

BASQUE WRITING IN THE IBERIAN CONTEXT: BRIEF NOTES ON THE TRANSLATIONS OF BASQUE LITERATURE

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Abstract¹

After considering the function of translated literature (from Basque, into Basque) in our literary system, the article analyzes the relations between the literatures of Spain (Catalan, Galician and Spanish). Some reflections on the evolution of translated Basque literature, and the contribution this translated Basque literature is making to the Iberian Interliterary System, complete the article.

The purpose of this article will be to make some thoughts on translation, analyzing the function of translated literature (from Basque, into Basque) in our literary system. We have come a long way since the time when Dasconaguerre's lie in claiming that his novel, *Les échos du pas de Roland* (1867), had been translated from Basque was enough to alleviate, though briefly, the anxiety that our literary history lacked a genre (the novel), which was not to have its true birth until 1897. What writer Ramón Saizarbitoria called a "narcissistic hallucination" (Saizarbitoria 1999) is merely one more episode in the recurring debate on the capacity of the Basque language to create fictional worlds.

The excellent work of Basque translators in the enhancement of a Basque literary language cannot be underestimated. Manuel López Gaseni (2008) speaks precisely to this point when he argues that the impact of translated literature can be seen in "the creation of an indigenous literary language, the contribution of literary repertoires previously lacking in Basque literature, and the revival of certain models that were beginning to become outdated". This important function that translated literature has had for literature in the Basque language is consistent with the centrality that Even-Zohar (1990: 47) attributes to weak systems:

... (a) when a polysystem has not yet been crystallized, that is to say, when a literature is "young," in the process of being established; (b) when a literature is either "peripheral" (within a large group of correlated literatures) or "weak," one or both; and (c) when there are turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a literature.

¹ This article is an extract of the contribution I wrote for a volume of the Hispanic Issues Series, to be published by the University of Iowa. Translated from Spanish by Kristin Addis.

In the opinion of Mónica Domínguez (2008), this is the function that translations still have in some literatures of the Iberian sphere, such as the Basque and Galician literatures.² In the case of Basque literature, the agreement that Euskal Itzul-tzaile, Zuzentzaile eta Interpreteen Elkarte (EIZIE; the Association of Translators, Interpreters and Correctors of the Basque Language, founded in 1987) signed with the Basque Government in 1989 to translate into Basque a collection of works of world literature, the *Literatura Unibertsala* (World Literature) collection, has had a positive influence on the legitimation of the work of the translator in the revival and standardization of the Basque literary language. At the time of this writing, the *Literatura Unibertsala* collection included 139 titles. The same can be said of another collection, *Pentsamenduaren Klasikoak* (Classics of Thought), which came into existence in 1991. This corpus, together with collections of crime novels published by Basque publishing houses such as Igela, Erein and Elkar, have made available to the Basque reader quality translations of canonical authors like Eliot, Faulkner, Dostoyevsky, Maupassant, Queneau and Barthes. The Basque literary institution has recognized the importance that translation has for literature in the Basque language through awards such as the Euskadi Prizes for Translation (first awarded in 1997) and with the creation in 2000 of a program in Translation and Interpretation at the University of the Basque Country. Does this mean to say that translations in the Basque literary system have a centrality that they do not have in other systems? To date, there has been no rigorous study that would offer trustworthy data on print runs, sales or processes of canonization. However, the data suggest that translations have a very limited acceptance among Basque readers (Olaziregi 2000), and that outside academic circles their real impact is very limited. This is the situation in a context in which cultural consumption in Basque continues to be low: according to *Kultura 07* (Publication of the Observatory of Culture of the Basque Government, November, 2007), 67% of the population of the Autonomous Basque Community do not read a single book, newspaper or magazine in Basque per year. This percentage is as high as 78% in the French Basque country, and 83% in Navarre. Although the last few decades have seen an increase in the number of Basque speakers, their impact on the consumption of Basque literature has not been as high as it was hoped. This might be due to what writer Anjel Lertxundi describes as “a deficit in the transmission of the language” (Etxeberria 2002: 193) or “the crisis of a model of Basque speakers, of readers” (Etxeberria 2002: 194). It is highly significant that young Basques who have studied their subjects and materials in Basque through secondary school have (linguistic) difficulty in reading Basque literature, and that their reading habits in the language decrease toward the end of their secondary education.

