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Language Mixing in Seattle Ladino: Influence or Interference?*

by Molly FitzMorris

INTRODUCTION
This article profiles three women, all native speakers of Judeo-Spanish, or Ladino, currently living in or near Seattle, Washington. A brief analysis of the information provided by these women in interviews and surveys demonstrates that speakers’ proficiency in a language and their perceived proficiency do not always correlate. The cases of these three women in particular suggest that perceived proficiency may, in fact, relate more directly to the speaker’s linguistic repertoire than it does to actual performance or demonstrated proficiency. It appears that some languages may be perceived as influencing Ladino, while others are seen as interfering.

LADINO FROM SEFARAD TO SEATTLE
Ladino is a mixed Sephardic Jewish language that includes elements from Turkish, Hebrew, French, Greek, and Arabic, among other languages. Though scholars debate whether the Jews in Spain were already speaking a distinct Spanish-based language before the Inquisition, Ladino is essentially a result of the expulsion of these Jews from Spain, or Sefarad, in 1492. Tens of thousands of these emigrants fled to the Ottoman Empire, where they maintained the language for more than four centuries.

Ladino arrived in Seattle around the turn of the twentieth century, as the Ottoman Empire began to crumble. The first Sephardic settlers came from the island of Marmara in 1902 or 1903 (Cone, Droker, and Williams 60; Moriwaki),
and were followed shortly thereafter by the first Rhodesli Sephardic settler in 1904 (Papo 286; Cone, Droker, and Williams 61–62; Adatto 58; Moriwaki). As Sephardic immigration from both Turkey and Rhodes increased, the Seattle Sephardic community split into two groups: the “Turks” and the “Rhodeslis” (Umphrey and Adatto 256). Quite remarkably, Seattle continues to maintain two Sephardic congregations one hundred years later, the “Turkish” Sephardic Bikur Holim Congregation, and the “Rhodesli” Congregation Ezra Bessaroth.

Presently in Seattle, there is a group of Ladino speakers who get together once a week to practice the language. This group has gained considerable recognition in the past year or so in Seattle, and is known publicly as the “Ladineros.” The data used for this article were obtained in a sociolinguistic study of the Ladineros conducted in late 2013 and early 2014. Using an interview in Ladino and a survey in English, I investigated not only the speakers’ demonstrated proficiency in Ladino, but also their ideas and evaluations about the language and their proficiency in the language.

THE SPEAKERS
The three women profiled in this article, all Ladineras, have spent most of their lives in or in close proximity to the city of Seattle. It is important to note, however, that although all three women are native speakers of Ladino, they grew up in extremely different speech communities. Only one of the women is, in fact, a native speaker of a Seattle variety of Ladino, while the other two women learned Rhodesli varieties of Ladino on two different continents abroad before moving to Seattle.

The first speaker is Victoria, who was interviewed with her husband but did not take the survey. Victoria was born on the island of Rhodes in 1932 and spent the first seven years of her life there. At the time, Rhodes was an Italian territory, but according to Victoria, Ladino was spoken within the Sephardic community. Victoria and her family moved to Tangier, Morocco in 1939 because it offered more refuge from the War than did Rhodes, whose Jewish population was eventually decimated. In Morocco, Victoria was educated in Castilian Spanish. When she was fourteen, Victoria’s family moved to Seattle, where she was placed in seventh grade instead of ninth merely because she did not speak English. Victoria later married a Sephardic man who was a passive bilingual, meaning he could understand but not speak Ladino. Upon meeting
Victoria’s family, her husband decided to re-learn Ladino in order to communicate with his new in-laws.

The second speaker is Marie, who was interviewed and surveyed. Marie was born in 1937 in the city of Elizabethville in what was then the Belgian Congo. There was a large Sephardic community of Rhodesli origin in this city at the time, and Ladino was widely spoken among the members of the community. Marie confirmed, however, that French was the majority language and the language in which she was educated. Marie’s family moved to Seattle when she was eleven, and she immediately began to take English courses with her father. Although she began school a couple of grades behind the other children her age, Marie learned English very quickly and was moved to the proper grade in just a few months. Marie married an Ashkenazi man from New York who does not speak or understand Ladino.

The third speaker is Rose, who was interviewed individually and surveyed. Rose was born in Seattle in 1929 and is the oldest of four children. Her parents were both born in present-day Turkey. Rose’s status as the oldest child is relevant to her language use, since the oldest child of immigrants often has little to no exposure to the majority language until he or she begins school. Younger siblings, in contrast, are often exposed to the majority language by their older siblings, leading the majority language to become the language spoken among the children. For this reason, older siblings tend to have a higher proficiency in the minority language than do younger siblings.

