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# Memory and oblivion

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# Memory and oblivion: Exploring the collective identity of the Greek Sephardic Jews through the online rediscovery of Ladino

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**Abstract**
The Sephardic Jewish language, Ladino, a language that almost experienced linguistic extinction in the post-war period due to the extermination of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki is now undergoing a remarkable resurgence on the terrain of online platforms. By examining who speaks Ladino today as a habitually used language that is linked to collective memory, this article seeks to understand the ways in which the usage of Ladino has raised identity issues for Greek Sephardic Jews via an interdisciplinary approach. In particular, based on a synthesis between digital ethnographic approaches, drawing on Marcus's (1995, 1998) multi-sited ethnography and Critical Discourse Studies' (CDS) analytical framework, especially the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), this study examines how members of Facebook groups interested in Ladino create their own digital space and maintain their cultural and religious identities via this specific language variation, and at a time of a worrying surge in antisemitism.

## 1. Introduction

On 7 October 2023, Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israeli territories that proved to be the worst attack on the Jewish people since the creation of the state of Israel. The details of that attack, as well as its consequences related to Israel's military attacks against Palestine, dominated Greek mainstream and social media. In an attempt to justify their support for Israel and criticize any no conditions pro-Palestinian statements, many popular commentators and right-wing politicians alluded to the history of Israel and its people in order to enable the Greeks to get to know the 'unknown' Jewish people. In this vein, a well-known novelist, Christos Chomenidis, deployed a parallelism that analogized the establishment of the Greek and the Israeli states and underlined the importance of language in the formation of Israel. As he stated on a Facebook post, '*The desire to discover their roots led the Israeli people to leave Yiddish and Ladino, that they used to speak during their exile,*

*and to raise up and modernized Hebrew, the language of the Bible*'.[1] I do not plan to explicate the historical inaccuracies of the above quotation, but I would like to mention that this comment triggered a lively debate among the novelist's followers, one that illustrated their ignorance of Jewish culture and its linguistic history. Further, I would like to point out that some commentators rested their argument on the false claim that Greek is the language of the Bible and others among were confused about the relation between the Latin language and Ladino.

Chomenidis' Facebook post brought to mind the attempts made in 2018 by the then mayor of Thessaloniki, Giannis Boutaris, to highlight the history of the largest Jewish community of Greece and its devasting fate, as part of his seeking approval for the construction of a Holocaust Museum in the city (Boukala & Serafis 2022). Through this it became apparent to me that the history, as well as the cultural characteristics of the Sephardic Jews, remain unknown to the majority of their Greek fellow citizens. Moreover, Sephardic Jews' usage of an unidentified language (Ladino) has complicated relations between the two religious communities (Christian and Jewish) and contributed to the establishment of 'Jewish Otherness'. On the terrain of Facebook and the public sphere that this platform has shaped, a dialogue between various identity groups on the subject of Greek Jewishness has already started (Boukala & Serafis 2022). This intensifies when relations between Greece and Israel are challenged, and when links between Greeks (Christian and Jews) are rediscovered; Ladino is not excluded from this terrain. In contrast, the Sephardic Jewish language, Ladino, a language that nearly experienced linguistic extinction in the post-war period due to the extermination of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki is now undergoing a remarkable resurgence on the terrain of online platforms. This raises a number of questions; namely, who speaks Ladino today, to whom, when, why and how? How do questions of Ladino as a habitually used language and as a language choice develop? How are memory and culture linked with Ladino learning and the way in which its speakers unite? By focusing on the above questions, this article seeks to understand the ways in which the usage of Ladino has raised identity issues for Greek Sephardic Jews.

The article begins with a historical review of the language and the population in question followed by the matter of the linguistic hierarchy of Greekness and of today's Ladino revival. This is followed by a description of the participants, Facebook groups and methodological aspects that are based on a synthesis between digital ethnographic approaches, drawing on Marcus's (1995, 1998) multi-sited ethnography and Critical Discourse Studies' (CDS) analytical framework. The study then examines how members of Facebook groups interested in Ladino create their own digital space and maintain their cultural and religious identities via this specific language variation, and at a time of a worrying surge in antisemitism.

By introducing an interdisciplinary study, I aim to shed light on the ways in which members and admins of the groups negotiate the mechanisms of memory and oblivion on the basis of the digital juxtaposition of space (here and there) and time (past and present) and to explore their contribution to the preservation of Sephardic

[1] https://kis.gr/index.php/israil/polemos-xamas-israil-2023/synenteykseis-arthra/chrestos-chomenides-ta-nea-14-10-2023-to-israel-tha-antexei

Jewish heritage and Holocaust memory via their online interest in an endangered language.

## 2. Sephardim and Ladino in Greece: Historical aspects

The Greek city of Thessaloniki used to be called the 'mother of Israel' because of its Jewish community, one that has a history stretching back more than two thousand years. The Jewish population of Thessaloniki was mainly composed of Romaniotes Jews at the beginning of the Ottoman period, a situation that changed after 1492 with the arrival of almost twenty thousand Spanish Jews who settled in the city, thanks to the expulsion of Jews from Spain as well as other European countries.[2] The Sephardic Jews contributed to the demographic and financial development of the city and transformed Thessaloniki into a multicultural center along with Armenians and Turks (Molho 2010; Naar 2016; Saltiel 2018). In the sixteenth century, Thessaloniki's 'Golden Age', the Sephardic Jews dominated the city's economic, cultural and political life and assimilated the Jewish communities of Romaniotes and Ashkenazi Jews. The Spanish Jews were better educated than the others, and founded libraries, synagogues, schools and a printing press in the city, all of which allowed their language (Ladino, also called Judeo-Spanish) to be heard, as well as spoken by many Christians and Muslims, insofar as more than fifty percent of Thessaloniki's population was Jewish. Hence, within a century, all the Jews in Thessaloniki spoke Judeo-Spanish. These circumstances contributed to the dominance of the Jewish community in the city and the linguistic homogeneity of its Jewish population. The first original works in Ladino were produced in Thessaloniki at the same time as the development of the printing press (Borovaya 2012; Molho 2010).

