



## Elbira Zipitria Chair in Basque Studies

(Etxepare Basque Institute and McGill University)

Inaugural colloquium. September 9<sup>th</sup> 2022

McGill University Faculty Club, Montréal (Canada)

[https://www.mcgill.ca/centre-montreal/files/centre-montreal/engfinal\\_programme\\_-\\_colloque\\_elbira-zipitria\\_9\\_sept\\_22.pdf](https://www.mcgill.ca/centre-montreal/files/centre-montreal/engfinal_programme_-_colloque_elbira-zipitria_9_sept_22.pdf)

## *Euskaraldia*: an attempt to change the social norms for the use of languages

Pablo Suberbiola Unanue (Soziolinguistika Klusterra)

Good afternoon and first I would like to thank Etxepare Institute and McGill University for inviting us to participate in this event. I hope that the Elbira Zipitria Chair, which is just beginning today, enjoys a very long and fruitful development. I also would like to say thank you Kanien'keha:ka nation, for hosting us today in their territory.

In my speech I will try to introduce a new initiative carried out in the Basque Country, because, this initiative may have certain interesting elements concerning, culture innovation, and also, promotion of minority languages.

I work at the Sociolinguistics cluster, in the Research Center for the Revitalisation of Euskara. There, along with University of the Basque Country teacher Pello Jauregui, we have been performing applied research about the subject of language habit changing processes, which is the approach this speech focuses on.

On the 23rd of November 2018, in many cities and streets of the Basque Country, thousands and thousands of Basque speakers and passive Basque speakers, went out to the street wearing a badge.

It was the Euskaraldia, a widespread sociolinguistic exercise, directed at Basque speakers and passive Basque speakers, and with a duration of ten days.

Before the initiative, many people worked hard and thrillingly to prepare it: both, organizers from different towns, and representatives and technicians from many institutions. It required work and excitement, but also a lot of resources.

In 2018 the first Euskaraldia was held in the whole Basque Country, and it can be said that it was a success. It was decided to organize it every two years, and in 2020, in spite of the pandemic, it was possible to somehow hold the second one. Now, in two months, in November of 2022 the Euskaraldia will be celebrated a third time.

And, what does “Euskaraldia” mean? “Aldia” means the moment to do something, therefore “euskaraldia”, could be translated as the moment or the time for euskara.

In her 2012 rich work *Reclaiming Basque*, Jacqueline Urla describes how the social movement in favor of Basque has been reshaping.

It could be said that Euskaraldia is a current example of the creativity and new opportunities Urla describes, and we will try to bring this initiative closer to you, with this presentation. Bringing it closer and also valuing how it can contribute to the efforts to revitalize minority languages.

And what is Euskaraldia? It's an initiative that aims to improve the social use of Basque, and to do that, it pays special attention to the linguistic behaviors, habits and their changes.

People take part in it voluntarily, and to do it, they have to choose one of the following two roles.

AHOBIZI. “Aho” means mouth and “bizi” means alive or active. So it would translate to active mouth. If you wear that badge during the Euskaraldia you will be saying: I will talk in Basque to anyone who can understand me. I will always say the first word in Basque, and I will continue to do so if the partner can understand me, even if he or she replies in Spanish or French.

The other role is BELARRIPREST. “Belarri” means ear and “prest” ready or eager. So it would translate to eager to listen, or active ear. If you wear that badge, you will be saying: I understand Basque and want to be talked to in that language. Because I may find it difficult to speak in Basque, but understand it. Or maybe, I do have the ability to speak Basque, but I don't have the habit to do it constantly, or just don't want to commit to it. But in any case, I want to be talked to in Basque, and I will reply in Basque or not, but please continue talking to me in Basque.

To understand the nature of this initiative, it is advisable to underline two key aspects.

The first one is that the initiative is both social and institutional. Euskaraldia has always been a result of the combined work of Basque social movements and institutions. That double nature, social and institutional, is in our opinion, one of the keys to achieve the goals of this initiative.

During Euskaraldia people are invited to make specific changes about their linguistic behaviour. It would be difficult for people to join an initiative with such personal implications, if they didn't feel there was a social aspect attached to it.

On the other hand, without the protection of public institutions, the initiative would not have resources to be organized and widespread, which would limit the capacity it can have to make a difference. Similarly, the involvement of public entities has enabled the initiative to be believable and to have an official label, which is very important to achieve the involvement of big enterprises and social organizations.

The second key aspect is that the initiative has got a very concrete proposal regarding the use of the language. It proposes the mentioned Ahobizi and Belarriprest roles, and each one is given simple and clear instructions about the use of the language. That way, those who join the initiative, make a public commitment with their language practices, shown by their badges.

