

Normalizing the natural: the Aljamiado phenomenon as a case of scriptal variation

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Since the mid-19th century, the term Aljamiado literature has been used for referring to the Hispano-Romance texts written with the Arabic alphabet by the Moriscos —i.e. the Muslims of the Iberian Peninsula forcefully converted to Christianity in the late 15th–early 16th centuries and their descendants— between the 15th and 17th centuries (Calderón, 1848a, 1848b). Between the late 1920s and the 1970s, a number of authors started using it for referring to similar phenomena in the Balkan area in Albanian (Kaleši, 1956, 1970), Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian (Bajraktarević, 1928, 1936, 1937; Hadžijahić, 1941, 1955) and Greek (Theodoridis, 1965, 1966, 1970, 1974). Later, Hegyi (1978, 1979) introduced the concept of “the Aljamiado phenomenon” for referring to the use of the Arabic alphabet by Islamic minorities in border areas for writing their own vernacular languages. Yet another, albeit earlier, usage of the word Aljamiado came from Hebrew tradition where the term “Hebraic Aljamiado” (Ribera & Asín, 1912) was used for referring to the writing of Hispano-Romance with Hebrew characters. Each of the expansions on the meaning of the term carries implications that have not been analyzed in depth and, in spite of the popularity and breadth that it has acquired, the phenomenon remains understudied from a linguistic standpoint. While research on sociolinguistics of writing and grapholinguistics has seen recent and significant developments (Lillis, 2013; Bunčić, 2016; Meletis, 2020a, 2020b; Meletis & Dürchscheid, 2022) and research on Aljamiado (in any of its iterations) is ongoing, these traditions rarely mix: linguistic research has not examined the details and implications of the so-called Aljamiado phenomenon and research on Aljamiado has overlooked to a great extent linguistic contributions. In this talk I trace, first, a history of the evolution of the meanings and implications of the term Aljamiado up to the emergence of Hegyi’s idea of the Aljamiado phenomenon, then I contend against the reification of Aljamiado as a category of linguistic analysis and lastly I characterize the so-called Aljamiado phenomenon as an instance of scriptal variation. This characterization opposes the common assertion that instances similar to the so-called Aljamiado phenomenon are rare occurrences and stresses that they are natural manifestations of scriptal variation resulting from processes of cultural hybridization.

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