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Multilingualism in Contemporary Sephardic Children's Literature

Fostering Young Readers' Engagement in Ladino Culture

Abstract: This article explores the resurgence of contemporary Sephardic children's literature, with a particular focus on its multilingual nature as a central feature. The study aims to demonstrate how the use of multiple languages within a book serves as a tool to keep young Sephardic readers connected to Ladino – their heritage language – which, nowadays, is considered severely endangered. The methodological approach is based on Jeffrey Shandler's concept of post-vernacularity, positioning contemporary Judeo-Spanish children's literature as a post-vernacular phenomenon. The selected books were published in Israel and the United States between 2010 and 2023. This research categorises these works based on the various configurations of multilingualism, which may manifest as direct translations or the use of different languages (and alphabets) in distinct sections of the text and in the pictures. The study concludes that multilingual children's literature offers a meaningful way for young Sephardim to connect with their cultural roots and engage with Ladino culture.

Keywords: Sephardic children's literature, literary multilingualism, Judeo-Spanish (Ladino), post-vernacular mode of a language, endangered languages

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Contemporary children's literature on Sephardic culture and history is a niche branch of literary production, and its specimens are still few and far between. Interestingly and understandably, this scant corpus of texts is multilingual. This mirrors the long-standing diasporic quality of Sephardic culture, with the books written in the vernaculars of their authors' home countries, which boast communities that still, fully or partly, identify with their Sephardic roots.

Currently, the Sephardim live in the so-called "secondary diaspora," which took shape as a result of migrations, mainly propelled by economic and political motives at the turn of the 19th century. In spatial terms, the Sephardic diaspora is scattered over Israel, South and North Americas, Turkey, and – to a lesser extent – some European countries. This sprawling territory does not really overlap with the boundaries of the primary Sephardic diaspora, which emerged in the aftermath of the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the 15th century. Until the early 20th century, a considerable majority of the Sephardim had lived in the Mediterranean region, including southern Europe and northern Africa. The Holocaust was the most important, albeit not the only, reason behind the shrivelling of Jewish clusters in Europe, while the mass emigration of the Sephardim from Arab lands took place in the 1950s (Benbassa and Rodrigue 356–378; Díaz-Mas 53–94).

In cultural terms, the major differences between the primary and secondary diasporas lie in the role ascribed to religion and, crucially, in their language. In previous centuries, the Mediterranean diaspora was held together by its shared language, or rather languages, since it was characterised by diglossia. Hebrew (and Aramaic) prevailed in religious writings and education, while Judeo-Spanish was used in speech, gradually expanding its presence in printed publications. Besides, Judeo-Spanish – also known as *Ladino* or *Judezmo* – appeared in popular culture and secular literature, which started to thrive in the 19th and 20th centuries. Sephardic vernacular is a fusion language that combines a prevailing Hispanic component with Hebrew-Aramaic, Turkish, South Slavic, Greek, French, and other elements. For centuries, it has been written mainly with Hebrew letters, predominantly with a so-called "Rashi" script, but from the beginning of the 20th century, the use of the Latin alphabet became increasingly common (Bunis; August-Zarębska, "The Language").

In the contemporary Sephardic diaspora, Judeo-Spanish is commonly recognised as the language of Sephardic heritage, and people who define themselves as Sephardim report a cultural and emotional attachment to it as the language of their ancestors. A range of campaigns dedicated to highlighting and bolstering these bonds, in addition to commemorating Judeo-Spanish and its culture, have been launched – even though an overwhelming Sephardic majority no longer speak Judeo-Spanish, let alone read literature in it. Rather, their cultural participation relies on the languages spoken in the countries where they live. While the diasporic Sephardic community is multilingual, Judeo-Spanish is almost absent in the various configurations of this polyglossia. Today, the native Sephardic language is classified as being at serious risk of extinction, having only a residual presence in Israel and Turkey (Moseley; Harris; Meyuhas Ginio 335–337). Recently, there has been a surge of interest in learning it on the internet, particularly intense since the COVID-19 pandemic (Yebra López; Fredholm).

The 21st-century growing concern for Ladino is mirrored in the books I address in this article.[1] My purpose is to show the breadth of the resurgent Sephardic children's literature and to demonstrate the different ways of its multilingualism, which is one of its main features. I take the multilingual nature of this literature to be a tool for keeping the younger generation of Sephardim connected to their heritage language and to foster their engagement in Ladino culture. The books that underpin my argument are written in English, Hebrew, and Judeo-Spanish, and they were published in Israel and the United States from 2010 to 2023. The ones I have chosen for this research are bilingual and combine Ladino with either Hebrew or English. This means that I do not include monolingual books written exclusively in Ladino or other languages, as I intend to examine works whose authors have recognised that literary multilingualism is a vehicle for manifesting their identity and familiarising the youngest generation with Sephardic language, culture, and roots. Given the current situation of Judeo-Spanish, one of their goals is to give visibility to the language. The works analysed here have recently been published, and my article is one of the first studies devoted to them.[2] Therefore, I primarily take an informative approach to categorising the books and illustrating the various forms of their multilingualism.

I understand literary multilingualism as the co-presence within a single book of two or more languages, in different configurations, either as a doubling of the same text or as the use of two or more languages at distinct levels of the organisation of the book. In the latter case, one language appears in the main body of text and the other in paratexts such as the title, preface, and editorial information. The language chosen for paratexts is usually considered "stronger" (that is, more intelligible to the audience), and is employed to assist the "weaker" Ladino language. The terminology of "strength" and "weakness" raises issues of ordering and domination (see Kauranen et al. 11–17); however, I will not address them here.

