Arabic Words in the Spanish of Syrian Jewish Mexicans: A Case for 'Heritage Words'

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1. Introduction

Toward the end of my fieldwork period in Mexico City, I met to discuss an article draft with Syrian Jewish Mexican sociologist Liz Hamui, foremost scholar of Mexican Jewry. The article was an overview of the local Jewish Mexican linguistic repertoire. Hamui was generally enthusiastic about the piece, but when we got to the section on Arabic loanwords, her smile faded. "*Palabras prestamos*," (loanwords), she said with consternation. "Is that a linguistics term or what?" Yes it is, I answered. She continued: "*Es que, estas palabras no se nos han prestado. ¡Son nuestras!"* (It's that, these words weren't loaned to us. They're ours!) I tried to explain that the term reflected the "perspective" of the Spanish language, which had borrowed the words from Arabic. But she still wasn't satisfied. "Come up with a new term," she said. "That can be your contribution."

I politely agreed, but in reality, I quickly dismissed her suggestion. I wasn't about to take on the canon of historical linguistics and usurp such a key concept as 'loanword.' But every time I used it in my writing, Liz's disappointed face came back to haunt me. I realized she had a point. If I was committed to privileging speaker agency in my analysis, it made sense to use a term that reflected that. After reading some literature on heritage languages, a bell went off: *heritage words.*

In this paper, I explore the potential and limitations of using heritage words as an analytical tool, based on the case of Arabic words and phrases in the lexicon on young Mexicans of Syrian Jewish descent. These words are essential components of the local Jewish linguistic repertoire, which Benor defines as "the linguistic features Jews have access to that distinguish their speech or writing from that of local non-Jews" (Benor, 2009, p. 234).[1] Heritage words serve not only to signal ethnic distinction among Jewish Mexicans of different backgrounds. Rather, they are also an

[1] 'Jewish linguistic repertoire' is a subset of the more general theoretical construct of 'ethnolinguistic repertoire' (Benor, 2010).

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important interactional resource for Syrian Jewish speakers to construct and enact relationships toward heritage. It is this capacity I highlight in applying the term heritage words to theorize how and why speakers use such lexical items. In so doing, I aim to foreground the role of speakers in contact-induced linguistic change and honor their perceived relationship to source languages: not borrowers, but rightful heirs. In defining the concept, I draw on notions of heritage language and engage with other scholarly formulations of linguistic "afterlife," such as Shandler's (2008) notion of postvernacularity. I also consider how heritage has been theorized in folklore and anthropology: as tangible and novel cultural production with recourse to the past, with political and economic dimensions. I then proceed to examining the case of *palabras árabes* (Arabic words) among Syrian Jewish Mexicans. I highlight four qualities: 1) Their association with strong emotion, as reflected in many of the semantic domains they occupy; 2) their salience; 3) the strong (largely negative) language ideologies associated with them and 4) their versatility and productivity in stance construction and identity work. I illustrate the latter point with a recording excerpt that features young Syrian Jewish women using Arabic words to construct an indeterminate, multivalent stance toward heritage. In my conclusion, I reflect on how the term may be useful to analyzing different sociolinguistic contexts and propose heritage words as a fruitful domain of comparative inquiry.

2. Theorizing Heritage and Language

2.1 Loanwords in Jewish Languages

While neglected in some studies of ethnic dialects or ethnolinguistic repertoires (the term I prefer), loanwords have long received a great deal of attention in Jewish language research. Indeed, they are central to defining 'Jewish language,' no matter how conservative the definition. Whether words from Hebrew and Aramaic in Yiddish, or words from Yiddish in the English of Jewish Americans, such lexical items play a prominent role in constructing and communicating Jewish identity. In a recent study, Benor and Cohen (Benor, 2011; Benor & Cohen, 2011) use survey data to analyze the lexicon of Jewish English, observing that "the use of loanwords is generally quite salient…and Jews make regular use of (them) to indicate to their audiences not only that they are Jewish but also that they are a certain type of Jew" (Benor, 2011, p. 144). As I describe below, these observations about the salience and productivity of such words apply to Jewish Mexican speakers as well.

