

A grammar of Basque

Jose Ignacio Hualde & Jon Ortiz de Urbina
Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, 2003

Basque is one of the minority languages that has received more than its fair share of attention from the linguistics community. This is no doubt due to its unusual collection of characteristics: it is a non-Indo-European, typologically isolate language, with no known relatives, it shows an ergative agreement systems with some further intricacies, a large number of cases, discourse driven word order permutations... Moreover, in the last 20 or so years, several Basque generative linguists have appeared (a relatively very high number, if one considers the meager three million population of the entire region, and that many are non-Basques that immigrated during the seventies looking for work in the then flourishing Basque industry). Consequently, the amount of theoretical work on different aspects of Basque has increased greatly, creating a need for rigorous descriptive work. Hualde & Ortiz de Urbina's *A grammar of Basque* seeks to satisfy this need.

This book is the result of the collaborative effort of nine Basque linguists (the two editors plus Inaki Amundarain, Xabier Artiagoitia, Ricardo Etxepare, Gorka Elordieta, Bernard Oyharçabal, Igone Zabala, and the late Larry Trask), each contributing on their respective field of expertise. Its main bulk consists of three chapters, dealing with phonology, morphology, and syntax, respectively. On top of this, there is an introductory chapter dealing mainly with sociological, geographical, and historical aspects of Basque, and a small selection of texts at the end of the book.

Summary

The first one of the main chapters is the one dedicated to phonology (pp. 15-112), with its first part devoted to issues of segmental phonology, syllable structure, narrow phonological processes and (lexical) accentuation (Hualde). In this part one can already see the aim of cross-dialectal comparison the book was created with. Hualde presents a detailed description of Basque phonology, making numerous remarks on the points in which different dialects differ (as he already did in his 1991 book). The latter part of the chapter deals with prosody (Elordieta), though it must be noted that he takes a somewhat different approach. Instead of presenting the core data and referring to dialectal variation along the presentation, he picks out three dialects (Lekeitio, Tolosa, and Baztan), and examines them in detail (although much more space is given to the Lekeitio dialect than to the other two, presumably due to the fact that it is Elordieta's own). I believe this allows for a clearer exposition of the individual dialects discussed, although at the cost of the comparative perspective.

Next up is the morphology chapter (pp. 113-362), most of which is taken up by the sections on different aspects of nominal and verbal morphosyntax. It opens with a section (Trask) on modifiers, pronouns, determiners, and other categories to be found within the noun phrase. Following the general line of the book, no formal analysis of the data is provided. Instead, Trask provides a general template (modifier* > Det1 > N > Adj* > Det2) to illustrate how the different elements line up. This description is subsequently completed by Hualde, who provides the paradigms for case and number inflection.

On the side of verbal morphology, Hualde provides again extensive paradigms of non-finite and finite forms. This description is completed by the next two sections, which deal with the morphology of Tense, Aspect, and Mood (Oyharçabal), periphrastic constructions, and semi-auxiliary verbs (Ortiz de Urbina). The chapter is completed by short sections by Hualde on other categories: postpositions, adverbs, and conjunctions and other connectors. He also provides some description of derivational morphology and compounding.

The major bulk of this grammar is constituted by the syntax chapter, which takes up over half of the book (pp. 363-892), where a lot of ground is covered (including some data for which no description existed so far). This chapter contains sections of argument structure (Etxepare), copular sentences and secondary predication (Zabala), reciprocity and reflexivity (Artiagoitia), impersonal clauses, causatives, word order (Ortiz de Urbina), negation, and exclamatives (Etxepare). Of special interest here is the section of focus and wh-constructions (Etxepare & Ortiz de Urbina). This is one of the classic topics of Basque syntax, about which much has been written in the past 20 years, from all kind of theoretical viewpoints. Still, Etxepare & Ortiz de Urbina provide a very valuable and detailed survey of the data. Even in spite of the huge literature on the topic, this section will possibly be of obligatory reference for any future students of focus and wh- movement in Basque.

Within this long chapter, the longest section is devoted to various kinds of subordination: first up are two sections (Artiagoitia) on nominal and adjunct subordination. We also find a section on different kinds of relative clauses (Oyharçabal), and a final section on comparatives (Hualde & Ortiz de Urbina). Especially relative and comparative clauses are two areas in which very little work has been done, even on a descriptive level, so the data reported here are of great relevance. The chapter closes with a section on coordinate structures (Amundarain).

