

FAMILIARITY OR SOLIDARITY: THE PRONOUN HI IN BASQUE*

One of the many matters a foreigner learning Basque has to worry about consists in the proper selection of pronouns used in addressing others. Since the inventory of Basque pronouns is not overly rich, the problem looks manageable. Indeed, a choice of four is all he has to cope with: *hi*, *zu*, *zuek* and *berori* (with its plural *beroriek*).

This last form, however, need not retain his attention for very long, as it is merely an instance of the well-known practice of making use of a third person form for the purpose of signifying something more than the usual level of politeness.¹ The form *berori* can be analysed as consisting of two morphemes: *ber* “same” and *ori* “that one”, with the demonstrative pronoun corresponding to the addressee. This term is but slightly less deferential than the English expression *Your Lordship*, and is traditionally used by farmers to address priests and other dignitaries. Our foreigner, too, may occasionally be addressed in this way, in which case it would be proper for him to protest and insist upon the use of *zu*.

The form *zuek*, used if and only if there is more than one addressee, conceals no mysteries either, although a linguist or a historian might be interested in the evidence² showing this pronoun to be a relatively late addition to the language, despite its presence in all dialects and its early attestation —already in the oldest Basque volume printed: *Linguae vasconum primitiae* of 1545.

At this point, only two pronouns are left for consideration: *hi* and *zu*. On the important question as to precisely how these two modes of address function in Basque society, remarkably little has been written in the grammatical literature, from its early beginnings in the seventeenth century up to the present day.

* *RIEV* XXXVI (1991.2), 373-378.

¹ Quite often, superpolite forms later turn into ordinary polite forms. A typical example is the Italian pronoun *Lei*, once used to express special courtesy, now the usual form of polite address, still requiring, of course, a third person verb form. A similar evolution for Basque *berori*, however, does not appear at all likely. Quite the contrary, its use seems to be rapidly disappearing, as may be seen from the results of a survey carried out by J. Alberdi Larizgoitia in the Markina region, that may very well be typical of the situation in general. See pages 462 and 463 of the article cited in footnote 5.

² For this evidence, see J. W. van Eys, *Grammaire comparée*, pp. 92-93; A. Campión, *Gramática*, p. 162; and, especially, *DRA* (*Diccionario Retana de autoridades del euskera*), 9, pp. 4067-4068.

What little hints are sometimes given seem to suggest that the difference between *hi* and *zu* closely corresponds to that between Spanish *tu* and *usted*, or that between French *tu* and *vous*.³

Any such conviction, however, is likely to prove itself a source of trouble to its bearer. To see this, listen to the aforesaid foreigner complain:

When they are talking to me, my French cronies all say *tu*; my Spanish buddies say *tu*; so why can't my Basque friends, whom I have known for so long, finally make up their minds to do likewise and call me *hi*? What is the matter with them? Are they afraid of me? Don't they like me enough, or what?

There can be no doubt that a better insight into the cultural background of this aspect of linguistic behaviour would help to forestall perplexities of this sort. It stands to reason that only native scientists are in a position to evaluate the finer nuances of the cultural attitudes governing interpersonal behaviour, the more so as these are known to vary a great deal according to geographical area. Thus, it is only natural for linguists and other social scientists to await with eager anticipation the results of an ongoing study by the young Biscayan scholar Jabier Alberdi Larizgoitia.⁴

Given that Alberdi's work is still in progress and his results as yet unavailable,⁵ there should be little objection to my going ahead and sharing with the reader a line of thought that seems to me rather promising. Needless to say, no detailed study can be envisaged here, as I am only too sorely aware of my lack of sociological expertise and that intimate knowledge of Basque culture essential to such an enterprise.

I take my starting point from the traditional conception in which the pronoun *zu* is said to be polite, and the pronoun *hi* familiar. At first blush, this view seems tenable enough. A standard analysis along the lines of Roger Brown and Albert Gilman's seminal paper "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity"⁶ does seem to afford at least a first approximation to the sociolinguistics of pronominal address in Basque. Here, too, inequality of "Power" gives rise to asymmetrical forms of address: one-sided *hi* downward from above and one-sided *zu* upward from below.

Actually, in view of the firmly egalitarian ethic of traditional Basque society, such asymmetry is, in my experience, quite rare. Even between employer and employee mutual *zu* prevails, or, more rarely, mutual *hi*. Only within the family context does the power dimension play a significant role: parents wilt address their teen-age children with *hi*, but not vice versa.

³ The renowned eighteenth century jesuit scholar Larramendi is exceptional in pointing out with admirable caution that *zu* is to be situated somewhere in between *usted* and *tu*: "...es del modo y trato medio entre usted, y tu..." (*El imposible vencido. Arte de la lengua bascongada*, p. 62)

⁴ Reference is made here to a forthcoming doctoral dissertation entitled *Tratamenduak euskaraz*, to be presented by Javier Alberdi Larizgoitia at the University of the Basque Country (Vitoria).

⁵ Concerning the area surrounding the Biscayan town of Markina, some preliminary results have already been made public. See Javier Alberdi Larizgoitia: "Alokutibotasuna eta tratamenduak euskaraz: II. Markinaldeko kasua" *ASJU* 20, 2 (1986), 419-486.

⁶ R. Brown and A. Gilman, "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity", in: Th. A. Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language*, MIT Press, 1960, pp. 253-276. Reprinted in: P. P. Giglioli (ed.), *Language and Social Context*, Penguin Books, 1972, pp. 252-282.