In the seventeenth century, the Jewish community was affected by Thessaloniki's economic decline, and it lost its glory. However, the Jews remained the majority of the city's multicultural population by including its social and political elites. At the turn of the twentieth century, with Thessaloniki passing from the Ottoman Empire to the Greek state in 1912, and especially after the Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1919-1922, which saw more than 100,000 refugees arrive in the city, and then during the interwar period that followed, the Jews became a minority. However, the Jews continued to be active in every domain (Borovaya 2012; Molho 2010). It was only with the arrival of the Nazis in 1941 that the Jewish community of Thessaloniki was fully eclipsed. The extermination of more than 90 percent of the city's Jews and the destruction of the Jewish cultural heritage by the Nazis and their Greek allies brought the Jewish community and its linguistic particularity to an abrupt end.

This particularity is linked to the language that was used as a first language by the Sephardic Jews of Thessaloniki and beyond, namely Ladino or Judeo-Spanish, a fusion of Old Castilian, Hebrew, Aramaic and Judeo-Arabic. Ladino is also characterized by considerable lexical innovation based on local contact languages, such as those of the Ottoman Empire, as well as colonial languages, such as Italian and French (Bunis 2019). Ladino was used by the Sephardic Jews in Greece for daily

[2] Here I should clarify that Sephardic Jews had also settled in other Greek cities, such as Kavala and Larissa and islands, Rhodes, Crete and Corfu; however, I decided to focus on the history of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki, which was the main source of Sephardim in Greece, having the largest population of Ladino speakers.

newspapers,[3] original works of fiction, theatrical plays, religion, poetry and folk songs and it contributed to the educational and cultural development of the Jewish community (Molho 2010). Ladino as the lingua franca of the Jewish community also had its place in the official education system of Thessaloniki under the Ottoman Empire along with Hebrew and French, as well as Turkish and Greek, when they were the state languages. This multi-linguistic landscape and the dominant position of Ladino in it changed dramatically after Thessaloniki passed to the Greek state and the political decision was made for the city to be 'Hellenized' (Buller 2018). During the following decades, Greek became the main language of the state. With this language dominating the country's cultural and educational apparatuses and illustrating the ideological and political profile of the then state, Ladino became restricted to religious and domestic domains (ibid.). The stigmatization and isolation of Sephardic Jews by the Nazis and the city's authorities, which was in part based on their linguistic difference, led to Holocaust survivors' unwillingness to use the language.[4] As Kirschen (2020: 71) also noted:

> 'Aside from general forces of assimilation, the Holocaust is also a main reason for the endangerment of Ladino. During the first half of the 1940s, cities throughout what is now Greece, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, to name a few, witnessed the mass decimation of their centuries-old Sephardic communities'.

Thus, the extermination of the Sephardic Jewish community in Greece also meant the death of Ladino.

## 3. Rediscovering an endangered language online?

Against this background of linguistic death, how is Ladino described today? According to Bunis (2019: 190):

> Although still enjoying a speaker community of perhaps several thousand individuals, most of them over 60 and living in Israel, Turkey, the Balkans, the United States, and France, Judezmo[5] is today an increasingly endangered language, with no new generations acquiring it as their primary or even secondary language. However, there are some attempts being made to revitalize Judezmo, research and teach it in universities and local community centers, and maintain cultural vitality and foster creativity through the publication of new and re-edited fictional and non-fictional works, reference materials, and recordings, as well as governmental and grassroots encouragement of performances by musical ensembles and theater troupes… Judezmo also enjoys a virtual homeland on the Internet.

Ladino speakers are also located in South America but there too usage of the language is limited to older generations. As Kirschen (2013, 2017, 2020) claimed, younger speakers of the language do exist and are considered heritage speakers of the language. Furthermore, several universities in Israel, the US and Spain have introduced programs providing Ladino knowledge (Altabev 2010; Bunis 2019). In

[3] Usually two languages, Ladino and French, would be used in the same paper to attract more readers and provide a feeling of social and cultural elitism (Borovaya 2012).
[4] This was a point mentioned by my informants (see Section 5).
[5] Judezmo' and 'Ladino' refer to the same linguistic variety.

addition, ethnographic work on Ladino speaker communities in Istanbul and the US (see Altabev 2010; Kirschen 2017, 2020) has proved that the language still has a pulse, albeit a weak one. Moreover, Ladino seems to be undergoing a revival in digital settings with blogs and social media providing information about the language, its history and knowledge of the language. As Brink-Danan (2011) noted in the very same year (2000) that historians of Sephardi Jewry declared Ladino to be a dead language due to its lack of speakers, a small group of speakers created an online discussion group and website named *Ladinokomunita,* as a place in which Ladino speakers could work as a community to share information on the revitalization of the language and to salvage it. Like users of other endangered languages, Ladino speakers have used digital technologies to revitalize their speech communities and at the same time to create a place in which their collective memory could be guarded (Brink-Danan 2011; Eisenlohr 2004). Following online debates, the members of groups share memories and negotiate the semiotic process of the language. Studies on endangered Jewish languages and their online presence are not limited to Ladino, but also address Yiddish and other diaspora languages (see Sadan 2010).

