

Week 1

Historical and social aspects of Basque

October 20, 2009

1 Terminology

Words referring to the Basque Country, the Basque language, and diverse Basque institutions are formed around the root *eusk-* ‘Basque’. For example, the name of the language is *euskera*, which combines *eusk-* with the suffix *-era* ‘in the manner of’ –thus, *euskera* means “(speaking) in the manner of the Basques”; the territory of the Basque Country is called *Euskal Herria* or *Euskadi*; the Academy of the Basque Language is *Euskaltzaindia*, with combines *eusk-* with the verbal root *zain(du)* ‘to protect’ –i.e., it literally means “those who protect the Basque language”.

The etymology of this root is unclear, though. In the 19th century, Sabino Arana and other Basque nationalists proposed that it derives from *eguzki* ‘sun’, eventually modifying spellings to *euzkera*, *Euzkadi*, *Euzkal Herria*, and so on. This hypothesis was clearly in imitation of the connection between the Greek name for Greece (*Hellas*) and the Greek word for ‘sun’ (*helios*), but it was proposed without any supporting evidence, and it is groundless. Various linguists have pointed to Ausci (a Pyrenean tribe from Roman times that might have spoken some form of Proto-Basque) as a possible source, but no definitive consensus has been reached.

It is notable that Latin already had a verb *uasconice* which meant ‘to speak in the Basque way’, which later derived into the French and English word *Basque* and the Spanish *vasco* and *vascuence*. Thus, whatever the origin of the root *eusk-*, it goes back to pre-Roman times.

Someone who can speak Basque is called *euskaldun*, which comes from *euskera* plus the possessive suffix *-dun/-tun* –i.e., *euskaldun* means “person who has (knowledge of) the Basque language”. Typically, a distinction is made between *euskaldun zahar* (old *euskaldun*) and *euskaldun berri* (new *euskaldun*), depending on whether, for a given person, Basque is their native language or a second language learnt later in life. In recent times, though, there has been some confusion, as some people have begun extending the meaning of *euskaldun* to cover people born or socially connected to the Basque Country, regardless of whether they speak Basque. This is incorrect, however, as there exists already a different term to refer to such people –namely *euskal herritar* (literally “Basque citizen”). Note that the two terms are logically independent of each other.

- There are a number of people that qualify as *euskaldun* (as they are fluent in Basque), but which are not *euskal herritar* because they were born and spent most of their lives outside the Basque Country. Some of the people in this situation are very notable Basque linguists, such as Rudolf de Rijk (born and lived in the Netherlands) or Larry Trask (born in the

United States, lived in England), and more recently Bill Haddican (born in the United States, living in England), and Milan Rezac (born in the Czech Republic, living in France).

- Conversely, there are a number of people (especially in the western part of Bizkaia and the southern parts of Araba and Nafarroa) who, having been born and having lived in the Basque Country, qualify as *euskal herritar*, but who have a poor or non-existent knowledge of Basque and therefore don't qualify as *euskaldun*.

Basque also has the word *erdara* (or occasionally *erdera*), which refers to any language that is not Basque. In context, though, it usually refers to either Spanish or French, depending on the location of the speaker. As an amusing note, the first element of the word is *erdi* 'half' –so if you are not speaking Basque, you are only speaking a half-language.

