

# Compensatory linguistic strategies in the gradual death process of a minority language : evidence from some dying dialects of Basque

Autor(en): **Elordui, Agurtzane**

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## **Compensatory linguistic strategies in the gradual death process of a minority language: Evidence from some dying dialects of Basque**

**Agurtzane ELORDUI**

### **Abstract**

El objetivo principal de este trabajo es contribuir al entendimiento de varias cuestiones acerca de los principios lingüísticos y sociolingüísticos que gobiernan la dirección del cambio estructural en las lenguas en vías de extinción. En particular, nos interesan los principios que determinan las condiciones de permeabilidad en los casos de transferencia lingüística y los que gobiernan la dirección y difusión de los cambios que no pueden ser explicados como transferencia directa o indirecta de la lengua en contacto.

Para contribuir al estudio de estas cuestiones, tratamos las estrategias compensatorias de transferencia y simplificación observadas en el cambio estructural de dos dialectos vascos terminales: el vizcaíno del sudoeste y el del noroeste.

Nuestras conclusiones apoyan hipótesis que se han propuesto para lenguas en contacto: (i) Los cambios estructurales que muestran transferencia estructural vienen determinados por la preexistencia de paralelismos estructurales específicos entre las lenguas en contacto; (ii) los casos de simplificación parecen gobernados por una jerarquía de marcación y principios universales de carácter cognitivo, entendido éste como transparencia morfológica y semántica.

### **1. Introduction\***

Among the studies dealing with the linguistic conditions of dying languages, I am particularly interested in those trying to answer questions about the universal linguistic implications of change in the terminal phase of a language. The main goal of this work is to contribute to the understanding of questions such as: the main compensatory linguistic strategies observed in the language use of speakers of terminal languages; the loss and maintenance hierarchies found in such strategies; the directions of the changes, and the linguistic principles that govern their direction.

In order to contribute to the cross-linguistic study of these questions, I will consider here the main compensatory linguistic strategies observed in the structural change of some dying dialects of Basque, guided particularly by an interest in the study of the linguistic principles that govern the direction of that change. In particular, I analyse the structural change of the verb inflection

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system in the Northwest and Southwest Biscayan (NWB and SWB) dialects, in the west of the Basque Country<sup>1</sup>.

Currently, the positive attitude of Basque people toward their language and the language planning program of the Basque Government are helping to establish Basque as a language for education and the promotion of its use in different spheres of social activity. However, after years of low prestige and the absence of official support and the lack of institutions (i.e. schools, academies, literary texts), the Basque language has almost disappeared in some Basque communities and has been substituted for Spanish in most social domains. That is the case of the communities I am analysing here. In fact, the linguistic communities of North-western and South-western Biscay provide a rich environment to study language loss; the use of Basque in these communities has been decreasing rapidly in the last four decades and the acquisition of the language by the youngest segments of the population has ceased. The last generations are not acquiring the Basque language from their parents. At best, they are acquiring the Standard Basque in the school (ELORDUI, 1995a, 1995b).

As in other cases where the death process is gradual, I have observed the semi-speaker phenomenon (DORIAN, 1973, 1977b, SCHMIDT, 1985) in the analysed Basque dialects. While the fluent-speakers of these communities are habitual users of Basque and speak the language fairly fluently, there is a group of speakers that speak Spanish in their everyday life and reserve the use of Basque for interaction with a few highly specific individuals and in few restricted settings. They can make themselves understood in Basque, but use many idiosyncratic structures markedly different in form from the fluent-speakers' norms.

These idiosyncratic structures are relevant to this work. This research is based on the different use of the verb inflection system made by fluent-speakers and semi-speakers of the NWB and SWB dialects, focusing on the different structures used by the semi-speakers.

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<sup>1</sup> The data on which this analysis is based was collected during a two-year period of fieldwork in these communities. I used a set of stimulus sentences for translation from Spanish into Basque. Approximately 500 sentences were designed to include significant features of verb categories such as Valency, Tense, Aspect and Mood. Also informal conversations between various members of the speech community were recorded in order to compare the free use of the verb with the forms obtained by translation.

## 2. Compensatory linguistic strategies

As GIACALONE RAMAT (1983), I assume that the lack of active usage of the dying language may result in a decay of competence or in an incomplete acquisition of competence in semi-speakers of terminal languages.

By analysing the changes of the Basque verb system used by semi-speakers, I observe that the decay of competence is compensated in two main ways: first, by adapting Basque structures to structures of Spanish and, second, by reducing the morphological complexity of the Basque verb inflection system.

