

Assimilation Through Language Learning?: Minoritised Language Perception and Integration Policies

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In this paper I will compare the official policies drawn by the Basque Government and the Basque Language Advisory Board with regards to Basque (or Euskera) and the integration of migrants in the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) region of Spain, with migrant students' perception of the role of this minoritised language. I will explore the relationship between the migrant students' attitudes towards Basque and the language ideologies that shape them.¹ I will use a content-based discourse approach to analyse my data.² Such a comparison will show how attitudes are constructed in discourse within a specific context. It will also allow me to consider the extent to which the development of positive and negative attitudes by migrants is related to the official stance on the role of Basque in integration.

Language, Migration and Citizenship

Migration, which typically involves a sense of blurred ethnic identities and cultural norms, is often seen as a threat to the integrity of the nation-state, in which the elites promote discourses that replicate one language: thus, a one nation ideology.³ This threat makes the elites feel the need to reevaluate the definitions of the national identity within the state, which involves the creation or recreation of regulations regarding immigrants' modes of belonging to a state. These are usually created on a scale that culminates with the acquisition of citizenship. This acquisition depends on an assessment of the immigrant's knowledge of the host society's cultural norms, history and, most prominently, the official standardised language.

While there are many outcomes of contact between the host society and immigrants, from assimilation to multiculturalism, the actions and policies of the governments often assume, though inexplicitly, only the assimilative one.⁴ This is because

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¹ For language ideologies, see Kathryn Woolard, 'Language Ideology as a Field of Inquiry,' in *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory*, ed. Bambi Schieffelin et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

² For the content-based discourse approach, see Jennifer Dailey-O'Cain and Grit Liebscher, 'Language Attitudes in Interaction,' *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 13:2 (April 2009): 197.

³ The one-nation ideology suggests that nation-states are institutions tied to only one language which unites the speakers as a nation. See E. Inman Fox, 'Spain as Castile: Nationalism and National Identity,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Spanish Culture*, ed. David T. Gies (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 21.

⁴ 'Assimilation' results in the minimal impact of the country of origin's cultural norms on an individual's behaviour. 'Multilingualism' suggests that the host culture's norms might not be replicated by immigrants, but that the cultural norms acquired in the country of origin and the norms of the host country might coexist. See Joanne Appleton, 'Assimilation or Integration: Migrants in Europe,' *Encounters Mission Journal* 36 (2011), accessed 24 May 2014, <http://emj.redcliffe.org/editions/faith-in-europe-issue-36-march-11/>.

migrants are expected to learn the host society's language well enough to be accepted as citizens. Language is then used as a tool for easing integration, which (even though ambiguously defined) should be understood as a two-way process, rather than as just assimilation.⁵

Moreover, language fulfils a number of social functions in the state, such as giving access to education, the labour market and institutions, and lending societal recognition.⁶ That is why the 'testing regimes' of the nation-states are concerned mainly with imposing control of citizenship through the official, economically-dominant language, ignoring other repertoires. But the implementation of such policies becomes even more challenging in situations where there exists more than one official language in a given territory, and when such languages are not given equal rank within the receiving society. This is indeed the case in the BAC. Even though Spanish laws and regulations, following the Spanish Constitution of 1978, grant official status to both the Castilian Spanish and Basque spoken in the region, there is a significant difference in the number of speakers, functions and usage between the two, with Spanish representing the dominant variety. Castilian and Basque are not simply co-existent and co-official, but have existed in a situation of conflict. Thus, what is the present role of Basque in integration and assimilation within the official authority discourses? And how is this role perceived by migrants?

Basque Language and Migration: Policy Dimension

In the remaining part of this article I will analyse and compare the role of Basque in integration as envisaged by the language promotional documents released by the BAC's Government, and the migrant Basque learners' perception of its role. I will show how such perceptions reflect migrant learners' attitudes towards Basque and 'Basqueness', and how prevalent language ideologies shape migrants' perceptions of national identities and community belonging.

Firstly, I will consider the following two documents: 'III Plan for Immigration, Citizenship and Intercultural Cohabitation 2011- 2013' ['Plan de Inmigración, Ciudadanía y Convivencia Intercultural' (PICCI)] and 'New Plan for the Promotion of the Use of Basque 2012' ['Plan de Acción para la Promoción del Uso del Euskera' (ESEP)]. PICCI was designed to regulate and promote integration on the level of the autonomous government, while ESEP was designed as part of Basque language policy through an initiative called 'Euskara 21', based on the idea of bringing the policy up to date with linguistic, economic and social challenges posed at the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁷ ESEP takes into account the cultural variety that has emerged as a result of the recent wave of intense migration into Spain, and the BAC's growing population of migrants, who are no longer considered just a temporary workforce but long-term settlers.⁸ That is why some actions presented in ESEP regarding acquisition-planning which focus

⁵ Guus Extra, Massimiliano Spotti and Piet Van Avermaet, *Language Testing, Migration and Citizenship: Cross-National Perspectives on Integration Regimes* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 3-33.

