I.   OVERVIEW OF *GIUDAICO-ROMANESCO*

A.   *GIUDAICO-ROMANESCO AS LANGUAGE OR DIALECT*

Within the field of Jewish sociolinguistics it is sometimes difficult to determine which languages or dialects should be considered "Jewish."[1] Everyone interviewed agreed that *Giudaico-Romanesco* is Jewish. Most people interviewed accept that *Giudaico-Romanesco* was a viable dialect during the period of the Ghetto, and continuing through World War II. A few felt that during the period of the Ghetto it could have been considered a "language." Only one person suggested that it had never truly been either a language or a dialect, saying:

> It is not a language now. But I think that not even in the time of the Ghetto was it a language. I think that during the time of the Ghetto, they weren't speaking *Giudaico-Romanesco*. It was more Hebrew, or *Romanesco* together with Hebrew. Then they invented afterward to say "we *speak Giudaico-Romanesco*" — it just didn't exist. Now it is just phrases thrown around, it isn't a language.[2]

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[1] An example, which defines the dilemma, and then takes it to the extreme, is Uzzi Ornan, "Hebrew is not a Jewish Language," *Readings in the Sociology of Jewish Languages*, ed. Joshua A. Fishman (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985) 22-24.

[2] MC, drama group member, taped interview, Rome, Italy, August 1, 1985. Her perspective on this distinction is not adopted in this research. It seems ironic that although she felt that it was not really a language, she is writing numerous short stories using the Dialect. It may be important to note that she has the weakest background in languages of all the people interviewed from the drama group. She acknowledged that her Hebrew is limited to minimal reading ability and she knows no other languages. Furthermore, her normal speech would probably be characterized as *Romanesco* and not standard Italian.

This person's opinion is obviously extreme. The belief by many of its speakers that it was a "language" during the Ghetto period may be explained by the fact that there was very little contact between the majority of inhabitants of the Ghetto and those outside the Ghetto. The language that was the standard before the Jews were confined to the Ghetto, although it fundamentally shared the same source, had changed to the extent that it was not the language that was spoken outside the Ghetto once the Jews were emancipated. Therefore, it seems logical that given their secluded situation, they would have considered their mode of speech a "language" as opposed to a variation or "dialect" of another language.

Even scholars debate where to draw the line between language and dialect. In his text, *Dialectology*, W. N. Francis attempts to define dialects as:

> varieties of a language used by groups smaller than the total community of speakers of a language. Any language spoken by more than a handful of people exhibits this tendency to split into dialects, which may differ from one another along all the many dimensions of language content, structure, and function: vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, usage, social function, artistic and literary expression. The differences may be slight and confined to a few aspects of the language, or so great as to make communication difficult between speakers of different dialects. At some point on this graduated scale the differences may become so great that linguists speak of separate but related languages, rather than dialects of the same language. Actually there is no positive and clear-cut way to establish criteria by which separate dialects can be distinguished from separate

languages. It thus appears at the outset that we cannot precisely define our subject matter.[3]

In America (the USA), it is commonly accepted that a number of dialects exist. During the interviews, a native Italian speaker provided an interesting insight into American dialects as compared with Italian dialects. While traveling in the southern United States,[4] he was warned that people in the South speak a different dialect of English, and it might have been difficult for him (a non-native English speaker) to understand them. Once he heard their speech, he was surprised at what was considered to be a different "dialect." To him it was primarily a modification of their pronunciation of English. His experience with dialects was from Italy, where speakers of dialects from different parts of the country have such distinct pronunciation and vocabulary differences, that often speakers from different dialect areas cannot understand each other at all. In Italy there is a continuum of adjoining dialects, all of which obviously are related to the standard Italian, yet opposite ends of the continuum may not be able to comprehend each other. From this perspective, *Giudaico-Romanesco* is easily defined as a dialect and not a language. It shares a majority of its features with standard Italian, and therefore is not sufficiently different to warrant its being considered a separate language.

Wardhaugh points out that:

> there is usually little or no controversy over the fact that [dialects] are either regional or social varieties of something that is widely acknowledged to be a language. . . . Some people are also aware that the standard variety of any language is actually only the preferred dialect of that language. . . . It is the variety

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[3] Winthrop Nelson Francis, *Dialectology*, (New York: Longman, 1983) 1.

