



**HAL**  
open science

## The Basque Language in the French State

Francis Jauréguiberry

► **To cite this version:**

Francis Jauréguiberry. The Basque Language in the French State. G. Toticagüena et I. Urrutia. The legal status of the basque language today, Eusko Ikaskuntza, pp.221-241, 2008, 9788484191643. hal-01669104

**HAL Id: hal-01669104**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01669104>**

Submitted on 17 Feb 2018

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# The Basque Language in the French State

Jauréguiberry, Francis

Université de Pau. Avenue de l'Université. F-64000 Pau

---

*Cet article propose une lecture historique et sociologique de la place du basque en France. Ayant remarquablement résisté face au français jusqu'à la fin du XIXe siècle, la langue basque va connaître un lent déclin durant tout le XXe, au point où elle se trouve menacée de mort en ce début du XXIe siècle. Pourtant, c'est au moment où la mort de la langue basque en France est annoncée qu'une mobilisation sans précédent en sa faveur apparaît. Une hypothèse, en termes de recherche identitaire et d'affectivité linguistique dans un monde post-moderniste, est discutée quant à l'explication de ce succès.*

**Mots-Clé :** Langue basque. Pays Basque français. Enseignement bilingue. Politique linguistique. Sociolinguistique. Culture basque.

*Artikulu honek irakurketa historikoa eta soziologikoa egiten du Frantzian euskarak duen lekua buruz. Frantsesaren bultzadari XIX. mendera arte eutsi ondoren, euskarak gainbehera jasan du XX. mende osoan zehar. Dena dela, euskara Frantzian azkenetan zegoela zirudienean, inoiz ikusi gabeko euskararen aldeko mugimendua sortu zen. Fenomeno azaltzeko erabilitako hipotesia, mundu postmodernistan identitatea bilatzeko beharrean eta hizkuntza-afektibitatean oinarritzen da.*

**Giltza-Hitzak:** Euskara. Ipar Euskal Herrian. Hezkuntza elebiduna. Hizkuntza Politika. Soziolinguistika. Euskal kultura.

*Este artículo presenta una lectura histórica y sociológica del lugar ocupado por la lengua vasca en Francia. Tras haber resistido airoso el empuje del francés hasta finales del siglo XIX, la lengua vasca experimenta un lento declive durante todo el siglo XX, hasta el punto de encontrarse amenazada de muerte en este inicio del siglo XXI. Sin embargo, cuando la lengua vasca en Francia parece estar a punto de dar su último suspiro, surge una movilización a su favor sin precedentes. Se plantea una hipótesis, en términos de búsqueda identitaria y de afectividad lingüística en un mundo postmodernista, como explicación de dicho fenómeno.*

**Palabras Clave:** Lengua vasca. País Vasco francés. Educación bilingüe. Política lingüística. Sociolingüística. Cultura vasca.

## HISTORY: LONG RESISTANCE FOLLOWED BY COLLAPSE

When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, almost all Basques in the provinces of Labourd, Basse-Navarre and Soule spoke Basque and only a minority expressed themselves correctly in French. Although we have no reliable statistics on the matter, all records we have found describe the Basque Country as being linguistically foreign to France and where it was essential to have translators to move in. This was not, however, a specifically Basque situation in France: historians tell us that at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century more than half the French still spoke a language other than French. Since the Villiers-Cotterêts order (1539) which made it obligatory to use French to pronounce and register acts of justice, French was certainly the official language of the Kingdom of France. However, outside its linguistic area, French was actually only spoken by people with administrative, political or advisory jobs.<sup>1</sup>

If French was imposed little by little as the language of power and knowledge during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Breton, Corsican, Catalan, Basque, Occitan, Flemish, etc. remained the everyday languages. Understanding the nature and the dynamics of this co-existence for the two centuries which preceded the Revolution can explain how it sorted out languages other than French in only a few months and without great debate. French was actually affirmed little by little, first against Latin and then independently and without any law being imposed, as the language of knowledge and reason. In other words: French became the language of modernity and Enlightenment in France (and also beyond its borders). Retrospectively of course we can ask the question: why French and not, for example, Occitan which was very widespread over the French territory? Or even, more fundamentally, why *one* and not *several* languages for modernity in France as it was a plurilingual country?

The answer comes in three parts. French was firstly imposed for quantitative reasons. Of course the sum of the people who spoke another language apart from French just before the French Revolution was greater than all the French speakers put together. But, out of all these languages taken individually, French was the most spoken: the others were therefore *already* minority languages on national soil, although majority in their respective territories. Secondly, because it was the language of power and administration and because it had a written form for these purposes (following standardization efforts) which could not be matched in the other languages. Finally because Basque (although we could say the same thing for Corsican, Breton, etc.) was not the language chosen by the Basques themselves for their mathematics, physics or philosophy. Sciences, learning and knowledge were read, written and practiced on the whole in Latin

---

1. On the demand of the Constituent Assembly (1789-1791), a linguistic survey was ordered in August 1790. Three years later in July 1793, Abbot Grégoire summarized it in a report which he entitled in the most explicit way *On the need and resources to annihilate patois and universalize the use of French*. We can read there that "six million Frenchmen, particularly in the country, cannot speak the national language; the same number are more or less incapable of holding a conversation and no more than three million speak it purely."

and then in French: there is evidence which overwhelmed the very rare Basque intellectuals during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It should be recognized that they barely went out in protest to make Basque a language of modernity or knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

This last point is important to understand the dynamics of the status of the Basque language from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards: it was the Basques themselves who let their language go progressively as they left traditional society ways of life behind and entered modernity. Nothing, until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when obligatory schooling was introduced in French, really *made them* do it. Retrospectively, we could think that these Basques, entering squarely into modernity via French, would also have been able to live this modernity and translate it into Basque, making an enlightened Basque speaking core, avoiding future assimilation between Basque language and tradition. But that was not the case. The majority of them left the Basque Country definitively. And for the rare number who stayed or later returned the challenge was doubtlessly too difficult to take up: the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries passed by without *euskaldun* modernity (in Basque) seeing the light of day.

Identity in traditional Basque society is inherited unquestioned identity, a transcendent identity which for those who bear it can barely take issue. It appears to them as always having been given: by God, tradition, customs. This determination is, for example, highlighted even in individuals' names. This is not a civil society name, a first name and a surname indicating autonomous singularity, but instead shows the place where the individual lives, marking them as belonging to the community's spatial organization. To a certain extent, the person belongs to the place, the family house and assumes from it, a little like a habit, the statuses and roles associated with it. In exchange, one gets secure integration which permits him or her to guide one's life without too many identity crises. The march towards modernity progressively moved away from this determination. It permitted the individual to find one's own path. This does not mean that the modern individual's identity becomes the product of their pure will. On the contrary, their identity remains largely determined by their socio-cultural heritage. But from then on there was the possibility of distancing themselves from this inherited identity. Among other things, modernity offers individuals the chance to be able to look at themselves 'from the outside' to at least partially shape their own identity. It is in this sense that they become a *sujet*, -meaning- a person capable of perceiving and guiding not only their relations with the world but also their relationship with themselves.

