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## Linguistic identity among new speakers of Basque

**Abstract:** The increase in Basque speakers in the last 30 years has been due in large part to ‘new speakers’ or *euskaldunberri*, a term that will be used here to refer to those who have learned the language by means other than family transmission. While very significant in numbers, to date this group has not been the object of much study. Little is known about their attitudes and motivations, how they perceive themselves as Basque speakers, or their language use and transmission patterns. Acquiring answers to these questions is of strategic importance for developing an effective evidence-based language policy for the future. This article presents the results of a qualitative study of new speakers. Drawing on data from focus groups and interviews, the central goal of the article is to examine how new speakers of differing profiles perceive and locate themselves with respect to the popularly used labels for “new” and “native” Basque speakers and the ideologies of authenticity and legitimacy that seem to shape these perceptions. The analysis shows that learning the language alone, even to a high degree of competence, does not guarantee a view of themselves as true and genuine speakers of Basque.

**Keywords:** new speakers of Basque, language attitudes, linguistic identity, legitimate speaker

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# 1 Introduction

The last thirty years of language revitalisation efforts in the Basque Autonomous Community (henceforth BAC) have been remarkably successful in reversing the steady decline of Basque speakers that had characterised most of the 20th century. Thanks in large part to the institutional and grassroots efforts to provide Basque language classes for adults and Basque-medium schooling for children, numbers of Basque speakers have increased from 431,219 in 1981 to 755,640 in 2006 (Basque Government 2009). Constituting 37.5% of the population, Basque speakers in the BAC today continue to be a numerical minority with almost half the population (45.2%) having no knowledge of Basque and another 17.3% being *passive bilinguals*, that is, individuals who report being able to understand but not speak Basque. Noteworthy as well is the uneven distribution of Basque speakers producing pockets of intense concentration where Basque is a habitual language of social life and others where opportunities for speaking and hearing Basque in one's everyday surroundings are rare. Another cause for concern are the findings from recent studies showing that youth who have learned Basque in school do not seem to be using it outside the classroom (Martinez de Luna and Suberbiola 2008).

Basque language advocates are thus only cautiously optimistic about the future. To realistically assess the situation of Basque, it is necessary to go beyond the numbers to better understand the changing characteristics of the Basque-speaking community. This article presents results from what is in effect the first comprehensive study of new Basque speakers, a group we define as individuals who have learned Basque by means other than family transmission. These newcomers to the language constitute an increasingly significant portion of the Basque-speaking population, particularly among youth. As such they are a sector of considerable relevance for future language planning efforts.

We begin by providing an overview of the demographic increase in new speakers, identify distinct profiles and key differences in the ways in which they have come to learn Basque. Our central concern in this article is to explore new speakers self-perceptions. We examine our study participants' discourses around what makes them a particular kind of Basque speaker, how they situate themselves *vis á vis* commonly used categories of linguistic identity, and the justifications they give for making those assessments. As O'Rourke and Ramallo (2011) have recently noted, new speakers in minority language contexts often experience insecurities and a sense of being not fully legitimate speakers. Our data confirm this finding and show that by itself learning the language, even to a high degree of competence, does not guarantee that new speakers will come to have a view of themselves as completely authentic speakers of Basque. New speakers by

and large consider they will never be like native speakers, however, habitual usage of Basque, access to Basque-speaking social networks and acquisition of some mastery of vernacular forms appear to provide pathways towards a greater sense of authentication as genuine Basque speakers.

## 1.1 Methodology

The findings in this article are based on five focus groups and nine in-depth individual interviews, constituting a total of 21 hours of recorded data with 35 participants in the 18–55 age-bracket. Previous research (Amorrortu et al. 2009) showed that the percentage of Basque speakers in the areas where the person lived was an important variable in the learning experiences of the speaker and in opportunities for usage. Because of this, the locations of the focus groups were chosen to represent different sociolinguistic areas, from mostly Spanish-speaking to very Basque-speaking. Focus groups were held in Bilbao (24.3% Basque speakers), Vitoria-Gasteiz (22.73% Basque speakers), Bermeo (73.53% Basque speakers) and Zumaia (71.67% Basque speakers).