⁶ Hartmut Esser, 'Migration, Language and Integration,' *AKI-Research Review* 4 (2006): accessed 28 May 2014, http://www2000.wzb.eu/alt/aki/files/aki_research_review_4.pdf.

⁷ 'Euskara Sustatzeko Ekintza Plana' [hereafter ESEP], last modified 2012, accessed 15 May 2014, <http://blog.euskara21.euskadi.net/uploads/Plan%20de%20Accion%20para%20la%20Promocion%20del%20Euskera%20%28ESEP%29.pdf>, 8.

⁸ Currently, migration in the BAC amounts to 6.8% of population. However, the percentage of immigrants increased almost seven times in fifteen years: 0.8% in 1998 to 6.9% in 2012. See Gorka Moreno Márquez, 'Inmigración e Impacto de la Crisis,' accessed 20 July 2014, http://www.ikuspegiinmigracion.net/documentos/anuarios/anuario_2013_cas_OK.pdf.

on the ‘creation of Basque speakers’ include migrants.⁹ This is stated in point eight of the results of the debate conducted by the Euskara 21 initiative:

To bring Basque and its contexts closer to immigrants, in order to ease their broad and rewarding integration, as well as to bring Basque closer to the environments of use that are demographically dynamic.¹⁰

This suggests a two-way process in which both immigrants and the promoters of Basque can obtain mutual benefits from the learning of Basque: successful integration as well as a new domain for the use of Basque. Furthermore, the Plan emphasises that migrants’ competence in Basque will be of decisive importance in future language revival.¹¹ Therefore, it proposes a set of actions, which in terms of immigration relates mainly to the acquisition area, to promote the learning of Basque among new settlers. One of these actions is the development of programmes that would bring Basque closer to the immigrant students [‘diseñar y desarrollar programas para acercar el euskera a las personas inmigrantes’].¹² Within the scope of this action the Plan mentions the AISA programme (a Basque language course) and other programmes designed by an organisation called Topagunea, both of which were the sites from which I recruited participants for my data, and for the project upon which this paper is based.

PICCI can be seen as a document parallel with each Spanish autonomous community’s policy of integration documents, in the sense that such plans often draw on the idea of integration within their own territorial and often nationalist contexts as incorporating assimilation to a different set of values than the ones represented by the Spanish, national community. According to Carrera, they ‘strengthen the perception of their own imagined ‘communities’, ‘societies’, ‘language’ and ‘identity.’’ Moreover, the linguistic difference in the communities with their own co-official languages is prominent, as the plans stress the need for immigrants to be able to access that particular culture through the local language.¹³

Thus, when looking at the latest III PICCI it is clear that the languages are divided into two categories: professional ones, in which Basque is promoted alongside Castilian, and integrative ones, in which prominence is assigned to Basque on its own. For instance, when it states the need for the strengthening of equal access to employment, it assumes that this can be achieved through the overcoming of linguistic barriers, and by stressing the importance of the learning of both official languages.¹⁴ The integrative dimension of the policy, which incorporates Basque as a language that can be the vehicle for the mutual integration process, stresses the need for the creation of public spaces of ‘cohabitation’ and ‘meeting points’. Such spaces would promote the ‘sense of belonging’, and the spaces that use Basque are greatly encouraged.¹⁵

⁹ ESEP, 8.

¹⁰ Author’s translation.

¹¹ ESEP, 13.

¹² ESEP, 44.

¹³ Sergio Carrera, *In Search of the Perfect Citizen?: The Intersection Between Integration, Immigration, and Nationality in the EU* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2009), 283.

¹⁴ ‘III Plan de Inmigración Ciudadanía y Convivencia Intercultural’ [hereafter PICCI], revised 2011, accessed 2 May 2014, http://www.gizartelan.ejgv.euskadi.net/r45continm/es/contenidos/informacion/planes_estrategicos_inmigracio/es_planes/adjuntos/III%20Plan%20Inmigracion%20Ciudadania%20Convivencia%20Intercultural.pdf, 59, 69.

¹⁵ PICCI, 104.

