

## Sharing Expertise on Boosting the Use of Basque Language in Public Communication

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**Abstract:** *Since Basque language obtained legal protection some decades ago, spreading the knowledge of the language has been the main aim of the public support policies developed in the Basque Country. Nowadays, the perspective of language revitalization and normalization policies and initiatives has changed. Promoting Basque language's effective use is becoming the main point of most of them. 'Public communication' is understood as a type of communication addressed to broad audiences. The relation between performers and institutional audiences, community relations, corporate communication, public services, and so on, is an important language use sphere. Social performers, institutions and companies are referential agents in that sphere and their public language practices can be a key for the minority language social promotion. Having presence and visibility in public media and performers' communication may grant minoritised languages acceptability and value because they affect language ideologies (e.g. normative monolingualism) and they increase affective usefulness as long as information, consumer products or speaking models spread. Jendaurrean Erabili Praktika Komunitatea (i.e. Community of Practice on the Public Use of Basque) is a project being developed since 2015 by the Basque Sociolinguistics Cluster (Soziolinguistika Klusterra) and the University of the Basque Country (Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea) in collaboration. A Community of Practice (from now onwards, CoP) for the promotion of the public use of Basque language has been created to capitalize and share the knowledge achieved through the public use of Basque made by public and private institutions. Special plan, regulations or direct intervention have often been applied in order to promote minoritised languages in public communication. Conversely, in this case, an indirect strategy has been employed, approaching the paradigm of the Linguistic Governance. The CoP itself is a methodology to overcome the obstacles that may arise in public use and in projects to promote it, while it offers a common place for knowledge exchange and communication among partners. In this paper, we will explain 1) the context and the political-ideological frame of the project and of the intervention, 2) why, what for and how the CoP has been employed as a collaborative collective method, 3) the adaptation and the development of the CoP, and 4), we will finally introduce the upcoming challenges derived from the results obtained so far.*

**Keywords:** *Community of Practice, Network Governance, Basque language promotion, Public use of Basque, Sociolinguistics*

### 1. Introduction

Basque language revitalization and normalization policies and initiatives are living a changing phase. It has been long time since Basque obtained legal protection and since its first public



support policies were developed, being in most cases the spread of people's knowledge of the language the main aim. The necessity to go beyond knowledge has gently extended in policies and social initiatives to support Basque and the promotion of its use is becoming increasingly visible. Its effective use is becoming the main point of language revitalization initiatives.

In this context, public communication has strategic relevance. Hereby, the Basque Sociolinguistics Cluster and the University of the Basque Country collaborated to conduct an action research project at the end of 2015: *Jendaurrean Erabili Praktika Komunitatea* (i.e. Community of Practice on the Public Use of Basque). In essence, the main goal of the project has been to a Community of Practice (from now onwards, CoP) for the promotion of the public use of Basque language.

Special plan, regulations or direct intervention have often been applied in order to promote minoritised languages in public communication. Conversely, in this case, an indirect strategy has been employed, approaching the paradigm of the Linguistic Governance. The basis of the project is the aim of promoting a minoritised language, ensuring the commitment and actions of social performers, institutions and companies. As long as performers who also communicate in that language have enough experience and knowledge of it, they favored the option of creating a CoP in order to learn from each other and to make a combined effort together. Then, the CoP itself is a methodology to overcome the obstacles that may arise in public use and in projects to promote it, while it offers a common place for knowledge exchange and communication among partners.

The central idea of the CoP is to capitalize the knowledge achieved through the public use of Basque made by public and private institutions. The procedures and functions of the CoP have been determined by a Core Group that has been part as well as a performer of this community. In fact, it has been this team the one in charge of initiating the CoP. Thus, diagnostic work related to knowledge and science on the public use of Basque has been made (e.g. how to conduct this work, how to overcome obstacles, what to use, how to improve, how to promote). The context has also been examined: what and how to communicate in this minoritised language in the current context. In addition, the project has two more specific goals: 1) communication practices, styles and policies have been analyzed, compared and taken as models available for everyone for public communication in Basque or in two languages, and 2) for the participants of *Jendaurrean Erabili* project, the CoP is 'a context for promotion' and a referential performer in public communication.

