

The Basque Country

Introduction

The “Basque Country,” or in the Basque language, *Euskal Herria*, is a region in the western Pyrenees that spans the Spanish-French border. It comprises two Autonomous Communities in Spain – The Basque Country and Navarre – and three French provinces – Lower Navarre, Labourd, and Soule. The total area of the Basque Country is 20,947 sq. km. and is inhabited by roughly 3 million people across the border, 70% of which live in Spanish Basque Country. For clarity’s sake, the term “Basque Country” will be used to describe the trans-national region, and “Spanish Basque Country” (SBC) will describe the Spanish Autonomous Community called “Basque Country.”

The three official languages spoken in the Basque Country are Spanish (ISO 639-3 spa), French (ISO 639-3 fra), and Basque. The Basque language, *Euskara*, (ISO 639-3: eus) is spoken by 468,000 in Spain, and by 545,872 people in total. Basque retains legal status in Spain, but not in France. It is an Institutional language, specifically EGIDS level 2 (provincial) (Ethnologue).

In the Spanish Basque Country, Basque monolinguals are virtually non-existent¹. However, more than half (54.8%) of the population is bilingual to some extent. The same report also noted the relative frequency

¹ A census of the Spanish Basque Country reported only bilinguals, passive bilinguals and Spanish monolinguals.

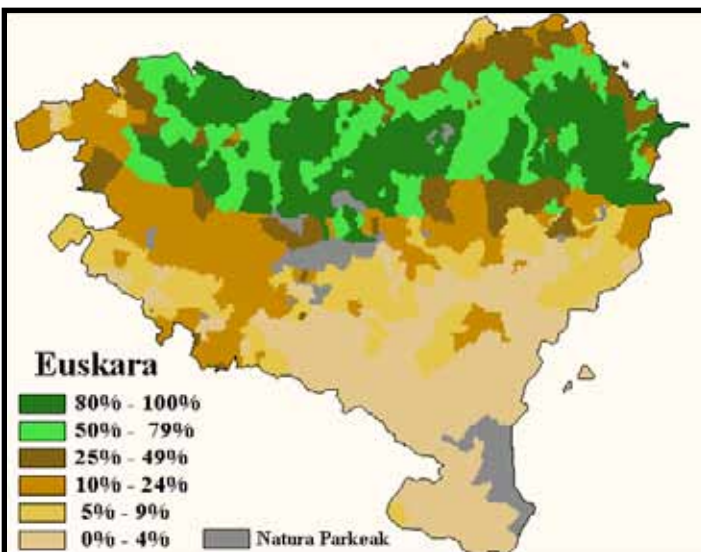


Figure 3: Basque Fluency

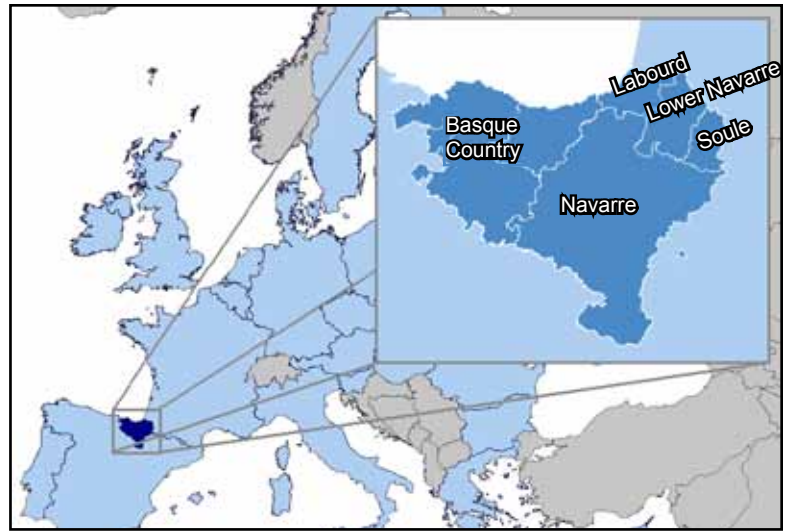


Figure 1: The Basque Country

The Basque Country - Euskal Herria País Vasco - Pays Basque

Names are given in English, Spanish/French, and then Basque.