The other dimension introduced by Brown and Gilman, "Solidarity", will serve very nicely to elucidate the symmetrical use of the pronoun *bi*, on the understanding, however, that its definition be tailored to the Basque cultural situation. Here, solidarity must be conceived of as an objective social reality: psychological factors play very little part in it. In particular, friendship, no matter whether close or not, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the use of mutual *bi*. The kind of solidarity that is relevant consists, above all, in being subject to similar living conditions: children raised in the same family, hamlet or neighbourhood, workers on the same farm or in the same factory, and so on. Age differences strongly hamper solidarity: a gap of fifteen years or more is known to virtually block the use of *bi* among adults.

This idiocratic concept of "solidarity" may well explain some of the rather striking divergencies between the use of *tu* in Romance and that of *bi* in Basque:

1. According to traditional practice, nowadays no longer universal but still widely observed, the allegedly familiar form *bi* is never used by adults to small children,⁷ not even by their own parents.⁸ The critical age for the transition from *zu* to *bi* may vary from roughly six to as much as fifteen years of age. Could the reason be that even for asymmetrical *bi* some measure of solidarity is needed, which is lacking in the case of fairly young children? A conceivable alternative explanation of the origin of this practice could be that young children were fed the forms they are supposed to use to their elders, a phenomenon not unknown elsewhere, e.g. in Bulgarian culture. However, the relative lateness of the subsequent transition to the regular one-sided *bi* would seem to militate against this alternative.
2. Aside from some surprisingly rare individual exceptions often motivated by ideological considerations, spouses never use *bi* to each other, although they may have done so prior to marriage. Apparently, the vastly different role patterns assumed in marriage are felt to preclude solidarity between husband and wife.

Such patent dissimilarity between the Basque and the Romance systems adequately accounts for a remarkable fact: the absence of interference in bilinguals. Nearly all speakers are perfectly bilingual, using Romance at least as often as Basque. Yet not the slightest tendency can be observed to equate Romance *tu* with Basque *bi*, or Romance *usted/vous* with Basque *zu*.

What has happened, however, is that in some rather limited regions the *bi* mode of address has fallen out of active use altogether, leaving *zu* as the sole form of singular address. But social factors other than Romance linguistic interference could quite well be responsible for this state of affairs, restricted as it appears to be to a few urban and semi-urban areas.

⁷ Note the exclusive use of *zu* in traditional lullabies: *haurra egizu lo, lo, lo; txakur aundia etorriko da, zue ez badezu egiten lo*. The recent Souletin composition by Etxahun Iruri *Lo hadi aingüria* constitutes a clear break with tradition.

⁸ An eminent Basque priest of my acquaintance holds this use of *zu* to reveal the deep respect Basque parents nourish toward their children, this in alleged contrast to Romance speaking parents. What a pity, then, to see this respect abruptly vanish with the children reaching puberty!

However that may be, in most of the Basque speaking territory, the pronoun *hi* is being kept very much alive. Its general survival is all the more noteworthy as mastering the corresponding morphology is no mean task. Indeed, an outstanding feature of the Basque language in all its dialects consists in the obligatory use of allocutive verb forms, so that any conjugated main verb, be it in the first, second or third person, must change to a special form as soon as the utterance is directed to someone requiring *hi*.⁹ For that reason it is just as well that non-native speakers are but seldom required to employ this form of address.¹⁰

As a conclusion to this brief discussion, I submit that the traditional conception of *zu* as a polite form and *hi* as a familiar form is seriously misleading inasmuch as it leads one to expect more conformity with neighbouring Romance practices than is in fact the case.

What I propose instead is that we view *zu* as the normal, pragmatically unmarked, form of address, and *hi* as a marked substitute, encoding the feature "Solidarity", as defined by the social realities of local Basque culture.^{11, 12}

⁹ For a recent cross-dialectal study of the morphology of allocutive verb forms, see Iñaki Gaminde, *Aditx etikoa*, Bilbao, 1984. The syntactic constraints on their use are touched upon in René Lafon's informative essay "Place de la 2.^e personne du singulier dans la conjugaison basque", *BSLP* 54, 1 (1959), 103-129.

¹⁰ Of the many thousands of otherwise competent non-native users of Basque, only a few appear to have mastered the intricate allocutive morphology. Yet, even these few almost invariably betray themselves by overusing such forms, that is, by using them in subordinate clauses also. A case in point is that of the late scholar Father Olabide s.j. whose meticulously prepared Basque Bible translation, published in 1958, is literally plagued with errors of this sort. Cf. L. Mitxelena's pointed criticism in *Egan* 1959 (1-4), p. 94, reprinted in *MIH*, p. 353 and in *MEIG II*, p. 122.

¹¹ The term "local" has been deliberately inserted here to take into account the, mostly minor, differences in the definition of "solidarity" from one region to the next, or even from hamlet to hamlet. A typical illustration of the nature of such differences is furnished by the fact that in the Baztanese area one does not use *hi* to one's sister, whereas in most other regions one does. Cf. Genevieve N'Diaye, *Structure du dialecte basque de Maya*, Mouton, 1970, p. 96.

¹² I should very much like to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Mr. Javier Alberdi Larizgoitia, whose expert comments on an earlier draft of this article resulted in more than one improvement.