[4] AD, personal interview, Rome, Italy, August, 1985.

that has been chosen for some reason, perhaps political, social, or economic, or some combination of reasons, to serve as either the model or the norm for other varieties. As a result, the standard is often not called a dialect at all, but is regarded as the language itself. One consequence is that all their varieties become related to that standard in some way and may be regarded as dialects of that standard. Of course, that usually involves a complete restructuring of the historical facts.[5]

Therefore, given these definitions of language versus dialect, we can say with certainty that *Giudaico-Romanesco* is currently a dialect. As will be seen in the translation of *Pur'io riderio* later in the dissertation, during the period of confinement in the Ghetto, Jews from inside the Ghetto could communicate with non-Jews from outside the walls; however, there was a significant number of linguistic differences (especially Hebrew terms, archaic forms) which could allow us to consider the *Giudaico-Romanesco* of that period a language.

B.   *GRAMMAR AND LEXICON*

In order to provide a better understanding of the characteristics of *Giudaico-Romanesco*, a brief description of some of its linguistic aspects will be presented, with more specific examples included later in this work. The following sections, based on written and spoken Dialect usage, include material from various scholars as well as my own analysis and observations.

There are a number of influences which contributed to the development of *Giudaico-Romanesco*. Some archaic Italian forms were preserved, even though they stopped being used in the rest of the country. Dialectologists and those interested in historical linguistics could benefit

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[5] Wardhaugh, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* 36.

from examining these forms for the insight they provide into the development of Italian, independent of the value studying the Dialect provides for those involved in Jewish linguistics, or sociolinguistics. Some examples of archaic forms retained only in the Dialect include: *amista,' mista,' amistanza*, which mean *amicizia* 'friendship'; and *valzente*, which means *valore* ('value').[6] Many refugees from the southern parts of Italy were confined in the Roman Ghetto, and influences of their language use were felt in *Giudaico-Romanesco* as well. These aspects were not found in the standard Roman speech.[7] In addition, some lexical items from other Romance languages were also found in *Giudaico-Romanesco*. One example is *melda,'* which means to "read in Hebrew, recite prayers, mumble"[8] (what in Yiddish would be *davven*). Although Debenedetti said that this term comes from Spanish, Jochnowitz observes that the term is found in all the Judeo-Romance languages, and "is a valuable piece of evidence that points to a continuous history of Judeo-Romance going back to the Roman Empire."[9]

The most obvious and prevalent element that helps to mark *Giudaico-Romanesco* is the way that Hebrew is integrated into the Italian.   One count shows over 360 terms taken from Hebrew in *Giudaico-Romanesco*.[10] It is important to analyze the sources for introducing Hebrew terms, and the mode and form of this inclusion.

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[6] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 39-40. Since she has written an in-depth analysis of modern usage, most of the examples used in this chapter are taken from her work.

[7] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 40.

[8] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 41 and Jochnowitz "Judeo-Romance Languages" 71-72. A discussion of the Greek origin of the word and its connection to Ladino and Judeo-Italian is found in Jochnowitz "Ladino" *Midstream*, February 1981: 29.

[9] Jochnowitz, "Judeo-Romance Languages" 72.

[10] Scazzochio Sestieri 127.

Many . . . terms were drawn exactly as is from the ritual and the holy books,

which Jews born in the last century read more or less fluently in the original

Hebrew, and more often than not understood, at least partially; but in jargon

usage, they tended to deform or arbitrarily enlarge the semantic area.[11]

Some of the suggested sources of the introduction of Hebrew terms in *Giudaico-Romanesco* are "names of objects and practices regarding religion, words inherent in the internal organization of the community, some terms for food and drink, words that lack adequate corresponding terms to indicate specific things. Another very large category is made up of the terms that could be classified as 'slang' or 'jargon,' used especially to conceal one's thought in front of strangers."[12] There are many examples for this category, including those dealing with the Christian world (such as referring to Jesus as *caròvve* from the Hebrew *qarov* 'close relative'), or money and business dealings (such as *mangkòdde* from the Hebrew *ma'ot* 'money').[13]

There are other reasons for including Hebrew in *Giudaico-Romanesco*; the most obvious and important is the general significance of Hebrew to the Jewish people. "*Historicity* refers to the fact that a particular group of people finds a sense of identity through using a particular language: it belongs to them. . . . It can also, as with Hebrew, be appealed to as a unifying force among a threatened people."[14]

Hebrew provides a primary source for historicity and ethnicity for Jews around the world:

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[11] Levi, *The Periodic Table* 11-12.

