

Saving Basque? An Analysis of the Evolution of Basque Knowledge, Transmission and Use from 1996 to 2006 – Euskara arriskutik at? Hizkuntza-gaitasunaren, transmisioaren eta erabilaren azterketa 1996tik 2006ra

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Abstract. Basque is the last remaining pre-Indo-European language in western Europe and stands out as genetically isolated. It spreads across three different areas: namely the Basque Autonomous Community and Navarre in Spain, as well as the Northern Basque Country in France. While Basque has co-official status with Spanish in much of the Spanish Basque Country, it has none in France. For centuries the Basque language has been subject to a diglossic situation and since the Middle Ages the areas where Basque has traditionally been spoken have shrunk relentlessly. However, since the restoration of full democracy in the late 1970s in Spain, considerable effort has been made to revitalize and normalise the use of Basque, with close official surveying of progress over time. In this paper we compare the results obtained in the 1996 and the 2006 sociolinguistic surveys with a view to analysing the evolution of Basque over the last decade. Although there are genuine signs of successful language revitalization and normalization, the sociolinguistic situation varies greatly in the three regions that make up the Basque Country, with the knowledge, transmission and use of Basque, as well as support for its

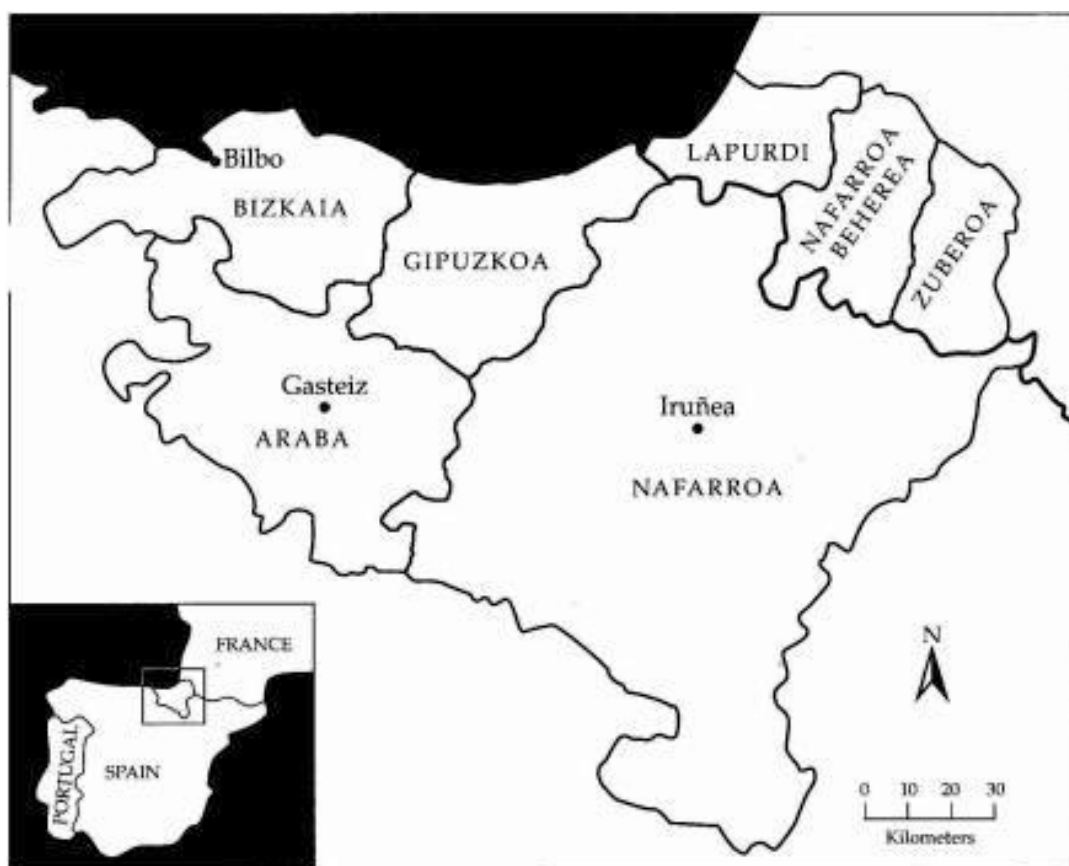
promotion, showing some remarkable differences and contradictory patterns.

