El Prezente
Studies in Sephardic Culture

Editors: Tamar Alexander • Yaakov Bentolila • Eliezer Papo

El Prezente, vol. 4, December 2010

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Center Moshe David Gaon
for Ladino Culture

האיגוד העולמי למדעי היהדות
WORLD UNION OF JEWISH STUDIES

The National Authority for Ladino
and its Culture

Table of Contents

The People Who Almost Forgot: Judeo-Spanish Online Communities As a Digital Home-Land

Michal Held
The Center for Study of Jewish Languages and Literatures, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem

Introduction

From the start of the twentieth century, the status of Judeo-Spanish[1] has seriously deteriorated because of various social developments, chief among these being the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Nazi extermination of the JS speaking Jews of the Balkans, the rise of Zionism and the revival of Hebrew.

Having lost its function as a vital a tool of communication, contemporary JS used online may be regarded as a metaphoric place, in which an identity is constructed in the absence of an offline Sephardi community. The new Sephardi courtyard forming on the Internet is based primarily upon the ethnic language: the vehicle for the recreation of a fragmented offline personal and collective Sephardi identity. Thus,

1 Judeo-Spanish is mainly a Romance language with embedded Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Turkish and Balkan components. Originating in medieval Spain, it became a widespread Jewish language, when the descendants of Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492 continued to use it in oral and written form in their newly established communities in the Ottoman Empire and Northern Morocco. The language received various names down the centuries, including the term, "Ladino", which originally referred to the Judeo-Spanish dialect used in the translation of the Bible and other sacred Jewish texts since the sixteenth century. This dialect differs from the spoken and written language used by Sephardi Jews. The language used by the participants in the online Sephardi correspondence circles analyzed in this paper is thus referred to as "Judeo-Spanish" (and in short "JS"), and the culture it represents is referred to as "Sephardi". The term "Ladino" is used only when quoted directly from those websites dealt with in this discussion.

a replacement for the Sephardi homeland (or rather the system of homelands that Sephardi Jews yearn back to, such as Eretz Israel and Jerusalem, Spain, the Ottoman Empire, the State of Israel–to name just a few) is being constructed.

One way of deciphering the online Sephardi activity is in the light of Benedict Anderson's definition of the Imagined Community,[2] as the reconstruction of an imagined Sephardi identity based upon a culture that has none or very little function in today's offline world. The following paper shall offer such an analysis of it, while demonstrating the move from concrete to virtual Sephardi life, focusing on the Internet as a territory where a culture may be revitalized after having faced a state of severe decline. The key concept deriving from the discussion is a proposed new phase in ethnic and folkloristic thought: *The Digital Home-Land*, a concept that illuminates not only the contemporary Sephardi situation, but also general aspects of human culture that is situated at a turning point in the technological age.

Judeo-Spanish Online Communities: The Current Situation

My interest in the phenomenon of online communities in general,[3] and in its Sephardi version in particular, started in the year 2000, when I visited South Africa during the Jewish High Holidays. My local friends did their best to make my stay a pleasant one. One thing, however, they had no idea how to help me find–and that was a Sephardi synagogue. A solution came from Ladinokomunita: a JS online community that was taking its first steps on the Internet at the time. A member of this circle directed me to the Sephardi synagogue in Cape Town, where I ended up celebrating Rosh Hashana with the community of the descendants of the JS-speaking Jews whose parents and grandparents had emigrated from the Greek Island of Rhodes to Africa in the 1930s.

This anecdote emphasizes the role that the Internet plays in contemporary Sephardi life. Towards the dawn of the twenty-first century, when JS almost ceased to exist as a spoken language, the Sephardi phoenix surprisingly arose from its ashes in the terra incognita of the World Wide Web. The new process may be demonstrated by

2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London 1983.

3 For more about the social online interaction at stake, see David Crystal, *Language and the Internet*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, "The language of chatgroups", pp. 129-170.

an analysis of two active JS online communities: *The Ladinokomunita Mailing List,* hosted by Yahoo groups,[4] and *The Ladino Culture Forum*, hosted by the Israeli web portal Tapuz.[5] Interestingly enough, the difference between the titles represents two levels of virtual reconstruction of Sephardi life: community and culture. [6]

Methodologically, I investigated the JS online communities with the tools used in folkloristic fieldwork and those relevant to a multidisciplinary approach to JS studies. The developing research method called cyberethnography ("an internet technologically mediated and enabled hypertextual/intertextual performance")[7] was also employed in my digital fieldwork, in which it emphasized crucial dilemmas such as the need to re-differentiate between the private and the public sphere, and between the written and the multimedia-presented material.

