

# Translating heritage language stimuli into a dominant language: Experiments with Bulgarian Judeo-Spanish speakers

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**Abstract.** The paper analyses certain grammatical features in translating Judeo-Spanish stimuli into Bulgarian in the context of experiments with native speakers of Judeo-Spanish as the heritage language and Bulgarian as the dominant language. The obtained empirical data reflect a specific situation of language contact, which allows us to focus on characteristic phenomena revealing the mutual influence of these contact languages, in particular the impact of Judeo-Spanish on Bulgarian.

**Keywords:** *Bulgarian; Judeo-Spanish; contact language; Ladino; bilingual speakers*

## 0. Socio-historical background

Judeo-Spanish (also known as Sephardic, Djudezmo, Ladino or Spaniol) is the name of a language spoken by a community of Mosaic faith who had to leave Spain in 1492 by the order of Spanish Queen Isabela and found refuge within the borders of the Ottoman Empire (cf. Hetzer 2001: 1 – 2). In particular, the name Ladino tends to refer to the original language that the Spaniards brought to the Balkans and thus historically classifiable as Old Spanish mixed with some Hebrew. On the Balkans, it changed greatly under the influence of various language contacts, adopting ca. 4,000 words from Old Spanish, 1,500 from Turkish, 500 from Hebrew and 400 to 500 from Greek, Arabic and other languages (cf. Moskona 2004: 19 – 20). Eventually, Djudezmo refers to a lexically poorer variety, due to the influence of socio-political and economic conditions in the Ottoman Empire<sup>1</sup> of that time (Moskona 2004, 21 – 22). People lived in closed Jewish environments with no secular education but only monastery schooling for boys.<sup>2</sup> All these factors explain how it came about that (everyday) Djudezmo lost many words from Ladino and replaced others with simplified synonyms (Moskona 2004: 22).

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<sup>1</sup> The author calls the Ottoman Empire Turkey.

<sup>2</sup> In the monastery school, the boys only learnt prayers, arithmetic and Hebrew. Girls were forbidden to attend the convent school (Moskona 2004: 22).

There are very few Jewish-Spanish (*JuSpa*) speakers in Bulgaria today.<sup>3</sup> In 2011, the Bulgarian census showed that only 1162 people belonged to the Jewish group (cf. Andreeva et al. 2022: 1). Studies carried out on some of the Ladino communities in Bulgaria reveal the influence of Bulgarian on Judeo-Spanish<sup>4</sup> with regard to phonetics and morpho-syntax (cf. Andreeva et al. 2022). These observations raise the reversed question whether and to what extent the Bulgarian language of the Ladino group in question may have been influenced by Judeo-Spanish.

During the work on the project “Judeo-Spanish in Bulgaria: a contact language between archaism and innovation”<sup>5</sup>, the speech of bilingual (JuSpa with Bulgarian as mother tongue) and monolingual (Bulgarian as mother tongue) speakers was recorded and their morphosyntactic, phonological and phonetic characteristics were analysed. An additional task was carried out for the bilingual speakers as part of the recordings: the speakers were asked to translate sentences in both directions, JuSpa – Bg and Bg – JuSpa. Some of these sentences had predetermined errors in the source language so that we could check whether the speakers would reproduce the same errors when translating into the target language. In this study, the peculiarities of the translations in the JuSpa – Bulgarian direction will be analysed, in this context special attention will be paid to: 1. accuracy of the translation and translation variants, 2. evaluation of the experiment.

## 1. The speakers

The tasks were recorded in various locations in Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas and Sofia. Twelve persons took part in the translation tasks, five women and seven men, aged between 70 and 90. Eight of the persons translated 13 sentences, two of them translated 15 sentences, and two persons translated 10 and 11 sentences respectively.

As the examples are very extensive, only some of them will be analysed here and the rest will be examined as part of another study. Only the initial outline and comments of the work with the translation tasks and subsequent hypotheses are given here.

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<sup>3</sup> Only the Sephardim are meant here, not the Jews in general. For research results on the history of the Jews in Bulgaria, see e.g. Koen 2009.

