

CONCERNING THE CATEGORY OF DEFINITENESS-INDEFINITENESS IN BASQUE

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From the viewpoint of case endings Basque is known to have essentially one declension differentiable into: a) declension of indefinite forms – the endings in the principal cases are added to the pure stem, and in locative cases to forms with the suffixes *-ta* (with inanimate nouns) and *-ga-n* (with animate nouns); b) declension of definite singular forms – the case endings are added to forms with the suffix of definiteness *-a*, the *-ta* suffix lacking in locative cases; c) declension of definite plural forms – case endings are added to plural *-ak/-e* (<**ag-e*) suffixed forms; in locative cases the *-ta* and *-ga-n* suffixes are present here too.

Basque indefinite forms express generic nominal notion, the stem being neutral with respect to indicating number. These forms are opposed in terms of definiteness/indefiniteness to *-a*-articled (definite) forms, the former constituting unmarked members and the latter marked members of this opposition. Definite forms, in their turn, are opposed with respect to number, the singular being opposed to the plural, as unmarked to marked members. The former opposition occurs only under certain conditions.

Thus, indefinite forms are used with numerals and words expressing quantity (*asko** 'many, much, enough', *anitz** 'many, much', *beredin* 'many, much', *gutxi* 'few, little' and so on), indefinite pronouns (*edozein* 'any', *zenbait* 'some', etc), interrogative pronouns (*zer?* 'what?', *zein?* 'which?', *zenbat?* 'how many?, how much?'), in adverbial forms (*txikitan* 'in childhood', *gaztetan* 'in youth') and also in some set expressions (e.g. *sutan jarri* 'to get (fall) into fire, to catch / take fire', *sutara bota* 'to throw into fire', *eguzkitan egon* 'to be in the sun', *lekutara joan* 'to go to some place far away', *ogitara joan* 'to go away in search of bread / living', *lotara joan* 'to go to sleep', *izerditan egon* 'to sweat' (lit. 'to be in sweat'), *ezkerretara hartu* 'to take to the left', *eskuz egin* 'to make with hands, hand made' *telefonoz mintzatu* 'to speak on the telephone', *oinez etorri* 'to come on foot', *autoz joan* 'to go by car', etc); the majority of these phrases are also adverbial forms. The indefinite stem is used

also in the function of a predicative (atributive)¹ with certain verbs; it also occurs as the first component of compound words.

It is noted also in the specialist literature that such words as *errege* 'king', *faraon* 'pharaoh', as well as words denoting kinship (*aita* 'father', *ama* 'mother', *osaba* 'uncle', *izeba* 'aunt', et.) are declined without the article, for they are construed as proper names.² This is known from other languages as well.

Thus in Georgian, words denoting kinship: *deda* 'mother', *mama* 'father', *deida* 'aunt', etc. occur in certain cases in differing form, depending on whether one's own mother, father, etc is implied or mother, father, aunt in general. In the former case the final vowel of the stem is not reduced before case endings beginning with a vowel (which favours their identification with proper names), whereas in the latter case reduction occurs, this being a general rule with common nouns.

Here note should be taken of the fact that in Georgian (as well as in Basque) these nouns end, as a rule, in a vowel, which seems to be very characteristic of appellatives, their basic function being that of address.³ (Some languages have special forms for the vocative, e.g. Georgian, while in others the stem or the nominative case form perform this function, as is the case in Basque). The specific form of the appellatives is accounted for by the peculiarities of allocation. Thus, an address in a phrase is intonationally marked out by a pause, high pitch, and tense articulation; hence the appellatives are characterized by vowel auslaut and consist of more syllables than one. Hence, it is probably not accidental that *ama*, *aita*, etc have more than one syllable and end in a vowel. The use in the functions of vocative of extended, *-a-* articulated forms (ie of vowel auslaut forms) in Modern Basque dialects can also be explained on the ground of the foregoing.

