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Migrant language and identity in the Spanish-speaking community in Israel

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Abstract: Spanish has a considerable presence in the socio-cultural mosaic of Israel, a country made up of ethnolinguistic communities from different parts of the world. However, language policy has not always integrated the study of languages as a source of interculturality. This paper summarizes the results of the first stage of a broader investigation into the linguistic practices and strategies developed by Spanish-speaking families to acquire and preserve the migrant language, as a way of transmitting the heritage, identity and culture of the country of origin in the face of the influence of the majority language, Hebrew. To this end, individual interviews were conducted to record specific data on the Spanish-speaking community and, particularly, the presence of Spanish as a vehicular language through the identification of sociocultural references among families who arrived under the Law of Return and include members who are 15 years of age or younger. The surveys reflect that the interest and affective need to preserve the language are main motivators in these Spanish-speaking families. These conclusions served as a basis for in the afore-mentioned group were considered relevant conclusions within the broad objectives of the larger project, which seeks to create a program of intergenerational activities to develop respectful bilingualism and strengthen the community of practice as a space to build the mutant puzzle between the inherited and acquired identity of children and youth.

Keywords: heritage language; identity; immigration; language practices; respectful bilingualism

1 Introduction

Spanish is part of the mosaic of languages coexisting in Israel, a country built around migratory waves, “a melting pot of peoples, traditions, cultures and languages” (Santos Carretero 2012: 435). For many decades, most ethnolinguistic communities

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tended to abandon their mother tongue to concentrate on learning Hebrew, adopting, thus, the national language. These linguistic practices changed dramatically with the mass arrival of Russian-speaking immigrants in the 1990s, especially in terms of migrant language retention (Remennick 2003). On the other hand, there is an increasing interest in the Spanish language, attributable to the influence of mass media, the relevance it has gained as a global trade language, and the educational and professional horizons available to youth today, together with interest in Spanish-speaking traditions and culture, especially among adults.

Given the specific characteristics of Israel as a multilingual and binational country and the ideological and historical weight of Hebrew in society, important insights can be drawn from the study of the ethnolinguistic evolution of young members of Spanish-speaking families across the various migratory waves, the presence of Spanish as a heritage language, and the strengthening of the traditions and culture of the country of origin as pillars for identity construction.

The specific objective of this paper is to present the results of the first phase of a larger research project designed to set up a theoretical and practical guide for Spanish speakers about the importance of retaining the heritage language and strengthening the culture and traditions of their country of origin to create a community of practice in Israel. This project was carried out in two stages. The first stage was dedicated to defining and analyzing the specific characteristics of the Spanish-speaking community in Israel, focusing on the immigrants arriving under the "Law of Return",[1] according to the policy in force in the State of Israel, especially families with members aged 15 and younger regardless of whether they were born in the country. The aspects to be determined were the presence of the heritage language – whether it was active or not – the resources and tools used to transmit the language, and the level of interest in its development. The younger subjects of this study were also invited to reflect on the probability of preserving the heritage language in the future, as adults, taking into account the strong weight of Hebrew as the dominant language. The second part of the larger project was devoted to the development of a series of didactic approaches and intergenerational activities to create spaces for linguistic practice. More concretely, the aim was to guide the various intervening players – institutions, educators, and families – in the process of acquisition, learning, and retention of the minority language among children and adolescents. This second aspect can also become a tool to encourage and guide the creation of multilingual educational projects. A future paper will detail the design and implementation of activities – both analog and digital – within the group under study.

1 The Law of Return (1950) grants every Jew, the right to immigrate to Israel as Olim (Jews who migrate to Israel) and acquire the Israeli citizenship.

The present article focuses on the results obtained during the first stage of the project and is organized as follows. Firstly, I shall provide some background on Israel as a country of migrants and its sociolinguistic policies to provide the context in which Spanish operates as heritage and minority language (Section 2), followed by a brief description of the methodology used (Section 3). Then, in the following three sections (Sections 4–6), I shall discuss the main features of the Spanish-speaking community and its ethnolinguistic identity within Israeli society as an immigration country, the status of Spanish as a language of origin, and the intercultural aspects and the linguistic features of the community of practice. Lastly, I shall present the results obtained in the first phase of the broader research and will include the opinion and experience of people from different generations who arrived in Israel in the various migratory waves, as well as their interest in developing their heritage language and the strategies deployed in the family circle to keep their customs and traditions (Section 7).

2 Israel: mosaic of cultures, languages, and ethnicities

Israel is a multicultural and multilingual country of immigrants who have arrived from all corners of the world since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 (Lerner and Katz 2003: 205), and its population is made up of varied ethnicities speaking different languages. It is a culturally and linguistically diverse community, a significant fact if we consider that its population barely reaches nine million people.

Nevertheless, the linguistic and sociocultural policies implemented by Israel do not mirror the above-mentioned situation. It is likely that the reasons are to be found in the creation of the State of Israel itself, since, at that time, Hebrew – for ideological, political, and social reasons (Shohamy 1994) – became the language that amalgamated immigrants. And this is not a minor fact since, as a consequence of the nation-building process (Ben-Rafael 1994; Muchnik et al. 2016), the language of origin of migrant communities was abandoned and a natural multilingualism turned into a forced monolingualism. In other words, immigrants were integrated under the motto of "one nation, one people, one language".

