

# LANGUAGE STANDARDISATION

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Basque recovery II

Garabide Elkartea





*On this DVD we have brought together the accounts of major participants in the process of Basque standardization who describe the motivations, obstacles and triumphs in this fascinating story.*

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# LANGUAGE STANDARDISATION

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Basque recovery II

Coordinator: Alberto Barandiaran

**garabide  
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Bizkaiko Foru  
Aldundia  
Diputación  
Foral de Bizkaia



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ARRASATEKO UDALA  
AYUNTAMIENTO DE MONDRAGON  
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# FORWARD

Basque is a language that may be described in seemingly contradictory ways. It is both an aboriginal and a western language. It is a very old language, yet also a rather modern one. It is language undergoing recovery, yet still a threatened language.

The Basque language community has been recovering and developing its language for the past fifty years, and it seems to us that the path it has followed may contain a few useful things worth sharing with other language communities wanting to revitalize their languages.

This is not to say that Basque is in a position to teach other people lessons, or that others ought to receive such lessons from us. Sharing experiences is a reciprocal thing; everyone can learn from everyone else. The Basque language, like most native minority languages, is subject to asymmetrical power relationships and faces many challenges. It is in the midst of a process that evolves amidst alternating advances and setbacks.

Nonetheless, some of the basic experiences of the Basque language may be said to have proved successful. If today Basque is alive in the home, in schools, in universities, in literature, in music, on television and the internet, it is because there have been development strategies. One such strategy, and not the least important, has been work done on Basque corpus planning. Efforts made in the area of unification of the written language, standardization and corpus creation constitute one of the pillars of the language's recent development in education, communications and modern life generally.

Of course this language standardization work is highly technical, but it involves a lot more than technical work alone. Language unification, standardization and corpus development imply a sophisticated national or collective effort which has to deal with philosophical, political – and technical – issues. It implies a dynamic concept of culture and a vision of the future.

We may say with satisfaction and gratitude that the generation of linguists and writers who guided the course of Basque standardization responded correctly to the challenges of their day. That generation, constituted by forward-looking men both

of the church and of letters, wove skilfully without breaking the threads.

We can recognise in this process of unification and corpus development a number of initiatives that Basque culture has been pursuing, either consciously or unconsciously. Probably they are initiatives that have formed part of the fact of Basque language survival since time immemorial. Underlying them is the constant attempt to balance two fundamental trends: continuity with the past and openness to future change. Basque culture appears to stand out by its strong *sense of flow*. That is to say, an instinctive drive to continue being what one has always been, to transmit the flow from the past, which constitutes one's identity, towards the future; and at the same time, a constant capacity to adapt, within that flow, to all sorts of new circumstances: circumstances of subordination to and contact with more powerful cultures, and to absorb the various elements that come their way with changing times.

In this dynamic equilibrium no dilemma is apparent between the traditional and the modern: it is not a dilemma, merely a question which can be answered differently in different circumstances, but always in a sense in which the flow of continuity is maintained, while at the same time renovation incorporating various influences will not be rejected. The flow of a culture can be truncated in two different ways: by veering so much towards tolerance and adaptability that one ends up assimilating to another culture and losing one's own flow; or else by going to the opposite extreme, shutting oneself in so much by sticking to traditional forms that one's culture finally stagnates completely and loses the capacity to respond to the new needs of future generations. Both excesses may be products of the same psychological complex and lack of self-confidence. But it is possible to find the right dynamic balance between continuity and openness to change. In this perspective, we may think of tradition as the product of a series of creations which grow out of a continual flow in which cultural continuity goes hand in hand with an openness to external influences. In a sense, the best way to remain faithful to a tradition is to reinvent and adapt it constantly.

# FOREWORD

The people who promoted and developed unified Basque implemented these concepts successfully, and this approach has in turn resolved many other issues. Various problems that have to be faced by any heritage culture are manifested in the course of corpus planning: in practice there is no sharp line dividing linguistic matters from sociolinguistic and sociocultural factors. Basque is very different, in its origin and its structure, from the big languages around it, and this entails added technical difficulties. This brings it a little closer than other languages to difficulties of many native languages.

Alberto Barandiaran's study provides a useful synthesis of the course of corpus unification followed by Basque; it is well documented, clearly written and highly accessible, thereby doing people active in other language communities a service. Many such communities are at a historical turning point where they must now face the issue of language standardization, which may prove crucial for the implementation of development strategies for their languages in education, media and use in everyday life in the future.

But this is also an interesting subject for a Basque audience. By endeavouring to produce a practical summary of our experience for the benefit of other communities around the world, we end up helping ourselves to understand our own steps. I think it will also be found useful by the present generation of Basques to help them learn about the efforts of their predecessors which contributed so much to making us still today a language community predisposed to continue creating life.

Jon Sarasua





# LANGUAGE STANDARDISATION

## Spoken and written languages

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Every language started life as a spoken language. For many generations oral transmission was the only way in which knowledge could be passed on about how to hunt or tend livestock, how to cultivate the land, what to be afraid of, what to protect.

Then there came a time when human beings found this was not enough. As civilisations sprang up, social structures

gradually became increasingly complex, and the need was felt to set down some rules, and to give those who needed it access to them. It also became clear that it was not enough to transmit knowledge and feelings only to one's most intimate circle. It was necessary to record business transactions, pacts and important decisions. Verbal agreements were no longer adequate for this, and so writing came into being.



It all started with the drawing of simple pictures called pictograms: a hand, an eye, a house, a cow or the sun. Next came ideograms and hieroglyphics. By means of various writing conventions developed in China, Mesopotamia or Egypt, it now became possible to convey to posterity ideas and issues pertinent to day-to-day life. Likewise, the Maya and Aztecs used signs to set down laws or to record the names of the dead. Primitive symbols were employed to write poetry, to pray to the gods, to preserve ancient epics and sagas, or to sing the praises of rulers. But this was still not enough.

Roughly twelve hundred years before the Common Era, the Phoenicians, a

trading people from the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, realised that they needed a more efficient writing system, one that was practical, quick, and not only accessible to scholars or priests, that would answer their business needs for bookkeeping. They started to represent by means of letters the sounds that we make when we speak, and so the first alphabet was born. This idea was eventually adapted to the languages of most civilisations.

But since each language is different, and its sounds are likewise different, each speech community had to adjust and adapt the written code to its needs. Although traditional writing systems

have been maintained in China, Japan, the Arabic cultural sphere, Israel, India, Georgia and Armenia, most written languages have adopted the Latin model, which is used in most of Europe.

## Alphabets and cultural propagation

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In many cases, a given alphabet was introduced as a component of a particular culture imposed on a people, in a similar way to other elements such as a given currency or a particular religion. Nearly all languages have a territory of their own, but states often establish settlements and achieve the domination of territories or nations with other languages in the process of their expansion. Unless there is a relation of equality between language communities, the language of one group, the dominating one, tends to take over from the others, usurping the other languages' functions.

The alphabet of the conquerors often failed to cover the linguistic needs

of the colonised countries. That is what happened with the languages of America, for example, and it is also what happened in the case of Basque. Thus, on the southern side of the Pyrenees the Basque language came to be written using Spanish spellings, and on the northern side with French spellings. This led to differences in the way the same word might be written: so the Basque word for 'house' was spelt *etche* in the part of the country north of the mountains but *eche* in the part that belongs to the Iberian Peninsula; and similarly, we have *çazpi* or *zazpi* 'seven'; *guiçon* or *guizon* 'man', and so on and so forth.

This situation created artificial, arbitrary divisions within languages. When a language is first written down, it is important to realise that not all speakers pronounce the same word the same way, and also that writing is a written representation of the spoken word for which each language community must establish its own agreement and set of conventions. At the time when a system of spelling is adopted, each language community should be in a position to choose its own system without being subordinated to neighbouring or dominant languages.

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## The standard language, a necessity

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The Basque language community is aware that it shares a single language. This unity may be due to its being the form of speech of a single people, or perhaps because it was once a *koiné* or common spoken language of several peoples. In any case, the further back in time we go, the smaller the differences become between different forms of Basque. This means that in former times, the differences currently perceivable between Basque dialects in vocabulary or in pronunciation did not exist. Let us consider an example. 'Black' and 'new' are *beltz* and *berri* in standard Basque and in most dialects, but in western Bizkaian these words are now pronounced *baltz* and *barri*. Yet even in this western dialect, many words derived from these lexical items still display the older form with e common to all varieties, such as *bele* 'crow', *harbel* 'slate' and *orbel* 'dead leaf' which are cognates of *beltz*, and the placenames Berriz, Berrio and Berriatu, all derived from *berri*.

This is something that happens in all languages. Languages are like trees. They are always sprouting new branches, which grow in length and become

more separate from each other, yet all begin from the same single trunk.