To the best of my knowledge, there has been no exhaustive study to date on the translation into other languages of works written originally in Basque. At the present

² In any case, it must be noted that the number of translations of children's and young people's literature continues to be greater than those of what is traditionally considered «literature for adults». Domínguez states that in the 1990s, «the percentage of children's and young people's literature in translation was approximately 50% of the total production of children's and young people's literature in Spain» (16). This percentage has been decreasing and, according to the INE (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, National Institute of Statistics), was 15.28% between 1999 and 2005.

time, the number of titles translated from Basque into other languages is estimated to be approximately 210 (www.basqueliterature.com). There is no doubt, however, that since the 1960s, the Basque *intelligentsia* has been convinced of the importance that translation into other languages has for the survival of the Basque language and the professionalization of Basque writers. There has been a very slow increase in the number of titles translated from Basque into other languages, and it was not until the end of the twentieth century that this trend was truly confirmed. Bernardo Atxaga was to mark a turning point in the international image of Basque literature (Olaziregi 2005). His *Obabakoak* (1989), with its translations into 26 languages, marks a milestone in our historiography. Moreover, Atxaga's fame constitutes for many authors a model to follow, even if it has generated a certain anxiety to "homologize" Basque literature and place it on the map of the modern global scene.³ What seems clear is that the promotion of Basque writing needs a professional and/or institutional infrastructure and should not be left to the scattered success of individual authors. There has been a reliance on direct contact with foreign readers and publishing houses, or on the endorsement of prizes such as Spain's Premio Nacional (National Prize) received by Atxaga, Unai Elorriaga and Mariasun Landa. The case is similar to that of Catalan literature: "(...) when Catalan identity achieves international status, language, that key historical element, becomes a hindrance, a problem" (Subirana 2008: 260). As an example, we could mention that among the 16 people who have been awarded the prize "Universal Basque" by the Basque Government since 1997, only one was a Basque writer.

The Basque Government did not fund the translation or promotion of Basque literature until the year 2000, and its presence in forums such as the Frankfurt Book Fair has not as yet generated the desired curiosity. Other projects and initiatives backed by institutions such as the Committee to Promote Basque Literature, which was created under the aegis of the European organization, Literature Across Frontiers (LAF) in 2005, or the Euskal Idazleen Elkartea (EIE, the Association of Basque Writers, founded in 1982) which launched the Plan for the Promotion of Basque Literature Abroad, also had limited effects in the promotion and dissemination of Basque literature. This is now changing thanks to the existence of translators with sufficient literary and linguistic competence to translate directly from Basque into other languages. A book series was created for this purpose in 2004 by the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno. The success of its first publication, *An Anthology of Basque Short Stories* (2004), has resonated with other translations into Spanish (2005), Russian (2006), and Italian (2007). This case shows that the preeminence of English in the global market can help to overcome the "invisibility" of minority languages such as Basque.

There is no doubt that the Basque literary system is dependent on the central system of the Iberian space, that is, the Spanish system. There is still a need to study the relationships between the different literatures of the Spanish State and to overcome the "ethnic, linguistic and cultural homogeneity" (Cabo 2001: 52) which dominates Span-

³ Professor Cabo Aseguinolaza sees the same anxiety to reach the world «or at least Western stature» among Basque academics. As an example, he quotes (incorrectly) the title of the anthology that we published at the Center for Basque Studies: *An American Anthology of Basque Short Stories* (Cabo 2006: 5).

ish literary historiography. Researchers like Arturo Casas (2003) from the University of Santiago de Compostela have begun very promising examinations of concepts like Even-Zohar's "interliterary system" and Dionyz Durisin's "interliterary community" applied to the Iberian situation. Other interesting work can be found in the reflections in the book coedited by Brad Epps and Luis Fernández Cifuentes (2005). Their volume includes proposals in favor of a new focus that would overcome the monolingual concept of the Spanish State "by delving into either the place of the so-called peripheral languages and literatures (Catalan, Galician, and Basque) or the place of emigrants and exiles in Spanish literary history" (Epps and Fernández Cifuentes 2005: 20).