Now, what is discovered by the individual in the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century Basque Country, that makes this step leading to a relative look at community organiza-

---

2. Exactly the same thing happened in the Spanish Basque Country where nearly all men of learning and letters, without constraint, abandoned Basque for Spanish. In defense of these Basques who abandoned their language for science, learning and letters we should recognize that their thirst for knowledge and intellectual exchange could be quenched by hundreds of readings and correspondence in French whilst there was very little material in Basque.

tion and morale to adopt a more strategic vision of reality? *His inherited language is of no use to him at all in his contacts with universal thinking.* Basque remains the language of belonging to a rural and traditional community. However, French is the language leading to universal thought, of Enlightenment and Reason. If the modern Basque (the individual entering modernity) then abandons his language, it is not because he is incapable, due to his intrinsic linguistic characteristics, to transport universal learning and Reason, but because the immense majority of those who speak it stick with tradition whilst everyone involved in the Enlightenment in the Basque Country communicates in French.

The basic communities making up the traditional Basque Country would not or could not believe in modernity themselves. On the contrary, one of the main characteristics of the Basque Country was that they continued with the same traditions and community organization until very late on in their history. Modernity was not created in Basque villages: it was imported there. Now this modernity spoke French. The first Basque-French bilingualism was bilingualism of *Basque to French as an obligatory journey to modernity*. Entering the sphere of universal learning implied the mediation of French and so also at least partially abandoning Basque. *It was then and in contrast that Basque became a symbol of tradition, rural life and the past.*

The French Revolution would synthesize this trend by giving it a framework which was both ideological and legal. It would magnify French as the language to open up universal thought, Enlightenment and Reason, and reduce the other languages to nothing more than traces of the past, inept to transport the new values of the Republic. The Lanthenas report, dated December 18, 1792, lowered local idioms for example to “simple remains of the barbaric nature of past centuries” which “should be made to disappear as soon as possible”.<sup>3</sup> Declared “treacherous” and “coarse”, local languages were described in the Barrère report (presented on June 4, 1794) as “perpetuating the fanaticism and superstition” and “keeping people back in the dark ages, ignorance and prejudices.” The dichotomy which occurred little by little over the two preceding centuries (French language = language of Enlightenment and Reason compared with regional language = languages of traditions and superstitions) was struck dumb in a head on clash. This would be even more virulent as, faced with counter-revolutionary dangers, local languages appeared as obstacles to propagating the ideas of the Revolution. As Abbot Grégoire wrote in his report to the Convention (30<sup>th</sup> July 1793), it was a matter of “removing this diversity of coarse languages which extend the infancy of reason and the aging of prejudices.” For this purpose, the Convention adopted (on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1793) a law setting up state primary schools. A few days later, it was specified that teaching would only be given in French. On 27<sup>th</sup> January 1794 a decree was promulgated ordering the nomination of a French speaking primary teacher for each commune in the departments where the inhabitants did not speak French.

---

3. A year earlier, the Talleyrand report (presented to the Constituent Assembly on 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> September 1791) specified that, as opposed to French, language of learning and teaching, “this crowd of corrupt dialects, last remains of the feudal systems, will be condemned to disappear: the force of things orders it.”

Despite this, the progression of French in the Basque Country remained slow. Administrators and academy inspectors regularly complained about this throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was particularly noted that, as opposed to what was stipulated by the January 1794 decree, school teachers in the Basque Country spoke rather superficial French most of the time and education was very often given in the Basque language. The overall result was that Basque was maintained as the clearly dominant language. So, Félix Pécaut, delegate to the general primary teaching inspection, observed in 1880 that in the Basque Country

three quarters of children who go to our schools are no more capable of speaking usual French than they are of understanding it; when we ask them questions or give them an explanation, it is tempting to believe we are among foreigners.

Absenteeism was high:

Just in the district of Mauléon, almost 3,000 out of 9,500 children aged six to thirteen years old do not appear in the registers; as for those who have been registered for school, most do not stay for more than five months.<sup>4</sup>

Pécaut's verdict is both realistic and defeatist:

We were flattering ourselves to think that by sending French speaking school teachers to the Basque Country we would impose the exclusive use of French in schools (...). But let us not fool ourselves: as Basque is not only the dominant but really the only language, we cannot do without it for teaching French.

This did not prevent, the same year, the inspector Louis Soulice from “demanding that school teachers completely abolish the use of the Basque language in class”.<sup>5</sup>

The Law of 28<sup>th</sup> March 1882 (Jules Ferry) which instills obligatory teaching for children from six to thirteen got things moving: generations of young Basques would from then on unavoidably go through school where one of the clear aims was to gain a command of the French language. Coercive methods developed. The most widespread and at the same time the most shocking were doubtlessly the “symbol” (also called “sign punishment” or “anti punishment”). From the start of the day the teacher catching a child speaking Basque, gave him a symbol (a stick, a ball, a cloth, an iron ring). The aim was for this child to get rid of this symbol by giving it to another child who they in turn had caught speaking Basque. The last child to carry the symbol at the end of the day was punished often humiliatingly.<sup>6</sup> But the worse punishment for these children was to be educated with

---

4. Félix Pécaut, *Rapport d'inspection générale sur l'académie de Bordeaux*, Bordeaux, Imprimerie nationale, 1880, p. 69.

5. Louis Soulice, *Notes pour servir à l'histoire de l'instruction primaire dans les Basses-Pyrénées*, Pau, Véonèse, 1881, p. 42.

6. This type of punishment went on until the 1950s!

ambivalent regard for their mother tongue. On the one hand, Basque was, for them, their everyday language, for their family, feelings and subjectivity, but on the other hand, this same language was constantly devalued by institutions, stigmatized at school and reduced to nothing more than the language of bumpkins and illiterates.