In the present writer's view, the indefinite forms in such examples as *txikitan* 'in childhood', *gaztetan* 'in youth', *sutan* 'in fire', *eguzkitan* 'in the sun', *eskuz* 'by hand', *oinez* 'on foot' are today construed as adverbs: *noiz?* 'When?', *txikitan* 'in childhood', *gaztetan* 'in youth'; *non?* 'Where?' *sutan* 'in fire', *eguzkitan* 'in the sun'; *nola?* 'How?' (and also: *zertaz?* 'By what?) *eskuz* 'by hand', *oinez* 'on foot', etc. Similar is the form *etxen* 'at home', as opposed to the articulated form *etxean* 'in a/the house'.

The use of indefinite forms with indefinite pronouns is quite natural. The

¹ It is noteworthy that L. Hjelmslev (see his *Catégorie du cas*, t. I, Copenhague, 1936, p. 120) identified in Modern German a predicative case (prédicatif) in a certain adjectival system.

² See, eg J. L. Alvarez Enparantza (Txillardegui), *Euskal Gramatika*, San Sebastián, 1978, pp. 102-104; by the same author: *L'emploi de l'indéfini en souletin* (a travers l'oeuvre du poète Etxahun). *Fontes Linguae Vasconum*, 1977, N 25, pp. 44-45.

³ On this see: Sh. T. Apridonidze. *Forms of address and the syllabic composition of Georgian person names*. In: 'The Case Composition and the System of Declension in the Ibero-Caucasian Languages'. 9th Regional Academic Conference. Abstracts of papers, Makhachkala, 1981, p. 17. (In Russian).

same seems to apply to the use of indefinite forms with numerals and with words expressing quantity. In this case these attributes denote number, and marking them additionally in the noun would be redundant. Neither is the singular number of the verb illogical here. The agreement of the noun with the verb in number appears to depend on the stem of the noun. If the number is not marked in the noun, it is not expressed in the verb either, irrespective of whether it agrees with the numeral (or some other word denoting quantity). The situation is the same in Georgian. The rule of agreement of the singular form of the verb with indefinite forms accompanied with attributes denoting quantity is often violated in almost all dialects of Modern Basque. In this respect, Souletin appears to be an exception, for it follows the original tradition more faithfully. (Such violations –though on a smaller scale– are found in Georgian as well). This can be accounted for by the influences from the neighbouring European languages. However, it should be noted here that such violations are not opposed by the logic of the meaning of indefinite forms. After all, these forms are neither singular nor plural, and the verb with them can be construed not only in the singular, but in the plural as well (the more so if accompanied by an attribute denoting quantity which gives the corresponding syntagma the meaning of plural).

As for the forms of the predicative (attributive), as noted also in the specialist literature, the indefinite noun (i.e. a pure stem) was invariably used in this function in Old Basque. The situation must have been the same in Old Georgian. Some authours see here an absolutely formless case, which would point to the state of the language prior to the formation of a system of cases.⁴ In their view, it is opposed to all the other cases, and, whereas it is substituted only for the nominative, theoretically it can replace all the cases.⁵ However, such an assumption is not indispensable to explain the above. The generic nominal meaning of the indefinite forms accords fully with the meaning of the attributive.⁶ It is noteworthy that in this meaning neither is the use of the definite form ruled out, which is actually quite frequent in Modern Basque dialects. On the one hand, this is explained by the influence of other languages, and on the other, the inner logic of the language may also be assumed to play a part. The same has occurred in Georgian: variants marked by the *-i* suffix (originally the definite article) of the nominative case are invariably used at present in the attributive function: only in a small number of compound verbs is the pure stem used in the attributive function: *zal-mic* 'I am capable of', *natel-q'ops* 'sheds light on', *cxad-q'ops* 'makes clear', etc.