[12] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 42

[13] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 42-44.

[14] Wardhaugh, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* 34-35.

Classical Hebrew thought contains recurring emphasis on the perfectibility of ethnicity, i.e., an emphasis on its highest realization via sanctification. It was not only Jewish ethnicity which could be so elevated and attuned with the Creator's designs and expectations, although Hebrew thought is, understandably, repeatedly more concerned with the theoretical perfectibility of Hebrew ethnicity (just as it is with the actual shortcomings of Hebrew ethnicity). Hebrew thought is an early source for the recurring message that sanctified ethnicity is ennobling, strengthening, healing, satisfying. Its thought proclaims the message of the joy, the wholeness, the holiness of embodying and expressing language-and-ethnicity in accord with the commandments of the Master of the Universe: 'for they are our life and the length of our days.' Whosoever lives in the midst of his own kind, speaking his own language and enacting his own most divinely regulated traditions in accord with these imperatives, has all that one could hope for out of life.[15]

Rarely is a Hebrew word introduced in *Giudaico-Romanesco* which remains unaltered. At the very least there is usually a morphological change, such as using Italian suffixes for singular and plural, or a phonetic change characteristic of the Dialect. Often when a Hebrew root is used in Italian, it takes an Italian form analogous to the standard form it is replacing (for example, in order to say "fear," the Hebrew root is *pahad*, which in *Giudaico-Romanesco* became *impachadito*, analogous to the standard Italian adjectival form *impaurito*). There are examples of the opposite phenomenon, in which Italian terms are given Hebrew forms (such as

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[15] Joshua A. Fishman, "Language, Ethnicity and Racism," *The Rise and Fall of the Ethnic Revival: Perspectives on Language and Ethnicity* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1985) 8.

the *Giudaico-Romanesco* term *schifitòdde* meaning "boring flattery" from the Italian *schifiltoso* with the addition of the Hebrew 'ot' plural suffix, but with the *Giudaico-Romanesco* phonetic adaptation). Sometimes instead of introducing the actual Hebrew word, a substitute term is used to represent it. For example, the Italian word *chiuso* (literally "closed") is used in place of the Hebrew word *'arel* 'uncircumcised' to indicate a non-Jew.[16]

"*Giudaico-Romanesco* has a large number of words in common with current *Romanesco*, some that *Romanesco* used in the past, but not anymore, and finally some that *Romanesco* never used or used with different meaning. Among these, some follow the tradition of old Italian, others are the result of specifically biblical terminology."[17] One of the most common features which mark similarities between the *Romanesco* and *Giudaico-Romanesco* is doubling of consonants. This can be found in the beginning (*bbottèghi* from the Italian *bottega* 'shop'),[18] middle, or end of words (*beridde* 'circumcision' from the Hebrew *b'rit* 'covenant' or 'circumcision'). Research has shown that Hebrew terms which have doubled consonants at the end of words in *Giudaico-Romanesco* will only occur when the original Hebrew word has its accent on the last syllable[19] (Hebrew, as a rule, puts the stress on the last syllable), and that all words from Hebrew which start with 'g' (except the name Gavriel) double the initial consonant

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[16] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 45-46.

[17] Scazzochio Sestieri 117.

[18] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 52. Note also unusual suffix, since the singular should end in "a" and the plural should end in "e."

[19] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 52.

(i.e., *ggana'vve* from Hebrew *ganav* 'thief,' which also shows doubling of the final consonant before adding a vowel).[20]

Other common romanizations include ways of making Hebrew terms fit into the Italian forms. For example, to create dialectal forms from Hebrew terms often requires adding a vowel at the end of the words, (*ngkascire* 'rich' from the Hebrew '*ashir* 'rich'), or creating Italian infinitives (*ngainare* 'to look at' from Hebrew '*ayin* 'eye').