Multilingualism is an important or, in some examples, even central feature of contemporary Sephardic children's literature. The questions posed in this article concern the patterns of multilingualism manifested in this literature, the factors that these patterns depend on, and the ways that they influence the intended audience. My article is focused, first of all, on the books and the reciprocal relations between languages within a volume. These books are considered to be a completion of a deliberate strategy of the authors who strive to find a space for the language that no longer has its own territory on a map, either physical or political. Instead, it represents the past and heritage of modern Sephardim and alludes to the system of cultural values embedded in their complex identities. The junctures and intersections of languages in the text represent a border zone in which what has been silenced, gone quiet, or been erased comes to the fore. Making this border visible in literature can be read as a gesture of recognition or reclamation of the silenced (Kauranen et al. 4–5). In children's literature, this act also expresses the importance of communicating it to the youngest.

Based on the language criterion, the publications under scrutiny can basically be divided into two categories. The first one includes books in Judeo-Spanish, or at least containing a Judeo-Spanish text as one version, and the second comprises books composed in other languages. Some of the books defy such a clearly defined classification because they combine features of the two categories (either in terms of language or in terms of other typical characteristics). In the former category, poetry prevails, whose major function is to foster knowledge of the Sephardic language, and which serves as a means of teaching it. Books in the latter category are instead committed to disseminating knowledge of Sephardic history and culture, which is depicted as having a special place in the lives of the protagonists. The language is mentioned as one of the many components of the Spanish Jews' culture, and if some Judeo-Spanish words or phrases are cited, language instruction or preservation is not the main aim pursued by the authors.

The Current Situation of Judeo-Spanish

Since the 1940s, the community of Judeo-Spanish speakers has been successively shrinking. The language itself is barely spoken today, and as the potential target readership disappears, literature in Judeo-Spanish is ceasing to be written. Since the 1970s, Judeo-Spanish has been increasingly listed among languages at risk of extinction. At the same time, the awareness that Judeo-Spanish is vanishing has fuelled efforts to record what can still be transmitted in this language. As a result, a number of activists have been working to preserve and revive Judeo-Spanish by restoring its literary function, or at least by commemorating it in their texts (see Cassani).

While this upsurge of efforts has been dubbed *arrebivimiento* (a revival of Judeo-Spanish and its literature) by the activists themselves, I claim that this development, in many respects, also constitutes a post-vernacular phenomenon. It certainly exhibits a range of features which Jeffrey Shandler has catalogued as typical markers of post-vernacularity in his research on Yiddish culture. As a characteristic of the post-vernacular mode, the symbolic meaning of a textual or verbal utterance, either in text or in speech, along with the choice of Judeo-Spanish rather than any other language, overrides its basic informative function. Briefly, what language is used and how it is used matter more than what is being said (Shandler 22). How well the language is known and how proficiently it is used is of secondary importance compared with the motivation that prompts the speaker to choose this language, rather than any other, at that moment, even if they only use its vestigial form. The most frequent aims of resorting to Judeo-Spanish include bringing into relief the Sephardic component of the speakers' complex identities, embracing the Judeo-Spanish cultural legacy, demonstrating concern with the current status of the language and/or, especially for writers, promoting its survival and the development of its expressional potential (August-Zarębska, "Contemporary [in its]" 258).

As the movement is gathering momentum, it is becoming ever clearer that its initiatives and campaigns are informed by modern socio-linguistic knowledge regarding language revitalisation (Yebra López).[3] For several decades now, there have been no children learning Judeo-Spanish at home, school, or in extracurricular settings,[4] and languages that are not taught to the youngest generation are known to stand no chance of surviving (Crystal 27–28). Given this, the publications for children over the last ten years can be interpreted as the response of activists for the preservation of Judeo-Spanish to these insights and realisations and can be perceived as a post-vernacular phenomenon. Particularly, Israeli authors familiar with the history of the Hebrew revival in the second half of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the role of children's literature in it, take inspiration from selected elements of this process.[5] Even if by no means numerous, Judeo-Spanish children's books hold significant relevance as they help bridge the substantial gap that has emerged in this field over the preceding decades.

The First Touch of Judeo-Spanish

Released in 2010, the first publication project in the category of poetry books in Judeo-Spanish consisted of two works, each of which had two separate – Judeo-Spanish and Hebrew – language versions. These were Ada Gattegno-Saltiel's *Multikolor: Poemas Para Chikos i Grandes* (Multicolour: Poems for the small and the big, 2010) and Avner Perez's *Una Torre en Yerushalayim* (A tower in Jerusalem, 2010). The project epitomises a range of features observable in other Judeo-Spanish children's books as well. First, the books are pointedly bilingual, which results from the fact that their authors (and the publisher, Avner Perez himself) were fully aware that Judeo-Spanish alone was no longer sufficient as a language of publishing and marketing information, and that the content of the poems would be more comprehensible if accompanied by a Hebrew translation. The project was published in Israel, and the combination of the two languages indicates that it was primarily intended for the Hebrew-speaking reading public. As an important component, the books include the preface in Hebrew and Judeo-Spanish which explains the motivations of the writers and their ideas about what the books were supposed to accomplish. The preface states that their fundamental intent was to test the expressional capacity of Judeo-Spanish in children's poetry; they sought to meet the formal and linguistic criteria of the genre in their poems and believe that they have achieved their goal. They also define two addressee groups: firstly, the *aficionados* of Judeo-Spanish (mostly members of their own generation), and secondly, young readers whose appreciation of the poems will be mediated by their grandparents and parents. This assumption has resulted in the dual address of the books, a feature that is almost ubiquitous in children's literature. However, adult readers appear to be central to the project, with children being accorded a secondary position as additional addressees (August-Zarębska, "Contemporary [for Young]"). The main idea seems to have been that engaging children would be a welcome side effect, but not the prerequisite of the execution of the project's fundamental goal of boosting the development of Judeo-Spanish and its literature.

