation, these digital meeting spots have sustained longevity, and popularity, their position as the axiom of 'authentic' or, 'correct' Ladino being reinforced as a result.

PART 2 WEB 2.0: THE PARTICIPATIVE, MULTISEMIOTIC, MULTIMODAL SOCIAL STAGE (2000s-)

Chapter Two

Web 2.0, unlike Web 1.0, allows for a multimodal mode of communication. In this chapter Dr Yebra López discusses the emergence of digital archives on YouTube, where the spoken word becomes the primary focus of the language. *Wikitongues*, perhaps the most well-known digital archive, is a non-profit, grassroots organisation with the goal of recording, archiving and sharing endangered languages from all over the world. An important factor about these digital archives is that they are a collaborative effort between the organisation and its audience, who are invited to actively participate in the archive,

through engagement, or submitting their own content. Ladino-specific digital archives have been established since 2011 through 2024, including the *Autoridad Nacional del Ladino i su Kultura*, *eSefarad*, *CCSefarad*, and, Dr Yebra López's own, *Ladino 21*.

The Autoridad emerged in 1997 as an organisation after the Knesset passed a law to establish two national authorities in Israel, one for Yiddish and the other for Ladino. *eSefarad* was created as an information hub for Judeo-Spanish news and culture, including a weekly one-hour meeting conducted entirely in Ladino called *Enkontros de Alhad* (explored in depth in Chapter Four). Similarly, *Ladino 21* was set up as a community interest company in 2017 with the initiative to offer classes, apps (Chapter Three), translations, talks, and transcriptions along with a digital archive. *Ladino 21* is somewhat unique in that there is a concerted effort to reach Ladino speakers outside of the Turkish and Israeli bubble, as well as Ladino-speaking Sephardim whose background does not align with the established norm promoted in the aforementioned organisations, as well as non-Jews who have learnt Ladino, by conducting interviews over *Zoom* and, where possible, face to face, establishing trust between the organisation and the speakers.

Subsequently, the growing importance of the audiovisual component in the preservation and revitalisation of Ladino, may contribute to the prescriptivist attitudes introduced in Chapter One, and tends to see L1 Ladino-speakers fall unintentionally into *nativespeakerist* ideology due to judgement against a speaker's choice of vocabulary, their accent, and sometimes, appearance. Some L1 speakers may be unintentionally signalling what an authentic *ladinoavolante*, and by extension, Sephardi looks, acts, and sounds like.

Apropos of *Ladino 21*, Dr Yebra López published a *Terminolojia LGBTQIA+ en ladino* in 2024, paralleling the current discourse surrounding grammatically gendered 'modern' languages, as well as challenging the uncritical use of pejorative terms relating to women and LGBTQIA+ people. As seen in Chapter One, L1 Ladino-speakers – self-proclaimed native speakers – who are generally speaking, over the age of 60, worry that academics may be imposing their own ideology on the language. This position fails to consider that not only are Ladinospeakers who do not meet the standard alienated, but also, refusing to allow Ladino to evolve and adapt is not conducive to revitalisation efforts of an endangered language.

Chapter Three

This chapter focuses on social media, primarily, *Los Ladinadores* on Facebook, and language learning apps, such as *Memrise* and *uTalk*, which Dr Yebra López calls the 'gamification' of Ladino.

Whilst social media platforms such as *TikTok* and *Instagram* are the most popular for Millennials and Gen Z, with a handful of users creating content exclusively in Ladino, due to the average age of L1 Ladino speakers being >55, Facebook remains the dominant platform for consistent, interactive Ladino communication. *Los Ladinadores*, like *LK*, only accept posts written in Judeo-Spanish. Regarding language learning applications, these platforms focus on the acquisition of language, primarily speaking and listening skills. Interestingly, while the gamification of language learning appeals to younger demographics, the user-friendly design and simplicity of these applications have become popular with the elderly – thus, the intergenerational gap which endangered language communities suffer from, is bridged.

Dr Yebra López co-translated the Ladino course for *uTalk* with Alejandro Acero Ayuda. He notes that *uTalk* courses require the curriculum to contain cultural specific terminology etc. – in this case, vocabulary related to Judaism, and specifically Sephardic culture, internalising, Dr Yebra López argues, the ideological message that Ladino belongs exclusively to Sephardim, while on the other hand acknowledging that speech communities should take ownership of their heritage languages, “lest they end up being the recipients all-too-familiar forms of benevolent (neo)-colonialism in the name of humanitarian protection” (p. 23).

