

William H. Jacobsen's contribution to Basque accentuation and historical morphology

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In his linguistic research, William H. Jacobsen [1931-2014] focused primarily on the native languages of the western part of the USA, including Washo, Makah, Nez Perce and Hookan, and for a time served as president of the Society for the Study of Indigenous Languages of the Americas (see unsigned obituary in *The Reno Gazette-Journal*). In the 1970's he became interested in the Basque language as well and made a number of insightful contributions to the field of Basque historical linguistics. Some of his writings on Basque were published during his lifetime (see Jacobsen 1972, 1977, 1982, 1995), but several other very valuable contributions have remained in unpublished form. Among the papers that are kept in the Jon Bilbao Basque Library at the University of Nevada, Reno, we find the 1975 manuscript that is published in this issue of *ASJU*, «Historical implications of the Western Basque Tonal Accent». (Another item in that library collection is Jacobsen's 1971 manuscript on vowel rule interaction in Bizkaian Basque, which was cited in Trask 1997.)¹

The starting point for Jacobsen's investigation of the implications of the Western Basque tonal accent for Basque historical linguistics is an observation that he had made in an earlier paper dealing primarily with a specific aspect of Basque inflectional morphology, the expression of grammatical number and absolutive and ergative case in different Basque dialects (Jacobsen 1972). This led him to confront the issue of accentuation in Western Basque, since in this area segmentally identical ergative singular and plural forms are often distinguished by their prosodic pattern. The nature of this prosodic contrast, however, was anything but clear at

¹ For comments, I am grateful to Joseba Lakarra and Julen Manterola.

the time when Jacobsen undertook his dialectological survey, with several seemingly contradictory descriptions.

Working with José Basterrechea, who had produced a detailed description of surface prosodic patterns in his native Basque variety of Gernika (see Basterrechea 1974-1975), Jacobsen concluded that the surface distinction between words with a falling and a sustained tonal pattern that other authors had described is properly analyzed as a phonological contrast between accented and unaccented words, which he calls «marked» and «unmarked» words, respectively:

[The] facts lead one to the conclusion that the words with sustained pitch actually have no accent on them at all, that what is heard is a result of general rules of pronunciation, controlled in part by the syntactic relationships present, rather than being a property of the individual word. Thus we will have what we may well call both *unmarked* and *marked* words—some words with no distinctive accent at all on them, and others with a distinctive (falling) accent on one of their syllables. (Jacobsen 1972: 80)

Luis Michelena [Koldo Mitxelena], by his own admission, was inspired to write his 1972 article on Old Labourdin accentuation—which contains a classification of Basque accentual types—by proofreading Jacobsen’s article. Both papers were published in the same issue of *ASJU*. In his own paper, Michelena commends Jacobsen for clarifying a chaotic situation and accepts his distinction between words with unmarked and marked accentuation as a feature of the accentual system of the Central and Western area:

Noun forms fall, as far as the accentual pattern goes, into two classes: words belonging to the unmarked class, to put it in Jacobsen’s terms, characterized by a sustained accent, and words with a marked accent, signaled by a falling contour. The difference between the two is clear, at least among the older generation to which obviously the present writer belongs, even if the manner in which it is realized may vary widely from one place to another within this area. (Michelena 1972: 111)

However, Michelena interpreted «unmarked», not a lacking accent altogether, as in Jacobsen’s perceptive phonological analysis, but primarily as lexically most frequent:²

The unmarked type deserves to be called so, since it is the pattern to which is adjusted the pronunciation of the bulk of the indefinite and definite singular nouns. (Michelena 1972: 111)

Michelena’s reluctance to accept Jacobsen’s analysis of unmarked accentuation in Western Basque as unaccentedness (which, as mentioned, was based on observations about Gernika Basque), appears to have to do with his conviction that, at a deeper level, the accentual system was essentially the same in the whole of the Central and Western area. In fact, in his additions and corrections to the chapter on Basque accentual systems in the second edition of *Fonética Histórica Vasca*, Michelena explicitly mentions Jacobsen’s (1975) manuscript and states that, in spite of

² This is in fact the way Jacobsen himself also uses the «marked» vs. «unmarked» terminology when referring to stress-accent varieties of Basque, such as the Zuberoan or Souletin dialect.

Jacobsen's insistence on lack of homogeneity within the area, the Central-Western accentual type is «en buena medida unitario» (Michelena 1977: 667).

Perhaps because of Michelena's reinterpretation of Jacobsen's distinction between unmarked and marked words, together with the fact that Jacobsen's manuscript has remained unpublished until now, this insight was lost to other scholars and is not found in other work published in the following decade. And yet, a proper understanding of the Western Basque pitch-accent system as being based on a phonological distinction between accented and unaccented morphemes and words is crucial for understanding its prosodic patterns and its historical development.

More recent work has shown that the accented/unaccented contrast is in fact nowadays limited to some areas of the province of Bizkaia and is not found in Gipuzkoan varieties, where the accentual rules are rather different. Nevertheless, there is a fairly good correspondence between marked and unmarked words in the whole area, as Michelena believed, and it is extremely likely that the accented/unaccented contrast was indeed found throughout the whole Central-Western area just a few centuries ago. Larramendi's (1729) description can be interpreted in this way. It is thus not impossible that in Michelena's generation and even more earlier generations whose speech Michelena had an opportunity to observe, the accentual system was indeed more homogeneous throughout the Central-Western area.

In the 1975 work that is published in this issue of *ASJU*, Jacobsen thus starts from the observation that in the Western Basque tonal accent system words with the general or unmarked pattern are unaccented and assumes that what needs to be explained is why some specific classes of words, including all plurals, bear an accent. He advances the strong hypothesis that the contraction of vowel sequences is the original source of the tonal accent, other factors being secondary. Although the idea that there is a connection between marked accent and earlier vowel sequences had been proposed before, in this paper, Jacobsen takes this idea further by seeing this as the original source of lexically accented items in Western Basque.

Jacobsen then proceeds to examine the different word classes with marked accentuation, including plural nouns and pronouns, second and third person plural forms of verbs, and compounds and derived words, discussing in every case the plausibility of a reconstruction containing a vowel sequence. As Larry Trask remarked, more than two decades later, «Jacobsen's analysis is a very economical one which deserves more attention than it has so far received, no doubt because of its unpublished status» (Trask 1997: 165).

In order to put Jacobsen's diachronic analysis within the context of current research, it should be noted that, regarding the reconstruction of nominal inflection, Manterola (2015) has forcefully argued for the position that this has resulted from the suffixation of inflected demonstratives, which is different from the historical development that Jacobsen assumes. But even if this is so, this conclusion does not necessarily invalidate Jacobsen's hypothesis. The hypothesis may remain viable provided that the vowel sequences that Jacobsen postulates in accented inflectional markers can be reconstructed as being contained in the original corresponding demonstratives. As for Jacobsen's reconstruction of modern accented verbal forms, this was discussed in detail in Gómez & Sainz (1995: 257-260), where an alternative historical analysis is presented.

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