2 Geography

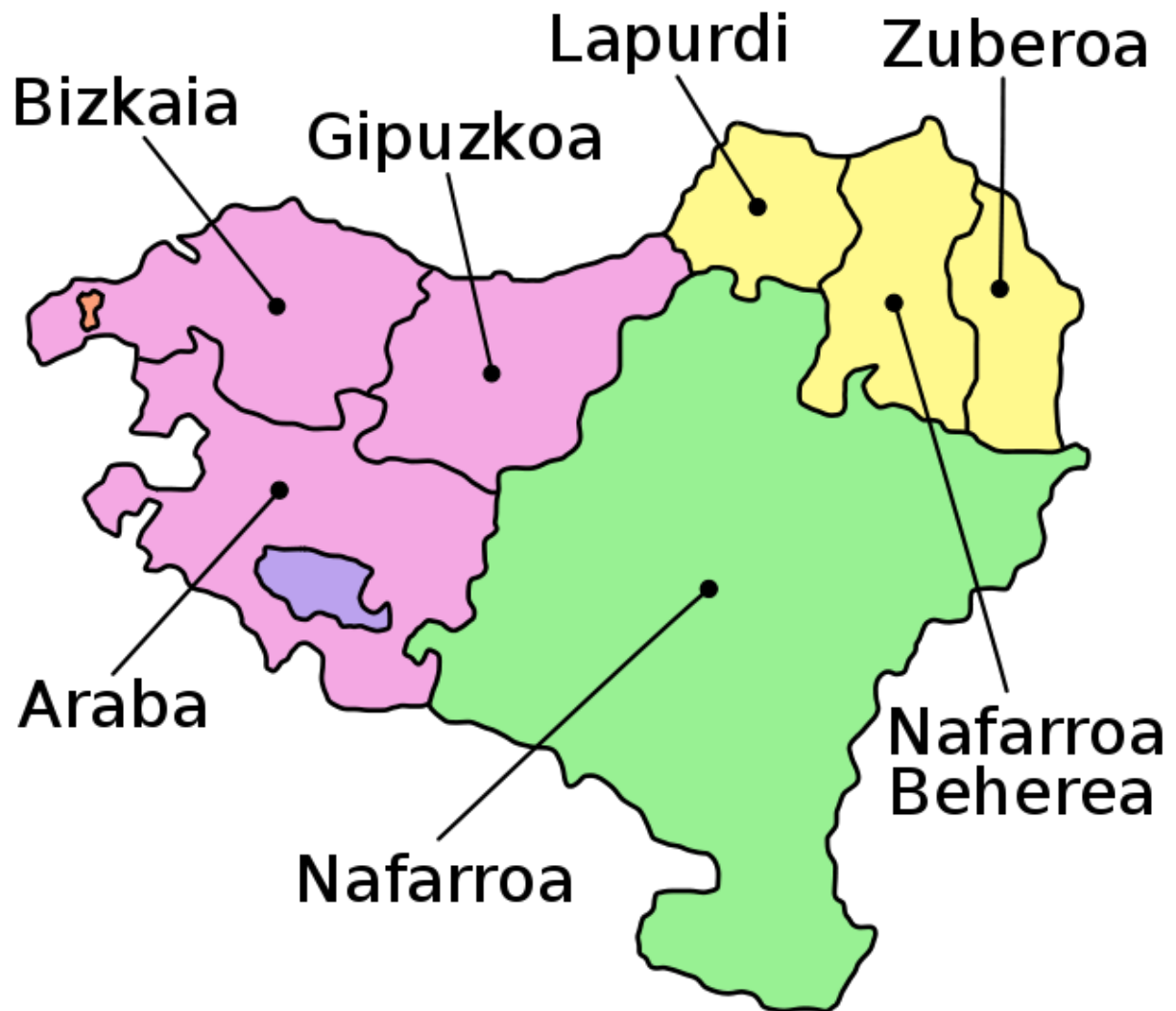
The term “Basque Country” has two different meanings, which we should be careful to distinguish.

- **The Autonomous Community of the Basque Country:** in Spanish, *Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco*. This is an official administrative division of Spain (one of the 17 Autonomous Communities), comprising three provinces:
 1. Bizkaia (*Vizcaya* in Spanish), whose capital city is Bilbao. Bilbao is also the largest city of the Autonomous Community: while the municipality of Bilbao itself only has around 350.000 inhabitants, the larger metropolitan area associated to it (*Gran Bilbao*) is home to around 950.000 people –that is, about 80% of the population of Bizkaia, and over 40% of the total population of the Autonomous Community.
 2. Gipuzkoa (*Guipúzcoa* in Spanish), whose capital city is Donostia (*San Sebastián* in Spanish), the smallest of the three capital cities.
 3. Araba (*Álava* in Spanish), whose capital city is Gasteiz (*Vitoria* in Spanish). Gasteiz is also the capital of the Autonomous Community and the seat of the Basque Government (*Eusko Jauriaritza*).



- **The Basque Country as a historical/cultural entity:** this is a set of seven regions bound by the fact that Basque has been spoken in all of them for several centuries. However, as it is split between Spain and France, it has (as of today) no official status, and therefore no capital city, no parliamentary representation, etc. The seven territories in question are:
 - The three provinces of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country.
 - The province of Nafarroa (*Navarra* in Spanish), located in Spain. Its capital city is Iruñea, occasionally also spelled Iruña (*Pamplona* in Spanish).
 - The western half of the Département des Pyrénées Atlantiques in France, which is divided into three historical territories. These territories are called *historical* because, while they corresponded to provinces in pre-revolutionary France, nowadays are only a conglomerate of arrondissements within the Département des Pyrénées Atlantiques.
 1. Lapurdi (*Labourde* in French). The capital was Ustaritz (*Ustaritze* in French), although presently the most prominent city is Baiona (*Bayonne* in French).
 2. Behe-Nafarroa or Nafarroa-Beherea (*Basse-Navarre* in French), which used to be part of the Kingdom of Navarre in medieval times. It had two capital cities, namely Donibane-Garazi (*Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port* in French) and Donapaleu (*Saint-Palais* in French).
 3. Zuberoa (*Soule* in French). Its capital city was Maule (*Mauleón* in French).