<sup>4</sup> For further research findings on Judeo-Spanish, see Andreeva et al. 2017, Andreeva et al. 2019, Andreeva et al. 2021, Fischer et al. 2014, Fischer, Vega Vilanova 2018, Gabriel, Kireva 2014, Gabriel, Grünke 2018, Dobрева 2021, Tarpomanova, Dobрева 2018, Kireva, Gabriel 2015, Kireva, Gabriel 2016, Gabriel, Grünke 2022.

<sup>5</sup> For further research on the project, see Fischer 2022, Fischer 2024, Grünke et al. 2023, Grünke et al. 2023a, Klüh, Avgustinova 2023, Vega Vilanova, Fischer 2024.

**Table I**

	Person/ abbreviation	Sex	Sentences	Age	City centre
1.	P1	f	13	90	Sofia
2.	P1	m	13	72	Sofia
3.	P2	f	13	99	Sofia
4.	P2	m	13	71	Sofia
5.	P3	f	13	-	Sofia
6.	P3	m	13	71	Sofia
7.	P4	f	13	70	Sofia
8.	P4	m	13	81	Sofia
9.	P5	m	15	72	Burgas
10.	P5	f	11	85	Varna
11.	P6	m	15	90	Sofia
12.	P7	m	10	72	Plovdiv

## 2. Conducting the experiment and the translations

The experiment was to be conducted in the following way: a sentence was to be played or read aloud to the speakers, who were asked to memorise the sentence and then translate it. Due to the age of the speakers, however, it was very complicated to carry out the tasks in this way, so the speakers also had the sentences they were supposed to translate in front of them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The translation tasks were carried out and recorded as part of the *project Judeo-Spanish in Bulgaria: a contact language between archaism and innovation*. The recordings were made by Bistra Andreeva, Jorge Vega Vilanova and Jonas Grünke. Jorge Vega Vilanova provided us with information about the translation tasks.

All speakers – with minor exceptions (P6) – understood the JuSpa sentences correctly and translated them well into Bulgarian. They had greater difficulties with the translation in the other direction – Bulgarian – JuSpa (cf. Vega Vilanova, Fischer 2024).<sup>7</sup> The varieties that we can observe in the translations often occur due to missing or forgotten lexis, or due to the confusion of words, and then the speakers themselves are not entirely sure. For example, in the sentence *Agora vo eksplikarte la istoriya de mi papú*, the speaker says that he is not sure how to translate it – *Sega šte razkaža istorijata na bašta mi ili djado mi, ne znam*. There are also other variants of the translation of this sentence, which are distributed among the participants as follows:

**Table II**

	agora vo eksplikarte la istoriya de mi papú./ Now will I.P.Sg. explain You she history from my grandpa	
1	сега ще ти обясня историята на моя дядо  sega šte ti objasnja istorijata na moja djado	P1f
2	сега ще разкажа историята на баща ми или дядо ми, не знам. Сега ще разкажа историята на дядо ми.  sega šte razkaža istorijata na bašta mi ili djado mi, ne znam. Sega šte razkaža istorijata na djado mi	P1m
3	сега ще ти обясня историята на моя дядо  sega šte ti objasnja istorijata na moja djado	P2f
4	сега ще ви разкажа историята на моя дядо  sega šte vi razkaža istorijata na moja djado	P2m
5	сега ще ти разкажа, ще ти обясня историята на моя дядо  sega šte ti razkaža, šte ti objasnja istorijata na moja djado	P3f
6	сега ще разкажа историята на моя дядо  sega šte razkaža istorijata na moja djado	P3m
7	сега ще ви обясня историята на моя дядо  sega šte vi objasnja istorijata na moja djado	P4f
8	сега ще ви разкажа историята на моя дядо  sega šte vi razkaža istorijata na moja djado	P4m

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the methodological concept of this experiment, see Vega Vilanova, Fischer 2024.