Each Hebrew consonant sound is represented in *Giudaico-Romanesco*, although a few are modified to reflect the *Romanesco* pronunciation. For example, the Hebrew letters which correspond to the 't' sound in Italian (*tav* and *tet*) are both reproduced in the Dialect as "t." When the "soft" *tav* is in the final position in the word, the *Giudaico-Romanesco* is pronounced "d" (i.e., *tachadde* for the Hebrew *tahat*, 'under'). The Hebrew letter '*ayin* is usually represented in the Dialect as "ngk." The Hebrew letter *hey* has no equivalent in *Giudaico-Romanesco* since there is no 'h' sound in Italian.[21] The Hebrew vowels are easily represented by the Italian equivalents (note that the mobile *sh'va* becomes 'e').[22]

There are certain morphological features which are characteristic of *Giudaico-Romanesco*, including the article, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs:

The article: Although the masculine singular article *lo* had been used in old forms of Italian, today it is only used in two situations in standard Italian: contracted before words

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[20] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 53.

[21] A complete phonetic presentation is found in Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco," including individual letter comparisons with the Hebrew consonants, and historical evolution. Another chart is provided in Jochnowitz, "Parole di origine romanza ed ebraica in giudeo-italiano," *Rassegna Mensile Di Israel* 40.5 (1974): 212-219.

[22] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 55.

beginning with vowels (*lo + albero* becomes *l'albero* 'the tree'), and before words beginning with 's'+consonant blends (*lo spettacolo* 'the performance'). *Romanesco* had shown evidence of its use in some of its older literature, but for more than a century *er* has been used instead. In *Giudaico-Romanesco*, however, it is still used before masculine singular nouns (*lo benzachar* 'the male child'), and sometimes without the 'l' (*o zaghenne* 'the old one').[23]

For the plural article, *li* is used in *Giudaico-Romanesco* for masculine or feminine. Often the article is eliminated between two vowels (*piglio animale e amazzo* for the Italian *prendo l'animale e lo ammazzo* 'I take the animal and I kill it').[24]

Pronouns: *Romanesco* uses the third person forms *lui*, *lei*, *loro*, but *Giudaico-Romanesco* maintains the archaic form *esso* (sometimes seen as *essa*, *issa*, or even the variant *e'ccio, e'cceco*. The form *lori* for *loro* (third person plural) is used especially to indicate non-Jews. The possessive pronouns have all preserved the archaic Italian forms. Another interesting archaic form that has been preserved is the possessive suffix, which is still in use in some of the southern Italian dialects, but not in Rome, other than in *Giudaico-Romanesco*.[25]

Nouns: Feminine singular nouns which end in 'a' use the plural form 'i' (unlike modern standard usage 'e'). A few terms from Hebrew exhibit no change between singular and plural (*ngesa'vve* 'a Christian' or 'Christians,' derived from the Hebrew word, *'esav*, the biblical Esau, which became in the Jewish folk mind the archetype of the Christian). Some nouns can be used as either masculine or feminine according to the gender of the person or thing to which they are

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[23] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 59.

[24] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 59-60.

[25] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 60-61.

being referred (*quello gioio de figlio* 'that joy or jewel of a son,' the standard Italian is exclusively *gioia*).[26]

An adjective which corresponds to a feminine noun that uses the plural ending 'i' will take the masculine form (*benedetti quelli mani* instead of *benedette quelle mani* for "those blessed hands"). In *Giudaico-Romanesco* the adjectival number "two" (standard = *due*) is found most commonly as *doi*, but may be one of the variants: *doj, doa, do,' duva*.[27] "'*Doi*' (for two) is used when preceding a noun beginning with a consonant; when preceding a noun beginning with a vowel, '*du*' is preferred."[28] A limited number of adverbs have modified forms in *Giudaico-Romanesco*.[29] Debenedetti also points out that the Italian conjugation *perche'* is always found in *Giudaico-Romanesco* as *perchi'*.[30] A number of verb forms still use archaic elements.[31]

Many aspects of the Dialect and Ghetto life from before World War II persist today. As in earlier times, the old women sit around in the *Piazza* telling stories and singing songs using the Dialect. You can also "still see people yelling from one window to another if they have something to say to a neighbor. [It seems that] people never fight in the houses, they fight in the streets."[32]

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[26] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 62-63.