The selection of participants for these four focus groups was made with the assistance of liaisons in the community who helped us to find suitable candidates and achieve a balanced representation in terms of gender, professed political ideology and generation. As we describe below, generation is a highly significant factor correlated with different learning experiences. Given the high proportion of new speakers among youth, we added a fifth focus group made up entirely of university students who learned Basque in early immersion programs.

The code used to identify the participants reflects the location of the focus group and the participant. For instance, (ZU-F, 268) refers to speech turn 268 of participant F from the Zumaia (ZU) group.

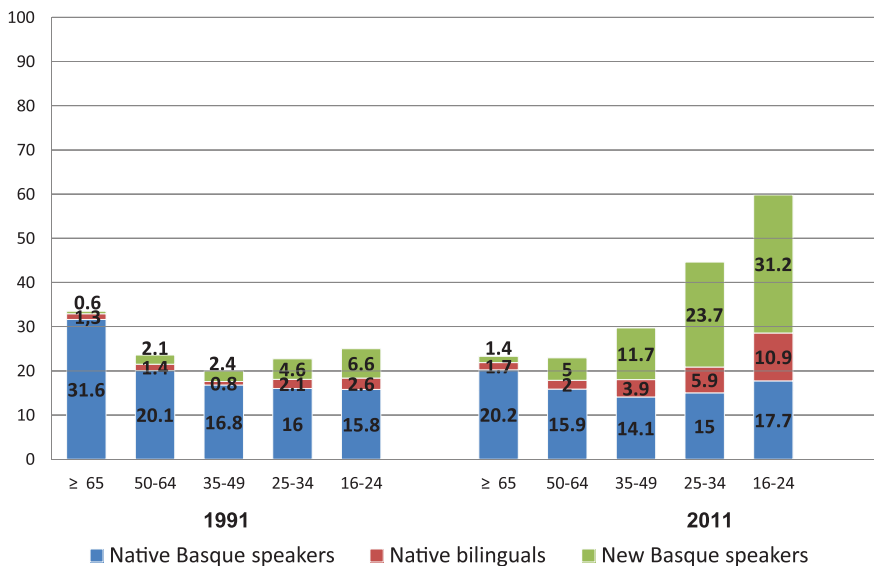
Moderators of focus groups provided minimum input so that participants had the opportunity to propose and explore the issues and topics that were relevant to them. Inductive or bottom-up Content Analysis (Mayring 2000) was performed to generate coding categories from the database.

In addition to the five focus groups, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore in greater depth new speaker's self-perceptions and attitudes towards their learning experience. Interview subjects were either participants of the focus groups whose experiences merited a deeper analysis, or representatives of specific profiles that had not been properly represented in the focus groups. They are coded as ELK (from *Elkarrizketa*, interview) followed by the identifying letter (e.g. ELK-A).

## 2 The Basque context

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the different types of Basque speakers. Note that in 1991 native speakers, that is, individuals who learned Basque in the home, accounted for the great majority of Basque speakers in all age groups. However, two decades later this is no longer the case among the younger generation. Not only does one see an increase in the number of young people who know Basque, but also that new speakers now outnumber native speakers. In fact, as many as 60% of the 16–24 age group was Basque-speaking in 2011 and more than half were new speakers.

In contrast to new speakers in the older generations, who tended to learn Basque in adult education schools, those in the younger generations are an outcome of immersion Basque-medium schools, which began to expand following the implementation of bilingual education by the Basque Government in the 1980s. The overwhelming support for such programs by parents is illustrated by



**Fig. 1:** Evolution of bilingual population according to mother tongue by age group. BAC, 1991–2011 (%)

Source: Fifth Sociolinguistic Survey, 2011

the increase in the percentage of three year old children enrolled in full immersion (known as *D Model*),<sup>1</sup> which went up from 14% in 1983–1984 to 75.2% in 2011–2012 (*Beria* 2011). Taken as a whole, these data show that, not unlike other European minority languages, Basque can now be said to rely to a great extent on its new speakers for its maintenance and survival.