I have also found other compensatory strategies that are well documented in the literature about language death, such as variability in morphological realisations (DORIAN, 1981, DRESSLER, 1988) and loss of stylistic options (DORIAN, 1981). However, the most common changes found in the language use of the semi-speakers of NWB and SWB dialects can be grouped into the two compensatory strategies mentioned above.

An example of language adaptation (section 2.1.) and two examples of reduction of morphological complexity (section 2.2.) will be provided in this paper<sup>2</sup>. I will also consider the question of loss and maintenance hierarchies found in these changes (section 2.3.).

### 2.1. *Adaptation to structures of the dominant language*

The example of structural adaptation concerns the Basque Verb-Object agreement system of the NWB and SWB dialects. In these dialects, when using first and second person DOs, instead of the traditional ergative system of Basque, we find a new 3-way system. This new system is halfway between the traditional Basque ergative system and the nominative-accusative system of Spanish. I maintain that the pre-existence of parallel structures in the Verb-Object agreement system of the two languages in contact has favoured this adaptation process.

I will now briefly present the traditional Verb-Object agreement system of Basque (2.1.1.) in order to show the changes clearly and I will continue describing and explaining such changes in depth (sections 2.1.2. and 2.1.3.).

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<sup>2</sup> Abbreviations used in the examples: 1: first person; 2: second person; 3: third person; A: subjects of transitive verbs; ABS: absolutive; ACC: accusative; comp: complementizer; DAT: dative; ERG: ergative; hab: habitual; in: inessive; fut: future; O: objects of transitive verbs; past: past; preDAT: pre-dative; pres: present; pl: plural; s: singular; S: subjects of unaccusative verbs.

**2.1.1.** According to traditional descriptions of the Verb-Object agreement system, Basque shows ergative morphology both in overt arguments and in the verb agreement system: subjects of unaccusative verbs (symbolised as S) and DOs of transitives (O) share absolutive cases in the noun system, whereas subjects of transitive and unergative verbs (A) bear ergative case. They are marked on the arguments by the morphemes *-k* for the ergative and *-ø* for the absolutive. In addition, the verb inflection also shows agreement with IOs that are marked by the DAT marker *-(r)i* in the noun system.

Verb inflection shows agreement with all subjects and objects by adding person agreement markers to the root of the verb. In the inflection, except for cases of split ergativity, the agreement markers have a fixed order with respect to the root and also with respect to one another (see the person agreement markers and their order in (1)). Absolutive agreement markers have a pre-root position and ergative and dative agreement markers a post-root position where the ergative agreement markers follow dative markers.

(1)

ABSOLUTIVE			DATIVE	ERGATIVE
1s	n-	ROOT	-t/-da-	-t
2s	z-		-zu	-zu
3s	ø-		-o	-ø
1p	g-		-gu	-gu
2p	z-		-zu	-zu
3p	ø-		-e	-ø

The inflected forms fall into two major classes based on the agreement markers they show; some forms involve ergative agreement and others do not show such agreement. Each of these two base types, in turn, carries a marker of dative agreement. Therefore, there are four agreement patterns: (i) inflected forms taking only absolutive (ABS pattern) are used with unaccusative verbs and express agreement with the absolutive subject (see an example in (2a)); (ii) forms taking absolutive and dative (ABS-DAT pattern) are used with unaccusative verbs and express agreement with the absolutive subject and with the IO (see (2b)); (iii) forms involving absolutive and ergative (ABS-ERG pattern), are used with transitive and unergative verbs and show agreement with the ergative subject and with the DO (see (2c)); (iv) the fourth pattern includes forms taking absolutive, dative and ergative (ABS-DAT-ERG pattern) with the well-known restriction that the absolutive argument can only be a 3<sup>rd</sup> person (see (2d)).

(2)

a. ABS pattern

*ni-∅ etorri n-a-z*  
I-ABS come 1sABS-pres-aux  
“I have come”

b. ABS-DAT pattern

*ni-∅ aita-ri etorri n-a-tza-k(i)-o*  
I-ABS father-DAT come 1sABS-pres-aux-preDAT-3sDAT  
“I have come to my father”

c. ABS-ERG pattern

*ni-k zu-∅ eroan-go z-a-it-u-t*  
I-ERG you-ABS take-fut 2sABS-pres-pl-aux -1sERG  
“I will take you”

d. ABS-DAT-ERG pattern

*ni-k zu-ri dirua-∅ eroan-go d-∅-eu-tzu-t*  
I-ERG you-DAT money-ABS bring-fut pres-3ABS-aux-2sDAT-1sERG  
“I will bring you money”

2.1.2. As a consequence of the changes that have taken place in the language use of the semi-speakers, there have been important restrictions in the use of the Verb-Object agreement system, especially when using ergative verbs.