Current online technologies and the spread of social media platforms such as Facebook provide an important terrain for endangered languages speakers and those who are interested in these languages. I claim that Facebook groups can be considered public spheres where members of communities who are usually not known to each other can shape the linguistic present and future of an endangered language and at the same time share memories that form their collective identity as an imagined community (Anderson 2016).

In academic circles and within Jewish communities themselves, Greece is not mentioned as a country where attempts are being made to revive Ladino. However, the memory of Ladino is still alive for many Sephardic Jews and it is this that prompted me to examine who speaks Ladino in Greece nowadays, to whom, when, why and how. It was the existence of Ladino-oriented groups on Facebook that led to the second question of this study: could the Ladino-oriented Facebook groups increase interest in the language among Greek Jews and contribute to its rediscovery or maintenance? Finally, this study also investigates language ideologies and bottom-up discourses as there has been no systematic attempt to revive the language by either the Greek state or the Jewish communities.

I will now attempt to answer the above questions and shed light on the chronotropic dimension (time and space relations) of the language and its meaning for the past and present of the Jewish community of Greece by utilizing a synthesis of digital ethnographic approaches and Critical Discourse Studies.

## 4. Method of analysis

### *4.1 Ethnography in a discourse-oriented digital landscape*

When it first started to be used, ethnography shaped anthropological research by providing scholars with an integrated method for studying sociocultural phenomena and small communities using practices such as participant observation, data collection and face-to-face interviews. As Blommaert & Dong (2010: 6) further explained, '[t]he roots of ethnography are in anthropology, not in linguistics, sociology or psychology'. However, ethnographic approaches were thereafter

adopted by different disciplines and studies and not exclusively by anthropological research. Since the mid-1990s, the rapid growth of the Internet and then social media platforms have created new sites for ethnographic fieldwork and provide opportunities for qualitative digital research using a new digital field of communication between researchers and interlocutors (Markham 2020; Pertierra 2018; Postill & Pink 2012). Virtual ethnography (Hine 2000, 2015), or digital anthropology (Miller 2011, 2018), goes back almost two decades and underlines the importance of digital practices in the study of contemporary anthropology and social sciences in general by investigating everyday life, the formation of communities and online engagements. Social media platforms, especially, have developed on a terrain of identity formation, communication, political participation and activism.[6] Moreover, the question of participant observation has led to a synthesis of online and offline practices (Hine 2015; Markham 2020, 2016; Pink 2009; Postill & Pink 2012). The new digital platforms have also become a terrain of study for linguists, sociolinguists and scholars of endangered Jewish languages (see Brink-Danan 2010; Sadan 2010).

The Facebook platform's latest developments, and the diffusion of Facebook Messenger, have turned this specific social medium into a polymedium (Madianou 2015) that offers its users the opportunity to communicate via phone calls, chat and video and to researchers, a new landscape for online studies (Caliandro 2017; Eisenlauer 2013; Pertierra 2018). All this has occurred alongside other options such as sharing news, tagging, posting, linking, and using emoticons. Hence, Facebook has become an integral part of our daily routine and a new landscape for the study of language ideologies (Lenihan 2011). Moreover, Facebook groups support online engagements that surpass online networking and constitute new forms of 'imagined communities' (Anderson 2016) between people who might not know each other but who share the same interests (Boukala & Serafis 2022).

In its long-standing interdisciplinary tradition, CDS has been combined with computer-mediated communication (KhosraviNik 2014, 2017; KhosraviNik & Unger 2016) and has shaped computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring 2013; Herring & Androutsopoulos 2015) to support the systematic analysis of digital discourses. Only a few works have combined online ethnography and discourse analysis (Androutsopoulos 2008, 2013; Boukala & Serafis 2022, 2023; Georgalou 2017; Kytölä & Androutsopoulos 2012; Page et al. 2014). Androutsopoulos (2008) noted the importance of doing ethnography on the Internet and introduced discourse-centered online ethnography in an attempt to emphasize language-focused research and 'combine the systematic observation of selected sites of online discourse with direct contact with its social actors' (ibid.: 2), thus, raising again the online and offline ethnography issue and the importance of identity matters, as well as the differences between direct and indirect communication between the ethnographer and the interlocutors. A current sociolinguistic analysis based on digital ethnography and the online construction of identity by Li & Huang (2024) shows that the study of online discourses through the lens of ethnography still challenges discourse analysis and Critical Discourse Studies (CDS).

[6] See Beneito-Montagut (2011); Dalsgaard (2016); Kavanaugh & Patterson (2001); KhosraviNik & Zia (2014); Komito (1998); Marwick & Boyd (2014); Miller (2011); Pink et al. (2016); Postill & Pink (2012).