## 2.1 Defining new speakers of Basque

As this is the first major study on new speakers of Basque, we are deliberately using a fairly broad definition so as to capture and analyze the diversity that this grouping may entail. Thus, in this study the term “new speakers” includes all those individuals who have learned Basque in settings other than family transmission, whether or not they are labeled “new speakers” by themselves, others, or the current research literature.<sup>2</sup> Participants had to have achieved a level of proficiency defined as *competent*, certified C1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001) or by virtue of their own demonstrated capacity to competently perform the communicative functions required in their social or professional life.

## 3 Profiles of Basque new speakers

Analysis of our data revealed that the variables that were most often correlated to differences in our participants’ language attitudes, reported usage and self-perceptions were: (a) learning experience and age of learning, (b) opportunities to use Basque, and (c) the linguistic variety learned and used. At this stage of the analysis we are using these elements for the identification of the different profiles of new Basque speakers. The first two will be discussed next.

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1 Parents from the BAC choose one of these three linguistic models for their children: *D Model*, where Basque is the language of instruction for all subjects except for Spanish and foreign languages (and therefore functions as a “mother tongue” model of L1 Basque speakers and as an “immersion model” for Spanish L1 speakers); *B Model*, where both Spanish and Basque are used as languages of instruction; and *A Model*, where Spanish is the language of instruction for all subjects except for Basque and foreign languages.

2 This definition is similar to that used by the Basque Government (EAS Language Indicator System, Basque Government): “those for whom a language other than Basque is their mother tongue, but who report understanding and speaking Basque ‘well’”.

### 3.1 The learning experience, linked to age

Bearing in mind the drastic historical change brought about by the transition to democracy in the late 1970s and the subsequent implementation of language policies to support Basque, most notably the introduction of Basque in education, two main groups can be identified based on the age of acquisition and the type of learning experience:

- (a) Those over the age of 35–40 roughly, who learned the language in adulthood, in *euskaltegi* or Basque adult schools, after no or limited opportunity to learn Basque as children. We refer to this group as “traditional” new speakers.
- (b) Those under the age of 35–40 who have learned Basque at school in early partial or total immersion models.

Our data show some important differences between these two groups in terms of their motivations for learning Basque, their level of commitment towards speaking Basque, and the rewards that learning Basque has brought them. On the one hand, the older cohort of traditional new speakers reports motivations to learn Basque linked to their Basque identity or to political ideology – often related to resistance to the Franco regime. Individuals in this cohort report that they had to devote a great deal of time and effort to learn the language. Most consider it was worth it and mention rewards such as “discovering a new world” (the world attached to Basque), integration (being able to communicate with native Basque speakers, becoming a member of the community), being able to understand Basque language cultural traditions such as songs, *bertsolariak* (Basque improvised oral poetry).

However, instrumental reasons, such as gaining access to certain forms of public sector employment, are becoming more prevalent among adults. For instance, one of our interviewees in the older cohort cited her employment as her only reason for learning Basque and mentioned no other motivation or rewards:

- (1) *Mi vocación es ser profesora en la universidad. Para ser profesora universitaria decidí, bueno, no decidí, decidieron por mí, la sociedad, hacer euskera. Entonces, con bastante frustración.* (ELK-A, 28)

‘My vocation is to be a university professor. To be a university professor I decided, well, I did not decide, somebody else decided, society did, that I had to learn Basque. [And so I did], but with a great deal of frustration.’

