

Batua and Euskaltzaindia. A Unified Basque Language and Its Creators

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The word *euskaldun* literally means possessor of the Basque language. Although today it is possible to proclaim one's Basqueness and maintain a certain level of Basque ethnicity without speaking euskara, for many the language is still the foundation of the Basque cultural heritage.

There are many theories concerning the origin of the Basque language, but they remain only theories. No one really knows if the language sprang up among the ancient inhabitants of what today we call the Basque Country, or if it was imported by immigrants to the region from some other part of the world. We do know that euskara is a language family unto itself. It is not a member of the Indo-European language family, a large group that embraces the Romance, Slavic, and Germanic languages, including English.

Because of the lengthy history of the Basques on the Iberian Peninsula, one of the strongest theories about the language is that the Basques and their tongue originated *in situ*. Basque would then be one of the oldest languages of the region and possibly the original Iberian tongue. On the more fanciful side, popular theories date the language from the Tower of Babel or even link it to the lost continent of Atlantis. Anyone who has attempted to learn Basque as a second language is familiar with some of the more obvious difficulties that arise when dealing with a language that is as different from English as Japanese or Swahili.

Dialects

There are several dialects of Basque, including Biscayan, Guipuzcoan, Labourdin, Zuberoan (also known as Souletin), Low Navarrese, and Batua (Unified Basque). Navarrese and Alavese are examples of dialects that were spoken as little as one hundred years ago but are virtually lost to us today. The geographical inaccessibility of the Basque Country provides the explanation of why so many language variations arose down through history, but the character of the Basque people is responsible for maintaining those linguistic varieties in this modern age of mass communication.

The dialects with the largest numbers of speakers are Biscayan and Guipuzcoan, but the dialects on the French side of the border, Zuberoan (or Souletin), Labourdin, and Low Navarrese, still have their speakers and played a major role in the history of Basque literature. These five dialects, plus Batua, were the dialects Gorka Aulestia decided to include in the Basque-English Dictionary. Virtually every village has its own variations of vocabulary and grammar. Euskaltzaindia, the Academy of the Basque Language, indexes seven distinct dialects by region, not dialectal name. They list: Araba, Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, Lapurdi, Nafarroa Beherea, Nafarroa, and Zuberoa. However, when Euskaltzaindia wanted to circulate an early questionnaire regarding usage's and the dialectal variations that occurred in the language, they talked to people in 366 different villages or locations in the Basque Country (as listed in Euskera, 1980, pp. 113-161). So, when we speak of dialectal variations, we are not limiting ourselves specifically to the easily spotted differences between Biscayan and Guipuzcoan or Unified verbs. We must also keep in mind all the myriad possibilities for variation that occur as the language is spoken on a daily basis.

This proliferation of dialects, ironically, was one of the factors that stood in the way of any hope of reinstating the Basque language as the official language of Euskadi. It was realized that in order to promote the language efficiently, a standard dialect was needed to ensure that children would learn the same language in school and that publications would use the same vocabulary and spelling.

To that end, the organization called Euskaltzaindia came into being. Euskaltzaindia is officially in charge of the unification of the Basque language. This has been an ongoing task, and it has not been an easy one.

Speakers of Biscayan felt slighted because the model for the United Basque verbs came from Guipuzcoan and the French Basque dialects. The majority of Basque writers, even those that did not belong to Euskaltzaindia, agreed that a unified literary language was needed. Some of them, such as Nicolas Ormaetxea, "Orixe," were friends of Academy members and made their opinions heard. "Orixe" was a good friend of the first president of the Academy, Resurrección María de Azkue, and took a definite stand on various aspects of the unification process. Many arguments arose over how unification should be implemented, which dialect should be used as the basis for the literary version of the

language, etc., and in fact two separate camps arose as a result of the battle.

Orixe, like many others, was against excessive purism, but did not want the language to be reduced to a pool of borrowed words or Basquified Spanish. This was a major concern of the Academy members, and they are still working to determine the right mix of Basque and borrowed words.

The need for words to describe the modern age required that some words from other languages be retained or new ones be invented. Orixe followed a middle-of-the-road path similar to what Euskaltzaindia maintains today. He did not oppose all neologisms because he felt that an educated language needed a few of them, but there should not be so many "new" words that one's writing became incomprehensible.

The standardization of spelling by the Academy still continues. The *h* presents an especially thorny problem. The myriad aitches used in the northern dialects have been reduced in **Batua**, but the Unified dialect uses more aitches than either Guipuzcoan or Biscayan.

In spite of all the problems inherent in creating a man-made dialect, the members of Euskaltzaindia have been successful in creating **Batua**. It is now one of the two official languages of the Basque Government (Spanish being the other) and is taught in Basque schools from preschool to university. A Basque student can now complete his or her education entirely in the Basque language.