### *4.2 Synthesizing digital ethnography and CDS*

Although discourse studies, and especially Critical Discourse Studies and ethnographic methods have been combined for the analysis of different social issues that are examined on an online or offline level (Catalano & Waugh 2020), I argue that the two disciplines have been used separately, one after the other in the analysis of the topics that are examined and that they do not provide a common approach that underlines the interdisciplinary character of CDS (see Boukala & Serafis 2023; KhosraviNik & Unger 2016). By reintroducing Marcus's (1995, 1998, 2012) multi-sited ethnography on a multimodal social media platform and focusing on both the online discourses of social actors and their Facebook discursive activities, I aim to provide an in-depth understanding of online processes from a critical perspective and underline the relevance of CDS, especially the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) to digital ethnography through the lens of multi-sited ethnography. Marcus's multi-sited approach is based on mobility, as the ethnographer should be willing to move around rather than remaining static in a specific community. Marcus introduced a number of techniques to explicate the importance of this mobility in the study of various dimensions of his interlocutors' everyday life. I aim to provide an in-depth analysis of ethnographic data and discourses by drawing upon his 'follow the metaphor' and 'follow the plot, story or allegory' techniques (Marcus 1995: 108-109) and synthesizing them with the Discourse Historical Approach. The DHA elements I employ include the nomination, predication and argumentation strategies that are involved in construing a positive Self and negative Other presentation, and in explicating the main linguistic and pragmatic elements, rhetorical tropes, and argumentative schemes that establish discursive oppositions and ideological parameters in general (Reisigl & Wodak 2001, 2016). In this way, I intend to examine linguistic modes and discourses in detail, while at the same time my aim is to highlight the CDS social and critical dimensions that separate them from a simple method, indeed, to prove its theoretical background in social theory, social anthropology, and politics.

To do this I focus on the DHA, insofar as it can reveal the links between discursive practices, social variables, institutional frames and socio-political and historical contexts. Hence, the DHA is a useful theory and method with which to analyze and explain the complexities, and historical and ideological dimensions employed in Ladino users' discourses and provide a holistic study based on linguistic anthropology. As Reisigl & Wodak (2001) have explained, the DHA employs three dimensions of analysis. These are the specific contents or topics of specific discourses; discursive strategies; and the linguistic means that are used to disclose both topics and strategies (Reisigl & Wodak 2001). Finally, this study does not attempt to examine sociolinguistic models to account for variation across the Greek speech community. I cannot claim that my aim is to study the vitality of the language and provide a synchronic description of it. My aim is to proceed with an ethnographic study on a digital terrain, based also on Critical Discourse Analysis that could provide new perspectives for the study of social media.

### *4.3 Data and participants*

The data for this study were generated using virtual ethnographic methods and by an examination of social and linguistic interactions between the users. Since March 2020 I have been collecting material from Facebook, starting with a focus on three Facebook groups: *Los Ladinadores, Jewish Language Project, Desde Grecia, aki Salonika-Greek Jewish Legacy and Cultural Heritage*; three groups that focus on the Jewish heritage and especially Ladino language, its revival and dissemination. Here, I should also notice that the first group refers exclusively to Ladino language, the second group to all the Jewish languages and the last one emphasizes the Greek Sephardic heritage of Thessaloniki and the Ladino language. The textual data I used in my research are multimodal and were uploaded on the pages of the groups. However, as I have already mentioned, this study is based on a multi-sited ethnography on the Facebook platform[7] and on participant observation in the sense of 'living with' the people and their stories that I decided to 'follow' (Marcus 1995, 1998). The fieldwork study involved two stages. The first took the form of a month of 'following' members of the Sephardi community who had started to attend Ladino classes and participate the above-listed Facebook groups to get information about the language and culture of the Judeo-Spanish. The COVID-19 crisis and lockdown interrupted the Ladino classes in the Greek Jewish community and my plans for a combination of online and offline ethnographic approaches through the Ladino classes and the Facebook groups. However, this provided me with the opportunity to readjust my questions and ethnographic method and realise the importance of Facebook as a polymedium. The second stage of my fieldwork started in September 2023 and lasted until mid-April 2024. The war in Gaza and its dramatic consequences for both the Israeli and Palestinian people left me feeling that the participants would not be willing to talk to me about memories of the Holocaust and the use of Ladino. However, I was wrong.

The data is mainly extracted from fieldwork notes (Facebook comments/discussions in public or private via Messenger), informal interviews and recorded interviews that refer to tradition, family memories, historical and political concepts, all of them through the prism of Ladino usage. Also, I focus on interactions between FB communities as language communities. Having established a handful of participants in the Facebook groups who either spoke Ladino or knew of people who did prove beneficial in locating additional speakers and members of the groups.

Six informants participated in this study. I selected these interlocutors on the basis of purposive sampling, insofar as they fulfilled specific criteria: they were interested in or were speakers of Ladino, and active members of the above Facebook groups, as admins or commentors on the groups' pages. Moreover, I was interested to select the participants of this study by taking into consideration their age and family links, insofar as my aim was to study whether and how their family memories and heritage could lead to the revival of the language and its dissemination to the next generations. Some more variables under consideration include (a) education (b) sex, (c) age, and (d) location. The participants' demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1 below:

[7] I realise that Facebook is not currently the most popular social medium among young people. However, it remains the most popular platform overall, for all demographic groups. The participants of this study represent people of different ages and it was the existence of groups interested in Ladino, mainly in Facebook, that prompted me to focus on this specific polymedium.

| Name | Age | Sex | Education | Location |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Athena | 65-70 | Female | University degree | Athens |
| Dimitra | 50-55 | Female | University degree | Israel |
| Artemis | 20-25 | Female | University degree | Athens |
| Aristotle | 60-65 | Male | University degree | Thessaloniki |
| Socrates | 50-55 | Male | Postgraduate studies | Israel |
| Pericles | 40-45 | Male | Postgraduate studies | Athens |

Table 1: Informants in this study

### *a. Ethical considerations*

Online research practices involve issues such as consent, copyright and anonymity. To deal with these, first I communicated with the interlocutors via private messages on Facebook and after they had agreed to participate in the study, I proceeded to undertake systematic observation of their posts and comments in parallel with the FB group's activity. Moreover, I arranged semi-structured interviews and exchanged private messages with the participants via Facebook Messenger. We also exchanged calls through the same application when they had new information about the language and its speakers to share as a part of the 'following' tactic. The online interaction that is offered by Facebook due to its accessibility to data also raises ethical challenges (D'Arcy & Young 2012). For this reason, data has been anonymized so that informants and commentors are not traceable and pseudonyms based on popular Ancient Greek names have been utilized for the informants due to ethical concerns. The posts that have been chosen for analysis here were presented in public and it is reasonable to infer that those posting were open to the possibility of critique. Nevertheless, I decided to keep the identity of the uploaders and commenters blurred.