Spain

Basque Country - País Vasco - Euskadi

Navarre - Navarra - Nafarroa

France

Lower Navarre - Basse-Navarre -
 Nafarroa Beherea

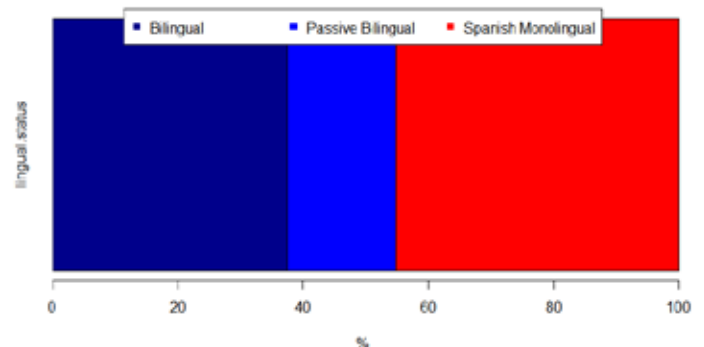
Labourd - Labourd - Lapurdi

Soule - Soule - Zuberoa

Figure 2: Constituent Regions

of Spanish-Basque bilinguals, which was highest in the province of Gipzkoa, which is the north-central region indicated in Graph 1. High proportions of SBC society is fluent in Basque, as seen in Figure 4, where the concentration of fluent speakers is notably centered around the northern area of the greater Basque Country, in the SBC province² of Gipzkoa, northern Navarre and Pyrenean France.

² A subdivision of the Autonomous Community.



Graph 1: Bilinguals in Spanish Basque Country

Background, Spain

The Ethnologue lists 15 living languages for the Kingdom of Spain. The national language is Spanish, and there are three provincial languages: Basque, Catalan, and Galician. Furthermore, there are two developing languages¹ (including Spanish Sign Language), four vigorous languages², four threatened languages³, and one shifting language⁴.

Spain is, of course, the birthplace of the Spanish language, which is spoken by more than 38 million people in Spain and by more than 414 million worldwide. Spanish is also one of the six official languages of the United Nations. Besides Spain, Spanish is also the national (or sometimes co-national) language of 19 nations in South America, as well as a co-official state language of New Mexico (Ethnologue).

Spain's language situation is recognized both in its 1978 constitution, which allows communities to declare regional languages co-official with Castilian Spanish. Six communities are bilingual. They are (clockwise from the northwest, Figure 4): Galicia (Galician), the Basque Country, Navarre, Catalonia (Catalan), the Balearic Islands (Catalan), and Valencia (Valencian). The Statutes of most of these Autonomous Communities maintain laws that allow for use of their minority language, and state that "No one will be discriminated for reasons of language."

This remarkable support for these regional languages arose under dictator Francisco Franco's forty-year regime. His rule was hostile to languages other than Castilian, and use of these minority languages sprung up in protest against the oppressive dictatorship. In defiance of Franco, the use of these languages snowballed and led to the ideological breakup of his regime (Siguán).

Despite Spain's status as the homeland of Spanish, a powerful language worldwide, its unique history has led to powerful and emotional support for its minority languages, and for many strong legal protections for Basque, Catalan, Galician, and Valencian.



Background, France

The French Republic is listed as the home to 23 living languages and to two extinct languages. The national language is French, and French Sign Language also has recognition. Spanish and Portuguese are used for wider communication. Catalan, Greek, and Italian are described as dispersed, and there are nine developing languages¹, three vigorous languages², two threatened languages³, two shifting languages⁴, and one moribund language⁵. The extinct languages of France are Shaudit and Zarphatic (Ethnologue).

French is spoken by nearly 274 million people worldwide, making it the fifth-most widely spoken language on the planet, and the only language besides English to be spoken on all five continents. French is also the fourth-most common language used on the



Figure 4: *Bilingual Autonomous Communities*

Internet. The countries that speak French are known as "La Francophonie," which is represented by the International Organisation of La Francophonie, based in Paris, Addis Ababa, Brussels, New York, and Geneva. La Francophonie consists of 80 states, and account for a population of over 890 million (Organisation).

The French has historically had very strict language policies, beginning with King François in 1539. Today, modern authorities are more favorable to regional languages and immigrant languages.

In France, linguistic unity is paramount. To this day, France refuses to sign the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML). Regional languages have no status and no recognition in France. The reasons for this prejudice dates to the French Revolution. France stated the ECRML was incompatible with its constitution. However, in 2008, a change was made to the constitution, recognizing that "regional languages belong to the heritage of France."

While mainland linguistic diversity is low, France retains a number of colonial territories. Languages spoken in these territories include Amerindian languages, French creoles, and Austronesian languages.

1 Caló, Spanish SL

2 Catalan SL, Fala, Quinqui, Valencian SL

3 Aragonese, Asturian, Erromintxela, Aranese Gascon

4 Extremadruan

1 Basque, Caló, Corsican, French SL, Ligurian, Luxembourgish, Picard, Sinte Romani, Vlax Romani.

2 Alsatian, Lyons SL, Balkan Romani

3 Erromintxela, Occitan

4 Breton, Vlaams

5 Arpitan

Basque Education

Spain

The situation of Basque in Spain is comparable to another minority language - Catalan (ISO 639-3 cat). The revival of Catalan has been more successful, with a total of 4 million native speakers and over 5 million L2 users (Ethnologue).