This panorama was significantly transformed in the 1990s with the mass arrival of Russian-speaking immigrants, in a global context of pluralism and multiculturalism. A new linguistic outlook emerged, enabling communication in the migrant language not only within the family circle, but also in social, work, and educational settings.

Regarding education – a critical aspect of this research – the Ministry of Education designed an official multilingual program to allow new immigrants to

retain their language of origin while learning Hebrew at school. Even though this decision was a turning point in Israeli linguistic policy, the implementation of these guidelines turned out to be a significant challenge due to the lack of financial support along with the absence of a theoretical framework (Muchnik et al. 2016). As a result, the teaching of the migrant language was not fully institutionalized. It was up to each migrant family to decide whether their members should learn or keep the heritage language of their community of origin, be it as a form of communication at home or to keep in touch with relatives and friends abroad. This, in turn, led to their strengthening, to some extent their traditions and customs in the face of a dominant vehicular language, namely, Hebrew.

Nevertheless, and regardless of family decisions or linguistic policies, it is necessary to understand the difference between migrating to Israel and migrating to other countries in the world. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM),[2] a migrant is

> any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of: (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) the length of the stay is.[3]

The parameters mentioned by the IOM do not include obtaining the nationality of the new country of residence upon arrival, something the State of Israel provides, along with its inherent rights, automatically to all immigrants of Jewish origin, regardless of their geographical origin, by means of the above-mentioned Law of Return. However, as Graciela Spector-Bitan notes,

> This automatic citizenship gives rise to two opposite phenomena: a strange and nearly magical sense of instantaneous belonging resulting in a high level of euphoria and optimism, and a naïve expectation that this belonging will be complete and will be present in the attitude of the locals towards the newcomer. This expectation creates a difficult situation and is inevitably conflictive for both the immigrant and the native. (Spector-Bitan 2014: 4, translation mine)

Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of the nation as an "imagined community" can contribute to understanding the feeling of natural belonging to Israeli society of Jews

2 Founded in 1951, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is the leading intergovernmental organization in the field of migration, and it works to help ensure the orderly and humane management of migration in order to benefit migrants and society at large. It is part of the United Nations System as a related organization.

3 United Nations Organization. Global Issues: Migration. https://www.un.org/es/global-issues/migration#:~:text=La%20Organizaci%C3%B3n%20Internacional%20para%20las%20Migraciones%20(OIM)%20define%20a%20un,2)%20el%20car%C3%A1cter%20voluntario%20o (accessed 23 October 2022).

in the Diaspora in relation with Israel, either as a historical need of identifying with a place of their own or from the perspective of the immigration policy implemented by the Israeli government.

The integration to Israeli society – to the above-mentioned imagined community– demands from migrants that they assume responsibility for their own feelings: on the one hand, for the feelings of belonging to the country of origin – the baggage of experiences they come with – as well as adjusting to loss; on the other hand, immigrants must also understand that they are living in a country with different codes of behavior and with a language that is unintelligible in many cases, in addition to a potential sense of marginalization produced by the weight of a history that has been neither lived nor shared.

> The immigrant's feeling of rootlessness, of living between two worlds, between a past that has been lost and a present to which he/she is not integrated, is perhaps the perfect metaphor for the post-modern condition. (Spector-Bitan 2014: 5, translation mine)

The immigration experience is a complex and dynamic process, determined by several personal factors, including the choice of language and the desire to retain the ethnolinguistic and cultural identity of the country of origin as heritage. This choice is affected by the efforts to gain acceptance and socially integrate in the host country (Stavans and Ashkenazi 2022). In the face of the strong historical, social, and ideological presence of Hebrew, this process acquires a special meaning, since keeping the heritage language and identity produces conflicting responses in Israeli society (Stavans and Ashkenazi 2022).

As mentioned above, this paper presents the results of our efforts to better understand the phenomenon of acquisition, retention, and enrichment of Spanish as a heritage language among children and grandchildren aged 15 or younger in Spanish-speaking families who arrived to Israel under the Law of Return. The delimitation of this group implies bearing in mind the current immigration policy in the State of Israel and the possibility of integration and adjustment of Spanish-speaking people to the new society, in accordance with Israeli immigration laws.

On the basis of these delimitations, we will describe, from a sociolinguistic and pragmatic perspective, the linguistic reality of this group of people and their expectations in terms of bilingualism. We will also reflect on the tools available to them in order to keep their Spanish as heritage and minority language in the Israeli context.

3 Methodology

The larger project this article is based on was created in 2014 to respond to requests made by Spanish-speaking families who wanted to teach Spanish to their

grandchildren or younger children. Upon the reception of the first queries, research was designed and organized combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies, including theoretical and empirical strategies. That is, a combination of direct methods (close-ended survey questions specially prepared) and indirect methods (interviews with open-ended questions with text in several formats) was applied to capture a variety of data and check the consistency of respondents' answers.