## 5. Analysis[8]

### *5.1 Between two languages or two identities?*

Artemis was the first person to hear about my attempt to conduct ethnographic work on the Sephardic Jews in Greece and examine current usage of Ladino. As seen in the table, three generations of Sephardic Jews participated in this study and some of them contacted me thanks to Artemis, who was my key participant. As a result of her young age and the fact that she is not a Ladino speaker, Artemis suggested that I

[8] The communication with participation was conducted mainly in Greek. Only in some cases we used Ladino to examine similarities between Spanish and Ladino. All the extracts used in the article have been translated by the author.

should talk to older people when I asked her my first question and told her about the main aim of the study, namely: who speaks Ladino today?

Hence, when I asked Athena this question, she replied, 'Nobody does.' Her direct reply indicated an unwillingness to talk about it. But when I explained to her that there were classes and FB groups on Ladino and that a few Greek Sephardic Jews participate in them, she was eager to talk about 'her lost language'. As she noted:

> Ladino was my grandparents and parents' first language. They spoke Ladino. I remember them speaking in Ladino at home. I can now hear them speaking and I feel touched. I can speak the language, yes… but I couldn't teach it to my kids. To me it is a language that I know by heart. I have never been educated in Ladino, like kids today are educated in Hebrew. I used to listen to it and speak it… Today? There is no one I can talk to in Ladino anymore. I'm afraid that I'm losing the language and with it my family memories. We should keep the language. I do not know how, but we must do something about it and these Facebook pages I see that they can help.

Family memories and their link to Ladino usage was something that all the participants pointed out. According to Aristotle:

> Ladino is a part of my family memories. The language that my parents and grandfathers used to communicate in. I'm trying hard to secure it in my mind as a treasure. You know, family treasures, photos, jewelry, all these things that you keep, and you pass down to the next generation.

Then, he turned to how there was no new generation of Ladino speakers and what would come of this.

> If we die, the language will be dead. My generation did not learn the language in school, there is no one left who could teach the language. I don't know what we can do, but we should work to keep the language going.

The two interlocutors noted that Ladino is an endangered language and they define themselves as the last people who speak it. The usage of the language is related to their family traditions. Looking at the language through the prism of the DHA's discursive strategies, I argue that Ladino should be classed as a part of their personal and family memories: it was named 'treasure' by Aristotle and Athena describes it as a language that is known 'by heart'. Furthermore, both of them claim that it is their duty to keep the language going, to secure it, an argument that is further supported on the basis of the topos of consequential (Boukala 2016, 2019) and the topos of responsibility (Reisigl & Wodak 2001: 78), which can be summarized in the conditional scheme: 'if the older generation of Greek Sephardic Jews are the last to speak Ladino, then they should act to keep the language alive'.

Following my Messenger discussions with the above participants, I insisted on knowing Artemis's view on Ladino, insofar as she was a representative of the younger generation of non-Ladino speakers. She stated that:

> To me Ladino is a 'sweet memory'. It is true that I do not speak the language… but yes, I can recognize some words. You know, when my parents were angry with me as a kid

> they used Ladino to tell me off. I always knew that Ladino was there somehow, especially when parents wanted to say something and make sure that the kids didn't understand it.

Hence, every generation of Sephardic Jews understands Ladino to be part of a family tradition that is related to people's memories. An important point here is that the participants do not make generalizations about the Ladino and the Sephardic tradition to convince others about the language's importance. Rather, they explain how Ladino bears on personal and family memories that they are willing to share to save the language. Thus, by referring to their own family memories, they illustrate how the language has been part of their everyday life, and they tacitly describe Ladino as a first language that has been linked to people's life rather than a dead language only mentioned in books. This argument could be developed on the basis of the topos of definition (Boukala 2016; Reisigl & Wodak 2001: 76) that here could be labelled the topos of the maintainers of Judeo-Spanish (or *los ladinadores*) and can be condensed into the conditional: 'if a person or group carries the memory of Ladino then they could be named as Judeo-Spanish (los ladinadores)'.

At another point, we were given the opportunity to discuss through personal messages and by using the Messenger call the coexistence of the two languages and two traditions through a Facebook post that referred to a traditional Greek song that had been translated in Ladino. The visual element of the shepherdess together with the message verbally expressed in the image and the poster that refers to the coexistence of the two languages testify to the construction of an 'assimilated group' (van Leeuwen 2008: 37) that shares a common language and tradition with the Greek one. As the informants commented:

Image 1: Facebook post on a Ladino song

Aristotle:

> I have heard that a lot of original plays were written in Ladino, but I never heard of translated Greek plays. It is so nice to listen to something like this. Listening to it I realized how the two languages have occupied my brain all my life.
>
> Socrates:
> You see, this is why I believe that these Facebook groups are important. You said that you know the song, that it is part of your family memories. To be honest with you I have never heard that song but listening to the words, Ladino words… It shows me how the two languages, the two religions, the two traditions co-existed. And today? It is important to save the language, to give the language a future, [and] the new generation a chance to secure it. On the other hand, this language is their tradition.
>
> Athena:
> Of course, I recognize the song. It is a traditional one, no? ...Karino. I didn't know that there was a Ladino translation. Have you noticed the lyrics? They are relevant (to the Greek lyrics), no? I'm moved, Greek and Ladino together. A Greek song in Ladino. To me it was always like a mother of two children. A mother never separates the children, I never separated the languages and traditions.
>
> Pericles:
> Two languages, two identities. We were Spaniards, we are Greeks. It seems that being Greek was enriched by my Sephardic origin.