Evaluation

At the very beginning of the book, Hualde states that “the existence of other works does not make the present grammar unnecessary or redundant. Both in its coverage and in its methodology the present book differs substantially from all other available grammars of the Basque language” (p. 13). In which way is this so? Most Basque grammars in the market (such as the grammar being edited by Euskaltzaindia, the Academy of Basque Language) are written in Basque and oriented towards language learners and language users like teachers, journalists, or translators. This leaves the linguistic community out of their reach. Out of the reference grammars written for linguists, Hualde *et al*'s (1994) work is the most suitable one to establish a comparison. Both books describe Basque phonology, morphology, and syntax in

detail. However, Hualde *et al*'s grammar is restricted to the dialect of Lekeitio, whereas the present work has the goal of cross-dialectal comparison. One must bear in mind, though, that a truly comprehensive comparative work is next to impossible, given the large number of Basque dialects (there are seven main varieties, each one sub-divided in dozens of minor dialects). However, the comparative perspective is as worked out as one can expect in a grammar of these characteristics.

A major feature of this grammar (and which is explicitly mentioned) is that it is purely descriptive. It includes no theoretical analysis at all, and the technical vocabulary is kept at a theory-neutral level (save for very few exceptions, e.g., Etxepare's characterisation of *ez* 'no' as "an element of category X^0 ", p. 516). In principle, this ought to be a positive feature, in that it does not restrict the readership to experts on specific frameworks or types of analysis. However, I can only agree with Georges Rebuschi (LinguistList issue 14.3478), who considers that the contributors have been over-zealous in this respect. Some technical analysis and vocabulary would have certainly been most welcome in several places (along with references to more technical works, which are quite scarce and vague). It would have enhanced the readability of the book, which, as it stands, more often than not gives the impression of being simply a list of examples. More theoretically-minded readers would have benefited from it, without representing a barrier for other kinds of readers. For instance, in the intonation section, Gorka Elordieta uses figures of pitch tracks, and makes explicit reference to formants and F_0 contours. I find his section particularly helpful for anybody trying to understand the fine details of Basque intonation. Yet the technicalities he uses can be easily grasped by anybody who has sat through an intro course on phonetics and/or phonology. One wonders whether other contributors could not have done the same and introduced some basic analysis in their descriptions (e.g., morphological/syntactic bracketing, more theoretical terminology, etc...). This would presuppose some level of familiarity with different aspects of syntax, morphology... , but certainly no more than what can be reasonably expected from your average advanced undergraduate. And, to be fair, anybody without even this level of formal training is highly unlikely to be found reading this book.

Similarly, given the comparative perspective of this grammar, I find it surprising that there are virtually no references to similar phenomena in other languages. For instance, the sections on focus and relativisation, despite being over 60 pages long each, contain no single mention of other languages that are widely known to show similar properties, e.g., Hungarian and Turkish for focus, or Japanese and Quechua for relative clauses. Possibly actual examples from other languages are not needed, but a reference to them in the running text would not have been out of place.

Turning now to the contents of the book, it is clear that it covers an impressive amount of ground (even providing new data on a number of constructions) and very few things have been left out. Nonetheless, there is one topic that I was surprised not to find a section on: adverbial syntax. Ortiz de Urbina's section on word order contains a very small discussion (p. 450 ff) on the distributional differences of VP and sentence adverbs, but, given the increasing popularity of this topic in recent years, one could expect a more detailed description –i.e., descriptive work along the lines of Cinque (1999), mentioning several classes of adverbs and some ordering restrictions amongst them. Possibly a truly Cinque-style description would have been too much, but

surely the topic deserves more space than a brief mention of VP vs. sentence adverbials.

A final note on the layout of the book. I find that the different chapters and sections are not well differentiated. That is, a new page is started only with the beginning of the phonology, morphology, and syntax chapters. Sections within these chapters are only separated by a blank line, and no visual aids are given to identify sections, subsections, and further divisions (except for boldfacing the first subdivision within each chapter). This is so in spite of adjacent sections may have totally disparate topics. Although there is a detailed index, this layout puts a strain on the reader's eye when searching for a specific section.

Now, even in spite of these objections, I believe this grammar is an exceptional piece of descriptive work. It is not, to be fair, something you would have in your office shelves unless you are working actively on Basque. But, for anyone who ever develops an interest in the language, or needs to look into it, it will surely prove to be a very useful tool.

References

- Cinque, Guglielmo (1999), *Adverbs and functional heads: a cross-linguistic perspective*, Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Elordieta, Arantzazu (2001), *Verb movement and constituent permutation in Basque*, PhD dissertation, Leiden University.
- Hualde, Jose Ignacio (1991), *Basque phonology*, Routledge, New York
- Hualde, Jose Ignacio, Gorka Elordieta, and Arantzazu Elordieta (1994), *The Basque dialect of Lekeitio*, University of the Basque Country, Bilbao