[27] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 63-64.

[28] FD, personal communication, 1997.

[29] Refer to Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 64-65 for a list.

[30] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 65.

[31] Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 65-67 for discussions on specific forms.

[32] CDV, interview 1985. Jochnowitz (personal communication) informs me that "yelling from windows always occurred in a television program of the 1950s called *The Goldbergs*."

Some of the most prominent remnants of the Dialect which are still being used are its gestures and cadence. Even if standard Italian words are being spoken, they would be recognized by those who know the Dialect as particularly Jewish by the intonation, facial expressions, or gestures that the speaker uses.[33] They are used either out of habit, for those accustomed to hearing and/or using dialect, or with the intention of conveying the familiarity of using "home-talk."[34] The following debate from one of the interviews focuses on such usage:

CDV: I think that the gestures have been maintained from *Giudaico-Romanesco.*

AP: I think that they are Roman gestures.

CDV: I disagree, because I think that facial expressions, the eyes, how the mouth is used, are very much from *Giudaico-Romanesco* and different from the Roman dialect.

AP: Yes, more that than the gestures which are typically Roman.[35]

Giudaico-Romanesco should not be confused with using Italian or *Romanesco* interspersed with Hebrew. For example, the Jewish community of Rome distributes an annual calendar which includes some helpful information about Jewish holidays and festivals, blessings and prayers, rituals and observances. The majority of these items (if not all) are specifically Jewish and usually have Hebrew terms interspersed in the explanations. For example, " *il 5 di Iyar, considerato come giorno di festa per gli Ebrei di Erez Israel e della Gola . . .*" (underlined emphasis mine), which translates to "the fifth of *Iyar* (a month of the Jewish calendar) is

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[33] Jochnowitz (personal communication) points out that "intonation is part of the tradition of comic depictions of American Jews."

[34] LSS, interview 1993.

[35] AP and CDV, joint interview 1985.

considered a holiday for the Jews of the Land of Israel and of the Diaspora." The underlined terms in the Italian are all Hebrew, and it seems that only the name of the month needed to be given in Hebrew, since there is no secular way of representing it (short of the 'second month of the Jewish calendar'). There are common Italian words for *Erez Israel*, namely *Israelle* or *Lo stato d'Israelle*, and an Italian term for *Gola* is *Diaspora*. Why did they choose to include the Hebrew instead of the Italian? It may be suggested that they tried to preserve some secrecy; however, it is no secret that some Jews celebrate Israel Independence Day even in Italy. Another suggestion is that they did it out of ignorance, but the Jews of Italy are certainly aware of the secular Italian terms. Perhaps it is just the opposite — perhaps it is precisely because the Italian Jews are familiar with the Hebrew terms that they feel more comfortable including them. It seems unlikely that a publisher in America would presume that all or most of the readership would know what *Gola* is. It seems inappropriate, however, that this should be considered *Giudaico-Romanesco per se*, that is, a specifically dialectal form.[36]

"The Hebrew term might also be used as it is in almost all Jewish communities in the world as an educational device — to teach another basic Jewish concept in its primary and authentic terminology. Any term in the vernacular would by definition be further removed from the original Hebrew and a more indirect reference to the concept."[37]

The Jewish details of the daily lives of the Jews in Rome did influence *Giudaico-Romanesco*. It is this "Jewishness" of the language that Max Weinreich asserted for Yiddish: "On the basis of evidence uncovered it can be firmly stated that *yiddishkayt* ["Jewishness"]

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[36] Dr. Martin Kanes suggests that it seems to be a way of marking an in-group. He also noted similar usage in England.

[37] Dr. Daniel Grossberg, personal communication, January 15, 1997.

shaped not only the conceptual world of the Ashkenazic community, but its language as well."[38]
This helps to explain the number of Hebrew words commonly used in Jewish speech.