Only religion escaped this dichotomy. Basques were allowed to address God in their mother tongue: it would therefore not be devalued. Maybe it was not the language of learning, administration and social ascension, but it was the language which made sense, whilst the Catholic faith guided the spirits and community morals commanded social insertion. Until the end of the 19th century, almost all intellectual activity in the Basque Country was run by the clergy, with the exception of the town of Baiona, or Bayonne. In the country where the vast majority of the population lived, it was the clergy, speaking and writing Basque, who knew, guided and comforted. This intellectual monopoly and the prestige associated with it give us an insight into the resolutely favorable position of the clergy in terms of defending the Basque language against French. New and secular ideas and attitudes led by French actually represented a threat not only for religion but also for this monopoly. This explains the virulence and constancy of the self same clergy, for the two centuries following the Revolution, to demand that the catechism be taught in Basque.<sup>7</sup> This position largely explains the Basque language's resistance against French. But it would only comfort antagonism between French, modernity and universal reason on the one hand and, the Basque language, traditions and community morale on the other. This also explains the success of the expression *euskaldun-fededun* (Basque speaking and believer) which was, for a long time, the main self-identifying sign of the Basques.

Between the traditional community -attacked of course but still held together by its language and its religion- and modern society organized by the state, an intermediate figure then appeared that would be central throughout the 19th century and a large part of the 20th century: the notable. This figure continues to be part of traditional society and participates in the functioning of the community. The notables knew its practices, beliefs and ways of life from the inside. But at the same time they were squarely part of modern society and knew how to act in it. They understood the stakes and the rules, and did not feel foreign but an integral part of it. They were in fact modern but had not left their traditional country and rather than get on with the doubtlessly enormous task of changing the rules, they accepted to live two identities. This position was sometimes very uncomfortable but still offers a singular privilege in return: being an essential mediator, the undeniable go-between between the still traditional local community and the modern national society. There was then relative peace in society: via the notables, the state learned to accept the survival of local traditions reasonably well and the local communities accepted the modern state reasonably well. Basque notables talked to the local population in Basque whilst speaking perfect French

---

7. This attitude is not specific to the Basques: the same goes for other regions, particularly in Brittany where Breton and Catholicism are also very closely linked.

with their national contacts. They were not only literal translators (often the case for certain administrative steps) but also inter-cultural translators: they adapted local demands to how the nation worked institutionally, while translating expectations in understandable terms for the traditional mentality. Having done this, they actually helped to perpetuate the break between traditional local community and modern national society.

If 1880 represented an important date in the history of the decline of the Basque language with the introduction of obligatory schooling in French, the First World War (1914-1918) would also deeply affect this history specifically in terms of Basques joining the French nation.<sup>8</sup> The idea of the French nation had certainly been widely spread throughout the Basque Country for more than a century, even if only through civil instruction at school, but for the majority of the Basque population it was still an abstract concept. Most Basques were for example completely incapable of drawing the geographic outline of France, of naming the main towns or saying how many people lived there. The feeling of belonging was not national but local, political loyalty was not as a citizen but as a member of the community. The First World War broke with this indifference towards the nation because, in the space of four years, several thousand young Basques would die for France. In the Basque Country (and also everywhere else in France) there is no village without a monument to those who died with tens or even hundreds of names written under the simple phrase: "died for France." From that moment on, France *can no longer* remain an abstract concept: it is the reason why their son, brother, father or husband is dead. Basques experienced their belonging to the body of the nation in dramatic fashion, loaded with a supreme value: sacrifice and loyalty to the dead. In this new economy of sense, not loving France would mean betraying those who died for her and would be seen as sacrilege. However, on the one hand, Basques continued on the whole, particularly in the country, to not really know what France was and to only speak French with difficulty. This explains the diffuse feeling that appeared then and which would last for several generations (until the 1960s): that of "not being French enough". This "lack" was demonstrated by an increasingly ambiguous attitude towards the Basque language. Euskara became a rather bothersome heritage which was still spoken of course but started not to be passed on to children anymore - in order to make them "good Frenchmen".

At the same time the mass of people from the country, the large majority of the Basque population, entered modernity directly, over the top of the notables and the clergy we could say. This entry into modernity was most seen in terms of understanding the inferiority status of Basque compared to French. Basque was not good for anything: here is the affirmation, hammered out for more than a century by the Republican State, particularly through National Education, which then appears as evidence in the eyes of the majority. Basque was just a relic from the past, anachronistic for modern society. Obviously, this awareness raising is the

---

8. We should also add the imposition of obligatory military service, in March 1905, lasting two years for all Frenchmen.



corollary of a discovery of modernity under just one of its aspects: that of efficiency, instrumental rationality and profitability. The other aspect of modernity, that of the capacity of individuals to tear themselves away from determinations and weighty traditions to think of themselves as free subjects and autonomous protagonists (and therefore particularly capable of managing this bilingualism and the effects it brings), is brought to the fore, laminated by the need to adapt at any cost to what then appeared to be the course of history. In this sort of alienation to modernism, caricature of modernity, the *euskaldun* was not happy. He lived his language, the language of his childhood, of his emotions and his subjectivity as a suffering. He felt that there was a wealth there, an immense heritage passed down by his ancestors, but a heritage which was not useful for anything in the modern world, could not be minted as anything except to provoke mockery from those who did not speak it.

These were the 'between the wars' generations who lived the most traumatizing aspect of this linguistic suffering. Many of them chose not to teach their children Basque, for their own good and their future so that they did not feel humiliated like their parents had at school or with administrations because they did not speak proper French. But, but if parents did all they could to prevent suffering being passed down to their children, there was still a stigma for these children. Because, although they barely spoke or did not speak Basque at all, they grew up in an ambivalence which was just as traumatizing: their parents continued to express the essential part of their subjectivity in the Basque language (belonging to a community, intimacy, religion, relation with nature, etc.) and, at the same time, they were deeply ashamed by it. This ambivalence was experienced painfully by these children because it was synonymous to a life principle denied by reason. We find it hard to measure just how much damage was done by this negation in the Basque Country, doubtlessly because it was quashed or hidden. But the result is there; in less than a century the Basques massively abandoned their language to the point that it seems at risk of extinction.

This ripping apart is often presented as the forced product of a virulent Republican policy against minority languages in France. It is true that, thinking of it as a privileged tool of modernity and universal reason, the French state was not sentimental when defining its linguistic policy. In the Basque Country, this was translated by forced linguistic socialization of the population and Basques had to access French as fast as possible in order to *bridge language* to be able to cross what was thought of as the abyss separating tradition from modernity. Of course, this theoretically generous logic, linked to a change in society, is also doubled by a practical logic doubtlessly less noble, in any case more trivial and historic, constructing a nation-state and encouraged by the desire for homogenous communion for their citizens. But, in all, it should be recognized that it was the Basques themselves who, for reasons which have just been presented, left their language in favor of French. And this to such a point, that at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only one third of the population understood Basque and only 14 % used it on a daily basis.<sup>9</sup>

---

9. Basque Government: *Sociolinguistic survey 1996*.

## LATE YET DYNAMIC MOBILIZATION: CHOOSING BASQUE

It was at this precise moment, when the bell was tolling for the Basque language, when its passive transmission was being exhausted and where its programmed death was supposed to remove so much linguistic suffering, that the Basques wanted, it seems to, to speak it, read it, learn it or teach it the most. What a paradox! We have never spoken it so little and yet wanted so much to do so! Whilst only 22.5% of the inhabitants of Iparralde, the French Basque Country are capable of speaking Basque (the lowest figure ever reached), 83% express an interest in the Basque language, 41.2% are for active promotion and 56% think that all children should learn Basque at school (23% against).<sup>10</sup> Only 17.6% have an unfavorable attitude toward Euskara.