2.2 Postvernacularity

Another Jewish language scholar who pays a lot of attention to words from ancestral languages is Jeffrey Shandler. In his exploration of Yiddish in postwar United States, Shandler coins the term *postvernacular* to describe a language's continued existence once it has ceased to function as a whole-language medium of communication. He analyzes how non-Yiddish speakers produce and consume Yiddish in things like children's books, humorous dictionaries, clothing and tchochkes, and in formal performance like klezmer music and Yiddish theater.

Shandler characterizes postvernacular language use as "a relational phenomenon. It always entails some awareness of its distance from vernacularity, which is usually contemplated in terms of retrospection" (2008, p. 22). It has the capacity to convey simultaneous mockery and affection, toward both the language itself and the ancestral worlds it evokes. Another defining feature of postvernacular Yiddish is what Shandler

calls "atomization," or the display of isolated lexical items as "something less than a whole language" (2008, p. 126); here is where the relevance to heritage words comes to the fore. The embodiment of atomized Yiddish is Magnetic Poetry: tiny magnets that each display a single word or morpheme, which one could presumably arrange into novel sentences on a refrigerator door. But Shandler points out that a fluent Yiddish speaker would be at pains to construct a full sentence due to the lack of basic grammatical items. Rather, the 600 sticky words feature the most "extreme, the particularist and richly connotative" (2008, p. 127). Yiddish is rendered as "limited and fragmentary on one hand, aestheticized and charged with affect on the other hand" (2008, p. 127). Shandler likens these words to

> "charged subatomic particles, endowed with a new energy by having broken free from the stable structures of a full vernacular code. Being magnetic, they are at liberty to attach themselves anywhere, in any fashion. And their endlessly, recombinant, artful play ultimately promises to enliven and transform another language – English…"(Shandler 2008, p. 128)

I find this a great way to envision heritage words in speech. As Silverstein (1981) argued, the semantic and structural properties of words make them the easiest linguistic entities to isolate, to talk about, to hold up and reflect upon. These qualities render words particularly object-like. Magnetic Poetry, as Shandler recognizes, is simply the literal, material embodiment of the inherent "thinginess" of words. This quasi-tangibility, together with their evocativeness and creative potential, is part of what makes 'heritage' an apt modifier for these words.

2.3 Heritage in Language and Culture

Why heritage? In using this label, I am directly borrowing (as it were) from the notion of 'heritage language.' This term is used to refer to a language with which speakers have a personal, genealogical connection, regardless of their degree of proficiency (Fishman, 2001; Valdés, 2001). What I like about how heritage language is defined, and what I hope to transfer to heritage word, is the emphasis on speakers: it is speakers' relationships to a language that makes it a heritage language. In the way I conceive of it, this is also what makes a given lexical item a heritage word.

Clearly, 'heritage word' applies most neatly to lexical items from languages associated with a speaker's known, lineal ancestors, such as the case of Arabic among Syrian Jewish Mexican speakers. However, I argue that the concept is most useful when we privilege emic understandings of heritage, rather than impose strict etymological or genealogical standards. Furthermore, I consider both synchronic and diachronic dimensions: Heritage is not only that which connects us to the past, but also what defines and unifies us in the present, whether the "us" in question is a small, face-to-face network or a transnational diaspora. On these grounds, I argue that words from both Modern Israeli Hebrew and Biblical Hebrew (used by speakers who identify as Jewish) should be considered heritage words as well. I say this because of the special status of Hebrew in Jewish collective identity and history, combined with the dimension of peoplehood that is central to defining Judaism and Jewishness. Indeed, much Hebrew language education for Jews in the United States is carried out under the rubric of heritage language education. While the topic certainly merits further exploration and debate, in this preliminary consideration I argue for analyzing Hebrew words among Jewish speakers under the rubric of heritage words.