This ramification, whether in vocabulary, grammar or pronunciation, appears as a weakness when put into contrast with the language's shared elements. Every country in the world realised long ago that in order for a language to remain strong and healthy, we must look after its trunk, and that it is very difficult for a language to survive unless it is used in education, cultural transmission, mass media and the public administration.

**Each language is different, and its sounds are likewise different. Each speech community had to adjust and adapt the written code to its needs, giving rise to the different alphabets**

The mere knowledge of a language does not ensure that all of an individual's communicative needs will be covered in a modern society. For this to come about, education plays a central role. Schools help young pupils to broaden and deepen their understanding of the language, improves their vocabulary and their grammar, and teaches them to read and to write. In addition to this, when people are educated in their own language, they come to think more highly of it, the reason being that they



are able to understand the world better through it. Let us not forget that when we study mathematics, geography or history, we are also studying language.

The same is true of the press and media. The fact that we are able to access information through the medium of one's own language enhances its value, while at the same time developing and extending the language's ability to express knowledge and formulate ideas. But in order to be able to teach or give information in one's own language, it must be possible to write it, and to write it in a common code accepted and shared by its speakers.

Every people that has organised itself into a state has felt the need, once a certain level of development is reached, to create mechanisms for writing down their language, because if not, the language, even if it survives within the home and in certain rural or limited

contexts, runs the risk of becoming more and more isolated.

## The staircase of language

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If we think about it in terms of a staircase, we can say that all *living* languages have reached the first step, as a vehicle of private thought, and the great majority also occupy the second step, that of communication in the home. The next step after that is that of the workplace and the school. As we continue upwards in the scale of language functions, the fourth step is that of the smallest social domain of the neighbourhood, the village or maybe even the town. A language that only climbs this far up the staircase is a language

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without the support of a state or official status, but still a language that a community uses for communication and the language in which it lives. The fifth step is that of a country or nation. This is the case of languages that possess official status.

There are still two more steps that are only reached by a small number of select languages. The first of these is that of languages associated with a dominant cultural system which spreads beyond the frontiers of a state, such as German, French, Spanish or Arabic. The last step of all is that of international languages, such as Latin in the past, and nowadays basically English.

For a language to be in a "normal" situation, it must occupy the first five steps at least. There are cases of a language only existing on the higher steps, such as Latin in the Middle Ages in Europe, but they have all ended up dying out because there was no place, no land, no society brought up speaking them. But we should also note that if a language is unable to progress up the staircase, this means

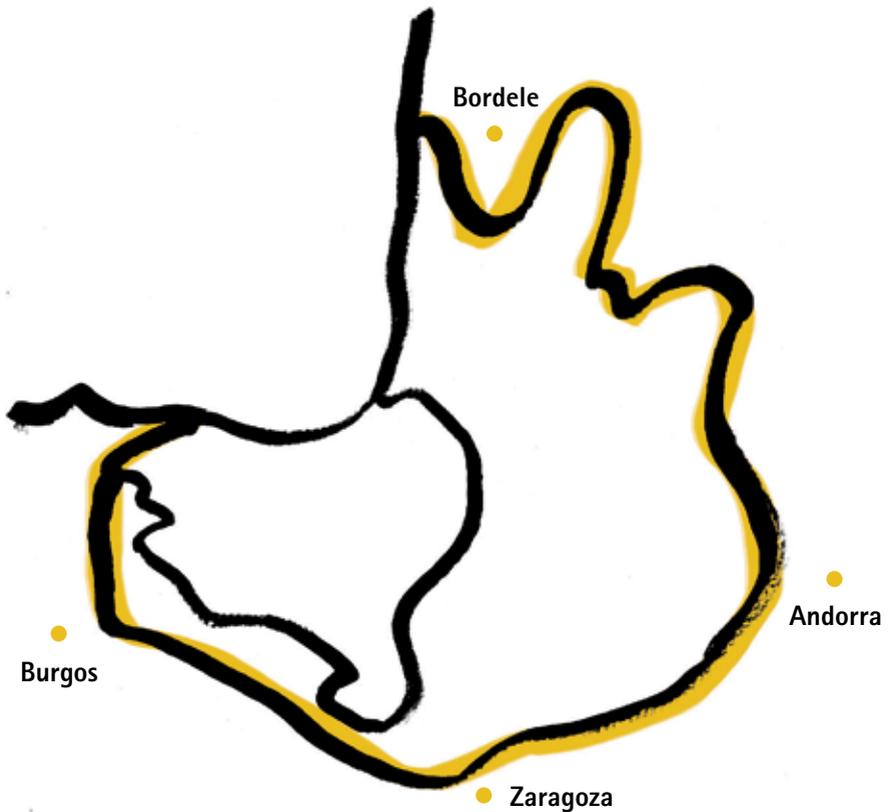
that it is in a minority situation since there is another language taking up the space it ought to be occupying.

Most languages that have died out or are on their way to extinction have gone through this stage: they became more and more dependent and subordinated to other dominating languages until they were weakened so much that they disappeared.

For this to be avoided, it is often not sufficient for people to not want it to happen. For a language to become "normalised", that is, for it to occupy the place that corresponds to it, it must be used in education, administration and the press and media. For that to be possible, the language must fulfil certain requirements: it must have a standard spelling not pervaded with dialectal features. Often such a standard language is built on the basis of the language's common core. This happened in Spanish, English, German and Chinese, among others. Today, it is a necessary step to ensure success in the future.

# EXPANSION OF OLD BASQUE ( CIRCA 0 A.D.)

-  The Basque language area
-  The Basque Country today



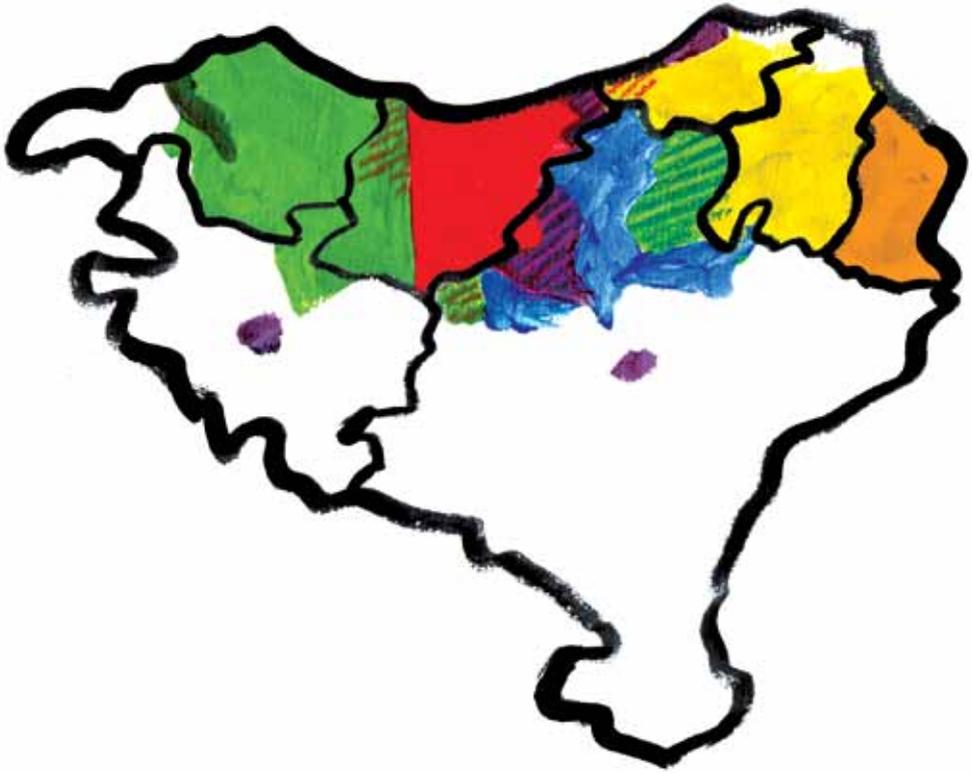


# THE BASQUE CASE

"The real mystery of the Basque language is its survival, not its origin," wrote one of the greatest of Basque linguists, Koldo Mitxelena.

The Basque language has always aroused interest because of its special characteristics. One of the oldest languages in Europe, its relationship to other languages has never been clarified. It is generally acknowledged that Basque, or its ancestor forms, has been spoken in Europe for thousands of years and that prior to the arrival of the Indo-Europeans over two

thousand years ago it was spoken over a much larger territory than at present, basically in the region of the Pyrenees mountain chain. The argument over its relations to other languages is still going on; no hypothesis has gained enough adherents to be generally admitted. It is not certain whether it has always been spoken on the shore of the Bay of Biscay, that is, if it came into existence in this area, or was brought there by some very ancient people. It is therefore referred to as an isolate, that is, a language which has no known relatives.