The two books comprise poems for two age groups, which comes across as a deliberate and consistently implemented design. Gattegno-Saltiel's *Multikolor* targets toddlers and pre-schoolers, to whom it offers texts explicitly classified as nursery rhymes. Perez's *Una Torre en Yerushalayim* contains poems for school-age children which, expectedly, employ a more varied diction and display greater grammatical, syntactic, thematic, and formal complexity. What is peculiar about the project is the idea of placing the Hebrew and Judeo-Spanish languages in relation to each other – they are in separate booklets (four in total, two in each language) collected into one edition due to a cardboard box. The graphic layout and material form of the booklets diverge from the main trends that prevailed in the children's literature market in Israel, Europe, or the United States in 2010. Thus, it is evident that the editors aimed at testing the possibilities of the Judeo-Spanish language and book, rather than at releasing a product that would really reach young readers' hands. It is hard to imagine that children would willingly choose such booklets, touch them, look at them, engage in a multimodal experience or, finally, read.

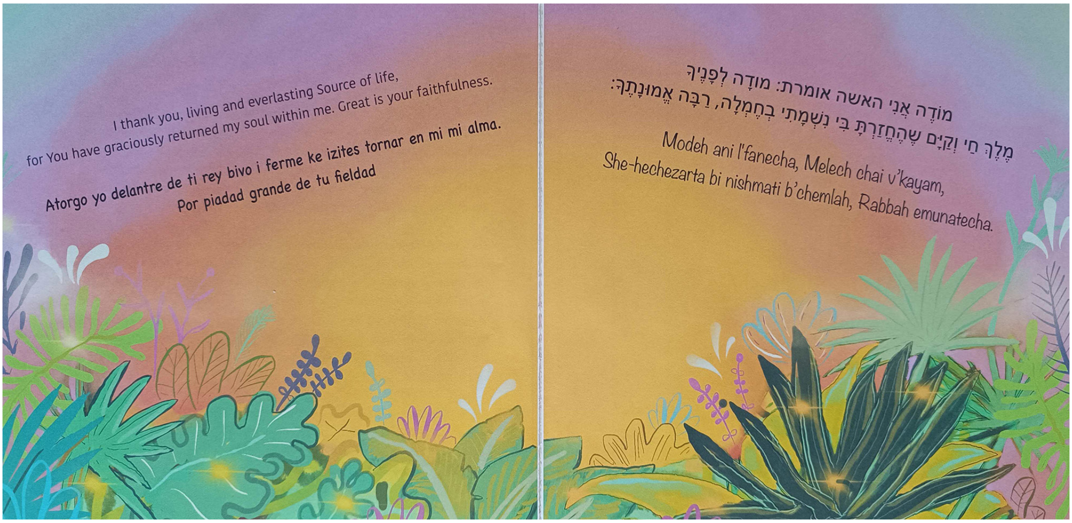
The subsequent children's publications, comprising a Judeo-Spanish version of the text, are also bilingual and – likewise – contain paramount prefaces that address adults as prospective intermediaries between children and texts composed in a language unfamiliar to them. The pattern of dual address is repeated, with adults assigned a more prominent role. They must be convinced of the value of Judeo-Spanish in the education of children from a Sephardic background, often receiving translated texts and basic information about the language itself (see August-Zarębska, "Contemporary [for Young]"). Between 2016 and 2018, two projects of this kind were released, one of them in the United States and the other in Israel. They were, respectively, *Ora de despertar* (Time to wake up, 2016) by Sarah Aroeste and the two-volume *Yeladino* (2017, 2018), an anthology of poetry by various poets in Shmuel Refael's Judeo-Spanish translation, with an audio version and a musical arrangement by Hani Nahmias.[6] The choice of language, coupled with Judeo-Spanish – which was envisaged as the major channel of communication with readers – correlated with the place of publication. Specifically, English was used in the United States release and Hebrew in the Israeli one. As a result of this choice, *Ora de despertar*, in all likelihood, has better prospects of broader international reception than *Yeladino*. Interestingly, both projects are multimodal and multimedial. The books come complete with recordings available in a variety of formats such as CDs, sound files on the internet, and video clips of all or selected works posted on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. Additionally, *Yeladino* was adapted to the stage as a theatrical-musical performance for children and with children. Sarah Aroeste has used the album *Ora de despertar* in her educational music classes for pre-schoolers and early education pupils, and developed a songbook with scores as an aid for educators and parents to initiate classes, activities, and play.

The poems in *Ora de despertar* are typical children's songs about themes such as times of the day, meals, family, body parts, and animals. The lyrics are based on simple syntactic structures and are, as such, effective in initiating children into language, no matter whether it is their first or second language. The latter applies to Judeo-Spanish. Another asset is that the lyrics are easily combined with music. These two functions – rudimentary exposure to Judeo-Spanish and singability – lead to the simplicity of the literary expression.