As the above extracts show, by using metaphors (*two languages have occupied my brain, a mother of two children*) the participants underlined the coexistence of the two languages and the memories that this evoked. Socrates highlighted the importance of supporting and continuing the language and the role of the Facebook groups in this, by employing the topos of responsibility (see above). Finally, Athena used the Ladino word 'karino' (sweetheart) to show her emotions and to illustrate her ability to speak the language.

In speaking of language and tradition, I could not ignore the religious parameter in my attempt to examine the rediscovery of Ladino and the speakers' collective identity. According to Athena:

> Our rabbi speaks Ladino. He wants to please us, us members of the older generation, to remind us of the language. Language and religion go together… When he says prayers in Ladino, some of us feel all that the language means to us. I do not think that the young people understand a word.

Moreover, as Socrates explained:

> I started Ladino classes because I wanted to read the holy books in my parents' language. I have kept the books my parents left me and not being able to read them… I was ashamed… You see, for them, language and religion were their everyday life.

During a Messenger call Dimitra also mentioned:

> We always listen to prayers in three languages, Greek, Hebrew and Ladino. During the holidays my relatives never forget to read the[ir] prayers in Ladino. They pay respect to our ancestors.

Here, the links between religion and the language that the informants highlighted, especially the rabbi's choice to use Ladino and the existence of prayers and holy books in Ladino, give further grounds for saving the language. These are supported on the basis of the topos of (religious) authority (Reisigl & Wodak 2001: 79) that here relies on the conditional: 'Ladino has to be secured because it is a language that is used by the rabbi and in the holy books, it is part of religion'.

Moreover, a post relating to Passover that was uploaded on the Facebook group's (Jewish Language Project) public page under investigation provided new data for exploring the links between religion, tradition and language. The visual element (van Leeuwen 2008), that is, the image of matzah, a recognizable product that is linked to Jewish tradition, is accompanied by the verbal expression of a popular Ladino phrase and the highlighting of three Judeo-Spanish words.

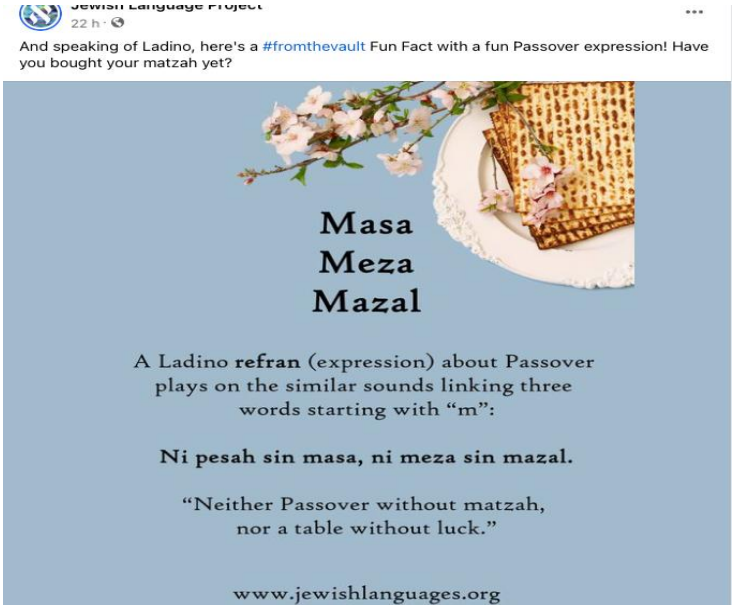

Image 2: Facebook post on 'masa'

The informants noticed the Ladino expression and especially the word 'masa' and its difference from the very popular Hebrew word and bread type 'matzah'. As Dimitra mentioned:

> Masa, this is what my mother used to call matzah. I think that I use the same word, too. My daughter sometimes corrects me, she says 'matzah'. You see, it is 'masa'.

In this way she illustrated her own pronunciation and memory of it, insofar as the word 'masa' is referred to in the poster as a word of Ladino origin. In contrast, Artemis did not share Dimitra's excitement and she was confused by the difference. However, she declared that she understood the word even with a different pronunciation due to the way it is commonly used to define a special type of bread:

> Matzah, it is always matzah… Let me think. You say that the pronunciation changes 'tz' or 's'… I'm confused. I really do not know, I have the feeling that many people say

> ‘masa’ but it is clear to me that they mean ‘matzah’. Even my Christian friends understand the word.

The important point, according to Pericles, is not the phonology but the coexistence of the two traditions. As he mentioned:

> Matzah… what do you call it en espanol? Matza?? No, I have never noticed the different pronunciation, but I know the expression. My grandmother used to tell us of the three Ms of the Pesach. You see, Pesach, Pasxa, another relevant pronunciation. Ladino, Hebrew, Jews, Christians, all of them… and all the languages come together in Thessaloniki, or they used to be together.

