

# Week 1

## Historical and social aspects of Basque

Baldin zuk ontzat artu badezu Euskal Herriko egona, Gauz auxe eskatutzen dizut gaur zu holandatar gizona: Zabaldu zazu hemengo berri naiz txarra eta naiz ona. Esan hizkuntza zahar bat badala ia galduan dagona.	If you have found it pleasant to stay in the Basque Country, Then today I ask you for this, man from Holland: Spread the news from here, be they good or bad. Say there is an ancient language that is almost lost.
Baldin zu bizi bazera eta zartu eta hemen izan, Hemen mintzoa galdu liteke Oraintxen dijuan gixan. Hemen ezjakin gazterik bada zuk gazte aieri esan: Ni gazterik etorritakuan olaintxen hitz egiten zan.	If you live to old age and live among us, Our language may be lost, the way things are going. If there are unknowing youngsters here, tell those young people: “When I came here as a young man people used to speak this way”.

*Farewell of bertsolari Lazkao Txiki to Dutch guest Rudolf de Rijk.  
Transcription of a recording made in August 1965 in Ormaiztegui.*

### 1 Terminology

Words referring to the Basque Country, the Basque language, and diverse Basque institutions are formed around the root *eusk-* ‘Basque’. For example, the native name of the language is *euskera*, which combines *eusk-* with the suffix *-era* ‘in the manner of’ –thus, *euskera* means “(speaking) in the manner of the Basques”; the territory of the Basque Country is called *Euskal Herria* or *Euskadi*; the Academy of the Basque Language is *Euskaltzaindia*, with combines *eusk-* with the verbal root *zain(du)* ‘to protect’ –i.e., it literally means “those who protect the Basque language”.

The etymology of this root is unclear, though. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sabino Arana and other prominent Basque nationalists proposed that it derives from *eguzki* ‘sun’, eventually modifying spellings to *euzkera*, *Euzkadi*, *Euzkal Herria*, and so on. This hypothesis was clearly in imitation of the connection between the Greek name for Greece (*Hellas*) and the Greek word for ‘sun’ (*helios*), but it was proposed without any supporting evidence, and it is groundless. Various linguists have pointed to the Ausci (a Pyrenean tribe from pre-Roman times that might have spoken some

form of Proto-Basque) as a possible source, but no definitive consensus has been reached.

It is notable that Latin already had a verb *uasconice* which meant ‘to speak in the Basque way’, which later derived into the French and English word *Basque* and the Spanish *vasco* and *vascuence* (note that *vascuence* is currently considered a derogatory form). Thus, whatever the origin of the root *eusk-*, it goes back to pre-Roman times.

Someone who can speak Basque is called *euskaldun*, which comes from *euskera* plus the possessive suffix *-dun/-tun* –i.e., *euskaldun* means “person who has (knowledge of) the Basque language”. Typically, a distinction is made between *euskaldun zahar* (old *euskaldun*) and *euskaldun berri* (new *euskaldun*), depending on whether, for a given person, Basque is their native language or a second language learnt later in life. In recent times, though, there has been some confusion, as some people have begun extending the meaning of *euskaldun* to cover people born or socially connected to the Basque Country, regardless of whether they speak Basque. This is incorrect, however, as there exists already a different term to refer to such people –namely *euskal herritar* (literally “Basque citizen”). Note that the two terms are logically independent of each other.

- There are a number of people that qualify as *euskaldun* (as they are fluent in Basque), but which are not *euskal herritar* because they were born and spent most of their lives outside the Basque Country. Some of the people in this situation are very notable Basque linguists, such as Rudolf de Rijk (born and lived in the Netherlands), Larry Trask (born in the United States, lived in England), and more recently Bill Haddican (born in the United States, living in England), and Milan Rezac (born in the Czech Republic, living in France).
- Conversely, there are a number of people (especially in the western part of Bizkaia and the southern parts of Araba and Nafarroa) who, having been born and having lived in the Basque Country, qualify as *euskal herritar*, but who have a poor or non-existent knowledge of Basque and therefore don’t qualify as *euskaldun*.

