



The Challenge of a Bilingual Society in the Basque Country

Pello Salaburu, Xabier Alberdi

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Of the non-Indo-European languages that survive in Europe, only one of these is in the western half of the continent—Euskara (the Basque language). It is, according to every study and despite the fact that the oldest testimonies in Euskara are only two thousand years old, a language that was used in the region prior to the invasions of Indo-European peoples with other cultures and other languages six thousand years ago. The Basque language, spoken by half a million people, is not related to any other language in the world. While it has constantly been challenged by its upstart linguistic neighbors, most notably French and Spanish, this language has survived through centuries. However, it has only been quite recently—and only in one part of the Basque Country—that Basque has received the stable recognition of being a coofficial language recognized by the public administration. In the space of a few years, Euskara went from being a language spoken mostly in rural areas to being used in the media, at university, and in the offices of the Basque government. In short, it became a “visible” language in a modern society. In the current work we present some of the features that characterize this modern bilingual society and investigate this new situation in Basque history: a history that, for good or bad, is still being written by its protagonists—the inhabitants of the Basque Country, something that is quite unusual in the history of languages.

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