The data reported by Hooft Comajuncosas are quite remarkable and inspire reflection on the hierarchical relationships and interferences among the various literatures of the Iberian sphere. Hooft Comajuncosas describes the Spanish intercultural space from 1990 to 1998 as very unbalanced due to the dominance of Spanish over the other Iberian languages as a vehicle for translating novels, stories and poetry written originally in Catalan, Galician and Basque; Spanish has served as a *lingua franca*. The statistics do not change significantly for the period from 1999 to 2003: the Catalan, Galician and Basque systems continued translating a great percentage of their works into Spanish (in the case of Basque, as many as 88%, compared with 12% translated from Basque into Catalan or Galician). It is notable that it is the Basque literary system that is most willing to engage in intercultural exchange, that is, the one that translates the greatest percentage of its works into the other languages of the Spanish State.⁴ However, the extremely low number of works that are translated from Spanish into the other languages of the Spanish State is particularly striking. While 317 works written in Basque, Catalan and Galician were translated into Spanish from 1999-2003, only 20 were translated from Spanish into the minority languages.⁵

⁴ Mario Santana (2009) makes this interesting comment about Atxaga's centrality in the Iberian literary context:

While a limited number of the 121 narrative works to have won the Critic's Prize in Spain since 1976 have made it into other languages, Atxaga's *Soinujolearen semea* enjoys the distinction of being the only one that has been translated into *all* the other official languages of the State—from Basque into Catalan, Galician, and Spanish. This extraordinary circumstance undoubtedly accounts for the popularity of the novel and its iconic status as perhaps the most prominent materialization of an ideal, cross-linguistic literature in Spain.

⁵ Similar numbers are seen in children's and young people's literature. According to data provided by Domínguez (2008), the percentages of translation are the following:

Diagram 16: translations between the central and peripheral literatures of the Spanish sphere. Percentage of translations from each original language out of the total translations into the target language (books for children and young people only, fiction and non-fiction). 1967, 1977, 1987, 1997.

	TRANSLATIONS FROM SPANISH			TRANSLATIONS INTO SPANISH		
	Translations from Spanish	Total translations	Percentage	Translations into Spanish	Total translations	Percentage
Catalan	158	1,002	15.77%	160	3,991	4.01%
Galician	33	122	27.05%	17	3,991	0.43%
Basque	98	286	34.27%	14	3,991	0.35%

Despite these data, Hooft Comajuncosas sees a notable trend toward the construction of an intercultural literary space, which is corroborated by the anthologies of poetry and short stories published in the last two decades, and the number of writers who have seen their work published in the various languages of the Spanish State (Hooft 2004: 330). According to him, two Basque authors, Bernardo Atxaga and Unai Elorriaga, are the best example of authors who facilitate the existence of an intercultural space by having their work published in Basque, Catalan, Galician and Spanish. The practice of translating works into all of those languages is more common in children's and young people's literature.⁶ It is tempting to paraphrase Aresti's well-known verse in homage to a socialist from Bilbao, Tomás Meabe ("He is a true Spaniard / who knows the four languages of Spain"), and to disparage the contribution of Basque literature to the creation of an Iberian inter-literary space. Irony aside, the percentages mentioned above reflect the processes of *invisibility* inflicted on the peripheral literatures of the Spanish sphere by the central (Spanish) literature. The problems in the ISBN database in defining the original language of a text, and the omission in the credits of translations of the original title in Basque are only some of the processes that occur constantly in the case of Basque authors like Atxaga.

It is worth mentioning the translations into Spanish that Basque publishing houses like Hiru, Erein, Alberdania and Ttartalo have produced since the 1990s. While these translations are distributed throughout the Spanish State, they nevertheless find most of their potential readership in the Spanish-speaking Basque community. The comments of Basque authors on the relative lack of interest shown by their fellow citizens toward their work speaks to the relegation of literature written in Basque even in the Basque Country. One can only hope that, in the not-too-distant future, literature written in Basque will establish itself as a more effective means of communication among the different linguistic communities.

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⁶ As Domínguez (2008) points out, this practice is common in a number of collections, including «El barco de vapor» (published by SM), «Infantil Alfaguara» (Alfaguara) and «Ala delta» (Edelvives). The collection «La chalupa» / «La xalupa» / «Txalupa» / «A chalupa», created by the publishing houses La Galera, Elkar and Galaxia, is also outstanding.

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