The two volumes of *Yeladino* assemble classics of Israeli children's poetry coupled with their Judeo-Spanish translations. Children – and certainly their parents and grandparents – are bound to be intimately acquainted with these texts as they are a staple of young people's earliest education and upbringing. This familiar component of native Israeli culture is intended to channel children's involvement with Judeo-Spanish. This is explicitly acknowledged in the preface to the anthology, in which its producers explain that, as young children, they still had a chance to hear the sound of Judeo-Spanish as another language besides Hebrew. Over the following decades, this sound faded away more and more, and their literary-musical project is an attempt to make it audible again to the youngest generation (*Yeladino* 34). The language structures of the poems presented as songs are diverse, and their styles vary significantly, as the volume includes translations of works by various classic authors of Hebrew children's poetry.

It should be emphasised that the authors decided to publish the anthology of translations into Judeo-Spanish, rather than original poetry, also because they were aware of the role that translation plays for weakened literatures, being a tool for developing new means to replace those that have disappeared or never been formed (Even-Zohar 47). A similar process occurred in Hebrew children's literature about a century earlier, during the revival of the Hebrew language, when there was a need to fill a gap in texts for young audiences (Shavit, *Hebrew and Israeli*; Jagodzińska 70–72). In Israel, this process is still remembered and is a point of reference for Ladino activists, although the situations of Hebrew and Judeo-Spanish in their different phases (early vernacular and post-vernacular) cannot be equated.

In *Ora de despertar*, Judeo-Spanish is written in Latin script, as it is assumed that the target audience rarely can read the Hebrew alphabet. Here, a separate picturebook edition of the first song of Aroeste's songbook should be mentioned: *Ora de despertar: Time to Wake Up* (2017). This poem, which helps children start a new day in a positive and joyful way, was preceded by the prayer *Modeh Ani* which observant Jews recite upon waking up. Two lines of this prayer were printed in three languages, successively in English, Ladino, and Hebrew (image 1). In my opinion, the author chose the order deliberately as English is the first language of the target readers and it paves the way for Ladino and Hebrew to reach the audience. Interestingly, the Hebrew version is doubled because it appears both in the original Hebrew alphabet and in Latin script. This biscriptal procedure makes readers aware of the materiality of language (Hebrew and not Ladino) and puts them more directly in touch with the experience of multilingualism that is natural to the diasporic culture (see Bodin). This separate edition is addressed to a broader group than the whole songbook, namely families who want their children to become acquainted with Judaism.



I thank you, living and everlasting Source of life,
for You have graciously returned my soul within me. Great is your faithfulness.

Atorgo yo delantre de ti rey bivo i ferme ke izites tornar en mi mi alma.
Por piadad grande de tu fieldad

מוֹדֶה אֲנִי האשה אומרת: מוֹדָה לְפָנֶיךָ
מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיָּם שֶׁהֶחֱזַרְתָּ בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי בְּחֶמְלָה, רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתֶךָ:

Modeh ani l'fanecha, Melech chai v'kayam,
She-hechezarta bi nishmati b'chemlah, Rabbah emunatecha.

Image 1. The two initial lines of the *Modeh Ani* prayer: in English and Ladino (on the left), as well as Hebrew in its original alphabet and Latin transcription (on the right). From *Ora de despertar* (2017) by Sarah Aroeste and Miriam Ross. © Sarah Aroeste and Miriam Ross.

By contrast, *Yeladino* uses almost only the Hebrew alphabet both for Hebrew language and Judeo-Spanish. This choice significantly limits the audience to Hebrew-speaking people. Square Hebrew letters (Hebr. *Meruba*) – typical of Modern Hebrew or Yiddish – appear in both language versions. This means that Ladino was not printed here in its original Rashi script – based on medieval Sephardic handwriting – which is most frequently used in the history of Ladino printing (see Bunis 208–210). Rashi script was employed in this book only in the title of the anthology on the title page, together with its translation into Spanish (not into Judeo-Spanish):

Cantigas hebreas para niños traducidas y cantadas en Ladino
(קאנטיגאס איבריאס פארה ניניוס טראדוזידאס אי קאנטאדאס אין לאדינו)

This exception seems to aim to remind us of the Ladino past and tradition. Even if nowadays the Rashi script is not legible to most readers, it attracts attention with its different typeface and, thus, evokes another layer of Ladino's history. More emphatically than in other alphabets and fonts, the Rashi script gives visibility to the language itself.

The arrangement of the alphabets of *Yeladino* was slightly modified in *Yeladino 2*, perhaps to make the book available to readers outside of Israel. Here, the Latin transcriptions of all the Judeo-Spanish texts were added at the end, on pages 45–65. Curiously, the order of the transcribed poems is opposite to the Hebrew one: the first poem appears on page 65 and the last one on 45. This means that the book opens from left to right and all the pages are numbered in accordance with this order, which indicates that Hebrew is the chief language of the edition. Nevertheless, the reader should realise that, despite this order, the Latin transcriptions are to be read according to the system of Latin-alphabet books.