9	сега ще ви разкажа историята на дядо ми	P5m
	sega šte vi razkaža istorijata na djado mi	
10	сега ще обясня историята на моя дядо	P5f
	sega šte objasnja istorijata na moja djado	
11	сега ще ти разкажа историята на моят баща	P6m
	sega šte ti razkaža istorijata na mojat bašta	
12	сега ще ти обясня историята на моя дядо	P7m
	sega šte objasnja istorijata na moja djado	

The first thing we see is that there is uncertainty in the translations as to whether the 2nd person singular or 2nd person plural is involved<sup>8</sup> (te in *eksplikarte* cf. Hetzer 2001). In these cases, *ti* vs. *vi* occurs. Some even omitted the pronoun and did not translate it (Table 2, P1m, P3m, P5f), which could also mean for us that these people did not feel quite sure how to translate the pronoun. The speakers who did not translate the pronoun probably did not realise at all that there was a pronoun at the end of the verb and thought it was part of the verb. The next is the translation of the verb *eksplikar* (explain) (Hetzer 2001: 101), here *objasnja* (explain) is translated six times and *razkaža* (tell) seven times, in one person *razkaža* is corrected by *objasnja* the second time (P3f). Here we can draw the conclusion that the part of the speaker who translated the sentence with *objasnja* was more concerned with the meaning in JuSpa, while the other speakers were more concerned with the meaning and sense in Bulgarian and then rendered the verb with *razkaža*. In Bulgarian, *ще ти разкажа историята* also makes more sense than *ще ти обясня историята*, so we can say that the group with *обясня* translated literally, and the other group translated meaningfully. The last thing in this example that is considered here is the opposition in the translation of *moja bašta* and *moja*<sup>9</sup> *djado*. Even though only two people (P6m, P1m) confused *papú* (Judeo-Spanish *Opa*) with *papa* (Judeo-Spanish *Papa*), this confirms the assumption that some varieties occur due to missing or forgotten lexis.

<sup>8</sup> Another possible explanation why some have translated this with the 2nd P. Pl: the sentence begins with **agora vo** (*Now I will*), it is possible that the people from the JuSpa **vo** (form of the verb **ir**, with the help of which one forms the future tense on JuSpa) analogously then rendered with the Bulgarian **vi**, as a paronym.

<sup>9</sup> The differences between the forms of the possessive pronouns are analysed and described in another research paper.

In the next example given here (Table III), we can again observe that the speakers have some difficulty recognising the pronoun because it comes at the end of the verb:

**Table III**

	ya ampesimos a evitarla already started (we) avoid (she/her)	
1	започнахме да я избягваме	P1f
	započnahme da ja izbjagvame	
2	започнахме да отбягваме	P1m
	započnahme da otbjagvame	
3	ние започнахме да я избягваме...	P2f
	nie započnahme da ja izbjagvame	
4	аз започвам да отбягвам... започваме да отбягваме	P2m
	az započvam da otbjagvam ... započvame da otbjagvame	
5	започнахме да я избягваме	P3f
	započnahme da ja izbjagvame	
6	започнахме да отбягваме	P3m
	započnahme da otbjagvame	
7	започнахме да я избягваме	P4f
	započnahme da ja izbjagvame	
8	и затова го отбягвам	P4m
	i zatova go otbjagvam	
9	започваме да я излагаме	P5m
	započvame da ja izlagame	
10	започнахме да отбягваме	P5f
	započnahme da otbjagvame	
11	започнахме да те каним, поради тези причини те поканихме	P6m
	započnahme da te kanim, poradi tezi pričini te pokanihme	
12	започнахме да ги избягваме...или да я избягваме	P7m
	započnahme da gi izbjagvame... ili da ja izbjagvame	

You can see that four speakers – just like in the example in Table I – did not translate the clitics of the personal pronouns. It is interesting to note that these are almost the same speakers as in the first example (Table II). In the first sentence, these are P1m, P3m and P5f and here – P1m, P2m, P3m and P5f.