To explore the suitability, potential and limits of Euskaraldia, it is advisable to outline the sociolinguistic reality of the Basque Country. Anyhow, because of the limited time, I'll just mention a few general ideas.

Taking into account different sociolinguistic surveys and other investigations, and attempting to summarize the development of the last decades, it can be said:

Firstly, thanks to a big social and institutional effort, the society of the Basque country is becoming more bilingual. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to provide the new speakers, who have only learnt Basque at school, with opportunities to use it in daily social situations, and to socialize in Basque.

Overall, the efforts to revitalize Basque have been plentiful, both socially and institutionally. In this post-industrial society of the start of the XXI century, nevertheless, the number of factors which obstruct and difficult the advancement of a minority language such as Basque are numerous and powerful, and are constantly changing.

Thus, the advancements that have happened, regarding the place and importance that Basque has on our society are partial and limited. And, considering the data about the social use of Basque, it would appear that the forces for and against it are quite balanced at the moment.

The Euskaraldia initiative would be placed in this context.

And, what are the results of this initiative?

The first result we would underline is that, Euskaraldia has achieved a big involvement and participation inside the movements in favour of Basque. In a wide majority of the towns in the Basque Country, commissions were created to organize Euskaraldia.

The second important result would be the participation. On this table it can be seen the number of people who signed up for Euskaraldia, compared to the potential participants. In 2018, 19.1% of all the Basque speakers and passive Basque speakers signed up for the initiative: two hundred and twenty five thousand citizens. Since this is an initiative that

requires personal involvement, we can say that this number is significant, which shows that people were touched and motivated by it.

And what happened with the use of Basque? Has Euskaraldia had any effect on that? You can see one of the data provided by the research during the 2018 Euskaraldia in the graph. Those who took part in Euskaraldia were asked the following question "Among your close interlocutors, to how many of them who understand Basque do you speak in Basque?". The percentage on the graph shows the sum, the proportion of those who answered "To all or almost all" or "To the majority". Three different moments are shown, before Euskaraldia, immediately after and 3 months later.

Euskaraldia, therefore, has had a significant impact on those who took part in it: an improvement of twenty points. However, three months later, this improvement is diminished for the most part, remaining at a growth of 5.6 points.

Therefore, we could say Euskaraldia has given its participants the chance to change their language use and to taste a higher use of Basque. However, in many cases this experience was too short to stabilize those behaviours.

If we move to personal experiences, as the participants claimed, the identifying badge and the context created by Euskaraldia encouraged them to use Basque more. And also that, it creates suitable socio-emotional conditions for the use of Basque, also providing a certain social legitimacy.

Through the survey some limits and weaknesses have been noted too. We will focus on two, for the moment. On the one hand, as said by the participants, it is difficult to speak Basque for long and in a relaxed way, with those who have a limited ability to speak it. And on the other hand, Euskaraldia has proposed to carry out bilingual conversations in order to introduce Basque. Although there have been improvements in this area, this behavior hasn't spread much among the participants for the moment.

After looking at the characteristics and results of the initiative, we will direct our attention to the theoretical basis, to the theoretical hypothesis and sociolinguistic approaches behind its design. To do so, we will underline four ideas:

The first one is the collective perspective. This perspective is one of the foundations of Euskaraldia. The use of a language is never an individual matter, but a collective one, it requires at least a group of two people. So, when this initiative was designed, it was done taking this approach into account.

The second one is, the transgressive behaviour, and its protection. In a relationship where Spanish or French are usual, talking in Basque breaks an implicit rule and it can be transgressive in a sense. It is something strange, uncomfortable and tiresome. However, a change in language habits cannot happen, without that transgression. Besides, if we want speakers who will embrace it, that behaviour must be protected, and try to make it attractive and viable for those speakers.

Euskaraldia tries to achieve that, through the complementing roles of Ahobizi and Belarriprest.

Ahobizi is the transgressive behaviour, who will take the initiative to speak Basque. He or she can break what was a habit until then, and can clear the way for a greater use of Basque.

And Belarriprest is the one who protects that attitude and makes it viable. First of all, by making sure the Ahobizi is understood. Secondly, by expressing a desire for said behaviour and accepting it. And also, with that protection, the attitude is given legitimacy and a sense.

The next idea is to consider the use of Basque as a mean, not as an end. In many attempts to improve minority languages, the use of it is understood as a result of certain steps; as a goal that will be achieved after following instructions a, b and c. That is not the perspective behind Euskaraldia.