Nono's Kisses for Sephardic Children (2014), a picturebook by Flori Senor Rosenthal, stands out among the books geared towards promoting Judeo-Spanish. The title itself, with the Judeo-Spanish word "nono" (grandpa) woven into an English phrase, suggests that the book brings the two languages together. Indeed, it does: most of the text is in English, but the book aims to teach some Judeo-Spanish vocabulary, which is arranged in thematic groups along with a sample of Sephardic sayings and phrases that open each of them. As a result, the publication offers a sort of picture dictionary that consists of nine illustrations, each accompanied by two related phrases and a list of words. In total, eighteen expressions and more than one hundred Judeo-Spanish vocabulary items are assembled, all paired with their English equivalents. For example, the theme "Look Who is Dressed in Grandma's Clothes!" comes with the phrases "La kukla de la Nona!"/ "The doll of Grandma!" and "Ke esta vistyendo?"/ "What is she wearing?" as well as with eight words such as "el fostan"/"the dress," "la chanta"/"the purse," and "el yardan de perlas"/"the pearl necklace" (Senor Rosenthal 17). Other thematic sections concern playing musical instruments, toys, furniture, household objects, food, colours, body parts, and family members. What makes this dictionary different from typical dictionaries for children is that the vocabulary part is preceded by paratexts: "Acknowledgements" (5–7) and "A special note from Flori" (9–10). Quite sizeable in proportion to the total volume of the book, the paratexts briefly relate the author's family history, illuminating the entanglements of her Sephardic and Ashkenazi roots. Senor Rosenthal emphasises her fascination with Judeo-Spanish, a language she would occasionally hear as a child, but never had any opportunity to learn:

> I always leaned more toward my Sephardic heritage. […] I wanted so much to speak Ladino (also known as Judezmo) and be able to have a conversation with my great Tia Sarah who never spoke English. But no one seemed to have the time to teach me. So, I learned Spanish in school and kind of knew how to pronounce some of the Ladino changes, but it was not the same. Since we did not live near my grandparents or other family, I had no one to practise with anyway. (Senor Rosenthal 9)

These paratextual additions braid a narrative element into the book, enveloping the illustrations and word lists in a meaningful cultural and personal context.

Four separate dedications – personal ones, to Senor Rosenthal's parents, husband, and children with grandchildren, and a more general, concluding one, worded in Hebrew, "L'dor Va'dor"/ "From Generation to Generation" (3) – and the "Acknowledgments" transfigure this modestly sized booklet into a celebratory and commemorative object, which adult readers may construe as nostalgic. If the paratexts are simply comprehensible to children, they are bound to feel profoundly emotional to adults, who likely look for similar experiences and ties with their loved ones in their own biographies. Senor Rosenthal encourages the adults who will read this book to children to share with them their own tales connected with the heritage language and its place in their lives. Allowing the children a glimpse into parental life stories may not only bolster their commitment to Judeo-Spanish, but also strengthen intergenerational ties.

The book is also furnished with an introduction, or "Pronunciation Chart," to the principles of reading in Judeo-Spanish (Senor Rosenthal 11–12). Several modern publications that contain Judeo-Spanish texts (fiction, non-fiction, and even critical scholarly editions of old writings) include information on the phonetics and transcription of Judeo-Spanish words in the Latin alphabet. This is one of the typical features of publications released in the post-vernacular phase of the Sephardic language (see August-Zarębska and Paprocka).

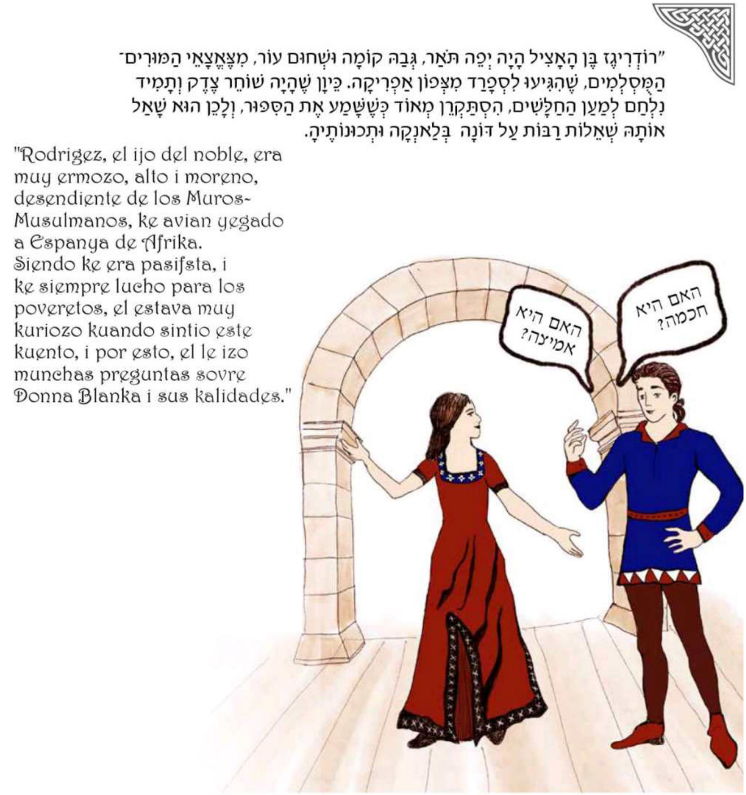
Nono's Kisses for Sephardic Children resembles the other books discussed above in its dedication to the central goal of crafting a space for Judeo-Spanish to be heard again. Senor Rosenthal recollects: "I often wondered about Ladino as it appeared to be a language in jeopardy or near extinction. However, I always thought to revive it somehow" (9).