Basque also has the word *erdara* (or occasionally *erdera*), which refers to any language that is not Basque. In context, though, it usually refers to either Spanish or French, depending on the location of the speaker. As an amusing note, the first element of the word is *erdi* ‘half’ –so if you are not speaking Basque, you are only speaking a half-language.

## 2 Basque society

The Basque people belong to a different ethnicity than the rest of inhabitants of either Spain or France. This was noticed at least as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, where Caesar observed that the inhabitants of Western Aquitania (what today is the French part of the Basque Country) looked very different from the rest of the people of Gaul. This impressionistic characterization has found support in modern times, as various researchers have found that the Basque population has a much higher percentage of individuals with the O-negative blood type than other European populations.

Traditionally, Basque society was a matriarchal one, unlike many other societies in Europe. The Greek historian Strabon characterized it as “a sort of woman-rule, not at all a mark of civilization”. Women could inherit and control family property, as well as officiate in churches. The Lithuanian anthropologist Gimbutas observes in her book *The living Goddess* that “matrilineal

inheritance laws, and agricultural work performed by women continued in the Basque Country until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For more than a century, scholars have widely discussed the high status of Basque women in law codes, as well as their positions as judges, inheritors, and arbitrators through pre-Roman, medieval, and modern times. The system of laws governing succession in the French Basque region reflected total equality between the sexes. Up until the eve of the French revolution, the Basque woman was truly the mistress of the house, hereditary guardian, and head of the lineage". Nowadays, Basque society (especially in medium-to-large population centers) has been assimilated to the larger European norm.

Basques also have certain traditions without clear equivalents in neighboring societies. One of them is *bertsolaritza* contests and exhibitions, which can be succinctly described as events in which participants improvise songs (*bertsoak*) around a topic and/or a set of rules set by a jury. Another is a series of competitions (*herri kirolak*, literally "rural sports") mostly based around certain farming activities, such as felling trees (*aizkolaritza*), lifting stones (*harrijasotzaile*), mowing grass (*sega proba*), or using pairs of oxen to drag large stones (*idi probak*). Basque pelota (*Esku pilota*, literally "hand ball") is different from other ball games like tennis or squash in that (i) players bounce the ball against a wall, instead of throwing it against each other; and (ii) in its traditional form, players use their bare hands to hit the ball, instead of a racquet. The winners of these contests (*bertsolaritza* included) receive a large embroidered beret as a trophy. In fact, the Basque word for "champion" is *txapeladun*, which derives from *txapel* "beret", and can be literally translated as "the one with the beret", and this tradition has been extended to not-exclusively-Basque activities (e.g., cycling).

### 3 Nationalism and politics

Since the feudal era, the system of *fueros* (in Basque, *foroak*) gave the Basque Country a special status vis-à-vis with the Kingdom of Castille, and later on as a part of the Kingdom of Spain. As part of this system, the kings of Spain swore to grant the Basque Country certain privileges (regarding, for example, taxes or army drafting) in exchange for a Basque allegiance to the Spanish crown. Traditionally, the kings swore this oath under a specific oak in Gernika, which to this day still survives as a symbol of Basque unity and independence.

The situation changed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when a series of laws abolished the *foroak*. This gave rise to the foundation of the Basque Nationalist Party (known as PNV in Spanish and EAJ in Basque) by Sabino Arana, whose ultimate political goal was the Basque secession from Spain. In its origins EAJ was based on a xenophobic ideology that proclaimed a supremacy of the Basques over the Spanish and sought to maintain the ethnic purity of the Basques. The present day EAJ, while still working towards the political independence of the Basque Country, has by and large rejected its original ideology. However, the active repression suffered during the 1939–1975 dictatorship resulted in the rise of a number of alternative parties that picked up on Arana's original vision —most prominently, *Herri Batasuna*, which has been repeatedly outlawed and reorganized under different names. The main reason behind Herri Batasuna's repeated outlawings was its association with the terrorist group ETA (acronym of *Euskadi ta Askatasuna*, in English, "Basque Country and Freedom"), which since 1968 has been responsible for shootings and bombings that have killed more than 800 people and have injured thousands. Their activities were financed mainly by extortion means (i.e., kidnapping of wealthy Basques that could afford to pay a ransom, or more indirectly, the so-called "revolutionary tax"). While there was some

support for the actions of ETA during their first years (given that they were seen, to some extent, as a reaction to Franco's regime of active repression against Basque culture), its acceptance among the majority of the Basque population has declined significantly —to the extent that, as of late 2012, the leaders of ETA announced that they were taking steps to permanently end terrorist activities and dissolve the organization.