This shows us that these speakers had great difficulty in understanding the sentence correctly. Again, however, the other part of the speakers understood the sentence correctly and translated the clitic correctly, with two variations in P7m and in P4m, who translated the JuSpa *la* (3rd pers. f em., sing.) with the Bulgarian *go* (3rd pers. mascul. sing.) or *gi* (3rd pers. pl.). There is also one speaker who barely understood the sentence (P6m) and one who did not realise

the meaning of the verb (P5m). There are also two variants in the translation of the verb – *evitar* is rendered as *izbjagvam* or *otbjagvam*, but this does not change the meaning in this case, and this is more of a stylistic issue. What is important here is that almost all speakers understood the meaning of the sentence again and were able to render its meaning.

From the first two sentences (Table II and Table III) it is also noticeable that when the clitics are also translated, they occupy the normal place in the sentence. The Bulgarian clitics are in no way influenced by the word-per-word translation and do not take a different place under the influence of the word order on JuSpa, which actually gives us information about the word order and clitics in the Bulgarian language.<sup>10</sup>

The last translation we will quote here is a sentence that is a little longer than the two before:

**Table IV**

	Aki todos los vizinos la konosen a una mujer ke avla japones <sup>11</sup> , eya vive muy serka de aki <sup>12</sup>	
1.	<p>тук всички съседи познават една жена, която говори японски, тя живее много близо до нас</p> <p>Tuk vsički sāsedi poznavat edna žena, kojato govori japonski, tja živee mnogo blizo do nas</p>	P1f
2.	<p>тука всички комшии я, една жена, която говори японски, тя живее много близо от тук</p> <p>Tuka vsički komšii ja poznavat, edna žena, kojato govori japonski, tja živee mnogo blizo ot tuk</p>	P1m
3.	<p>тука всичките съседи познават една жена, която говори японски, тя живее много близо до нас, до тук (ама не говорим на български така, казваме „до нанас”)</p> <p>Tuka vsički komšii ja poznavat, edna žena, kojato govori japonski, tja živee mnogo blizo do nas, do tuka (ama ne govorim na bălgarski taka, kazvame do nas)</p>	P2f
4.	<p>тука всички се виждат и се познават, а една жена, която говори японски, тя тя беше много ... тя вижда, че е много близка тук</p> <p>Tuka vsički se viždat i se poznavat, a edna žena, kojato govori japonski, tja beše mnogo...tja vižda, če e mnogo blizka tuk</p>	P2m

<sup>10</sup> For more on word order, clitics and pronouns in the Bulgarian language, see Avgustinova 1997, Avgustinova 1998, Dimitrova 2016, Nicolova 1986, Nicolova 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Aki todos los vizinos la konosen a una mujer ke avla japones  
Here all thePl. NeighborPl. She know3P.Pl. a/one woman who speaks Japanese

<sup>12</sup> Eya vive muy serka de aki  
She lives very close from/to here

- |     |  |     |
|-----|--|-----|
| 5.  | <p>тука всички съседни познават една жена, която говори японски, тя живее много близо до тук</p> <p>Tuk vsički sāsedi poznavat edna žena, kojato govori japonski, tja živee mnogo blizo do tuk</p>   | P3f |
| 6.  | <p>тука всички съседни познават една жена, която говори японски, тя живее близо, тук близо</p> <p>Tuk vsički sāsedi poznavat edna žena, kojato govori japonski, tja živee blizo, tuk blizo</p>   | P3m |
| 7.  | <p>тука всички съседни познават една жена, която говори японски. Тя живее много близо до тук</p> <p>Tuka vsički sāsedi poznavat edna žena, kojato govori japonski. Tja živee mnogo blizo do tuka</p>   | P4f |
| 8.  | <p>наблизо при съседите познавам една жена, която знае японски. Тя живее много близо до мене. Да, до нас или оттук</p> <p>Nablizo pri sāsediti poznavam edna žena, kojato znae japonski. Tja živee mnogo blizo do mene. Da, do nas ili ottuka</p>  | P4m |
| 9.  | <p>тука всички съседни познават една жена, която говори японски, тя живее много близо до тук</p> <p>Tuka vsički sāsedi poznavat edna žena, kojato govori japonski, tja živee mnogo blizo do tuka</p>   | P5m |
| 10. | <p>тука всички съседни я познават, има една жена, която говори японски, тя живее много близо до тук</p> <p>Tuka vsički sāsedi ja poznavat, ima edna žena, kojato govori japonski, tja živee mnogo blizo do tuk</p>   | P5f |
| 11. | <p>тука всички всички съседни я познават, или всички съседни познават една жена, тук всички съседни познават една жена, която говори японски, тя живее много близо до, от тук, много близо</p> <p>Tuka vsički, vsički sāsedi ja poznavat ili vsički sāsedi poznavat edna žena, tuka vsički sāsedi poznavat edna žena, kojato govori japonski, tja živee mnogo blizo do, ot tuka, mnogo blizo</p> | P6m |
| 12. | <p>А тук всички познават една же... я познават една жена, която а... говори японски език. Тя ааа живее много близо оттук</p> <p>A tuka vsički poznavat edna že... ja poznavat edna žena, kojato a... govori japonski ezik. Tja aaa živee mnogo blizo ottuk</p>   | P7m |