Keywords: Basque, language revitalization, normalization, sociolinguistic survey

1. Introduction

Basque is the traditional language of the so-called Basque Country which straddles the national border between France and Spain along the Pyrenees mountains. The Basque Country is generally understood as the seven traditional Basque provinces (see Map 1) which are today divided into three regional entities across two states. There are two autonomous Basque regions in Spain, namely the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) (made up of the provinces of Bizkaia, Guipuzkoa and Araba) and Navarre. In the south of France, three traditional Basque provinces (Lapurdi, Zuberoa and Nafarroa Behera) belong, along with some Gascon-speaking areas, to the department of Pyrénées-Atlantiques. From now on we will refer to these three provinces as the Northern Basque Country (NBC). According to 2006 data, 2,965,758 people live in the Basque Country as a whole, the overwhelming majority of whom (72%) are in the BAC, with 20% in Navarre and the remaining 8% in the Northern Basque Country.

Basque stands out as genetically isolated in the classification of world languages (Hualde et al. 1995; Trask 1997) and has defied all attempts at explanation by linguists, historians and philosophers. It remains one of the main identity markers amongst its speakers, as the Basque language has played a paramount role in constructing Basque identity, a historical process in which it became the trench of cultural resistance (Järlehed 2008). And this has been so not only amongst those who live in the Basque Country, who have historically shown great loyalty towards Basque (Azurmendi et al. 2008), but also amongst the members of the Basque diaspora (Lasagabaster 2008). However, until the early 1980s the Basque language remained in a strongly diglossic situation in which it was hardly ever used in formal contexts such as school, government or the administration.



Map 1. The Basque Country¹

Consequently, the Basque language has historically been characterized by its minority status and, nowadays, since it is surrounded by two powerful, international languages, Spanish and French, all Basque speakers are bilingual. Its survival has hinged for centuries on bottom-up processes in which its speakers have maintained the language through natural transmission and despite the many hurdles that have had to be overcome throughout the centuries. National policy in France since the French Revolution (late 18th century) has always been strongly anti-regionalist, much to the detriment of Basque and other languages, with a very gradual softening of attitudes only in recent years. In Spain, centuries-old centralist policy against regional languages, such as Basque, was only finally reversed after the collapse of Franco's right-wing regime in 1975.

¹ <http://ysursa.com/y%20boys/Pages/map-basque%20country2.jpg> (accessed 9 February 2010).

Basque's bleak treatment led many harbingers to prophesy its disappearance before the end of (first) the 19th and (then) the 20th centuries, in what is known as the "discourse of the death of Basque". Even the extraordinary man of letters, advocate and pioneering investigator of Basque, Wilhelm F. Humboldt, foresaw back in 1801 that "in less than a century Basque may have disappeared from the group of living languages" (Erize 2006:27). However, contrary to the doom and gloom expectations expressed by many others not so fond of Basque, and despite a centuries-old shrinking of the area in which Basque was and is spoken (cf. Trask 1997:4), its speaking community has fought long and hard to maintain its language and identity in difficult circumstances. Only now during the last three decades, with the return of democracy to Spain in 1975 and the full autonomy given to the BAC and to Navarre that followed in 1979, has it been really possible for the Basque community (Basque-speaking or otherwise) to make the considerable effort required to reverse loss and to revitalize and normalise the use of Basque (especially in the BAC, to a lesser extent in Navarre and relatively little in the NBC). All the while there has been close official surveying to monitor progress over time. This latter activity is incredibly useful in assessing any changes in the status of Basque in the entire Basque Country as well as in each of the three Basque areas, as we shall see in our discussion of results below.