As for the noun system, there is an overgeneralization of the use of the DAT marker *-(r)i* to express first and second person DOs instead of the ABS marker *-∅*. See in (3) how the DO is indicated with the DAT marker (*gu-ri*, “we+DAT”).

The pattern ABS-ERG has almost disappeared in the verb inflection. Speakers have replaced the pattern ABS-ERG by the pattern ABS-DAT-ERG in sentences that contain a first or second person DO. The example in (3) illustrates these changes. The DAT marker of the verb inflection (*-ku*) shows agreement with the DO (*gu-ri*)<sup>3</sup>:

(3)

*aite-k gu-ri ondo ezautu-ten d-∅-eu-s-ku-∅*  
father-ERG we-DAT well know-hab pres-3sABS-aux-  
preDAT-1pDAT-3sERG  
“The father knows us well”

<sup>3</sup> The English translations of the examples are translations of the Spanish sentences I gave to the speakers and not the direct translation of the Basque example.



Therefore, the present pattern ABS-DAT-ERG has two functions within the verb system and, likewise, two corresponding grammatical behaviours: (i) When there is only one object in the sentence, this object carries the DAT case *-(r)i* and the dative marker of the ABS-DAT-ERG system indicates the agreement with this DO. (ii) When there is a DO and an IO in the sentence, the DO carries ABS marker and the IO a DAT marker. The DAT here shows agreement with the IO in this ABS-DAT-ERG pattern.

An exception to this general behaviour is the case in which the sentence contains a 3<sup>rd</sup> person ABS argument, in which case there has not been any change. In fact, all the speakers still use the pattern ABS-ERG and do not add the DAT marker to indicate the DO.

As a consequence of this reorganisation of the Verb-Object agreement system, there are now two different patterns: (i) when using first and second person DOs, the traditional ergative system disappears and a 3-way system is introduced. Thus, Ss are marked by ABS (*-ø*) and expressed by ABS agreement markers in the verb inflection (see (1)); As are marked by ERG (*-k*) in the noun system and by ERG agreement markers in the verb; Os by DAT (*-(r)i*) in the noun system and by DAT agreement markers in the verb inflection; (ii) those cases where the ABS argument is a 3<sup>rd</sup> person do not show any changes, therefore, they maintain the ergative pattern (see section 2.1.1.).

**2.1.3.** As I stated above, this change with the first and second person objects can be explained as an adaptation to structures of Spanish. I explain it as halfway between the traditional Basque ergative system and the nominative-accusative system of Spanish. In this new 3-way system, Ss and As show different markers as in an absolutive-ergative system, but Os do not share case with Ss. Moreover, an overt marker —as is common in a nominative-accusative system— indicates the Os.

The grammatical condition of expressing first and second person DOs by an overt marker with the preposition *a* in the Spanish system (*te he visto a ti* “I have seen you”, *me ha visto a mi* “S/he has seen me”) has favoured the generalisation of DOs expressed by an overt marker (DAT *-(r)i*) in the noun system of the NWB and SWB dialects. Also the fact that the DOs and the IOs of first and second person are marked by the same pronominal clitics, *te* and *me* in the Spanish clitic system (*te he visto a ti* (“I have seen you”); *te he dado el libro* (“I have given the book to you/I have given you the book”) has definitively contributed to the overgeneralization of the use of the DAT to express all the objects in these Basque dialects.

As a consequence of this adaptation, all objects of first and second person are marked in the same way, choosing as the only marker the one that in the traditional system has an overt expression, that is, the DAT marker  $-(r)i$ .

However, the Animacy Hierarchy that seems to drive the Spanish system when expressing DOs (COMRIE, 1989, FRANCO, 1993) in particular, the introduction of the preposition *a* with 3<sup>rd</sup> person DOs containing the features [+animate], [+specific], [+referential], does not affect the 3<sup>rd</sup> person forms of the NWB and SWB dialects. They do not seem to be sensitive to this influence. When 3<sup>rd</sup> person DOs are in the sentence they are still expressed in the noun system by an ABS marker  $-\emptyset$  and an ABS-ERG pattern is still used in the verb system.

## ***2.2. Reduction of morphological complexity***

As in the terminal phase of other languages (DRESSLER, 1981, SCHMIDT, 1985 CAMPBELL & MUNTZEL, 1989), the importance of markedness values in the loss and maintenance hierarchies of the cases of reduction of morphological complexity in the NWB and SWB dialects is evident. Morphemes, subcategories and structures that can be considered unmarked at the level of linguistic universals are better maintained and are generally used as the basis to generate new constructions.