## PRESENT-DAY DISTRIBUTION OF BASQUE DIALECTS

-  Western dialect
-  Central dialect
-  Navarrese dialect
-  Navarrese-Lapur dian dialect
-  Zuberoan dialect

But what is really interesting is how it was able to survive all the neighbouring languages and all the conquerors who passed through its territory: Celts, Romans, Visigoths and Arabs. And the most amazing thing of all is that it is still alive to this day as an "orphan", without a strong state protecting it and without being used in public administration or education.

This survival is even more exceptional if we bear in mind that languages are subject, during their history, to tensions which cause them to change, be transformed, sometimes growing and being enriched, other times shrinking and being impoverished. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure said that at the heart of a language there are always forces of two kinds: agglutinating forces which produce unity and uniformity, and dissolving forces which break up a language's homogeneity and result in the development of dialects and spoken variation. In a normal situation the two forces balance out, but in the case of Basque the centripetal tendency has dominated.

In consequence of this lack of cultural and political power, today there are six dialects, fourteen subdialects and numerous local varieties all in an area of 270 kilometres by 200.

## The appearance of dialects

Such dialectal variety is surprising. Differentiation seems to have commenced about a thousand years ago. With the fall of the Roman empire tensions arose in the Basque-speaking area as they did all over Europe: there ensued power vacuums, a succession of invasions, feuds between rival bands and constant skirmishes among neighbouring tribes, up until the appearance of the first institutions in connection with the kingdom of Pamplona. Around 700 years ago the Basque lands formed part of the kingdoms of Navarre, Castile, France and England. From the sixteenth century onwards, the area was divided up between the crowns of Spain and France. This is the history that has divided the language.

**What is really interesting is how Basque was able to survive all the neighbouring languages and all the conquerors who passed through its territory**

When for the first time a French scholar drew up a classification of Basque dialects in the nineteenth century, he

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created an eight-coloured map. Subsequently linguists have traced two fundamental lines of diglossia: a political one between territories to the north of the Pyrenees and those to the south, and a cultural one between the coastal territories, more cultivated literarily, and the inland ones.

As time went on, some of these dialects came to have more prestige than others owing of their use in literature. Up until the eighteenth century, Basque literary production occurred chiefly in the dialects of Lapurdi (north of the Pyrenees) and Gipuzkoa (south of the Pyrenees).

In the mid-twentieth century a number of Basque language enthusiasts realised that, notwithstanding the dialectal wealth and variety, the lack of a standard, unified language posed a threat to the language, and deemed that there was a need for a set of basic rules to create a certain degree of unity. While they saw the way ahead, it was a road that had already been started by others. A careful reading of early texts in Basque literature reveals that those who set out to use Basque as a written language have always perceived the need to establish a common written form.





# THE LONG ROAD TOWARDS STANDARD BASQUE

The preoccupation with the standardisation of Basque is almost as old as written Basque literature itself. Joanes Leizarraga, a priest who translated the New Testament into Basque in the sixteenth century, wrote in the preface that in Euskal Herria, the Basque Country, the language that was spoken varied practically from house to house. Therefore he tried to create a way of writing the language that would be understood by the largest possible part of the population. For this purpose he observed the language varieties around him, particularly those spoken to the north of the Pyrenees. He tried to develop something that would come as

close as possible to all the dialects in his area in order to reach the greatest number of readers. He was aiming at a standard language.

In the next century another Jesuit, Manuel Larramendi, was one of the first Basque language apologists and he also wrote the first Basque grammar and a dictionary, for which he took words from every dialect. He believed that in this way, not only would the language be enriched, but speakers of different dialects would understand each other better. It was his priority that Basques should listen to each other.



**Given that their language did not attain to the status of a language of culture, the Basque-speaking community was branded illiterate or even plain ignorant despite a rich cultural tradition which had mainly been transmitted orally**

included avoidance of the spellings *gue* and *gui*, to which *ge* and *gi* were to be preferred; the abolition of *ç* to be replaced by *z*; and the writing of *ts* rather than *ss*. The letter *v* was to be excluded from the Basque alphabet, and *i* or *j* were to be preferred to *y*.

Juan Antonio Moguel, another monk, went a step further. Although himself from Bizkaia at the western end of the country, he believed that if agreement was to be reached over a common form, the geographical centre should be kept in view, i.e. Gipuzkoa. He was irritated by criticisms of one or another dialect, and observed that in reality the differences between them are not great. For the most part they can be reduced to a few sounds, parts of the vocabulary and verbal morphology, and of course the different spelling systems used by his contemporaries.

Around about the same period, the nineteenth century, a group of writers from the northern side of the Pyrenees proposed some basic spelling rules. These

## Creation of the language academy

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There was a climate of change. It became common for books to be published in different Basque dialects, and under the influence of the European romantics, for whom national languages and customs acquired prestige, the Basque language and the Basque Country became popular subjects of study. This external impetus coincided with a deep sense of loss of identity given that the language was receding in large parts of the country. After 1878 the Basques also lost their historical, economic and

political rights. In these circumstances, a new generation arose which attached great importance to the preservation of the Basque language.

This did not happen immediately. The romantic exaltation of the vernacular was manifested through a multitude of folklore celebrations; boys and girls received prizes for speaking Basque; literary prizes were awarded to poets who sang the language's virtues. There was a will to recover the language and make this the central point in the debate over identity. But the new generations soon came to realise that folklore alone is not enough, and that to move forward a change of protagonists was required. As it happens, the political climate of the time was not adverse to this. Supported by Sabino Arana's Basque nationalists, who at the dawn of the twentieth century began to dominate in part of the country – the most industrial and economically powerful area – a new group of intellectuals came to the fore and founded *Euskaltzaindia*, the Basque language academy.

In addition to linguists, the academy's founding members included intellectu-

als, anthropologists and archivists. This was the scientific initiative that the country needed.

## Establishing the rules of the written language

The chief purpose of the academy was to establish a standard written language. Within a large section of the nationalist camp, there was support for radical proposals to abolish anything in the language that came from Latin and to promote the adoption of newly created words lacking tradition. Some of these neologisms stuck and are still used today. But in the long run, most speakers ended up rejecting these proposals to carry out a radical and overly artificial large-scale renovation of the language, which produced a type of standard Basque which most speakers found hardly acceptable, given that it proposed to replace immediately all the terms that had been borrowed into Basque over centuries with made-up words that had little or nothing to do with the language as it was spoken.

The very name of the Basque language academy, *Euskaltzaindia*, may be considered as a case in point to illustrate some of the problems. This title



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implies no fewer than five linguistic innovations!

*Euskaltzaindia's* constitution sets out its basic objectives, which are to regulate the use of Basque spelling and lexicon, and to contribute to the creation of a written form of the language that will be valid for all parts of the Basque-speaking area: in other words, to create a standard language. But the academy's founding members soon reached the conclusion that it was too early for this. There was a lot of resistance to such a move. The time was not yet ripe.

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## Opposition to unification

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Resistance was chiefly of two kinds. Some people were of the opinion that if the language was standardised, the rich variety existing in the language would be lost and the language would be impoverished. Others objected that if a specific variety of the language were chosen as the standard, speakers of other varieties would develop hangups because they couldn't master it, and this would give rise to first and second class Basque speakers. There were also some who thought the whole idea was nonsense and were opposed to anything being "invented", and

others who defended the freedom of individual writers each to employ their own dialects. One author even opted to publish each book he wrote in a different dialect, in accordance with its literary genre.

Indeed the time was not ripe. Linguistic ideas were immature, and the opposition was too powerful. The Spanish linguist Ramón Menéndez Pidal gave a lecture in Bilbao, not long after the founding of the Basque language academy, in which he argued that invented languages have no future since languages, per se, are a natural phenomenon. He rejected any grammatical or linguistic creation on these grounds, but he offered no alternative — or rather, the only option he offered was that of writing in Spanish or French. He said he had no objection to using a vernacular language as a means of studying the past, but that it was stupid to use it in education, the press, scientific or cultural activities. According to him it made no sense: why would you bother trying to say in Basque what the great languages of Europe express so much better?

The idea that minority languages are not really worth saving was one that became widespread in Europe in the early twentieth century. One Basque thinker and intellectual, Miguel de Unamuno, put it this way: "Basque culture, if it can be called 'culture', has been produced in Spanish or in French. You can't think universally in Basque.

When Basques think universally, they do so in Spanish or French."

## Minority languages and dominant languages

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These intellectuals had forgotten that centuries earlier Spanish and French stood in precisely the same situation vis-à-vis Latin. In the sixteenth century, writers in these languages, as in the case of the languages then emerging elsewhere in Europe, still felt they needed to defend their language; Latin was still considered the language of culture par excellence. In the case of languages descended from Latin itself, the changeover was not so difficult, but in that of other languages, such as Basque, things were more complicated. Given that their language did not attain to the status of a language of culture, the Basque-speaking community was branded illiterate or even plain ignorant despite a rich cultural tradition which had mainly been transmitted orally. This dichotomy between cultured and uncultured peoples lasted many centuries – far too many!