There are important differences between the three regions into which the Basque speaking community is split and which influence Basque's position in each of them. In the first instance, Basque is fully co-official with Spanish throughout the BAC. In Navarre, it is fully co-official only in the north, whereas it has no official status in the centre and south. In the NBC, as in the rest of France, only French is identified legally as the official language, although there have been recent attempts at elevating the legal status of Basque and other regional languages in France.² There

² One anonymous reviewer has queried our negative position on Basque's official status in the NBC. It is true that Basque receives some government support in the NBC, pointing to some kind of official recognition. However, history shows any such support on the part of French authorities to be hard fought for, and often grudging. It cannot in any case be compared to the generous legal recognition and practical support given to Basque in the BAC. The French Government refused on 7th May 2008 to ratify the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) on the grounds that it is not in line with the French constitution. However, in July

are also important socioeconomic differences, as the former two regions are modern and highly industrialized, whereas much of the NBC's economy still depends to a large degree on stockbreeding and agriculture (in addition to tourism in its coastal strip). The better economic situation has in recent times also helped to boost Basque in Navarre and, above all, in the BAC, by giving local authorities the means and the status to effect change. Industrialization for a long time led to increased contact with Spanish-speaking structures, e.g. schools, officialdom (and loss of Basque), as well as a huge influx of Spanish-speakers from the rest of Spain. There are also important sociolinguistic and geolinguistic differences between the three Basque entities. In the BAC, Basque has always remained widely spoken in two provinces, Bizkaia and Guipuzkoa, while it has survived in unbroken fashion only in a small part of Araba. In Navarre, only the northern reaches are traditionally Basque-speaking. On the other hand, a much larger proportion of the NBC is still traditionally Basque-speaking, a fact which reflects its more generally rural and physically isolated nature.

In this study we intend to analyse the knowledge, transmission, and use of Basque as well as attitudes towards its promotion in the three aforementioned Basque regions from 1996 to 2006, corresponding with the last sociolinguistic survey available (Basque Government 2008). This survey is carried out every five years by the Government of the BAC and includes the three Basque speaking territories. Our objective is to delve into the changes and trends that can be observed in the evolution of the figures related to the last decade, since, as Azurmendi et al. (2008:58) put it:

In this respect, the Basque case is of great interest in the context of the EU, because today it presents a dynamic, changing scenario, full

2008, as a result of a constitutional amendment, regional languages, including Basque (though none were mentioned by name) were legally recognized as part of France's cultural heritage. What this vague wording means in practice is still unclear, and has not yet resulted in any improvement in the promotion or protection of Basque or other regional languages in France. In the education sector, for instance, it remains the case that although Basque-medium schools receive some funding from the state and local authorities, insufficient funding forces them to constantly look for further financial assistance (Stuijt & Sanchez 2007).

of contradictions and new proposals that are difficult to interpret, yet ideal for studying all the questions raised [about language revival] from a position of uncertainty as challenges for the future. It also has farther reaching implications for language identity in general and in particular in the Spanish-contact contexts. The Basque case highlights nicely the complex and multifarious nature of constructing, performing and negotiating identity at the societal and individual level.

2. Sociolinguistic surveys

The government of the BAC carries out a sociolinguistic survey on a five-yearly basis with the aim of obtaining uniform information about the knowledge and use of Basque across the entire Basque Country. The 1996 survey gathered data among those aged 15 and above through individual interviews at home using a structured and closed questionnaire. The 2006 survey was carried out among those aged 16 and above and resorted to phone calls using a structured and closed questionnaire. The number of participants in the two surveys is apportioned according to region in Table 1.

Year	BAC	Navarre	NBC	Total
1996	3,495	1,464	1,400	6,359
2006	3,600	1,600	2,000	7,200

Table 1. Participants in the 1996 and 2006 sociolinguistic surveys

Survey results are subject to standardization to reflect the relative weight of each of the three territories within the entire Basque Country. Some differences in the way questions were asked in the respective surveys means that detailed comparisons are not always possible – as is pointed out below where such cases occur.

3. Language competence

As for language competence, we will start by comparing change in the number of speakers in the Basque Country as a whole (see Figure 1), and then in each of the three territories independently (Table 2). In 2006 the total number of proficient bi-

lingual speakers is 665,700, which represents an increase of 3.7% with respect to the 1996 figures. In 2006, 397,900 persons are able to understand Basque but have problems when it comes to speaking (passive bilinguals), an increase of just 0.9% on the 1996 results. In contrast, the number of those who cannot speak or understand Basque has decreased by 4.1% in only ten years. With the passing away of the oldest respondents in the ten year period from 1996, there are now no longer any monolingual Basque speakers – a fact reflecting the long-term impact of obligatory schooling eventually becoming available to all – in French or Spanish – over the last century.