On the other hand, new speakers in the younger cohort who were enrolled by their parents in Basque-medium schooling from an early age do not narrate their acquisition of Basque around a conscious personal decision. Rather, they tend to

regard their learning of Basque as a *given*. They did not have to *choose* to learn Basque and it has been a constant presence in their lives from very early on. BI-D, a man in his early thirties from Bilbao, reflects on how this makes his generation's experience different.

- (2) *Uste dut bere bai mentalitate kontu bat dala, azken finean. Gura dut esan, gure belaunaldian azken finean beti izan dugu euskara. Lehen ba, nolabait, legetik kanpo egoala euskara ... (...) Guretzako, bestalde, beti egon da hor euskara, beti erabili ahal izan dogu eta beraz ez da horren preziatua, nolabait esateko.*  
(BI-D, 55 / 59)

'I think it is also about your mind-set at the end. I mean, our generation, we have always had Basque. Basque was illegal at one time. ... (...) For us, on the other hand, Basque has always been there, we have always been able to use it and therefore it is not so valued.'

This group appears to have decidedly different characteristics when it comes to the way they perceive Basque, their affective attachment to the language, their expressed commitment to usage, their reported use patterns, and how they manage bilingual situations. They also appear different from the older cohort in the way they perceive the current sociolinguistic situation. For instance, in their discourse many younger new speakers do not perceive Basque to be in a vulnerable situation and therefore do not have a great commitment to use the language in daily life. This suggests that immersion programs, as effective as they are to teach the language, do not necessarily bring about a sense of responsibility among youth to contribute to the Basque normalisation project.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.2 Opportunities to use the language

As noted, the density of Basque speakers across the BAC varies significantly. While statistically high concentrations of Basque speakers would ostensibly seem to afford many opportunities for new speakers to use Basque, social networks must also be taken into account. As Amorrortu et al. (2009) have shown, access to Basque-speaking social networks, especially those which are close to a person's emotional world (family and friends) or workplace, strongly influence real world opportunities to speak in Basque.

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<sup>3</sup> However, some studies have shown that use patterns among the young are not a good predictor of future practice, which can change over the course of a lifetime depending on the circumstances (Woolard 2011; Pujolar and González 2013)

Vitoria-Gasteiz, the capital of the BAC, is an example of a place with a significant percentage of Basque speakers (24.6%), but relatively low rates of public Basque usage. This speaker, a 42 year old male, a journalist by profession, describes that there is not a consolidated Basque-speaking community, and the problem this creates:

- (3) *Jende asko gara, baina ez gara, gure artean, ba ez dago sarerik, ez dago ... Ni beti harritzen naiz, beti ezagutzen duzu jende berria, eta ikusten dezu jende asko dakiela baina, bakoitzak bere bizitza egiten du eta ... Baina ni seguru nago gure artean guztiok ezagutuko bagina, euskara entzungo zan Gasteizen askoz gehio, ba, ez dakit, sei elkarrizketatik bat, ba sei elkarrizketatik bat.* (GA-A, 36)

‘There are a lot of us [Basque speakers], but we don’t have Basque-speaking networks. It always surprises me ... I always meet new people who speak and you realise that there are really quite a few that know the language, but they have their lives ... But I am sure that if we all knew each other much more Basque would be heard in Vitoria ... Uh, I don’t know, but one conversation out of six, one out of six [would be in Basque].’

New speakers typically gain access to Basque-speaking networks by marrying into a Basque-speaking family or entering Basque-speaking groups of friends. However, this is not always the case, and many new speakers reported feeling frustration, not only because they could not realise their desire to be part of the larger Basque-speaking community, but also because they felt that this led them to gradually lose competence from lack of use, as reported by speaker GA-C, a civil servant working for Vitoria-Gasteiz town council:

- (4) *Inork ere ez daki euskaraz, nire inguruan inork, bakarrik lankideek eta erreta daude ...* (GA-C, 42)

‘In my life nobody speaks Basque, nobody other than at work, and they are really frustrated.’