Sociolinguists, in attempting to determine what a Jewish language is, have addressed the process of interweaving Hebrew with the local language. A mixture of Hebrew and English can be found, for example, in America, "in the *heder* and *bet midrash* [elementary and advanced Hebrew schools], where [the] two languages fuse as a result of the constant activity of explaining and reciting the scriptural text or halachic literature, a high degree of continuity and ease of transition between the language of study and the language of daily speech develops. For the most part, Hebrew contributes specific terms, expressions, and idioms, while the second language [English] contributes the basic vocabulary of everyday life." [39] Does this mean that these speakers are using their own unique language? It *is* unintelligible to most Americans, and therefore, might perhaps be considered "Judeo-English." The consensus is that it should not be considered a unique language. After all, "doctors and lawyers too can speak to each other in sentences that other Americans cannot comprehend. Being unintelligible is not the same as having a language. For a language to exist, its speakers have to be aware of its existence. Furthermore they have to have feelings about what is correct and incorrect. Judeo-English fails

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[38] David Cohen, quoting from the *Mordechai M Kaplan Jubilee Volume*, new York, 1973, 514 in "Some Historical and Sociolinguistic Observations on the Arabic Dialects Spoken by North African Jews," *Readings in the Sociology of Jewish Languages*, ed. Joshua A. Fishman (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985) 247.

[39] Joseph Sermoneta, "The bilingual prose of Italian Jews." *Judeo-Romance Languages*, ed. Isaac Benabu and Joseph Sermoneta, (Jerusalem: Misgav Yerushalayim and Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1985) 163-164.

the test. No one will correct another's Judeo-English."[40] *Giudaico-Romanesco*, on the other

hand, if spoken poorly, *is* corrected by others.

There is a variety of what could be included as Dialect usage as part of the current

resurgence. There are speakers who learned the language as a mother-tongue at home, who are

capable of speaking *Giudaico-Romanesco* to the exclusion of standard Italian. Current Dialect

use, however, usually consists of phrases, intonations, and expressions interspersed in standard

Italian or *Romanesco*. It may be considered analogous to the current use of Yiddish in America,

about which it has been said, "realistically, American Jews aren't reacquiring Yiddish so much

as they are adding an accent to English — an intellectual, emotional, perhaps even a religious

inflection.[41]

"Within Israel society there are sharply conflicting attitudes to a language such as

Yiddish. In some circles it is highly cherished; in others it is derided as a symbol of the

unpleasing aspects of a Diaspora existence."[42] The results of the interviews showed that

although there had been influences against its continued use shortly after emancipation from the

Ghetto, recently the people who are aware of the Dialect's resurgence have positive feelings

about it.

Although certain forms found in *Giudaico-Romanesco* can be found in other Jewish

dialects of Italy, it is interesting to note differences as well. In this dissertation, the works of

Jochnowitz and Levi regarding the Jewish dialect of Piemonte have been discussed. Most of the

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[40] George Jochnowitz, "Yearning" 36.

[41] Rosen, "A Dead Language" 27

[42] Simon R. Herman, "Explorations in the Social Psychology of Language Choice,"
Readings in the Sociology of Language, ed. Joshua A. Fishman (The Hague: Mouton Publishers,
1968) 499.

examples given for the Jewish dialect of Piemonte do not have direct correlation to terms or expressions in *Giudaico-Romanesco*. Even when there is a commonly derived term, it is incorporated differently in the different dialects. Examining an example from Levi that also exists in *Giudaico-Romanesco*, it can be seen that, even when they use the same term, the pronunciation would not be the same. He mentions *hasirùd*, which in *Giudaico-Romanesco* is *chazzirùdde*, from the Hebrew *hazir* 'pig' which is used to mean "junk." In *Giudaico-Romanesco*, unlike in Judeo-Piemontese, the consonants are doubled and the vowel is added at the end of the word.[43]

It is interesting to note which terms and expressions tend to get preserved in a resurgence. Jochnowitz relates that, "Modena Mayer believes that most of the lexical items that survive dialect decline are in some way taboo words (Modena Mayer and Merzagora Massariello. 1973: 933-935) . . . My impression is that the language freed its speakers and semi-speakers from taboo . . . it allowed them to speak openly . . . with a degree of frankness and perhaps coarseness that was not otherwise possible."[44] Although much of what has been preserved in *Giudaico-Romanesco* does indeed allow speakers a degree of "frankness and coarseness," it is debatable whether these expressions should be considered "taboo" words. By definition, "taboo can be characterized as being concerned with behavior which is believed to be supernaturally forbidden, or regarded as immoral or improper; it deals with behavior which is prohibited or inhibited in an apparently irrational manner. In language, taboo is associated with things which are *not* said,

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[43] Examples taken from Levi, *The Periodic Table* 10 and Debenedetti, "Il Giudeo-romanesco" 103. Grossberg, personal communication, January 15, 1997, points out that, "The identical semantic process was at work in the Yiddish which took the Hebrew word *hazir*, 'pig' and made the word *haziray*, 'junk'."