There are many examples of this strategy in the reorganisation of the NWB and SWB dialects. In fact, these examples are much more numerous than those that could be explained by adaptation. This paper concentrates on two cases that are representative of this strategy: the former concerns the Verb-Object agreement system (2.2.1.) and the latter the mood system of the Basque verb (2.2.2.).

**2.2.1.** There are many cases where the verb inflection undergoes a radical morphological reduction and the Verb-Object agreement system is almost totally lost. Only the most basic agreement patterns are maintained. Absolutive inflected forms (ABS pattern) are generalised with all unaccusative verbs and the ABS-ERG pattern which contains a 3<sup>rd</sup> person ABS agreement with all transitive verbs.

**2.2.1.1.** The language use of fluent-speakers shows agreement with the ABS subject and the IO by using the ABS-DAT pattern (see above the example (2b)). Semi-speakers, however, overgeneralize the use of ABS forms. Therefore, the agreement with the DAT argument (the IO) is lost. As sentence (4) illustrates the



ABS form (*d-ø-a*, pres-3sABS-aux) is used by semi-speakers instead of the traditional ABS-DAT form (*j-ø-a-k-o*, pres-3sABS-aux-preDAT-3sDAT).

(4)

*egun guztietan etor-ten d-ø-a semie-ø ekar-ten periodikue*  
 every day come-hab pres-3sABS-aux son-ABS bring-hab the  
 newspaper  
 “Every day (my) son comes (to me) to bring me the newspaper”<sup>4</sup>

2.2.1.2. In sentences with first and second person DOs, besides the overgeneralization of the ABS-DAT-ERG pattern (see section 2.1.2.), a loss of object agreement is found. Whereas in the traditional Basque verb system (see section 2.1.1.) agreement with first and second person DOs is always expressed, semi-speakers use frequently ABS-ERG forms containing a 3<sup>rd</sup> person ABS agreement in sentences containing a first or second person DOs, (*ni-ri* “I+DAT” in the example (5)). By doing this they lose agreement with first and second person DOs.

(5)

*ekarri z-ei-ø-n-ke-z ni-ri kotxean?*  
 bring 2sERG-aux- 3sABS-past-mood-pl I-DAT by car  
 “Could you bring me by car?”

2.2.1.3. Semi-speakers frequently express sentences with three arguments by ABS-ERG forms containing 3<sup>rd</sup> person ABS agreement instead of traditional ABS-DAT-ERG forms. As illustrated in (6), despite the fact that there is an ergative subject (*ni-k* “I+ERG”), an IO (*zu-ri*, “you+DAT”) and a DO (*nire kotxea-ø* “my car+ABS”) in the sentence, an ABS-ERG form with 3<sup>rd</sup> person ABS agreement is used and the agreement with the DAT argument is not indicated.

(6)

*ni-k eroan-go n-eu-ø-ke zu-ri nire kotxea-ø*  
 I-ERG take-fut 1sERG-aux-3sABS-mood you-DAT my  
 car-ABS  
 “I would bring you my car”

2.2.2. Within the mood system, there is another case where the basic form (indicative) is maintained and used to generate new paradigms.

<sup>4</sup> The forms into parentheses are not represented in the Basque sentence.

The traditional mood system of the Basque verb system is too complex to be explained here in detail. In short, it can be said that the Basque verb distinguishes indicative, subjunctive, potential, conditional and imperative moods. Concentrating on the first two moods, Basque expresses the difference between indicative and subjunctive in two different ways. First, by auxiliary suppletion: the subjunctive mood uses *\*edin* auxiliary for unaccusative verbs and *egin* for transitive and unergative verbs, whereas the indicative mood uses *izan* and *\*edun* auxiliaries in the cases mentioned above. Second, the subjunctive, unlike the indicative, takes the complementizers *-n* or *-la* and adds them to the inflected verb.