The first thing that draws attention here is the variation *tuk/tuka*, but this is a dialectal difference and has no relation to the quality of the translation. The peculiarity that emerges again, and which is common to all the examples we analyse here, is again the use and translation of clitics. In this sentence, in its first part – *Aki todos los vizinos la konosen a una mujer ke avla japones* – eight of the speakers did not translate *la* from *la konosen* (P1f, P2f, P2m, P3f, P3m, P4f, P4m, P5m) and thus said *poznavat* instead of *ja poznavat* in Bulgarian. The other four people who translated the pronoun translated it correctly again and put it in the right place in the sentence. However, we can also see here that two people (P4m and P2m) almost did not understand the first part of the sentence, or at least did not understand the grammatical connection between the words, and as a result the meaning was also lost in the translation. The same people had similar difficulties with the sentence from Table III. Speaker P1m is the only one in the whole group who used the word *komšii* instead of *sāsedi* in his translation, but this variant rather speaks for his own lexical preference and again has only a stylistic meaning and does not change the meaning of the sentence.

Here we also observe that all the people except P2f translated the second part of the sentence literally. Only P2f first rendered the JuSpa *serka de aki* with the Bulgarian equivalent and then gave the literal translation, explaining that it could not be said in Bulgarian. All the other speakers said *de aki* directly and literally in Bulgarian, with variations in the preposition – *ot* or *do*. The reason for the literal translation may also be the fact that the speakers had the sentences in front of their eyes and also read the sentences themselves. In this sentence, we observe that the speakers really did translate it word for word.

### 3. Conclusion and evaluation of the experiment

From the three examples we have analysed here, we can conclude that the speakers generally translated the sentences well and were not influenced by the JuSpa. It is noticeable that some have a better command of the JuSpa language than others and that some speakers had difficulties (P4m, P2m), but this is not a surprise. What is also interesting about the translations is that sometimes they translate word for word, i.e. the speakers render the JuSpa word order, but when the clitics of the pronouns occur (Table II and Table III) and they translate them, they take their normal place in the sentence. Unfortunately, not all speakers recognise the clitics in the JuSpa sentences, which also shows us that the level of command of the JuSpa language is very different for everyone.

To evaluate the experiment, we can say that the examples given here clearly show that it is not ideal if the speakers had the sentences written in front of them and were able to translate them in written form. However, even in this case it is very interesting to be able to analyse the different levels and varieties of the speakers' translations.

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# Превод на стимули от наследствен на доминиращ език: експеримент с българи, говорещи юдео-испански

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**Резюме.** В статията се анализират някои граматични особености при превод на стимули от юдео-испански на български език в рамките на експеримент с носители на юдео-испанския език като наследствен език и на българския език като доминиращ. Получените емпирични данни отразяват специфична ситуация на езиков контакт, която позволява да се съсредоточим върху характерни явления, разкриващи взаимното влияние на изследваните контактни езици, по-конкретно на юдео-испански върху български.

**Ключови думи:** *български; юдео-испански; контактни езици; ладино; билингви*

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