*Resurreccion Maria Azkue*

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## The work of the academy

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But *Euskaltzaindia* forged ahead, and began by deciding on issues where it was possible. In 1920 the academy took a position on some basic issues about Basque spelling, eliminating the letters c, q and v while giving the green light to the use of ü, ts, tx and tz, and also h. It was to be the only progress on standardisation in almost thirty years. Why? One reason was that Basques still lacked a clear consciousness of the relation between language and country: each writer focused on his own dialect, the language

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variety of his own community or at best his own region. Another reason was that the language was not a genuine priority. Most intellectuals in the academy still used Spanish for the most part; even the meetings of the Basque language academy were conducted in Spanish!

The traumatic experience of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and the subsequent authoritarian regime ushered in dark times for any attempt whatsoever to defend Basque language and culture. An entire generation was silenced, and many of its brightest stars either executed, imprisoned or forced to leave the country. The reactionary dictatorial regime forbade all cultural activity in Basque and made it impossible to even speak Basque in public. The Basque language academy was forced into a long period of hibernation.

In the fifties, at a time when young Basques living under the shadow of the Franco dictatorship were beginning to grope towards a new political awareness, a change of discourse appeared regarding the importance of language and of language recovery. Although this new discourse was still rooted in the old romantic view, it went well beyond that. Language was now seen, not just as an element of Basque idiosyncrasy to be preserved and studied, but as quintessential to the Basque Country's cultural recovery and absolutely unnegotiable.

## The language as a core element

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Basque language was generally seen as part of the Basque landscape comparable to its characteristic self-sufficient farmsteads (*baserriak*) which dotted the hills all over the country, or perhaps to the *txistu*, a shrill one-handed flute played while tapping a drum with the other hand, always present at Basque festive events. Instead, by the middle of the century some Basque intellectuals had come to view the language as a basic resource for raising Basque awareness, an incomparable agglutinating force that could contribute to the regeneration of a whole country, not just as a quaint part of its traditional folklore, but as a key to progress. This meant that the language, still predominantly rural, would now have to be

**At Arantzazu, the generation gap came to a head. The young writers had begun to publish since the civil war, and it was their dream to free Basque from the 'folklore' straitjacket and turn it into a living, modern language, adaptable and well-adapted; a 4-wheel drive, all-terrain language**



transformed into an urban language. The spaces that had hitherto been denied to the Basque language must be conquered for it. The country was to be rebuilt around its language!

There was an acute awareness of there being no time to lose. Gabriel Aresti, one of the Basque language's most highly reputed modern poets, forecast that if nothing was done about it, the language would disappear in forty years. People started to talk about *normalisation* of the Basque language and to challenge the mythical paradigm that equated Spanish and French to languages of culture, while Basque which was deemed a language for illiterates, by insisting that the Basque language

was equally capable of being used in all domains of modern life.

Some of the specific proposals that found advocates at the time were bound to fail, such as the fanciful notion of reinstating the refined but outdated written Basque of the seventeenth century classical authors. Real progress started when linguists and writers sat down together and began laying down a foundation based on one central idea: that the point of departure must always be the internal structure of the language so that nothing need be invented out of thin air. Where the creation of new words or patterns was concerned, the rule of thumb would be to do so as sparingly as possible. The principle was clear and coherent, but



big questions remained in the air: What would standard Basque be like? Which form of Basque would it be based on? What should be standardised, and why?

## The linguist Koldo Mitxelena

There were many questions and nobody had all the answers, but the academy asked Koldo Mitxelena to draw up a proposal for a unified Basque. Mitxelena, an internationally acclaimed

linguist, enjoyed the respect of his colleagues and was, without a doubt, the most knowledgeable person about the Basque language, its history and its linguistic mechanisms. He had a number of collaborators in this task, and he based his proposal on the work of earlier writers, but it was he who produced the central document, and he was quite possibly the only person who could have done so.

The point of departure was linked to the basic idea that it was not the differences between spoken varieties that required attention, but the common core. The existence of eight dialects in such a small geographical area did not so much signify linguistic wealth as reflect a situation of weakness; it was a consequence of the language community's disunity. To bring about the unity of the language, it was necessary to return to the point of origin. "If the language has become differentiated, broken up or fallen apart, the reason for this is the country's disunity; conversely, linguistic union will signal the union of all Basque speakers."

Mitxelena based his proposal on the central dialect "because that is where the heart of our country is, and because it has played a dynamic role in the history of our literature." Thus he primed linguistic and sociological reasons over all else. The central dialect is the closest to all the others, and it was the one most spoken and used in cultural production.

The document presented by Mitxelena has five sections: spelling, old words and lexical variants, new words, morphology and syntax. He laid down the principle that words that have been used in Basque for a long time are Basque words, no matter where they originally came from. Notwithstanding the importance attached to the central dialects, if the peripheral dialects coincided on something, that should be preferred. He recognised that standard or unified Basque would be detrimental for some dialect varieties but saw no other possible option.

Mitxelena's proposal was presented in October, 1968 at Arantzazu, a highly revered Basque shrine. It was to be a highly polemical gathering.

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## The meeting at Arantzazu

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At Arantzazu, the generation gap came to a head. The young camp consisted primarily of writers who had begun to publish since the civil war. They had grown up in a repressive atmosphere amidst oppression and prohibitions, and it was their dream to free Basque from the "folklore" straitjacket. They had seen their language castrated and restrained by all kinds of hangups; in

their dream they dared to imagine Basque as a living, modern language, adaptable and well-adapted; a 4-wheel drive, all-terrain language! It infuriated them to see speakers of different dialects meeting and speaking to each other in Spanish or French because they claimed they couldn't understand each other. To only way to change this that they could think of was to establish a standard language. "Unless we promote a high form of the language, the dialects will die out, and with them the whole language", some argued. "For a language to survive it needs to attain a status of refinement, and that comes about through books, education and cultivation in literature and the arts."

Indeed, the language was at a crossroads. All over Euskal Herria, ikastolak – Basque-medium schools – were springing up in towns and cities everywhere and were about to play a vital role in the next few years. Adult Basque literacy centres were also developing, and were destined to play an instrumental part by teaching the language to thousands of people past school age. And all these initiatives needed a single, coherent standard form of the language.

Other people, however, thought that this would amount to an attack on the dialects which would wipe them out. They took the view that the possession of a standard was not of such vital importance. They pointed out that existing publications used living

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Basque that approximated to the way people actually talk in real contexts. They feared that a form of the language that was concocted and designed by linguists would result in distancing ordinary people from Basque literature and culture.

When we go back and read public statements prior to the Arantzazu meeting, we receive the impression that the latter, conservative view represented the majority position and that, in all probability, those who wanted things to remain as they already were would win the day.

Now one particular issue ended up as the symbolic flag-bearer in this great controversy, and that was the letter *h*.

## The fight over the ‘*h*’

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In itself this is a purely linguistic issue. Students of the language know that the sound represented by the letter *h*, called aspiration, is a historical element of Basque. At the time of Arantzazu, it was still present in the northern Basque dialects, and it was also known to have been used elsewhere in older forms of the language. It was important for northern writers and speakers that the aspiration should be repre-

sented in spelling, and considering that the northern dialects had high literary significance (they are the dialects of most of the earliest books in Basque), Mitxelena thought that the letter *h* ought to be written.

Keeping the *h* was one way to ensure that language unification would be supported on both sides of the Pyrenees; it was a strategy to neutralise both political and linguistic borders. It might mean that the new Basque spelling had a chance to unify all Basque speakers, rather than driving a wedge between them.

The “young” group liked the idea, but older and more conservative delegates were against having to get used to a letter that they did not even pronounce.

Some critics read political motives into the issue, claiming that the *h* was an attack on tradition — a tradition, countered its supporters, that had clearly failed to make a modern language of Basque. Many even identified the letter *h* as a revolutionary symbol.

The polarisation of positions for and against reached such a frenzy that accusations were heard that the letter *h* was a diabolical, anti-religious, Marxist symbol and an attack on the moral decency of God-loving Basques!

## A mere spelling reform

But all that Mitxelena had been proposing was a straightforward spelling reform aiming to make the written language more coherent, and which would bring some symbolic benefits with it: not only would it help to surmount artificial (political) borders, but it also made perfect sense linguistically. It provides a way to distinguish between words which otherwise would be spelt the same way, but have completely different meanings, e.g. *nahiz* 'although; wishing' / *naiz* 'I am', *har* 'worm; take' / *ar* 'male', *hari* 'thread' / *ahari* 'ram' / *ari* 'be doing'. It also serves usefully to separate syllables with otherwise adjacent vowels, as in *zahar* 'old', *mehe* 'thin', *zuhur* 'prudent', *aho* 'mouth', *lehor* 'dry'.