Chapter Four

In this chapter Dr Yebra López examines the ‘Zoom Boom,’ catalysed by the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, which led to national lockdowns/quarantine periods. Employers and educators respectively made the pivot to online work and education. This included *The Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood of America*, which set up the *Sephardic Digital Academy*. Starting with five weekly classes offered pro bono, and eventually becoming 350 classes broadcasted live on Zoom with their recordings being uploaded to YouTube and Facebook. The founders of *eSefarad*, Marcelo and Liliana Benveniste, were given the push they needed to bring an idea that had been floating around into fruition, a virtual space in which *ladinoavolantes* could meet regularly. *Enkontros de Alhad* gave people going through a global pandemic a sense of routine, consistency, and socialisation during a time when they were limited to their ‘bubbles.’ They were also exposed to other Ladino speakers around the world, something which they had lacked before the pandemic. This chapter raises the question, was this global tragedy a blessing in disguise as far as Ladino, and endangered languages in general, are concerned?

These efforts sparked pedagogical interest, proving that languages can be taught successfully online. Therefore, the *Oxford Centre of Jewish Studies* and the *Institut des Langues*

Rares, in collaboration, founded the *Oxford School of Rare Jewish Languages* offering free, web-based instruction in rare Jewish languages. The OSRJL stresses that the teaching of languages and their respective Hebraic scripts are essential, in order to facilitate the transcription and translation of historic texts. OSRJL approaches language revitalisation as an academic conquest, resulting in, as Dr Yebra López describes it, “the creation of a community of scholars, as opposed to a community of Ladino speakers” (p. 134).

Chapter Five

Here, Dr Yebra López breaks down two *Netflix* original series which feature Ladino speaking Sephardim. The Turkish series *Kulüp*, and the Israeli series – and adaptation of a 2015 novel – *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem*, both airing in 2021. However, while *Kulüp* had a cadre of Ladino speakers to consult, ensuring the Istanbul gelect of Ladino was accurate, *TBQoJ*, did not.

Dr Yebra López calls into focus the careless, yet insidious way minority languages can continue to be subjugated. In this case, Netflix fails to enforce their own dubbing guidelines, which state “do not dub over foreign dialogue”. Ladino is not available as an audio language. Similarly, no Ladino subtitles are available, nor is the Ladino translated in the subtitles, leaving sections of dialogue lost for viewers who do not understand Ladino, instead the caption reads [In Ladino] or in some cases mislabeled as [In Spanish] (upon my own viewing of *Kulüp* the Ladino was labelled as [In Hebrew]).

When compared to the Yiddish language, Netflix originals, they do not suffer the same shortcomings. Indeed, there are more Yiddish speakers globally than Ladino ones.

In this chapter Dr Yebra López includes a transcription and translation of a full dialogue from both shows, breaking down the grammar, proverbs, and cultural context (as well as noting and correcting the errors featured in *TBQoJ*) which is a welcome addition for readers learning Ladino, as well as providing linguistic practical insight into the unique essence of Ladino.

PART 3 WEB 3.0: THE DECENTRALISED, BLOCKCHAIN-AND-TOKEN-BASED STAGE (2010s-)

Chapter Six

Dr Yebra López proposes *Sepharad 5*, the establishment of a *Network State* opposed to a *Nation State*. This radical hypothesis says that with the help of virtual reality technology

Sephardim will eventually be able to create a self-sufficient and autonomous nation within the *Metaverse* which will traverse the digital sphere and real-world locations. “*Decentralised Autonomous Communities*,” or, “*Startup Societies*” offer the potential for Jews (and other minority communities) to construct a Nation from an alternative anti-colonial perspective.

In short, *Ladino on the Internet: Sepharad 4* is an in-depth exploration of endangered languages in the digital age, an observation of the way prescriptivism manifests when a language’s primary mode of communication is written, and a radical yet hopeful probe into what it means (or could mean) to be a community in diaspora in a world where technology is advancing faster than we could have ever imagined. Whether your interest explicitly pertains to Ladino and Judeo-languages or not, this book should be a staple for anyone interested in endangered languages.

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