For obvious reasons, the set of Lapurdi, Behe-Nafarroa, and Zuberoa is usually referred to as the *French Basque Country*, whereas the set of Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, Araba, and Nafarroa is the *Spanish Basque Country*.



3 Dialects

A notable feature of Basque is the large number of distinguishable regional dialects. It is possible to find noticeable (although sometimes minor) differences even from one village to the next. This high degree of dialectal variations stems from two factors.

1. The fact that the Basque Country is a very mountainous area, which makes communication between different population centers difficult.
2. The fact that, until very recently, Basque lacked both official status and a standard form, which limited speakers to use their own regional varieties.

The most important isogloss coincides with the French-Spanish border, dividing Basque into Western and Eastern dialects (occasionally, you might hear Southern and Northern dialects, but these terms are not so geographically appropriate). If we want to be more fine-grained, classical scholarship identifies six dialects, corresponding roughly to the seven territories minus Araba. However, a more recent study by Koldo Zuazo proposes a new division, also into six dialects (see also the map in the next page).

1. Mendebalekoa (Western), spoken in Bizkaia, the northern edge of Araba, and the western part of Gipuzkoa.
2. Erdialdekoa (Central), spoken in Gipuzkoa and the northwest of Nafarroa.
3. Nafarrera (Navarrese), spoken in most the north-central part of Nafarroa.
4. Ekialdeko Nafarrera (Eastern Navarrese), spoken in the eastern tip of Nafarroa.
5. Nafar-Lapurtera (Navarrese-Labourdin), spoken in Lapurdi, Behe-Nafarroa, and a few places in northern Nafarroa.
6. Zuberera (Souletin), spoken in Zuberoa.

In addition, there were *literally dialects*, used for the production of written documents and other more formal types of communication (for instance, priests tended to use a literary dialect during their church sermons). The literary dialects are: Literary Bizkaian, Literary Gipuzkoan, Classical Lapurdian, and Literary Zuberoan. Not all of them were equally prestigious, though. In particular, Literary Gipuzkoan was the preferred one in the Spanish Basque Country, and Classical Lapurdian in the French Basque Country. Consequently, when Euskaltzaindia (the Academy of the Basque Language) began developing a standardized form in the second half of the 20th century, it picked a mixture of Literary Gipuzkoan and Classical Lapurdian as the basis. This standardized form is called *Euskara Batua* "Unified Basque", but often it is referred to simply as *batua*. This is the form that you will see if you pick a current newspaper, textbook, or official publication.



4 A brief history of Basque

Basque is an isolate, non-Indo-European language, meaning that it is unrelated to any other language spoken in the present day (although, due to the extended contact with French and Spanish, several Basque words are Romance in origin –for instance, *liburu* ‘book’ is clearly related to French *livre* and Spanish *libro*). Basque is, arguably, the last surviving member of a family of languages that were spoken in the Atlantic coast of Europe before the Roman expansion. Specifically, the earliest forms of Basque were spoken in an area that was at least as large as the present-day Basque Country. We can tell this because there exist several inscriptions from Roman times that are unmistakably Basque:

- Nafarroa (which was already known to the Romans as “land of the Vascones”) has inscriptions like “VMME SAHAR”, very similar to the present-day *ume zahar* ‘old child’.
- Similarly, inscriptions in the French Basque Country include CISSON (compare to present-day *gizon* ‘man’ and ANDERE (compare to *andere* ‘woman’).

- The Garonne river in France, which delimits the eastern border of the French Basque Country, originates in the Valley of Aran, where (*h*)*aran* is the Basque word for valley.

Further, Roman authors like Caesar observed that the inhabitants of Aquitania (the southeast corner of France) had an appearance noticeably different from the people of the rest of Gaul, so we can suppose that they spoke an ancient form of Basque. However, the romanization of Aquitania replaced Basque with Gascon, a Romance language with a heavy Basque substratum. The situation became better in the 16th and 17th centuries, due to the existence of a bourgeoisie that demanded literature in Basque. However, the French Revolution and the consequent marginalization of languages other than French put an end to this revival.