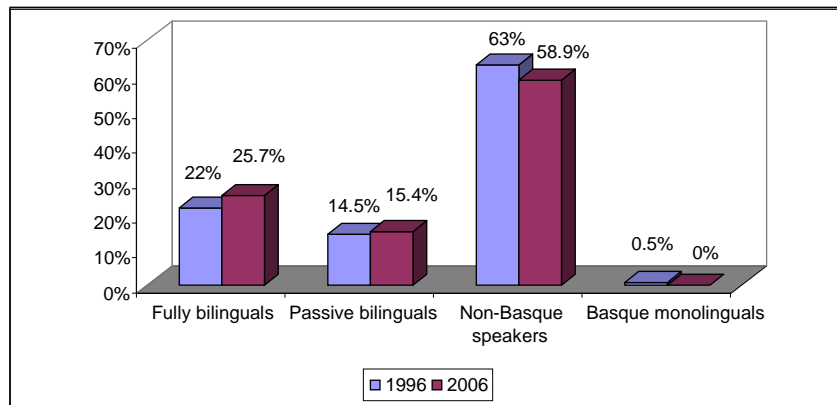


Figure 1. Language competence in 1996 and 2006, Basque Country.

While the overall trend across the Basque Country is very positive, on closer inspection it is in no way uniform. When language competence is examined by region, different trends are clearly evident. Whereas there is a significant increase in full bilinguals in the BAC (5.4%) and a slightly smaller increase (1.7%) in Navarre, the percentage of fully bilingual speakers in the NBC has fallen by 3.2%. In 1996 the NBC had the highest percentage of bilingual speakers in the Basque Country, but by 2006 this position is now clearly taken over by the BAC, with 7.6 percentage points more full bilinguals than the NBC. Likewise, the percentage of those who cannot speak any Basque at all has increased substantially (4.7%) only in the NBC.

		Full bilinguals	Passive bilinguals	Non-Basque speakers	Basque monolinguals
BAC	1996	24.7%	16.3%	58.5%	0.6%
	2006	30.1%	18.3%	51.5%	0%
Navarre	1996	9.4%	9.8%	80.6%	0.2%
	2006	11.1%	7.6%	81.3%	0%
NBC	1996	25.7%	9.3%	64.2%	0.7%
	2006	22.5%	8.6%	68.9%	0%

Table 2. Language competence by region

Therefore, for the entire Basque Country there is an overall increase in the number of Basque speakers, but not across each region. The BAC shows the most promising figures, with an increase in both active and passive bilinguals and a drop in non-Basque speakers. The picture is completely reversed in the NBC, and looks grim, especially given the increase in the proportion of non-Basque monolinguals. Navarre is in between, with a small shift from passive to full bilingualism, coupled also with a small increase in non-Basque speakers. The figures for Navarre point to a process of relative stabilization.

4. Language transmission

In the two surveys mother tongue is defined as the language or languages learnt before the age of three. As far as the mother tongue or L1 is concerned, three different groups are distinguished: those who have Basque as L1, those who have either Spanish or French (or any other language) as L1, and those who have both Basque and Spanish or French as L1. In the last decade there has been a moderate 1% gain among those who have Spanish or French as L1, and who represent more than 3 out of 4 of the Basque population. On the contrary, those who have Basque as L1 have diminished 2.3%, whereas those who have two languages as L1, despite a small increase (+1.3%), continue to be a very restricted minority (3.5% in 1996 and 4.8% in 2006).

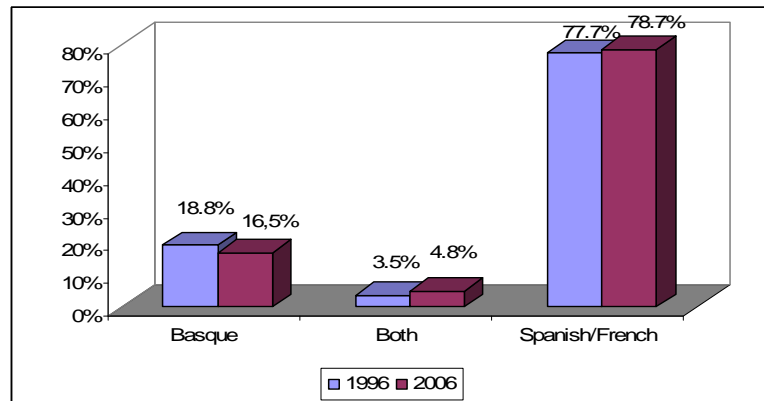


Figure 2. Mother tongue in 1996 and 2006, Basque Country.