Euskaltzaindia

Because of the major role it plays in the preservation of the Basque language, it is appropriate here to discuss Euskaltzaindia. In 1984, Euskaltzaindia published a very handy little book in five languages (*Euskaltzaindiaren Historia Laburra*. Bilbao: Euskaltzaindia, 1984) describing the history of the organization. It was written by Martin Ugalde and José Antonio Arana Martija, and provides a great deal of useful information about the organization that is shaping the Basque language today.

The Academy of the Basque Language is the only Basque organization to survive the Spanish Civil War. It was founded in 1919, and the by-laws called for a total of twelve academic members. Four of those members had been determined during the Congress of Oñate where the by-laws were drawn up. They were Resurrección María de Azkue, who was elected the first president of the organization and served in that capacity until his death in 1951; Arturo Campión (1854-1937); Luis Eleizalde (1873-1923); and Julio de Urquijo (1871-1950). The other eight members were elected in a meeting held on September 21, 1919, and they were: Domingo Aguirre, J. Blaise Adema, José de Aguerre, Pierre Broussain, Juan Bautista Eguzkitza, Ramón de Intzagarai, Pierre Lhande and Raimundo Olabide.

The Academy went to work in 1920, immediately appointing various scholars and linguists as Honorary members and Corresponding Academic members. In 1927 Azkue and Urquijo were named as academic members to the Royal Spanish Academy as representatives of the Basque language.

In 1954 the Academy increased the number of its Academic members from twelve to eighteen, and in 1972, it was changed again to twenty-four Academic members.

Most of the works and research carried on by the Academy since 1920 have been published in the journal *Euskeria*, the official organ of the organization.

The activities of this important body are generally referred to as those that took place before the Spanish Civil War and those that occurred afterward. In the prewar period, 1920 to 1937, the Academy adopted an alphabet for use with the Basque language. As an example of the flexibility of the Academy, that early alphabet included orthographical practices that are not used in *Batua* today. For example, palatalized consonants were marked with a horizontal line above the letter, and double letters were represented by a single letter with a grave accent above it.

The Academy also began to work on one of its major goals, as set forth in its original by-laws, the formation of a unified literary Basque language drawn from all dialects (**batua**). This unification of the Basque language was considered the most serious and most urgent problem faced by the Academy.

Many great debates hinged around the question of unification. Some feared the creation of an artificial-sounding language. Azkue supported the idea of *Gipuzkera osotua*, a complete Guipuzcoan dialect enriched by borrowings from the other dialects. Urquijo and Lacombe did not want the Academy to create new words or neologisms because they thought that was a task for the people and Basque authors.

Other works undertaken by the Academy were a Spanish-Basque dictionary and the establishment of literary prizes to encourage creativity in the language.

The Spanish Civil War was a difficult time for everyone, and many members of the Academy went into exile. Azkue, however, continued his work and in 1941, the Academy met once again to carry on its program, although very quietly.

Between 1939 and 1952, the Academy set many of the goals that it would continue to work toward for years to come, including the promotion of a literary language that would not be excessively purist, the establishment of a modern orthographic system, etc.

In 1959 the Academy declared that words deeply rooted in the Basque language, regardless of their point of origin, should be considered Basque. This was a statement intended to cool the ardor of those still pushing for the creation of a new "truly Basque" word whenever a borrowed word was encountered in the language.

The Academy has also sponsored the publication of several works aimed at promoting the Basque language, such as Ricardo Arregi's literacy courses entitled "Alfabetatze ikastaldiak." And of course they fought for the inclusion of Basque language in the school system.

In 1968 they renewed their dedication to the goal of a unified Basque literary language. They launched ships of investigation into the seas of orthography, declensions, conjugations, and vocabulary.

Until Juan Carlos became king on November 22, 1975, it was still illegal to speak the Basque language in public. Among Juan Carlos' first duties was to sign a decree allowing the public use of languages other than Castilian, and to allow the teaching of non-Castilian languages in the classroom.

Then, in February 1976, King Juan Carlos gave Euskaltzaindia official status in a decree issued in Madrid. On March 6, 1978 the Eusko Kontseilu Nagusia, or General Council of the Basque Country, adopted Euskaltzaindia as an official organ of the Basque Country with the mission of preserving, improving, and unifying the Basque language.

In 1980 the Academy sponsored the First International Meetings of Bascologists. In the same year they established a Translators School in San Sebastián.

Presidents of Euskaltzaindia have been Resurrección María de Azkue, Ignacio María Lojendio Irure, Manuel Lecuona Echebeguren, Luis Villasante Cortabitarte, and Jean Haritschelar.

Future of the Language

The Basque people are putting forth a phenomenal effort to save their minority language in the face of overwhelming cultural saturation in the Spanish tongue. Unfortunately, Basque has been partly lost down through the centuries as a result of several factors. One such factor has been the natural pressures from the dominant languages of the area, Spanish and French. Those languages have also affected the pronunciation of Basque and introduced a large number of loan words, or non-Basque words, into its vocabulary.