Taking into account the results recorded, the target group to be analyzed was accurately defined, and a representative sample was obtained, which included 22 migrant families with members arriving in Israel from different linguistic contexts between 1970 and 2020, and who had children/adolescents between 8 and 15 years of age, regardless of whether they were born in Israel or not, in families where one or both parents spoke Spanish (see Figure 1).

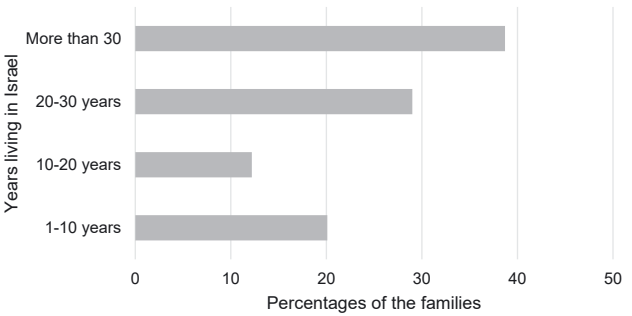

Figure 1: Years the surveyed families have been living in Israel.

Adults and children over 12 received closed questionnaires and the whole group (80 people) received open questionnaires.

To ensure compliance with ethical requirements, all the participants, or their parents, in case of minors, gave their consent to be part of the survey.

It is important to highlight that, given the age range analyzed, we also considered it was essential to use a wide choice of materials, such as listening to traditional songs in Spanish; reading stories, poems, riddles, and tongue twisters in Spanish; identifying traditional objects from the different Spanish-speaking countries (*mate*, *dulce de leche*, *arepas*, flags, etc.); and watching movies for children. Likewise, a sample of images with representative elements of the Spanish-speaking culture was shown to children and family accounts were narrated so as to achieve a broader and concrete look at the presence of the

heritage language and of the influence of parents and grandparents on keeping habits and traditions. It is worth mentioning that the responses given by children and adolescents were recorded (after prior authorization by their parents) to allow for a fluent and spontaneous conversation.

The conclusions drawn in this paper are part of a broader study that covers, first of all, the specific features of the Spanish-speaking immigrants and their evolution at sociolinguistic level and also the use of the migrant language to communicate within the family nucleus and/or the immediate environment. On the other hand, this research work took into account the different linguistic practices and family strategies that may favor the acquisition and development of the heritage language in non-immersive linguistic contexts, such as the Israeli case.

4 The Spanish-speaking community in Israel

Public records held by the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration show that there has been migration of Spanish speakers since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, although some groups arrived as early as the 1920s, mostly from Latin America and to a lesser extent from Spain. Table 1 details the number and country of origin of Spanish-speaking immigrants in 2019 (before the COVID-19).[4]

Latin American migration to Israel in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was mainly due to ideological reasons linked to Jewish and Zionist identity. In the 1970s and 1980s, both political persecutions in the country of origin and identity issues (anti-Semitism) became the main factors behind immigration (Lesser and Rein 2008; Sznajder and Roniger 2005). According to Lerner and Martínez Mesanza (2019), from 2002 onwards, the main reason has been the economic crisis in Argentina and, to a lesser extent, in Uruguay.

It is estimated that, at present, the Spanish-speaking community accounts for 1.7% of the population (Rein 2020). In general terms, it could be stated that it is made up by two groups: a majority group represented by Jewish immigrants from Latin America and Spain and a minority group made up by residents from Spanish-speaking countries who are in Israel for personal or work reasons not included in the rules of the above-mentioned Law of Return. As can be seen in the statistical data of Table 1, the first group is represented by immigrants from several countries, mainly Argentina, Venezuela, Uruguay, and Spain.

4 Data from the official site of the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration, available at https://www.gov.il/en/Departments/Guides/the-aliya-story (accessed 20 October 2022).

Table 1: Registry of immigrants from January to December 2019.

Country of origin	Number of immigrants
Panama	31
Colombia	46
Venezuela	122
Ecuador	7
Peru	35
Bolivia	9
Spain	102
Uruguay	89
Argentina	451
Chile	52
Total immigrants	944

Despite the historical significance of the Spanish-speaking immigration in Israel, mostly from Argentina, research work on the topic is scarce. The existing data prove that immigrants are considered to be successful, both from a cultural and social standpoint and from the perspective of their adjustment to the work culture (Goldberg and Rozen 1988). This description is consistent with the presence of many immigrants in liberal professions, academia, the arts, industry, and agriculture. These data draw a picture of successful integration to the country (Roniger and Babis 2008).

However, the arrival of these immigrants, unlike other groups, such as Jews from Ethiopia or from Russia and other Russian-speaking countries, did not demand changes in public administration. They arrived in small numbers and settled in several Israeli cities, as illustrated in Figure 2.