It was Socrates’s comment that opened a new chapter to this study, which arose from the difference between ‘masa’ and ‘matzah’. In particular, Socrates mentioned:

> I don’t know if I have noticed the difference. However, I have noticed that the Greeks are keen on matzah. All my Greek friends ask me if I’ll cook matzah for them when I invite them to my home for dinner… Did I say Greeks? Ah, you know what I mean, Greek Christians… No, of course I’m Greek as well. It is that sometimes I feel that I also belong to another community, I mean Greek Jewish… Not exactly another, but it is not only the religious difference.

Here, Socrates clearly refers to his dual identity. The use of the Judeo-Spanish language by his family members at home and the Greek language in public, as well as different religious customs and histories have cultivated a common identity among the members of the Greek Sephardic community. However, this identity does not undermine their Greekness insofar as most of the participants of this study comprehend their Greek identity in terms of the Greek language and its homeland. The new generation seems to consider its Greekness unproblematic. As Artemis explained:

> Of course we are Greeks. There is no reason to explain this. I was born in Greece, my parents are Greek, my friends, my relatives. My native language is the Greek language. I decided to participate in these groups just because I have these memories of Ladino, but no, this does not make me less Greek.

An important point to note here is that Artemis refers to Ladino memories, not language, hence she tacitly declares her ignorance of the language and the weakness of her claim to be identified as Sephardi. The Greek Sephardic Jews philosephardism is not related to Spanish origins (Naar 2019, 2023). I claim that their philosephardism or the dual identity is also an outcome of the community’s historical memories, a hypothesis that I was prompted to examine because of Socrates’s argument cited above. What I discovered through my ethnographic study is that the users of Ladino intend to secure their family memories and their cultural identity and heritage by keeping the language alive, however their national identity is a non-negotiable matter to them.

### *5.2 The historical aspect of Ladino-memory and oblivion*

Ladino fits the language death theory due to the drastic fall in the number of its speakers following the loss of most of the speech community during the Second World War. Hence, Ladino is linked to memory of the Holocaust. A characteristic description of this combination was Athena's quote:

> My father left Thessaloniki and went to the mountains. He felt ashamed when he lived with the rebels because his first language was Ladino and his Greek was not so good. When he came back, he didn't want to speak Ladino anymore. I remember him always reading a Greek newspaper and trying to improve his Greek by using dictionaries and grammar books. Ladino was a stigma for him and most of the Sephardic people… The language betrayed them. It was because of the language that the Nazi could find them. On the other hand, in the camps, Ladino unified Jews. I mean, not only could Greeks understand each other due to Ladino, but people from different countries. At that time, the language, the religion, unified people beyond Greece. Being Sephardic Jewish is something more than being Greek. That is why I think that Ladino is a feature of our identity that we have to keep up. I wish I could teach the language to the new generations.

Athena named Ladino 'a stigma'. It was the different language that 'betrayed' (revealed) the Jews and made her father feel ashamed among the rebels. Hence, the language had to be forgotten and replaced by the dominant Greek language as a matter of safety. Athena's argument is further developed on the basis of the topos of the consequential or the topos of threat that here could be extended to the conditional: 'if Ladino posed a threat to the Jewish people, then it was not to be used'. On the other hand, according to Athena, in the camps, Ladino unified people with different national identities around, a common identity that was based on their Sephardic origins and its linguistic particularity and not on nationality. Aristotle also shared Athena's view on the use of Ladino and the endangered Jewish community. He mentioned:

> When my relatives came back to Thessaloniki, they did not use the language. They did not want to. I understand this. People were afraid. It was not only Ladino, they [also] did not want to label their children with Jewish names anymore. They did not want to talk about all those events that had happened… the Holocaust. Do you know the lyrics of that song… how history turns to silence? I think that this happened to us, the Sephardi. Ladino turned to silence along with the Holocaust.

Based on the topos of threat, Aristotle explains how the memory of the Holocaust and Ladino had to fade into oblivion. He refers to history, Sephardic Jewish history and the tradition that was interrupted by the Second World War and the community's language that had to remain in silence.

A Facebook post, a post of the *We remember* campaign showing an image of the Greek Parliament onto which is projected the visual elements of the yellow star and the barbed wires of the camps, made a positive impression on all of the participants. Aristotle's response was representative:

> For too many years my parents, my relatives, called themselves Greeks… Nothing more, not Jews, not Sephardi, nothing. Silence… Now I feel proud being a Greek Jew, and this photo with the yellow star on the front of the Parliament. Yes, we remember,

we care, we are Greeks, we are also Sephardi and it is our duty to remember our history and our language.

Image 3: Facebook post with Greek Parliament

Thus, history and language are intertwined, according to the informants of this study. Sephardic Jews were forced not to use Ladino and to let it fade into oblivion, an argument that was developed via the topos of threat. Holocaust memories, too, were shrouded in silence because of the collective trauma and Greek antisemitism. The rediscovery of the Greek Jewish tradition and increasing interest in the silent stories of the Holocaust survivors led to Greek Jewish history and tradition re-emerging from the shadows of oblivion (Boukala & Serafis 2022). Hence, history and language appear in parallel based on the topos of history (Reisigl & Wodak 2001: 80) through which the participants justified their arguments about the links between Ladino and the Jewish tradition. In addition, the rediscovery and support of Ladino is also understood by the informants to be a duty that is explicated on the basis of the topos of responsibility (see above). Thus, the danger and silence that in the past were synonyms of Ladino have today turned into a responsibility to disseminate the language and they illustrate the language's chronotropic transformations as space and time change in a historical view. All of which raises the question: how is the Ladino language viewed today?