Opponents countered that in all languages, letters that are not pronounced end up disappearing, and since most Basques do not pronounce the *h*, it too will eventually disappear. They said the *h* would make writing more difficult, because most people would need a list to tell them which words are spelt with *h* and which ones are not. Some went further, claiming that this letter was not going to bring people together, but to create new divisions. In the end it would merely be a silent letter that was written but not pronounced.

Others suggested that this was not a matter to be decided by a majority vote. Granted, they said, that were reasons



*Koldo Mitxelena*

for some people's feeling of reluctance towards the proposed change, nevertheless this was an important decision best made by those who fully mastered the issues. Ordinary people, they suggested, are not the best judges in such difficult cases: to be sure, people are aware of their own reasons, yet are ignorant of the contrary reasons of other people. It called for analysis in a broader perspective.

Most people placed their trust in Mitxelena's expertise.

When all the official reports and documents had been read out to the meeting and open discussion began, there was an uproar! One after the other, people

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stood up and spoke for or against the spelling reform, but mainly everyone was concerned about the *h*. Reading through the minutes of the meeting, what comes across is that those present were fully aware that this was an historic moment. They realised that whether or not Mitxelena's proposal was ratified, henceforth the history of the Basque language would not be the same.

## “Basque is dying!”

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Perceiving that no consensus was being reached, Piarres Lafitte rose to his feet. This seventy-year-old priest, who enjoyed enormous prestige in the world of Basque culture, represented the writers of the north. With all eyes on him, he addressed the assembly with these words: “Basque is dying! If it is to be saved, it will be saved here.” By “*here*” he was referring the south, where the majority of young creative writers were to be found. “Therefore we should all channel all our efforts towards protecting what there is here: the people from there and the people from here. I would not bother with the *h*. We are going to end up disappearing, don't chain yourselves to a ship that is about to sink!” So the writers from the north, the heirs to Basque's greatest classical literature, were willing to give way, and sacrifice an essential feature of their group of

dialects, in order to give the language a chance. It was was a turning point.

But Mitxelena's response turned the tables once and for all: “It is not the weak who are called on to give in,” he said, “but the strong. Besides,” he added, “the young are always right.” And the young were in favour of the *h*.

And so in the end Mitxelena's proposal won the day, and standard Basque took a massive, historic leap forward.

The contributions of the Arantzazu meeting can be summed up as follows:

- **The basic principle:** “It is of fundamental importance that Basque should move towards unification, and unification should commence chiefly with matters of form, leaving matters of substance for later.”
- **Spelling:** Several letters about which there were doubts, such as *f* (which originally didn't exist in Basque and was not traditional in the opinion of some), were admitted. The letter *j* was accepted, as was *x*. It was agreed that the letter *ñ* was to be used in certain clearly defined cases.
- **Old words:** It was agreed that words commonly used in Basque, even if they are clearly borrowed from other languages, are still Basque words. Now at the time there was a widespread purist be-

TRADITIONAL TERM (LOAN WORD)	PROPOSED NEOLOGISM	TERM IN CURRENT USE TODAY
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Geografia (geography)	Lutelesti	Geografia
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Elektrizitate (electricity)	Argindar	Elektrizitate
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Arraza (race)	Abenda	Arraza
---------------	--------	--------

Aingeru (angel)	Gotzon	Aingeru
-----------------	--------	---------

Eskribatu (write)	Idatzi	Idatzi
-------------------	--------	--------

Paper (paper)	Ingi	Paper
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Kantari (singer)	Abeslari	Abeslari/kantari
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Foru (feudal law)	Lagizarr	Foru
-------------------	----------	------

Basamortu (desert)	Lekaro	Basamortu
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Pertsona (person)	Notin	Pertsona
-------------------	-------	----------

Berde (green)	Orrlegi	Berde
---------------	---------	-------

Zerbitzatu (serve)	Otseindatu	Zerbitzatu
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Eliza (church)	Txadon	Eliza
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Bitxi (jewel)	Txingi	Bitxi
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lief that words that were originally Latin loans, such as *eliza* 'church' (from Latin *ecclesia*), ought to be avoided. According to this view-point, the neologism *txadon*, a spurious invention lacking any tradition at all, was regarded as "more Basque". Arantzazu took a stand against such fanciful notions. "*Eliza* is Basque," Mitxelena declared. It was also agreed that in cases where there were different words for something such as *tximeleta*, *pinpilinpauxa*, *inguma* and *marisorgin*, which mean 'butterfly' in different places, all the words are valid. But in the case of variant forms of the same word, such as *ile* / *ule* 'hair', *gezur* / *guzur* 'a lie', *utzi* / *itzi* 'leave', *guraso* / *burraso* 'parent', the form that was best known and already had the most widespread acceptance should be preferred, or else the form coming closest to the original word within the history of Basque. Hence *barkatu* 'forgive' is preferred to *parkatu*, *bake* 'peace' to *pake*, *berri* 'new' to *barri*, etc. However, if the peripheral dialects happen to coincide, their form is to take preference over the central form.

- **Neologisms:** Mitxelena observed that a language always needs new words: these sometimes develop in the language itself and sometimes are borrowed. Both procedures are valid, on one condition: new words



should not be created if there is an old one that already serves the same purpose. In the event that it is necessary to create a new word, it is preferable for it to come from the language itself. Basque has a large number of suffixes by means of which words that did not previously exist may be formed from an existing word. Thus from *luze* 'long' we get *luzatu* 'lengthen', *luzera* 'length', *luzagarri* 'extendible, extension', *luzamendu* 'delay, postponement'. When proceeding to the creation of a word, it is better to search around within the language before resorting to a loan from another language. Many words used quite naturally in Basque today were unknown to most speakers twenty or thirty years ago, although they have been developed out of some

word or other that already existed. It was decided at Arantzazu that, when adopting learned words that are internationally known and used, unwarranted difficulties should not be introduced, so that, for example, *filosofia* is preferable to *philosophie*, and *matematika* is better than *mathematik*. palabra que ya existía. Igualmente, en Arantzazu se decidió que, en el caso de palabras cultas conocidas y utilizadas internacionalmente, lo conveniente era evitar cualquier dificultad añadida. Se estableció, por ejemplo, que era más conveniente utilizar *filosofía* que *philosophie*, o *matematika* que *mathematik*.

- **Morphology:** At the time of Arantzazu, Mitxelena did not think it possible to standardise the system of verbal conjugation. However, not many years later *Euskaltzaindia*

did appoint a commission to do just that.

- **Syntax:** The report recommends reading and learning from the language's classics.
- **The letter *h*:** Mitxelena thought *h* should be used between similar vowels, as in *ahari* 'ram' and *mahai* 'table', and between different vowels to separate syllables, as in *aho* 'mouth', *behar* 'need', *oh*e 'bed'.

The foundation for standard Basque was laid at Arantzazu. It was not a decision *ex nihilo*, but built upon the work of earlier writers and linguists. Yet it had an incalculable symbolic value. Indeed, *Euskaltzaindia*'s prestige increased because it now became the reference point for groups and associations supporting the Basque language.



# AFTER ARANTZAZU

Two years after the Arantzazu meeting, it was time for *Euskaltzaindia* to elect a new president. The proponents of the road to standardisation considered that it was of vital importance for the academy to be led by someone who was committed to the decisions that had been ratified, because they knew that their ultimate success would depend on further development of the points that had been agreed upon and their transfer to the realm of practice.

The academy's incumbent president, Manuel Lekuona, was highly regarded among the academy's members, but his support for the standardisation process

had been lukewarm. He believed that the academy should stick to a neutral position, neither for nor against standardisation, and he stated that he would personally carry on writing Basque without h.

He was not the only one. In 1970, a group of Basque writers and academy members started a movement in opposition to the rules that had been ratified at Arantzazu, and convinced the president of the academy that it was not feasible to move ahead with spelling reform. Lekuona wanted to create a new committee to review the issue and suggested that Mitxelena should not be



*The Bergara conference (1978): From left to right, Jose Maria Satrustegi, Koldo Mitxelena, Luis Villasante and the mayor of Bergara Jose Luis Elkoro.*

on it. His proposal was not approved, but it triggered off a great deal of concern among some academy members who believed the time had now come to make a move forward in support of *Euskaltzaindia's* official position.

On the 29th of July, 1970, Luis Villasante was elected as the new head of *Euskaltzaindia*. Villasante was a Franciscan who had performed his life's work on language and literature within the walls of the Arantzazu monastery itself. His presidency constituted a vital step forward in support of Basque language unification. With Villasante, the Arantzazu recommendations became rules.

The new president surrounded himself with the best available specialists and set up committees to undertake all the work ahead of them. The first deci-

sion was that the spelling reform was in need of a new drive forward. The academy set itself a ten-year target: to carry out a thorough analysis of the feasibility of the Arantzazu rules. In the meantime, the academy was to get started on the gordian knot of Basque standardisation: the conjugation of the auxiliary verb.