Among semi-speakers of NWB and SWB dialects auxiliary suppletion has disappeared and the addition of the complementizers *-n* or *-la* is maintained in such a way that, instead of using the subjunctive auxiliaries, they use the indicative auxiliaries and add the complementizers to them. The examples in (7) illustrate the loss of the auxiliary suppletion. In these examples *izan* (see 7a) and *\*edun* (see 7b) are used instead of *\*edin* and *egin* and the complementizers *-la* and *-n* are added to them:

(7)

- a. *esan notsen aita-ri ez j-ø-a-k(i)-o-la aiztu prentzue*  
 I asked father-ri pres-3sABS-*izan*-preDAT-3sDAT-comp  
 forget the feed  
 “I asked my father not to forget about the feed”
- b. *gure dot esan d-ø-eu-s-ta-zu-n pentsetan dozuzen gauzak*  
 I want say pres-3sABS-*\*edun*-preDAT-1sDAT-2sERG-comp what  
 you think  
 “I want you to tell me what you think”

At this point, it is worth pointing out that there is a direct connection among the preferences observed in each category. The case of the loss of object agreement with transitive verbs is an interesting example of such a connection: The substitution of ABS-ERG and ABS-DAT-ERG forms by ABS-ERG forms containing 3<sup>rd</sup> person ABS agreement forms is much more common in forms expressing past tense and subjunctive mood than in cases expressing present and indicative. Likewise, subjunctive forms are better maintained in present tense than in past tense (ELORDUI, 1995a, ELORDUI, 1995b).

### **2.3. *Loss and maintenance hierarchies***

By analysing the compensatory strategies observed in the changes of these dialects, some hierarchies of loss and maintenance can be established. The presence or absence of parallel structures in Spanish has an important effect in the choices made by semi-speakers in the cases of structural adaptation. Many changes involve the disappearance of structures that do not have an equivalent in Spanish (such as the different marking of DOs and IOs). However, it is interesting to note that some forms—in this case the forms containing a 3<sup>rd</sup> person ABS argument— seem to be more protected from the effect of the dominant language than others, such as the first and second person forms.

The cases of reduction in the morphological complexity show a tendency to use more basic forms or more unmarked forms and also to generate in them the more complex or marked forms. Basic forms, such as the most basic agreement patterns and the indicative, are better maintained and have become the basis to generate new paradigms. Also more common and unmarked morphological structures (in the sense of DRESSLER 1985 and WURZEL 1989), such as the ones symbolised by addition are better maintained. An example of this is the addition of the complementizers *-n* or *-la* to express the subjunctive. However, marked morphological structures (for instance, auxiliary suppletion in the mood system) are lost first.

### **3. Conclusion**

Of the findings reported in this work, I would like to emphasise some about the type of changes and their direction and governing principles.

The first one pertains to the linguistic influence of the dominant language on the direction of the analysed changes. The changes observed in this work support the observation made in earlier studies about language death (among others, DORIAN, 1981, SCHMIDT, 1985) and languages in contact (SILVA-CORVALÁN, 1987, LANDA 1995) about the indirect influence of the dominant language. While there is a great deal of lexical and phonological interference from Spanish into Basque (OÑEDERRA, 1992, ELORDUI, 1993), the direct structural interference from the dominant language is small. There are a loss of native distinctions not shared by the speakers' second language and the patterns that have a parallel structure in Spanish are better maintained and overgeneralized replacing the functions of the traditional lost patterns. However, there is not an introduction of new structures foreign to the Basque language,

such as replacement of case structures by prepositional structures as in the case of Sutherland Gaelic (DORIAN, 1981).

In addition, the influence of Spanish does not justify the order in which the morphological distinctions in the mood system are lost. The loss and maintenance hierarchies in these changes seem to be governed by universal markedness principles. Speakers favour cognitively and formally simple constructions, preferences proposed also for other language types such as pidgins (MÜHLHÄUSLER, 1986, MUYSKEN, 1981, THOMASON & KAUFMAN, 1988) and child language (BYBEE & PARDO, 1981, BYBEE & SLOBIN, 1982).

It is also worth pointing out that the status the forms to be borrowed have at the level of universal markedness is important in the interference filter system of the terminal language. The more unmarked or basic forms (such as ABS forms and the ABS-ERG forms containing a 3<sup>rd</sup> person ABS) are not only more protected from internal change but also are more protected from being replaced by a borrowed construction.

As for the universality of the strategies and hierarchies identified in this study, there are many parallels with the cases discussed in the literature on language shift and language death. Such parallels raise the question of whether the types of changes included in these strategies can be considered as particularly characteristic of a language death process. My conclusions reinforce the hypothesis of Dorian that language change in dying languages is not distinguishable from language change in “healthy” or “normal” languages because of the type of changes involved. The types of changes analysed in this work are quite usual to language change in general and, in particular, to cases of language contact. In the history of the Basque language itself there are many examples of cases of adaptation and morphological reduction such as the ones explained here (TRASK, 1977, GÓMEZ & SAINZ, 1995). Moreover, they are quite common in the present language use of verb inflection by Basque children (BARREÑA, 1993).

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