## 4 Geography

The term “Basque Country” has two different meanings, which we should be careful to distinguish.

- **The Autonomous Community of the Basque Country:** in Spanish, *Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco*. This is an official administrative division of Spain (one of the 17 Autonomous Communities, roughly equivalent to a Bundesland in Germany) and it comprises three provinces:
  1. Bizkaia (*Vizcaya* in Spanish), whose capital city is Bilbao (it is often claimed that the Basque name of Bilbao is *Bilbo*, but this is incorrect; *Bilbao* is the city's name in both Basque and Spanish). Bilbao is also the largest city of the Autonomous Community: while the municipality of Bilbao itself only has around 350.000 inhabitants, the larger metropolitan area associated to it (*Gran Bilbao*) is home to almost 1 million people – that is, about 80% of the population of Bizkaia, and over 40% of the total population of the Autonomous Community.
  2. Gipuzkoa (*Guipúzcoa* in Spanish), whose capital city is Donostia (*San Sebastián* in Spanish), the smallest of the three capital cities.
  3. Araba (*Álava* in Spanish), whose capital city is Gasteiz (*Vitoria* in Spanish). Gasteiz is also the capital of the Autonomous Community and the seat of the Basque Government (*Eusko Jaurlaritza*).
- **The Basque Country as a historical/cultural entity:** this is a set of seven regions bound by the fact that Basque has been spoken in all of them (to varying degrees) for several centuries. However, as it is split between Spain and France, it has (as of today) no official status, and therefore no capital city, no parliamentary representation, etc. The seven territories in question are:
  - The three provinces of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country.
  - The Autonomous Community of Nafarroa (*Navarra* in Spanish), located in Spain. Its capital city is Iruñea, occasionally also spelled Iruña (*Pamplona* in Spanish).
  - The western half of the Département des Pyrénées Atlantiques in France, which is divided into three historical territories. These territories are called *historical* because, while they corresponded to provinces in pre-revolutionary France, nowadays are only a conglomerate of arrondissements within the Département des Pyrénées Atlantiques.
    1. Lapurdi (*Labourde* in French). The capital was Ustaritz (*Ustaritze* in French), although presently the most prominent city is Baiona (*Bayonne* in French).
    2. Behe-Nafarroa or Nafarroa-Beherea (*Basse-Navarre* in French), which used to be part of the Kingdom of Navarre in medieval times. It had two capital cities, namely Donibane-Garazi (*Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port* in French) and Donapaleu (*Saint-Palais* in French).

3. Zuberoa (*Soule* in French). Its capital city was Maule (*Mauleón* in French).



For obvious reasons, the set of Lapurdi, Behe-Nafarroa, and Zuberoa is usually referred to as the *French Basque Country*, whereas the set of Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, Araba, and Nafarroa is the *Spanish Basque Country*. Throughout this course, *Basque Country* will mostly have the second meaning. If I want to use the first meaning, I will tell you so.



## 5 Dialects

A notable feature of Basque is the large number of distinguishable regional dialects. It is possible to find noticeable (although sometimes minor) differences even from one village to the next. This high degree of dialectal variations stems from two factors.

1. The fact that the Basque Country is a very mountainous area, which (until the advent of phone lines and public transportation networks in the early-to-mid-20th century) made frequent communication between different population centers difficult.
2. The fact that, until very recently, Basque lacked both official status and a standard form, which limited speakers to use their own regional varieties.

