

Introduction: presenting the Basque case

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This issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* is devoted to *Euskara* (the Basque language) in order to take stock of its current social situation. It has the same aim as the chapter on *Euskara* (Azurmendi et al. 2001) included in the publication *Can Threatened Languages be Saved?* (Fishman 2001a). At that time we were writing from a perspective that depended more on the Reversing Language Shift (RLS) theoretical-empirical model propounded by Fishman (1991), now from a freer perspective. We are deeply grateful to Joshua A. Fishman for providing us with this new opportunity through this prestigious journal which he directs and edits, to show the recent evolution and current situation of *Euskara* to the fields of the sociology of language, of languages and of sociolinguistics in general. It is not the first time that we have to express our gratitude to him and we trust that it will not be the last.

To contribute toward an understanding of “the case of Basque”, we have believed it necessary to provide some data on *Euskara* and on *Euskal Herria* (the Basque Country) in this introduction. *Euskal Herria* is a small country located in the vertex of the Atlantic Arc on both sides of the Pyrenees mountain range, divided between the Spanish and French States. The seven historical territories or provinces that make up *Euskal Herria* are divided in the following way: in the Spanish State Araba, Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa that constitute the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) and Navarre which forms the Charter Community of Navarre; in the French State, Lapurdi, Behe Nafarroa and Zuberoa that make up Iparralde or the Northern Basque Country as part of the département of the Pyrénées-Atlantiques (it does not constitute a single, distinctive administration in the French State, despite the continual demands for the creation of a Basque *département*). *Euskal Herria* has a surface area of 20,664 km² (the BAC 7,234 km², the Charter Community of Navarre 10,392 km², and 3,039 km² in the French State), and 2,900,856 inhabitants (2,082,587 in the BAC and 556,263 in the Charter Community of Navarre, according to the 2001 census, and 262,440 in the Northern

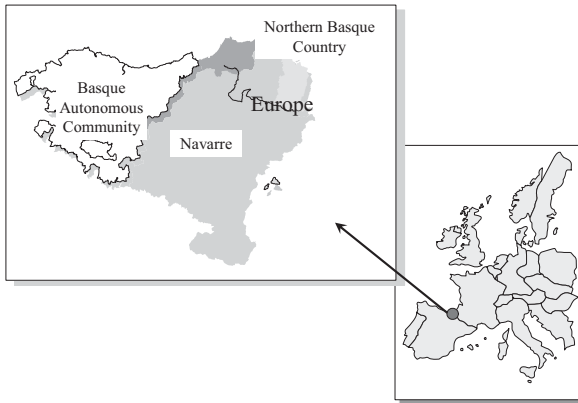


Figure 1. *Euskal Herria (the Basque Country)*

Basque Country or Iparralde of the French State, according to the 1991 census) (Figure 1).

The BAC and the Charter Community of Navarre are two of the seventeen Autonomous Communities of the Spanish State, and are among the economically most dynamic, most industrialized and most modern ones with their wealth well distributed. This has undoubtedly facilitated the great efforts toward the normalization of the Basque language and culture that have been made over the past thirty years, especially in the BAC. By contrast, the Basque territories in the French state have a more traditional economy, being based mainly on agriculture, stockbreeding and tourism, and with retired people from other parts of the French state; it is precisely these territories where the decline of *Euskara* still persists. The BAC saw high immigration rates from other territories of the Spanish state, above all at the beginning of the twentieth century and during the Franco era, so that about one third of the current population in the BAC is the result of this immigration. Despite this, the BAC has been, and continues to be, the most dynamic community in the Basque language and culture normalization process. It appears to be obligatory today, to make a reference to the European Union (the EU) in which *Euskal Herria* is included: in the Atlantic Arc in the west of the EU. The most important Basque city, Bilbao, is also one of the most important ones in this Atlantic Arc of the EU.

Euskara is a language island in Europe from a genealogical viewpoint, since it is not related to any other European language, and also from a typological viewpoint. It is one of the oldest languages in Europe and predates the arrival of the languages classified as Indo-European. Although

its ambit was considerably greater in early history than in recent history, its current location appears to go back to time immemorial and, in this respect, it is truly an autochthonous language in Europe. Perhaps because of all this, *Euskal Herria* (the Basque Country) means “the Country of *Euskara*”. In addition to its remarkable historical value (could or should it be regarded as the “heritage of humanity”?), it has a tremendous symbolic and pragmatic value for Basque citizens today, with the result that the defence of *Euskara* is currently the subject of social and political debate, and one of the main reasons behind the rallies and the social movements widely supported in *Euskal Herria*. In other words, the interest, the attitudes, the motivations, both symbolic and pragmatic, ethnolinguistic identification, future prospects, etc., are overwhelmingly in favor of *Euskara*, at least in the BAC territories (less so in the territories of the Charter Community of Navarre in Spain or in Iparralde in France), with the BAC spearheading the linguistic normalization process.