While heritage language was my original inspiration for heritage words, I also consider how the concept of heritage has been theorized in folklore and anthropology. Scholars like Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett analyze heritage both as a mode of performance and an industry: think museums, historical preservation, reenactments, and "traditional" music, dance and handicraft productions. Below, I draw on Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (1995) definitions of heritage – combined with my own formulations - in exploring how the concept applies heritage words.

"Heritage is a new mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, p. 369-370). This is the first definition of heritage Kirshenblatt-Gimblett presents in her article. Note the similarity between this and Shandler's definition of postvernacular ("a relational phenomenon that entails some distance from vernacularity, in both time and space" (2008, p. 22)). Like Shandler, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reminds us that heritage is not just something old that is still around. Rather, heritage is something we generate in the present. In the case of heritage words, each utterance is not simply a repetition of past forms, but rather a novel production (and indeed, the phonology and pragmatics of contemporary usages often differ greatly from the originals). While the relationship of these words to the past is "built in," as it were, their meanings and functions are of the here and now. The way speakers construct and manage these temporalities constitutes a task for analysis.

Heritage is a tangible medium for articulating shared culture and history. Heritage is not simply a feeling of commonality or a subjective relationship to the past. Rather, it is the tangible manifestations of these experiences; something we can produce, display, circulate and interpret. Heritage is therefore a *medium* with which people give form to notions of culture and belonging. This also applies to heritage words. I have previously underscored the relative materiality of lexical items compared to other elements of language. It is precisely this tangibility that allows them to serve as instruments for people to construct relationships toward their shared culture and history.

Heritage is political (and economic). Heritage is never neutral. Rather, there are always political and economic stakes in labeling a given practice or object as 'heritage.' Such stakes can include access to state-regulated benefits and resources (for example, in preserving a heritage site or teaching a heritage language) as well as money to be made from tourism. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett puts it, heritage is a 'value-added industry' in that it "adds value to existing assets that have either ceased to be viable…or that never were economically productive" (1995, p. 370). The heritage projects Kirshenblatt-Gimblett analyzes also "produce the local for export" (1995, p. 372) through tourism. Thus, heritage is not just for *us*, but it is also - perhaps primarily - for *them*.

Heritage is contested. As a corollary to the previous point, it is important to recognize that what counts as heritage is always a highly charged question; one contested by different actors and stakeholders.

Do these latter qualities – political, economic and contested - apply to heritage words? I argue that they do, although somewhat differently than with the kinds of heritage projects Kirshenblatt-Gimblett considers. As I discuss below, Arabic words among Jewish Mexicans are indeed the subject of potent language ideologies. They are in this way politicized, albeit at a very local level. Nonetheless, I am aware that I risk imposing further politicization through labeling these words as heritage. Additionally, due to the

negative evaluations applied to Arabic words, I expect that some Syrian Jewish Mexicans will contest my designating them as 'heritage.' Such a designation implies they are a cultural resource worthy of preservation and celebration, and many simply do not see them as such.

The overtly economic dimension of heritage words may vary by context. The commodification of Yiddish among North American consumers, as Shandler explores, is well documented. In contrast, few Syrian Jewish heritage projects - much less those with economic potential – expressly feature the Arabic language. There is, however, at least one work that "produces the local for export" to a broader audience: not through tourism, but through literature. The novel *Los Dolientes* (2004) by Syrian Jewish Mexican author Jacobo Sefamí provides a glossary for the many Arabic and Hebrew words that pepper his characters' speech, thereby making Syrian Jewish language and culture accessible to outsiders. While this lone book does not hold a candle to the vast body of commodified Yiddish, it demonstrates an incipient awareness of the capacity of the Arabic language to effectively represent Syrian Jewishness to outsiders. As I conceive of it, heritage words need not have any economic dimension at all to merit the label. My primary interest is in their social meanings and functions within the speech communities that use them. Nonetheless, because of their effectiveness in representing what is different or exotic about minority/immigrant subcultures, the economic potential of heritage words – for use in tourism or art – is always present.