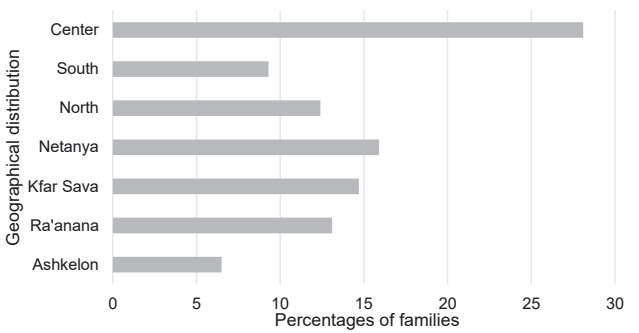

Figure 2: Geographical distribution within Israel of the surveyed Spanish-speaking families.

Their integration has been discrete, and they do not retain any distinctive features of their previous identity. Not surprisingly, they are called the "invisible community" (Roniger and Jarochevsky 1992). In addition, they have an excellent linguistic proficiency in Hebrew (Spector-Bitan 2007: 6–7), due to the work carried out by the Jewish School Network in the different countries. All these factors contribute to their integration into the labor market and their involvement in Israeli society.

Nevertheless, the Spanish-speaking community does maintain, in general, the bonds with their country and culture of origin by means of culinary practices, the language, and travel, thus enriching the Spanish language with linguistic and cultural diversity. These facts will be described in more detail in the sections that follow.

The second group within the Spanish-speaking community is made up by immigrants who are not Jewish according to Israeli laws and, therefore, cannot avail themselves of the Law of Return or of the rights and opportunities provided by this status. Within this group, we find, on the one hand, Spanish speakers who migrated to Israel for personal reasons, usually due to relationships with Israelis, be they romantic or familial in nature, and, on the other, Latin American foreign workers. The first group includes binational families whose non-Jewish migrant members try, in most cases, to assimilate into the society, acquire the culture and learn Hebrew as part of their social integration. For them, these aspirations go hand in hand with the desire and need to maintain the language and cultural identity of their place of origin.

The second group includes residents (Latin American workers, in general) who arrived at the beginning of the 1990s because it is easy to enter as tourists or pilgrims and then stay on; they are well-treated and, for religious reasons, find it attractive to live in the Holy Land (Lifszyc Friedlander 2020). In some cases, these immigrants had employment contracts, but others lacked the required documents. This situation has changed remarkably due to governmental policies regulating foreign workers in general. Moreover, a department within the Population and Immigration Authority was created in 2002 to set in motion a strict deportation policy (Lerner 2006).

Even though this second group is not the focus of this paper, the conclusion of the ethnographic research carried out by Kalir (2010) is worth mentioning. This research work shows that a few hundreds were legalized and assimilated in cultural terms. Their children study at Israeli schools, speak Hebrew, identify with the State, and are even ready to serve in the Israeli army. Unlike other non-Jewish immigrants, they are accepted and have received positive feedback from Israelis, thus facilitating the ongoing interaction between both ethnolinguistic groups.

Regardless of the migratory origin, the linguistic vitality[5] of the language in the Spanish-speaking community faces common challenges, including the development of linguistic practices as speakers of the heritage language in the family and the creation of opportunities for natural exchange in different contexts, as well as the strengthening of identity and culture within the framework of the multilingual Israeli society.

On the other hand, the mosaic of traditions, cultures, and languages that characterizes Israeli society has been enriched by the bonds that link the Hispanic culture with the Jewish people. The most evident bond is *Ladino* or Judeo-Spanish, a dialect that the Sephardic Jews brought to Israel from countries such as Greece, Bulgaria, and Turkey (Santos Carretero 2012: 435). Ladino is a language that derived from Andalusian Spanish and, as a living language, evolved, since 1492, outside Spain in the new places of settlement (Santos Carretero 2012: 436), mainly the former Ottoman Empire and the North of Africa.

According to estimates from the *Autoridad Nasionala del Ladino i su Kultura* ('National Authority of Ladino'), Judeo-Spanish is spoken by 100,000 people in Israel at the present time. They are mostly older people who arrived in Israel after the creation of the State in 1948. The second generation, born in the country, understands the language but does not use it (Lerner and Katz 2003: 205–252). Several institutions are dedicated to the research and dissemination of Judeo-Spanish culture, including the above *Autoridad Nasionala del Ladino,* founded in 1997, as well as the *Sentro Naime I Yehoshua Salti para el Estudio del Ladino* ('Salti Institute for Ladino Studies') and the *Sentro Moshe David Gaon de Kultura Djudeo-Espanyola* ('The Moshe David Gaon Center for Ladino Culture'), both of which were created some years later. Finally, the *Akademia Nasionala del Ladino* ('National Academy for Ladino') was founded in 2018.

More recently, and due to the enactment of Law 12/2015 of October 2015 to obtain Spanish citizenship, the historical and cultural bonds between the legacy of Sepharad and the Diaspora were reinforced, and we are witnessing a renewed boom in the study of Judeo-Spanish language and culture in Israel (Capelusnik et al. 2022: 19–25).