Rose indicated in the interview that her first language was, unsurprisingly, Ladino. In fact, she said that when she entered school at the age of five, she spoke English with a Ladino accent, and even pronounced the word “Seattle” with an accent:


I was born in Seattle, Washington. Siatli [as the name is often pronounced in Ladino], Seattle, Washington because when I began, when I went to school for the first time in kindergarten, when they asked me, “Where do you live?” [I said] ‘Siatli’ because in my house we spoke only Ladino. I was the first of four [children] and my mother

Rose's status as the oldest child most likely contributed to her proficiency in Ladino, but there is another unique factor in Rose's case that came up in the interview.

When I asked her if she spoke Ladino as a child, Rose told me yes, but that now, “no kedaron djente kon ken avlar” (“there's no one left to talk to”), and then she told me that she had traveled to Israel twenty-seven times. Although Rose did not describe all of the trips in detail, she suggested that the trips were extended visits, providing this anecdote to illustrate the acclimation she underwent:

Kuando me iva a Israel, avlava kon las tias, tios, primas en ladino. Solo los chikos avlavan en inglez. Una vez fui a la banka kon el chiko de mi primo, y le dishe, “Kualo dize aki?” There was a big sign, and he said, “Doda Rose, it's in English!”

When I went to Israel, I spoke to my aunts, uncles, cousins in Ladino. Only the kids spoke English. One time I went to the bank with my cousin's son, and I said to him, “What does it say here?” There was a big sign, and he said, “Aunt Rose, it's in English!”

After this anecdote, Rose told me that during this particular trip, she had already spent a month in Israel, and joked that she had forgotten her English during this month because she had been speaking virtually exclusively in Ladino. Although forgetting one's native language would take far, far longer than a single month, this anecdote is telling in that it suggests that Rose experienced a high level of immersion in Ladino each time she traveled to Israel. Although many of the other Ladineros talked about trips to Israel, no one other than Rose reported having been more than just a few times. It appears that none of the other Ladineros had the opportunity to practice their Ladino by using it almost exclusively for an extended period of time.

In contrast to Victoria and Marie, who were immigrants themselves, Rose was born to immigrant parents in the United States. It is Rose's American-born generation that is at the center of a linguistic phenomenon called language shift. David Crystal describes language shift as the change in the language used by a particular speech community as a result of contact with a more dominant language. Typically, but not always, this shift occurs over the course of two generations, where the older generation speaks the minority language more, but
the younger generation relies more heavily on the majority language (78–79). In a similar theory of minority language loss, Silvina Montrul concludes that learning and speaking a second language well from early in life can negatively affect a speaker’s first language, and that as a speaker improves in one language, he or she may start to decline in the other (207). In his 2012 study on Istanbul Judeo-Spanish, Rey Romero points out that linguistic change can sometimes look like mistakes or inconsistencies in speech. It is clear that each of these scholars’ theories relates to the current situation in the Seattle Ladino speech community, which is undergoing language change in the form of language shift. This shift, which is nearing its completion as the oldest current generation of Sephardic Jews in Seattle ages, has led to considerable language loss among the individual speakers.

Every one of the speakers whom I interviewed produced grammatical constructions that indicated some level of language loss. During the interviews, there were many agreement errors, both subject-verb and for number and gender in adjectives. Another characteristic of the Ladino that is spoken today is that the subjunctive is almost never used. Phrases like “No kreo ke vamos a . . .”3 were used commonly by the speakers that I interviewed. Crystal notes that “there is usually a dramatic increase in the amount of code-switching [in languages in shift], with the threatened language incorporating features from the contact language(s)” (22). This suggests that American Ladino speakers will demonstrate quite a bit of interference from English in their speech. T. K. Harris observed that there was code-switching in the speech of all of her informants, but she says that the type of code-switching she noticed, the type also referenced by Crystal, was more like the code-shifting that C. Silva-Corvalán defined. Code-switching, a commonly studied phenomenon, is the unmarked alternation between two languages by a speaker who is proficient in both languages. Code-shifting, in contrast, is a phenomenon in which a bilingual who speaks one language more proficiently than the other is forced to use his or her less dominant language and, because of this, incorporates elements of the stronger language into his or her speech. Code-switching was not common among the Ladineros, but code-shifting was observed in every speaker who was interviewed, with the majority of the shifts, as Crystal predicts, between Ladino and English. I will focus on these two types of language mixing and the speakers’ responses to their own language mixing below.
LANGUAGE MIXING AND LINGUISTIC SECURITY