By regions, 26.4% in 1996 and 21.6% in 2006 of the population in the Northern Basque Country, 20.5% and 18.7% respectively of that of the BAC, and 8.3% and 6.4% respectively of Navarre had Basque as their mother tongue. In both surveys the highest proportion of those who have Basque as L1 is found among those who are 65 and over (28% in 1996 and 23.5% in 2006) and this proportion goes down steadily among the younger age groups. However, this trend then changes amongst those aged 24 and under, as in 1996 those who had Basque (14%) or both languages (5%) as L1 amounted to 19%, whereas this percentage is higher in 2006 and reaches 21.3% (12.9% had Basque as L1 and 8.4% both languages). This new upward trend amongst the youngest respondents takes place mostly in the BAC and to a lesser extent in Navarre, whereas in the NBC the percentage of youngsters with Basque as L1 continues to nosedive.

When the language that children learn from their parents is analysed, the 2006 survey does not provide as detailed information as the 1996 survey did, which is why we can only speak of general trends. In the 2006 data it can be observed that nowadays the loss of Basque transmission in the family is very low and takes place almost exclusively in the NBC. In the BAC and Navarre more than 98% and in the NBC 88% of children whose parents are bilingual learn Basque at home. In the case of those children who learnt Basque at home, this was the only language – to the exclusion of French/Spanish – learnt in the household for more than 80% of Navarrese and BAC Basque-speaking children and for 75% of those in the NBC whose parents are also both Basque-speaking.

5. Language use

Unfortunately, the parameters followed to examine language use in the 1996 socio-linguistic survey do not coincide with those of the 2006 survey. As a result, we are only able to point out the main findings of the former before delving into the results obtained in the latter. The 1996 survey analysed language use by considering only those who could speak Basque fluently (22.5% of the population) and, consequently, passive bilinguals and monolinguals in Spanish or French were excluded, whereas the 2006 survey included the whole sample irrespective of their Basque competence. This difference hinders any attempt to compare results, as the samples are not comparable (partial sample in 1996 and whole sample in 2006).

The 1996 survey concluded that the use of Basque was more widespread with friends due to the highest presence of bilinguals in that setting (as a result of the bilingual educational system, where it was available), whereas there was no gain in the family, as the parents of the youngest bilinguals were not Basque speakers on many occasions: their children had learnt Basque at school. This was especially apparent in the BAC, and to a lesser degree in Navarre, whereas all indices pointed in the same downward direction in the NBC, as Basque was used less and less in all social spheres. The use of Basque in the Basque Country and its three subparts according to the 2006 survey is summarized in Table 3.

	More Basque than Spanish/French	Both equally	More Spanish/French than Basque	Spanish/French only
Basque Country	9.9%	5.4%	9.8%	74.9%
BAC	12.5%	6.1%	11%	70.4%
Navarre	3.2%	2.4%	4.1%	90.3%
NBC	3.6%	6.7%	12.3%	77.4%

Table 3. Language use in 2006, Basque Country and by region

The use of either Spanish or French is predominant in every age group (typically about 75%), but the percentage of those who exclusively speak Spanish or French is falling amongst the youngest age groups (under 35s), and most notably in the under 25s group: only 65.4% exclusively use the majority language in this age

group, that is to say, almost ten percentage points below the overall average of 74.9%. The highest percentage of people who use Basque as much or more than Spanish is found amongst the under 25s in the BAC (23.5%) and in Navarre (6.7%), whereas the highest percentage (18.5%) in the NBC is found among the over 65s. A clear generation difference between regions is thus confirmed, in the sense that the oldest and youngest speakers in the BAC and Navarre are the ones who use Basque more often, whereas it is only the oldest in the case of the NBC, which again has gloomy implications for the future of the Basque language in this region. Similarly, whereas in the last ten years the use of Basque has increased steadily in the BAC and remained constant in Navarre, the percentage of people who use Basque more than French has continued to decrease in the NBC.³

The use of Basque at work can be considered to be one of the most outstanding indices of language recovery and normalisation – and as a result is closely monitored in the surveys. However, whereas the role of Basque in education is well established (in the BAC above all), this is not the case in the job market, as can be observed in Figure 3. Those who use Basque to a greater or lesser degree amount to 27.2%, where almost three out of four never use it. Moreover, those who use Basque more than Spanish/French are just 8.1%, which clearly shows that Spanish/French is the hegemonic language in work relations.