## **2. Framework of the Action Research Project**

After Franco's dictatorship and its language repression policy (Anaut 2013), initiatives for the promotion and revitalization of Basque have been presented as normalization since autonomous communities were established. In 1982 in the Basque Autonomous Community, the *Law for the Normalization of the Use of the Basque Language* was approved. According to the model established there, the policies for the revitalization of Basque have not been addressed to a small or monolingual community but on the spread of Basque to the whole population. In the Community of Navarre, those policies have had territorial limits since the *Basque Law* of 1986 distinguishes three language areas: 1) the Basque-speaking one, 2) the mixed one and 3) the Spanish-speaking one.

It can be said that the official language ideology has been bilingualism. Even though social initiatives, activist groups and sub-state public institutions have been and are often confronting one another, there has been an agreement on the idea that the normalization of Basque had to be in line with bilingualism, in some cases, as an unwanted but compulsory phase. As Gorter and Cenoz put it, “the official aim of the language policy is the equivalence of Basque and Spanish and the policy is basically bilingual, but at the same time there is the underlying idea that citizens should be given the opportunity to use Basque in their everyday life. Therefore, the aim for the minority language is to become a normal language of everyday communication” (Gorter and Cenoz, 2016: 235). In order to respect citizens’ linguistic rights, the administration has had to become bilingual, which is an ongoing process. In addition to language learning policies and the ‘bilingualization’ of the administration and public media, Basque has also appeared and spread in the public sphere. Therefore, many communications in Basque are performed in front of people who cannot speak Basque, that is to say, making no distinction between audiences who can speak Basque and those who cannot. This leads us to the main problem that originated this project: how can a language be normalized in the public sphere when not everybody speaks it? Basque is frequently excluded in favor of bigger languages. But acceptability problems may arise when people who cannot speak Basque reject being addressed to in Basque. In short, Basque is regarded as a less valuable language in terms of communication.

For a long time, the conflict dynamics between power and counter-power that took root during the Francoism has characterized the Language Governance of the Basque Country. Pro-Basque movements and Basque public autonomous institutions have been working in a conflictive governance situation, although they have sometimes achieved collaborations and agreement. In the past years, on the contrary, things have changed and it is increasing the number of public institutions, activist groups, social and community associations and private companies that work together on initiatives and projects. There are two clear signs that indicate that the Linguistic Governance model is changing: 1) more and more efforts and initiatives to revitalize Basque are being carried out so that collaboration is created, promoted and developed, and 2) goals and means of Language Governance are being primarily assigned to increasing the language use, the effective use, and not so many to increase the number of speakers.

Among the factors that facilitate the change of the governance model it has to be considered the institutionalization and professionalization of the pro-Basque movement and the linguistic normalization attempts. In addition, the feeling that the language revitalization and spread based on learning and standardization have reached their limit has extended among experts and citizens: a pause period is mentioned and how to overcome it by means of ‘activation’, some initiatives have been carried out in order to activate the language use. In this kind of projects, it is essential to previously work on an extensive and varied legitimation, that is to say, it is essential to organize the Language Governance and more specifically a community governance to revitalize language, because the key for innovation might be there (Normand, 2011).

The change of language policies is also taking place because it depends on global changes from national monolingual perspectives to a diversity perspective that globalization offers (Wright, 2005) and from planning to governance (Loughlin and Williams, 2007; Walsh, 2012).



Language governance is related with the ‘neoliberalization’ of states and with the neoliberal models of the New Public Management, but governance is beyond privatization of state and public services—it is a resource for the participation of all social actors in public policies (in the case of Canada, see: Wallot, 2005; Cardinal and Forgues, 2015). In this sense, corporate groups, lobbies, communities and activist groups have the opportunity to grow their effectiveness and social responsibility. In short, governance is the result of the decay of the state-centric regulation (Loughlin and Williams 2007: 59–60). This is why there is not an only governance model, and, in the end, the participants in those policies will form the predominant nature of governance: conflictive, collaborative, agreeing, engaged, and so on.

Language Governance should work to properly join and manage the demands of activists associations (i.e. language revitalization and equality) and the interests of private performers according to the normative framework established by the public institutions (i.e. bilingualism based on voluntariness), so that, for instance, all of them, including companies and private groups, assume responsibility for respecting legal language equality and speakers’ rights established in this framework during their work.