Traces of Ladino in Children's Books in Other Languages

Recently, several children's books whose purpose was to show Sephardic history, culture, and heritage were published. Four of them, which represent different attitudes to the multilingualism of Sephardic books, will be examined in this section: Sarah Aroeste's *Buen Shabat, Shabbat Shalom* (2020, the United States) illustrated by Ayesha L. Rubio, *Mazal Bueno!* (2023, the United States) illustrated by Taia Morley, Zehava Chen-Turiel's *Agada sfaradit* (2020, Israel)[7], and Debbie Levy's *The Key from Spain: Flory Jagoda and Her Music* (2019, the United States).

Aroeste's *Buen Shabat* and *Mazal Bueno!* are board books. Each of them contains a poem in English which explains the meaning of the traditional Sephardic saying placed in the title. The sayings are the only Ladino words in the text and are repeated several times. The expression "Buen Shabat" was one of the most frequently used greetings in the Sephardic community to wish a good and peaceful Saturday. It is deeply rooted in the culture of Judaism. "Mazal bueno" is equivalent to the English "good luck." Both books target toddlers and their main idea is to teach simple elements of Ladino culture through the use of rhyme, repetition, and images.

Chen-Turiel's *Agada sfaradit: Ha-sipur al dona Blanka u-mishpahat Tsuriel* (A Spanish legend: The story of Dona Blanka and the Tsuriel family) is a book primarily for Hebrew-speaking children. Its original Hebrew text is accompanied by Medi Malki-Koen's and Sarah Sufrin's Ladino translation, printed in the Latin alphabet (image 2), which I consider to fulfil three fundamental functions: it expands the potential readership, can serve as a teaching aid in Judeo-Spanish language instruction, and is a vehicle of symbolic meanings. The translation is a site – a symbolic territory – where Judeo-Spanish breathes and makes its mark in its current post-vernacular stage. Today, the language basically has no geographical area of its own and exists in the temporary and mutable places where oral or written communication takes place, mainly on websites and in online speech communities, where it is used either as cyber-vernacular or cyber-post-vernacular (Brink-Danan; Held; Romero; Yebra López). With its material form, the book constitutes one of the most stable and palpable symbolic territories of Ladino. Liliana Ruth Feierstein has observed, in her discussion of Jewish culture across its history, that "writing has always been a shelter and an abode of



״רוֹדְרִיגֶז בֶּן הָאָצִיל הָיָה יְפֵה תֹּאַר, גְּבַהּ קוֹמָה וּשְׁחוּם עוֹר, מִצֶּאֱצָאֵי הַמּוּרִים־
הַמֻּסְלְמִים, שֶׁהִגִּיעוּ לִסְפָרַד מִצְּפוֹן אַפְרִיקָה. כֵּיוָן שֶׁהָיָה שׁוֹחֵר צֶדֶק וְתָמִיד
נִלְחַם לְמַעַן הַחַלָּשִׁים, הִסְתַּקְרֵן מְאוֹד כְּשֶׁשָּׁמַע אֶת הַסִּפּוּר, וְלָכֵן הוּא שָׁאַל
אוֹתָהּ שְׁאֵלוֹת רַבּוֹת עַל דּוֹנָה בְּלַאנְקָה וּתְכוּנוֹתֶיהָ.

"Rodrigez, el ijo del noble, era
muy ermozo, alto i moreno,
desendiente de los Muros-
Musulmanos, ke avian yegado
a Espanya de Afrika.
Siendo ke era pasifsta, i
ke siempre lucho para los
poveretos, el estava muy
kuriozo kuando sintio este
kuento, i por esto, el le izo
munchas preguntas sovre
Donna Blanka i sus kalidades."

Image 2. The son of a nobleman thinking about the qualities of his beloved in medieval Spain (speech balloons in Hebrew). From *Agada sfaradit* (2020) by Zehava Chen-Turiel and Mayia Uziel. © Zehava Chen-Turiel and Mayia Uziel.

the people that learned to live and survive among letters" (11, my translation).[8] This insight can be rephrased to note that under some circumstances, the language itself lives on and finds an asylum and an opportunity for survival in written texts, specifically in literature. This is what is happening with Judeo-Spanish in its current post-vernacular stage. The gesture of placing a Judeo-Spanish tale side by side with a Hebrew one (the two share the same pages in the book) is profoundly meaningful.

On the editorial page, an additional language can be seen, namely English, only in the translation of the title of the book. In the illustrations, speech balloons sometimes appear (images 2 and 3). They contain solely Hebrew text; the "Acknowledgements" at the end of the book are also printed in Hebrew. These elements highlight the fact that Hebrew is the leading language.