Some people think that this is a reflex action in the face of death: we do not want things to die, particularly when they have been used to transport so much life. This reaction, which mixes conservational instincts, fear of the irreversible, and fear of losing some reservoirs of authenticity, is always defensive. Our gaze, full of nostalgia, then turns towards the past which barely needs magnifying. It is sad to see that arguments used in favor of defending minority languages in France are often similar to those aiming to preserve bears in the Pyrenees or baby seals in Canada. It is largely a matter of saving a part of heritage. There is a sort of condescendence which is so much more indecent that it is almost never followed up by action. It is moreover a matter of quickly forgetting the action of three or four previous generations that did nothing to prevent Basque from disappearing. The potential nostalgia which the disappearance of Basque represented for these generations was less hard to bear in their eyes than the misfortune that using it seemed to bring them. Of course, as the misfortune was no longer there (now everyone speaks French and Basque is no longer stigmatized), nostalgia seemed painful to live with for the following generation, so much so that the desire that it engendered came cheap. The explanation for choosing Basque should therefore be sought out elsewhere. It lies firstly in the undeniable dynamism of promoters of actions in favor of the Basque language, but also, and doubtlessly above all, *in the radical change of image of this language within the very Basque population*. From devalued, synonym of an old fashioned country bumpkin past, it has, within thirty years, become considered as a modern identity sign, fashionable and highly valued.

Mobilization around the Basque language started to become structured among a very active minority, from the 1970s. This essentially refers to actions led by militants of the Basque cause, meaning politically committed around the idea of institutional recognition of the Basque country. Although Basque nationalism formerly had its representatives in the French Basque country, this movement only really appeared at the start of the 1960s. Carried by the first genera-

---

10. Basque Government: *Sociolinguistic survey 2006*. Another survey, done in 2004, gave this opinion answering the question, "If you have children, would you want them to learn Basque?" The answers were: "They already speak it": 19%; "Yes, I'd like them to learn it: 45 %"; "Don't care: 20 %"; "No, I don't want that: 12 %"; "No answer: 6 %". (Eusko Ikaskuntza, *Basque Identity and Cultures at the Start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*).

tion of Basque students returned to the country after studying, it is undeniably influenced by national liberation movements from countries colonized by France, as well as by Basque political refugees fleeing Franco's repression. The first *ikas-tola*, or Basque medium school, appeared in 1970: a school where instruction is all in Basque. Children who attended it were all children of political refugees or of activists. A year later, Basque language lessons for adults started to be organized. The first records from the 'new wave' of Basque songs were released and Basque language essays were published. It was a very small environment, strongly activist and repercussions in the population were low. But the image of the Basque language which these activists gave was completely new: they had weighted it with a protesting and anti-authority dimension in a total break with the backward-looking status it had had for more than two centuries. The Basque language was now a language of resistance, dissent and affirmation of oneself in a world of oppression, cultural alienation and negation of individual expressiveness to use vocabulary from the time. Belonging to a cultural minority was no longer considered to be a defect but quite the opposite as an opportunity in a culturally uniform world. This new eminently anti-authority vision of minority cultures harmonized with all the new social movements springing up all over Europe.

For more than ten years, almost all mobilizations around the Basque language would involve nationalist activists. They had undeniably been the craftsmen of the Basque cultural and linguistic renewal. But the favorable echo which had awakened the idea of promoting and learning the Basque language among the Basque Population was soon become more intense than anything Basque nationalism has to offer. This is fortunate for the Basque language because, over all these years, the nationalists have never actually managed to cross the threshold of 15% at the different elections. On the other hand, at the same time, the majority of the Basque population has moved from rather negative lack of interest in the Basque language to a more positive lack of interest and finally, an openly positive attitude. It is therefore not political motivation, particularly Basque nationalist, which is founding this reversal in trend. The essential part of the explanation lies rather in the break with the phenomenon which caused the decline of the Basque language: associating French with modernity. *If the historic idea of Basques entering modernity largely explains why they abandoned their language, it is the crisis in this self same modernity which in turn explains their new attention for their language.* Or, more exactly, it is the crisis of how this modernity has on the whole been lived in the Basque Country, namely modernism, which helps us to understand why they are choosing their Basque identity.

We can define modernism as the offensive ideology of modernity against traditional beliefs, community attachment and shared subjectivity in which they are pitted against reason, individual freedom, science and progress. Applied to our century, modernism should lead to the decline in local specificities as opposed to universal stakes, exceeding regional inertia by worldwide acceleration of flow, eliminating spatial inscription of social links by generalizing exchanges. Technical progress, development of communications and economic rationalization indicate the direction that societies should follow, moving them from the global nature of villages to the global village so dear to McLuhan.

This modernist view, along with a certain taste of evolutionism, was historically the basis for devaluing the Basque language and traditions. And, from the 1960s, it has also inspired the majority of interpretations of movements to defend minority cultures and demands of the type “live and work in the country” which appeared at the time, reducing them to nothing more than pure backward-looking reactions or nostalgia. These movements were apprehended as crisis behavior and the defensive replies of protagonists destabilized by progress. Local particularities went against the tide of the general evolution of our societies towards more rationality, universality and movement. And by not leaving another alternative to those who remained loyal to local cultures and traditions which closed it into a retrograde community feeling or the historical leap in nationalism, modernism has doubtlessly not produced what it expected.

But this assimilation from modernity to modernism, from reason to instrumental rationality and from feeling to irrationality is obsolete from now on. Our societies are now classified as ‘post modern’, in ‘second modernity’ or even ‘hyper-modern’. One of their characteristics was that, by exhaustion or doubt, they were incapable of offering sufficiently stable and central markers to their members to give a social sense to their existence. The current malaise is almost as serious as the attitude which presided over the passage of traditional communities to modern society: which, up to then, caused all sense to collapse. Yesterday, it was community morals, traditions, obligations linked to a system of interdependence. These markers were certainly constrained but also reassuring. Today, their replacements have had the same fate: ideologies no longer give hope, social utopias seem harmful or dangerous; science and technology are no longer automatically synonymous of progress. Our societies suffer from a sort of dereliction which leaves their members orphans in terms of sense and hope. This turns their worried gaze towards anything which can bring them a little serenity. This is therefore a dangerous situation: we know full well that it is in this type of social development that populist and fundamentalist movements develop, and an admittedly negligible but real part of Basque nationalism reveals this logic. But moving from concerns about a social vacuum to the defense and promotion of the Basque language as an identity marker luckily takes another route on the whole.