The most important isogloss roughly coincides with the France-Spain border, dividing Basque into Western and Eastern dialects (occasionally, you might hear Southern and Northern dialects, but these terms are not so geographically appropriate). If we want to be more fine-grained, classical scholarship identifies six dialects, corresponding roughly to the seven territories minus

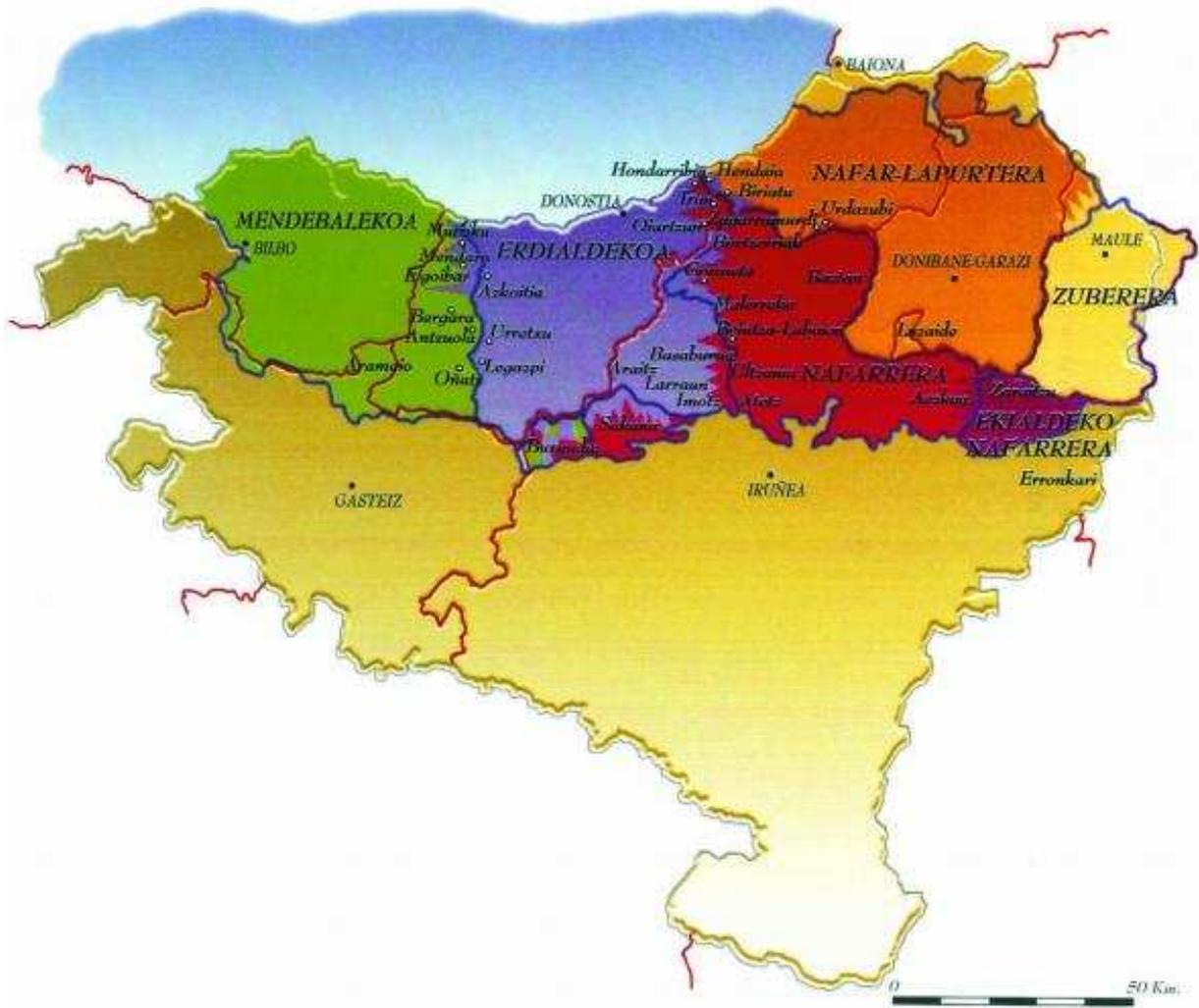
Araba. However, a more recent study by Koldo Zuazo proposes a new division, also into six dialects (see also the map in the next page).