The following table represents the activity in the JS online communities in December 2009:

	Ladinokomunita	**Ladino Culture Forum**
Founded	January 2000	January 2002
Number of Members	Over 1,100	Over 350
Members' place of origin	Worldwide (over 30 countries)	Israel
Member's ethnic origin (As much as may be deciphered from the messages' content when not openly declared).	Sephardi Jews and Spanish speaking non-Jews interested in acquiring the JS language and identity.	Sephardi and non-Sephardi Jews.

4 http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Ladinokomunita/. For a forthcoming discussion of this group, see Marcy Brink-Danan, "Limiting Ladinoland: Virtuality and Ideology in an Online Speech Community".

5 http://www.tapuz.co.il/tapuzforum/main/forumpage/asp?forum=420/.

6 Naturally, web-based activities are constantly changing and cannot possibly be grasped in their entirety. The digital fieldwork done as a basis for the present study was concluded in August 2009, before the research was first presented. The data collected in it is analyzed in retrospect, not without a realization that possible changes may have occurred in it ever since then.

7 Radhika Gajjala, "Cyberethnography: Reading South Asian digital diasporas", in Kyra Landzelius (ed.), *Native on the Net: Indigenous and Diasporic Peoples in the Virtual Age*, Routledge, London & New York, 2006, p. 273.

Number of messages	Approximately 30,000	Approximately 20,000
Language	Judeo-Spanish	Hebrew and Judeo-Spanish
JS Script and Orthography	Latin script– in most cases the standardized orthographic system formed by the *Aki Yerushalayim* JS periodical is applied, with some messages being "corrected" according to it by the group's moderator.	Hebrew script–until recently non-regulated or non-standardized. Currently, there is an attempt to introduce and assimilate the traditional orthographic system of JS in Hebrew characters.

The central topics of both circles are the following:

* JS language, including attempts to decipher meanings and origins of words and personal and family names and to acquire, or re-acquire, the language
* Sephardi culture: music, literature, folk songs, proverbs, material culture
* Sephardi cuisine, and in particular the attempts to reproduce lost linguistic and practical dimensions of it
* History and genealogy of the Sephardi communities in Israel and around the world
* Past experiences related to Sephardi tradition and communities
* Jewish holidays in the Sephardi tradition
* Contemporary literary creation in JS
* Sephardi events and publications
* Biblical commentary
* Personal affairs (birthdays, weddings, condolences)

An online JS dictionary is being compiled in both circles, and in Tapuz a collection of articles devoted to JS language and culture is also available.

As the list of topics confirms, the JS online communities concentrate mainly on specific Sephardi issues. The participants rarely present general affairs (political, economical, cultural, etc.). By limiting the subject matter of their interactions to their ethnic concerns, they create a Sephardi enclosure that can exist more easily in the virtual realm than in the concrete world in our times.

Conceptual Framework

The JS online communities' founders and moderators emphasize that a central aspect of the raison d'être of the activity that they started online in JS is to preserve and revive Sephardi memory. "Vamos a korrespondermos en muestra kerida lingua para ke no mos ulvidemos de eya" (we are going to correspond in our dear language so that we do not forget her), says Rachel Bortnik of Ladinokomunita. Ruti B. of the Tapuz forum claims that:

> "פורום שיעסוק בתרבות הזו יתרום לאנשים שכבר כמעט הספיקו לשכוח, (ואני נמנית על אלו), יאפשר להם לזכור".
>
> ["A forum dedicated to this [Sephardi] culture shall contribute to the people (myself included) who almost forgot, it will enable them to remember".]

As already mentioned, the subject matter of the messages exchanged in these online communities, as well as their conceptual framework, confirm Benedict Anderson's definition of the imagined community:

> It [the community] is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.[8]

According to Anderson, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in it, the imagined community is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.[9] The participants in the online Sephardi interactions are indeed forming an imagined community, in which a comradeship that cannot possibly be reached offline is created.

Another illuminating context to the phenomenon we are looking at is Jean Amery's interpretation of the concept of the transportable homeland:[10]

8 See Note 2, p.6.

9 See Note 2, p.7.

10 Heinrich Heine originally presented the concept of the portable homeland. For his consideration of the Jewish Portable Fatherland, see Henryk Broder, *A Jew in the New Germany*, translated from the German by the Broder Translators' Collective, edited by Sander L. Gilman and Lilian M. Friedberg, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 2004, p. 44.