According to Fishman (2001c: 474), there are three possible alternative strategies in the endeavors to normalize the Basque language and culture: “one is ‘shoot for the moon’. Another is ‘anything is better than nothing’. The third is ‘the right step at the right time’”. These three strategies exist in *Euskal Herria*, although we suspect that the third one is the predominant one and also the one which is most widely expressed in this issue.

The Basque case shows important specificities in the group of cases of revival and renormalization of subordinate and minority languages and cultures, and these specificities turn out to be “relatively atypical” from the RLS model. Thus:

1. It is atypical from the point of view of the strategy proposed by the RLS model because the Basque case produces a semicircular U-shape, and not the linear one which is put forward in the eight stages of the RLS model (Fishman 2001b: 151), probably because more work has been done in the initial stages (“the pre-intergenerational transmission stages”) and the later (“high power”) stages, but less in the intermediate stages (the “intergenerational transmission stages”), despite the obsession surrounding the desire to stress the importance of intermediate stage 6: “The intergenerational and demographically concentrated home-family-neighborhood-community: the basis of mother-tongue transmission” (Fishman 2001c: 466). This could perhaps be interpreted as “shooting for the moon.”
2. *Euskal Herria* (taken as a whole) is a developed country located within the western developed world of the European Union (EU), and on a par with the wealthiest countries of the EU itself in its “current human development indices”; in other words, different from most of the

cases of contact languages or of subordinate, lesser used languages, perhaps the ones most taken into account in the RLS model (in this respect the Basque case is similar to the Catalan case, the Welsh case, or others). The ambitions of *Euskal Herria* could therefore be greater because its self-sufficiency would also be greater. Experience itself bears this out, since the BAC is more effective in most of its spheres of application than the remaining Autonomous Communities of the Spanish state.

3. From the “ideological consensus” viewpoint, the relationships with the “Big Brothers”¹ (the dominant communities of the Spanish and French states), are also atypical in the Basque case. This is because in the BAC and in Navarre this initial ideological consensus among the parties in favor of the revival and renormalization of the Basque language and culture, was only possible after the Franco era, as one of the unavoidable (although undesired) requisites of the move from dictatorship to incipient democratization in the Spanish state. Moreover, as the normalization process progresses, the maintenance or re-establishment of the ideological consensus becomes increasingly difficult, instead of progressively easier or automatic. All this is reflected not only among the dominant and subordinate communities, but also within the subordinate community itself, the Basque community in this case, which finds itself divided in this respect. In Iparralde, *Euskara* has no official status, so that relations with the French Big Brother are completely atypical: they exist, but without express official recognition.
4. In connection with the difficulty of ideological consensus, there is both ambiguity about the final aims of the renormalization process of the Basque language and culture, and uncertainty about the degree of the sociopolitical dependence or independence of *Euskal Herria* in the near future. All this produces a chicken-and-egg situation in which one does not precisely know what is the cause and what is the consequence. In the BAC, the final official linguistic-cultural objectives are the general achievement of balanced bilingualism and biculturalism (on an equal footing). But among the nonofficial objectives are those which hope that *Euskara* and the Basque culture in *Euskal Herria* will enjoy a situation similar to that which German and the German culture have in Germany, or which Portuguese and the Portuguese culture have in Portugal — although there are also those who would prefer the current situation to remain the permanent one. In the BAC, too, the final official sociopolitical aspirations lie in the development of a “statute of free association with the Spanish state”, through the recognition of the right to self-determination, now that

the current autonomous framework is obsolete for Basque nationalist aspirations. However, among nonofficial political sectors, once again, there are those who aspire to independence, to the setting-up of a state more integrated in the EU context, similar to the way in which the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Slovenia etc. have recently joined the EU — although, one again, there are also those who prefer to maintain the present situation. In other words it is all about the debate on “How can Functions be both Differentiated and Shared in Furtherance of RSL Purposes?” (Fishman 2001d: 9), not only in the competition between the languages and cultures currently in contact (dominant and subordinate) and between languages in general in a world that is increasingly interdependent and interrelated, but also in the competition between countries and states.