Each of the women exhibited interference from at least one other language in their Ladino speech, suggesting a certain level of language loss since childhood. For Victoria, the interference came from both English and Castilian Spanish. For example, while talking about her family, Victoria said “mi uncle,” and was immediately corrected by her husband. Victoria repeated her husband’s correction, “mi tio,” and continued speaking. Though Victoria often uttered Castilian Spanish words like “ahora” or “lengua,” without seeming to notice, there were times when she clearly recognized the Spanish interference in her Ladino. An example of this was when I asked her how to say “neighborhood” in Ladino. At first, Victoria replied that she did not know, and when I offered that the word was “barrio” in Spanish in an attempt to remind her of its Ladino equivalent, Victoria replied that it was “barrio” in Ladino too. But after confirming and using this word in her response to an interview question, Victoria admitted, “No se si esto avlando ladino o espanyol” (“I don’t know if I’m speaking Ladino or Spanish”). This confession suggests that Victoria was conscious of the mix of Spanish and Ladino in her speech. Also interesting was Victoria’s variation between the Spanish word “judío” and the Ladino “djudio.” The first word, the Castilian Spanish word for “Jews,” is pronounced [huˈðio], where the first consonant is pronounced like an h in English, the second consonant is pronounced like the th in “the” and the stress falls on the second-to-last syllable. Its Ladino equivalent is pronounced [dʒudiˈo] by most speakers in Seattle, where the first consonant is pronounced like the g in “gym,” the second consonant is pronounced like an English d and the stress falls on the last syllable. It is surprising that Victoria would vary in her usage of these two words, especially because Ladino is so closely tied to Sephardic Jewish identity.

Marie demonstrated interference from both English and French in her Ladino speech. In response to my question about her date and place of birth, Marie replied:

Yo nasi en un pais de Afrika, Elisabethville, la . . . city . . . sivdad,
Élisabethville, Belgian Congo, Congo Belge. En français, c’est Congo
Belge. Et je suis née à Élisabethville, mille neuf cents trente-sept,
nineteen thirty-seven, juillet dix-huit, July eighteenth.

This particular quote is an example of code-shifting, where Marie shifts from Ladino to both French and English, suggesting that she feels more proficient in both of these languages than she does in Ladino. It is telling that after struggling with the Ladino word “sivdad,” Marie gives the rest of the response
in English and French, using no additional Ladino words. In fact, as in the quote above, Marie replied with entire sentences in French to some of my later interview questions, which were asked in Ladino. For example, when I asked which language Marie spoke with her parents when she was a child, she replied, “Nous parlons entre nous dans notre famille, nous parlons en français et ladino (“We [spoke] among ourselves in our family, we [spoke] in French and Ladino”). We always spoke both languages,” but then added a Ladino addendum: “La primera lingua de kasa era ladino (“The first language at home was Ladino”), very much so.”

A major challenge for the study of Ladino, a mixed language, is that it is often very difficult to distinguish between interference from another language and borrowed vocabulary that has been integrated into the speaker’s dialect of Ladino. For example, in a bit of interesting metalinguistic commentary, or ideas and evaluations about her own language use, during the interview, Marie observed, “Kuando yo avlo aki kon los Ladineros i partikularmente kon el Hazzan, ay munchos biervos ke son en fransez” (“When I speak here with the Ladineros and particularly with the Hazzan [the cantor who is also the leader of the Ladineros], there are a lot of words that are in French”). This could mean that Marie recognizes the French interference in her Ladino speech, or it could mean that she just perceives her Ladino as having a lot of French influence. Many dialects of Ladino display considerable influence from French thanks to the Alliance Israélite Universelle, a French organization that established schools throughout the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century. Though the amount of French influence varies from dialect to dialect, most Ladino words of French origin have been either Hispanified with the addition of Spanish suffix, for example, or at least adapted to fit the phonology of Ladino. This means that entire sentences in standard French should not be considered Ladino, but rather instances of code-switching or code-shifting, depending on the circumstances.

In addition to the examples cited above, Marie’s speech also contained many instances of code-shifting between English and Ladino, with no French influence. At the end of the interview, for example, while commenting about the future of Ladino, Marie asked, “Ke es la vida si no tienes . . . what’s the word for ‘hope’? I’m starting to forget [Ladino].” Other examples include, “Keria venir a Amerika pero his, su, brother . . . hermano i hermana estavan aki” (“He wanted to come to America but his, his, brother . . . brother and sister were here”), “La chikez was a joy” (“[My] childhood was a joy”), and “Yo esto
rogando al Dio ke la lingua va . . . regenerate” (“I’m praying to God that the language is going to . . . regenerate”).

