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## Death of a language: the history of Judeo-Spanish

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[1994](#)

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[University of Delaware Press](#)

### Abstract

After expulsion from Spain in 1492, a large number of Spanish Jews (Sephardim) found refuge in lands of the Ottoman Empire. These Jews continued speaking a Spanish that, due to their isolation from Spain, developed independently in the empire from the various peninsular dialects. This language, called Judeo-Spanish (among other names), is the focus of *Death of a Language*, a sociolinguistic study describing the development of Judeo-Spanish from 1492 to the present, its characteristics, survival, and decline. To determine the current status of the language, Tracy K. Harris interviewed native Judeo-Spanish speakers from the Sephardic communities of New York, Israel, and Los Angeles. This study analyzes the informants' use of the language, the characteristics of their speech, and the role of the language in Sephardic ethnicity.

Part I defines Judeo-Spanish, discusses the various names used to refer to the language, and presents a brief history of the Eastern Sephardim. The next part describes the language and its survival, first by examining the Spanish spoken by the Jews in pre-Expulsion Spain, and followed by a description of Judeo-Spanish as spoken in the Ottoman Empire, emphasizing the phonology, archaic features, new creations, euphemisms, proverbial and foreign (non-Spanish) influences on the language. Finally, Harris discusses sociological or nonlinguistic reasons why Judeo-Spanish survived for four and one-half centuries in the Ottoman empire.

The third section of *Death of a Language* analyzes the present status and characteristics of Judeo-Spanish. This includes a description of the informants and the three Sephardic communities studied, as well as the present domains or uses of Judeo-Spanish in these communities. Current Judeo-Spanish shows extensive influences from English and Standard Spanish in the Judeo-Spanish spoken in the United States, and from Hebrew and French in Israel. No one under the age of fifty can speak it well enough (if at all) to pass it on to the next generation, and none of the informants' grandchildren can speak the language at all. Nothing is being done to ensure its perpetuation: the language is clearly dying.

Part IV examines the sociohistorical causes for the decline of Judeo-Spanish in the Levant and the United States, and presents the various attitudes of current speakers: 86 percent of the informants feel that the language is dying. A discussion of language and Sephardic identity from a sociolinguistic perspective comprises part V, which also examines Judeo-Spanish in the framework of dying languages in general and outlines the factors that contribute to language death. In the final chapter the author examines how a dying language affects a culture, specifically the role of Judeo-Spanish in Sephardic identity.

### Topics

## Genre

[Book](#)

## Geographic Coverage

[United States of America](#) [Israel](#) [Spain](#)

## Original Language

[English](#)

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