The presence of Spanish in Israeli society is evident not only in the language and its practical use but also in the culture it represents. As a result, many literary works, plays, movies, and television programs – especially from Latin America – as well as songs have been translated into Hebrew. Likewise, Spanish as a foreign language is taught in both formal and non-formal education courses provided by private centers

5 The concept of "linguistic vitality" responds to the need for setting measurement tools regarding the actual use of a language which, in a situation of interaction, manages to be chosen, kept, or replaced by the speakers within a context of multilingualism (Lagos 2005).

such as the Cervantes Institute, cultural centers for children, youngsters, and adults, and in different universities. The implementation of Law 12/2015 also adds a boost to this interest as it requires certification of linguistic and sociocultural knowledge to grant the Spanish citizenship (Lerner and Sitman 2017: 244–261, quoted in Capelusnik et al. 2022: 19–25).

In the Spanish-speaking linguistic context, the creation of the "Escuelita" deserves special mention. It was founded in 2000, with the support of the Municipality of Tel Aviv, by the leaders of a community of Latin American foreign workers living illegally and under constant threat of deportation. The main objective of the "Escuelita" was to allow the children of this community to learn about their identity, language, and culture of origin and to preserve them. This institution still exists, even though its original objective is not the same due to the new situation of this specific Spanish-speaking group (Lifszyc Friedlander 2020: 161).

In short, Spanish as a heritage language is linked to various sources of affects that contribute both to the presence and continuity of the language within society, be it for historical, economic, or social reasons. Paraphrasing Sol Genafo Anselem (2022: 28), Spanish in Israel "is healthy".

5 Interculturalism, heritage language, and identity in the Spanish-speaking community

When a migrant individual or family crosses the border to enter a new country, a transition period starts. The simple fact of finding themselves in an unknown context confronts them with the need to abandon familiar cultural parameters and forms and adopt, to a greater or lesser degree, the new cultural rules of the host society. In other words, immigrants experience an uprooting phenomenon – analyzed by anthropologists, sociologists, linguists, and researchers in the field of cultural studies – when settling in another country, giving rise to acculturation as a process consisting in embracing another culture and adjusting to it, especially with a loss of their own culture. Interculturalism involves knowledge and experiences, as well as actions and meanings, leading to cultural and social practices and, consequently, also to discourse practices. It is a disposition, a process in permanent construction, which, even though not free from tensions and conflicts, also gives way to communication (Rizo García and Romeu Aldaya 2009). In their condition as bilingual immigrants, they try to adjust their communication behavior to the roles they now play in the new context by means of an accommodative process between their old and their new identities (Giles et al. 1991).

Several sociolinguists working on different geographies (Bonomi 2010; Fishman 1977; Milroy and Milroy 1992; Spector-Bitan 2014; Weinreich 1953) have pointed out that learning a new language within a migration context is highly relevant in the process of building a binational identity and implies an awareness of one's own language and culture. Therefore, the conflict in the negotiation of meanings and in the way, people understand themselves and understand others becomes a mutating mosaic, consisting of pieces from their personal history and "the task of accepting reality" (Winnicott 1971), merged by the migration experience of each human being (Spector-Bitan 1993).

The speakers of a heritage language are in a constant negotiation between the inherited and the acquired language. This constitutes an essential part of the identity construction mechanisms in the immigration process and is a decisive factor in the life of immigrants in their efforts to adjust to the host country. This negotiation can adopt three modalities: (1) one of the languages prevails over the other and makes it disappear; (2) a combination of both languages produces a third one; or 3) there is code switching between languages in oral expression. It is possible to affirm with Appadurai (1996: 185) that these processes produce "subtle shifts in language, worldview, ritual practice, and collective self-understanding".

These movements and the changes introduced to identity construction will allow for the continuity of the human being as an individual (Erikson 1964). Therefore the identities of immigrants are to be found in a state of "integrity" – of flow between the inside and the outside – rather than of a "totality," where there is no conciliation between the familiar and the unfamiliar, since they are separate states even though they may attract each other (Spector-Bitan 1993).

Thus, families of Latin American origin who are speakers of a heritage language in Israel face the challenge of getting to the point where both identities (the Latin American one and the Israeli one) reach a state of peaceful coexistence (Spector-Bitan 1993), and they can use both languages by keeping the language of their country of origin or acquiring it in order to communicate with their roots, history, and loved ones.

Even though the Spanish-speaking community and Israeli society evidently belong to different ethnolinguistic groups, the immigrant collective shares, to a large extent, a historical, religious, and cultural heritage, at least in some traits, with the individuals of the host country. This means that this group has a sense of shared belonging to a broader community, the Jewish People, even when they do not really practice the religion or have a different family history. They have a shared past that has accompanied them in various geographical contexts before uniting as individuals in Israel.

However, one must take into account that for decades – since the creation of the State of Israel – the ideology was to promote the use of Hebrew as a national and

unifying language, thus imprinting a strong mark on the identity of immigrants. As a consequence, the members of many families decided not to keep Spanish as vehicular language (lingua franca) for communication at home. In many cases, the children refused to learn their heritage language and, as a result, they became monolingual (Muchnik 2012).