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## Standardising the auxiliary verb

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The need for a common norm for the conjugation of Basque's ubiquitous and complex auxiliary verb forms had rarely been addressed before. Few had

dared to, since Mitxelena had expressed the opinion that it was still too early to tackle this problem. However, precisely because verb forms differ notably from place to place and are perhaps the area of greatest interdialectal variation, it was a crucial issue for Basque standardisation. This would be *the Reform-with-a-capital-R* so to speak, which could make or break the whole endeavour, by showing whether or not it was possible to reach agreement on a single set of basic rules even when starting out from the greatest diversity.

As in other areas of the language, the ideal solution would have been to attempt to reconstruct the primordial system from which all the dialects had sprung. That was easier said than done since no one really knew what that system had been. Besides, the little that was known included elements that were perhaps too archaic to be of practical use at the present stage of the language's evolution, and so to meet present-day needs. Instead, the most coherent way forward might be to adopt the verb forms of one dialect.

It was decided in 1973 to take as a basis the central dialects, together with certain features from the northern coastal area. Once more, the most widely spoken varieties of the language were given priority.

Standardisation was now underway but opposition was still rife. In 1973 eleven publishers of books in Basque

requested that *Euskaltzaindia* concede a "moratorium", in consideration of the "issues and confusions" involved. It was a euphemism: the publishers in question had already made up their mind to go on applying pre-Arantzazu spellings in their publications. For two reasons, the revolt failed: the academy responded with firmness that it was determined to go ahead with its standardisation project, and in any case, most publishers, including the biggest ones, were ready to accept and implement the new rules.

## The analysis of the Arantzazu rules

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The time came in 1978 to assess progress to date towards the new standard or unified (*batua*) Basque. Work groups were set up to find out what people thought of the new language guidelines. Various research projects were set going to collect information and synthesize the opinions of those actually involved in the production of written Basque, including educators, creators of literature, publishers, media professionals and teachers of Basque to adults.

- A survey of books published from 1967 to 1977 was carried out, in which a total of 431 publications were analysed. The analysis focused

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on spellings, declined and conjugated forms used in each publication. It was found that in 1967 only 3-3% of books incorporated the new rules, but by 1977 as many as 65-4% of publications complied with the *Euskaltzaindia* guidelines.

- A similar pattern emerged in the survey of schools. Of 570 educators interviewed, 90% used standard Basque on a day-to-day basis when speaking, writing and reading. 80% believed standard Basque was necessary for their work, and the most important reasons given for this were related to the question of the language's survival.
- In the field of teaching Basque to adults, a study found that a majority of the people who were actively involved in such work were very or fairly familiar with unified Basque and taught the language in accordance with the academy's guidelines. 93% believed that these were necessary or recommendable "because they are essential in order to turn Basque into a modern instrument."
- Of 196 Basque writers who were interviewed, 61% used standard Basque in their writing. Most of those who did not do so believed that it was necessary to write "for ordinary people" or that writing in *Batua* made



*The Bergara conference (1978): From left to right, Federiko Krutwig, Luis Villasante, Piarres Lafitte, Jose Maria Satrustegi and Koldo Mitxelena.*

reading too difficult. Some were convinced that the standard language was harmful or too artificial. The main reason for using unified Basque given by those who did so was the need to convert the language into an instrument of culture, and they hoped the academy would continue with its standardisation work. Only 4-6% said they wished to return to the situation prior to 1968.

The conclusion was clear: the majority believed that standard Basque was here to stay, and that there could be no going back.

The final document was written in the new Basque spelling. When we read

## **By 1978 the foundations of standard Basque had been laid, and further construction could proceed**

this text and compare it to one written ten years earlier, the differences in style, vocabulary and spelling are very striking. But even more striking is the high number of linguistic discrepancies to be found when comparing two different texts written in 1968, before standardisation had got underway. By 1978 such differences had either disappeared completely or were greatly reduced. By 1978 the foundations of standard Basque had been laid, and further construction could proceed.



# WHAT ABOUT THE DIALECTS?

As unified Basque gained ground and was adopted progressively in all Basque writing, many Basque speakers began to ask themselves what role remained for the spoken dialects. The new standard had found its way into schools, the press and media, and the parts of the public administration that worked in Basque. As a result, a new generation of Basque speakers had begun to grow up who were already incorporating words into their daily speech from *Batua*. Nowadays there are many people – professional writers, traditional verse improvisers, educators and even presidents of local governments – who speak and work in a form of Basque based on the guidelines that came out of Arantzazu. The presence of standard Basque is felt not only in the written language but even in ordinary speech.

So what will happen with the dialects? What role remains to them? Can they be written down? How, where and when?

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## Prestige of the dialects

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A language's prestige depends to a large extent on its role in society. As we have seen, a language that is only used within the family is doomed to exclusion from the social domains where important decisions are made, and may eventually die out altogether; if it is

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used locally, or is present in the work place or in culture, it will have greater prestige; and if it is the language of a nation, a certain status will be guaranteed, and this is likely to favour its consolidation and ensure its future survival.

Once standard Basque had begun to take its place in areas previously reserved exclusively for the dominant language, in domains such as education, and had acquired some degree of co-official status in certain parts of the country, doubts started to arise about the future role of local Basque dialects. The situation was complicated somewhat further by the contrasting degrees of prestige attached to different Basque dialects, leading to prejudices which did not help the greater cause.



*Miren Azkarate.*

In the seventeenth century there was a saying to the effect that in heaven snakes speak English, women speak French and God speaks Spanish. Comparably, in Basque it was said that the dialect of Zuberoa, the easternmost Basque province, sounded quaint; that of the Lapurdi coast north of the Pyrenees was pompous and pretentious; that of the central area, pleasant and forthright; while that of the west was harsh-sounding.

According to such stereotypes, the most acceptable dialects were those nearest the central part of the country. And these were the favourite candidates as models for standard Basque. But this ranking had undesirable consequences too. Because some forms of Basque were valued more highly than others, some speakers perceived that their own dialects were ungainly and unattractive. There are many testimonies of Basque speakers who abandoned their mother tongue because they were convinced it was worthless and ugly. For instance, in areas where the easternmost dialect was spoken, there were petitions in the early twentieth century for sermons to be delivered in a more central variety of Basque because it was considered "more appropriate".

Because the language's real structure was poorly known, dialect differences were widely viewed as very great or even insurmountable. Today, the experts say that variation within Basque is not so great, and that the dialects are themselves a fairly recent phenomenon.

## The dialects are not very old

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According to Koldo Mitxelena there are two indicators of the relative modernity of the present-day Basque dialects. One is the similarity between dialects: from a linguistic point of view, the differences are very superficial. All share a common morphological and phonetic structure and a similar lexicon. Many of the dialects' distinguishing features are manifestly recent innovations, while other features are shared. For example, words borrowed from Latin show similar adaptations to Basque right across the dialect range.

The other point is that the dialects that show the most distinct features are the geographically peripheral ones, whereas differences tend to be minor and trivial amongst the central dialects. According to Mitxelena, this suggests that the dialects are not old: existing differences are not so much the product of antiquity as of geographical distance.

We have also seen that scholars believe these divergences to have resulted from the various political units and administrative divisions that have existed since the Middle Ages. When speakers were not separated from each other by clearcut borders, the language remained united. It is a universal principle that political centres favour internal cohesion, in language as in other matters.

So the question is: should dialects be promoted and supported, or is it better to move towards a common standard in all linguistic registers?

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## Euskaltzaindia and the dialects

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The Basque language academy has often been accused of promoting standard Basque at the expense of local dialects. But in various documents after 1979, *Euskaltzaindia* clarified its position: Basque is one language, not many. Therefore a single spelling system should be used for the whole language. And for that very reason, because it is one language and not many, the academy has always denied the assertion that the standard language is an artificial, made-up way of speaking and writing.

In a statement issued in 1994, *Euskaltzaindia* advised against contractions and local pronunciations, and insisted on the use of standard declensions and verb forms in writing. In 2004, it recognised the positive value of the relationship between different forms of Basque and specified different kinds of language use. On national television, for instance, the most widely known forms should be used; in local

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**The question is: should dialects be promoted and supported, or is it better to move towards a common standard in all linguistic registers?"**

publications, on the contrary, the use of regional expressions was considered appropriate.

