

## Revitalizing Ladino: Towards a Critical Approach

**1. Outline** Drawing on the body of critical literature on language loss and revival, this talk interrogates scholarly and community responses to language endangerment, with reference to our own work and collaboration as scholar-activists on Ladino. Ladino is the eastern (sub)branch of ‘Judeo-Spanish’, a Romance language of Ibero-Ottoman origin (Papo 2021) preserved by the Sephardic diaspora for 500 years but today considered ‘severely endangered’ by UNESCO. Forced migration of Sephardic Jews in the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to the global dispersal, and subsequent dissolution, of physical Ladino-speaking communities. In the last 30 years, however, a global online linguistic community—without physical counterpart—has emerged, expanding across various platforms (Yahoo!, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Zoom, i.a.) in step with wider transformations in the evolving virtual environment. In this talk, we outline and critically discuss our respective responses to Ladino’s endangerment through Author 1’s scholarly work on the grammatical description of Ladino; Author 2’s community-based online digital archiving; and the ways in which these endeavours intersect with the proliferation of online community efforts to reclaim and reinvigorate Ladino.

**2. Context** Work in critical applied linguistics and allied fields has long expressed skepticism regarding academic and public discourses surrounding language loss, and (theoretical and practical) responses to this ‘crisis’ (Duchêne & Heller 2008; Cameron 1995). Amongst other insights, such work has traced the colonial history of documentary linguistics and its legacy in today’s documentary practices, e.g., the extractive researcher-subject dynamic (Calvet 1974; Errington 2001; Deumert et al. 2020), as well as its rearticulation in endangerment narratives currently in circulation, where even well-meaning ‘progressive’ rhetoric (e.g., ‘language rights as human rights’, ‘language diversity as biodiversity’) can serve to legitimise and reinforce the colonial inheritance its proponents seek to disavow (Hill 2000; Davis 2017; Ndhlovu 2018). Even the terminology of language loss and revival is contested, with scholars proposing alternative *framings* such as Davis’s (2017) language survivance (a portmanteau of ‘survival’ and ‘resistance’, following Vizenor 1999) as a counter-narrative to rhetorics of language extraction; and alternative *models*, such as Zuckermann’s (2020) (re)classification of language revival efforts into reclamation (i.e., the revival of a no longer spoken language), reinvigoration (i.e., the revival of a language that has a high percentage of speakers but is still endangered) and revitalization (i.e., the revival of a severely endangered language with minimal intergenerational transmission). At the same time, these insights do not diminish the observation that (i) glottophagic (Calvet 1974) processes continue to produce, or *coerce* (Roche 2019), language shift to the detriment of minoritized groups; and (ii) members of endangered language communities still strive to push back against these processes in various ways, and may seek institutional or scholarly support in doing so.

**3. Revitalizing Ladino** Against this backdrop, our efforts as scholar-activists in language revival tread a fine line between pragmatism and complicity in our contributions towards halting, or reversing, the glottophagic processes at work in the case of Ladino. On the one hand, we must navigate multiple, often conflicting, ideologies (Kroskrity 2009) in the community as well as reckon with our personal and disciplinary blindspots that perpetuate inherited structural asymmetries. On the other, the digital character of the Ladino community is, we contend, of particular significance for envisaging alternative modes of approaching and undertaking language revival (cf. also Zuckermann 2020, who stresses the increasing importance of digital tools in language revival efforts). Ladino’s digital home-lands (Held 2010; Yebra López 2021) have been instrumental in documenting and revitalizing Sephardi culture and language, affording critical infrastructure, community, and renewed visibility for an otherwise low-resource language. The transformative potential of the virtual world has facilitated a move away from the static, slow, written production of Ladino towards the interactive, the ephemeral and the multimodal. Amongst other changes, this movement disturbs purist ideologies (cf. Pons 2018) and (to varying degrees) democratises linguistic production by admitting a plurality of communicative modalities and the dimensions of variation these entail. The irruption of communicative possibilities not only re-invigorates the vitality of the language by providing further and diverse opportunities to use and create with the language, but the plurality of multisemiotic forms involved produces evocative and nostalgic effects which, in turn, arouse identity and affective responses (in ways in which the written word arguably cannot, cf. Yebra López 2021:103ff), offering what community members articulate as a ‘mechanism of survival’ (Salmon 2021).