

## **SAVING BASQUE? AN ANALYSIS OF THE EVOLUTION OF BASQUE KNOWLEDGE, TRANSMISSION AND USE FROM 1996 TO 2006**

### **EUSKARA ARRISKUTIK AT? HIZKUNTZA-GAITASUNAREN, TRANSMISIOAREN ETA ERABILAREN AZTERKETA 1996TIK 2006RA**

Full Presentation

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Basque is the last remaining pre-Indo-European language in western Europe and stands out as genetically isolated amongst world's languages. It has long fascinated linguists for its unusual history and complicated nature. It is native to the so-called Basque Country spread across three different areas in Spain and France: namely the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) and Navarre in Spain, as well as the Northern Basque Country (NBC) which is part of the department of the Pyrénées-Atlantiques in France. These three areas have a combined surface area of 20,664 km<sup>2</sup> and almost three million inhabitants. While Basque has co-official status with Spanish in the Spanish Basque Country, it has none in France.

For centuries the Basque language (called *euskara* by its speakers) has been subject to a diglossic situation and since the Middle Ages the Basque-speaking areas have shrunk relentlessly. This situation led many harbingers to prophesy its disappearance before the end of (first) the 19<sup>th</sup> and (then) the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, in what is known as the “discourse of the death of Basque” (Erize, 2006). Contrary to these doom and gloom expectations, the Basque speaking community has fought long and hard to maintain its language and identity in difficult circumstances – achieving by the 1930s significant language rights, alongside political autonomy, only to lose all of these gains with the rise of the Spanish dictator Franco in 1936-39, only to regain them again after his death in 1975. Since that time considerable effort has been made to revitalize and normalise the use of Basque, with close official surveying of progress over time.

However, the sociolinguistic situation varies greatly in the three aforementioned Basque regions and the knowledge, transmission and use of Basque presents some remarkable differences and contradictory patterns. In this paper we compare the results of the 1996 and the 2006 sociolinguistic surveys with a view to analysing the evolution of Basque in the last decade. Overall there appears to be successful language revitalization – with 74,327 more bilinguals in 2006 than in 1996. But the increase has taken place basically in the BAC and to a lesser degree in Navarre, whereas in the NBC the number of bilinguals continues to drop. And yet, the percentage of Basque use is higher in the NBC than in Navarre, while the BAC is the region where its use has risen most. Transmission of Basque is also higher in 2006 and guaranteed in the BAC and Navarre (98%) when both parents speak Basque, while in the NBC the percentage is significantly lower. We consider the reasons for the very different trend patterns, which point to three Basque Countries, not one, moving in very different directions.

#### References

Erize, X. (2006) History of the Basque Language: From the Discourse of its Death to its Maintenance. In M-J. Azurmendi and I. Martinez de Luna (eds.) *The Case of Basque: Past, Present and Future* (pp. 19-41). Donostia/San Sebastián: Soziolinguistika Klusterra.

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