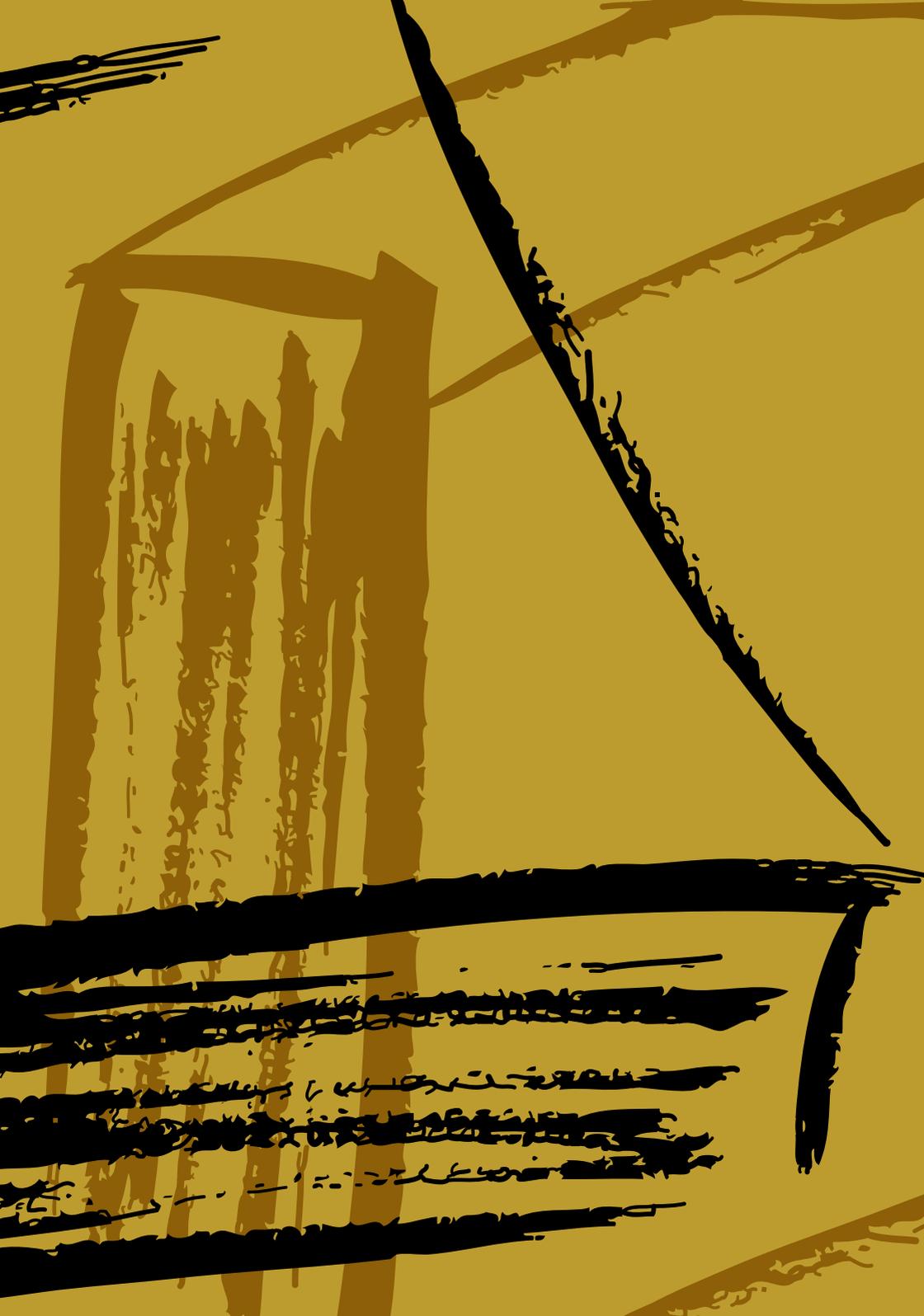
Nowadays *Euskaltzaindia* acknowledges dialectal vocabulary as an asset to be maintained and exploited. Its position has always been clear: local Basque is not bad Basque, just as standard Basque is not artificial Basque. Local Basque forms may be inappropriate for contexts where a high register is called for, such as a university lecture, the mass media or a general publication. But standard Basque may also be out of



*Jean Haritzelhar.*

place in everyday talk between speakers from the same village.





# THE CORPUS OF UNIFIED BASQUE

The expression *classical language* refers to a language that has attained to a permanent high status unaffected by passing fashions. At the opposite end of the scale, languages such as Quechua, Aymara or Basque are called *vernacular languages*, with the implication that they are neither big nor important. Finally, one speaks of *modern languages* such as English, French or Spanish. In the common view implied by this classification, knowledge of modern languages is valued as something necessary and useful; familiarity with classical languages is a bonus enjoyed by a select, highly educated few; while knowing and using a vernacular

language is, on the contrary, perceived as a drawback, a sign of backwardness.

Yet all languages are really equal, because they share the same capacity to communicate knowledge and feelings. Languages all serve their chief purpose equally well, namely to express the full range of human thought through the emission of sounds. Is this enough? Yes it is. Is this alone desirable? No. A language community that hopes to survive in the modern world needs to have the ability to expand in new directions, to spread into new sociolinguistic spaces.

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In the Basque case, standardisation has been beneficial inasmuch as it has made it possible for the language to extend into uses from which it had previously been excluded. Standardisation:

- has helped to demolish the barriers between speakers of different varieties of Basque: people who can speak standard Basque no longer feel the need to resort to Spanish or French to communicate with somebody who comes from a different part of the Basque Country.
- has allowed Basque to enter all domains of social life, including education, public administration, the press and media, the Internet, etc.
- has, for the above reasons, facilitated the expansion of the Basque language into new domains. If Basque was to survive, it was essential for the total number of speakers to stop declining and instead to grow. Such growth has been favoured by the increased prestige of the language in domains of use such as education and the media. Today there are more Basque speakers, and they are no longer confined to the pre-existing linguistic boundaries; speakers can now be found in any part of the Basque Country.
- has favoured the perception of Basque as a "real language", not a hodgepodge of dialects that even

other Basque speakers can barely understand (as was the stereotyped image in the past); in consequence, against the backdrop of the dominant languages, the prestige of Basque has positively skyrocketed.

There are several reasons that help to explain this phenomenon:

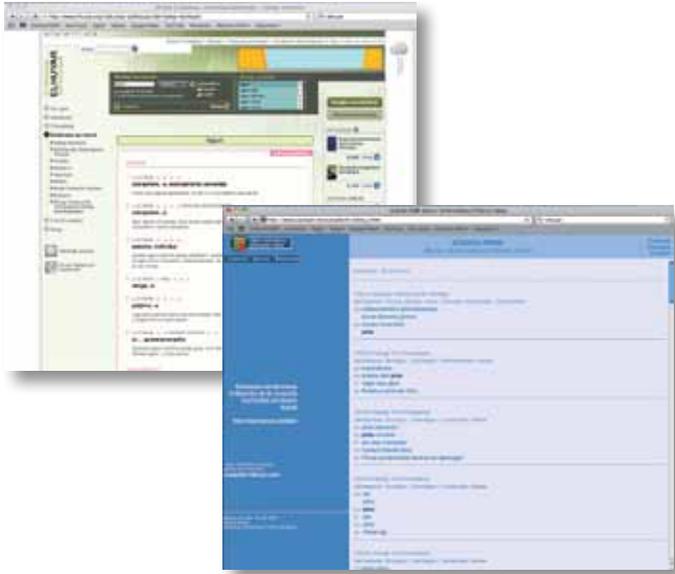
- By the mid-twentieth century, the outlook for Basque was very bleak. Basques were faced with two options: they could abandon their language to its fate, or make a desperate effort to save it; in the event, they decided to go all out in favour of the latter option. By oppressing the Basques, Franco's dictatorship created a generation of young people with a very strong political and cultural consciousness who embraced this option with enthusiasm as something that was both necessary and inevitable.
- The initiatives in support of Basque that were set in motion during that period – the Basque-medium schools or *ikastolak*, the movement of adult Basque evening classes or *gau-eskolak*, the Basque-language press, radio stations and eventually television, the literary movement – all stood to benefit from, indeed urgently needed, a unified language as an essential tool allowing Basque to compete successfully with the dominant languages.

- The “right” generation appeared at the right time and was lucky enough to have the support of a great linguist. It became clear that an external impetus is important, but that it must be the language community itself that ultimately decides on the nature of standardisation.
- The new rules that were proposed for the development of standard Basque were, in technical terms, logical and coherent. From a purely linguistic point of view, the big arguments that ensued, such as the great controversy over whether or not to write the *h*, were really a storm in a teacup.
- The society as a whole and the creators of Basque culture adopted and cultivated the new rules, polishing and adjusting them in the process. From 1977 onwards, technical dictionaries of terms for every branch of human knowledge began to be published, and terminological databases were created which later on were published on the Internet. The Basque press and media also jumped on the bandwagon, and the most important Basque-language periodicals began to publish in standard Basque in accordance with the academy's guidelines. New Basque-language media and newspapers that sprang up in the nineteen-eighties and nineties helped further to promote language *normalisation*. All these initiatives were reinforced

further by the creation of a Basque government and other new institutions run by political parties which chose to back the horse of language recovery.