> If I am permitted … to give an answer to the question how much home does a person need, I would say: all the more, the less of it he can carry with him. For there is, after all, something like a transportable home[land],[11] or at least an ersatz for home. That can be religion, like the Jewish one.[12]

Pierre Nora's description of the cultural stage in which, when "lieux de mémoire" no longer exist, "milieux de mémoire" are created provides a most relevant approach to the situation we are looking at.[13]

The online imagined community as a milieu de mémoire cannot be understood without taking into consideration another key concept. Describing the social network developing on the web, Howard Rheingold started a pioneering discussion of the virtual community:

> My seven-year-old daughter knows that her father congregates with a family of invisible friends who seem to gather in his computer. Sometimes he talks to them, even if nobody else can see them. And she knows that these invisible friends sometimes show up in the flesh, materializing from the next block or the other side of the planet.[14]

Bearing these various theoretical concepts in mind, the understanding of the online reconstruction of Sephardi life and identity as well as the personal and collective memory based on a culture that has a minor function in today's offline world becomes clear. The following message, posted on Tapuz in February 2009 by oferashkenazi is motivated by the wish to revive the Sephardi culture and JS language, whose offline

11 Amery uses the word "Heimat" (capitalized in the German original), which refers to a homeland as well as to a home. Thus, here I am using "Homeland" in accordance with Amery's Hebrew translation, as it seems more accurate in the context in which it appears.

12 Jean Amery, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, translated from German by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1980, p. 44.

13 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire", *Representations* 26 (1989), pp. 7-25.

14 Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2000 and the Introduction to the electronic version quoted here: http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/intro.html/.

existence is endangered. All the above-mentioned theoretical insights function as a context for it:[15]

> komo tengo diskarino a ladino avlantes!!!
> Me akodro ke [kuando] era chiko todos avlavan espaniol in la kaya (me engrandesi in Yaffo) era muy ermozo, toda esta ermoza kultura eskapo. Komo kero ke toda la jente de la Turkiya e la Grecia van a alevantar de la foya e van a kidar kon mozos. Kyeriya murir kon eyos, yo sto ke no tengo qualo azer in la vida sin eyos. Eyos eran me alma. tanto treste ke pekado. Me swenyo ez estar kon eyos por un dia sola para nostaljia. Quando gritan Nissim ya basta. Ach ke swenio.!!!!!!!
>
> [How I long for Ladino speakers!!! I remember that [when] I was little everybody spoke Spanish in the street (I grew up in Jaffa.) It was very beautiful. All this beautiful culture ended. How I wish that all the people from Turkey and Greece get up from the grave and stay with us. I wish I died with them, I am the one who has nothing to do in this life without them. They were my soul. So sad what a sin. My dream is to be with them for just one day for the nostalgia. When they shout Nissin that's enough, ah what a dream!!!!!!]

Recently, the Tapuz Ladino Culture Forum's founder and moderator announced that she can no longer act as the group's leading figure, an announcement that evoked many emotional reactions. One of these reactions, posted by Trandafilo in November 2009, demonstrates the process of personal and collective JS and Sephardi revival that in our times may take place only online:

> אנתיס סינקו אניוס מיאינתרי פור לא פרימה בֵּיס אי מיאימוסיניי מוצו בֵּיינדו לא אקתיבֵּיתה אי אלומאס לו קי אסקריבֵּיאן לוס אמיגוס דאיל פורום אין לאדינו. יו קי דייזיס דיאניוס לא מיאינפלאי לא לינגואה מי אמוסיני סאנקי מיתורני אתראס א מי פאמיה אי לא צֵיקיז. אין סופיתו אינפיסי א פינסאר אין לאדינו אי אפילו סוניאר אין לא לינגואה די מי צֵיקו. נו מי פואידו אימאזינאר קי איסתי פורום נו בֵּה איקזיסתאר מאס. [...] בֵּה סיר פיקאדו גראנדי סי נו בֵּה אבֵּיר קונתונאיסיון די איסתי "מפעל חשוב". [...] פור לאמור דיל דיו איס "כמעט פיקוח נפש".
>
> [Five years ago I entered for the first time and was very excited to see the activity and more than that what the friends of the Ladino forum are writing. I, who have

15 Hereafter, all quotes form the online JS correspondences are given in the original script and orthographic systems used by their writers, and followed with an unedited English translation.

> not used the language for years [decades?] got very excited because I returned to my family and the childhood. All of a sudden I started to think in Ladino and even dream in the language of my childhood. I cannot imagine that this forum is not going to exist anymore […] It will be a big sin not to have a continuation of this "*mif'al hashuv*" (important enterprise.) … For the love of God this is "*kimat piku'ah nefesh*" (almost a matter of life and death.)]

Realizing that the existing theory is not sufficient for a complete understanding of the JS online communities, I propose adding to it a new concept that may lead to an improved description and analysis of the phenomenon.