3. The Case of Arabic Words among Syrian Jewish Mexicans

I now delve further into the details of Arabic heritage words among Syrian Jewish Mexicans. In the following overview, I emphasize four qualities of these words that, in my hypothesis, may be common to heritage words across sociolinguistic context. These are:

1. Emotionality
2. Salience
3. Strong language ideologies
4. Productivity in stance construction

3.1 Ethnographic Overview

Since its institutional beginnings in the early 20th century, the Jewish Mexican community has organized itself into separate sub-communities based on the origins of their founders. Two of these groups represent Jews from Syria and Lebanon: the Aleppan or 'Halebi' *Comunidad Maguen David*, and the Damascene/Lebanese or 'Shami' *Comunidad Monte Sinai*. The other two major groups represent Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern and Central Europe, and Sephardic Jews from Turkey, Greece and the Balkans. My research focused primarily on Syrian Jewish young people, from late teens to early thirties. The majority of these individuals were grandchildren or great-grandchildren of immigrants, although there were some whose own parents had migrated in a later wave to Mexico in the 1970s and 1980s. They are, for the most part, monolingual Spanish speakers until learning Hebrew in formal educational settings.

My broader research question regards how people used language to maintain (or alter) these ethno-geographic distinctions in the context of broad social and religious changes. Such changes include a general opening of relations between members of the four communities (including more "intermarriages" between members from different groups)

and shifts in the balance of intercommunal power and influence from Ashkenazi to Syrian sectors, due to the latter's increasing numbers and socioeconomic mobility. Finally, a transformative process in recent years has been the local growth of ultra-Orthodoxy, especially in the Syrian sectors. These styles of Jewish religious practice and belief, which emphasize stricture in adherence to laws of ritual observance, originated in Eastern Europe and remain dominated by Ashkenazi Jews worldwide. However, significant segments of Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jews in several countries have adopted ultra-Orthodox beliefs and practices (Deshen, 2005; Jacobson, 2006; Lehmann & Siebzehner, 2006). In Mexico City, it is the Halebi (Aleppan) community that has seen the greatest growth of ultra-Orthodoxy, although its effects pervade general Jewish life Mexico City. These religious changes, coupled with the demographic and socioeconomic shifts mentioned above, have served to complicate relations within and between the four ethnic Jewish sectors. My broader research goal is to understand how these changes are both reflected in and negotiated through language.

3.2 Methods

I gathered ethnographic data and recordings over more than a year of dissertation fieldwork in Mexico City. In addition to general participant observation in communal life, I conducted interviews with around 45 individuals. I also made recordings in religious classes that catered to young people and a university classroom that included Jewish and non-Jewish students. Finally, I conducted an activity I call "shadowing," in which six people wore a voice recorder during most of an entire day. I accompanied them during part or all of this time. Throughout my fieldwork period and after, I compiled a list *palabras árabes* (Arabic words) I encountered and documented instances of their use, both in my fieldnotes and my recordings. I have documented about 65 words, excluding food words and numerals. In compiling this list, I privilege local categorizations rather than strict etymological standards. For example, there are many words derived from Hebrew and Aramaic, but within the context of Jewish Mexico, they are considered *palabras árabes;* that is, used by and associated with Syrian Jewish speakers.

3.3 Properties of Heritage Words

3.3.1 Emotionality

The list below represents the major semantic areas that Arabic heritage words occupy. In compiling this list, I was immediately struck by the many words that are used and associated with strong emotion. After presenting this list, I discuss how this quality of emotionality is relevant to designating them as heritage words[2].