A consideration of the evidence of Modern Basque dialects will make it clear that the original system of definiteness-indefiniteness in Basque has suffe-

⁴ See, e.g. N. Marr, M. Brière, *La langue géorgienne*, Paris, 1931, p. 273.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ H. Vogt, *Le système des cas en géorgienne ancienne*. Norsk Tidsskrift for sprogvidenskap, Bind XIV, Oslo, 1947, pp. 98-140.

red some change. The tendency is clearly in evidence for the singular forms to be construed as general, unmarked forms (which substitute freely indefinite forms, except when combined with numerals, indefinite and interrogative pronouns, or in some adverbial forms, and set phrases) and to be opposed —with respect to number— to marked plural forms. Thus, *gizona etorri da* may mean 'the man came', 'as well as a man came'. Or: *begia eduki* 'to keep eye on', *begia bota* 'to cast a look'. A breakdown in the opposition of definiteness-indefiniteness in attributes is also observable with plural forms, e.g. *onak dira* (not: *on dira*) 'they are good', *begiak ipini* 'to set eyes on'. Such examples do not convey the meaning of 'definiteness', this also being a natural process attending the above reinterpretation.

This view seems to be supported also by the morphological evidence of the locative cases, the latter being of relatively recent origin and closer to post-positional forms; parallelism of the stems of the indefinite and plural forms (e.g. the *-ta* suffixed stem in either case), whereas the stem of the singular (definite) differs from them.

In the present writer's view, the function of *-a*-articled forms has become so extended that in Modern Basque *-a* has become a general marker of nominality (like the *-tu* suffix of verbality which at present occurs not only in denominal stems but redundantly is added to old, primary verbal stems). Addition of *-a* to a verbal stem yields a nominal stem, eg: *edan* 'to drink', *edana* 'a drink; a beverage'; or: *ustea ez da jakitea* 'supposing is not knowing'. The undermining of the morphological opposition of definiteness-indefiniteness is aided by the fact that this opposition has a lesser functional loading⁷ in Modern Basque than, say, the number opposition.

Besides, in the theory of markedness⁸ special significance is being attached to the functional criterion —the frequency characteristic of the opposition members: the member with a greater frequency in normally unmarked. The functional power of the opposed units may change under certain conditions, causing a change of the opposition. The reinterpretation of the definite/indefinite forms of the Basque noun constitutes an illustration of this general point of view functionally loaded forms of higher frequency turn into the general, unmarked members of the opposition.

True, on the one hand we have such a reinterpretation, yet the inner tendency of language to differentiate between definite and indefinite forms still operates, being manifested in the expression of this opposition syntactically — by means of certain pronominal elements, such as *hau* 'this', *hori* 'that' (Lat. 'iste'), *hura* 'that' (Lat. ille), *hauek* 'these', *bat* 'one', *batzu* 'some', etc. The more so that this tendency is favoured by examples of neighbouring languages.

⁷ For the role of functional load in language see, eg J. Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1972, § 2.4.1.

⁸ See, eg J. H. Greenberg, *Language Universals with Particular Reference to Feature Hierarchies*, The Hague, 1966.

Typologically, reinterpretation of definiteness-indefiniteness is known from other languages too. The build-up (e.g. this category was not yet formed in Latin and Gothic, but developed later in Romance,⁹ and in Germanic¹⁰ languages) as well as a breakdown (e.g. in Modern Georgian this opposition has disappeared, though it existed in Old Georgian) of this category is on record. Cases are also evidenced of the disappearance and reemergence of the same category (e.g. in a language of one group of the mountain Ibero-Caucasian languages, namely in Abaza¹¹).

Abstract

The expression of the category of definiteness/indefiniteness in Modern Basque is analyzed in the paper. It is inferred that the initial morphological opposition of the above forms is being reinterpreted, while the indicated category becomes expressed syntactically.

⁹ A. Dauzat, *Histoire de la langue française*, Paris, 1930, § 483-490.

¹⁰ M. G. Arsenyeva, et al. *Introduction to Germanic Philology*, Moscow, 1980 (in Russian).

¹¹ K. V. Lomtadize. *From the history of definite forms of noun in the Ashkhar dialect of the Abaza language*. *Voprosy jazykoznanija*, 1977, N 2, pp. 103-108 (in Russian).

* It is noteworthy that in certain dialects of basque these words can be construed like numerals, viz. they can be preposed to the corresponding nouns which is not a general rule for the adjectives.