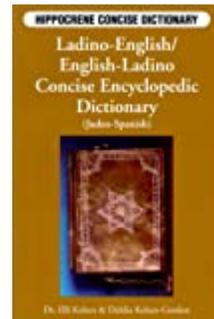


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Elli Kohen, Dahlia Kohen-Gordon.** *Ladino-English/English-Ladino Concise Encyclopedic Dictionary*. New York: Hippocrene Books, 2000. 602 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7818-0658-9.



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Until 1991, when Al Passy published his *Sephardic Folk Dictionary: English to Ladino, Ladino to English*, English-speakers could only find Ladino glossaries included in certain books. Although Passy's dictionary did not completely fill the void, as it was limited in both scope and accuracy, it has nonetheless been widely sold and used, and reprinted several times. The recently-published *Ladino-English/English-Ladino Concise Encyclopedic Dictionary (Judeo-Spanish)*, written by Istanbul-native Dr. Elli Kohen and his daughter Dahlia Kohen-Gordon, will in all likelihood also be equally welcomed and used. However, it, too, falls far short of the academic-level, accurate and comprehensive dictionary expected from a reputable publisher as Hippocrene Books.

The book has three main sections: Ladino-English Dictionary (400 pages), English-Ladino (165 pages), and Ladino Proverbs and Popular Sayings (27 pages.). What strikes one immediately is the absence of a unified system of spelling throughout the book. In fact, the greater size of the first section is primarily due to the separate entries for the various spellings of the same word. The word for bird, for example, appears as "pajaro", "pasharo", and "paxaro". Sometimes a word is spelled one way in the dictionary, and in another way in the Sayings section. (The word meaning "cough," for example, appears as "tos" in the dictionary, and as "toz" within the saying, "La toz i la

provedad no se pueden eskonder," meaning "one cannot hide the cough and the poverty.") With such a variety of spellings, one would at least expect there to be a key to pronunciation, but there is not. There is no way of knowing, for example, unless you already know the language, that the letter "x" is pronounced as [sh] in "paxaro", as [h] in "xaber", and as [tch] in "maldixo"; or that the letter "j" sounds as [z] in "jiles" (meaning bells, from the Turkish "zil"), [dj] in "Judio", [zh] in "jeneral", [h] in "bojor", and [sh] in "pajaro" (for Ladino pronunciation.) The spelling choices often seem baseless (How did "zil" become "jil"?).

In the Introduction, the authors explain that they "have adopted separate systems for transcription according to the origin of the word listed..." The "origin" is found in the Bibliography, which includes a selection of Ladino works. The authors have taken words exactly as they were spelled in these works. For most users of the *Dictionary*, this means that they may have to search for alternate spellings to a word for which they are looking. Ladino was written and printed in the Hebrew (mostly Rashi type) alphabet for centuries. Works that have appeared in the Latin alphabet (in the last 80 or so years) have had no standard system of spelling. The Bibliography of this *Dictionary* does not list any of the Ladino books published in Israel in the last twenty years, such as those by Matilda Koen-Sarrano, or the very popular semi-

annual review *Aki Yerushalayim*, which use a de facto standardized orthography. The authors also seem unaware of the existence in Israel of the government-funded “Autoridad Nasyonal de Ladino i Su Kultura”, an organization for the promotion of Ladino and its culture, which just last October held an international conference on establishing a uniform spelling system for Ladino. A new dictionary might have done much to promote that endeavor; instead, this one perpetuates the confusion.

The Introduction in this self-proclaimed *Encyclopedic Dictionary* is a generally incoherent essay with elitist statements and much misinformation about the language and its history. It speaks of “the unschooled” calling the spoken language “muestro espanyol,” our Spanish. On the contrary, those who used that appellation knew that there were people in the world who spoke a different Spanish! It also states that “Judeo-spanish, the spoken language, ... does not have any trace of the Hebrew syntax”, and that “One can find in the same sentence Spanish, Turkish, Hebrew and French, which makes it quite difficult to speak of a unified Judeo-Spanish syntax”! It claims that “Ladino comprises three separate languages”: Ladino, Judeo-spanish, and “a purified, solemn, noble Judeo-spanish ... which has never been spoken by women and would bring ridicule upon them.” In fact, the “noble Judeo-Spanish ... cultivated by the male elite” is no more different from the Judeo-spanish spoken by women and everyone else than the English of our politicians is from our own today. To our knowledge no one has, at least not with any degree of seriousness, categorized these as “two separate languages.” Furthermore, although Sefaradim always distinguished between Ladino, the “calque” language of liturgical texts, and Judeo-spanish, the spoken language, these two have many common syntactical and morphological charac-

teristics, a fact not acknowledged in the essay.

It may be unrealistic to expect a dictionary of Ladino to be truly “encyclopedic”, all-comprehensive, and all-accurate, for it is difficult to expect that one can know all the regional dialectical differences in vocabulary and pronunciation, nor the seemingly endless number of proverbs and sayings that exist in that language. But it is not too much to expect certain standards such as a systematic method of entries. The Bibliography in this *Dictionary* shows that the authors consulted Joseph Nehama’s *Dictionnaire du Judeo-Espagnol* (Madrid, 1977). But they have not attempted to follow its standards. Even the modest-sized Turkish-Ladino dictionary by Perahya, et al, (*Judeo Espanyol - Turkce; Turkce -Judeo Espanyol* [Istanbul, 1997]), not consulted by these authors, is far superior to this one in its accuracy, comprehensiveness, and consistency. A dictionary in the strict sense (proverbs and sayings, which were published in a separate volume, are not included) Perahya’s dictionary, like Nehama’s, gives the grammatical function of each word – something the Kohens’ *Dictionary* only rarely and randomly provides.

All this being said, compiling a Ladino dictionary is, above all, a labor of love, and we must give the Kohens their due credit for their labor. Users of the *Ladino-English/English-Ladino Concise Encyclopedic Dictionary (Judeo-Spanish)* may not mind its flaws, and it might probably serve their needs better than anything else of its kind available.

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