

FROM AUTOMATIC ASSIMILATION TO SOUND SYMBOLISM

A case study of Basque Palatalization

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Lan hau *Societas Linguistica Europaea*-k Toledon izan zuen bere XVIII. Biltzarrerako prestatu zen. Bertan aurkeztu zen 1985eko irailaren 5-ean.

Donostia eta Donostiatik hurren dauden herri batzuetako ebakerak dira lanaren oinarri¹. Hain zuzen ere, hirikoen eta herrikoen artean aurki daitezkeen bustidurarekiko bereizkuntzak aztertzen dira. Pentsa genezake, eta lan honek hala dio, bustidura-asimilazioa esanahiaren arloan sartzen ari dela herrikoen hizkera formala hiriko euskararen antza hartzen ari den neurrian. Hau omen da bilakabide fonologiko semantiko eta automatikoen bidagurutzean espero daitekeena eta beste zenbait hizkuntzez egin diren analisiekin bat letorke erabat.

1. This paper is based on the data obtained by the author (who can speak the two varieties described) from four informants:

— Josefa Arbelaiz Makuso.

From Oihartzun, she has been living in Astigarraga for the last 53 years. She is 76.

— Antonia Lekuona Etxepelekua.

From Errenteria, she has been living in Astigarraga for the last 20 years. She is 42.

— José Mendiluze Etxeberria.

He has been living in Astigarraga since he was born 83 years ago, except for a few months in San Sebastián for his military service.

— Petra Mendiluze Etxeberria from Astigarraga, she has been living in San Sebastián for the last 52 years, although she very often goes to her village. She is 77.

I am very grateful to all of them for their help.

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with a pragmatic aspect of Basque palatalization. Palatalization of dental and alveolar segments can take place either under phonetic or morphosemantic conditions. The phonetically induced palatalization consists of a progressive assimilation caused by a high palatal vowel or glide. But substituting palatals for their alveolar and dental counterparts can also result in semantic change. The palatal-containing forms express affection or diminution in contrast with the basic neutral forms.

Our starting point will be the comparison between two Basque speaking areas one of which applies a restricted version of the assimilatory palatalization rule. We will refer to this area, in which only sonorants are palatalized, as *A-area*. It corresponds to the prestige speech of the capital of the province. What we will call *B-area* consists of some villages situated at a short distance to the East and South of the city.

In the speech of *B* both sonorants and obstruents undergo assimilatory palatalization. But it more and more seems to be the case that the pattern of the prestige community *A* is spreading. Therefore, palatal sounds that are primarily the result of a morphophonemic process acquire a stylistic status within the values that morphosemantic palatalization establishes. The assimilation rule is still working fully at home and among friends, while only its restricted version applies informal speech. The result is that some sounds palatalize only at home. This fits the distribution of the morphosemantic palatalization: palatals always imply diminution, affection, or scorn.

This paper deals with a pragmatic aspect of Basque palatalization. It is a rather specific discussion, but (as I will try to show) deeply related to the very nature of the palatalization system in Basque phonology².

For those of you who are not familiar with the Basque language or at least with this part of its phonology, I will briefly summarize the main characteristics of palatalization in that language. As a matter of fact, we should be talking of palatalizations or of palatalization phenomena (using the Greek plural marker, as Claudia Corum did in her paper about Basque palatalization: Corum, 1972)³. There is indeed a distinction to be made

2. Being related to pronunciation, palatalization is still an open question in the process of standardization of the language. Norms given up to now are all relevant to the written language.

3. Claudia CORUM. 1972. «Palatalization phenomena in Basque». *ASJU*, VI, 29-34.

between a morphophonemic palatalization, and a morphosemantic palatalization. The morphophonemic palatalization is a clear case of consonantal sound symbolism.

Both these processes apply to dental and alveolar segments (cf. inventory in number 1 of the hand-out). Among the sonorants, *n* and *l* can undergo the change (apart from the vowels, there are only two more sonorants in the language: the trill *l* and the flap *r*). Among the obstruents, the dental stops *t* and *d*, the apicoalveolar fricative *ʃ* and affricate *tʃ*, and the lamino-alveolar (dorsoalveolar on the hand-out) fricative *s* and affricate *ts*.

The assimilation rule can be induced by a preceding *i* sound (it is a progressive assimilation), both as a syllabic element or as the non-syllabic element of a decreasing diphthong. Examples of this can be seen in number 2 of the hand-out⁴.