The following tangible products of the Basque language corpus were developed:

- **Orotariko Euskal Hiztegia** (The comprehensive Basque dictionary). From the beginning, one of Euskaltzaindia's top priorities was to produce a dictionary. The plan was to collect together, classify and publish the entire lexicon occurring in Basque writings. The programme was outlined in 1905 and several starts were made, but it was not until 1959 that Koldo Mitxelena took up the task in earnest. The first volume of a great historical dictionary saw the light of day in 1987, and the last volume was completed in 2005. This dictionary is not prescriptive, but rather descriptive and historical. It documents the written tradition as evidenced in the totality of materials previously published in Basque, and includes authentic examples of the ways lexical items and verbal inflections have been used in Basque writing throughout that time. This dictionary is based on a corpus of three hundred books and more the four million words, and consists of 125,987 entries. The entire work is now freely available on the Internet.



- **Hiztegi batua**(The standard dictionary). With work underway on its mammoth comprehensive dictionary, the academy commissioned a group to set to work on a dictionary of unified Basque, in which words are given in the spelling recommended by the academy according to its rules. This dictionary has gone through several revisions and in total covers more than 40,000 word entries.
- **The statistical corpus of twentieth-century Basque.** This is a 4,600,000-word corpus of Basque texts produced in the course of the twentieth century. It is an open corpus that is continually updated.
- **Other dictionaries.** In addition, scientific and technical dictionaries have been produced, and also historical and etymological dictionaries.
- **Grammar.** The academy started work on a Basque grammar in 1960, and in 1979 a special commission was created for this specific purpose. A first volume of over 500 pages on the structure of the noun phrase was published in 1985, followed by a series of further volumes covering the verb, the structure of the simple sentence, compound sentences and connectors.



- **The Basque dialect atlas.** Thousands of interviews were carried out and recorded in 145 Basque towns between 1987 and 1992, producing over four thousand hours of recordings. The interviews were based on a 2,762-point questionnaire, supplemented in coastal towns with 222 further questions relevant to life at sea.
- **Place names and personal names.** In 1971 Euskaltzaindia decided it should draw up a list of Basque names, and in 1983 a committee was formed to catalogue the names of people, towns and places. Thus began the publication of the Onomasticon Vasconiae series, of which

28 volumes have been produced to date, covering toponyms from all over the Basque geographical area. Additionally, the academy has published a list of Basque spellings for major place names around the world, including countries, states, islands, mountains, lakes, major rivers and places of historical importance.

**A language community that hopes to survive in the modern world needs to have the ability to expand in new directions, to spread into new sociolinguistic spheres**



# CONSEQUENCES OF STANDARDISATION

Today, everybody who works in any field, or leads a life, linked to Basque language and culture agrees that the change involved in language standardisation was both a necessary and a positive one. Let us remember that every language possesses dialectal variations; such a situation is quite natural. Both the standard form of the language and the dialects fulfil their purposes and ought to be mastered and used, each in its own context.

Obviously, in order for a language to recover spaces that it needs to occupy for communication and to acquire the ability to express all the things that are

necessary in a contemporary society, the language community must really have the will to do so. If a community lacks enough energy to undertake that route, it is resigning itself unsonsciously to being assimilated. Therefore, it is essential for language recovery that one should have a clear notion of the ultimate goal, which is that knowledge and use of the language should become a necessity in the territory to which it pertains. That is what has occurred in every case where a language has been successfully recovered.

But can we say that in the case of Basque the route that has been fol-

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lowed was the right one? Has Basque been impoverished in the process of bringing about the increasingly widespread use of the standard language? Have local language varieties lost out in the process?

It is the feeling of people who have laboured day and night to ensure the success of language normalisation that Basque is a richer language today than it was forty years ago, and that in the future it will become even richer as it gets more malleable and versatile. To be sure, there will no doubt be some local variations, expressions and words that will die out gradually, in Basque as in all the world's languages; but that does not mean that those varieties will be any the poorer, since the number of new forms that will be adopted is greater than the number of old ones which will be lost, and furthermore the new items are better adapted to the community of speakers' present-day needs.

Mitxelena was wont to say that linguistics is the worst enemy of standardisation, because the linguist tends to prefer wild flowers to domesticated plants. He also said that it is impossible to predict any language's future development. Nevertheless, having performed the foregoing analysis of the process undergone by Basque, it is possible to list some basic steps that may be valid for other peoples who desire to address this task in the light of our experience, provided we always bear in mind that standardisation is not an end unto it-

**In order for a language to recover spaces that it needs to occupy for communication and to acquire the ability to express all the things that are necessary in a contemporary society, the language community must really have the will to do so**

self but a means towards language normalisation:

- The first step in standardisation is to establish a basic orthography. In many cases, establishing the spelling for individual words will come later. At the initial stage it is necessary to bear in mind the following:
  - that whichever spelling system is adopted is purely conventional,
  - that the system of spelling of the dominant language should not be viewed as the ideal or only possible solution for our own language,
  - that all languages have variation, and each language differs in its phonological component,
  - that it is necessary to seek a consensus and give way on some points while preserving the language's basic features,
  - that it is important to be aware of what elements are shared by dif-

ferent dialects, and if possible, of the common core out of which these have all developed, that is, the protolanguage which may serve to guide decisions,

- that it is almost always necessary to sacrifice some features which distance a given dialect from the common core, no matter how important these may appear to be from the point of view of speakers of a given dialect.
- It is advisable to pay particular attention to the most active dialects, and also the most conservative among these, i.e. the varieties that have preserved best the language's original forms. In any event, it is a mistake to take on all the forms used in one particular dialect, since some of these may differ widely from those found in the remaining dialects.
- Artificial combinations are often better avoided. It is better to follow a set of shared general patterns. For example, a basic phonetic system should be established; in languages where it is applicable, a generic auxiliary verb system can be proposed; but beyond that, in principle at least, writers might be left to make their own choices in other respects, provided they adhere to the general rules. In this way dialect forms and vocabulary can find their way into the stan-

dard language and be integrated in a natural manner.

- No dialect is superior to any other. All are equally rich and expressive, and they possess the ability to express ideas and concepts to the same degree.
- Standardisation is not, and must never be turned into, a competition. It is best to seek a consensus and aim for unanimity. Perhaps one dialect has more prestige than another but arouses resentment from speakers of other dialects. Imposition will not work in such cases.
- Priority should be given to forms and constructions that are the same in all the dialects, and guidelines established concerning these.
- It is not really the job of the academy to create neologisms. New words should be coined, when necessary, in the course of creative language use or in connection with educational activity.
- Standardisation must never be linked to a particular ideology or political tendency.
- Language standardisation is not a matter that can be submitted to a general referendum. It is important that it should be understood

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that the right way to achieve a standard language ought to be determined by those who are best acquainted with the language's structure and its history. It also needs to be understood that this is a slow process which demands patience and perseverance.

- In the course of standardisation one may proceed to collect together a corpus of language texts. It will also be desirable to work on dialectology and lexicography, or to develop dictionaries, in order better to understand the structure, origin, history and characteristics of each language variety or dialect. It is also necessary to write a grammar of the language, and to collect materials from the language's folklore.
- It is also important fully to understand that:
  - The standard form of the language is not in direct competition with the dialects because it does not aspire to be used in their place, but rather to be used in domains monopolized until now by the dominant language, such as education, media, public administration or town life.
  - The standard form of the language serves to strengthen the dialects given that it can help to enrich these with language forms found in other dialects as an alternative to borrowing from the dominant language.
- The standard helps to create a greater sense of unity in the people.
- This whole process is only possible in a context of heightened political awareness in the society, i.e. the speakers of the threatened language must be aware of the need for them to unite as a necessary condition for preserving their language and their culture.
- It is therefore essential to work to heighten awareness on this level. There must always be someone working in this area of awareness and defense of the language, culture, and in general the rights of the people in question.
- It is also necessary to make moves and create strategies to attract to the cause members of the dominant language community who might sympathise with it.
- It is likewise important to be aware that some decisions that have been taken earlier will subsequently need to be modified, as experience shows that they were not such a good idea or better options are encountered.
- Attempts should be made to bring together people with linguistic ex-

perspective who not only know the language well but are driven by their love of the language and their desire to devote themselves to supporting it with their work, and to encourage them to cooperate with each other towards a common cause. Such people ought to come from all the areas where the language is spoken, so that they may:

- Agree on a common alphabet.
- Form a grammar committee to draft a proposal on those aspects of the grammar that involve complexities.
- Write a prescriptive dictionary showing the recommended spelling of all words, including names. This should above all list the words that are most used, paying less attention to less current items. The dictionary should show the most usual meanings for each word as attested in the language's history.
- One might also create committees to work on the analysis and classification of dialectal variations.
- Another committee might study the language's literature, analysing and classifying any literary works existing in the language.
- Last but not least, it is desirable to create an awareness group which will focus on the need to recover for the language those functions which are at present monopolized by the dominant language.

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