5. On the other hand, the Basque case provides an interesting setting for “the primordialist/constructivism debate” (Fishman 2002). The primordialists look more to the past and to conservation, the debate is more emotional, while the constructivists look more to the future and to survival in modernity, the debate is more rational. Both schools of thought exist in the Basque context, both in the academic and discursive worlds, and in sociocultural militancy and everyday life. It is not easy for us to declare ourselves in favor of one or other of the schools we deem to be more important quantitatively and qualitatively. Moreover, both schools of thought exist at the same time. In a way similar to that adopted by most states, there is also in *Euskal Herria* “a propensity to make primordialist claims upward in the power scale (i.e., when appealing to higher and stronger states and multistate bodies) and to make constructivist claims downward (when laying down the law to smaller and weaker political entities)” (Fishman 2002: 87–88). As an example of this Fishman cites France, which demands the international presence of French as the bastion against the monopoly of English, while at the same time it does not recognize the different languages which are included in the French state itself. Nevertheless, the dominant communities of the Spanish and French states do the opposite with respect to their subordinate and minority Basque community: they attack the primordialism they attribute to the Basques, while at the same time invoking constructivism to hinder the Basque language and culture normalization process. In actual fact, with respect to both the Basque community and the Spanish and French communities, “both points of view have their activists and their analysts. They are not in themselves an activist versus an analytic camp, as is sometimes alleged” (Fishman 2002: 89). Fishman goes on:

the more this contribution is recognized, the more primordialism and constructivism will be recognized as alternative strategies available to, and utilized by, all cultures in arriving at, and in making use of, their own fluctuating views of all the factors and circumstances that surround them and that have created them (Fishman 2002: 89–90).

In the Basque case both paths (primordialism and constructivism) go in part in the same direction and with much strength in favor of the revival and normalization of Basque. This explains not only the huge amount has been achieved over the past thirty years, despite the hurdles and brakes placed by the Spanish and French communities on both paths, but also the high levels of the final objectives proposed for the (more or less near) future of *Euskara* and *Euskal Herria*, by a considerable sector of the current Basque population — in spite of the bad linguistic-cultural situation and the poor socio-political situation at present.

This, more or less, is the context of the Basque case, which can be taken as the general setting against which the subject matter of the different articles included in this issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* are set.

Moving on to the presentation of the contents of this issue, the two articles by Miren Mateo and by Jose M. Legarra and Erramun Baxok describe the different “status planning” conducted by the different language policies applied in the different Basque administrative units: the BAC and the Charter Community of Navarre in the Spanish state, and the Basque territories of Iparralde in the French state. In short, they describe a policy of promotion and development in the BAC (which turns the BAC into the main point of reference in the Basque normalization process), an ambiguous policy in the Charter Community of Navarre (mixing promotion with indifference and hindrance), and the nonpolicy, or institutional silence in the Basque territories of Iparralde in the French State. This largely explains the different results obtained in the normalization process of *Euskara* in these administrative units of the Basque territories.

The article by Xabier Aizpurua Telleria and Jon Aizpurua Espin looks at the level of Basque knowledge, its intergenerational transmission, its use and the attitudes toward it. Nicholas Gardner and Mikel Zalbide’s article is devoted to the education system, the main factor in the transmission of *Euskara*, albeit as a second language (L2). The novel system is based on the three linguistic models in the case of the BAC: model D in *Euskara*, model B bilingual, and model A in Spanish, for all children from the age of 3 onwards (with children of different linguistic origins mixed together in the same classrooms in any of these linguistic

models), depending on parental choice. In the other Basque territories the organization of education is different, as are the results. Jokin Azkue and Josu Perales' article looks at the 'basquization' of adults (over the age of sixteen), among whom the parents of children schooled in *Euskara* are in the minority, despite the importance of this according to the RLS model.

Finally comes our article, in which we offer a final reflection on the possibilities of *Euskara* in the near future, bearing in mind the new, changing socioeconomic and political conditions of the so-called "knowledge and information society": among the different theorizings available in this respect we have opted for the one relating to "information society" (Castells 2001), as sufficiently adequate to analyze, shed light on and adequately guide the task of the Basque language in the future, bearing in mind its integration into the principle processes of power, of production and of relation, which are being born in the new society.

We should like to end this introduction by expressing our thanks to all those who have participated in this issue, and whose generous help has enabled us to take up Joshua A. Fishman's invitation to turn this project into reality. We trust that these endeavors will serve not only to make the Basque case known internationally, but also to foster debate on the questions dealt with in this issue. Such a debate is particularly necessary for subordinate, lesser used languages and communities.

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Note

1. An expression widely used by Fishman (2001).

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