In the Spanish side, Basque remained a healthy language until the end of the middle ages: we know this because, for instance, the city of Huesca (about 100km east of Nafarroa) issued an ordinance in the 14th century prohibiting the use of Basque (among other languages) in its market. Similarly, the 10th century manuscript that contains the oldest known writing in Spanish (known as *Glosas Emilianenses*) also contains some sentences in Basque. This monastery is located in San Millán de la Cogolla, in the province of La Rioja, south of Araba. Thus, we can suppose that, even at this late time, Basque was spoken regularly not only in the Basque Country, but also in the neighbouring kingdoms. However, Basque never enjoyed an official status, and wasn't used as the language of administration or literature. As a consequence, it began to gradually lose ground to Spanish. By the 18th century, Basque had been largely lost in Araba and Nafarroa, and in the 19th and 20th century, a similar trend started in Gipuzkoa and (especially) Bizkaia due to a wave of immigration from other parts of Spain.

In the Spanish side, the lowest point coincided with the 1939-1975 dictatorship, where regional languages (Basque included) were actively repressed. The final years of the dictatorship, however, saw a relaxation of the repression, allowing the creation of semi-legal Basque language schools (*ikastolak*). After the dictatorship, Basque became the official language of the Autonomous Community (together with Spanish), and it was introduced as a language of instruction at all educational levels. It also began to be used in media, with the creation of several newspapers, radio stations, and one TV channel.

5 Present and future of Basque

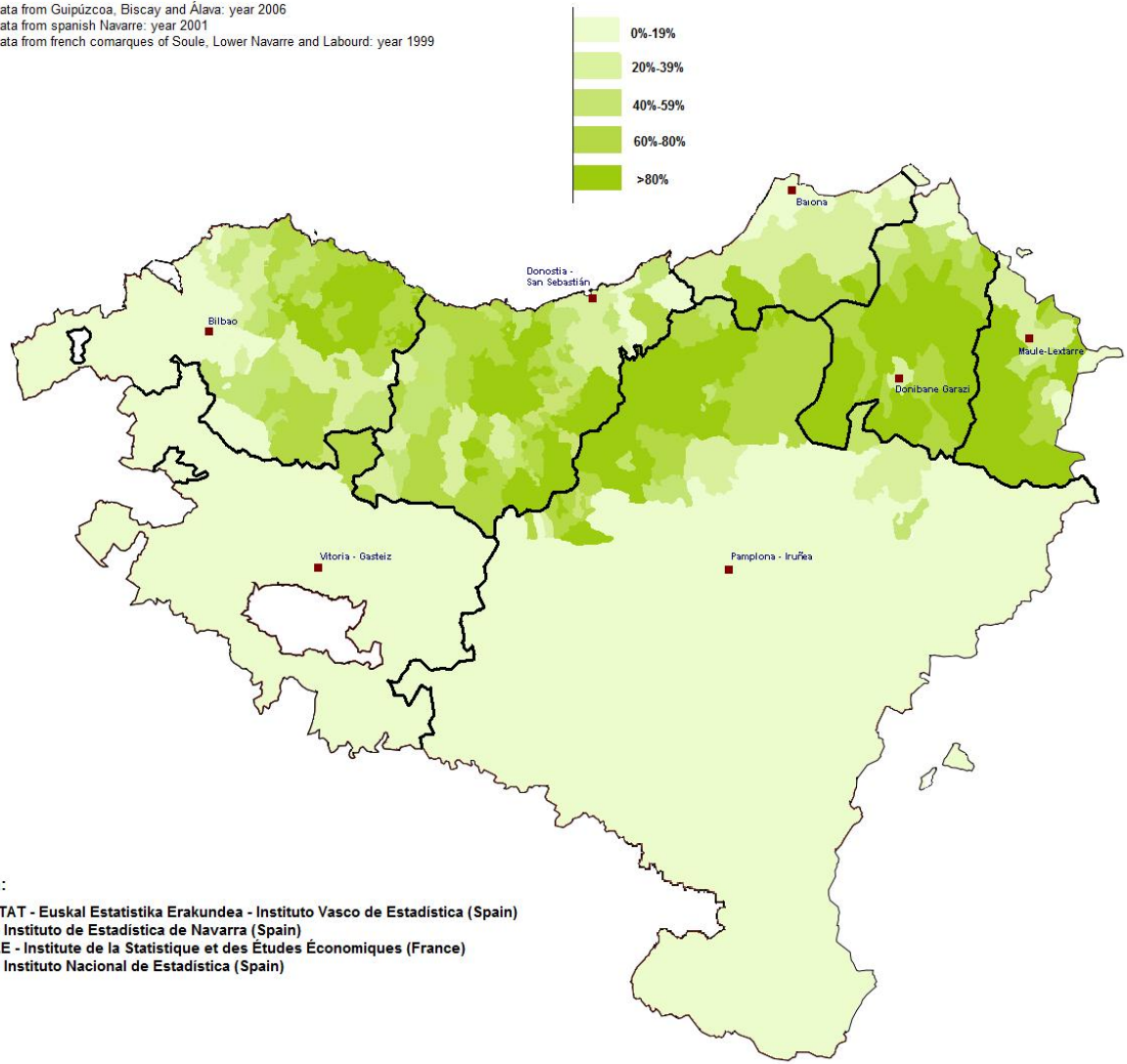
Basque is spoken, to varying degrees, in all of the 7 territories of the Basque Country. However, the large majority of speakers concentrates in the area comprising the eastern half of Bizkaia, the whole of Gipuzkoa, the northwest corner of Nafarroa, and the southern parts of the French provinces. Unsurprisingly, this is also the area with the highest percentage of native speakers. Overall, there are on the range of 700.000 people that either have Basque as their native language, or have become fluent in it. Note, however, that nearly all of those 700.000 speakers are actually Basque-French or Basque-Spanish bilingual. The number of monolingual Basque speakers is very low, and the large majority of cases are old people living in remote villages.