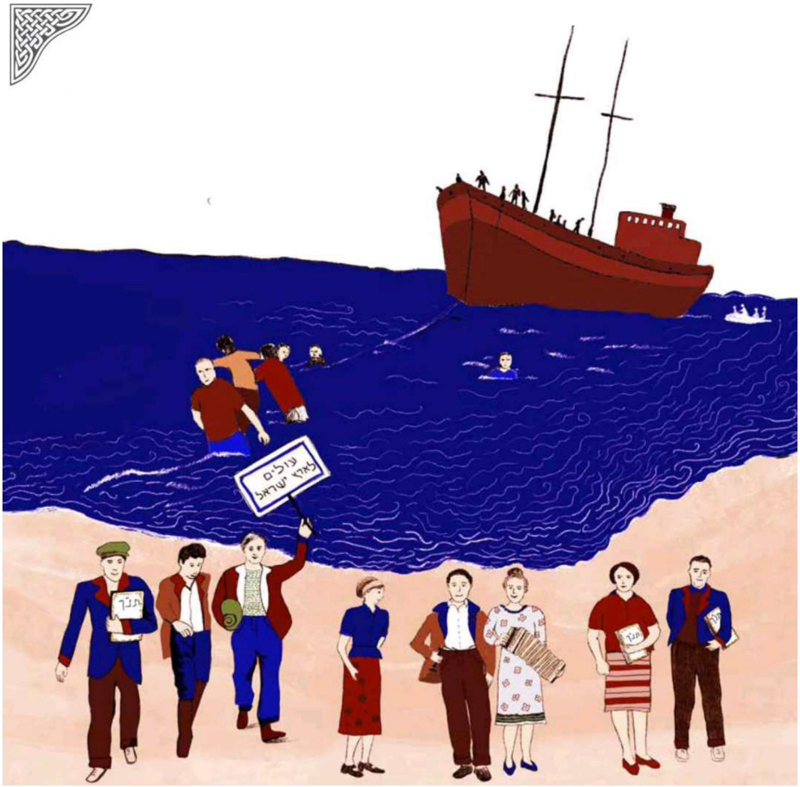


Image 3. New immigrants (Hebr. *olim hadashim*) arriving in Israel in the mid-20th century. From *Agada sfaradit* (2020) by Zehava Chen-Turiel and Mayia Uziel. © Zehava Chen-Turiel and Mayia Uziel.

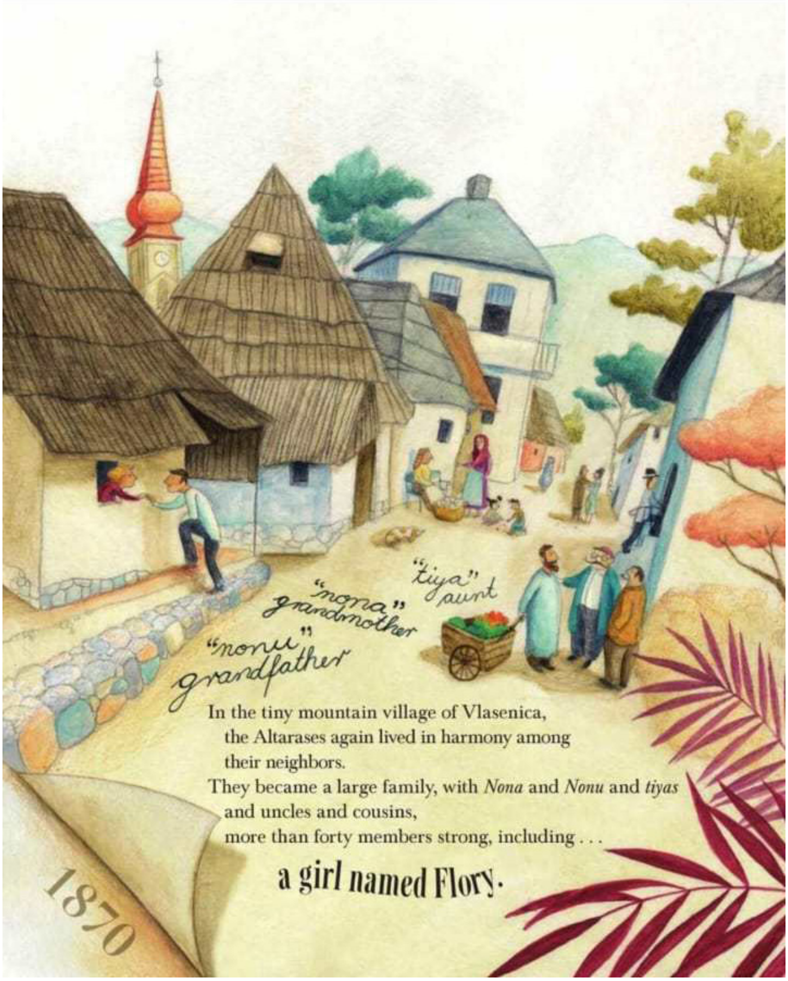
As far as the illustrations in *Agada sfaradit* are concerned, I believe they emphasise the continuity of Sephardic history. The settings and costumes of the depicted characters represent different stages of the diaspora: the medieval court realities in Spain (image 2), the moment when Sephardic migrants arrived in the newly founded state of Israel in the mid-20th century (image 3), and the contemporary life of the author-narrator and her granddaughter in Canada.

Levy's *The Key from Spain*, which recounts the life story of singer-songwriter Flory Jagoda (1923–2021), came out in print while its protagonist was still alive. Written in English, it is primarily intended for American children of Sephardic or generally Jewish descent, but its language makes it more accessible to the reading public in other countries, given that the age group of 5-to-9-year-olds – whom the publisher defines as its target readership – are likely to be assisted by adults in their reading practices. Jagoda was a Bosnia-born performer and populariser of Balkan and Sephardic music, well known in the United States and, more broadly, in today's Sephardic diaspora.

The multilingualism of *The Key from Spain* consists of the fact that a few Ladino words are intertwined in the English text, for example: "nona" (grandma), "nonu" (grandpa), "tiyas" (aunts), and "harmoniku" (a diminutive of accordion).[9] They appear in the story more than once; moreover, they are presented separately in the pictures. This technique resembles a textbook for learning to read (image 4).