1. Ethnic labels or ethnonyms
   - *Shami* ('Damascene Jew' or 'Member of the *Comunidad Monte Sinai'*). From the Arabic 'of the north' (referring to Damascus).
   - *Halebi* ('Aleppan Jew' or 'Member of the *Comunidad Maguen David'*). From the Arabic 'Aleppan.'

[2] I follow local orthographic conventions in representing these words, including /j/ to represent an unvoiced velar fricative ([x]). The letter /h/ represents IPA [h] as it does in English (and occasionally in Spanish, although /h/ is most commonly silent).

2. Food. As Kershenovich (2002) has discussed in depth, food items such as *kipe*, *keftehs,* and *mejshi* play an important role in the expression and transmission of Syrian Jewish identity.
3. Religion
   - *Jajam*. This is the Hebrew word for 'sage,' but is used in some Sephardi/Middle Eastern groups as an address and title for rabbis.
   - *Knis* (Ar. 'synagogue').
4. Blessings and "verbal talismans,"[3] including:
   - *Alamák.* Glossed as "*Que Dios te acompañe*" ('May God accompany you'); used as a parting phrase. This is derived from the Arabic *Allah ma'ak,* '[May] God [be] with you.'
   - *Barminán.* This is glossed as "*Ni Dios lo quiera"* ('Not even God desires it'). Commonly cited as 'Arabic,' it is ultimately of Aramaic origin.
   - *Mashalá.* (Ar. 'it is God's will), glossed as "*Que Dios lo cuide"* ('May God take care of him), when talking about a child. Also said in remarking on other good or fortunate affairs.
5. Terms of endearment/affection, including:
   - *Habibi* (Ar. 'my beloved'). Glossed as "*mi amor"* ('my love').
   - *Roji* (Ar. 'my soul'). Glossed as "*mi vida, mi alma"* ('my life, my soul')
   - *Jazit/jazito/jazita.* Glossed as *"pobrecito/a"* ('poor little thing'). This may ultimately derive from Judeo-Spanish.[4]
6. Insults, derogatory labels and bad words, or what my consultants call "*groserías*" (and generally reveal with some reluctance). These include:
   - *Fájam.* Glossed as "*horrible, feo"* ('horrible, ugly'), possibly derived from the Arabic *fahm* ('coal').
   - *S'bale.* Glossed as "*basura"* ('trash'), possibly derived from the Arabic *zabala* ('filth, dung, trash') (Avraham Ben-Rahamiël Qanaï, personal communication, November 20, 2008).
7. Nouns/adjectives for people.
   - *Ishire*. Noun used to refer to a non-Jewish, female domestic servant. It can also be an adjective meaning 'common' or 'stupid.'
   - *Shatra.* Adjective describing a woman who is a good housewife and hostess, attentive to the needs of her family and her guests.
   - *Amí/mertamí.* Terms of address for fathers-in-law and mothers-in-law, respectively. *Ami* comes from the Arabic *'ami* (lit. 'my uncle,' also used among many Arabic speakers as a title of respect for men other than one's uncle) and *mertamí* from *merāt ámi*, (lit. 'woman (wife) of my uncle').
8. Money. Arabic is often used as a "secret language" when discussing finances, especially in the presence of domestic employees or strangers.
   - *Masari* (Ar. 'money').
9. Interjections/expressions of emotion. This is probably the most common domain, and one that overlaps with some of those above.
   - *Jarám.* This comes from the Arabic *ḥarām* meaning 'forbidden.' I have heard it used in that sense, e.g., *"Eso es jarám"* ('that is forbidden'). I have also heard it used in ways more similar to *barminán* ('God forbid') or simply as a stand-in

[3] Matisoff (2000) has referred to such phrases as "psycho-ostensives" in his work on Yiddish phrases.