Apart from supporting the existing centres that teach Basque to adults, one further objective mentioned in both documents is the promotion of the AISA course.¹⁶ The AISA course is promoted as a course of Basque for foreigners above sixteen years of age at a beginners' level, in order to 'make first steps in the learning of Basque.' According to the official Basque Government's body, 'the topics that are taught (greetings, numbers, the family, school, transport, etc.) give students a better understanding of the Basque society.'¹⁷

Basque Language and Migration: Reception by Migrants

These two documents reveal a policy that gives priority to integrative measures, but at the same time subscribes to the ideology of equation between language and culture (such as getting to know the Basque society through basic knowledge of Basque), and creates the idea that it is in fact assimilation, rather than integration, on the policy's agenda. Having analysed them for their conception of the role of Basque in the process of integration, I will now contrast them with the analysis of migrants' perceptions of Basque and its role in their process of integration, as well as the part it plays in the creation of 'Basqueness' as envisaged by migrants.

The extract that I will discuss here forms part of an ethnographic group interview with six young and middle-aged male participants, students of the AISA course in Eskoriatza, two of whom were nationals of Pakistan, two of Morocco and two of Western Sahara. Eskoriatza is a small industrial town of around 4,000 inhabitants, located in the valley of Mondragón in the province of Gipuzkoa. The local cooperative created here in the 1950s was an example of a successful enterprise in the fields of business, industry, retail and education until, in October and November 2013, during the time of my fieldwork, Fagor (initially the mother company of the cooperative and later an entire group of companies which produced domestic appliances) announced bankruptcy under the Spanish law. This was due to the debt accumulated as a result of the 2008 crisis in Europe.¹⁸ The Mondragón area has a relatively high number of Basque speakers. According to the data collected by EUSTAT 2011, the three towns of Mondragón Valley (Arrasate, Aretxabaleta and Eskoriatza) have 53%, 61% and 57% of Basque speakers respectively. At the same time the percentage of inhabitants of these towns who were born abroad equals 5.9, 5 and 4.7.¹⁹

The participants below are the two students from Morocco, discussing their opinion of the role of the crisis and its relationship to language.²⁰

¹⁶ PICCI, 93.

¹⁷ Servicio de Euskera. 'Curso de Euskera Para Personas de Origen Extranjero', revised October 2013, accessed 20 May 2014, <http://www.vitoriagasteiz.org/wb021/http/contenidosEstaticos/adjuntos/es/11/57/41157.pdf>.

¹⁸ 'Flagship Spanish Cooperative Appliance Maker Fagor Goes Bankrupt,' Eurointelligence, last modified October 2013, accessed 20 May 2014, http://www.eurointelligence.com/news-details/article/flagship-spanish-cooperative-appliance-maker-fagor-goes-bankrupt.html?no_cache=1.

¹⁹ See 'Eustat,' accessed 20 July 2014, [http://en.eustat.es/ci_ci/municipal/Dialog/Varvalagg.asp?idioma=c&ma=pxMunicipal_c&ti=Informaci%C3%B3n+municipal&path=../&lang=3&xu=&yp=&nr=2&prevagg=YN N&group\(1\)=Municipios%20de%20Bizkaia&aggfile\(2\)=Construcci%F3n+y+viviendas&mapname=Capv_municipio&multilang=#axzz3816bDIIW](http://en.eustat.es/ci_ci/municipal/Dialog/Varvalagg.asp?idioma=c&ma=pxMunicipal_c&ti=Informaci%C3%B3n+municipal&path=../&lang=3&xu=&yp=&nr=2&prevagg=YN N&group(1)=Municipios%20de%20Bizkaia&aggfile(2)=Construcci%F3n+y+viviendas&mapname=Capv_municipio&multilang=#axzz3816bDIIW).

²⁰ Transcriptions, emphasises and translations are the author's own. Transcriptions do not include prosodic features.

M_01: ‘*Antes de que entró la crisis no miraban a la lengua... antes cuando había trabajo **no era el español, ni el euskera**. Miraban al hombre si es fuerte y puede trabajar...*’

M_01: ‘**Before** the crisis came, they were not looking at the language... **before** when there was work, **it was not Spanish, neither Basque, they** were looking at a man, if he’s strong and able to work...’

M_02: ‘*Pues, como **queda la hora de la crisis** pues igual en el trabajo hay selección, selección a la gente, **primero los...la gente de aquí, luego la gente que está...igual sabe euskera, pues porque se ha integrado... pues, ya no sé.***’

M_02: ‘Well, since **now we have the time of crisis**, perhaps at work there is selection, selection of people, **first** these...these **from here, later those** who are...**maybe know Basque, well because they have integrated...** well, I don’t know.’

