I would like to suggest the use of the word “repertoire” in place of “canon,” as part of our attempt to expand the context, or reframe the terms, of the discussion of Jewish languages. We typically associate “repertoire” with music and theater, and the expression “linguistic repertoire” is not totally alien to us either. When speaking of literature, however, we typically refer to “canon.” We speak of “defining the canon,” of “enlarging,” or “opening the canon,” and inclusion into the canon is identified with agreed-upon value and recognition. The word “canon” comes from a Greek word, kanon, which corresponds to a yardstick — a rod used for measuring; “canon” by its very etymology focuses heavily on measurement and value. The literary use of “canon” comes from a religious context: “canon” is associated with the list of books selected to be preserved and included in the Bible. Such an origin reinforces doxa, rule, valoration, hierarchy, and stasis; it also centers on verbal and written texts.

The word “repertoire,” on the other hand, is a French word, from the Latin “repertorium,” and it means “inventory,” or “catalogue.” It conveys the idea of a list, which in itself implies a process of organizing, through the concomitant selection and deselection of items. In that respect it shares characteristics with “canon,” but where “canon” seems valorative, closed, static, and authoritative, “repertoire,” either by virtue of its etymology, or by its use, seems to be more inclusive and agreeable to flexibility and change. Not only does the etymology of “repertoire” include both discovery (in the Latin repertus) and invention (in the Latin prefix re, or “again” + the verb parere, “to produce”), but the term has been used in more and broader contexts. Besides the more widely recognized use in the performing arts (musical, dance, and drama repertoires), scholars from across multiple and very different fields speak of “interpretive repertoire” (discourse analysis),
“cultural repertoire” (anthropology and sociology), “verbal repertoire” (linguistics), “ethnolinguistic repertoire” (sociolinguistics), “opening repertoire” (chess), “genre repertoire” (management), and “immune repertoire” (molecular biology and biochemistry). The range and elasticity that “repertoire” allows far surpass those of “canon,” so the term can more aptly be used to integrate different disciplines.

“Repertoire” has been imagined, or depicted metaphorically, not only as a list, but also as “a toolkit,” “a building block,” or “a set of resources.” Such images emphasize the flexibility of the repertoire and the different degrees to which it can be mobilized by either individual or collective agencies. Individuals or groups can choose to pick one or more elements from a pool at their disposal, a process that is thus infused with fluidity and variation. For example, many scholars believe that the origins of what eventually became Ladino/Djudezmo, or vernacular Judeo-Spanish, can be found in the selection and use of lexical varieties of Spanish, along with Hebraisms, followed by Arabisms, that would indicate a specifically Jewish identity in a Christian, and then, Muslim, environment. With time and with new waves of migrations, more and more languages became available to the Jews of Spain, who gradually selected and incorporated into their own language variety phonemic, lexical, and syntactical elements from languages as diverse as French, Italian, Greek, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Bosnian, and Serbo-Croatian. The selections and the degree of incorporation vary among communities, and between generations (with the modernization and Westernization of Ottoman Sephardim, for example, many young women soon began to speak French, Greek, and Italian, while older women remained exclusive Ladino speakers), and, to a certain extent, even among individuals. It is precisely this lack of uniformity that makes “repertoire” the apt word choice, as it allows us to consider the broad spectrum of options that are deployed by the agents. This is not to say that the choices are all consciously made: varying degrees of awareness and deliberation are considered in the making of any repertoire.

Whether inadvertently or deliberately, this aggregate of options from which the group can draw selectively is shaped mostly by means of invention and import. This is what Itamar Even-Zohar claims in The Making of Culture Repertoire and the Role of Transfer (1977). The notion of invention brings us back to the etymological meaning of “repertoire,” and that of import emphasizes the significance of contact between cultures, while also introducing the idea of translation, broadly stated. More often than not contact implies exchange and flow of languages, texts, melodies, and songs, not to mention food and clothing.

The existence of so-called Jewish languages cannot be dissociated from the non-Jewish environment among which Jews lived. Such languages appeared in contact with non-Jewish languages, in addition to, and in opposition to them. In fact, the relationship between Jews and the peoples among whom they settled has shaped the development of the
main elements that usually define their group identity as Jews. The cultural repertoires of Jews have been formed in the constant negotiation between inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, sameness and difference, tradition and change. If the dynamic interplay with the surrounding peoples has heavily informed what is recognized as “Jewish,” an assessment of any “Jewish repertoire” has to engage with these relational contexts and acknowledge the different elements that migrate from one group to another — elements that are absorbed, adopted, refashioned, and transformed. With its creative tensions, this complex and active process is, in the end, one of translation. The contact, exchange, and adoption of “foreign” elements bring change and innovation to the repertoire — a process that is not only historical but also synchronic, happening today. That is how we can account not only for the prestigious Romancero, but also for the old Turkish Bestes and Greek Tragoudia of Eastern Sephardic Jews, or for their Spanish Zarzuelas, Argentine Tangos, US American Charlestons, and French Foxtrots in the early 20th century; or, in a synchronic take on this diachronic practice, for the new Sephardic Tango in Ladino in Buenos Aires today.

To speak of translation latu sensu, the notion of “repertoire” again is useful. It allows us to consider not only written texts — the concept of “texts” to which we are accustomed — but a broader and qualitatively different kind of “texts”: texts in other media or languages, in semiotic terms. I explain: Taking Charles Sander Peirce’s idea of semiotics as inclusive of the different studies of signs, in which verbal language is just one segment in the infinite process of semiosis, we should consider not only the constitutive verbal linguistic elements per se — phonemes, lexicon, syntagms, morphology etc. — but also other ways of representation, or sign systems, i.e., other languages. That would include music, fashion, objects, gestures, cuisine, painting, photography, and many other systems of signification. But even if we focus on verbal language alone, “repertoire” goes beyond the “written,” and embraces oral tradition, a tradition that has been an integral part of Jewish culture — and very significant in Sephardic culture especially. Not limiting itself to literacy, but embracing orality, “repertoire,” unlike “canon,” lends itself to recognizing the complexity of oral genres, to acknowledging that orality is in itself a kind of textuality.

“Repertoire” is a broad enough term to allow us to redraw the boundaries among languages, between genres and media, and between oral and written. In so doing it also mines hierarchies between high and low culture. By emphasizing invention and import, “repertoire” is also dynamic enough: it points at composition and circulation, and gets us beyond stasis and essentialism. In order to account for the interrelatedness of semiotic systems in Jewish culture, and to how this varied and dynamic compound informs the creation and use of “Jewish languages,” it is time to change our terminology. It is time to ditch the canon and embrace the repertoire.