Compared to the other Ladineros, Marie indicated very high linguistic security. In response to the survey statement, “I am a native Ladino speaker,” Marie responded with a four on a scale where one indicated “strongly disagree” and five indicated “strongly agree.” For the statements “I can communicate effectively in Ladino;” “I can read and understand Ladino well;” and “I speak Ladino as well as my parents did;” Marie wrote in “4½,” indicating that she was somewhere between “agree” and “strongly agree.” All of these responses suggest that Marie perceives her proficiency in Ladino to be quite high, significantly higher than the Ladineros’ average, even though she did not demonstrate a lower degree of language loss than most of the group members who were interviewed.

In contrast to the other two women, Rose only demonstrated interference from English in her Ladino speech, but much of this interference came in the form of connectors and filler words, often the first word of a sentence. The most common English words I observed in Rose’s speech were “so,” “you know,” “but,” “yes,” and “yeah,” in phrases like, “So ya estavan aki” (“So they were already here”), or, “But esta mujer, lo ke oi, era muy buena” (“But this woman, from what I heard, was very good”). It was very common among all the speakers I interviewed to say the names of cities, countries, and other proper noun place names in English, but, with the exception of one instance in which she said that her mother came from Marmara, “una isla between the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus” (“an island between the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus”), Rose typically did not regularly exhibit this type of code-switching in the interview. In fact, Rose provided the only examples of code-switching that I encountered during the entire investigation. While speaking about her favorite foods during her childhood, Rose told me:

Oh, komidas, my mother was a great cook. Agora, antes teniamos de lenya i kimur estovas and gizavan las komidas kon savor i de alma i korason, you know? And kada viernes, well, first of all, on Thursdays, they would go shopping, and no avia automobil. Era todo kon shopping bags.

Oh, foods, my mother was a great cook. Now, before we had wood stoves, and they cooked the foods with flavor and with heart and soul, you know? And every Friday, well, first of all, on Thursdays, they would go shopping, and there weren’t cars. It was all with shopping bags.
This particular passage can be distinguished from the previous examples of language mixing in that the speech was fluid; there were neither pauses nor hesitations separating the two languages. Rose was not switching to English to fill lexical gaps in her Ladino, but rather speaking in a way that felt natural to her. Rose demonstrated code-switching once again when she said, “Komo de funny name is that?” (“What kind of funny name is that?”).

Though Rose appears to have a high level of proficiency in Ladino compared to many other speakers of Ladino in Seattle, she demonstrates quite a bit of linguistic insecurity, or negative feelings and evaluations regarding her language use. Firstly, Rose’s perceived relationship with Ladino is very unclear from her interview and survey responses. In the quote above, in which she talks about going to school not knowing any English, Rose distinguishes herself from the other children in her school by the language she spoke and by the non-native accent she perceived herself as having when she started to speak English. Rose does not, however, continue to distinguish herself from native English speakers today. In fact, in response to the survey statement, “I am a native Ladino speaker,” Rose responded with a three, indicating “neither agree nor disagree.” Rose’s responses suggest that she perceives a strong connection between birth country and native language, an idea that is also evident in the following anecdote she told regarding one of her many trips to Israel:

The last time I was in Israel, I went to the synagogue and [a] man asked, “Is that your mother tongue?” because I was conversing with the members there [in Ladino] and he overheard me, and I said, “No, I’m American.”

Here, Rose suggests that Ladino could not be her native language, or “mother tongue,” because she is American. This is particularly striking when compared with her public school anecdote, when she clearly perceived herself as different from the other children because of her language. In reality, the fact that Rose went to kindergarten speaking Ladino and not English confirms that her first language, or her mother tongue, was Ladino.

In further contrast to Marie’s strong and positive survey responses, Rose also replied with a three, indicating “neither agree nor disagree,” to the statements “I can communicate effectively in Ladino” and “I can read and understand Ladino well.” For the statement “I speak Ladino as well as my parents did,” Rose responded with a one, indicating “strongly disagree.” Rose’s linguistic insecurity is also evident in some of the comments she made during the interview, such as, “It may not sound like my Ladino is so good now, but it takes
me a while to get started,” and, “Well, the language is [...] not a living language like when I grew up, and, unfortunately, I don't speak it all that well, maybe in a conversation.” Clearly there is a wide disconnect between Rose’s perceptions and her performance in Ladino, but why?