The Digital Home-Land

According to Robin Cohen,[16] offline Diaspora communities have traumatic characteristics, such as dispersal from the homeland, self-exiles in search of work, trade, or colonial ambitions and an uneasy relationship with the 'host' society. On the other hand, he claims, these communities also have some reassuring features such as a collective memory and myth concerning the homeland, a return movement, a strong ethnic group consciousness, a sense of solidarity with co-members of the Diaspora community in other countries, the possibility of a positive experience in tolerant host countries and an idealization of the homeland.

The Digital Diaspora is a derivative of the offline Diaspora described by Robin, only it is conceived and practiced online, with possible yet not essential breaks through to the offline world. In a study of Hip-Hop music in cyberspace, Andre Pinar and Sean Jacobs suggest that virtual diasporic communities are constructed according to their symbolic marginalism because of their cultural and ethnic orientation. They understand the Virtual Diaspora as a metaphor for a terrain in which, due to experiential and historical dynamics, social agents position themselves appositionally as well as opportunistically to the status quo or the dominant ideology, and thus the Virtual Diaspora establishes what Pierre Bourdieu would define as "its own sociopolitical space or field".[17]

16 Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, London 1997, p. 180.

17 Andre Pinard and Sean Jacobs, "Building a Virtual Diaspora: Hip-Hop in Cyberspace", in Michael D. Ayers (ed.), *Cybersounds: Essays on Virtual Music Culture*, Peter Lang, New York 2006, p.84.

A close reading of our corpus of online messages raises the question whether in the case of the JS interaction on the Internet we are witnessing a state of a Sephardi Digital Diaspora. When Sephardi homelands no longer exist offline and are shifted to the Internet, where "the people who almost forgot" them reconstruct a vivid virtual Sephardi community, are they forming a digital Diaspora?

The concept of the digital Diaspora is used in relation to societies whose members have been brutally uprooted from their realistic homeland and who re-organized themselves, both personally and collectively, around an alternative Diaspora, virtually situated in cyberspace. In the context of the online JS interactions, the traumatic aspects of the historical Sephardi Diaspora seem less relevant, and the virtual replacement of the otherwise non-existing Sephardi community evolves around a wish to re-assemble the disentangling collective memory and the idealized Sephardi community, its language and culture.

In addition, a recent study emphasizes two main characteristics of the Digital Diaspora: the affinity (political, cultural or religious) with an existing or a potential offline homeland, and the creation of a hybrid identity.[18] Both these traits are quite uncharacteristic of the Sephardi online communities, whose members are using their online interactions to form a unified rather than a hybrid identity, in the context of having no single offline homeland with which they may affiliate.

Therefore, in the case of the study of Sephardi online communities, I propose that the concept of the Digital Diaspora should be replaced with the more accurate *Digital Home-Land* (DH-L): a virtual territory in which long-lost offline communities, such as the Sephardi one in our case, are reconstructed online. Their reconstruction involves a process of creating a milieu de mémoire when most aspects of the trauma of losing the lieu de mémoire have already faded away. It is only natural for endangered ethnic languages, such as JS, to play an important role in the formation and practice of the DH-L when the offline homeland they are associated with disappears.

Once an existence of a new DH-L is acknowledged, one may reasonably ask who the citizens of it are, and what grants them their citizenship. The contexts for these questions are works such as that of Marc Prensky, who identified the Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants in 2001.[19] According to his model, recently expanded

18 Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transitional Engagement*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2009.

19 Marc Prensky, "Digital natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1," *On the Horizon* 5 (2001), pp.1-6; idem, "Digital natives, Digital Immigrants Part 2: Do they Really think differently?" *On the Horizon* 6 (2001), pp.1-6.

by Palfrey and Gasser, Digital Natives were born after 1980, when social digital technologies came online.[20] Digital Natives live much of their lives online; they are constantly connected to the web; they experience friendship and relate to information differently from their parents; they are tremendously creative; they rely upon the connected space for all the information they need to live their lives; they will move markets and transform industries, education and global politics.[21]

As opposed to Digital Natives, Digital Settlers grew up in an analog-only-world, and although they are active online and use web-based technologies quite sophisticatedly, they continue to rely heavily on traditional, analog forms of interaction. Finally, Digital Immigrants are those who learned to use basic web-based interaction forms, such as e-mail and social networks, late in life and have never turned it into a meaningful aspect of their lives.[22]