As opposed to what optimistic postmodernists think, the conscience of the random and the ephemeral belonging to our societies is not always exhilarating and amazing; it also creates vertigo and collapse cannot be ruled out. In a world where everything is scattered, broken up and accelerated, the individual at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is hesitating. In their doubt, they are looking for a stable element to support them and construct themselves as a person. For the inhabitants of the Basque Country (whether they are ancestrally Basque or not) or the descendents of Basque immigrants of the diaspora, belonging to the Basque identity, for which the language is the main marker, *can* (and there is not automatism there) play this role of a stabilizing element. Of course, other identifying poles exist, but this identity works as original capital, available to everyone, non exclusive and quite easy to access. This identity returns to a free and voluntary choice. To the extent that it is minority and does not concern the economy, it is also supposed to incarnate a form of truth, authenticity and sensitivity. From this

point of view, reinvestment in terms of Basque identity can be read as a reaction to the information-based form of society that Jacques Attali is predicting, even if he does not want it to happen: a society where “man as the object, will be a nomad, with no address or stable family, carrying himself, in himself, everything making up his social value” and where “the ephemeral will be the rhythm of the law (and) narcissism the major source of desire.” The Basque identity which is being aspired to by those who wish to reinvest in it is, on the other hand, built against this ephemeral aspect and this nomadic life, against urgency, stress and zapping. Everywhere, a sort of universal equivalence can be verified, dictated by a functional pragmatism. Dictated by market laws, globalization is more often synonymous with identity standardization than opening up to otherness. Against this levelling, Basque identity appears on the other hand to be unique and incomparable. It returns to the sensitivity and not to efficacy, to belonging and not to restless wandering. Identity is then, depending on the case, thought of as a ‘refuge’, identity transcendence or spatial metaphor for stability. It is no longer simply synonymous with a community tradition or a nationalist aspiration, but also a mark of the desire to construct their own life by relying on their own culture and a collective memory without having to renounce universal reason and democratic principles.

In any case it is this idea of a marker, open and non exclusive identity which seems to guide the promoters of doubtlessly the most important mobilization ever undertaken for the Basque language: aiming to establish bilingualism at school. If the first *ikastolak* were, without exception, schools created by nationalist activists, the movement in favor of bilingual schools (then the *ikastolak* themselves) is carried along by parents who are concerned about offering their children the choice to speak Basque or not when they become adults. This movement started at the beginning of the 1980s. Faced with mobilization from certain parents (and perhaps with the intention of excusing themselves for not honoring the electoral promise made by François Mitterrand when he was running for the Presidency of the Republic to create a Basque Country department), an opening was made towards teaching no longer just *of* Basque but *in* Basque. On 1st July 1982 an official bulletin was issued by the French Republic including a circular on “Teaching regional cultures and languages in the public National Education service.” It contains the condition to “translate recognition by the government of the regional fact in all its dimensions, the wish to safeguard an essential element of national heritage and the desire to meet families’ demands in this area.” Among the instructions taken up by the infant and primary schools, we can note: “Finally the conditions will be studied in which experimental bilingual classes can be created taking into account experiments which have already been set up in certain regions and using the skills which they have revealed.” In April 1983, the first bilingual Basque-French classes were started within National Education. Since that date, the progression of opening classes has been continual.<sup>11</sup>

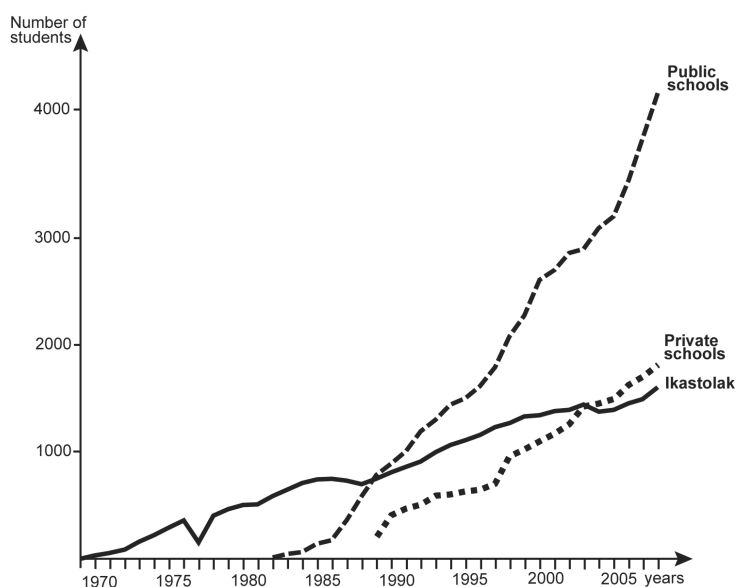
---

11. In 1986, a bilingual stream, adopting the same principle as in the public system, was opened in private schools. Outside the *ikastolak*, all private schools in the French Basque Country give Catholic education.

When the option to choose this line is offered to parents, children are always enrolled voluntarily after an interview with the head teacher. The child can leave this stream at any time to return to the stream entirely in French. On the other hand, this cannot be done the other way round: children can only join at two, three or exceptionally four years old and no later, unless the children already speak Basque or have followed this stream in another school. Half the teaching time –fourteen hours– is given in French and the other half –another fourteen hours– in Basque. For children aged six to twelve, a class is organized as follows: all children take French, history and part of the artistic and physical activities in French with the same teacher. For maths, sciences, geography and the other half of the artistic and physical activities, the class splits into two: children in the entirely French stream stay with the same teacher and those following the bilingual stream change classroom to take classes in Basque with another teacher. For these subjects, the number of students in class is therefore less: all children in a bilingual class benefit from this organization, whether they follow the bilingual stream or not, from a smaller classroom size.

The success of this bilingual stream is constant as, in the space of twenty-five years, the number of students (ages three to twelve) schooled in this way in the public systems has risen from seventeen in 1983, to 4,280 students in 2008, and from forty-six in 1986, to 1,816 students in 2008 in the general private system. Meanwhile, teaching entirely in Basque with French as a subject in the *ikastolak* has also developed constantly, rising from nineteen students (aged three to twelve) in 1970, to 1629 students in 2008. In total there are therefore 7,725 students (out of a total of 25,138, so 30.7%) who currently receive at least 50% of their teaching in the Basque language.