1. Mendebalekoa (Western), spoken in Bizkaia, the northern edge of Araba, and the western part of Gipuzkoa.
2. Erdialdekoa (Central), spoken in Gipuzkoa and the northwest of Nafarroa.
3. Nafarrera (Navarrese), spoken in most the north-central part of Nafarroa.
4. Ekialdeko Nafarrera (Eastern Navarrese), spoken in the eastern tip of Nafarroa.
5. Nafar-Lapurtera (Navarrese-Labourdin), spoken in Lapurdi, Behe-Nafarroa, and a few places in northern Nafarroa.
6. Zuberera (Souletin), spoken in Zuberoa.

In addition, there were *literally dialects*, used for the production of written documents and other more formal types of communication (for example, priests tended to use a literary dialect during their church sermons). The literary dialects are: Literary Bizkaian, Literary Gipuzkoan, Classical Lapurdian, and Literary Zuberoan. Not all of them were equally prestigious, though. In particular, Literary Gipuzkoan was the preferred one in the Spanish Basque Country, and Classical Lapurdian in the French Basque Country. Consequently, when Euskaltzaindia (the Academy of the Basque Language) began developing a standardized form in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it picked a mixture of Literary Gipuzkoan and Classical Lapurdian as the basis. This standardized form is called *Euskara Batua* “Unified Basque”, but often it is referred to simply as *batua*. This is the form that you will see if you pick a current newspaper, textbook, or official publication.

## 6 A brief history of Basque

Basque is an isolate, non-Indo-European language, meaning that it is unrelated to any other language spoken in the present day (although, due to the extended contact with French and Spanish, several Basque words are Romance in origin –for instance, *liburu* ‘book’ is clearly related to French *livre* and Spanish *libro*). Basque is, arguably, the last surviving member of a family of languages that were spoken in the Atlantic coast of Europe before the Roman expansion. Specifically, the earliest forms of Basque were spoken in an area that was at least as large as the present-day Basque Country. We can tell this because there exist several inscriptions from Roman times that are unmistakably Basque:



- Nafarroa (which was already known to the Romans as “land of the Vascones”) has inscriptions like “VMME SAHAR”, very similar to the present-day *ume zahar* ‘old child’.
- Similarly, inscriptions in the French Basque Country include CISSON (compare to present-day *gizon* ‘man’ and ANDERE (compare to *andere* ‘woman’).
- The Garonne river in France, which delimits the eastern border of the French Basque Country, originates in the Valley of Aran, where (*h*)*aran* is the Basque word for valley.

Further, Roman authors like Caesar observed that the inhabitants of Aquitania (the southeast corner of France) were ethnically different from the people of the rest of Gaul, so we can suppose that they spoke an ancient form of Basque. However, the romanization of Aquitania replaced Basque with Gascon, a Romance language with a heavy Basque substratum. The situation became better in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, due to the existence of a bourgeoisie that demanded literature in Basque. However, the French Revolution and the consequent marginalization of languages other than French put an end to this revival.

In the Spanish side, Basque remained a healthy language until the end of the middle ages: we know this because, for instance, the city of Huesca (about 100km east of Nafarroa) issued an or-

dinance in the 14<sup>th</sup> century prohibiting the use of Basque (among other languages) in its market. Similarly, the 10<sup>th</sup> century manuscript that contains the oldest known writing in Spanish (known as *Glosas Emilianenses*) also contains some sentences in Basque. This monastery is located in San Millán de la Cogolla, in the province of La Rioja, south of Araba. Thus, we can suppose that, even at this late time, Basque was spoken regularly not only in the Basque Country, but also in the neighbouring kingdoms. However, Basque never enjoyed an official status, and wasn't used as the language of administration or literature. As a consequence, it began to gradually lose ground to Spanish. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Basque had been largely lost in Araba and Nafarroa, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, a similar trend started in Gipuzkoa and (especially) Bizkaia due to a wave of immigration from other parts of Spain.