### **3. Learning Together and from One Another**

Our main objective was to promote the use of Basque in a strategic sector. We wanted to spread the need to activate (i.e. to turn knowledge into practical use) the public communication of the minoritised language. To this end, we chose a common and shared leadership who should represent the actual actors of that change; they should be the ones in charge of creating, legitimizing and spreading this goal. And this is why we undertook the action research project called *Jendaurrean Erabili*.

The project has been a Participatory Action Research (from now onwards, PAR) right from the beginning, which is a research method based on the active participation of the analyzed subject. There are three main differences between the PAR and the conventional research: 1) shared ownership of research projects, 2) community-based analysis of social problems and 3) an orientation toward community action (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2007: 273). All of these aspects characterized *Jendaurrean Erabili*.

The characteristics of our CoP are revealed in the creation, development and results of the community itself. On the one hand, because the development of a PAR is not a mechanical sequence of steps but a spiral of self-reflective cycles of constant planning, action and testing again and again (Ibidem, 2007: 276). On the other hand, the success criterion is that the participants “have a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their practices, their understandings of their practices, and the situations in which they practice” (Ibidem, 2007: 277). We have searched the change in communication practices; to make them easier, better, more effective and more in Basque. Hence, as usual in PAR, we have initiated a project for the learning group to build some research knowledge and know-how. In short, the task of the project has been to provide a tool for the collective learning—a tool that offers the opportunity to learn from each other, to create new knowledge, to improve one’s practice and a way to transform each one’s linguistic environment. This tool is of course the CoP. The CoP fulfils the requirements of the PAR: it directly affects learning, it offers the opportunity to change

and to reframe social practices, it serves to analyze one's knowledge and to share it with others, and it provides the context to carry out transformation and change processes.

As it is well known, the concept CoP was created in the context of theorization on learning and knowledge spreading, initially related to social learning and shared knowledge creation (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). In brief, a CoP is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Ibid, 2015); or shorter, it is a 'social fabric of learning' (Wenger et al. 2002:28). In CoPs, experience and competence complement each other. They are regimes of competence (Eckert and Wenger 2005). In this sense, the goal of the project gets clear: expanding and promoting a 'regime of competence' (i.e. competence and knowledge for the public communication in Basque) means promoting the practice and activity itself (i.e. the public communication in Basque).

As stated by Wenger in his work, a CoP has three essential characteristics (Wenger 1998; Wenger and Wenger-Trayner 2015):

- 1.** The domain: the community has an identity defined by an area of interest. Its members have a shared competence, they learn from each other.
- 2.** The community: the CoP is organized around a joint enterprise or common goal, common or similar interests and matters.
- 3.** The practice: the CoP is not an interest community. Members practice, and from this practice, members create a shared resource repertoire experiences, stories, tools, usual ways to solve problems.

It has been more than three decades since the concept of CoP was created, and in this time span it has been applied, worked, transformed and criticized in lots of different ways. In general, it has apparently had a particular evolution, from a 'psychological model with the social as a context' into a 'model which is essentially social' (Barton and Tusting, 2005: 4). As explained before, considering the situation of Basque and the current context, we thought that the CoP could be a proper and effective tool to perform its function. Therefore, we conceived the CoP *Jendaurrean Erabili* as a tool for social transformation and, at the same time, as a social actor.

In October 2015, the CoP of the *Jendaurrean Erabili* project was initiated. More specifically, the core group that should be the seed of this community started to meet. Nine performers have participated in this group: Adeg, AEK, Athletic Club Bilbao, EITB, ELA, Getxo Town Council, Provincial Government of Gipuzkoa, Guggenheim Bilbao Museum, and the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU). We wanted to mix sectors, sizes and activities, but the two most important things were having special leadership in its sector and having notorious activity in public communication.