[4] The Arabic-speaking Jewish communities in Syria received an influx of Judeo-Spanish-speaking immigrants beginning in the 15th century. Therefore, local Judeo-Arabic included many Judeo-Spanish words.

for '*que pena*' ('what a shame'), which is also a common usage in contemporary Syrian Arabic.
- *Shemá Israel* (Heb. 'Hear, Israel'). These are the first two words of the most central prayer in Jewish liturgy. Halebi and Shami Mexicans also use it as an interjection to express surprise or angst. I include this as an Arabic heritage word because this usage is unique to Shami and Halebi Jews (and was likely used pre-migration).

I draw your attention to categories 4, 5, 6 and 9 because they have in common the quality of being used or associated with strong emotion. They are words one whispers in tenderness or shouts in anger. This reflects something Shandler observed about postvernacular Yiddish in the United States, as exemplified in Magnetic Poetry: it is the "extreme, the particularist and richly connotative" (2008, p. 127) that tend to be preserved. I propose that this set of qualities - color, evocativeness, and strong emotionality – set heritage words apart from other kinds of loanwords. Such qualities contribute to these words' salience.

3.3.2 Salience

Whenever I told a Jewish Mexican that I was researching language and identity among Syrian Jews, they instantly rattled off a list of *palabras árabes*. I realized early on that these and other words from heritage languages –including Yiddish, Ladino, and Biblical and Modern Hebrew–performed a lot of the work of signaling ethnic and religious distinctions among Jewish Mexicans. One of my research participants "Dina" (see below) told her friends in a recording that she "spoke very Shami (Damascene Jewish)." When I later asked her what she meant, she specifically mentioned Arabic words. These words are certainly not the only linguistic boundary marker speakers recognize. Nonetheless, since words in general are among the most salient components of language, so too are heritage words among the most salient markers of ethnic distinction.

3.3.3 Language Ideologies

Of course, what is salient to speakers is also generally the subject of strong language ideologies. Among Jewish Mexicans, Arabic words are associated with negative stereotypes of Shamis and Halebis; stereotypes that can be characterized as Orientalist more broadly (Said, 1978). In particular, many people see Arabic words as icons (Irvine and Gal 1995) of a supposedly inherent Syrian Jewish religious mentality: one often cast as superstitious, ritualistic and pre-rational. I heard this critique as much from secular-leaning Ashkenazi Jews as from those aligned with ultra-Orthodoxy. People from the latter group, in particular, saw Arabic words as a foreign, Islamic influence, and therefore unfit for a proper Jewish lexicon. This ideology was frequently applied to the word *jarám*. At lunch at the home of an ultra-Orthodox (but not Syrian) rabbi, for example, I was talking about *jarám* with one of my Syrian Jewish research participants. We were laughing about the versatility of the *jarám* and its multiple senses, as I describe above. The rabbi had been listening quietly and spoke at an opportune moment. "*Jarám* isn't just an Arabic word," he said. "It's an Islamic word." He explained that it has to do with the Muslim concept of "*lo prohibido*" (the forbidden), and Judaism doesn't embrace the same concept. His evaluation of this word was clear: this was an Islamic word, a foreign influence, an intruder. We as Jews should not use it. This ideology, of course, erases the long historical trajectory of Jews in Islamic lands and the shared culture between Arab Christians, Jews and Muslims. In its place, it imposes contemporary geopolitical schema

that serve to equate 'Arab' with 'Muslim' and position these in opposition to 'Jewish.'

In addition to associating these words with Oriental superstition and Islamic influence, they are also linked to the unflattering local stereotype of the Syrian Jewish *shajato.* The word *shajato* comes from the Arabic word for sandals that men used to wear in the outdoor markets in Mexico City's historic center. The *shajato* stereotype shares much in common with others associated with the *nouveu riche*: a combination of wealth and lack of formal education, as well as a public demeanor described as *prepotente* (arrogant or presumptuous). These negative evaluations can serve as strong disincentives for Syrian Jewish people to use Arabic words. Indeed, many told me they avoid using because they didn't want to be seen as superstitious or *shajato*. At the same time, however, such ideologies surrounding heritage words – combined with their emotionality and general salience – make them especially potent for innovative usages. In my observations, Arabic heritage words don't just function as signals of Syrian Jewish descent or communal membership. Rather, speakers use them creatively to construct complex, often indeterminate stances toward heritage. Below I present an example of such a usage.