In the Spanish side, the lowest point coincided with the 1939-1975 dictatorship, where regional languages (Basque included) were actively repressed. The final years of the dictatorship, however, saw a relaxation of the repression, allowing the creation of semi-legal Basque language schools (*ikastolak*). After the dictatorship, Basque became the official language of the Autonomous Community (together with Spanish), and it was introduced as a language of instruction at all educational levels. It also began to be used in media, with the creation of several newspapers, radio stations, and one TV channel.

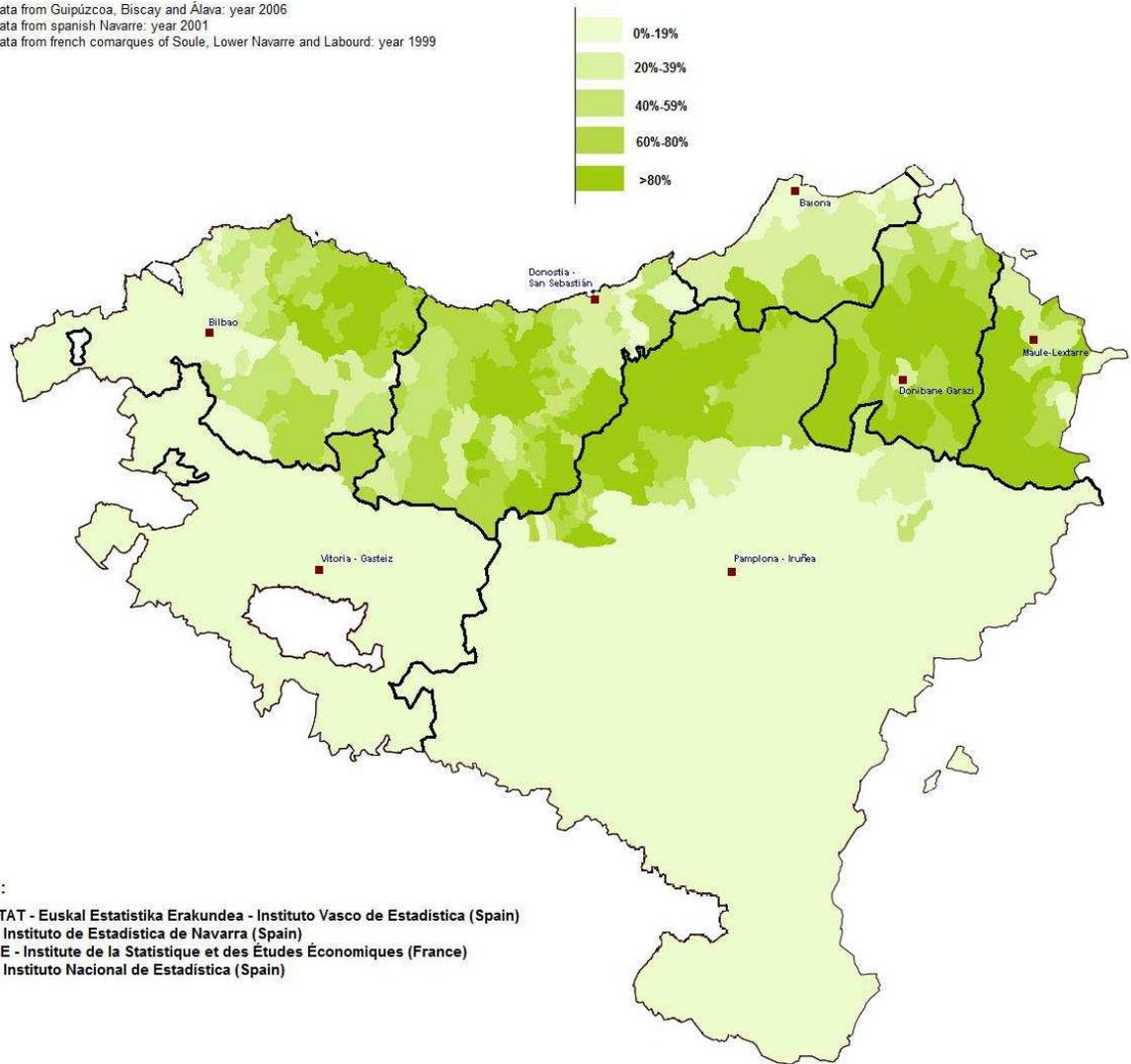
## 7 Present and future of Basque

Basque is spoken, to varying degrees, in all of the 7 territories of the Basque Country. However, the large majority of speakers concentrates in the area comprising the eastern half of Bizkaia, the whole of Gipuzkoa, the northwest corner of Nafarroa, and the southern parts of the French provinces. Unsurprisingly, this