As I said before, semantic palatalization is a clear case of sound symbolism. It consists of substituting palatal or alveopalatal segments for their «plain» alveolar or dental counterparts in order to convey an idea of affection, diminution, scorn, etc. It is commonly said that this type of palatalization turns the words into diminutives, where «diminutive» is obviously a cover term. And this is usual whenever sound symbolism is at issue. The examples in number 3 (see hand-out) should make the point clearer. Forms on the left hand side are the shifted version of the «plain» neutral ones, which are listed on the right.

This is an over-simplified view of the whole process, but it should be enough for a general background. Nevertheless, there is something which should be mentioned before we go into the next point. There is a great deal of variation in the palatalization system from one dialect to the other. The two processes that we have been talking about change very much depending on the linguistic variety under discussion. Differences can be found in productivity, linguistic

4. It is difficult to obtain parallel unambiguous examples of alternation in the assimilatory type of palatalization where sibilants are involved within a single dialect. Context limitation work in a different way for sibilants. For that reason, only forms which can be compared with the basic Spanish source are shown. It must be taken into account that the only sibilant sound in the phonemic inventory of Spanish (Castilian Spanish is the Spanish that Basque bilinguals speak) is the apicoalveolar fricative.

Palatalization of the voiced dental stop is of a more complex type. Its explanation is beyond the scope of this paper.

and extralinguistic conditioning, phonological environment, the set of sounds which undergo the change, etc.

But we are going to focus on the Basque spoken in a small part of the province of Gipuzkoa. I must say that the subject of this short paper was brought to my attention by Prof. Michelena. He comes from a village not far from my hometown, Donostia-San Sebastián, the capital of the province. The phenomenon he observed in his own dialect can also be found in some other nearby villages. Informants from three villages provided the data on which this paper is based¹. We will use the term *B-area* to group all these villages and differentiate them from the capital, which will be considered to be the *A-area*.

Palatalization is very much the same in these two areas, but there is an important difference that we will examine here. Basically, we can say that the two kinds of palatalization are productive in the province of Gipuzkoa, where these two areas belong geographically and linguistically⁵.

In the *A-area*, the assimilatory palatalization applies most productively to the sonorants (*n* and *l*). In the *B-area*, on the other hand, also the voiceless dental stop *t* undergoes regular palatalizing assimilation: this segment is changed into a voiceless palatal stop when it follows a high palatal vowel or glide. The rule is optional when the segment is right before a pause. Otherwise, and abstraction made of a few conditions which are not important now, the rule is obligatory.

However, and this is crucial, the rule only holds within the *B-area*. Things are not the same when a speaker of the *B-area* is in formal situation: it would be enough some years ago to be shopping in the city (50 years ago?); a public lecture, an interview in the radio, or (in our case) when informants are required to translate words one by one⁶, function nowadays as «formal».

5. Semantic palatalization is becoming obsolete for some classes (mainly sonorants), though. When it happens, it most often is due to borrowing or to palatalization of old basic forms already disappeared (so that the palatal does not add any meaning or connotation; it is a vestigial state). On the other hand, assimilatory palatalization of sibilants is more limited than that of sonorants. It does not exist for *d* and we will be discussing the conditions on the palatalization of the *t*.

6. The «familiar» situation was almost easier to obtain. As I had relatives in the village, they soon accepted me as one of them, and I could record normal everyday conversations in their kitchen.

situations. They will say *aita* with no palatalization, as they do in the *A-area* (see number 4 for more examples). So, here the non-palatalization of the *A-area* (prestige dialect) is an element that the speakers of the *B-area* are introducing in their formal register. This kind of phenomenon is a well known fact of standard and non-standard dialect contact.

On the other hand, forms with a non-palatalized *t* segment following an *i* sound within a word would be considered too elegant among *B-speakers* in their area⁷. They are undoubtedly identifying themselves as part of their group when they do palatalize. It has become voluntary and conscious. It is not automatic anymore.

We can deduce that the speakers of the *B-area* tend to make their pronunciation more similar to that of the speakers of the *A-area*. In fact, as it was said before, the Basque spoken in the *A-area*, constitutes the prestige dialect (not only, but especially in part of the province of Gipuzkoa). As far as palatalization is concerned, we saw that in the *A-area* only sonorants are palatalized regularly by the assimilation rule.