[44] Jochnowitz, George, "Religion and Taboo" 111.

and in particular with words and expressions which are *not* used."[45] Although there may be a

few taboo terms still in use in *Giudaico-Romanesco*, a similar category with a large number of

expressions which are currently being used, might more appropriately be called "euphemisms."

These are considered to be "the result of 'dressing up' certain areas in life to make them more

presentable. Euphemistic words and expressions allow us to talk about unpleasant things and

'neutralize' the unpleasantness."[46] There are a number of ways in *Giudaico-Romanesco* to speak

about unpleasant situations or concepts. Levi, although he is describing the Piedmont-Jewish

dialect of Italy, provides examples of this style of speaking that are also applicable to *Giudaico-*

Romanesco:

> Even a hasty examination [of the Dialect] points to its dissimulative and
> underground function, a crafty language meant to be employed when speaking
> about *goyim* [non-Jews] in the presence of *goyim*; or also, to reply boldly with
> insults and curses that are not to be understood, against the regime of restriction
> and oppression which they (the *goyim*) had established.[47]
>
> There is also a rather large assortment of not very decent terms, to be used
> not only with their real meaning in front of the children but also instead of curses,
> in which case, compared to the corresponding Italian and [Dialect] terms, they
> offer, besides the already mentioned advantage of not being understood, also that
> of relieving the heart without abrading the mouth.[48]

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[45] Trudgill 17.

[46] Wardhaugh, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* 231.

[47] Levi, *The Periodic Table* 8.

[48] Levi, *The Periodic Table* 10.

Certainly more interesting for the student of customs are the few terms that allude to things pertaining to the Catholic faith. In this case, the originally Hebraic form is corrupted much more profoundly, and this for two reasons: in the first place, secrecy was rigorously necessary here because their comprehension by Gentiles could have entailed the danger of being charged with sacrilege; in the second place, the distortion in this case acquires the precise aim of denying, obliterating the sacral content of the work, and thus divesting it of all supernatural virtue.[49]

The Jewish Dialect of Rome has terms and expressions which fall into these specific categories and are still commonly used. For example, a pretty woman is sometimes referred to as a "*mezuzodde*" (which derives from the Hebrew, *mezuzah*, the box containing scriptural passages which traditional Jews kiss upon entering and exiting a house), since men would want to kiss her. Non-Jews are referred to generally as "*ngesavve,*" from the Hebrew for Esau; a non-Jewish woman is a "*chiusa*" (Italian for "closed");[50] and a non-Jewish male is "*ngarelle*" (from the Hebrew for "non-circumcised").

There are examples of frequently used terms in *Giudaico-Romanesco* with Hebrew origins which are used with significantly different meaning than their Hebrew sources, [51] that could be called, "reversed usage." The phrase, "*famo rishud*" is used to mean, "let's get out of here," attempting to encourage others to leave situations early. However, it comes from a

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[49] Levi, *The Periodic Table* 10-11.

[50] Scazzochio Sestieri 120 discusses origin of *chiusa*. See also discussion of *chiuso* earlier this chapter.

[51] Scazzochio Sestieri 125 includes a brief discussion and list of expressions.

Romanesco form of *facciamo* 'let us make' or 'let us do' and the Hebrew *rishut* 'permission,' which might seem more appropriate to use upon entering rather than leaving. Even more paradoxical is the use of "*davarre*" or "*fa davarre*," which comes from the Hebrew (*davar*) meaning "word" or "thing" (and the Italian *fa* 'make' or 'do'), but is used to mean, "be quiet" or "shut up." This phrase is also still very common, and often used to keep someone from divulging too much information, or by a parent to quiet children. These expressions are commonly used, confirming what both Modena Mayer and Jochnowitz imply about retaining ways of discussing uncomfortable topics as part of what is retained from a dialect. The speakers of the Dialect use these euphemisms to aid in evading uncomfortable situations and allow speakers to speak more freely.