is also the area with the highest percentage of native speakers. Overall, there are on the range of 700.000 people that either have Basque as their native language, or have become fluent in it. Note, however, that nearly all of those 700.000 speakers are actually Basque-French or Basque-Spanish bilingual. The number of monolingual Basque speakers is very low, and the large majority of cases are old people living in remote villages.

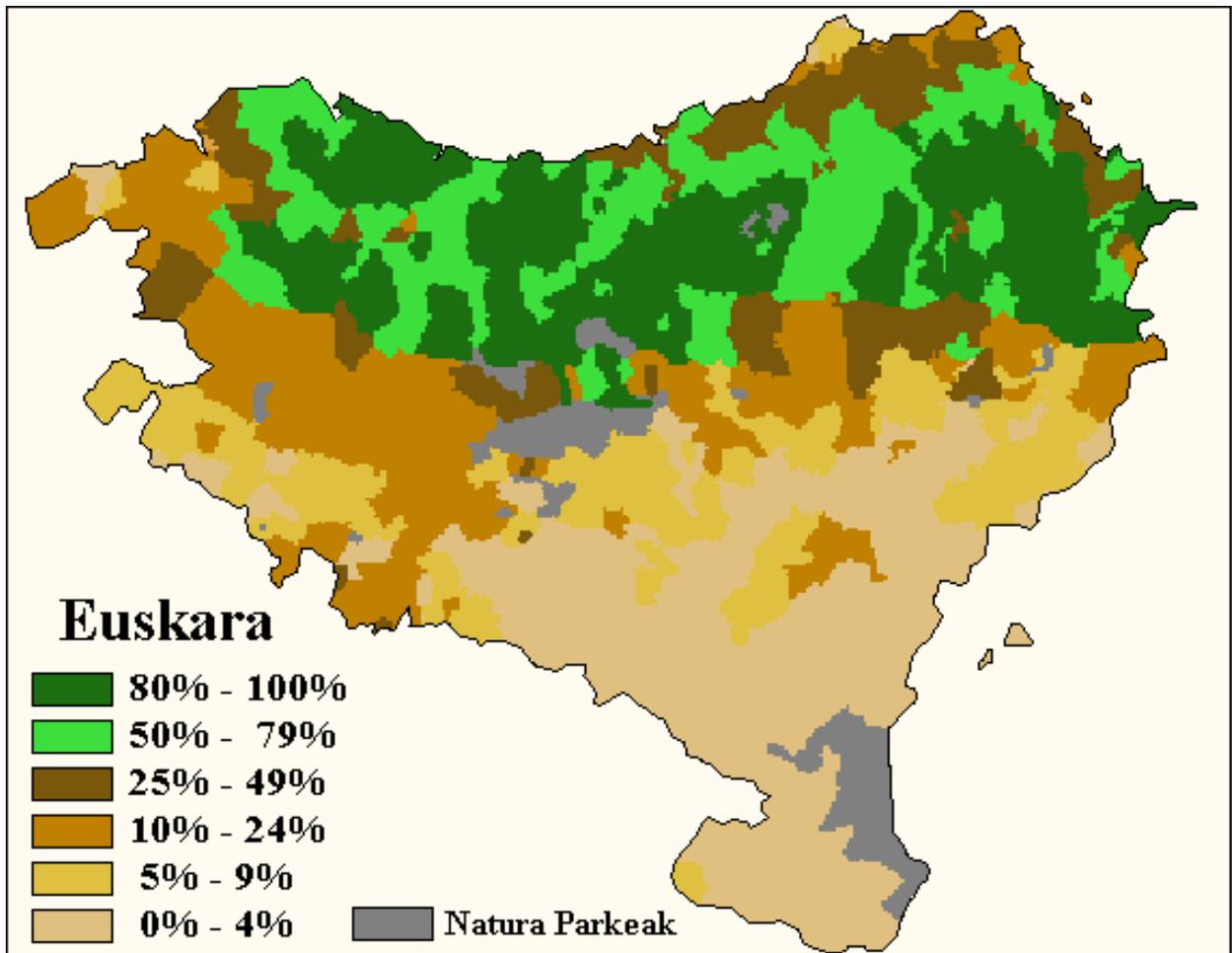
While the sheer number of speakers doesn't make Basque an endangered language, the situation is not entirely optimistic. To begin with, the usage of Basque in the French side has been declining constantly, and it is very likely that it will disappear in the foreseeable future. In the Spanish side, the high number of speakers (including native speakers) is counterbalanced by the absence of monolingual Basque speakers, and by the fact that Spanish is still the preferred language for a majority of the population.