Biological age is, thus, an absolute characteristic of the Digital Natives, who are intensively exposed to and make use of digital technologies and tools, internalized by most but not necessarily all of them as a way of life. Don Tapscott's work on what he defines as "the net generation" reinforces the understanding of the social framework that is rooted online. Tapscott surveyed more than 11,000 young people, whom he describes as a remarkably bright community, which has developed revolutionary new ways of thinking, interacting, working, and socializing. According to him, the members of the first generation to have literally grown up digital are part of a global cultural phenomenon: they are changing every aspect of our society. [23]

The members of the Sephardi online communities explored in this study may hardly be defined as Digital Natives. Some of them are Digital Settlers; others go only as far as being Digital Immigrants. My definition of the online territory they share as a DH-L requires an understanding of the concepts of Digital Natives and the net generation that differs from the one-dimensional interpretation offered by the above-mentioned researchers.

20 John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*, New York 2008, p. 1.

21 Ibid, pp. 4-7.

22 Ibid. pp. 3-4.

23 Don Tapscott, *Growing up digital: The Rise of the Net Generation*, McGraw-Hill: New York 1997. For a digital description of the book, as well as Tapscott's activity in general, see: http://dontapscott.com/.

The people who lost their actual Sephardi life do not have to be born digital in order to gain full citizenship rights in the DH-L. The ethnic void that they face and their attempt to re-acquire it online enable them to establish the DH-L and act as its digital citizens although most of them were born long before 1980, and had not internalized digital technologies and ways of thinking. Thus, when Sephardi culture can hardly be practiced offline, the people who experienced it in their own past or in that of their families reconstruct it as a DH-L: a virtual replacement for the actual Sephardi 'place' leading to the creation of a contemporary reconstructed Sephardi personal and collective memory that could not have existed otherwise or anywhere else.

The Sephardi DH-L represents a wider situation, in which the very concept of place is shifting, and the people who practice the change do not necessarily have to be born digital. They may immigrate to or settle into an online place, their DH-L, and use it as an alternative for the lost Sephardi or any other offline homeland.

I am pointing here to a higher degree of communal imagination than the one defined by Anderson, who referred to concrete nations that are being imagined by their members. As opposed to this view, in the Sephardi DH-L we actually witness the reconstruction of an imaginary identity based upon a culture that is merely virtual and has none or very little function in today's world. The separation of Home from Land in the DH-L emphasizes the fact that the virtual Sephardi community signifies a shift in the concept of place, as the home no longer depends solely on the land in the DH-L.

The JS language used by the members of the online Sephardi communities, and the ethnic state that they are intensively concerned with, function as a metaphoric place, where compensation for the absence of either a realistic or an imagined Sephardi community is found. Thus, a Sephardi identity that substitutes the lost realistic system of homelands that Sephardi Jews inhabited and longed for in the past is created. These lost actual homelands are now being replaced with the DH-L–perhaps the only Sephardi homeland existing in the twenty-first century, when a JS interaction on a daily basis is more possible online than anywhere else in the world.

The Function of Language in the DH-L: A Written-Spoken Language?

Although the online communities that this paper focuses on are technically defined as a mailing list (The Ladinokomunita Mailing List) and as a forum (The Ladino Culture Forum), they shall hereafter be referred to as correspondence circles–a term used by the initiators of Ladinokomunita. I deliberately adopted this term in order to convey

two aspects of the materials with which I am concerned. One aim was to encapsulate the way in which the members of the community define themselves, rather than the way in which they are identified by researchers' analytical definitions–an approach presented and practiced by Dan Ben-Amos and Tamar Alexander-Frizer, among other influential researchers of folklore.[24] Moreover, I find the term 'corresponding circle' to be highly relevant to the ethnolinguistic study of the materials with which I am concerned, and to the definition of the 'Written-Spoken Language' used by their participants suggested hereinafter.

The fact that the Sephardi online correspondence circles we are looking at as a prototype for the DH-L in general use JS language not only as a linguistic infrastructure but also as a meta-linguistic central theme is not accidental. These online JS interactions convey a quest situated between losses and Diasporas as well as an attempt to reconstruct a multilayered system of homelands within the boundaries of the DH-L.

According to Jean Amery, in the years of exile our relationship to our homeland was akin to that toward our mother tongue. In a very specific way, we have lost it too and cannot initiate proceedings for restitution.[25] Having lost its function as a tool of communication, the JS language used online makes possible a reacquisition of the lost mother tongue. Using Amery's concept, we may say that the online messages, unfolded in the ethnic language that represents the fragmented Sephardi collective identity becomes a substitute for the offline Sephardi homeland.