Much like Catalan, Basque received official recognition after the death of Francisco Franco and Spain's transition to democracy (Basque Language). After many years of "neglect and outright repression," Spain adopted a more friendly attitude toward its minority languages in the 1978 constitution.

Basque-language schools are known as *ikastola* schools.

The 1982 Law for the Normalisation of the Use of Basque established a number of basic standards for the Basque language. These standards include (Basque Language, Spain):

- The right of students or their parents to choose the medium of instruction.
- Pre-university students must receive classes in the official language not used as the medium of instruction.
- The Basque Government will define bilingual teaching models for parents.
- the Basque Government will take measures with regard to teachers' language competence, plans of study and teacher training colleges in order to be able to satisfy parental demand for Basque-medium and language teaching.

Today, more than 90% of the Basque population is enrolled in Basque Immersion Programs. (The Basque Education System). They are able to choose from three methods of education:

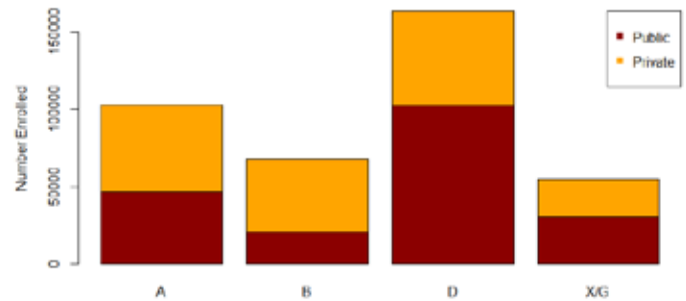
- Model A: Spanish is used as the teaching medium, Basque is taught as a subject.
- Model D: Basque is used as the teaching medium, Spanish is taught as a subject.
- Model B: Both Spanish and Basque are used as subject and medium.
- Model X/G: Spanish only.

Both public and private schools follow these models. Approximately 60% of students attend state schools. Distribution of students by model is given in Table 1 and Graph 2.

Impressively, the most popular model is D, where Basque is the primary language of instruction. Few students (51,477; or 13%) have no exposure to the Basque language, at least in Spain.

	A	B	D	X/G	Total
Public	46,445	20,540	102,344	29,973	196,302
Private	56,205	47,429	61,306	24,474	189,414
Total	102,650	67,969	163,650	51,477	385,716

Table 1: Enrollment by Model



Graph 2: Enrollment by Model

France

Fewer French speak Basque than Spaniards. 468,000 of the total 545,872 (86%) Basque speakers live in Spain (Ethnologue). In France, the Northern Basque country is also known as Iparralde. Iparralde is a part of the *département* Pyrénées-Atlantiques.

Although 54.8% of Spanish Basque Country residents are familiar with Basque to some extent, only 36.3% (2001) of Iparralde residents are familiar with Basque, and that number is only decreasing.

In 2005, the Filon Law made it possible for regional languages to be learned, but only in an optional setting, never as a "modern language." Instruction in minority languages is at the will of the teacher.

However, *ikastola* do exist in France. At the primary level, 26.8% of students are exposed to Basque in some capacity. Secondary education in France is divided into two levels, *collège* and *lycée*, taught in public schools and Catholic schools.

The distribution of students is shown in Table 2. It is clear that Basque education is lacking in France, compared to its success in Spain.

The inter-university department of Basque Studies¹ of Bayonne is the only place in France that offers the Basque Studies *License*, a form of bachelor's degree. A master's program is available for continuing study in France (Basque Language, France).

¹ *Département interuniversitaire d'étude Basque*

	Collège	Lycée
Optional	8%	4.4%
Bilingual	6%	2.3%
Immersion	2.4%	N/A

Table 2: Enrollment in France

Policy

Spanish Basque Country

The Spanish Basque Country is divided into three provinces, Biscay (spa: Vizcaya, eus: Bizkaia), Gipuzkoa (spa: Guipúzcoa), and Araba (spa: Alava).

The SBC maintains a law, “The Basque Normalization Law,” a law that states its objective is to “acknowledge Basque as the most visible sign and objective of the identity of our community,” a law comparable to others in other Communities.

Basque’s status as an isolate separates it from Spanish. This means other Communities can take for granted its population would have some understanding of their regional languages, but the SBC government cannot assume this.

In Parliament, less than 25% of MPs¹ could speak Basque in 1993. While in session, simultaneous translation takes place to enable Basque-speaking MPs to speak in Basque if so desired.