From November 2015 to June 2016, we deployed the first and most laborious phase to structure and form the CoP with that core group. Tests were conducted during the discussions in order to decide how our CoP should be. Concerning the structure, an adaptation of Lave's and Wenger's proposal was prioritized (Lave and Wenger 1991). According to these researchers, there are usually layers or participation levels in CoPs. In strong communities, there are central and outlying layers—there is a core formed by skilled performers of a high level of participation, and then beginners of a low level of participation on the outskirts. In our CoP, the community has 1)



a core group (i.e. coordinators and most active participants), 2) members who sometimes could participate in the events and activities proposed by the core and who are registered as friends in the community, and 3) those who participate as followers.

The process of structuring of the CoP has been dynamic. As the group formed, it was decided how the CoP would be as well as its normal functioning. In this initial phase, then, participants had some tasks: the community was structured. To this end, the community took part in an evaluative diagnosis in order to organize a shared repertoire on the common practice by means of some discussion sessions and narrative building exercises.

In 2017 the public phase of the CoP has been activated. A public presentation and a web page have been made: <http://jendaurrean.eus/eu>. This phase is the monitoring phase of the CoP: arrival of new members, enforcement of the CoP in the working sessions, expansion of the network, and strategic development.

#### **4. From Multiple Experiences to Common Repertoires**

In the first phase of the PAR, the core group made a shared diagnosis and repertoire to organize and structure the CoP. In the working sessions each participant and examined how they made their public communication in Basque, overcame the obstacles or could improve their activities. The group discussed about communication practices in their current situations, communication strategies and techniques, legitimation of social innovation, management of the communication types and the new technologies, leadership development in social innovation and language change processes, public services organization in Basque (e.g. health service). A shared repertoire was arranged in those working sessions. As soon as participants started talking about communication practices in Basque, common topics arose: the adequacy of internal and external audience differentiation, the limited effectiveness of the communication plans the need to constantly adequate and renew brokers, and so on and so forth.

The *techniques and tricks* that the participants make use of were also mentioned—the contents of the messages in Basque were special value, the channel was special, the form was remarkable, special or bilingual things on social networks, and so forth. Due to the close relation with journalists, the problems of the use of minoritised languages in press conferences were also commented (e.g. when journalists leave the place if Basque is used after Spanish).

Participants tended to associate the poor value of the public communication in Basque with an abnormal situation. In fact, when communication in Basque starts, strong established habits should change in private as well as in public communication. All performers have a specific behavior when it comes to language use. Some based on strong decisions and specific plans; others based on habits. However, all have made many decisions on the kind of communication, especially on the communication in Basque—for sure, it has been a difficult decision-making process. Nowadays the public space for communication is not the space of traditional media. Many performers interact with their communities directly; they choose their audience in an increasingly accurate way and their messages to their audience are increasingly specific. In other words, in some cases media is not always the first choice when communicating and,

in addition to this, audiences are segmented. These audiences vary in size—in some cases, they are worldwide. Consequently, more and more languages are used (i.e. the case for Athletic, Guggenheim and some others) and the criteria and policies of language use are more complex. In such a context, performers have to pay special attention to public communication in minoritised languages such as Basque.

Beyond what has been collected in the discussion sessions of the community, we included the views of all participants in the project, so that shared and heterogeneous knowledge was achieved. Thus, we summarized in a single document the knowledge and experience that participants offered to each other. We made a diagnosis of each participant's communication performance, of their communication in Basque and of the context in general. In our CoP, researchers and participants wrote a narrative (Balasch and Montenegro 2003), and all the texts were grouped in a single document. Later on, this collection of narratives has been used as a guide to go 'from multiple voices to common challenges' in order to decide prospective challenges and working lines of the CoP. The following are the core ideas that appeared when accounting for the practice carried out by the CoP in public communication in Basque:

- *Consciousness of the leaders' function.* Participants do know that big and popular associations, public or not, work as a driving force in public communication in Basque.
- *Basque, a positive characteristic.* It is already known that guiding institutions can transform Basque into a positive characteristic by means of its use, especially if this use is presented in sensible frames.
- *Need for coordination.* It is necessary to work with the actors in charge of the communication and the space of information.
- *Targeted and positive differentiation for Basque.* The participants of the CoP act like media and use direct ways to communicate with their audiences, and special target groups.
- *Legitimacy and normality.* In general, it is taken as accepted and normalized the inert use of Basque. However, there are also exceptions, and problems are linked to the acceptability and legitimacy levels.
- *A minimum protection for systematic bilingualism.* When working to achieve acceptability, it is important to highlight that often the performance in both languages is carried out in order to be lawful, especially for public institutions.
- *The capacity of the institution to communicate in Basque.* Finally, each institution or performer must know and use its linguistic resources well.