Another example of using unpleasant vocabulary can be found in the prevalent use of nicknames.[52] Although *Romanesco* uses nicknames occasionally, it is something that has always been common in *Giudaico-Romanesco*.[53] Often people are known better by these nicknames than by their real names. Sometimes they are given these names to differentiate among many members of the same extended family who share the same "secular" names.[54] These nicknames may be related to their given names (such as diminutives for Ester: Stere, Sterina, Sterucia; one of the women always in the *Piazza* is called "*Zia Betta*" from Elisabetta), or particular personal

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[52] See Scazzochio Sestieri 123 for a discussion concerning nicknames of first and last names.

[53] See Piperno's book *Soprannomi e . . . contorni*.

[54] A humorous anecdote was recounted during the interviews about a carload of men who were arrested when a police officer asked them what their names were, and all three of the men in the car responded, "Angelo Di Cori." The officer assumed that they were teasing him, and brought them all down to the station for questioning. They were, in fact, all named Angelo Di Cori, and were a father, his son, and nephew.

characteristics about an individual (such as: *Ciuccia* 'Lollipop,' *Dentone* 'Big Tooth,' *Mugnetta* 'Mumbler,' *Mastrolindo* 'Mr. Clean'). Although many nicknames have no negative connotations, frequently the aspect chosen for determining the nickname of an individual is unflattering.

Both the *Romanesco* and the *Giudaico-Romanesco* dialects have tendencies toward other types of pejorative and/or humorous connotations as well:

> In the two dialects one notes a tendency to alter the words with a connotation that is pejorative, affectionate, funny. I observed that the phenomenon is common among the two dialects; I would say however, that it is common in principle, but not the alterations and the words that are included. Examples of specific alterations from *Giudaico-Romanesco*: *ragazzi* ['youngsters'] changes to *crepazzi* ['cracked']; *femmini* ['females'] to *scemmini* ['fools']; *sissignora* ['yes ma'am'] to *cciccignora* ['fat lady'].[55]

> The Jews who lived in Rome from the end of the republican era. . . assimilated in part the sarcastic, humoristic temperament of the Romans and they rerouted it toward making fun of the Romans. . . aggravated and strained by a difficult and sad life — into their Dialect.[56]

Many euphemisms and nicknames are especially precious because they are funny. Preserving the humorous aspect of the Dialect is apparently common among endangered languages. Dorian depicts similarities in the survival of various languages:

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[55] Scazzochio Sestieri 117.

[56] Scazzochio Sestieri 119.

You can say the thing in Pennsylvania German, you could say it in English, to be

funny; in Pennsylvania German it's ten times funnier, saying the same thing, than

it is in English. [Berks County bilingual, 1976]

Although this humorous character is greatly valued and serves a strong

social bonding purpose, among the Pennsylvania Dutch as among East

Sutherlanders, it is notable that claims for any special expressiveness, or for a

special effectiveness in sincerity, credibility, and the like are much less often

made. Weinreich (1964:95) noted that "obsolescent languages . . . easily develop

comic associations." Michael Silverstein suggests (personal communication) that

ethnic humor in the obsolescent language becomes, in ghettoized situations, the

equivalent of, or replacement for, humor at the expense of ethnics.[57]

Humorous uses of the Dialect have played a large part in its resurgence. Most of the

creative works that are being published are humorous. It may be the primary reason for the

success of the plays, which, in fact, are usually referred to as the "comedies." When asked to use

the Dialect, almost all of the respondents told anecdotal stories which were humorous. Jews

around the world have found it helpful to relieve their misery through laughter, and it seems that

the ugliness of the Ghetto experience has been replaced by laughter that reflects and preserves it.

The use of humor is extremely successful as a binding force for the people. It has become a

highly effective means for the Jews of the Ghetto, and Jews around the world, to cope with

misery, suffering, and hardship, since it involves intellectual play which requires and thrives on

shared associations.

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[57] Dorian, *Language Death* 78, fn 6.