The names of family members are remnants of Judeo-Spanish which even now are used by some Sephardic Jews when they refer to their relatives, even if they speak other languages. In a similar way, we come across the words "ts'daka" (charity) and "mezuzah"[10], which – in Judeo-Spanish – are of Hebrew origin. These Hebraisms are kept as elements of the culture of Judaism.

"Nona" and "harmoniku" (Flory Jagoda's instrument), as well as the expression "la yave de Espanya" (the key from Spain), become the key words of the book. "La yave de Espanya" plays a crucial role in the story and is highlighted by repetition both in the text and in the pictures. On the front page, we can see a sheet with notes and a couple of old keys on it. Later, in the image representing the procession of exiles from Spain, an elderly man grasps the key hanging from his neck. In another picture, which doubles the meaning of the text, Flory's grandmother has the same key fixed on the wall: "In Nona's house, the little key – *la yave de Espanya* – watched over the family" (Levy).[11]



In the tiny mountain village of Vlasenica,
the Altarases again lived in harmony among
their neighbors.
They became a large family, with *Nona* and *Nonu* and *tiyas*
and uncles and cousins,
more than forty members strong, including . . .

a girl named Flory.

Image 4. Sephardic neighbourhood life in a Balkan village in the 19th century (Judeo-Spanish words as element of the picture). From *The Key from Spain: Flory Jagoda and Her Music* (2019) by Debbie Levy and Sonja Wimmer. © Debbie Levy, Sonja Wimmer and Kar-Ben Publishing.

La yave de Espanya is the title of one of the most famous songs by Jagoda (Jagoda), and the author of the book deliberately draws attention to it. In another place, the narrator says: "The Altarases journeyed first to Turkey, later to Bosnia, always carrying two precious possessions with them. One was very little: a key. The other was very big, yet took up no space at all: *Ladino*" (Levy). The story shows that Sephardic language and music can still be regarded as keys to the identity and culture of Spanish Jews, although the ways of engaging with them in the contemporary diaspora differ from those typical of the era before the Second World War. In fact, this is the central message that Debbie Levy seems to want to convey to the adults and children of Sephardic background. Interestingly, the images in the book also represent a journey through time between different periods.

Conclusion

As can be seen, writers in various countries make a point of addressing today's generation of children with Sephardic roots in order to provide them with literature that illuminates these roots and helps children meaningfully relate to them. In doing so, these authors resort to two major strategies. One of them seeks to keep young readers in touch with the Judeo-Spanish language through poems, songs, and, occasionally, texts of other genres. These books are bilingual in order to effectively pursue their goal, and their authors are aware that children and their significant adults alike need to make use of another language to understand Judeo-Spanish texts and their cultural context. The context itself is less frequently sketched in the main body of the text but is rather explained in prefaces, which are – as a rule – addressed to adult readers. Offering these additional elements as reading props, the Judeo-Spanish editions of children's literature may halt the erosion of the bond between the Sephardic community and Judeo-Spanish as the language of their cultural and historical heritage.

More and more manifest in recent years, the other strategy involves publishing books in the vernaculars of the countries that are home to Sephardic communities. The themes of these writings dwell upon various aspects of the history and culture of Spanish Jews. As the plot is usually more complex than in the former group, they are written in the official language of the country (English or Hebrew). Nevertheless, the authors want their readers to get in touch with elements or remnants of Judeo-Spanish. That is why they weave Ladino words, expressions, or sayings which they consider important for the culture into the main text, and by repeating them, would like their audience to become acquainted with these elements, thus saving them from oblivion. Although multilingualism does not necessarily take a central place in these books, it is still present and carries certain meanings. Such contact with some pieces or traces of the language shapes positive attitudes towards it and prepares the ground for children's future engagement with the culture and the language.

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Notes

1 My research for this article is partly funded by "The Excellence Initiative – Research University" program in Poland.

2 Judeo-Spanish children's literature still appears to be marginal in research into the culture and literature of Sephardic Jews. A brief review of the works devoted to this topic is presented in Martín Ortega and August-Zarębska, and in August-Zarębska, "Contemporary Judeo-Spanish Poetry for Young Readers."

3 In recent studies, there is an ongoing discussion of vernacular and post-vernacular uses of Judeo-Spanish and I will not elaborate on this issue here. For more information, see: Yebra López; Brink-Danan.

4 On a global scale, exceptions to this rule are very rare.

5 To know the context of the Hebrew revival and Hebrew children's literature, see Shavit, *Hebrew Children's Literature*, and Reshef.

6 The title is a hybrid neologism that blends the Hebrew stem denoting childhood and the name of the Ladino language.

7 In 2021 and 2022, Asher Amado published three bilingual children's books in Israel: English-Ladino *Monster in the Ecological Lake*, as well as Hebrew-Ladino *El kalsado de Alberto* and *La brosh kolorada de la nona*. The multilingual aspects of his books resemble those of Chen-Turiel's *Agada sfaradit*. Thematically, they are not about Sephardic history and culture, but about scenes from the life of a modern family.

8 Original quote: "[...] la escritura fue siempre refugio y morada de un pueblo que aprendió a (sobre)vivir entre Letras."

9 "Nonu" and "harmoniku" imitate the Bosnian pronunciation of Judeo-Spanish, in which the unstressed vowel "o" is pronounced as "u."

10 Little case containing a parchment with particular verses of the Bible. It is placed on the doorposts of Jewish houses.

11 *The Key from Spain* is non-paginated.

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