In this case, the theoretical hypothesis is that the way to establish a habit of speaking Basque starts from the beginning with its use, and creating the conditions that will make it possible.

Once the use of Basque has been introduced in a new relationship or situation, if the conditions are adequate, it will be possible to repeat that behaviour and, that way, to start stabilizing and making it stronger, until it is set as a habit. We would say, therefore, that the viewpoint is not "first learn and then do" but "learn by doing".

And finally, the idea that if there is comprehension, it is possible to use it. From the theoretical approach of this initiative, wanting to increase the use of Basque, an effort has been made to identify the minimum components for its use. And those components have been defined as the following: a colleague who understands Basque, even if he or she is a passive Basque speaker, and another one who speaks it fluently.

And through the initiative, we try to create a situation in which the use of Basque can be initiated, with those minimum elements. Later, as these exercises are repeated and these behaviours are socially spread, they would become more known and usual, and so more viable.

To make that usage under minimum conditions possible, some innovations are proposed. Innovations which are not very usual for the Basque society and, so, are new to its speakers.

We would mention three: 1) those who understand Basque will specifically request to be talked to in Basque. 2) To have bilingual conversations, in which those who understand but can't speak Basque will speak Spanish or French, and the other will speak Basque. And 3) those who speak Basque correctly will adapt their speech, to be more easily understood by the other speaker.

And which are the limits of such initiative? Can it have the capacity to increase the use of Basque in the following years? Can it have the strength to change the social norms for the use of languages in the Basque Country?

And, about the innovations, to what extent does it suppose an innovation for the sociolinguistic culture of the Basque Country?

These questions don't have definite answers, and those answers can change over the following years, depending on different variables. For the moment we would mention the following aspects.

The first one we would mention, is the hopefulness and implication of the linguistic community. It could be said that, in the two previous editions, a big implication by both, institutions and people, was achieved. If going forward we want Euskaraldia's effect to be greater, it is important to maintain and renovate this level of implication, and to reach more members of the linguistic community with it.

In that process of expanding and reinforcing this type of initiative, increasing the number of Belarriprest will be key, and also to encourage people who don't have Basque very present in their lives, to take that role.

Amongst nowadays' Basque people, those who learn Basque at school instead of at home or on their closest network, are becoming bigger in numbers. Many Basque speakers of that type, even if they can understand Basque properly, don't have many chances to use it in their daily life. As far as we know, until now, the involvement of that type of speaker hasn't been significant in Euskaraldia.

If in the following years those speakers took up the Belarriprest role in big numbers, and began speaking Basque with Ahobizis who are used to speaking Basque, the effect of Euskaraldia would be much bigger.

Another aspect worth mentioning, is the duration of Euskaraldia and the relation it has to the processes of language habit changes. Euskaraldia is intended to be a widespread social exercise, which will create a special environment for ten days, in order to make changes and set new kinds of language uses in motion.

That doesn't mean that a process to change language habits, which have been established for long between two people, or within a group, can be completed in only ten days.

Euskaraldia can be a way to change language habits, if the experiences, changes and happenings of those ten days are continued afterwards, both in personal relationships and in the language use planning. It will be effective, if the changes happening on those ten days, set in motion deeper and wider change processes. If that doesn't happen, of course, its effect will be much more limited.

The quote you can read on the screen now, has been extracted from sociolinguist Joan Pujolar's work *"Gender, Heteroglossia and Power"*, and we could say that those two fragments we have put in bold, are key when looking at the effects an initiative like Euskaraldia can create.

According to critical sociolinguistics, if we understand speaking as a social practice, we accept that there is, in fact, a control over our way of speaking. A constant measuring of the symbolic value of our speech.

If an initiative like Euskaraldia wants to have a significant effect, if it aims to set in motion important changes in language norms, it has to be capable of creating those autonomous moments or spaces in which it will be possible to behave in an unusual way, and interlocutors will accept it.

To do so, it is necessary to use the power the linguistic community can have to create those spaces, regardless of their subordinated position. Depending on to what extent those autonomous spaces are created within the initiative Euskaraldia, its effects on the use of Basque will be bigger or smaller.

Finally, concerning social innovation, on the one hand it is important for Euskaraldia to maintain its double nature, social and institutional, and to keep renovating it going forward.

Besides that, we have mentioned three innovations made by this initiative: 1) those who understand Basque asking to be talked to in it, 2) bilingual conversations and 3) those who master Basque adapting their speech.

We believe that these three elements could help renew the sociolinguistic culture of the Basque Country, and in the current situation of Basque, they could help break ceilings in its use.

But of course, for these elements to expand and take root amongst the citizens, it will require hard work, time and social strength.

Thank you for your attention.