According to Spector-Bitan (2014), the second generation of immigrants is made up by "inactive bilingual people", that is, people who use Hebrew for almost everything, but their Spanish language has come back to life, particularly after visiting Latin American countries. In fact, they feel a sense of belonging simultaneously to both cultures, thus creating a binational community of practice. It is worth mentioning that, in most cases, grandparents have been and still oversee keeping and promoting the acquisition of the minority language and the culture of their country of origin. Research by Muchnik et al. (2016) has shown that the recent waves of Latin American immigrants tend to keep their Spanish and transmit it to children more naturally.

The situation described as regards the increasing presence of the culture of Spanish-speakers and of the Spanish language through the different migratory waves is in line with Labov's opinion (2001: 245) that ethnic identity is transmitted by parents endogenously. Nevertheless, it has been proven that exogenous factors (Fishman 1977: 16) also impact the life of each individual-family within the context of action.

At present, the resulting changes have led to a search for diverse and intergenerational linguistic practices, to the revaluing of Spanish as heritage language and, thus, to the strengthening of the customs and traditions celebrated within each family. These facts are confirmed in the results from field work carried out in the last eight years with members of Spanish-speaking families.

Figure 3 shows the constitution of the Spanish-speaking community of practice made up of immigrants and their families both inside and outside Israel across the various migratory waves.

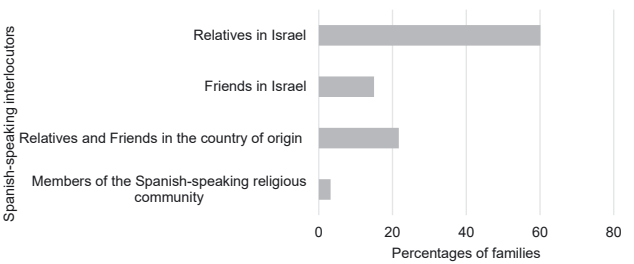

Figure 3: Spanish-speaking interlocutors of the children/grandchildren in the surveyed families.

The gradual construction of a Spanish-speaking community of practice was favored by the introduction of cable TV and the broadcast of Latin American soap operas, Internet access and, more recently, the availability of entertainment platforms. A more relevant presence of language in the urban linguistic landscape, due to its positive public perception in Israel (Capelusnik et al. 2022), also accounts for a greater visibility of this collective and its culture.

Finally, it is worth noting that, over the last 30 years, Israelis have shown an increased interest in learning Spanish, albeit with different levels of intensity. The main reasons behind the decision to learn Spanish as a foreign language are the wish to travel to Spanish-speaking countries for work or study; an interest in the culture; or simply a positive attitude of students towards the speakers of the language, identification with them, as well as a desire to establish communication (Muchnik 2012: 626–627).

6 Heritage language: linguistic practices and family strategies

It has been proven that the immigration process entails several changes and adjustments that inevitably impact the identity of each individual, the abandonment of familiar patterns, and the emergence of new expressions that cover not only practical and everyday aspects but also the need for using a new vehicular language or another way of life.

Learning the dominant language of the country of residence makes people aware of the particularities of their own culture and language (Weinreich 1953). In part, it implies the recognition that the migrant language will now be a minority language, with the resulting effect of losing one's cultural and linguistic sense of belonging in the host society. On the other hand, learning the languages of the different communities usually creates bridges between cultures and simultaneously enriches the society at large through the adoption of new customs and traditions and the respect for otherness.

From a psycholinguistic point of view, there is vast literature arguing in favor of bilingualism or multilingualism as positive and even desirable, since learning a new language does not affect the other and does not clash with the other culture. Research shows that bilingualism in childhood leads to a better command of both languages and contributes to cognitive development (Bialystok 2001; Bialystok and Hakuta 1994; Cummins 2005). In other words, minorities should be able to develop their heritage language to the largest extent possible while they acquire the official language of the State (Spolsky 2004).

Over the last ten years, the presence of Spanish as means of communication within the family in Israeli society has changed. In a study conducted in the first decade of 2000, Lerner concluded that there was no significant linguistic loyalty towards the heritage language. The data of that study indicated that, of those who continued speaking it, a wide majority speaks this language with friends (82%), less than half (45%) speaks Spanish with their children, and 25% of the population under study uses Spanish to communicate with their grandchildren (Lerner 2006: 6). Moreover, the surveys carried out in 2006 showed that 30% of their children hardly speak the language or don't speak it at all (Lerner 2006: 6). Surveys performed between 2021 and 2022, indicate a significant shift. Even though younger children have a poorer level of the language, as manifest in the lack of vocabulary or the frequent use of loanwords from Hebrew, the interest of older family members and the access to Spanish by younger members of family groups have opened a different and promising situation within the Spanish-speaking community.

Figures 4 and 5 describe the increase in the percentage of grandparents and parents who use Spanish as vehicular language within the family environment.