³ In the 16-24 age group, the proportion using more Basque than French has continued to fall, although there has been a slight increase in any use of Basque, alongside French, in that age group in comparison with the 25-34 group, although it still remains lower than older generations above 35.

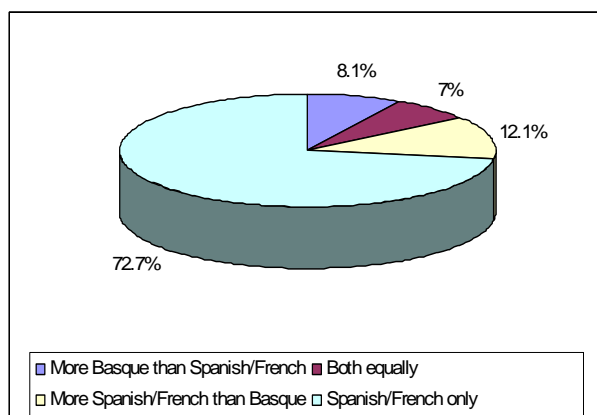


Figure 3. Use of Basque at work in 2006, Basque Country.

In general, the use of Basque is determined by two main factors. Firstly, the speakers' language competence: bilingual speakers whose proficiency in Basque is high tend to speak in the minority language, balanced bilinguals use both languages, and bilingual speakers whose command of Spanish/French is higher speak Spanish/French more often. Secondly, the density of Basque speakers in social networks is important: the higher the number of Basque speakers, the more habitual the use of the minority language is. At home, for example, if there is just one family member who cannot speak Basque, the drop in its use is significant. More broadly, therefore, and hardly surprisingly, the higher the percentage of Basque speakers in one's surroundings, the more widespread the use of Basque is; at home, at work and when talking to friends.

6. Language attitudes

The sociolinguistic survey also gathers data on the degree of support expressed towards the promotion of Basque in the Basque Country as a whole and by region. In the last decade there has been a small increase (2%) in the percentage of people who (strongly) support it, counterbalanced by a small rise in the percentage of people who are (strongly) opposed to its promotion, which has increased by 3%.

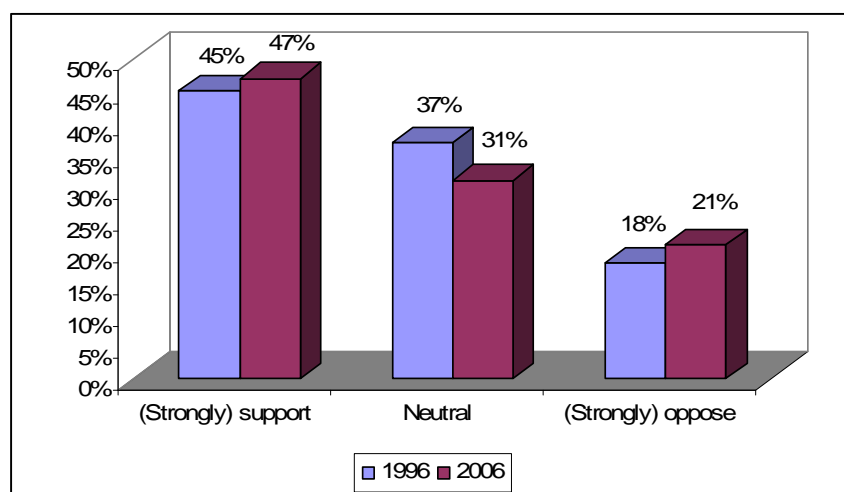


Figure 4. Attitudes towards efforts to promote Basque in the Basque Country.

When the support for the promotion of Basque is analysed by region (see Table 4), some differences stand out. In the BAC the autonomous government’s effort to normalise the situation of the minority language has led to a substantial improvement in the attitudes of the population, with an enviable rise of 18.7% for positively disposed attitudes, while there is a also large drop in those with a neutral stance (-14%) and a decrease (-4.8%) of those who oppose or strongly oppose the language policy measures undertaken.

