

Basque as an extinct language

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Abstract

The number of Basque speakers has increased dramatically in recent decades, putting an end to centuries of decline. In this brief essay I discuss some of the consequences that this dramatic growth may be having for the evolution of Basque as an independent linguistic system. In my view, the two areas that are most likely to be affected in an important way are pronunciation and lexical semantics, including phraseology.

1. When is a language extinct?

During much of its known history, the Basque language has been receding in its geographical extension and societal implantation. Observing this historical trend, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) predicted that the language would no longer be spoken by the beginning of the 20th century (see Zabaleta-Gorrotxategi 2003). Obviously, that has not happened. On the contrary, thanks to considerable efforts on the part of Basque society, now, a hundred years later than its predicted disappearance, the language has a larger number of speakers than it has ever had. Nevertheless, it may be interesting to consider whether there is some sense in which the language has become or is becoming extinct in spite of the growing number of people who can speak it.

Contrary to Humboldt's prediction, Basque is still widely spoken. What we do not find is a large number of monolingual speakers. The question is what the consequences of this absence or rarity of monolingual speakers could be for the language itself. Does it make sense to speak of a language being, in some way, extinct when its speakers, no matter how large their number, are all bilingual? There are several possible definitions of language extinction that we may contemplate:

- (a) An extinct language is a language without any speakers.
- (b) An extinct language is a language without native speakers.
- (c) An extinct language is a language without monolingual speakers.
- (d) An extinct language is a language without any speakers for whom it is their dominant language.

Languages like Etruscan, Iberian and Hittite, for instance, are extinct according to all definitions. On the other hand, Latin and Sanskrit are extinct according to definitions (b), (c) and most likely (d), but not according to definition (a), since there are people who have learned them through study and can express themselves in these languages with reasonable fluency.

Of course, it is possible for a language without native speakers to acquire them if people who have learned the language as adults decide to pass it on to their children. The most successful case of this type is that of Hebrew, which acquired native speakers after many centuries of being learned only as a second language, but it is not the only case. Other languages have also been revived more recently after the passing away of their last native speakers. A recent European example is Manx, the Celtic language of the Island of Man, whose last native speaker by continuous intergenerational transmission died in 1974, but which is being reintroduced through the school system and now has a sizable number of non-native fluent speakers, who in some cases may be transmitting it to their children as a native language.

Clearly Basque is not an extinct language under definition (a) or (b), but it may have reached the criteria to be included as extinct under definition (c) and, it is at least questionable whether it may also fall under definition (d). Whereas language extinction is generally defined only as in (a) or (b), I believe it is useful to consider the two other more liberal definitions of this concept given above. Arguably, when a language has no monolingual speakers, it has ceased to function as an independent linguistic system. Subordination to another language is, of course, greater when most of its speakers are not only bilingual but tend to be dominant in another language. Under these circumstances we may expect a strong influence from the dominant language of those bilingual speakers.

Again, although the term 'extinction' may seem overly dramatic, I think it is appropriately used to refer to the loss of distinctive features and structures of the language, as one may expect to happen by interlinguistic interference in circumstances where it competes with another language in the brains of its speakers. On the other hand, I want to make clear that I do not advocate puristic attitudes. My approach is simply to expose the facts without judging.

In this respect, it is interesting to note that purists have typically focused only on a few aspects of the language such as acceptable and unacceptable words and, in the case of Basque, word order. Nevertheless, there are other areas where language interference is far more difficult to avoid and is far more pervasive. These facets include lexical semantics and constructions, on the one hand, and sound structure on the other.

In this short paper I will focus on the Basque-Spanish bilingual context, which is the larger one by far in terms of speakers, but the conclusions apply equally to the Basque-French context.

2. Lexical semantics

Starting with lexical semantics, it is reasonable to predict that the present-day situation of widespread bilingualism may lead Basque-Spanish bilinguals to give Basque words the exact same meaning as their closest Spanish equivalent. For instance, Spanish *seguir* has the two distinct meanings of ‘to follow’ and ‘to continue’, as in *seguir las instrucciones* ‘to follow the instructions’ and *seguir leyendo* ‘to continue, keep reading’. Bilingual speakers are aware that *jarraiki* ~ *jarraitu* ‘to follow’ is a native word and that *segitu* is a borrowing from Spanish *seguir*, but there is generally no awareness that Spanish semantics are being calqued in expressions such as *irakurtzen jarraitzen du* ‘s/he keeps reading’ = Sp. *sigue leyendo*. Even really peculiar Spanish expressions, disguised in Basque clothing, are often found in formal writing. One striking case is the expression *faltan bota* ‘to miss’, but literally ‘to throw in fault’, as in *faltan bota zaitut* ‘I missed you’. The Spanish expression from which this common Basque locution is calqued, *echar en falta*, is certainly peculiar. It appears (see Dictionary of the Real Academia Española) that it arose from a missinterpretation of Portuguese *achar em falta* ‘to miss’, where *achar* is ‘to find’ (Spanish *hallar*).

To get a sense of the extent to which Spanish lexical semantics may be influencing the Basque of bilingual Basque-Spanish speakers, an interesting exercise may be to think of idiomatic expressions in Spanish, translate them literally into Basque and do a search in internet to see whether the calques are attested. Take, for instance, the Spanish verb *poner*. The main meaning of this verb is ‘to put’, but it is also used in a great number of idiomatic expressions where the English equivalent would contain a different verb. One of the Basque verbs for ‘put’ is *jarri*. For instance, ‘he has **put** the book on the table’ can be translated in Spanish as *ha puesto el libro en la mesa* and in Basque as *liburua mahaian jarri du*. Let’s consider now a few idioms and special constructions with *poner* in Spanish.

Spanish *poner difícil* ‘to make or become difficult’ may be calqued in Basque as *zail jarri*, as in this example found in the internet: *Oso zail jarri zaió igoera Realari* ‘promotion [to first league] has become very difficult to the Royal [Society] (name of a soccer team)’, cf. Sp. *Se le ha puesto muy difícil el ascenso a la Real*.

If we continue this exercise, it is readily apparent that this direct calquing from one language to the other extends to even more idiomatic Spanish expressions with *poner*. For the same meaning of ‘to make or become difficult’, Spanish has the idiom *poner(se) cuesta arriba*, which could be translated in English as ‘to become an uphill battle’, but, which literally translated would be ‘to put uphill’. We find the same Spanish idiom in Basque: *Maldan gora jarri zaió* ‘it has become difficult for him/her’ = Sp. *Se le ha puesto cuesta arriba* (over 20,000 hits for *maldan gora jarri*, lit. ‘put uphill’, in a Google search).

All instances of Spanish *poner(se)* with the meaning of ‘to make, become, turn’ are in fact translatable with Basque *jarri*. To give a couple of additional examples from internet searches: *Semaforoa berde jarri da* ‘the traffic light has turned (lit. ‘put’) green’ is a literal translation of Sp. *El semáforo se ha puesto verde*; and *Momentu honetan modan jartzen ari dira podcast-ak* ‘At present podcasts are becoming fashionable (lit. ‘putting themselves in fashion’)’ literally translates Sp. *En este momento se están poniendo de moda los podcasts*.

Other idioms with Sp. *poner/Bq. jarri*, not involving the notion of ‘becoming’ are, for instance, Sp. *poner recurso/Bq. errekurtsua jarri* ‘to submit an appeal’ as we find in the Basque example *Hirurteko Planari errekurtsua jarri zaio* = Sp. *Se le ha puesto recurso al Plan Trienal* ‘An appeal to the Triennial Plan has been submitted’ and Sp. *poner en marcha/ Bq. martxan jarri* ‘to start’, as in the example *Webgunea martxan jarri dute* = Sp. *han puesto en marcha el sitio web* ‘They have started (lit. ‘put in march’) a web site’.

Like Spanish *poner*, Basque *jarri* can also be used with the meaning of ‘to say in a text’, as we find in the example *Esango al zenidake zer jartzen duen orri hortan?* = Sp. *¿Me podrías decir qué pone en esa hoja?* ‘Can you tell me what it says (lit. ‘puts’) on that page?’. To conclude, we may say that, for many Basque speakers, *jarri* is an exact equivalent of Spanish *poner*, whatever its meaning and including literal translations of all sorts of idiomatic expressions.

I have used Bq *jarri* = Sp *poner* as an illustration for a general point, to illustrate convergence in lexical semantics and usage. Basque still has quite a few idiomatic expressions that are quite independent from anything found in Spanish and we also find differences between the two languages in the realm of lexical semantics. For instance, the verb *jo* ‘to hit’ has several other meanings that its Spanish translations, *golpear*, *pegar* do not have, including ‘to play an instrument’ and ‘to arrive’ and participates in a number of idioms without a literal Spanish counterpart (e.g. *adarra jo* ‘to make fun’, lit. ‘to hit the horn’). Nevertheless, the expectation is that the tendency will be for these cases to become residual.

It is worth pondering to what extent Basque retains the capacity to create new idioms that are not calqued from Spanish. The expectation is that in the current situation these mismatches between the two languages will tend to decrease. New Spanish idioms are certainly freely translated, but I am not aware of new Basque idioms arising in the last few decades. To the extent that we find a serious curtailment of the creative capacity of the language in giving rise to new expressions and shifting the meaning of words, independently of developments of other languages, I think it is appropriate to speak of extinction. The current situation seems to be one where new Spanish usages are immediately calqued into Basque, but there is little if any innovation in Basque itself. This is a feature that Basque shares with languages that lack native speakers.

3. Phonetics

It is an obvious fact that very few people can speak two unrelated languages, say, Spanish and English or French and Chinese, without a “foreign accent” in at least one of the two languages (see, e.g., Flege 2007). The exception is found in some bilingual or multilingual societies, where the languages have converged in their phonetic structure, to the extent that switching from one language to another does not involve a change in articulatory patterns.

Throughout its history, Basque has of course been influenced in its phonological structure by the languages with which it has been in contact. To give only an example, the fact that the originally voiced palatal sound of words like *jakin* ‘to know’ became a voiceless velar fricative in all of Gipuzkoa and neighboring areas of Bizkaia and Navarre obviously cannot be divorced from parallel developments in Spanish. In his description of the phonological system of the dialect of Roncal, Michelena points out that, although in many respects this dialect is closely related to Zuberoan, there are considerable differences of pronunciation that are explainable by language contact, with Galo-Romance in the case of Zuberoan and with Ibero-Romance in the case of Roncalese (and Salazarese): “Si se busca una fórmula concisa que permita resumir los hechos sin gran daño para la exactitud, podría servir la siguiente: el suletino es un dialecto galo mientras que el roncalés y el salacenco son dialectos hispánicos” (Michelena 1988[1954]: 296).

Nevertheless, in spite of centuries-long contact and phonological transfer, Basque phonology is not identical to Spanish phonology and the traditional Basque speech of many areas is quite different from Spanish in its phonetics. What we are witnessing now is an acceleration in the processes of convergence. For many speakers of the younger generations there are not many phonological or phonetic differences between their Basque and their Spanish, if any: their Basque does not contain any phonemes that are not found also in Spanish and all phonemes have the same phonetic realization in both languages.

One may think that this has to do with the spread of standard Basque, since this variety was initially developed as a written standard, without any specific pronunciation norms. However, we can observe the same pattern of phonetic convergence among young speakers who speak a local dialect. As documented by Gaminde (2010: 15), in Gernika, for instance, all phonetic and phonological differences between the traditional Basque dialect and Spanish, which were substantial, are being lost in the span of a single generation. Where older speakers have a contrast among the consonants written <tt>, <tx> and <ts> or <tz>, young speakers have a single affricate phoneme which ranges between [tʃ] and [ts], as in *aitte* [ajtse] ‘father’, *atzo* [atso] ‘yesterday’, *gatxa* [gatsa] ‘difficult’ (the pronunciation of the single Spanish affricate <ch> as dental [tʃ] is also a change in progress in the same genera-

tion of speakers) (see also Gaminde et al 2013). The prepalatal fricatives voiceless [ʃ] and voiced [ʒ] are replaced by [s], as in [mendise] ‘the mountain’ (which for older Gernika speakers is [mendize]). The affricate [dʒ], on the other hand, is replaced by [j] (= Spanish <y>), so that, older [dʒat] ‘it is to me’ becomes [jat]. The delateralization of the palatal lateral /ʎ/, which is a sound change that is reaching completion in Spanish, also affects the Basque pronunciation of these speakers, as in *mutille* [mutije] ‘the boy’. Finally, at the level of phonetics, Gaminde reports that the retracted apical /s/ used by older Gernika Basque speakers is no longer found in the speech of many young speakers. In sum, whereas the Basque of Gernika, as spoken by the older generations has a number of phonological and phonetic differences with respect to Spanish, some young Basque speakers from Gernika have exactly the same pronunciation in their two languages, Basque and Spanish.

In spite of the obvious influence of the neighboring Romance languages, as long as those languages were truly “neighboring” for many Basque speakers, and not installed in the same brains, Basque had its own phonological innovations, quite different in some cases from those taking place in Spanish (or Gascon and French). One could give many examples of phonological developments in recent centuries. One of them would be the dialectally widespread palatalization of alveolar consonants after /i/ as in *milla* ‘a thousand’, *miña* ‘the pain’. Another example would be the raising of /a/ to /e/ after a high vowel, as in *sagarr-a* ‘the apple’ but *egurr-e* ‘the firewood’, which has been spreading in a large area from western Bizkaia to western Navarre. We may wonder whether Basque retains the capacity to innovate such home-grown phonological processes, as it has been doing until recently. My own feeling is that in the present situation this is unlikely. It seems to me that the only phonological innovations that we may expect to arise are those that are either transferred from Spanish or result in Basque becoming more similar to this language.

A modern study of Basque phonology, based on the sound system of many speakers, could for the most part contain the phrase “see Spanish phonology”, complemented only by a few notes, including a the statement that the position of the stress is not contrastive (e.g. *autóbusean etórri gará* ~ *autobúsean etórri gára* ‘we have come by bus’), the description of a few alternations (e.g. *mutil* ~ *mutiya* ‘boy/the boy’), the fact that native words which orthographically have initial <j> (e.g. *jakin*, *jaun*) can be variably pronounced with /x/ or with /j/, and little more. There wouldn’t be much more to say, if we leave aside matters of lexical frequency and old, lexically-rooted, morphophonological alternations. Of course, this description does not apply to all Basque speakers nowadays. There are still speakers who retain a distinctive Basque phonology, especially in areas where the social use of Basque is very high. For instance, in areas with traditional pitch-accent systems, which are completely alien to Spanish prosody, one finds speakers who make lexical contrasts in tone even among the younger generations.

4. Что делать?

One way to test the vitality of a language is by observing its ability to change. Dead languages do not change. Languages that are alive are in constant flux. Basque is changing and, therefore, alive. The question in our case is whether Basque is able to undergo independent changes, other than those leading to convergence with Spanish (or French in the case of Basque-French bilinguals).

As I have tried to illustrate above, in the present situation Basque may have lost all vitality that could lead to the development of new non-borrowed expressions or new independent phonological phenomena. In this sense, the Basque language is in a state of semi-extinction in some specific areas where it is subordinated to other languages (Spanish or French) that serve as its sources of innovation.

Is this a cause of concern? Is there anything one should or could do about this? I don't think so. It is simply unavoidable in a situation where all speakers of one language are also speakers of another language that has many monolingual speakers. Looking at the positive aspects, the elimination of phonetic difficulties for speakers of the majority language who want to learn the minority language facilitates their integration in the linguistic community enormously. Clearly, if, in order to be admitted into the community of Basque speakers, second language learners had to master the complex prosody of the dialect of Ondarroa, the segmental contrasts of traditional Zuberoan (with nasalized and nonnasalized aspiration, aspirated stops, voiced and voiceless fricatives at various places of articulation, etc) or the phonetics of any such other local dialect with many phonological differences with respect to Spanish, there would be many fewer Basque speakers nowadays.

In his edited 2001 book, Joshua Fishman asks whether threatened languages can be saved. In many respects, the case of Basque is one of the most remarkable success stories, showing that, indeed, threatened languages can be saved. Azurmendi, Bachoc & Zabaleta (2001), in their well-informed and balanced account of the Basque language situation in their contribution to Fishman's (2001) volumen, point out that "One of the most positive changes seen over the last two decades has been the reversal in the process of the loss of Euskara transmission as an L1 within the family" (p. 241). But, in addition to this, transmission of Basque outside of the family, primarily through the school system, has had a huge impact. Recent data published by the statistical service of the Basque Government, Euskostat, show that in the Basque Autonomous Community, the lowest point in the historical decline in the transmission of Basque is reached in the generation born in the decades after the Spanish Civil war. Among the speakers who were in the 65-69 age group in 2011 only 20.5 % were Basque speakers. On the other hand, the percentage of Basque speakers reaches an astonishing 80 % in the 10-14 age group (Eusko Jaurlaritza/Gobierno Vasco 2011: 29). To account

for this huge gain in knowledge of Basque across the generations, we must assume that most of the transmission has not been direct throughout the generations within the family. Instead teachers and parents who were themselves L2 speakers of Basque have played an important role in changing the tide. Under these circumstances the phenomena that I have discussed in this paper seem unavoidable. This seems, however, like a fair price to pay. As linguists, we may bemoan language convergence: the more similar Basque pronunciation becomes to Spanish pronunciation, the less there is for phonologists and phoneticians to describe and analyze. Convergence in lexical semantics and other aspects also results in less work for us, linguists. But it is not clear that any of this matters to anyone but professional linguists. Basque, as a linguistic system, may be becoming extinct in some of its structure. For many speakers it may not have a phonological system and patterns of phonetic implementation that are separate from Spanish. The language may also be losing its ability to generate independent expressions and innovate in lexical semantics. But this extinction of its linguistic structures is compensated by the success of its social revitalization.

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