Basque is used in books, newspapers, television, and radio. Today, Elkar is a Basque publisher that lists over 1,600 Basque-language items on its site. In 1988, there were 24 periodicals published in Basque (Siguán). Now, the last remaining Basque newspaper, Euskaldunon Egunkaria closed in 2003 (Egunkaria), but at least one Basque magazine continues to be published, Argia, which began publication in 1919, and although it ceased production during his rule, it started to publish again in 1963 (Argia).

The SBC government established a television station in 1982, “Euskal Telebista.” It launched with two channels, one in Basque and one in Castilian with a little Basque. The government also maintains radio stations that broadcast entirely or partially in Basque, including the Euskadi Irratia, which covers the entire Basque speaking area.

Overall, the Basque language maintains a very strong presence in the Spanish Basque Country, both legally and culturally. Its recovery has been aided by the SBC government, protected by both its Statue of Autonomy and the Spanish constitution (Siguán).

Navarre

Navarre (spa: Navarra, eus: Nafarroa) is a singular community, with no internal provinces. In medieval times, Basque was spoken throughout Navarre.

Presently, the number of Basque speakers in Navarre is fewer than in SBC. The legality of Basque is also more limited in Navarre. Although its Statute

of Autonomy legalizes both Castilian and Basque as official languages, it states that Basque will only be considered official in “Basque-speaking zones” and that “a special regional law will establish the limits of these zones.” Navarre was divided into three zones; Basque-speaking, intermediate, and Castilian-speaking.

The Basque-speaking zone is a rural area, and its population small. This status relegates the governmental use of Basque to largely symbolic.

Most of the popular Basque media in Navarre comes from the SBC, although the government subsidizes Basque teaching manuals and readers for children. There is no Navarrese television, but most residents can watch SBC television if they desire (Siguán).

France

The French Basque Country is located in the *département des Pyrénées-Atlantiques*. No spoken language besides French has legal status in France.

Although the French government historically aggressively expunged non-French languages, interest in Basque in France has experienced a revival. Recently, in the French Basque Country (eus: Iparralde), despite the fact that only 22.5% of residents can speak Basque, the lowest recorded for that province, 83% are interested in learning it, and 56% think that it should be taught in schools².

The first event favoring the Basque minority was in April 1983, when the first bilingual Basque-French classes were started within the national education department. Since then, growth of Basque schools has grown.

In 2004, the Public Basque Language Office (OPLB) was founded by local governments and communes. Its mission is to “design, define and implement a public and concerted language policy in favor of the Basque language.” Its budget is two million Euros annually. The OPLB has been successful promoting Basque language, and in 2007 it signed a cross-border agreement with the Basque Autonomous Community to promote the language (Jauréguiberry).

Despite a smaller population and less legal facility for the language, the Basque language has seen remarkable growth in France in the last decade.

1 Member of Parliament

2 23% are against it.

Looking Forward

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) considers a language in serious danger if less than 30% of the youngest generation speaks it. This has been the situation in France for thirty years, and the death of French Basque has been predicted since the 1990s (Jaruéguiberry).

However, surveys from 2001 and 2006 show that this trend may be reversing, due to a growing number of parents sending their children to ikastolak¹. Francis Jauréguiberry hopefully states that “it is highly likely that in just a few years’ time, more than half of [French Basque Country] children will be educated in a bilingual system.” Jauréguiberry also emphasizes the sociolinguistic role of language maintenance in its survival.

Although France will continue to defend French as its sole institutional language, there are no laws against using Basque in France. The OPLB has been working to create public spaces for Basque usage, and the sociolinguistic outlook in France is hopeful.

Cultural identity is important to maintain a minority language, and while France may be struggling to identify itself, the Basque in Spain have a much better starting point to maintain their language, although Miguel Siguán expressed concern (1993) over the relative difficulty acquiring Basque, compared to other regional, Romance languages.

In the Spanish Basque Country, a marked decline in unfamiliarity with Basque can be seen across age groups. In 2001, 63% of the oldest citizens (85 years or older) were unfamiliar² with the Basque language. In the same year, 47% of middle-aged citizens (35-44) were unfamiliar with Basque, and only 10% of teenagers (16-19) were unfamiliar with Basque.

The situation is less improved in Navarre. 76% of the oldest generation is not familiar with Basque, but 61% of the teenage generation is still unfamiliar with Basque (Instituto).

This cross-sectional look at Basque is amazing. Clearly, Basque usage is trending upward. According to UNESCO, Basque is far from “serious danger.” While both Spanish and French will remain international languages for decades to come, Basque may yet see revival in the decades to come. It seems Siguán’s concerns have, luckily, not come to pass.

¹ Ikastola, plural.

² The data was divided by level of familiarity - knows how to read, speak, etc. Lack of familiarity was the easiest metric to report.

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