Benedict Anderson commented that "there is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests … nothing connects us all but imagined sound".[26] In the case of the JS DH-L, the question of sound is interesting since it is a 'written community' in which JS language is actually not heard (almost no use of audio or video is made, although it is technologically possible to incorporate them.) To use Anderson's definition, it is definitely an imagined sound that connects the members of the DH-L. Jean Amery's words are also relevant for the understanding of

24 See Dan Ben-Amos, "Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres", *Folklore Genres*, Dan Ben-Amos (ed.), University of Texas Press, Austin, 1976, pp. 215-242 and Tamar Alexander-Frizer, *The Heart is a Mirror: The Sephardi Folktale*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit 2007, p.8

25 See Note 12, p. 51.

26 See Note 2, p. 145.

the lost offline JS community and the tendency to reconstruct, as a replacement of it, the online DH-L in which the forgotten mother tongue is revived.

An intriguing aspect of the function of language in the Sephardi DH-L has to do with the way in which JS script is being treated in the online correspondence circles. The traditional orthographic systems used for the writing of JS in square and Rashi Hebrew script, as well as the varied spelling systems applied for the writing of the language in Roman script, have already been widely described and analyzed by the linguists.[27]

A debate regarding the 'correct' method of writing JS has occupied the minds of writers and readers of the language for a long time. At present, attempts are being made to convince the users of JS around the world to adopt the phonetically oriented orthographic system formed and practiced in the JS periodical *Aki Yerushalyim* that is published in Latin characters. At the same time, scholars encourage the acquisition of the traditional method of writing JS in Hebrew script, in order to allow modern readers of the language access to earlier JS texts. These negating spelling ideologies are reflected in the online JS correspondence circles, when the moderator of Ladinokomunita makes an effort to correct messages that are misspelled according to the *Aki Yerushlayim* method. In Tapuz, the orthographic situation was non-systemized until recently, when over the months of July and August 2009 a vivid discussion of this matter evolved, and the decision was made to try to follow the traditional method of spelling JS in Hebrew characters.[28]

27 See for example David Bunis, "Ktav ke-semel zehut datit-leumit: al hitpathut ktivat ha-Judezmo" [Orthography as a Symbol for Religious-National Identity: The Development of Judezmo writing], *Peamim* 101-102 (2005), pp. 111-171; Aldina Quintana Ronriguez, "Proceso de recastellanización del Judesmo", in Judit Taragona Borras & Angel Saenz-Badillos (eds.), *Jewish Studies at the Turn of the Twentieth Century II*, Brill, Leiden, Boston and Koln 1999, pp. 593-602; Ora Schwarzwald, "Masorot ha-ktav ve-ha-ktiv be-targumei ha-ladino min ha-me'a ha-t"z va-eilakh" [The Traditions of Script and Orthography in the Ladino Translations from the 16th Century onwards], *Peamim* 101-102 (2005), pp. 173-186.

28 The orthographical issues that occupy the attention of the participants of the two corresponding circles as well as some other applications of the use of JS in them are analyzed in Eliezer Papo, "El ladino i el kazal global", *Aki Yerushalayim* 86 (2009), pp. 33-36.

The fact that language is being focused on so heavily in the Sephardi DH-L echoes Roman Jakobson's theory,[29] and raises the question which one of the six functions of language he defined (the referential, the emotive, the conative, the phatic, the metalingual and the poetic) dominates the phenomena that we are looking at. The answer must be multiple, for in the Sephardi DH-L, JS language is being dealt with in a way that resembles both the metalingual function (expressed, for example, in the numerous attempts to clarify the lost meanings of JS words and expressions) and the poetic function (expressed in the constant concentration on the JS message for its own sake). Interestingly enough, contemporary Yiddish is regarded in a similar way, as expressed by Jeffery Shandler:

> Though perceived largely in terms of loss, the current state of Yiddish–increasingly self-conscious, contingent, and tenacious–has also opened up new cultural possibilities for the language. Indeed, the symbolic values invested in Yiddish have expanded greatly and have done so precisely because of the prevailing sense that it is no longer what it once was, with this disparity inspiring innovation.[30]

Likewise on the JS scene: the ethnic language that had already been classified as endangered or even dead in the offline world[31] is revived in the DH-L as a language that may rely more on its metalingual and aesthetic function than on its other functions, which are essential in offline interactions. In this respect, the Sephardi online corresponding circles may be regarded as a model for the behavior of language in the DH-L in general.

Naomi Baron explores the history of written culture and presents its changing role in the context of the way in which it is used in contemporary societies online.[32] Emerging from her survey of reading, writing, authorship, copyright, publishing

29 Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics", in T. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1960, pp. 350-377.

30 Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 2006, p. 20.

31 See for example Tracy Harris, *Death of a Language: The History of Judeo-Spanish*, University of Delaware Press, Newark 1994.