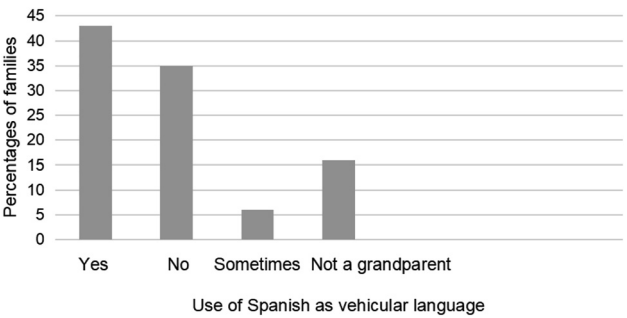

Figure 4: Use of Spanish as vehicular language between grandparents and grandchildren (percentage among surveyed families).

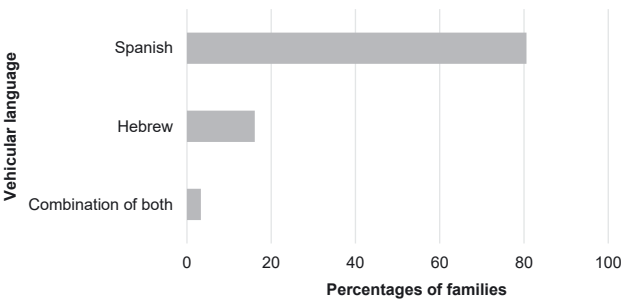

Figure 5: Use of Spanish as vehicular language between parents and children.

Taking into account the changes in the sociolinguistic perspective in Israel mentioned in the previous sections and the interest shown by the various migratory groups – including some pertaining to the migration waves of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s – it is possible to conclude that most Spanish-speaking families are encouraging their children and grandchildren to establish a closer relationship with the Spanish language. The development of the heritage language – as language acquired within the family – supported by a profound affection and presence of the family history, will mainly depend on the interest and motivation of each individual and on their linguistic loyalty towards their heritage to set in motion a series of strategies as family plan.

Regarding the best linguistic strategies to adopt for the acquisition and/or development of a Heritage Language within a family, most consulted authors agree on the fact that, regardless of the strategy chosen, the positive attitude towards bilingualism, the perseverance in the plan devised, together with the richness and affection involved in the interactions, the ability to create coherent speech and, especially, the quality and variety of inputs are key to helping children become bilingual people (De Houwer 1999; Kielhöfer and Jonekeit 1994; Rosenberg 1996; Solé Mena 2010).

There are numerous methods to develop bilingualism and as many combinations as families. However, the grandparents, parents, and children surveyed all had in common their desire to transmit the language and keep it in the future. Likewise, it is possible to observe the presence of some cultural elements of the community in daily life, such as the sale of traditional products from the places of origin, the offer of varied gastronomy, the existence of themed bookshops with books for all ages, or cultural activities, like theater, in Spanish. This proves the increasing interest in consuming the culture of Spanish-speaking immigrants.

Figure 6 shows that telling stories about the family constitutes the most frequently used strategy, followed by storybook reading. Access to multilingual platforms (for entertainment purposes) is an excellent resource for being in contact with the heritage language, to add value, and to transmit the culture and perspective of the Spanish-speaking world. Traditional songs or modern music, as well as family events and traditional dishes, are, undoubtedly, valuable tools to strengthen vocabulary in a natural manner.

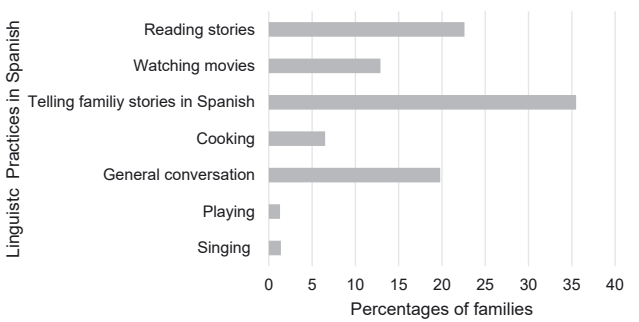

Figure 6: Activities to promote the heritage language (percentage among respondents; respondents could choose as many options as applicable).

The Spanish-speaking collective has several resources to keep and enrich language at all ages, such as weekly journals like *Aurora* ('Dawn') or monthly journals like *Línea Directa* ('Direct Line'), as well as quarterly journals like *Economía y Negocios* ('Economy and Business'). There is also a newspaper in electronic format, *Piedra Libre* ('Free Stone'), founded in 2003 (Muchnik 2012). Likewise, the Israeli radio broadcasts some special programs for Spanish speakers, including two daily newsreels of 15 min each and a 2-h program with Hispanic and Latin American music.

The analysis carried out on the use and scope of the services provided by some social media confirms that they are also important as practical tools for the development of sociolinguistic knowledge in the communities. It also revealed that introducing linguistic varieties from home (Fairclough 2015) into the materials used to learn a heritage language has an added value. Figure 7 shows the social media used by the respondents.