3.3.4 Productivity in Stance Construction

This example is taken from the shadowing activity, in which one of my college-aged consultants "Dina" wore a voice recorder for 24 hours. This particular incident occurred during a get-together with her girlfriends from her high school. All were members of the Shami (Damascene) community. I heard far more Arabic words during this party than in almost any other context I'd recorded or observed. Often, these words were used in relatively habitual and unselfconscious ways. Other times, however, they were the subject of a great deal of laughter and verbal play. In this segment, the women are in the middle of a card game. One woman is reading another's fortune in her Turkish coffee grounds. "Tani" is heard asking about the meaning of the mountain shape seen in the grounds. In the midst of this conversation, Dina indiscreetly burps, which causes the women to explode in laughter. Their subsequent interaction, focused on Dina's utterance of the Arabic words *saja* and *sajten*, demonstrates how speakers can use Arabic words to embody "traditional" Syrian Jewish language and culture while simultaneously distancing themselves from it. The Arabic words in the following transcript are bolded.

Tani: *Qué significa la mon[taña]*
Dina: *[(muchas faltaron)] Mili*
Leah: *Que vas para la cima*
?: *U:::*
?: *[<chuckles>]*
Tani: *(Me, ve) la montaña sí se [<unintel>]*
Dina: *[<burps>]*
Mili: *Vacílalas [(unintel)]*
Various: *[<laughter>]*
Tani: *Guácala Gina eso sí no lo po' creer <laughing>*
Leah: *Que vergüenza, que vergüenza (unintel)*
Dina: *No lo pensé <laughing>*
Tani: *Sí! Sí al principio porque [(unintel)]*
Dina: *[De veras] que no lo pensé*
Various: *<Laughter>*
Tani: *Qué asco*

Mili: *Est- a ver voy a decir algo eso se lla[ma **saja**]*
Dina: *[(unintel)]*
?: *(Unintel)*
Mili: *(Unintel) diles como se dice esa en árabe*
Dina: ***Saja**! <Chuckle> Ellas, maleducadas me [deberían de decir] **sajten**.*
Tani: *[(Qué significa la montaña?)]*
Mili: ***Sajten***
Leah: *Provecho*
?: *La montaña que (unintel)*
?: *Pro[vecho]*
Tani: *[Qué] significa la montaña.*
Mili: *Que si montaña no va [(unintel)]*
Dina: *[(Que eres] gra:::nde mirrey*
Various: *<laughter>*

Tani: What does the mountain [mean]
Dina: [(several are missing)] Mili
Leah: That you're headed for the top
?: U::::
?: [<chuckles>]
Tani: (Me, see) the mountain does [<unintel>]
Dina: [<burps>]
Mili: Empty them [(unintel)]
Various: [<laughter>]
Tani: Eww Dina that I really cannot believe <laughing>
Leah: How embarrasing, how embarrasing (unintel)
Dina: I wasn't thinking <laughing>
Tani: Yes! Yes at first because [(unintel)]
Dina: [Honestly] I wasn't thinking
Various: <Laughter>
Tani: How gross
Mili: This- wait I'm going to say something that's call[ed ***saja***]
Dina: [(unintel)]
?: (Unintel)
Mili: (Unintel) tell them how you say it in Arabic
Dina: ***Saja***! <Chuckle> These, rude girls [should say] ***sajten***.
Tani: [(What does the mountain mean?)]
Mili: ***Sajten***
Leah: Bon apetite
?: The mountain that (unintel)
?: Bon [apetite]
Tani: [What] does the mountain mean.
Mili: That if the mountain doesn't go [(unintel)]
Dina: [(That you are] grea::::t *mirrey*
Various: <laughter>