32 Naomi S. Baron, "The future of written culture: Envisioning language in the New Millennium", *Ibérica: Journal of the European Association of Languages for Specific Purposes*, 9, no. 1 (2005), pp. 7-31. Online version: http://www1.america.edu/tesol/In%20Press%20Paper--Future%20of%20Written%20Culture.pdf

and language standards, is an understanding that what may be called in the present technological age human culture is facing a critical change in the way in which its written aspects are being practiced and understood. Baron concludes her article with the realization that "the technological genie is out of the bottle. We will need to feel our way to a new cultural praxis regarding the written word".

David Crystal offers a similar understanding of the language used online by saying the following:

> The situations of … chatgroups, though expressed through the medium of writing, display several of the core properties of speech. … their utterances display much of the urgency and energetic force which is characteristic of a face-to-face conversation … chatgroups are for 'chat', and people certainly 'speak' to each other there … These are 'speech acts', in a literal sense. The whole thrust of the metalanguage in these situations is spoken in character.[33]

What are the implications of these theories to the understanding of contemporary Sephardi online activity? Reproductions of printed works in JS, as well as online publications of original works in JS, do occupy a central place in the online Sephardi correspondence circles, which, from this respect, are an example of the change in the written culture with which Baron is concerned. However, the case of the Sephardi DH-L involves a language whose function as a spoken one is minimized in the offline world, while it is used intensively for written conversation online. This, for sure, is not a conventional example of the difference between written and spoken language. The boundaries between the two are actually even more challenged than in the situation described by Crystal. I propose seeing it as a new linguistic phase in which an endangered offline spoken language is turned into a vibrant online 'Written-Spoken Language' within the boundaries of the DH-L.

This stage is made possible due to the release of the technological genie out of the bottle on the one hand, and the flexibility of the last members of the past Sephardi communities, who replace their offline situation of cultural decline with the technological alternative which keeps it alive and enables it to further develop, on the other. The characteristics of the Written-Spoken Language and their implications go far beyond the boundaries of this paper, and deserve further multidisciplinary comprehensive analysis.

33 David Crystal, *Language and the Internet*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001, p.29.

Conclusion: A Possible Return Offline?

This paper opened with a recollection of my personal experience of managing to locate an unknown offline Sephardi community as a result of an online conversation. A potential for a similar experience is found in the following correspondence that took place in Ladinokomunita in June 2009. In this exchange, a graduate student majoring in JS Studies at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem asked for help in reconstructing the traditional Sephardi game of cards that she vaguely remembered from her childhood in Istanbul and wished to analyze in an academic paper.

A few members of Ladinokomunita answered her message, offering a virtual revival of the traditional game that is rarely played anymore offline. One response went further in the direction marked by Rheingold, and offered the student a chance to return to the offline, non-virtual community of JS-speaking cards players. It came from the manager of a Sephardi elderly citizens home, who invited the student to meet and interview the residents of the institution he is in charge of, and experience a 'real' Sephardi game of cards.[34]

The members of Ladinokomunita from around the world have traveled together to Israel, Turkey, and Argentina lately, and their visits to the remains of the offline Sephardi homelands are widely documented online. A highlight of their journey to Israel was the ceremonial inauguration of a grove of trees planted in the north of the country. This site, named 'The Ladinokomunita Forest' was funded with the contributions made by the participants of the online community. Are these two examples, the forest and the game of cards, marking a possible return to the offline Sephardi community via the online experience of the Sephardi DH-L?

According James Slevin, technologies such as the Internet are serving to increase the capacity for both reciprocal and non-reciprocal communication. These new conditions challenge individuals and organizations to seek out new possibilities for reciprocal bonding and collaboration, and to create opportunities, which were previously only associated with the sharing of a common locale.[35]

Our journey in the Sephardi cyberspace indicates that the contemporary wandering Sephardi Jew, who has almost no distinguished 'locale' to identify with in the actual world, may find refuge online. Moreover, in some circumstances, it is possible to

34 For the full conversation see appendix.

35 James Slevin, *The Internet and Society*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 90.

organize Sephardi activity offline as an outcome of the activities taking place in the Sephardi DH-L. This is not to say that struggling Sephardi communities are being revived offline because of the online revival of their culture and language. Yet a possible new stage of ethnic experience may be marked when people get together in the actual world because of their being co-citizens of the DH-L.

The possible new phase in Sephardi culture based upon an online activity in JS that is being re-channeled into the actual world awaits the attention of a future study. Whatever the conclusion of it may be, the present study hopefully made it clear that at this point in time, the Sephardi Digital Home-Land itself provides cyberfolkloristics and Ladino culture scholars with fascinating phenomena, evoking general insights regarding contemporary culture and the interface between virtual and actual human existence.