Despite the odds, many new speakers from areas where Basque is spoken less report going to great efforts to create opportunities to use Basque organizing themselves to develop “communities of practice” (Meyerhoff 2002) in order to speak the language. Strategies include finding shops where the assistants are Basque speakers, participating in certain types of events in Basque (such as drama plays, concerts or cinema), blogs, and participating in *berbalagun* (an initiative where volunteer Basque speakers get together with new speakers or learners so that they can practise).



## 4 Self-perceptions: “What kind of speaker of Basque am I?”

How the participants perceived and described themselves as Basque speakers was a frequent topic in the focus groups and we consequently made linguistic identity an explicit question in the individual interviews. In the group setting, the topic most often elicited elaborate justifications and revealed a keen interest to explore this issue with the other participants. We take linguistic identity to be a socially constructed notion that is negotiated and signaled through social interaction, rather than a given. Sameness and difference, authenticity, authority, and legitimacy, all key elements of linguistic and other forms of identity, argue Bucholtz and Hall, “are not objective states, but phenomenological processes that emerge from social interaction” (2004: 369). These interactions in turn are situated within ideological discourses and structures of power that must be taken into account and which these interactions semiotically reproduce, destabilise or rework. Given this understanding, Bucholtz and Hall suggest that it is analytically preferable to think in terms of “identifications” rather than “identity”, or “authentication” rather than authenticity, to capture this dynamic and socially produced nature of linguistic identities (see also Agha 2007).

This is the approach taken in our analysis of the self-perceptions of new speakers. Our data allow us to explore how new speakers situated themselves in relation to the three commonly used terms for Basque linguistic identity and the reasoning they gave for those self-ascriptions. These discussions offer insight into taken-for-granted ways of understanding linguistic identity currently operating. They also point to tensions and emergent configurations. As we will see shortly, at various points our subjects’ discussions convey a conception of linguistic identity as a deep and enduring essence profoundly shaped by “mother tongue”. Contemporary language ideology assigns a privileged role to both the notion of the mother tongue as a mechanism for indelibly shaping one’s character and to native speakers as the ideal and most authentic embodiment of a linguistic community’s identity (Pujolar 2007; Irvine and Gal 2000; Grillo 1989; Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1989). As we analyse new speakers’ talk about their relationship to Basque, we see their struggles to situate themselves in this ideological field: at times embracing the mother tongue claim and at others legitimating their claims to Basque linguistic identity based on other criteria.

Our data show that new speakers expressed their identifications with the Basque language in the form of the following three propositions:

- (a) “*Ez naiz euskaldun zaharra*” ‘I am not a native Basque speaker’
- (b) “*Ni euskaldunberria naiz*” ‘I am a new speaker’
- (c) “*Ni euskalduna naiz*” ‘I am a Basque speaker’

The three terms are widely used labels for linguistic identity. The term *euskaldun* (< *euskara duena*) literally means ‘person who *has* Basque’, and is the general or unmarked term for ‘Basque speaker’. However, as we will discuss at greater length, the term *euskaldun* is also sometimes used to mean ‘Basque person’ in terms of national identity. The term *euskaldun zahar* (from *zahar(ra)* ‘old’) is usually translated as ‘native speaker of Basque’.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the term *euskaldunberri* (from *berri* ‘new’) literally translates as ‘new speaker of Basque’. This term became popularised in conjunction with the language revitalisation movement from the 1960s onwards. It is a distinctive feature of the Basque case that a special term has evolved to designate the new speaker. We now turn to explore the criteria participants used to make these identifications.

#### 4.1 “*Ni ez naiz euskaldun zaharra*” ‘I am not a native Basque speaker’

All subjects seemed clear in their minds that this term did not apply to them and were quick to give reasons for this. Similar to the findings of O’Rourke and Ramallo (2011) for Galicia and Ireland, Basque new speakers perceive themselves and native speakers as fundamentally different. At the most basic level, the chief reason why they could not call themselves *euskaldun zahar* is because they had not learned Basque in the family. In their matter-of-fact assertion new speakers most often grounded their statements on what they presented as the *objective* facts of their different forms of language acquisition. Additional insight into how they saw the ramification of home *versus* school learning and what separated them from nativeness can be gained by looking at new speakers’ discussions of the labels that they did apply to themselves: *euskaldunberri* or *euskaldun*.