### Evolution of bilingual pupils and pupils in immersion models in primary schools



Retrospectively, we can think about the linguistic trauma, the distress and humiliations that could have been avoided at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and particularly during the entire first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century if this possibility to learn in Basque and French simultaneously had been offered in Basque schools. As opposed to what many people fear, bilingualism does not lead to prejudiced children. The constantly higher marks on tests in maths *and in French* of bilingual students, both compared to their non bilingual classmates and the national averages might lead us to think the contrary.<sup>12</sup>

Adult classes have also grown constantly. The AEK association<sup>13</sup> was created in May 1980. It offers evening classes, intensive daytime courses for one or two months, providing six hours of teaching a day, and live-in full immersion courses for several weeks during summer or winter holidays. The number of students has risen from 540 in 1980, to 926 in 2008 at fourteen study centers. In parallel (figures from July 2007 to May 2008), AEK gives classes to 126 people in nineteen specific groups (town halls and administrations) and 210 people have taken intensive courses.

This mobilization in favor of the Basque language has finally been seen in the creation of the Public Basque Language Office (OPLB) in December 2004. Financed 30% by the state, 30% by the Aquitaine Region, 30% by the Pyrénées Atlantiques department and 10% by Basque communes, this structure aims to “design, define and implement a public and concerted linguistic policy in favor of the Basque language” as well as to “mobilize the financial resources required to successfully complete the actions proposed within the framework of its own activity program.” Its budget is currently two million Euros per year. Since its creation and within the framework of a participative approach, the OPLB mobilized numerous protagonists of linguistic action for several months and managed to adopt a linguistic policy project in December 2006. In parallel, and in partnership with the teaching institutions, this has led to pluri-annual planning of teaching of Basque and in Basque. It has been possible to implement this planning since September 2006. The OPLB, in partnership with local collectives, is also in the process of deploying a network of language technicians in order to assure, at the closest ground level, work to encourage the Basque language promotion department. Finally, a cooperation agreement was signed in February 2007 between the OPLB and the Basque Autonomous Community Government’s Counsellor of Culture.

---

12. It would however be imprudent to deduce that the fact of being schooled in two different languages produces *ipso facto* better students. To reach such a conclusion, homogeneity would have to be assured for children’s socio-cultural environments. In fact, we can make the hypothesis that only parents who are sufficiently sure of their level and their cultural integration choose the bilingual stream for their children.

13. Alfabetatze Euskalduntze Koordinakundea: Coordination of Recovery of Basque Language and Literacy.

## STATISTICAL DATA

The first completely reliable data (collection techniques for data methodologically controlled with a very low percentage of errors) which we have on the use of the Basque language in the French Basque country is recent. Significantly, this does not emanate from French organisms or institutions, but from the Autonomous Basque Community Government itself.<sup>14</sup> This data shows us *the very worrying status of the Basque language at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*. It was a dying language, having almost completely disappeared in the most urban areas of the Basque Country towns of Bayonne, Anglet and Biarritz. Only the most rural areas maintain significant knowledge of the Basque language.

So, and according to the data from the survey in 2006, out of 230,200 people over sixteen years old living in the French Basque Country, 51,800 (22.5%) are bilingual expressing themselves well in Basque and French; 19,800 (8.6%) are receptive bilinguals and understand Basque well but cannot speak it properly; and 158,000 (68.9%) do not understand or speak Basque at all.

### Overall evolution of linguistic skills (in percentages)

Linguistic skill	Population aged 16 and over		
	1996	2001	2006
Bilingual	26.4	24.8	22.5
Receptive bilinguals	9.3	11.7	8.6
<i>Total bilinguals</i>	35.7	36.5	31.1
Non Basque speakers	64.2	63.5	68.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>212,400</b>	<b>221,600</b>	<b>230,200</b>

Source: 4<sup>th</sup> Sociolinguistic survey, Basque Government, 2006

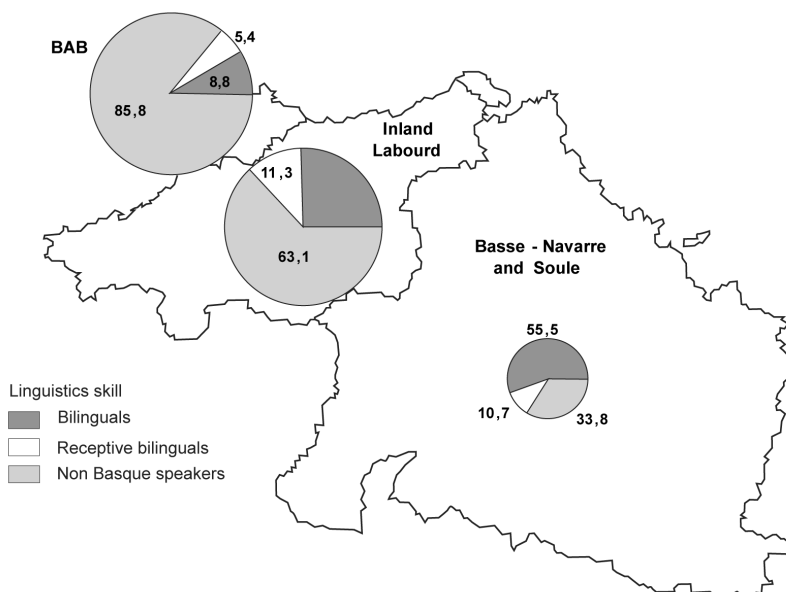
The distribution of linguistic skills by territory is very unequal.<sup>15</sup> So the provinces of Basse-Navarre and Soule, which are the least populated and demographically least dynamic sectors, have the higher percentage of bilinguals (55.5% or 18,200 people), whilst BAB, which is the most populated sector, has the lowest percentage (8.8% or 8,800 people). The rest of Labourd has 25.6% bilinguals, or 24,700 people.

14. This refers to linguistic surveys in 1991, 1996, 2001 and 2006. We had to wait until 2001 for an official French organism (INSEE) to associate with the Basque Government to lead this type of survey (and with the participation of the Public Basque language Office for the latest one).

15. The survey chose to distribute the population not by province but into three demographically typified sectors. The first corresponds to the towns of Bayonne, Anglet and Biarritz (BAB, strictly urban area), with 100,900 inhabitants; the second includes the rest of the province of Labourd (area with high demographic expansion), with 96,500 inhabitants; and the third represents the provinces of Basse-Navarre and Soule (rural area) with 32,800 inhabitants. The number of inhabitants corresponds to the over 16 group. The whole population of the French Basque Country stands at 277,400.



### Distribution of linguistic skills by territory (in percentages)



Source: 4th Sociolinguistic survey, Basque Government, 2006. The size of the circles is proportional to the population in each sector.