**Percentage of basque speakers as initial language by municipalities in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country, Foral Autonomous Community of Navarre (Upper Spanish Navarre) and french *comarques* of Soule valleys, Lower Navarre and Labourd**

Data from Guipúzcoa, Biscay and Álava: year 2006  
 Data from spanish Navarre: year 2001  
 Data from french *comarques* of Soule, Lower Navarre and Labourd: year 1999



**Data:**  
 EUSTAT - Euskal Estatistika Erakundea - Instituto Vasco de Estadística (Spain)  
 IEN - Instituto de Estadística de Navarra (Spain)  
 INSEE - Institute de la Statistique et des Études Économiques (France)  
 INE - Instituto Nacional de Estadística (Spain)



## 8 Notable features of the Basque language

Since Basque is not an Indo-European language, some aspects of its grammar might be weird to speakers of Western European languages (including German). Some of these features are:

- **An ergative-absolutive case system:** European languages function on a nominative-accusative system, which means that subjects get nominative case and objects get accusative case. In Basque, though, subjects of unaccusative verbs and objects of unergative and transitive verbs get absolutive case, whereas subjects of unergative and transitive verbs get ergative case.
- **A very rich case system:** German, which is considered a case-rich language by Western European standards, has four cases (nominative, accusative, dative, genitive). Basque, in contrast, has 15, exemplified below for the noun *hondartza* 'beach'
  1. Absolutive *hondartza*, see above
  2. Ergative *hondartza-k*, see above
  3. Dative *hondartza-ri* 'to the beach'
  4. Genitive *hondartza-ren* 'of the beach'

5. Benefactive *hondartza-rentzat* 'for the beach'
  6. Comitative *hondartza-rekin* 'with the beach'
  7. Instrumental *hondartza-z* 'by means of the beach'
  8. Partitive *hondartza-rik*, used in certain environments, e.g., under negation.
  9. Prolative *hondartza-tzat* 'as the beach', used only with certain verbs.
  10. Locative *hondartza-tan* 'on the beach'
  11. Ablative *hondartza-tatik* 'from the beach'
  12. Allative *hondartza-tara* 'to the location of the beach'
  13. Directional *hondartza-tarantz* 'towards the location of the beach'
  14. Terminative *hondartza-taraino* 'until reaching the location of the beach'
  15. Relative *hondartzatako* 'relative to the beach'
- **A three-way agreement system:** in European languages, verbs agree with the subject of the sentence. In Basque, on the other hand, they agree simultaneously with the subject, the object, and the indirect object. Moreover, the exact argument that a verbal morpheme agrees with can vary according to the syntactic environment: Rezac (2004) observes that "if the absolutive argument is 3<sup>rd</sup> person, then absolutive person agreement cross-references a non-3<sup>rd</sup> person ergative if there is one".
  - **Word order determined by information structure:** at first sight, Basque might seem like a free word order language, but a closer look shows that word order depends on which constituent is the focus of the sentence, in very precise ways.