**INFLUENCE VS. INTERFERENCE?**

There is no doubt that Victoria and Marie both demonstrate interference from other languages when they speak Ladino, but the interference can come from either English (both) or Spanish (Victoria) or French (Marie). It appears, however, that the women evaluate the languages of interference differently, apologizing for interference in English but not noticing or sometimes even freely admitting to interference from Spanish or French. Since any interference in Rose’s speech must come from English, Rose’s relatively low linguistic security may suggest that these speakers see French and Spanish as influencing their Ladino and English as merely interfering with their Ladino.

Victoria, in fact, said something during the interview that suggests that she finds it more acceptable to use Spanish than English while speaking Ladino. When I asked Victoria if she and her husband had traveled to their parents’ countries of origin, she misunderstood me, so I repeated the question in Ladino. Once again, Victoria did not understand, and responded by asking, “Qué quiere decir en español? Dime. Pregúntame” (“What does that mean in Spanish? Tell me. Ask me”). The fact that Victoria asked me to clarify the question in Castilian Spanish instead of in English suggests that she believed using Spanish would be less inappropriate than using English in the context of an interview in Ladino.

It seems that this apparent contrast between influence from French and Spanish and interference from English, then, has the potential to affect the speakers’ linguistic security. It is not the case that Victoria and Marie have an inflated linguistic security, since they speak Ladino as would be expected of multilingual speakers of an endangered minority language, with much influence from their dominant language(s), especially English. It seems, instead, that Rose has an unusually low level of linguistic security, and that her Ladino is actually stronger than average. Rose’s mention of her many trips to Israel shed some light on how she has managed to maintain her Ladino at a higher level of proficiency than the average Seattle speaker, and while this opportunity to
use Ladino almost certainly explains Rose’s proficiency in Ladino, it also raises the question as to how her experiences using Ladino in Israel have contributed to her feelings about her Ladino speech. Unfortunately further questions regarding Rose’s use of Ladino in Israel were not included in this particular investigation, but they could be the starting point for a fascinating future case study on Rose and her linguistic history. Such a case study could contribute to a better understanding of individual variation among speakers in communities undergoing language shift.

CONCLUSION
This article compares three women, all native Ladino speakers living in Seattle, Washington. Though all of the women exhibit signs of language loss, the foreign-born women seem to differ from the American-born speaker in their evaluations of their own language use, with the foreign-born speakers indicating much higher linguistic security. Analysis of the speakers’ reactions to their own language mixing suggests that there is a certain prestige in using languages like French and Spanish while speaking Ladino, while using English is akin to admitting to language loss. Importantly, a comparison of these three women makes clear that the speakers’ perceived proficiency in a language does not necessarily correlate with their actual proficiency in the language. It could be helpful to keep this in mind when planning language maintenance and preservation programs in endangered language speech communities around the world.
Notes

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1. Marie was interviewed individually, but her husband, who is Ashkenazi and does not speak Ladino, was present for the duration of the interview.

2. All translations are my own.

3. This type of phrase, meaning, “I don't think we are going to . . .” would trigger the subjunctive mood in Castilian Spanish, and would instead be realized as, “No creo que vayamos a . . .”

4. These words, which mean “now” and “language,” would be “agora” and “lingua” for many speakers of Ladino.

5. Similarly, I have observed in both the United States and in Argentina, that many Spanish speakers will use the Ladino word “sefaradi” instead of the Spanish “sefardí” while speaking Spanish.

6. Marie knew at the time of the interview that I understood French.

7. Since this speaker uses three different languages, I will distinguish here between English, Ladino, and French: “I was born in a country in Africa, Elisabethville, the city . . . city . . . Elisabethville, Belgian Congo, Belgian Congo. In French it's “Congo Belge.” And I was born in Elisabethville, nineteen thirty-seven, nineteen thirty-seven, July eighteenth, July eighteenth.”

8. It should be noted that Marie’s husband was present for the duration of the interview. This detail is important because, as mentioned above, Marie’s husband does not speak or understand Ladino, and so it is very probable that his presence affected the amount of English Marie used.

9. It turns out that the misunderstanding was due to my erroneous use of the word “padres” to mean “parents.” Though the masculine plural form is used in Castilian Spanish to mean both parents, in many dialects of Ladino, including the ones spoken in Seattle, one must say “padre i madre” to mean both parents.
Works Cited