It is easy to see that the assimilatory type of palatalization of the *t* is acquiring a symbolic value for the speakers of the *B-area*. I can see two reasons for this. First, they know, because they are close enough, that the speakers of the city do not use it. The speakers of the city are, of course, considered to be more elegant and speakers of a better variety of Basque. Second, there is the pattern that the semantic palatalization establishes: both dental and palatal voiceless stops (two different *t*'s for the speaker) can appear in the same phonological environment, but the palatal has the connotation of familiarity. It is the palatal that is used at home, with children, to make fun of somebody, etc.

I would add that this confirms Johanna Nichols (1971)' prediction⁸ when she says that «If a symbolic alternation is

7. Whether they palatalize it or not at the end of a word, depends on the speed they are speaking at.

8. From now on the situation might change: there are now more people who can read and write in Basque; the city is not anymore the (only) prestige dialect holder, the new standard dialect is beginning to share the kingdom; the new TV and radio start spreading their pattern. The tendency seems to be to palatalize all over, though a distinction should be made between the professional speakers and people who take part in programs through interviews or otherwise. The latter usually reflect the pronunciation patterns of their own area.

duplicated by an ordinary morphophonemic change, either the symbolism will lose its meaning or the phonetically conditioned alternation will be perceived as meaningful». What is going on with the palatalization of the voiceless dental stop in the *B-area* communities is an example of the latter possibility mentioned by J. Nichols⁹.

The rule is productive (number 4) but it only belongs to the informal register of the *B-area* speakers. As a result of this, the palatal voiceless stops resulting from either type of palatalization share features like familiarity, informality, «homeliness».

9. Johanna NICHOLS. 1971. «Diminutive consonant symbolism in Western North America». *Language* 47.4, 826-848.

HAND-OUT I.

1. <i>dental</i>	<i>dorsoalveolar</i>	<i>apicoalveolar</i>
t d		n l
	s ts	ś tś

2. awtomobil'a	<i>automobila</i>	'automobile' (from Spanish <i>automóvil</i>)
sajl'en	<i>zebilen</i>	'(s)he was walking'
sajltsen	<i>zebiltzan</i>	'they were walking'
in'un	<i>inon</i>	'nowhere'
nun	<i>non</i>	'where'
sejn'ena	<i>zeinena</i>	'of/from whom'
sejntsán	<i>zein zen</i>	'who was it'
pišu	<i>pisu</i>	'flat» (from Spanish <i>piso</i>)
pajšano	<i>paisano</i>	'in plain clothes' (from Sp. <i>paisano</i>)
ewkit'u	<i>edukitu</i>	'to have'
aleqratu	<i>alegratu</i>	'to rejoice'
ejt'en	<i>egiten</i>	'doing'
eoten	<i>egoten</i>	'staying'

— The underlined forms are written following the orthographic conventions of the standard dialect.

HAND-OUT II.

3. a.	l'o	<i>llo</i>	lo	<i>lo</i>
b.	on'a	<i>oña</i>	ona	<i>ona</i>
c.	neška	<i>nexka</i>	neška	<i>neska</i>
d.	šešen	<i>xexen</i>	sesen	<i>zezen</i>
e.	atšo	<i>atxo</i>	atšo	<i>atso</i>
f.	t'ont'a	<i>ttontta</i>	tonta	<i>tonta</i>

4. a(j)t'a	<i>aita</i>	'father'
a(j)t'u	<i>aditu</i>	'to hear'
ejt'eko	<i>egiteko</i>	'for doing'
mujt'u	<i>mogitu</i>	'to move'
o(j)t'uak	<i>ohituak</i>	'accustomed, used to (plural)'
noaba(j)t'ea	<i>norabaitera</i>	'to somewhere'
šejt'un	<i>segituan</i>	'soon, immediately'
polit'a	<i>polita</i>	'nice, pretty'
asit'u	<i>hazitu</i>	'to grow'
ewkit'u	<i>edukitu</i>	'to have'
šegit'un	<i>segituan</i>	'soon, immediately'
gajskit'u	<i>gaizkitu</i>	'to get worse'
éresibit'u	<i>errezibitu</i>	'to receive'
dit'u	<i>ditu</i>	'(s)he has them'
sekit'ek	<i>zekitek</i>	'they know it (familiar masc. conj)'
gorit'i	<i>Gorriti</i>	'Gorriti (family name)'
kit'o	<i>kito</i>	coll. expression, 'finished' (not registered in the formal setting)

— The forms on the right are written following the orthographic conventions of the standard dialect.