If we distribute linguistic skills by age, we see that the highest percentage of bilinguals occurs in the oldest group of sixty-five and older. The first two surveys of 1991 and 1996 show a constant reduction in bilinguals by age. There is strong evidence that if this type of survey was taken before, it would have shown the same phenomenon: a constant loss of knowledge of the Basque language among the youngest age ranges. However the surveys in 1991 and 1996 went beyond this statement. They actually revealed what everyone could see with different degrees of lucidity at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Basque had become a language of the elderly and the curves showed in no uncertain terms that the programmed end was nigh for the Basque language in the French Basque Country. The 2001 survey however showed us (doubtlessly for the first time in at least two centuries) a stabilization in the percentage of bilinguals among the youngest age group (sixteen to twenty-four years). The 2006 survey brought very significant news showing a *reversal of the trend*. The percentage of bilinguals sixteen to twenty-four years old is actually five points higher than the twenty-five to thirty-four group.<sup>16</sup> We must doubtlessly be seeing the first effects of the voluntary policy undertaken in schools in favor of bilingualism.

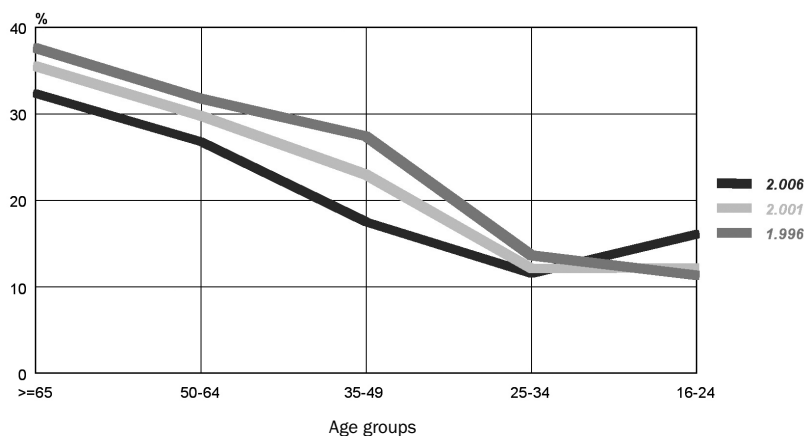
16. However, this reversal in trend is not uniform throughout the territory. This is verified very clearly in the urban sector (BAB) and in inland Labourd. But the drop in population of bilinguals according to age continues to be seen in the rural sector (Basse-Navarre and Soule) therefore this is precisely where the percentage of bilinguals is highest.

### Distribution of linguistic skills by age (in percentages)

Age groups	Population aged 16 and over		
	Bilingual	Receptive bilinguals	Non Basque speakers
≥ 65	32.4	8.1	59.5
50-64	26.8	5.9	67.4
35-49	17.5	10.1	72.4
25-34	11.6	10.4	77.9
16-24	16.1	9.6	74.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>22.5</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>68.9</b>

Source: 4th Sociolinguistic survey, Basque Government, 2006

### Evolution of percentages of bilinguals by age (and according to the last three surveys)

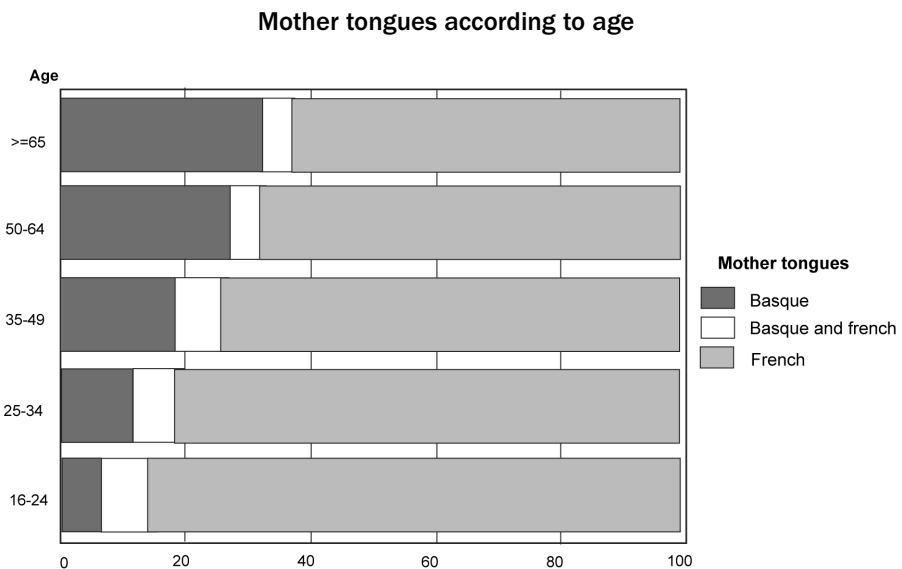


This recovery of the Basque language amongst the younger generation thanks to schooling must not allow us to forget that the essential part of knowledge of the Basque language has until now been transmitted by the family. Overall, Basque is the mother language for 21.6% of the population. 6.1% have received Basque and French as mother tongue and 72.3% just French. Distributed according to geographic sectors, the figures are as follows:

Mother tongues	Population aged 16 and over			
	Total	BAB	Inland Labour	B.Navarre and Soule
Basque	<b>21.6</b>	8.8	23.3	56.2
Basque and French	<b>6.1</b>	2.6	8.4	9.9
French	<b>72.3</b>	88.5	68.3	34.0

Source: 4th Sociolinguistic survey, Basque Government, 2006

But the overall figure (21.6%) of people with Basque as their mother tongue is misleading. *This transmission is currently in the process of disappearing among the younger generations.* Among the sixteen to twenty-four age group, the proportion of people for whom Basque is the only mother tongue is actually barely 6.4% (7.7% in Basque and French). In the space of forty years, the proportion of people with French as their only mother tongue has risen from 62.5% to 85.9%.

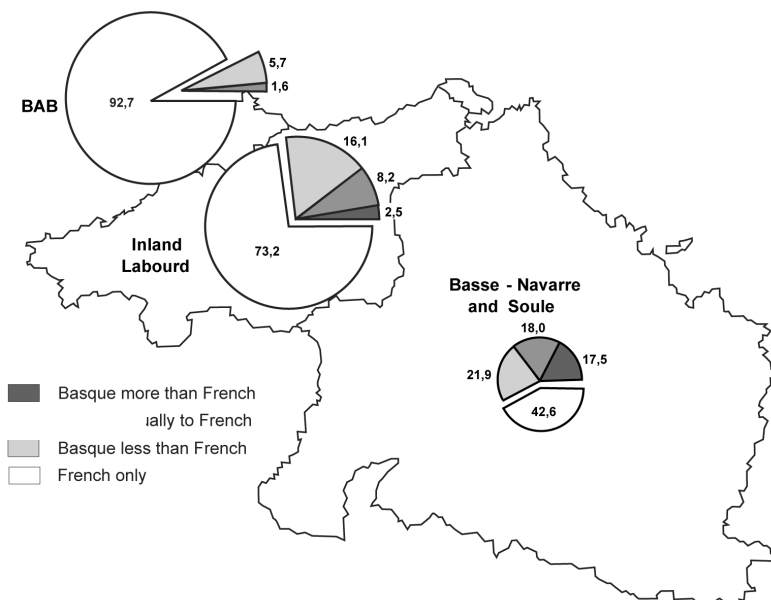


Source: 4th Sociolinguistic survey, Basque Government, 2006

If we look now not at the linguistic *skills* but at the *use* of the Basque language on a daily basis, the figures are even lower. 10.3% of inhabitants of the French Basque Country use Basque more than (3.6%) or equally to (6.7%) French in their daily communication. 12.3% use mainly French and sometimes Basque, and 77.4% never use Basque.<sup>17</sup> Geographic distribution is also unequal here.