While the sheer number of speakers doesn't make Basque an endangered language, the situation is not entirely optimistic. To begin with, the usage of Basque in the French side has been declining constantly, and it is very likely that it will disappear in the foreseeable future. In the Spanish side, the high number of speakers (including native speakers) is counterbalanced by the absence

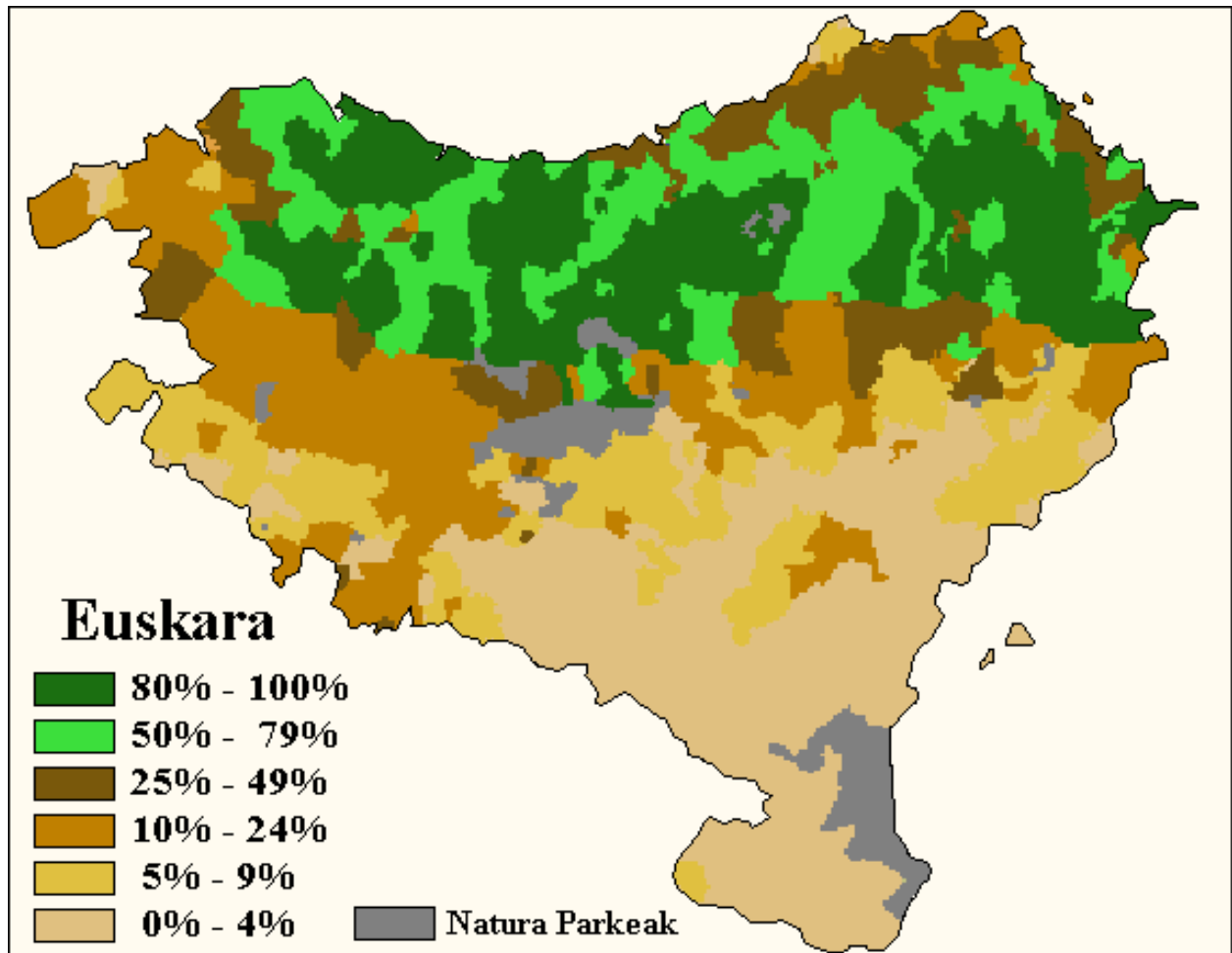
of monolingual Basque speakers, and by the fact that Spanish is still the preferred language for a majority of the population.

