El eskribano grande: Traces of Linguistic Shift among Sephardic Jews in Seventeenth-Century Italy and the Netherlands

A printed version of Nequdot ha-Kesef (‘Silver Grains’), a commentary on the Song of Songs by Abraham Laniado, appeared in Venice in 1619. The book was edited by Moshe Laniado, son-in-law of Abraham, and printed in the house of Pietro and Lorenzo Bragadin(i). The edition has five components, printed in separate columns: Shir ha-Shirim (Song of Songs) in Hebrew, Rashi’s commentary, the Aramaic Targum, Laniado’s commentary, and a Judeo-Spanish translation of the Targum, which follows the well-known principles of verbatim-translation characteristic of Ladino-books (like the famous Biblia de Ferrara of 1553, various Haggadot, and translations of Pirqe Avot).¹ The translation is printed in Hebrew characters, as is the rest of the text. Each column has a title; that of the Ladino-translation is signed la’az (‘vernacular’).

The state of print is somewhat coarse, but simultaneously there is relative coherence in the graphic system. Concerning the graphic and typographic quality of the edition it must be said that it is of a very low standard compared with the excellent Venetian Seder Haggadah shel Pesach, which had appeared just ten years earlier, in 1609. This might be related to the general decline of the Hebrew printing presses in Venice, which had become evident since the second decade of the seventeenth century.

The text of the translation, printed in square characters is completely vocalised by matres lectiones. In addition there is infra-linear punctualization. This vocalization is often wrong and perhaps made by another naqdan.

To elucidate the linguistic condition of the translation some specimens will be given here. The vocabulary, for example, contains many Hebrew loans, mostly written *more hebraico*, i.e. following the Hebrew orthographic system (e.g., *shabbat, mishnah, kohanim, bet ha-knesset, shekhinah, mitzvot*, etcetera). On the other hand – and quite surprisingly – we find translations of words which are, or at least should be, well known to Jewish readers, such *salmos* for Hebrew *tehillim*, and *santuario* for *bet ha-miqdash.*

Moreover, there is a remarkable quantity of typically Judeo-Spanish words, e.g. *meldadura* (‘reading, study [of the Holy texts]’, also ‘interpretation’), *froñiguantes i moñiguantes* (‘to be fruit-bearing and to

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2 It remains enigmatic why the Aramaic *safrai* is translated by a Hebrew word: *chakhamim* (‘wise men’). Umberto Cassuto found the same phenomena in several Judeo-Italian rituals and called it ‘une chose curieuse’, in *idem*, ‘Les traductions judéo-italiennes du Rituel’, *REJ* 89 (1930) 260-280. Curiously, the same Hebrew word is also found three times in the original text (6:23, 7:3, 7:14), but there the translators decided upon Spanish *savyos*. And in one case it even remains *chakhamim*. Similarly, the Hebrew *gan eden* is sometimes translated with Judeo-Spanish *guerto/guerta*, sometimes it is not.