The situation in the NBC is just the opposite, as the decrease in positive attitudes (7.8 percentage points) is accompanied by an increase in negative attitudes by 4.6 percentage points. In Navarre, the situation appears to be almost stabilized and just over 2.2% of the Navarrese are now more opposed to these promotion efforts than in 1996, whereas those who support them have slightly decreased (0.3%). Although support for the efforts to promote Basque is still 3.5 percentage points higher in the NBC than in Navarre, the drop in positive attitudes in the last decade is fairly stark in the former.

	(Strongly) support		Neutral		(Strongly) oppose	
	1996	2006	1996	2006	1996	2006
BAC	46%	64.7%	38%	24%	16%	11.2%
Navarre	38%	37.7%	30%	28.1%	32%	34.2%
NBC	49%	41.2%	38%	41.1%	13%	17.6%

Table 4. Attitudes towards efforts to promote Basque by region

In the 2006 data two variables exert a considerable effect on attitudes towards the promotion of Basque. The first variable closely linked to attitudes towards Basque is language competence, so much so that those who are bilingual are the ones who are most in favour of its promotion: 89.3% in the BAC and Navarre and 75% in the NBC. The second variable has to do with the respondents' age. Those aged 65 and older are the most positive ones in the BAC and NBC. However, the younger the age group, the less supportive the respondents are, although this downward trend changes in the 16-24 age group in the BAC and Navarre, where support now begins to rise. On the other side of the coin, the youngest group shows the smallest proportion of favourable responses in the NBC. Since this generation represents the future and will have to decide whether their children learn Basque or not, again prospects seem rather bleak in the NBC.

7. Further discussion and conclusions

The survival of Basque is determined not only by those who maintain it as a family language, but also by those who have Spanish or French (or a foreign immigrant language) as L1 and decide to learn Basque. Basque is being learnt by an increasing number of speakers who become fully bilingual: these so-called neo-Basque speakers (*euskaldun berriak* in Basque) now form 10% of the whole population in the BAC, 4% in Navarre but only 2% in the NBC. The differences between the three Basque regions are therefore remarkable. Although the presence of these new Basque-speakers varies considerably depending on the age group, the smallest proportion of neo-Basque speakers is found amongst those over 50 (1.7%), whereas for those under this age the figures increase substantially, especially amongst the youngest generation in the BAC, where 32.3% of Basque speakers in the 16-24 age range are *euskaldun berriak*.

Despite the emergence of thousands of new (L2) Basque speakers in the BAC, primarily the result of the bilingual educational system (Cenoz & Lasagabaster 2006), most of these express themselves more easily in Spanish than in Basque. This happens because, amongst all bilinguals, these new Basque-speakers are more likely to have fewer Basque speakers in their social network with whom they are able to use this language, especially if they live in urban areas rather than rural zones. The main problem is therefore twofold: (i) they have (more or less) difficulties in expressing themselves in Basque, and (ii) they have a limited number of people to whom they can speak the minority language, since they have direct access to the language in school but have no home support. Consequently, there is an urgent need to improve the Basque competence of many of those who have learnt it through the educational system and to provide contexts for its use. Revitalization efforts cannot rely only on the educational sector, as Fishman (1991 and 2001) has repeatedly warned, and in fact, “the bottleneck for Basque [...] lies outside the school rather than within it” (Gardner & Zalvide 2005:70). In the work sphere, for example, attempts to boost Basque have been scant, except for local government services in the BAC.

On the positive side, a large proportion of the population of the Basque Country (47%) supports the promotion of Basque and holds positive attitudes towards the minority language. Nonetheless, a regional split is evident: there is a notable fall in the number of citizens who (strongly) support the efforts made to promote Basque in the NBC, whereas the picture remains steady in Navarre and increasingly positive in the BAC. Once again, important differences are observed between the three regions and this is a question which undoubtedly deserves further attention, as no language policy can be expected to succeed if there is not wide social support.

Although there is still a long way to go before Basque can be on a truly equal footing with Spanish in the BAC, today its situation is better than ever in modern history, as Basque represents not only a symbol of national identity, but also a cultural asset which increasingly facilitates access to prestigious networks and employment. Moreover, family transmission of Basque is guaranteed, as 98% of children whose parents are bilingual learn Basque at home in the BAC. Hence, the BAC is the re-

gion where the conditions for the future of Basque seem to be more propitious and encouraging.