Percentage of basque speakers as initial language by municipalities in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country, Foral Autonomous Community of Navarre (Upper Spanish Navarre) and french *comarques* of Soule valleys, Lower Navarre and Labourd

Data from Guipúzcoa, Biscay and Álava: year 2006
 Data from spanish Navarre: year 2001
 Data from french *comarques* of Soule, Lower Navarre and Labourd: year 1999



Data:
 EUSTAT - Euskal Estatistika Erakundea - Instituto Vasco de Estadística (Spain)
 IEN - Instituto de Estadística de Navarra (Spain)
 INSEE - Institute de la Statistique et des Études Économiques (France)
 INE - Instituto Nacional de Estadística (Spain)



6 Notable features of the Basque language

Since Basque is not an Indo-European language, some aspects of its grammar might be weird to speakers of Western European languages (including German). Some of these features are:

- **An ergative-absolutive case system:** European languages function on a nominative-accusative system, which means that subjects get nominative case and objects get accusative case. In Basque, though, subjects of unaccusative verbs and objects of unergative and transitive verbs get absolutive case, whereas subjects of unergative and transitive verbs get ergative case.
- **A very rich case system:** German, which is considered a case-rich language by Western European standards, has four cases (nominative, accusative, dative, genitive). Basque, in contrast, has 15, exemplified below for the noun *hondartza* 'beach'
 1. Absolutive *hondartza*, see above
 2. Ergative *hondartza-k*, see above
 3. Dative *hondartza-ri* 'to the beach'
 4. Genitive *hondartza-ren* 'of the beach'

5. Benefactive *hondartza-rentzat* 'for the beach'
 6. Comitative *hondartza-rekin* 'with the beach'
 7. Instrumental *hondartza-z* 'by means of the beach'
 8. Partitive *hondartza-rik*, used in certain environments, e.g., under negation.
 9. Prolative *hondartza-tzat* 'as the beach', used only with certain verbs.
 10. Locative *hondartza-tan* 'on the beach'
 11. Ablative *hondartza-tatik* 'from the beach'
 12. Allative *hondartza-tara* 'to the location of the beach'
 13. Directional *hondartza-tarantz* 'towards the location of the beach'
 14. Terminative *hondartza-taraino* 'until reaching the location of the beach'
 15. Relative *hondartzatako* 'relative to the beach'
- **A three-way agreement system:** in European languages, verbs agree with the subject of the sentence. In Basque, on the other hand, they agree simultaneously with the subject, the object, and the indirect object. Moreover, the exact argument that a verbal morpheme agrees with can vary according to the syntactic environment: Rezac (2004) observes that "if the absolutive argument is 3rd person, then absolutive person agreement cross-references a non-3rd person ergative if there is one".
 - **Word order determined by information structure:** at first sight, Basque might seem like a free word order language, but a closer look shows that word order depends on which constituent is the focus of the sentence, in very precise ways.