Appendix:

A conversation carried on in Ladinokomunita, June 2009

Teza en Ladino de estudiante en la Universita Ebrea en Yerushalayim

En primero, demando pardon ke mi lingua no es buena i korrekta. Yo so una estudiante de Folklor en la Universita ebrea en Yerushalayim ke toma klasas en Ladino. Nasi en Istanbul ande mi grandmama me avlava en Ladino. Por modo de esto kije embezar la lingua en la Universita. Oy no ay munchas personas ke avlan la lingua, i kon el tiempo probablamente van aver mas pokos. Yo penso ke es muy importante de aver esta informasion para ke un dia otras personas ke se van enteresar en la lingua van a pueder a topar un poko de las tradisiones komo pasavan el tiempo los Judios ke avlavan Ladino.

Devo de eskrivir una teza par la fin de esta klasa. Porke me akodro ke los Judios en Istambul djugavan kartas i era una tradision ke les dava muncho agrado, pensi a eskrivir esta teza a los djugos de kartas ke los Judios ke vinyeron de todo modo de payizes i agora biven en diferente payizes aman a djugar.

Tengo 8 kestiones ke tienen menester de responsos i saver de ke lugar (payiz) vienen las personas muy agradavles ke me dan los responsos.

1. A donde djugan las kartas; en kaza, en el klub de la kommunita o en otro lugar?
2. Los ombres i las mujeres djugan las kartas en djuntos o aparte?
3. Ay djugos de kartas ke solo las mujeres o solo los ombres djugan?

4. Komo se yaman los djugos (Poker–Pokeriko…)?
5. Komo se yaman las kartas (El rey, el joker …)?
6. Ken son las personas ke djugan kartas mas, los viejos o los djovenes?
7. Kuando les plaze a la djente djuar cartas, la tarde o la noche o el la fin de semana?
8. La konversasion en el tiempo ke se djuagan las kartas es en Ladino o otra lingua?

Si vozotros puedian por favor ayudarme kon esta koza vo ester muy agradesida.
Mersi muncho de esta muy importante ayuda.
Kon respekto Orly Salinas Mizrahi agora en Yerushalayim

Translation

A Ladino thesis of a student in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

First, I beg your pardon that my language is not good and correct. I am a student of Folklore at the Hebrew university of Jerusalem who takes courses in Ladino. I was born in Istanbul where my grandmother spoke Ladino to me. For this, I wanted to study the language at the university. Today there are not many people who speak the language, and with time, there probably are going to be fewer. I think it is very important to have this information so that one day other people who are going to be interested in the language will be able to find some of the traditions the way they were practiced in the times of the Jews who spoke Ladino.

I need to write a thesis for the end of this course. For I remember that the Jews in Istanbul played cards and it was a tradition that gave them a lot of pleasure, I decided to write this thesis about the card games that the Jews who came from many countries and now live in different countries love to play.

I have 8 questions that need to be answered, and I need to know what place (country) the nice people who answer them for me come from.

1. Where did they play cards? At home? In the community's club, or in another place?
2. Did men and women play cards together or separately?
3. Are there card games that only men or only women play?
4. What were the names of the games (Poker–Pokeriko…)?
5. What are the names of the cards (El rey, el joker …)?
6. Who are the people who spend more time playing cards? The old or the young ones?

7. When did people like to play cards? In the morning, in the evening or during the weekend?
8. Was the conversation that accompanied the game or cards carried on in Ladino or in another language?

If you can please help me with this thing, I shall be very grateful. Thanks a lot for this very important help. With respect, Orly Salinas Mizrahi, now in Jerusalem.

Orli kerida
Mi nombre es Roni Aranya. Yo so el direktor de la kaza ande biven las personas ke vinyeron de los lugares ke avlavan el Ladino. Aki abasho tienes mi adreso elektroniko. Puedes vinir ande mozotros i avlar kon muestros moradores. Sere muy enteresante para ti i para eyos

בברכה, רוני ארניה, בית אבות ליאון רקנאטי

Translation:

Dear Orli
My name is Roni Aranya. I am the director of the home where the people who came from the places where Ladino is spoken live. You have my electronic address here at the end. You can come to us and speak to our tenants. It will be very interesting for you and for them.

Regards, Roni Aranya, Recanati Elderly Citizens Home.

Tables IV/2: Daniel Kabiljo, *A Street in Sarajevo*,
colored linocut, 1920s-1930s, courtesy of the Art gallery of
Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo