

## **A Sociological Study of Sung, Extempore Verse-Making in Basque**

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### ***Bertsolaritza: From Oral Tradition to Community Position***

This article is based on a project commissioned in 2005 by the Euskal Herriko Bertsozale Elkarte and conducted by researchers from the Sociology and Political Science Departments of the University of the Basque Country. Four main surveys were developed through the course of this research, and two field studies of a quantitative nature were conducted: one with the participants of the semifinals of the *bertsolari* championship and the other with those performers who went on to the finals. In spring 2006, two further quantitative surveys were completed: one with an audience of ordinary *bertsolari* events and another with the Euskaldun population (that is, speakers of the Basque language, Euskara). The latter survey is the one upon which the present article is based because an analysis of this study enables us to better discern the relationship that exists between *bertsolaritza*—improvised Basque oral verse—and its real basis: the Basque speakers themselves. Since the spring of 2006, two further studies of a qualitative nature have been conducted: one Delphi analysis with both experts and *bertsolaris* (performers) and another based on discussion groups with different social typologies—Euskaldun and non-Euskaldun—in order to better understand how the tradition of *bertsolaritza* is regarded in the Basque community.

### *The Linguistic Community of Euskara: The Miracle and the Numbers*

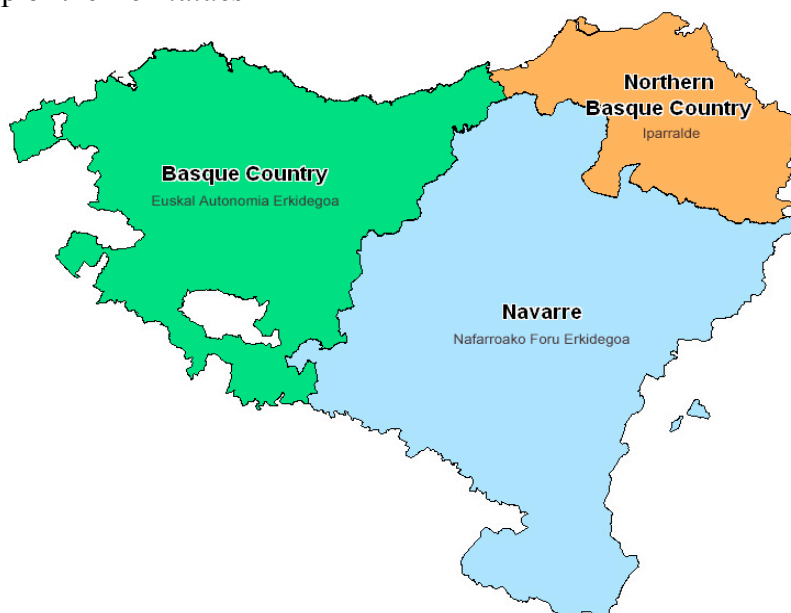
In order to put the phenomenon of *bertsolaritza* in context, it seems helpful to us to give a brief description of Basque culture and language. The Basque Country is a territory that straddles both Spain and France. Its name is derived from the fact that it possesses its own language, Euskara; Euskal Herria, then, means “the country of those who speak Euskara.” Three of its territories (Lapurdi, Nafarroa Beherea, and Zuberoa) are situated in the French Basque Country, or Iparralde; and four of them (Araba, Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, and Nafarroa Garaia) are located in Hegoalde, within the Spanish State.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Map 1.

As of January 2005, around 270,000 people were living in the Northern Basque Country, Iparralde, while about 2,720,000 people resided in the Southern Basque Country, Hegoalde. The development models on either side of the border have been influenced by the events of the respective states. Thus the South has experienced major economic development and a large influx of Spanish population,<sup>2</sup> and the North has seen minimal development and a high level of dependency, along with great waves of emigration, either to other areas of France or to the Americas.

**Map 1.** Map of the *Herrialdes*



**Table 1.** Distribution of the population of the Basque Country (2005)

	Population (2005)		%
<b>Southern Basque Country</b>	Araba	301.757	10,1
	Bizkaia	1.136.569	38,0
	Gipuzkoa	688.708	23,0
	Navarre	593.472	19,8
<b>Northern Basque Country</b>	Lapurdi	227.754	7,6
	Nafarroa Beherea	28.835	1,0
	Zuberoa	15.514	0,5
<b>Total</b>		<b>2.992.609</b>	<b>100</b>

<sup>2</sup> Following periods of emigration—largely to Latin America—the direction of emigration changed and the Spanish began to migrate to the Southern Basque Country as part of a massive process of industrialization that took place in the late nineteenth century. The outcome of this immigration was that the ethnic composition of the Southern Basque Country became as follows: one-third of the population is autochthonous, one-third are Spanish immigrants, and the remaining third are descendants of Spanish immigrants or the result of intermarriage of Spaniards and Basques.

To continue with our brief summary, the main issues we must keep in mind are the following:

1. The emergence of Basque nationalism in the south of the Basque Country (in Bizkaia) in the late nineteenth century and its differing level of development (intense in the South and very weak in the North). This development bred strong nationalistic sentiment and therefore politicized the cultural landscape.
2. Basques are a national minority and lack a governmental body—or even State status. This has meant that the population has not been able, as a unit, to establish its own political and linguistic systems.
3. The high degree of administrative fragmentation (seven provinces in two states and three administrative units) and the differing political autonomy of its territories make the situation very complex. The portion of Basque country that is in Spain currently enjoys a notable degree of political autonomy and is divided into two administrative units: the Basque Autonomous Community (with its three provinces, Araba, Bizkaia, and Gipuzkoa) and the Navarrese *Comunidad Foral*, which comprises the province of Nafarroa. In France, the Basque territory has been subsumed into a higher administrative unit and is not officially recognized.<sup>3</sup>

In light of these issues, we are in the presence of a linguistic reality intersected by an extremely complex political and social situation. Nevertheless, this complexity has influenced, and continues to influence, the realities of the linguistic community, the topic that comprises the subject matter for this first section of the present discussion and the basis of cultural production through the medium of the Euskara language in general, and of the phenomenon of *bertsolaritza* in particular.

In order to further clarify the situation, we have provided demographic data for Euskara speakers below that delineate the boundaries of the phenomenon accurately. The table below shows the numbers of Euskaldun (speakers of Euskara):

**Table 2.** Population and Euskalduns of the territories of the Basque Country (2001)

	Population	Basque speakers	Basque speakers by territory (%)
Araba	287.928	45.312	15,7
Bizkaia	1.123.002	273.872	24,4
Gipuzkoa	673.563	337.796	50,2
Navarre	555.829	63.631	11,4
Northern Basque Country	262941	59177	22,5
<b>Total</b>	<b>2.903.263</b>	<b>779.788</b>	<b>26,9</b>

In 2001 the Basque population numbered around three million, a quarter of whom could speak Euskara (with notable variations among territories). The province of Gipuzkoa presented

<sup>3</sup> Toward the end of 2006, the year in which this article was written, the French Parliament refused to grant joint official status to Euskara, claiming that it goes against the unity of the French people and against equality before the law, and that it may pose risks to the European Community. The French and Turkish governments are the only governments who have not signed the European Charter on Minority and Regional Languages.

the highest percentage: one in two residents of this territory can speak the language.<sup>4</sup> At the other end of the Southern Basque Country lies Nafarroa Garaia, where only one out of ten Navarrese can speak Euskara. Similarly, the language is spoken by 15% of the population in Araba and by 25% in Bizkaia. Apart from other vicissitudes of history, the differing legal status of Euskara as an official or joint official language in the different territories also forms part of this picture.<sup>5</sup> Although we do not have any detailed demographic data on Iparralde,<sup>6</sup> we do know that the region presents an average level of 22.5%. This area also, however, has a great deal of internal variability: the two inland territories (Zuberoa and Behenafarroa) have a notably higher percentage of Euskalduns than the coastal province, Lapurdi, but these territories present a demographic trend in steady decline and currently represent only 1.5% of the Basque population.

**Table 3.** Relationship between Euskara and the populations of the different territories, by percentage (2001)

	Araba	Bizkaia	Gipuzkoa	Navarre	Northern
Basque-speakers	16	25	52	12	23
Passive basque speakers	25	25	20	9	13
Non-basque speakers	59	50	29	79	64
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

If we consider Euskara-speaking ability by region,<sup>7</sup> we arrive at something similar to what is illustrated in Map 2, which shows us in which territories Euskara is still a living reality. The region in which over 50% speak Euskara begins in the middle area of Bizkaia, becomes clustered in Gipuzkoa, passes through the northwest of Nafarroa, and reaches as far as the inland territories of the French Basque Country. This “axis” does not touch the two large regions containing the capital cities of San Sebastián and Bilbao, however, and it hardly involves any of the territory of Araba and Nafarroa or the densely populated portion of the Northern Basque Country. In these areas, Euskara-speaking ability doesn’t reach the 50% mark even in the best of cases.

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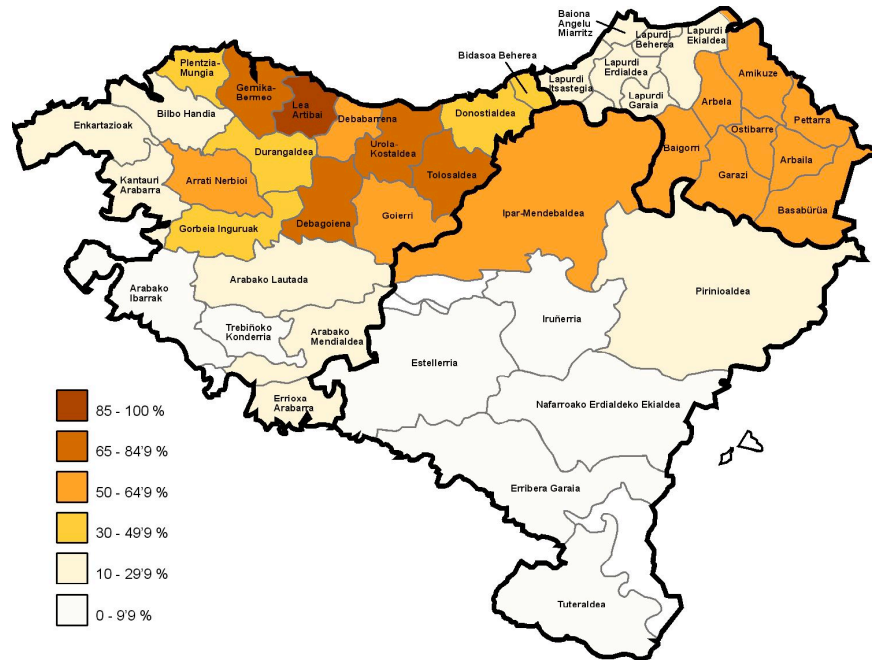
<sup>4</sup> See Table 3.

<sup>5</sup> In the Basque Autonomous Community, Euskara is a joint official language; in Nafarroa its status is under review, which is giving rise to a growing number of difficulties; and in the French Basque Country has not yet obtained joint official status (see note 2).

<sup>6</sup> Administrative fragmentation is an obstacle when it comes to obtaining consistent data, because the functioning of each unit is very much determined by the interests of its respective administration. The most exhaustive data available are those from the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country.

<sup>7</sup> The regions are divided by internal administrative boundaries of the provincial territories.

**Map 2.** Regions of Euskal Herria showing the percentage of the population who can speak Euskara (2001)



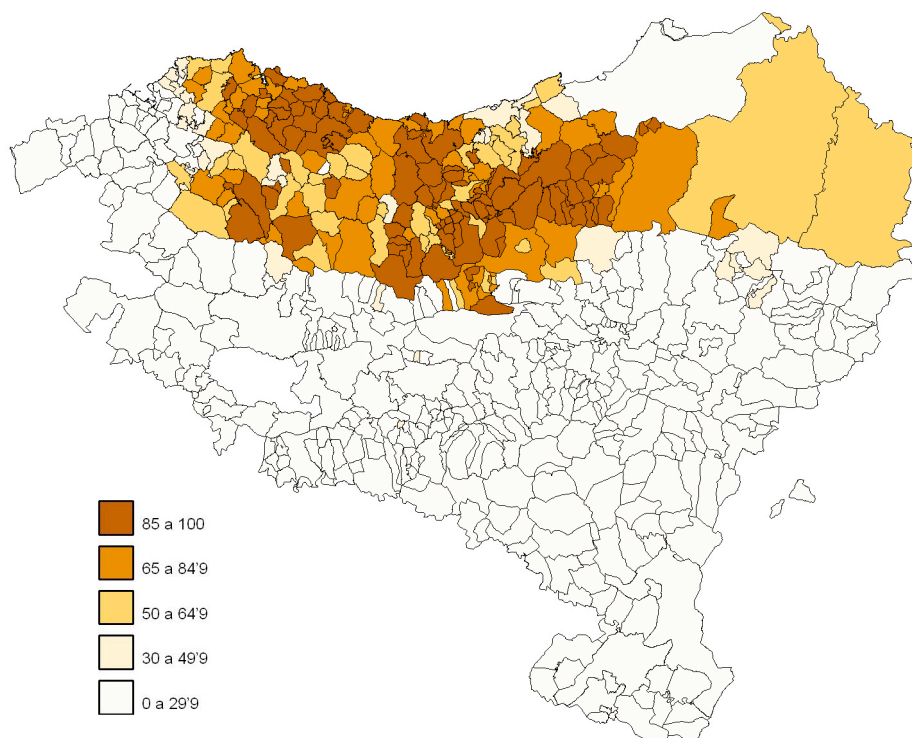
The realities illustrated by the map above are influenced by a number of different factors: the presence of the State languages, which compete with or replace Euskara; cultural marginalization processes; adverse legal frameworks; and the acceptance of marginalization by the Euskara-speaking population and the consequent abandonment of the language. This last phenomenon stems from the fact that in different phases of history, and especially during Franco's dictatorship, many families within Spain stopped speaking Euskara at home—either out of fear, or repression, or because they took the marginalization of the language to heart. In France, Euskara has never obtained official language status. Since the time when Spain recovered its democracy, the degree of sovereignty enjoyed by the Basque Country in Spain has been relatively high; as a result, policies and strategies for linguistic recovery and standardization have been put into place in the Basque Autonomous Community, although not in the Navarrese Comunidad Foral.

In spite of all these issues, it seems relevant here to note two things:

- 1) The language's survival amid two such powerful languages as French and Spanish is remarkable, and is a direct result of the attitudes adopted by Euskalduns in adverse historical contexts.
- 2) The territorialized placement of the Euskara linguistic community, thus enabling the existence of a dense network of relationships that allow a significant part of this population to live their lives in Euskara and to maintain a level of cultural production and consumption in Euskara that is far above what the data appears to suggest.

A more detailed snapshot<sup>8</sup> illustrates this territorialized placement of the Euskaldun linguistic community, which sustains both the general expression of culture through the medium of Euskara and one of its most successful features, *bertsolaritza*. This ecology of Euskara enables us to observe that it is not so much the number of speakers, but rather their concentration, that generates enough critical mass to preserve Euskaldun culture within an increasingly globalized framework. To put it another way, the social reality of Euskara is far denser than the numbers of speakers indicate. It doesn't come down to purely geographical considerations, but rather, in a more fundamental way, to a social and cultural community that constitutes the sociological humus that has made it possible for *bertsolaritza* to grow and develop as a mass phenomenon.

**Map 3.** Municipalities of Euskal Herria showing percentage of Euskara-speaking ability



### *Culture in the Basque Language and Popular Culture: The Phenomenon of Bertsolaritza*

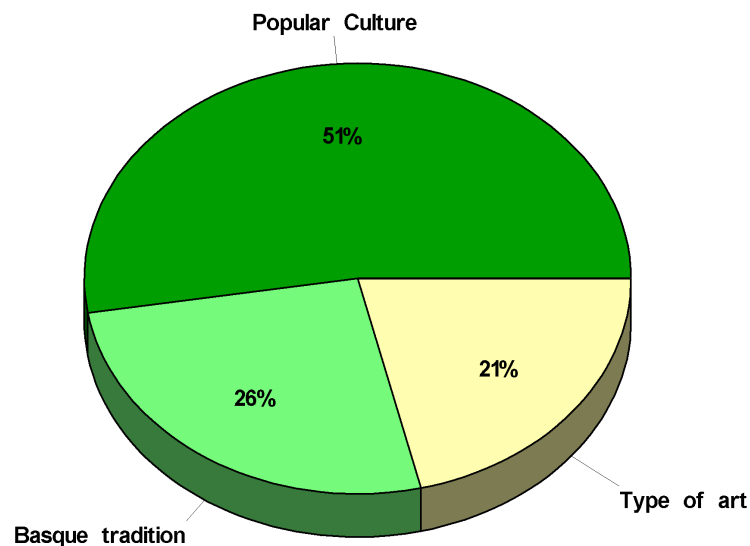
When Euskalduns are questioned about their concept of *bertsolaritza*, the most generalized picture is its link with Basque culture: only two out of ten Euskalduns define *bertsolaritza* as a type of art, while the rest note its link with the Basque tradition and above all with popular culture.

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<sup>8</sup> See Map 3.

Culture expressed through the medium of Euskara is a culture unavoidably colored by the linguistic community that supports it; this cannot be measured using the same parameters used for more standardized languages. This “coloration” operates on at least two levels. On the one hand, it seems logical to suppose that there is no way a marginalized language can have a standardized culture. But, on the other hand, we are not dealing with an abnormal culture, but instead simply one that is of lesser magnitude. It therefore generates some products that can be compared with global standards, and other products or expressions that are more specific and confined to Basque culture; some of these latter products give form to its traditional culture, or to those elements of traditional Basque culture that are special and unique. That’s where popular culture comes in.

**Chart 1.** Cultural definition of *bertsolaritza*



In the context of the present discussion, “popular culture” may be understood in several ways. The first of these consists of interpreting popular culture as Basque culture of a static nature—one that doesn’t show many signs of modernity and is foreign to the current dominant cultural trends. This description may be assembled either from outside of or from within the Euskaldun linguistic community. In this case we would be dealing with a way of understanding popular culture as a phenomenon that has hardly undergone any change in its development since time immemorial and that expresses the essence of traditional Basque culture. A second way of conceptualizing popular culture in this case is to understand it as that which is expressed through Euskara; in this case, culture is defined by language, not by content. A third way of thinking about popular culture in the context of this discussion would be to conceive of it as a synthesis of the previous two perspectives. Hence “popular culture” may be considered as culture expressed through the medium of Euskara, whose origins are anchored in traditional culture but whose content does not have any one component that expresses its essence; rather, it combines elements of modernity and tradition.

According to the impression of the majority of the Euskaldun population, *bertsolaritza* is included within our third conceptualization of popular culture, and it probably couldn’t be

otherwise, given its inherent versatility—after all, one must not forget that *bertsolaritza* is pre-eminently an act of communication. Furthermore, the fact that it serves as an act of communication means that the features of modernity are automatically incorporated without any major breaks with tradition, but rather with ongoing renewal and updating processes that make it possible to transmit current cultural content using relatively traditional forms. In sociological terms, we're almost dealing with a change of system in light of the effect that has been generated by the many changes of balances of power. This process has been influenced by the recovery of a high degree of political autonomy; the subsequent linguistic standardization and recuperation; and the access of educated sectors of the population to the world of *bertsolaritza*. For its part, *bertsolaritza* has responded to the challenges that have been set before it by a public that expresses the values and customs of a highly developed society. Therein lies its success. The fact that the very nature of Euskara as a means of communication has enabled this *aggiornamento* or updating to be progressive and steady has had much to do with it as well.

Perhaps, when viewed according to more traditional parameters, it may appear that this development is taking place as a radical transformation of *bertsolaritza*, and that there are even sectors of the population who believe there has been a historical watershed in the last 20 years; hence the line joining the yesterday and today of *bertsolaritza* remains blurred. But our study indicates this line still exists, and is the result of a continuous renewal process. From this perspective, *bertsolaritza* has all the accoutrements of present-day global culture, which understands itself only in terms of permanent reformulation (and, in part, negation). In any cultural context, this permanent avant-garde status may generate the perverse effect of disfiguring that which it renews. This does not appear to have happened in *bertsolaritza*, although at times it is true that one can observe a certain obsessive desire for innovation.

*Bertsolaritza* appears to be detached and removed from other developments in popular culture, while at the same time its ability to organize itself is being noticed as a model to be emulated by other cultural manifestations of popular culture. Nowadays *bertsolaritza* holds such a dominant position within Basque popular culture that it is establishing a continuum between those people who, on the one hand, regard it as tradition, and those—the majority—who regard it as popular culture, as well as those on the opposite side of the spectrum who regard it simply as art. None of these interpretations necessarily rules out the others. That is to say, not only are these visions not antithetical, but they even complement one another. This is due to the fact that today the *bertsolaritza* tradition is so strong that the same fact can be christened with different names. In the present context, we are searching for the roots of *bertsolaritza*'s self-authentication in the past or in the present—an authentication that may consequently be anchored in tradition, in popular culture, or in art. More than what's said, what is important is who says what. In other words, most sectors of *bertsolaritza* culture will likely swing back and forth between regarding it as a modern art form or as popular culture. The central axis pivots, evidently, on rooting this tradition in popular culture.

Consequently, because of the vigor and autonomy that has been achieved in the process of self-definition, what is perfectly clear is the central social and cultural relevance attributed to *bertsolaritza*. The enthusiasm of the sectors of the public closest to such performances, for example, is positively outstanding. This enthusiasm is also reflected in the almost unquestioned acceptance of the transformations that have taken place in *bertsolaritza* during the past 20 years:



the higher technical standard of present-day *bertsolaris*; the fact that *bertso* (“verse”) has successfully caught on with the mass media; the central staging of the championships; the development of the art in parallel with social changes; and the fact that *bertsolaritza* doesn’t pin its last hopes on the myth of the noble savage. To put it another way, its success lies in renewal, not in “purity.”

For all these reasons, *bertsolaris* are very highly valued. They receive hardly any criticism; in fact, quite the opposite—the public emphasizes their transmission of skill from one generation to the next, their intellectual abilities, and their creative talents. Among the characteristics ascribed to them, the most prominent are as follows: they are university graduates or higher; they are very well versed in culture and are avid consumers of information; and they are multi-faceted (creators, leaders of opinion, writers, musicians, authors, and so on). Their sphere of influence is not confined to *bertsolaritza*. They have honed their intellects and, within Basque culture, they have become a strategic group with benchmark status. All in all, the *bertsolari* is an intellectual who has formed a close dialectical relationship with the society of which he or she is a part—Euskaldun society—and with society in general—Basque society.

### *The Community of Enthusiasts*

The importance of *bertsolaritza* as a cultural, social, and linguistic phenomenon seems to suggest an especially fertile field of social research into key reproductive areas. In the context of a globalized cultural industry, we are speaking of those cultural phenomena that are heirs to tradition and popular folklore in general, and of those cultural phenomena that are located in marginalized linguistic communities in particular. Despite this fact, the phenomenon has to date received minimal attention from social researchers.

The study we conducted in 2006 in collaboration with the Bertsozale Elkartea cannot itself fill this vacuum; it did, however, succeed in illustrating what could potentially be done, and we hope it may thus serve to attract researchers’ attention. The 2006 study was largely targeted at analyzing the social context of *bertsolaritza* as a condition for the sustainability of the phenomenon—not so much from the point of view of the market demands of the modern cultural industry as from that of the premise of a transmitting audience for any and all oral traditions, an audience with whom the *bertsolari* interacts in the moment of creation and who serves as the “paper” on which the artist’s oral *bertsos* are written down.

We are thus devoting special attention to the enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* among the Basques—in other words, their *bertsozaletasuna* (a term in Euskara that more accurately expresses the audience’s emotional engagement with and ties to this verbal art). Because the potential borders of that audience lie in the linguistic community of Euskara, one portion of our study analyzed this issue in the Euskara-speaking Basque population as a whole, using a sample of 1,200 Euskalduns.

One part of the survey relates to the subjects’ own self-appraisal of their enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* on a scale from 0 to 10 points. In the chart below,<sup>9</sup> we can see the percentage distribution of their responses. The results are striking: we found that there were a mere 0.6%

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<sup>9</sup> See Chart 2.

who did not answer the question, and that only one in ten Euskalduns gave themselves a 0 rating; in contrast, over half (58%) gave themselves a 5 or above, and a quarter of the population (27%) marked themselves as 7 or higher on the scale. One could argue that these responses might be slightly exaggerated. But that still does not detract from the fact that the answers indicate the strength of the phenomenon: no one identifies so intensely with a cultural event unless it has social prestige. Furthermore, other, more “objective” data from the survey that relate to knowledge of and/or participation in *bertsozale* events are consistent with the feeling expressed in the responses to this question.

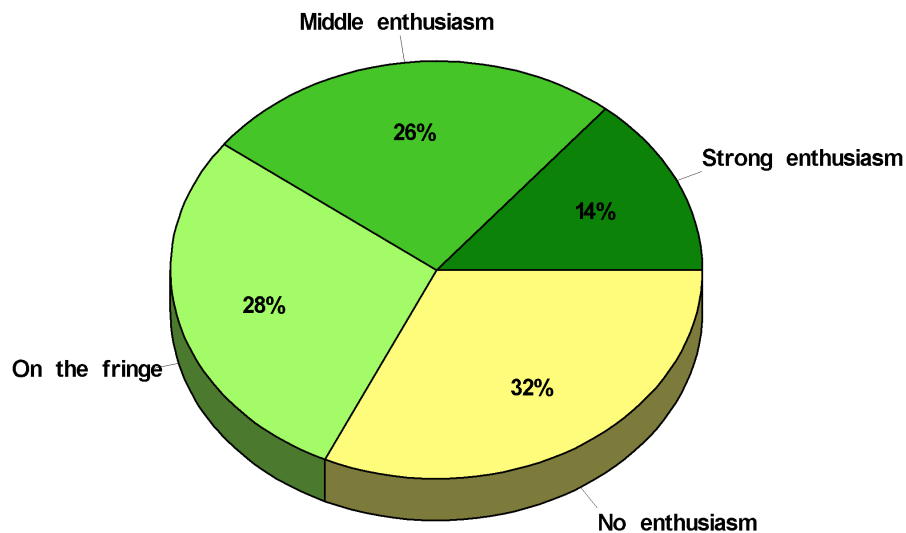
Using these data, we have developed a scoring system for the level of enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza*: strong (between 8 and 10 on the scale below), relative (between 6 and 7), little (between 4 and 5), and none (below 4 on the scale). In the highest bracket are those who form the strong and stable social nucleus of the phenomenon, and in the second bracket we also find regular followers of *bertsolaritza* among whom we encounter a very diversified distribution of cultural practices—even where the language in which these practices are expressed is concerned. In the third bracket are those with limited interest who, without distancing themselves from the whole phenomenon, are much less steady in their support, although the social influence of the preceding two categories does rub off on this category, especially around festive community events such as the championships. Finally, the fourth bracket represents those who, either through socialization or through their own volition, keep to the outskirts of the phenomena.

**Chart 2.** Levels of enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* amongst the Euskaldun population

In the following chart<sup>10</sup> we can see the proportion of these groups within the Euskaldun population. If we simultaneously consider the strong and middle brackets of enthusiasm, overall *bertsolaritza* followers represent 40% of the population (about 300,000 people)—a far higher percentage than the third bracket, who stay on the outskirts. That sign of strength likewise corresponds to the existence of the block of people on the fringe, who are closer to the first group than to the second—at least in the collective imagination—and who represent the biggest group. The enthusiasts on the fringe still participate, but largely on a one-time basis, either through media exposure or through their attendance at specific events (championships, festivals, exhibitions at local celebrations, or other types of shows).

Looking specifically now at the regular followers of the proceedings, the proportion that reflects the existence of one strong follower for every two mid-level ones likewise expresses a clear sign of the social strength of *bertsolaritza*. The fact is, however, that into this “strong” or “middle” definition of the follower comes not only the frequency of cultural consumption, but also other considerations that have more to do with the diversity of cultural practices and types of cultural consumption. That is to say, *bertsolaritza* consumption is not always higher among strong followers than among middle ones, given that in many cases the latter tend to understate their actual *bertsozaletasuna* because they are involved with a wider panoply of cultural practices.

**Chart 3.** Percentages of enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* among the Euskaldun population

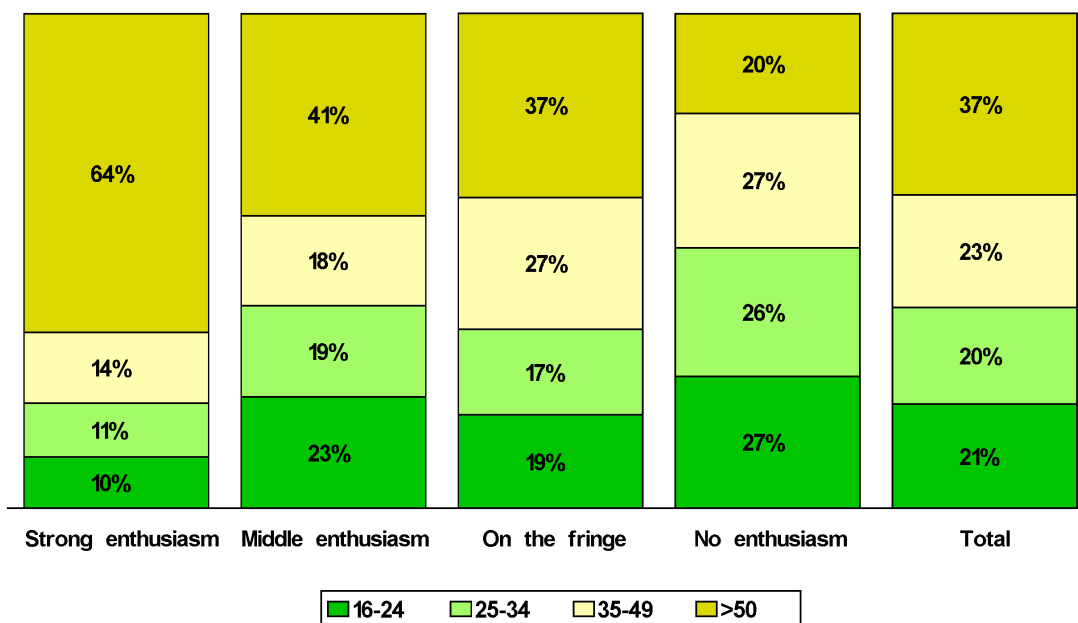


Distribution by age groups reflects in part what we have stated thus far in this analysis. Chart 4 (below) goes further in that it illustrates a certain weakness of the *bertsozale* movement that reflects issues related to aging among the active followers of *bertsolaritza*, particularly in the “strong” bracket, where two out of three followers are over 50. We shall discuss this phenomenon in the next section. For the moment what we wish to emphasize is that the relative aging of the strong bracket vis-à-vis the middle one is also in part a reflection of greater

<sup>10</sup> See Chart 3.

heterogeneity of types of cultural consumption (and of competition between and among them) in the second bracket. Thus, when it comes to the consumption of *bertsolaritza*, those under the age of 50 tend to understate their actual *bertsozaletasuna*, and hence the proportion of these followers in the strong bracket of enthusiasm also drops.

**Chart 4.** Distribution by age of the differing groups of *bertsolaritza* enthusiasts



To conclude this section of our discussion, we also wish to demonstrate the manner in which this *bertsozale* feeling translates into cultural consumption practices around *bertsolaritza*. Given the heterogeneity of the types of events (festivals, performances among friends, championships, and so on), the forms of contact with the world of *bertsolaritza* (*bertso* schools, the Association Bertsozale Elkarte), and the various sources of information (the media, informal networks), it is difficult to synthesize all the information that our study attempts to address. We shall use as an example only the data relating to the frequency of attendance of two types of events: the free-style performances,<sup>11</sup> because of their abundant presence throughout the Basque area (279 performances of this type in 2005); and the championships, because of their central focus and the impact they make on the social projection of *bertsolaritza*.

<sup>11</sup> Generally speaking, “free-style” performances (in other words, without a leader) are those where the *bertsolaris* themselves (usually two) set the pattern and pace of their performance. Normally more *bertsos* are devoted to each theme (usually three per theme) than is characteristic of more formal performances, such as festivals and championships.

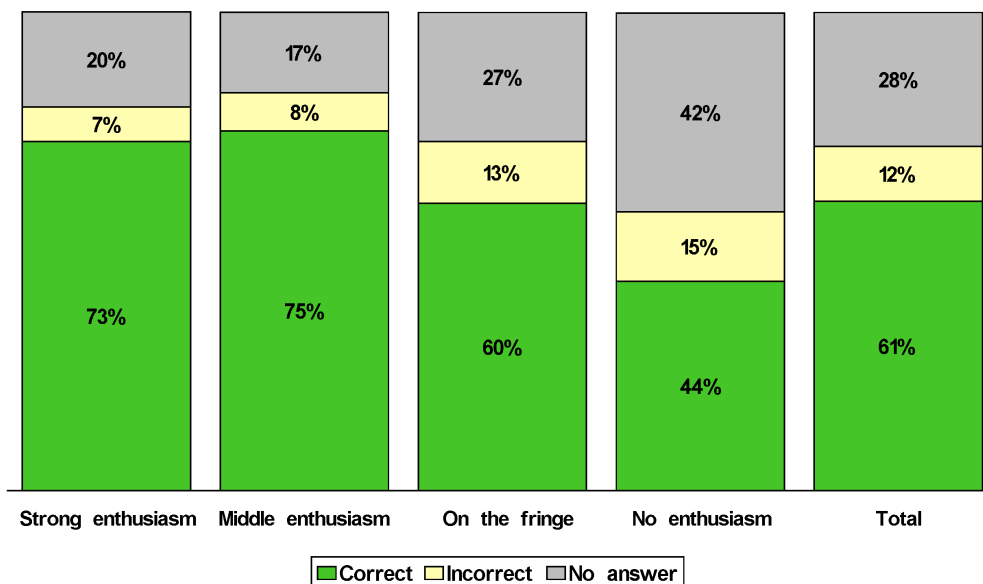
**Table 4.** Frequency of attendance at free-style performances and championships by brackets of enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* (percentage)

	Strong enthusiasm	Middle enthusiasm	Enthusiasm on the fringe	No enthusiasm	Total
<i>FREE-STYLE PERFORMANCES</i>					
Very frequently .....	6.4	1.3	0.8	1.0	1.8
Frequently .....	39.0	31.8	16.6	9.7	21.4
Seldom .....	33.8	42.5	46.3	30.3	38.3
Never .....	19.5	24.4	36.4	58.9	38.2
<i>CHAMPIONSHIPS</i>					
Very frequently .....	5.8	1.1	1.0	---	1.4
Frequently .....	20.5	12.1	2.8	1.7	7.3
Seldom .....	13.2	22.1	18.1	8.9	15.5
Never .....	59.7	64.4	78.1	89.5	75.5
Total	100.0 n=168	100.0 n=307	100.0 n=339	100.0 n=379)	100.0 n=1200

The data in the table above in part reflect the spread of enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* among the Euskaldun population. Only about four out of ten people (38.2%) have never attended a free-style performance event, and almost one quarter attend frequently. Regular attendance amounts to almost half of the strong enthusiasm, and it is only a bit less among those who express middle-level enthusiasm. On the other hand, the “pulling power” that the strong core of followers exert on those on the fringe is expressed in the low 36.4% of those who state they’ve never attended a performance. Even among those who express non-existent or scant enthusiasm, almost one in ten attends this type of event frequently (free-style performance events are of a local nature and the listener doesn’t actually travel to experience the performance; instead, the *bertsolari* performs where the public can hear).

Logically, these proportions go down when it comes to the championships, which are held far less frequently and where seating capacity is limited. Their highly important repercussions, however, stand out in the data presented in Chart 5: six out of ten people surveyed answered correctly when asked the name of the winner of the latest *bertsolari* championship, including almost half of the non-enthusiasts (44%).

**Chart 5.** Knowledge of the winners of the latest *bertsolari* championship, divided by brackets of enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza*

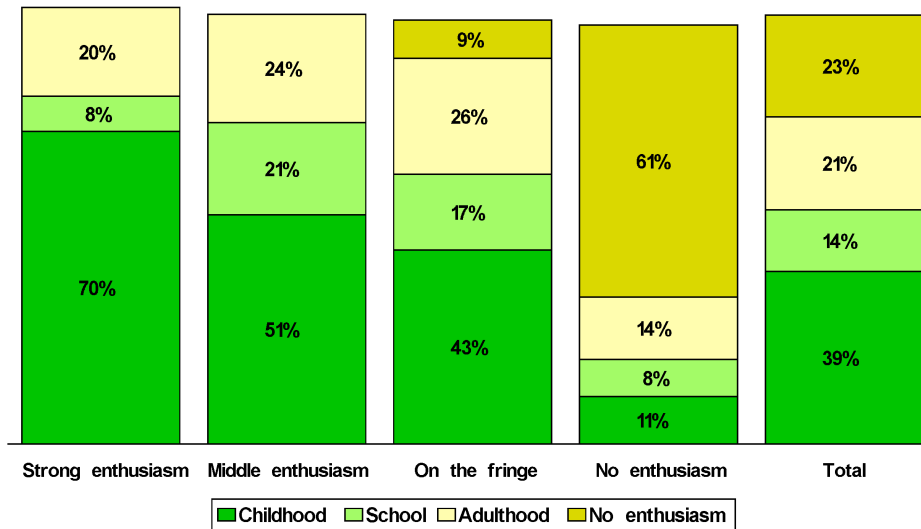


### *Dependent Cultural Transmission*

As we saw in Chart 4, when we consider the age distribution of the brackets of enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza*, we find that those brackets with the most active followers are relatively advanced in age. In the strong enthusiasm bracket, more than six in ten persons are over 50; the same goes for four out of ten in the middle-level enthusiasm bracket. On the other hand, the relatively greater youth that our study detects in those same brackets among the audience for the championship has more to do with the championship itself and its characteristics as an event than with the real composition of the social base. That being said, the data we present here relating to the Euskaldun population as a whole raises a question: could it be that enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* is falling off among the youngest people?

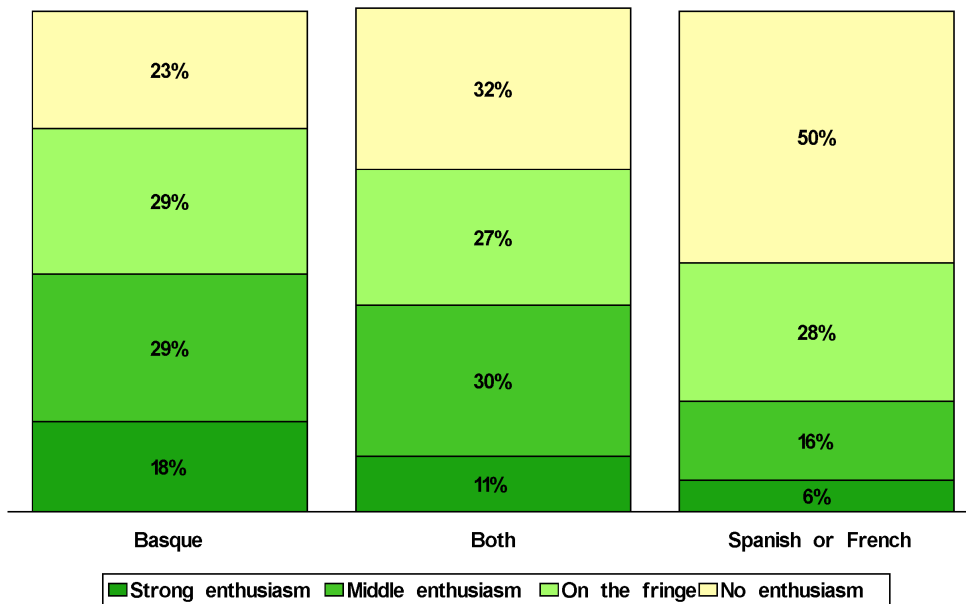
This factor is likewise underscored by the fact that a large majority of followers of *bertsolaritza* state that their enthusiasm stems from their earliest socialization within the family group and, to some extent, at school, as can be seen in Chart 6. Throughout the Euskaldun population as a whole only two out of ten people (21%) became enthusiasts after becoming adults, whereas 39% developed their enthusiasm in the family setting from early childhood on. This latter proportion increases with the intensity of enthusiasm, reaching 70% in the strong enthusiasm bracket.

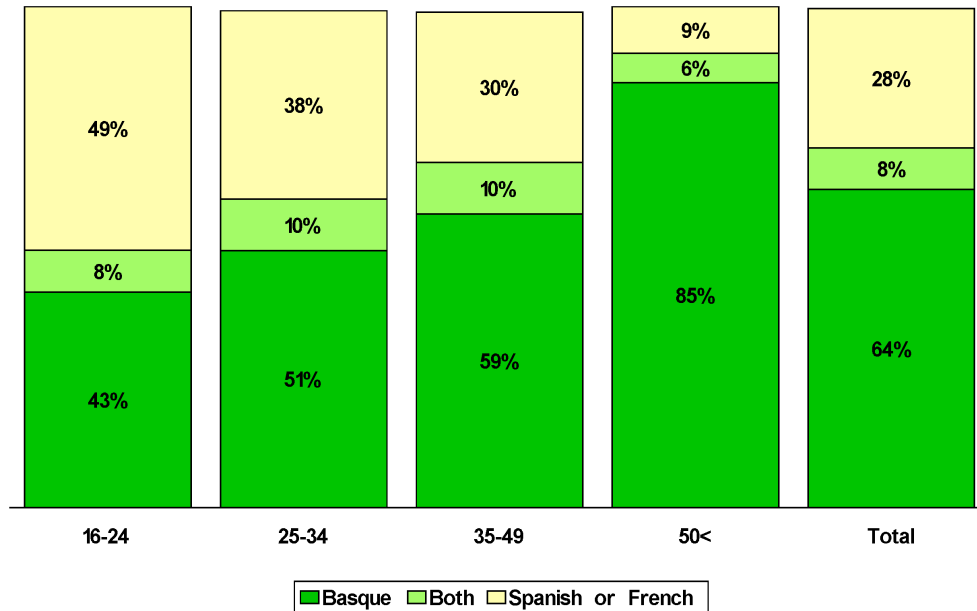
**Chart 6.** Socialization of *bertsolaritza*, divided by brackets of enthusiasm



If we analyze the impact that the mother tongue has on this issue, we find that among those people raised by a Euskaldun mother half are enthusiasts, compared with two out of ten of those people raised speaking French or Spanish. Furthermore, the distribution of mother-tongue speakers of the Euskaldun population by age group clearly shows a change from one generation to the next. The youngest people surveyed are divided practically into two halves where their mother tongue is concerned: one-half were raised speaking Euskara and the other half Spanish or French. This is in radical contrast to the composition of the over-50 group—almost nine out of ten were mother-tongue Euskara speakers.

**Chart 7.** Enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* by mother tongue



**Chart 8.** Mother tongue by age group

While these figures do suggest to us interesting sociolinguistic lines of thought, in the specific case that we are discussing they have a direct impact. As Table 5 shows, if we compare the enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* among the youngest and oldest, we observe that in the population as a whole non-enthusiasts represent 39.9% of the youngest age group, but that percentage is halved among the oldest age group (17.3%). That disparity diminishes when the comparison relates solely to those who were raised speaking Euskara. Thus, in the under-34 age group, the enthusiasts (strong and middle brackets) reach 40% if they were raised speaking Euskara, but their number falls to less than half of that percentage if they were not raised with the language.



**Table 5.** Enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* by age and mother tongue

		Euskara	Gaztelania/ Frantsesa	Biak	Guztira
16-24	Sutsuak	11,1	2,4	13,6	7,1
	Ertainak	35,2	19,5	31,8	27,3
	Periferikoak	30,6	22,0	18,2	25,3
	Ez bertsozaleak	22,2	56,1	36,4	39,9
		(n=108)	(n=123)	(n=22)	(n=253)
25-34	Sutsuak	10,8	4,5	---	7,3
	Ertainak	29,2	11,4	43,5	24,1
	Periferikoak	23,3	25,0	39,1	25,4
	Ez bertsozaleak	35,8	58,0	17,4	42,2
		(n=120)	(n=88)	(n=23)	(n=232)
35-49	Sutsuak	8,1	8,4	14,3	8,8
	Ertainak	26,9	9,6	14,3	20,1
	Periferikoak	31,3	38,6	32,1	33,2
	Ez bertsozaleak	33,8	42,2	39,3	37,6
		(n=160)	(n=83)	(n=28)	(n=274)
50<	Sutsuak	25,9	17,1	16,0	24,5
	Ertainak	28,6	24,4	32,0	28,4
	Periferikoak	29,4	26,8	20,0	28,6
	Ez bertsozaleak	15,0	29,3	32,0	17,3
		(n=374)	(n=41)	(n=25)	(n=440)

This syndrome has to do with cultural transmission mechanisms and their distortions, both in general and those that affect marginalized cultures in particular. For this reason, the relative tendency of enthusiasm to wane with successive generations merely illustrates a more general process that also affects the contemporary transformations and transmission of Basque culture. Moreover, we should point out that our study also shows that the decline in transmission within the family is accompanied by an increase at school among the youngest students. When viewed from the angle of numerical logic, the enthusiasm for *bertsolaritza* may seem to have waned; but the transmission of culture as a whole, *bertsolaritza* has actually gained status, and has managed to carve out a strong niche for itself.

Along the same lines, the greater numbers of youths that our study found in the audience at the championship also appears to suggest a beneficial adaptation to modern cultural norms. This major event is no longer simply expected entertainment for a captive public that comes to the championship as a result of a pre-selection process. Instead, the championship itself—and other events or displays of *bertsolaritza* activity—provide a focus of attraction. The *bertsolaritza* movement has thus changed from former times when it was reproduced through a more primary channel of transmission.

### Conclusion

In short, given that we are referring to *bertsolaritza* as a cultural expression of oral tradition, we must take as our starting point the fact that the tradition arises from a marginalized linguistic community—one that is limited even in its geographical extent, but which at the same time presents indisputable signs of life, among them:

1. The strong collective consciousness of the Euskaldun community.
2. Its limited geographical area, which promotes a much denser network of social relationships and expressions than the limited numbers of speakers (at least in comparison with the powerful languages surrounding Euskara) would suggest.
3. In spite of the administrative fragmentation and, in some places, the lack of official recognition, the linguistic recuperation policy put into place by the institutions within the area where this linguistic community is concentrated (for example, the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country) has strengthened the tradition and has furthermore acted as a driving force for speakers living in the remainder of the territories.
4. The fact that the Euskaldun community forms part of a modern and economically developed society that continues to maintain its strong sense of tradition.

This structural position of the Euskara linguistic community likely explains the cultural definition that is attributed to *bertsolaritza*: although it is expressed in terms of popular culture, it does not work against either tradition or modernity. The important thing, besides what's said, is who says it, how he or she says it, and the context in which they do so. What's more, this art form, as a cultural product, can no longer be understood as anything other than a constant renewal process with roots: the cultural success of *bertsolaritza* is based on maintaining traditional forms that work well within contemporary culture.

In short, *bertsolaritza* is an acknowledged cultural product in the present-day Basque Country, powerful in terms of both social importance and cultural prestige. The success of the latest national championship only confirms the social strength of the phenomenon. However, it is also a fact that *bertsolaritza*'s unavoidable dependency on its linguistic community of origin—with its own situation of marginalization—does generate uncertainties with regard to its future reproduction as a cultural phenomenon. The increasing fragility of the primary channels of linguistic socialization is having a weakening effect on the emotional components that this type of cultural performance depends on for its survival and development. Unlike other cultural projects that enjoy a greater degree of autonomy, *bertsolaritza* as an oral tradition simply cannot exist without its linguistic community.

In this regard, *bertsolaritza* finds itself in a curious position. On the one hand, it represents the most successful expression of Basque culture today, and its organizing ability is seen as a model to be copied by other Basque cultural expressions. On the other hand, it is often suggested that *bertsolaritza* serves as the main battering-ram of popular culture—understood here as a system—in its quest to maintain and develop the whole of the culture carried on through the medium of Euskara. Nevertheless, the fact remains that *bertsolaritza* would have a difficult task ahead of it if it attempted to go it alone in solving the structural problems involved in transmitting and reproducing Basque culture. What's more, this unique oral tradition is actually one of the expressions most dependent on the strength and geographical range of the linguistic community of Euskara. The paradoxical situation might even arise where a cultural recuperation process—which ought to be based on interdependence—results in the exclusion of the form of expression to which is attributed the ability to lead that same recuperation.

Regardless, while *bertsolaritza* is in a promising position to meet the future challenges of Basque culture, it cannot do so alone. The future of cultural expressions within the context of a marginalized language is necessarily interdependent and therefore fragile. Basque culture needs strong *bertsolaritza*; *bertsolaritza* needs a strong Basque culture; and they both need a strong and viable linguistic community to survive.

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