17. It should therefore be noted that 7.4% of people who can speak Basque do not use it.

### Type of use of Basque by territory (in percentages)



Source: 4th Sociolinguistic survey, Basque Government, 2006. The size of the circles is proportional to the population in each sector.

## PERSPECTIVES

For UNESCO, a language is in serious danger if the percentage of young people speaking it is less than 30% of the reference population. This has been the case for the Basque language in the French Basque country for at least three decades, and the first sociolinguistic surveys in the 1990s predicted the end of the Basque language in a short space of time. But the last two surveys from 2001 and 2006 show that this handicap is perhaps about to be overcome, essentially thanks to the decision of a growing number of parents to send their children to a Basque school. And it is highly likely that in just a few years' time, more than half of children will be educated in a bilingual stream. The future of the Basque language will then be in the hands of these students when they become adults. If they decide to transmit the Basque language to their own children by speaking mainly to them in Basque, then the Basque language will not only be maintained but it could be developed. On the other hand, if only a minority of them chooses this new family transmission, Basque has every chance of becoming just a symbolic language. It will doubtlessly still be spoken, but as a pure testimony.

The essential part of the linguistic question in the French Basque Country is therefore sociological: *What place do the Basques themselves want to give to the*

*Basque language?* For the time being, the opinion of the majority of the population is in favor of learning Basque for young people and this opinion, it is important to emphasize, is translated into specific mobilization in favor of bilingualism at school and by an effective choice from a growing number of parents so that their children are taught in this stream. But, in daily practice, we have to recognize that the Basque language is used everyday by just a small minority. We must already ask the question about how future Basque speakers might use it. Thinking that Basque might one day replace French seems to be completely unrealistic. As it happens, following this type of line, from the point of view of defending the Basque language, seems to be counter productive as it risks frightening or putting off a part of the population which does not want to learn Basque or their children to be taught it but that has nothing against bilingualism developing. Abruptly advocating replacing French with Basque could lead to part of the population standing up against the Basque language whilst right now they are showing reasonably welcoming disinterest. The most elementary realism shows that French remains, and will remain, the dominant language, particularly when we know how important it is, institutionally, for France to defend French as the language of the Republic.<sup>18</sup> But nothing will prevent the Basques from using their language in situations, places, times or spontaneously, when it seems natural to them to speak in Basque and not in French.

It is therefore these places, times and circumstances that be must prioritized. There will be even more of them as the number of bilinguals, even passive bilinguals, increases. We know that there only has to be one or two non Basque speakers in a group of ten for everyone to else to switch to French. The understandable communicative aspect prevails over any other linguistic consideration. And it is precisely this phenomenon which explains the great difference we can see between the percentage of Basque speakers and the percentage of effective Basque users. The probability of conversations and activities being carried out in Basque will obviously increase with the percentage of bilinguals. But this probability itself is not synonymous of any automatism: even when all the members of a group are bilingual they still might not choose to speak in Basque. The tacit agreement between speakers to use one language over another depends on the more or less attractive image, how highly valued it is and how practical they see this language. In other words: the Basque language must represent something positive, subjectively necessary and instrumentally useful to be used.

---

18. Lately, (21<sup>st</sup> May 2008), the French Parliament has made a statement on the government's proposal for regional languages to be recognized as "national heritage" in article 1 of the French constitution. This is a matter for the legislator of 'repairing' the overly perverse effects that the addition ("French is the language of the Republic") from 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1992 to article 2 of the constitution could produce (according to the legislator, this addition was not made against regional language but to defend French against English). One of these effects was to forbid the government from ratifying the European Charter for Regional or Minority languages. On 16<sup>th</sup> June, the French Academy reacted and made a unanimous statement against this recognition of regional languages because it "affects the identity of the nation." Following this, the Senate voted on 18<sup>st</sup> June against this amendment project. Finally, the recognition of regional languages as "national heritage" was voted and approved on July 21<sup>st</sup>. However, the recognition, will not be introduced in Article 1 or in Article 2 of the Constitution (where it would logically have its place), but... in Article 75-1 that deals with the territorial communities."

Subjectively, the choice of Basque points out the question of belonging, of identity, and the emotional part to which a language can return. For the time being, and after the reversal in the 1970s, Basque seems to be returning to something positive and attractive, as authentic in a superficial world, and as a vector for anchoring identity in an unstable world with perpetual changes. Authentic because of its intrinsic originality but also because adopting it only indicates marginal interest in the French Basque Country in any case. And an anchoring vector because Basque returns to a restricted community that the desire for continuity distinguishes. The notion of *anchorage* against and not in a sense of opposition but proximity that of *roots* indicates that this is a choice that anyone, whatever their origins, can make and not just someone with a birthright.

Instrumentally, Basque will only be chosen to the strict extent that it will be considered useful in public places. Shops, restaurants, places of work and leisure, of debate and worship must become bilingual for this instrumental dimension to be perceived. The efforts provided by the Public Basque Language Office (OPLB) to make public places, particularly town halls and health centers bilingual will bear fruit in a few years' time. But it is above all the voluntary nature of the most decided Basque speakers who by that time, and in parallel, can open up some spaces perceived as truly bilingual. They need to take up some real challenges in the search for balance: creating places where Basque speakers can express themselves spontaneously and without restrictions in their language without seeming, in the eyes of non Basque speakers, to be closed places or types of ghettos. The amateurish dimension of these places, where most of the speakers will doubtlessly be hesitant in their linguistic capacity, will doubtlessly help this opening: Basque language learners should be made welcome there and encouraged.<sup>19</sup> In all, they need to invent new spaces "for and with" and not "against and without."

---

19. Welcome as opposed to what might happen in the (very rare) places where former speakers meet and exclude or laugh at people who have learned Basque (because it is too different to the language they inherited which they call "real Basque").