## 5. Conclusions

The main task of the project here presented is to create a CoP formed by performers that work on public communication in Basque. The goal is clear: the CoP must achieve the transformation so that the minoritised language is more frequently used in wide public communication. The central core of the project is practice, not attitudes on practice. The basic hypothesis here is related to the performance of practice—if a certain practice is about to be implemented, this must become attractive and comfortable. Practice must be visible and worth seeing in the near context, it needs the legitimization of the referential actors and it must be available for everyone.



The bottom line is that not only the communication and the language use of the public services must be taken into account, but also the technical aspects of linguistic management. A Language Governance model strengthens the methods chosen in order to create and share the knowledge on practices—a governance based on language equality and the shared leadership of the different performers. We have made lots of work, therefore, in order to enable the public communication in Basque, in order to legitimize the use of the minoritised language, so that indirect legitimization and community leadership of the referential authorities is achieved.

With regard to leadership, and in order to promote a new model of governance, it must be said that the *Jendaurrean Erabili* CoP is achieving significant outcome as a ‘legitimization platform’ and as a ‘balanced model.’ An example of this is the initiative *Gipuzkoa Berdinago* (i.e. ‘More Equal Gipuzkoa’, a declaration in favor of a more balanced public language policy). This initiative is a working line emerged from the *Jendaurrean Erabili* CoP and promoted by the Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa (2018).

The document shows what kind of steps they will take to make Basque more visible in their public performances—conscious and deliberate management, spokespersons will have to have a good communication level in Basque, they will be provided with training, Basque-speaking reporters will be sent to the public events, linguistic balance on discourses and speeches, and so on.

This project has had a social impact since it was started. It has shown that there are many motivated performers ready to communicate in Basque. In fact, they have enough experience performing this task. Hence, sharing this knowledge and experience they will transform the context, create new leaders and new kinds of leadership. Since the beginning, we have assumed that CoPs are safe places to share challenges, and we have tried to create an atmosphere of collaboration and confidence in order to face the common challenges and innovations of the project. In this sense, to some extent, we have created a new and motivating context in which participants have heard others’ experiences and were given the opportunity to assess theirs. In some cases, some performers have seen others as driving forces.

In 2018 and 2019 the *Jendaurrean Erabili* CoP will continue working and facing the many challenges it has. Some challenges are internal, related to the management and development of the CoP. The internal life and collaboration density must increase since we have had clear limitations associated to the size, activity differences or even the individual positions of the participants. In brief, we have tested a method (i.e. a CoP) to create and manage knowledge in a difficult field (i.e. public communication performers of all types). The community will continue this way, redefining the pioneer work of the driving forces by means of their practice and, if possible, working on new commitments. At the same time, the CoP will keep playing the role of a partner for its participants, expanding its leadership and, finally, offering normalized, comfortable and easy models to perform public communication in Basque.

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## 7. Methodological Appendix

The main aim of the Participatory Action Research (PAR) project presented in this paper has been to create a CoP and to test the usefulness of this methodology in the sphere of language use promotion. Simultaneously with the creation process of the CoP, many tasks linked to knowledge sharing, a common diagnosis and looking for the design of monitoring tools have been developed. It is especially remarkable the use of narrative based techniques.

The first phase of the project, the creation and launch of the CoP was developed between 2015 and 2017. Nowadays the CoP is still working.

## 8. Biographical Note

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Eduardo Apodaka Ostaiakoetxea (Bilbao, 1965) is professor in the Department Of Social Psychology And Methodology Of The Behavioral Sciences at the University of the Basque Country. His main research interests include identity, psychologization, individualization, power relations, authority legitimation, linguistic praxis. He is the author of various articles in collective books and journals; i.e. *Komunikazioaren gizarte psikologia* (UEU, 2004), *Norberaren autonomia krisian* (Pamiela 2012) – Juan Zelaia Award –, *Identitate eta Anomalia* (Pamiela 2015).