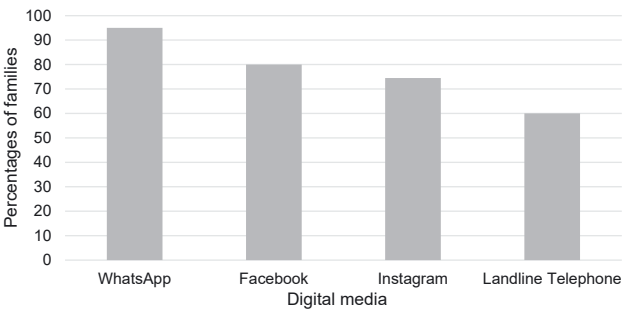

Figure 7: Media used by respondents (percentage among respondents; respondents could choose as many options as applicable).

The spread of media and social networks services, of the entire Internet environment, has facilitated access to real and diverse content in Spanish, to samples of language usage that represent linguistic varieties as vital aspects of the culture of each Spanish-speaking family.

7 Conclusion

A first and fundamental conclusion, in view of the changes in the linguistic context in Israel, is that the host society as a whole is interested in learning foreign languages and knowing other cultures without considering them a threat to Hebrew.

From an ethnolinguistic standpoint, it is worth mentioning that all the respondents state that they feel highly satisfied speaking Spanish, do not consider it a less prestigious language, and are willing to retain it. In fact, they want to improve their learning process, be able to read and write in Spanish and even to transmit it to their children in the future, as can be observed in the sample of answers provided in Figure 8.

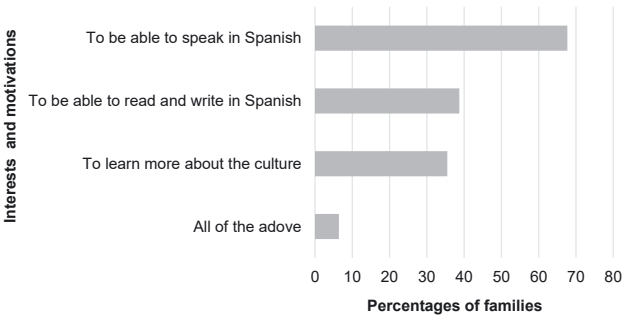

Figure 8: Interests and motivations in grandparents and parents to develop the heritage language.

Likewise, parents noted that the fact that "both" parents speak Spanish at home is an advantage that contributes to the process. Using Spanish in the home comes, thus, more naturally and it is accompanied by the use of an emotional language; it also facilitates the creation of bonds with the country of origin, and the inclusion of traditions and culture of their Spanish-speaking background into the language practice. In general, children, at a young age, received a varied input, including songs, stories, movies, and games in Spanish. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that, in some cases, the penetration of Spanish decreased upon the birth of other children and over the years living in Israel, and, as they pointed out, this is something that they are now trying to reverse.

In addition, it can be observed that regardless of the positive attitude and a favorable environment, Hebrew became more dominant when their children reached school age. As a result of this challenging situation, the learning of Spanish weakened, and the vocabulary became more limited and even segmented, with a vocabulary used at school and social life outside the home and a different one used in their daily life, particularly when associated with family traditions. However, bilingualism or multilingualism is giving speakers the possibility of using loanwords, resolving vocabulary gaps, and interacting more fluently with diverse interlocutors. Moreover, minors feel motivated and participate with true interest, and express that they want to improve their reading and writing skills as well as enhance speech cohesion and coherence in their discourse in the future.

In all families, the presence of grandparents, either face-to-face or virtually, helps and motivates children to make progress in language acquisition. The linguistic practices and strategies developed have been a source of motivation for both adults and children. The linguistic exchange between generations has been strengthened by the use of digital devices and messages on social networks, because they need to understand how to use them, write comments in family groups in social media, share photos, etc. This sense of belonging to a speech community, to a group culture, as well as the acknowledgement of the existence of shared habits and traditions and, consequently, the interpretation of a written or oral message, are all factors that boost their confidence in the acquisition of the vehicular language and stimulate speakers to learn it. In other words, the consideration of these two points of view – motivation and practice – leads to forging a closer connection between the heritage language student and the community speaking such a language.

The above-mentioned situation confirms that the acquisition, retention, and enrichment of the heritage language requires a strategy, a deliberate plan devised by parents, to favor bilingualism and the acceptance of the dominant language as a social, educational, and work vehicle. Therefore the players participating in this situation – parents and children – need to negotiate, accept, propose, and share experiences as real resources of meaningful learning of the minority language. They must also fit together the pieces of the family-language-identity mosaic using a broad range of rich and affordable resources and tools, which must be available to, and easily accessed by, the people involved in this linguistic family project.

Nevertheless, it would be useful to pave the way for an appropriate bilingual educational policy that may take the cultural background of each family and the traditions of the country of origin to the classroom. This approach would support the immigrant family's decision to favor the acquisition or retention of the heritage language by their members, so that it can be used to communicate at home or with relatives and friends abroad. To conclude, all the above would strengthen their habits, traditions, and identity, and would ultimately favor the development of multilingualism as a tool to interact in the current knowledge and information society.

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