### *5.3 A new arrival of an endangered language- Spanish or Ladino?*

The history and sociolinguistic landscape of Ladino have been examined in relation to Sephardic identity and attempts to preserve it (Bunis 2019; Kirschen 2017, 2020; Naar 2019). I mainly focus on the speakers' identity and the way my informants utilize and comprehend Ladino as an element of their past and present. This is why I decided to emphasize their understanding of 'modern' Ladino and its similarities with Spanish. The limited number of Ladino classes led most of the participants of the study to learn Spanish to keep up their heritage language. As Athena further explained during our private discussion regarding a Facebook post that had earned a positive reaction publicly:

> When I started learning Spanish, I did so because I could not find any Ladino classes. I used to interrupt my teacher and tell her, no we do not call it this in Ladino, the pronunciation is like this… One day I drove her crazy, she said you are here to learn Spanish, not Ladino. She was right actually. Look at that post, hanum, there is no such a word in Spanish. Nor quiero or kero…


Image 4: Facebook post on a Ladino expression

Socrates seems to hold the same view as Athena about the difference between Spanish and Ladino. As he noted:

> I had some Spanish friends when I studied in England in the ’80s. Once I tried to talk to them in Ladino and they said that it was all Greek to them. I was so embarrassed… I started learning Spanish on my own some years ago and I can see a lot of similarities, but Ladino is not only Spanish, but you can also find Greek and Turkish words as well. This post expresses it really well. Ladino is a mixed culture as is Sephardic Jewishness.

Here, Socrates underlines the linguistic particularity of the Ladino language. It is not only Spanish. Ladino has absorbed linguistic features from the cities and countries where Sephardic Jews settled throughout the Balkans, Turkey and Greece. He also commented in a positive way on the Facebook group’s post that presents Ladino expressions and the polyglottic features of the ‘modern’ language. Furthermore, the use of pink and the hearts at the bottom reinforced the positivity that the assimilated in-group (van Leeuwen 2008) of Ladino speakers generates in a multimodal way, one that synthesizes verbal text and a visual constructed context.

Dimitra also summarized all that Ladino and its online rediscovery mean today through the quotation that follows.

> When I travelled to Spain, I completely understood the people there, but when I tried to speak to them, I have some good Spanish friends, they said that they could not understand me, that Ladino sounds like Old Spanish to them. It is not only the pronunciation. It is also the word choices. Think about… Que tal? or Que habar?

> Ladino is something more than Spanish, it is based on Spanish, but it is a mix of cultures and languages. This is why it is unique. The Facebook groups represent the importance of the language. I think that, yes, they can help in the promotion of Ladino. These posts help me to understand things that were as blurred as my own memories of the language.

It can therefore be said that Ladino is based on Spanish, but it is not limited to the Spanish language. According to the informants, Ladino is unique and a reflection of a mixed culture and a combination of languages. It symbolizes all that Sephardic heritage means to them. The absence of face-to-face Ladino classes in Greece has increased Greek Sephardic Jews' interest in the Facebook groups and online classes. Hence, the present of Ladino is digital and is shaped through online communities.

## 6. Conclusion: Ladino as an imagined community and its online rediscovery

As Kirschen (2020) explained, language socialization refers to the diverse ways humans acquire social and linguistic competencies and activate them within a given social setting or group. It can also show how speakers preserve their heritage language to the present day. Drawing upon the sociolinguistic context of socialization, I argue that the Facebook groups under investigation contribute to the construction of an 'imagined community' (Anderson 2016) of members who do not know each other in person but share the same interests or have the same goal, which here is the rediscovery and rescue of the Ladino language along with the Sephardic past and the recursion of collective memory. The amalgamation of cultures that characterizes Ladino is reflected in the posts as well as the discussions of the FB group's members. Another important part of the analysis is the participants' references to the hegemonic dimension of the Greek language and its relation to the Greek Orthodoxy as the main elements of the Greek national identity. Through this prism, some of my interlocutors revealed that the resurgence of Ladino, to them, is connected to the continuity of the Greek Jewishness heritage and cultural identity, and it beyond their family memories.

By introducing a Facebook discourse-oriented approach that is based on multi-sited ethnography and CDS, especially the DHA, I proposed an interdisciplinary approach that provides an in-depth analysis of different texts (oral, digital, visual), emphasizes the synthesis between the methods without distinguishing them, and illustrates how social media are used in the rediscovery of an endangered language such as Ladino and the preservation of its speakers' collective memory and identity. The participants of the study emphasize bottom-up attempts to rescue their linguistic and cultural heritage and the absence of well-organized top-down cases. Moreover, the DHA argumentative strategies in tandem with Marcus' 'following' tactics –especially 'follow the people', 'follow the story', 'follow the metaphor', follow the life'– provided an analytical procedure that explicated further through the transition from the topos of threat to the topos of responsibility. It also illustrated in detail how memories that were forced into oblivion are now being re-negotiated and have led to the rediscovery of Ladino. Hence, by focusing on this transition via its chronotopic dimension and the juxtaposition of space and time, it is obvious that the fear and the silence that have accompanied Ladino speakers in the past have been replaced by a desire to spread the language and secure its present and future; a process that is taking place alongside talk about the Holocaust and Jewish heritage.

The online rediscovery of Ladino through the Facebook groups, thus, contributes to the construction of an imagined community that crosses the lines of the Jewish and Greek authorities, unifies people and their memories and shapes a bottom-up global shelter to secure Ladino and memory of the Holocaust beyond the threatening rise of today's antisemitism.

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