



EUSKALTZAINDIA

REAL ACADEMIA DE LA LENGUA VASCA
ACADÉMIE DE LA LANGUE BASQUE

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Some remarks in honour of Professor Joshua A. Fishman

Mikel Zalbide

Dear Professor Fishman, dear Gella and family, dear friends:

It is a great pleasure for both Marian and me to be here with you. It is truly a special event for us to meet the Fishman family and friends again and to do it here in the Big Apple. For a number of reasons we have never been here before. One of them, not the least, is that our last 30 years or so have been first and foremost devoted to the RLS enterprise in the Basque Country. This has meant that a good part of our “free” time has been spent reading and rereading the technical bibliography that has become progressively more accessible.

Of course, this has not been the only reason for not coming across the pond until now. Guaranteeing our children, now 30 and 26 a thorough command of the Basque language, our *euskara*, was our first concern. As their mother tongue it continues to be our exclusive language of family and acquaintance. But the outdoor realm, in our home town San Sebastian and in most cities in the Basque Country, is clearly not under the control of Basque. In order to prevent the language of the street from making inroads into family life we have done our best to keep our offspring in contact with the Basque-speaking hinterland (nearly every weekend and part of the holidays). It has been there where the children got the real possibility of enjoying their mother tongue in many emotionally encumbered contexts of interaction. Their Basque has been further expanded by its use as the language of instruction in their ikastola-school in San Sebastian, where my wife has been a history and language teacher for nearly thirty years. Spanish too is, of course, a firmly entrenched language in their speech repertoire: they have acquired a thorough command of it on the street as their second language, for mainstream media, the youth-culture and pop-entertainment, as well as in most of their post-secondary studies. Young 21st century European citizens also increasingly need English, at least for some modernity- or technology-related pursuits. We are proud they have a better command of English via school and through complementary out-of-school language schools than their father; in fact, our son's

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doctoral thesis, in telecommunication engineering, has been written exclusively in English¹. Finally, German is, through a very casual circumstance of my childhood, my co-second language². I was more fluent in it at 16 than now, but even so I haven't forgotten it, and both Marian and I wanted to see this knowledge transmitted to our youngsters. As a result, both Nagore and Ibon speak, read and write German thanks to what I call the agro-immersion program, for their achievement is due not only to their *Erasmus* stays in Germany, but principally to our summer-holidays repeatedly spent on a farm *auf dem Bergischen Land*.

But the proper time for a visit here has finally arrived. In fact, the unanimous nomination of Professor Fishman as honorary member of the Academy was the best occasion we could have thought of. So here we are, full of gratitude for this kind invitation to your home, in such delightful company. The president Mr. Andres Urrutia and his wife were intending to fly with us and to be here today. In the event, it has been materially impossible for them to attend but he has sent you this personal message. In any case, it is a great pleasure for us to perform the presentation in the Academy's name.

As you probably know *Euskaltzaindia*, the Royal Academy of the Basque Language, is nearly one hundred years old. It was mainly formulated in 1918, at the Basque Studies Congress in Oñati, and formally created a year later by the four Provincial Governments of Alava, Biscay, Navarre and Gipuzkoa³.

Euskaltzaindia didn't arise in a vacuum: there had previously been a number of attempts to create such an academy. The congress at Hendaia and Hondarribia in 1901 and 1902 which I have discussed at length in this article, so different from and yet so similar to the Yiddish Congress of Tshernovits in 1907, was not the least important, even if it had largely been considered a disaster until recently. In the mind of its most accurate definer in Oñati, Luis de Eleizalde, the Academy had to fulfil a double role: half of its efforts had to be devoted to corpus planning, and the other half to status planning, (including acquisition planning, in Robert Cooper's sense). At that time there were many factors counseling a dispassionate attention to corpus planning. The Basque language had been a vernacular language for the near totality of the Basque speaking population for centuries, and its use in the formal, written sphere was hindered by its great dialectal fragmentation, a solid geo-historical testimony of long established intra-community communication

¹ Marian's language acquisition history is a different (but fairly common) one: she learned French as a student and has since forgotten most of that exclusively school based knowledge.

² I did my preprimary, primary and nearly all secondary studies at the *Deutsche Schule* in San Sebastian.

³ Significant representatives (both at the civil, religious, academic and RLS-protolite levels) of the French Pays Basque were also present in Oñati, in 1918, and their academic representatives have been an integral part of the Academy since its formal creation.



cleavages. An authoritatively defined, socially accepted and operatively rewarded unified norm, either for the whole language or merely at the dialectal level, was simply not available. Attempts to achieve this uniformity, at least at the orthographical level, were far from becoming reality: this was true even for the intelligentsia which, in any case, was increasingly not Basque-speaking. It was not easy to establish priorities at the time, attending to the very different kinds of demographical, sociocultural and political-operative underpinnings of pro-Basque initiatives in different settings. So *Euskaltzaindia* tried to leave for a better time broader conceptual discussions about the kind of connections and chronologies that corpus and status planning efforts need to include if the whole effort is going to be something more than good will.

Of course, intentions are one thing and reality frequently another. So it was in our case too: in fact, most practical efforts in the 1919-1936 period were devoted to corpus planning. Status and corpus planning connecting efforts, infused with a general philosophy that sounds rather modern when analyzed from the RLS standpoint, were even so discussed and published by the Academy. The philosophy promoted by Seber Altube in 1933-36 was especially profound and empirically well-grounded. But the 1936 to 1939 civil war brought this activity, like many others, to a halt. It was twenty years later, in the 1956-59 period, that *Euskaltzaindia* reactivated its status and corpus planning objectives in three congresses that deserve special attention for the severity and diversity of opinions about what to do, when, where and how in order to achieve a double objective: a) the maintenance of Basque as an intergenerationally continuous language, especially in its shrinking core-lands and b) its sociofunctional expansion to the realms of modernity, urbanization and industry, i.e. to H functions hitherto reserved to the state unifying language, Spanish or French.

