

Basque

A multilingual map of Europe: identity and diversity

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1. Geographical location

Basque (*Euskara*)¹ is a language spoken mostly in the Basque Country (*Euskal Herria*) – a region located in the western Pyrenees which straddles the border between Spain and France. The region can be divided into three major sub-areas including the Autonomous Communities of the Basque Country and Navarre in Spain and the Northern Basque Country in France. These territories are home to nearly three million people, among whom are the Basques (*Euskaldunak*) – a group of people who have inhabited the land for several thousand years and have developed their own language (Basque), culture, and traditions (Zallo and Ayuso 2009).

2. Status and speakers

Since 1978, next to Spanish, Basque is recognized as the co-official language of the Autonomous Communities of the Basque Country and Navarre in Spain. On the contrary, the language has no official status in the Northern Basque Country in France (Zallo and Ayuso 2009).

According to the 2016 census, approximately 750 000 (28,4%) inhabitants of the Basque Country (aged 16 or above) speak Basque and another 434 000 (16,4%) of them can understand it. The vast majority of those language users (over 90%) live in the Spanish area of the Basque country (VIème Enquête Sociolinguistique 2016: 4). With increasing emigration, Basque is now also spreading over other parts of the world. It is, for instance, spoken by substantial populations in South and North Americas (mostly in Colombia, Argentina, Chile, Canada, and the United States) (Michelena and Rijk 2013).

3. Language use

Support for Basque and its promotion vary with area. Having the co-official status in the two aforementioned Spanish autonomous communities, the language is commonly used in administration and media (Aiestaran et al. 2010). As it shares the status with Spanish, both of the languages can be found in the public space – they co-occur in shop or road signs, outdoor ads, graphics, and digital prints. In public education, Basque is now used as the main language of instruction. In addition, there is a network of privately-run schools, in which teaching takes place solely in Basque (Zallo and Ayuso 2009).

On the contrary, as Basque has no official status in the French area of the Basque Country, it is only considered a regional language and does not receive significant governmental assistance. It is not widely present in the public space and in education (Zallo and Ayuso 2009).

4. Linguistic features

Basque is known for having some distinctive linguistic features and a mysterious origin. It is considered a language isolate, that is, a language which has no ancestors common with any other language. Some linguists hypothesize that Basque could be the oldest language in Europe which developed in prehistoric times. Unlike its prehistoric neighbors, Basque managed to resist much of Rome's influence and reliance on Latin as a lingua franca (Michelena and Rijk 2013).

¹ All names in italics are Basque equivalents of English names

4.1. Phonology and orthography

Similarly to Spanish, Basque has an average sound inventory comprising 5 vowels and 24 consonants (WALS 2013). Stress patterns in Basque differ greatly among dialects, but they are non-distinctive, i.e. they do not serve to distinguish between otherwise the same members of a word pair. In a few cases, however, different stress patterns can change the meaning of a word (e.g. *basó* 'the forest' vs. *báso* 'the glass') (Ignacio Hualde 1986: 871). Because stress in Basque is prone to a great deal of variation among dialects, it is not marked on words in the standard orthography. Otherwise, Basque orthography vastly coincides with the Spanish norm (e.g. the /ʎ/ sound corresponds to the <ll> letter and the /ɲ/ sound corresponds to the <ñ> letter) (Michelena and Rijk 2013).

4.2. Grammar

Basque is characterized by rich inflection, whose three aspects are especially interesting. First, Basque is an ergative language. That is, it has a special case denoting the agent of an action (e.g. the suffix *-k* is used to denote a subject of a transitive verb as in *oinak zerbitzatzan du eskua* 'the foot serves the hand'). Further, Basque makes special use of finite verbs, which serve the function of summarizing all the noun phrases in the sentence by inflecting for tense, voice, person, number, and mood. Each finite verb might therefore contain three personal references (for subject, direct object, and indirect object). For example, *da* means 'is', *du* means 'he has it', and *dio* means 'he has it for him'. Finally, the use of allocative verb forms in Basque is obligatory. That is, all nonsubordinate verbs must agree with the sex of the addressee when the form of address corresponding to the pronoun *hi* 'you (familiar)' is used. For instance, the sentence 'I don't know' would be translated into *ez zekiat* if the addressee is male and *ez zekinat* if the addressee is female (Michelena and Rijk 2013).

4.3. Vocabulary

Despite almost 2000 years of pressure from neighboring languages, Basque has preserved its distinctive lexicon. Nevertheless, it has also borrowed a considerable number of words from other languages, especially those belonging to the Romance family. Some of those loanwords have been demonstrated to bear the stamp of the archaic Latin ancestry (e.g. Basque *errege* 'king' comes from Latin *rex*, while Basque *bake* 'peace' comes from Latin *pax*). Apart from words, Basque has also borrowed several derivational suffixes and compounding practices from Spanish and French. However, the influence was not one-sided. More specifically, due to Basque's influence on Spanish and French, some family and place-names of Basque origin (e.g. *Aramburu* or *Guevara*) have entered the French and Spanish lexicons and are now present in those languages (Michelena and Rijk 2013).

4.4. Dialects

Although the above presentation of linguistic features of Basque concentrates on its standard (official) form, 6 additional dialects of Basque could be distinguished as follows: Vizcaino, Navarro, Bajonavarro, Guipuzcoano, Labortano, and Sulentino. All of them differ from the standard variety in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. The differences are especially prominent in the case of Vizcaino and Suletino, which are regarded as the most divergent dialects of Basque (Michelena and Rijk 2013).

5. Sample text and audio

The following text sample was written and recorded by a native Basque speaker for the purpose of this assignment. The audio file is shared as an attachment.

Kaixo! Javier naiz. Euskadin jaio nintzen eta herri honetan bizi naiz orain. Euskadiko hizkuntza Euskara deitzen diote. Hizkuntza entzuten duzun bezala ematen du. Grabaketa hau nire gretziatar lagun Vangelisentzat eta bere Poloniako kolega Agnieszkaentzat egiten dut "Europako Mapa Eleanitza" kurtsorentzat. Euskara benetako zahar hizkuntza dela uste dut. Inork ez daki noiz sortu zen. Gustatuko zaizula espero dut. Agur!

Hi! I am Javier. I was born and live today in the Basque country. The Basque language is called *Euskara* and it sounds as you hear. This recording is for my Greek friend Vangelis and his Polish partner Agnieszka for the project "Multilingual map of Europe". I believe that Basque is a really old language and nobody knows its origin. I hope that you will like it. Bye!

More text samples can be found in the **Corpus of Contemporary Basque (ETC)**, which is available [HERE](#). It contains around 270 million words selected from books and newspaper articles published in Spain and France in the 21st century.

References

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**OINEZKOEN
ALDERDIA**



**ZONA
PEATONAL**

**BERTAKOAK 1/1
IZAN EZIK**

**EXCEPTO
RESIDENTES 1/1**

**IGANDE JAIEGUNETAN
LANEGUNETAN 20:00 - 9:00**



**DOMINGOS FESTIVOS
LABORABLES 20:00 - 9:00**

**ZAMALANAK
LANEGUNETAN
8tatik 11 tara**

**CARGA-DESCARGA
LABORABLES
de 8 a 11 h**



**EZKER
ALDEA
LADO
IZQUIERDO**