The statements of the two men draw a clear division between the time before the economic recession and the present situation, which is indicated in the two temporal expressions ‘before the crisis came’ [*antes de que entró la crisis*] and ‘since now we have the time of the crisis’ [*como queda la hora de la crisis*]. This is then contrasted with the actual role of the language with regards to the economic means acquisition or occupational insertion (the insertion into the labour market of the host society) as part of assimilation.²¹ According to the first informant (M_01), Castilian and Basque were not in conflict during the ‘before’ period. He states that the local employers (presumably in Eskoriatza) were looking for employees and judging their physical ability to work, rather than their knowledge of either Castilian or Basque: ‘it was not Spanish, neither Basque’ [*no era el español, ni el euskera*]; ‘if he’s strong and able to work’ [*si es fuerte y puede trabajar*]. This also suggests a rather slender role for language in the professional dimension when it comes to the expression of attitudes. In this sense the role of both languages is highly disregarded.

The first statement triggers a response from another participant, part of which contributes to the previously-mentioned division between the times of crisis: ‘now we have the time of crisis’ [*queda la hora de la crisis*]. He expresses a major difference that the crisis brings: the difference between the knowledge of the two official languages is articulated as significant in the professional dimension. This is achieved through an identificational separation between speakers of these different official languages and a creation of a kind of a hierarchy between them: ‘first these...these from here, later those who are...maybe know Basque, well because they have integrated’ [*primero los...la gente de aquí, luego la gente que está...igual sabe euskera, pues porque se ha integrado*].

It becomes clear that the identification of the out-group, in this case the ‘Basques’ or the receiving community, is not achieved through language but rather through place, as they are referred to as ‘these from here’. In addition, the use of the demonstrative pronoun

²¹ Melanie Wallendorf and Michael D. Reilly, ‘Ethnic Migration, Assimilation and Consumption,’ *Journal of Consumer Research* 10:3 (1983): 292.

(‘los’ or ‘these’) represents a means of distancing oneself from that group. For the second speaker the receiving community is simply ‘*gente de aquí*’ – a group to which he does not belong. The second step in this drawn hierarchy incorporates ‘those who maybe know Basque’ [*la gente que...igual sabe euskera*]. Here there is a differentiation between Basque speakers and non-Basque speakers among the ‘immigrant’ population who are ‘not from here’. Those who do know Basque are seen to possess an advantage on a professional level, but at the same time the knowledge of Basque is in this instance equalised to being integrated. This suggests that, in this context, these particular migrants express a positive attitude towards Basque both in a professional and in an integrative dimension.

The Economic Crisis as a Factor Influencing Attitude Expression

It could be argued that such an attitude is built upon the fact that when discourses related to the economic crisis come into context, the role of Basque is made more prominent. This happens not only in the professional dimension (as in the hierarchical selection of employees and because the informant stated during the interview that his employer promoted and financed his learning of Basque), but also in the integrative one, as those who have supposedly integrated are seen as possessing the extra added-value ability of communicating in Basque. This can be a sign of a shift from the projection of the ‘official language’ ideology (many informants suggested that the motives for learning Basque were guided by the fact that Basque was an official language along with Castilian and compared with a situation of a prestigious language, associated with economic prosperity, such as German in Germany) and ‘state language’ ideology to an ‘added-value’ perspective and ‘language as resource’ ideology.

Moreover, the crisis in this example appears to be a shared phenomenon, applicable to both the receiving community and the migrant community (‘we have the time of crisis’). However, the knowledge of Basque seems to be advantageous only to the migrant community, which is not defined through the common space, such as ‘these from here’ are. In this sense Basque gains prestige in the context of crisis on the professional dimension among the migrant group.

It might also suggest that the occupational assimilation is somewhat eased by the integration ability realised through language. This view is similar to the view of language in integration presented in the official promotional material and policy documents discussed earlier, in which Basque was seen as a vehicle for getting to know the values and culture of the Basque society (separate from that of the Spanish/Castilian one). However, the official stance on the role of language for migrants does not interpret its role in a professional dimension as prominent, instead promoting Basque along with Castilian. This discrepancy between these particular migrants’ view of Basque in the professional dimension might be ascribed to the fact that the region where the interview was conducted is in fact largely Basque-speaking and industrialised; the role of the local language might be more prominent, unlike on the state-wide scale taken into account by the Basque promoting policies. On the other hand, the positive emphasis placed on the integrative dimension in the official documents is linked to the nationalist idea of the promotion of the language, guided by the ‘one-nation-one-language’ ideology, which sees language as a distinctive attribute of ‘Basqueness’.

To conclude, in an area with a high number of Basque speakers and a highly industrial economy, the attitudes towards Basque as a local language are expressed

positively on both integrative and professional dimensions, with an emphasis on Basque gaining an ‘added-value’ on the professional level. While the attitudes remain positive, there is a clear identificational divide between the groups whose attributes are the knowledge of Basque, or the belonging to a place as opposed to being a migrant. The official policies do not place such emphasis on the role of Basque in employment or on it representing a professional skill. This is perhaps because they do not relate to the economic situation in any way, being still guided by the ‘pride’ discourses, and making the equation between the speaking of Basque and being Basque.

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