The sixties were, also for us, the miraculous decade where nearly everything seemed to be feasible, if heart and will were effectively combined and the population demanding change was properly mobilized. It was the decade of bottom-up language planning *par excellence*, when Basque medium ikastola-schools were created⁴ nearly *ex-nihilo*⁵, Basque literacy-schools for adults proliferated, Basque writers emerged and publishing houses of different kinds (including *Zweckprosa* publishers in H. Kloss's sense) came into being. A great sociocultural effervescence, clearly measurable in theater, music and *bertsolaritza* (or spontaneous sung verse) creation and popularizing events, accompanied this ethnocultural rise. In particular, it was the time when *Euskaltzaindia*, under the guidance of the linguist Koldo Mitxelena, took

⁴ Mostly in an irregular and, in some sense, in a strongly confrontational way.

⁵ This is more so in a quantitative, short-term perspective than in a long-term, quantitative and qualitative one.



the most decisive steps towards the present unified written Basque language, *euskara batua*.

It was the time we were young. There was a broadly accepted idea that something had to change in order for us to face the eagerly awaited post-Franco era. In the language-and-society arena there was no universally accepted vision for the future, not even among the pro-RLSers, irrespective of their personal language profile.

Attitudes towards both Basque and Spanish were clearly contrasting and diverse. For some, Basque was a nuisance and an obstacle for modern life and for econotechnical progress. It would be best sidelined as quickly as possible. Unamuno and company's language-Darwinist followers were still alive. But they were clearly in the minority. There were others who considered it a pity that Basque was in such an irreversible receding situation, but 'that's how things are: don't mix dreams with reality'. There was additionally, as always, a substantial sector of society with no strong feelings about the unequal coexistence of Basque and Spanish/French. And finally there was a noticeable sector of society, particularly important among the young, increasingly university-trained population, which was firmly decided to do all it could in order to keep the language alive, to reBasquize the territories and population sectors which had been lost and, if possible, to expand the former L language to the whole of socio-functional space, including every social domain, role-relationship and formality-level. The Spanish Constitution of 1978 and the subsequent regional Statute of Autonomy of 1979 opened the doors for a number of different practical alternatives. It was the time when some among us started to think that the task was too difficult, too risky and too delicate for us to accept as inevitable the well known strategy of "let's do everything we can and perhaps something will work".

It was also the time many of us discovered Professor Joshua A. Fishman. Via his work, some of us came into contact with Max Weinreich⁶ and Charles Ferguson⁷, with Einar Haugen and Heinz Kloss, with Joan Rubin and Björn Jernudd, with Robert Cooper and William Stewart. Familiarizing ourselves with the Sociology of Language was a task that took years. We had the immense fortune to come into personal contact with Professor Fishman, to be direct benefactors of his reiterated visits to the Basque Country and thus to have the opportunity of asking him about our most profound doubts and of discussing status planning projects with him, both at the norm defining and implementation levels, as well as the options for evaluating the language policy that was already being carried out, both at the new regional Government level and others, local, regional or supra-regional.

⁶ ¹ We had already read and studied his son Uriel's *Languages in Contact*.

⁷ ¹ He has also been sporadically cited amongst us, but not as thoroughly studied as he obviously deserves.



Let me briefly review what we have learned from you.

a) For a start, there is a whole series of concepts: *language maintenance* and *language shift*; *domain of language use*; *ethnicity* as being, knowing and doing; the centrality of the *home-family-neighborhood-work spheres* in *intergenerational mother tongue-transmission* and many more.

b) *Diglossia* is not a valueless feature of old-fangled speech communities, but a construct that small speech communities like our own that wish to survive must reformulate and carefully apply: a fairly stable, widely-observed sociofunctional compartmentalization is on the whole a desideratum, not a mere calamity.

c) You have defined the meanings of *ethnicity* and the possible formulas for the survival of small speech communities with particular care and precision. We have a major task on our hands in our own community as far as achieving an appropriate combination of modernity and authenticity is concerned, particularly on the sociocultural level. Especially if we wish to pay more attention than in the past to a conflict avoidance paradigm and multiple membership configurations.

d) *Corpus planning* requires us to take into account the full linguistic repertoire of our speakers, both at the inter-language and intra-language levels. In other words, all the varieties of users and uses of Basque, putting emphasis on their situational appropriateness.

e) Professor Fishman, you considered our situation in your RLS book and many of your observations are fully appropriate to us. It is not surprising, then, that the book is so frequently mentioned and praised among us. Nevertheless, between you and me, I fear the book is more praised than read, more read than understood, more understood than taken on board, more taken on board than thoroughly applied. Even so, RLS is a prominent cornerstone in our sociocultural and language-policy life, both in top-down formulations and in bottom-up ones. I have taught it year after year on a postgraduate course since 1994 and its appeal does not seem to have waned.

We have of course learned much more from you, but it would take us a long time to detail everything. I use the plural advisedly, because many around me have also benefited from your wisdom, including Nick Gardner, who continues to work with me. To finish, I would just like to underline the attention and affectionate respect you have always shown towards sociocultural and ethnolinguistic pluralism. And, of course, the attachment to the Basques that you have demonstrated time and again: both on your visits and in your extraordinary intellectual production.

For all these reasons I give you my heartfelt thanks. My thanks too to Gella and the rest of the family as well as to the rest of you present at this accreditation ceremony.