The women's' interaction here is fundamentally performative; Mili keys the performance frame in line 17 by announcing "That's called *saja*," for the benefit of the recorder (and by proxy me, their imagined audience). *Saja* literally means 'health' in Arabic and is usually used in Syrian/Lebanese Arabic as a sort of blessing in response to a burp, although the women here use it to refer to the act itself. Mili then instructs Dina in

line 20, “tell them how you say that in Arabic.” When Dina exclaims *saja!* In line 21, the second consonant sound doesn’t resemble a typical Mexican Spanish /j/ (which is most commonly realized a voiceless velar fricative ([x])). Neither does it resemble the consonant sound of the original Arabic word (a voiceless pharyngeal fricative ([ħ])). Rather, it sound very forced and approximates an epiglottal sound ([H]).

Dina then tells the recorder that her friends should be saying *sajten*, which is derived from the same Arabic root and is also used as a post-burp blessing (it is also used in ways similar to the Spanish *provecho* or the French *bon apetite).* Again, her pronunciation of the medial consonant is “emphasized,” this time through a backed realization of the usually velar sound. In the original Arabic words, this consonant in *saja* and *sajten* is represented by the letter heh (ح); a sound especially iconic of the Arabic language and its speakers. I have heard Jewish Mexicans of all backgrounds imitate it when invoking Syrian Jewish personas. The effect of Dina’s distorted pronunciation is to draw attention and mock its “Arabness.” I believe the fact that she does this with the words *saja* and *sajten* is not coincidental. Many people mentioned *sajten* as an Arabic word that is particularly *shajato*. In addition, the act of publically burping itself can be seen as very *shajato*. The degree of the women’s mirth and embarrassment in this segment points to the gaps between their contemporary Mexican standards of decency, in which burping in public is a very serious faux pas, and Middle Eastern culture where it is considered a compliment after a meal. In this episode, the women use laughter, phonological manipulation and metadiscursive commentary to create a certain ironic distance between themselves and the Arabic words they utter. In this way, they construct a complex stance with regards to their “traditional” Syrian Jewish culture; one that simultaneously embraces and rejects, celebrates and derides. I believe heritage words are particularly effective in creating such stances because of the qualities I outline above: their emotionality, salience, and the strong language ideologies attached to them.

4. Conclusions

As highly salient, emotionally charged, quasi-material linguistic entities, these kinds of words do a lot of social work in minority subcultures. I seek to highlight these meanings and functions through applying the label of heritage words. Not only does this honor speakers’ affective ties to the source language, but it also draws attention to the importance of these words in creating ethnic distinction and constructing complex stances towards heritage. There are of course, some potential pitfalls and challenges in using heritage words as an analytical concept. One, as I’ve discussed, is the unavoidable political implications of labeling something as heritage. Another challenge is deciding what counts as heritage word in different contexts. I suggest above that Hebrew words among Jewish speakers indeed count because of the status of Hebrew in Jewish religion and history. Does this necessarily imply that Latin phrases should be considered as heritage words among Catholics? Arabic phrases among Muslim speakers worldwide? Once identified, do heritage words in other contexts have the same qualities of salience and emotionality that Arabic words have among Jewish Mexicans? Are they subject to strong language ideologies and prolific in the construction of stance vis-à-vis ethnic/ religious group? These are the kinds of questions I hope will spur further comparative research on heritage words across ethnographic contexts. In addition to contributing toward studies of language and identity among immigrant and minority groups, the comparative study of heritage words has important implications studies of language contact and change. As several papers in this conference have underscored (Ahmad, 2012; Epps, 2012), speaker motivations and ideologies are a key factor influencing the direction

of contact-induced change. Attention to how speakers use and evaluate words from heritage language provides important insight into the persistence of certain lexical items in new sociolinguistic contexts.

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