Conversely, in the Northern Basque Country the percentage of bilingual speakers among young people is around a third of that of older adults, meaning that the losses have really been major, although the use index for the 16-24 group improves very slightly in comparison to the preceding age group (25-34). It has to be underscored once again that only French has legally recognized official status in the NBC, hampering local efforts in support of the Basque language. It has been granted regional language status only very recently and this late recognition has obviously had a detrimental effect on the maintenance of Basque.

Navarre appears to fall squarely in the middle (Aizpurua & Aizpurua 2005; Oroz & Sotés 2006), as the importance and presence of Basque seems to have maintained a similar position over the last decade. Such an outcome is not surprising: the 1986 Act allowing for the promotion and protection of Basque is restricted to the traditionally Basque-speaking areas located in the north of Navarre. With no official status and no requirement to promote Basque in the rest of this Spanish autonomous community, it could reasonably be expected that over the period 1996 to 2006 Basque would continue to decline in the much larger, Spanish-dominated centrosouthern part, but improve in the smaller, traditionally Basque-speaking north of Navarre.

8. Final considerations

Overall, the picture for Basque appears to show signs in its favour. The number and proportion of people residing in the Basque Country with competence in Basque is increasing. On the other hand, there is a general small decline in mother tongue speakers of Basque. The incongruity of these two results can be explained: oldest residents are still most likely to be mother tongue speakers. So, as these speakers die off with the passing of time, the proportion of mother tongue speakers falls disproportionately. At the same time, as language shift is now being reversed amongst youngest generations, the number of Basque speakers is rising fast among the young, although many of these speakers have learnt it through education rather than at home. The challenge then is to shift this knowledge and use of Basque from

schools into the home, where transmission is guaranteed when both parents speak Basque. More also needs to be done to increase use of Basque in other spheres, especially the workplace. We expect future surveys to show positive signs here, as the increasing number of young Basque speakers plays a greater role over time in the workforce. Overall too, support for the promotion of Basque has been maintained, with a small increase in its favour, albeit counterbalanced by a small increase in those opposed to it.

However, it is important to bear in mind that overall survey trends for the Basque Country are somewhat misleading. There are, in fact, three different patterns within the Basque speaking community, which appear to point to three Basque Countries, not one, moving in somewhat different directions. The linguistic situation in the BAC can be dubbed as very promising, and essentially accounting for all reported gains in favour of Basque in the entire Basque Country over the surveyed period. The picture is barely moving in Navarre and, as we have seen, is grim in the NBC according to many indicators. In Navarre, and especially in the NBC, the level of commitment and the resources made available by the respective governments to maintain and promote the Basque language remain relatively low, and there are no guarantees that even this level will be maintained in the future. As a matter of fact, there are some ominous signs of some earlier gains being wound back since 1996, above all in the NBC. The NBC is the only regional entity where the number of bilingual speakers is still dropping both in absolute numbers and in proportion to the overall population, although signs of a small turnaround trend can be observed in the youngest age group (16-24). It is no surprise that signs in favour of Basque are most notable in the BAC since it is here most official support – legal and practical – has been given to the language.

We agree with Pujolar (2007:144) when he points out that:

Linguistics should recognize that language is not politically neutral, but a site of struggles for power and resources. Debates on language survival and language policy cannot be treated as simply “linguistic” or “cultural heritage” issues, but as important political questions that may affect the social and economic position of the social groups of a given territory.

The sociolinguistic situation varies greatly in the three aforementioned Basque regions and the knowledge, transmission, use of Basque and attitudes towards its promotion present some remarkable differences and contradictory patterns, whose analysis in the next years will help to shed some light on the future of this ancient language in the different parts of the Basque Country. The Basque case clearly demonstrates how important the combination of speakers' and institutions' efforts is, not only to maintain, but also to revive and, above all, normalise a minority language. Thus, the question posed in the title of this paper (Saving Basque?) has currently not one but three different answers, reflecting the three very different political divisions within the Basque Country and their sociolinguistic consequences among the three Basque areas. Only in the BAC is the direction of change strongly positive for Basque.

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