Another factor in the gradual loss of the Basque language has been the modernization of communications, especially the advent of television, and the heavy industrialization in the area. Spanish language television made it possible for the dominant language to blare at the populace from every open door and tiny bar in the country. We need only to reflect for a moment on how much time we and our children spend watching television to imagine the enormity of the influence that medium had when its Spanish-only broadcast hit the Basque country. In addition, the industrialization of the Basque provinces generated an influx of other people from different parts of Spain, people who were forced to communicate with each other in the common language of Spanish.

And finally, the adverse effects of the Carlist Wars from the last century, combined with Francisco Franco's genocidal enmity of the Basque people and his vindictive campaign against their native language in this century, dealt euskara a staggering blow. In 1936, 700,000 people spoke Basque in the four southern provinces. By 1954 that number had declined to 525,000 and at the time of Franco's death it was believed that of the 2,100,000 people in the Spanish Basque provinces, only 500,000 spoke the Basque language. If we include the French provinces, the number jumps only to 615,000 speakers in the seven provinces in 1975. Basque has almost died out completely in Navarra and has retreated drastically in Alava. (Stephens, Meic. *Linguistic Minorities in Western Europe*. Gomer, 1976, p.643)

In the late fifties, the language was in serious danger of extinction. At about that time, the *ikastolak*, or schools where all subjects are taught in the Basque language, were born amid numerous difficulties, not the least of which was persecution from Madrid. When the schools began the official view was that to educate children in Basque was a potentially hostile act. The schools came under regular police surveillance, and lists of pupils and teachers had to be submitted to the police. (Stephens, p.645) The *ikastolak* are a tribute to the perseverance of the Basque people in their love for their language.

Also at about the same time, the first night schools were established to teach those adults who already spoke Basque to read and write it. In this same period, a strong movement in the fields of music, art, and literature arose, and all of these efforts combined served to keep the Basque language alive.

HABE is another weapon in the arsenal dedicated to language preservation. Helduen Alfabetatze Berreuskalduntzerako Erakundea is an organization dedicated to the teaching of the Basque language to those who have lost it or to those whose ancestors never spoke it, and to the teaching of educated

Basque to those who grew up speaking the language but never learned to read or write in it. An entire generation of Basques who lost the language because of Franco's oppression are being given the opportunity to embrace it again. Today HABE's presence extends throughout the Basque Country and 50,000 people benefit from their assistance and services every year.

In the course of their efforts to teach the Basque language, HABE has created its own teaching centers, the *euskaltegiak*. It has created entire programs and masses of language-learning materials, including games, audio cassette tapes, video tapes, and slides, to help them achieve their goals, and these materials are on the leading edge of language instruction. It has offered didactic and pedagogical assistance to public and private organizations that have created *euskaltegis*. And it has built up a group of its own teachers, and offers help to other teaching staffs in a variety of ways. HABE also has an 8,000-volume library and subscribes to more than 200 magazines, giving them the best equipped library on language teaching in the Basque Country. They also publish magazines aimed at the learner of Basque.

In any discussion of the future of the Basque language, it is imperative that we talk about the *euskaltegis* and their growing role in the revival of the Basque language. There are a large variety of public and private institutions, cultural associations, and popular movements which are committed to the task of maintaining and spreading the Basque language. Although HABE initiated the *euskaltegis*, they guide, coordinate, and give assistance to any organization or group that would like to sponsor one. Not all *euskaltegis* have the same legal footing, nor do they all function in exactly the same way. And there are both public and private *euskaltegis*. Students pay moderate fees for classes, and HABE subsidizes the schools whenever possible.

Today the *ikastolak* and *euskaltegiak* are widespread, and more and more Basque youths are being educated completely in their native language. On a statutory level, in contrast to the opposition experienced during the Franco years, there is now the Gernika Statute that provides resources for the revival of the Basque language. As of 1987 there were 232 *euskaltegis* receiving subsidies from HABE. Those organizations are becoming more and more organized, and the teaching staff has become more professional and stable. There are now over a thousand teachers who are dedicated to teaching Basque to adults. With five hours of class a day, an adult can complete the process of recovering (or learning) the Basque language in a period of two years.

However, in spite of all this energetic activity in favor of the Basque language, the number of native speakers in existence today is still uncomfortably small, for although the number of new speakers is growing, thanks to HABE and the *ikastolak*, no new natives are generated by this process. Native speakers are necessary to the survival of a language, for it is only natural that we rely on our native tongue in situations where communication and mutual understanding is of the utmost importance. Those of us who learn Basque as a second or third language, may have good intentions but in times of stress or even in times of fatigue, we will fall back on another tongue to express ourselves and thus diminish the importance and the strength of *euskara*. Until the new speakers of Basque make *euskara* the language of their households and present it to their children as an undying part of their heritage, the language will be in danger.

With this thought in mind, I queried a few young Basques about whether those who learn Basque as a second language will teach it to their children. Interestingly, each individual responded that yes, he or she would use Basque with his or her children, but there was no guarantee as to what any other person might do. Perhaps young Basque people are actually concerned enough about the survival of their language that they will assume the personal responsibility for passing it on to the next generation. If that is the case, Basque should survive for centuries.