#### 4.2 “*Ni euskaldunberria naiz*” ‘I am a new speaker’

People who affirmed this type of identification came from both the traditional *euskaldunberri* profile of individuals who learned Basque in adulthood as well as the younger generation who attended immersion programs. We found four deter-

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<sup>4</sup> As used in language planning surveys, the term *euskaldun zahar* is defined as “those for whom Basque is their mother tongue, and who understand and speak it ‘well’” (EAS Language Indicator System of the Basque Country, Basque Government [2012]).

mining criteria given to explain this self-identification: (1) Mode of acquisition, i.e. the fact that they learned Spanish at home and Basque at school or in adult education programs. As noted above, they clearly thought that these different forms of learning were consequential enough to make them feel it was appropriate to mark this difference with a different label. (2) Competency. Some new speakers explained that they were *euskaldunberri* because they considered their strongest language in terms of competence to be Spanish. (3) They believe their “mental schemes” to be Spanish, that is, their thoughts and internal grammar to be Spanish. (4) Usage. Some participants felt this label best described them because Spanish was the language they most used in everyday life (or virtually the only language they used).

The following excerpts from focus group discussions show how the participants invoke these criteria for explaining their self-perceptions. In Excerpt 5 we have statements by two individuals in their 50s who live in the predominantly Basque-speaking town of Zumaia. Both are fluent in Basque and describe themselves as new speakers:

- (5) – *Guk ulertzen duguna euskaldunberria, gu bai gerala euskaldunberriak.* (ZU-B, 57)
- *Bai, ezta? Ja helduagoak ikasi dugula.* (ZU-A, 58)
  - ‘[In our case,] the way we understand *euskaldunberri*, we definitely are *euskaldunberri*.’
  - ‘Yes, we are. Because we learned in adulthood.’

In the BAC immersion programs begin quite early, at age two or three. Thus one might hypothesise that individuals who learned via this process would not adopt the term *euskaldunberri*. However, this was not the case; we found that the self-definition of *euskaldunberri* was in common currency among them. In the following excerpt, the participant is a male in his late 20s who learned Basque in early immersion school, but lives in a predominantly Spanish speaking city, Bilbao. Here we can see how he conjoins multiple criteria in explaining his identification:

- (6) *Eguneroko bizitzan gaztelania erabiltzen dudalako gehienetan, eta gañera, ba hori, etxean txikitatik gaztelania ikasi nebalako, gero ikastolan sartzekoan hasi nintzen euskera ikasten. Baña, zelan da, lengua madre, edo hori, ama hizkuntza gaztelania izan da, beraz, horregatik hartzen dut neure burua euskaldunberri. [...] Nik askotan pentsatu behar dodaz lehenengo gauzak gaztelaniaz gero euskeraz botateko, adibidez. [...] Printzipioz nire pentsamoldeak antolatzeko hizkuntza gaztelania da. Niretzako hor egongo litzateke behar-*

*bada ezbardintasuna, euskaldunbarri baten kasua edo euskaldun zahar batena.* (BI-D, 164 / 188)

‘Because what I most use in my everyday life is Spanish, and not only that, but because what I learned at home was Spanish. Then I learned Basque when I went to school. But what’s the name ... “mother tongue”, yes?, my mother tongue is Spanish and that is why I see myself as an *euskaldunbarri*. [...] In my case, I often have to think first in Spanish when I want to say something in Basque. [...] In principle the language in which my thinking is structured in Spanish. And that may be the difference between an *euskaldun zahar* and an *euskaldunbarri*.’

Despite their different learning experiences, we found that the reasons younger participants gave for identifying as new speakers are remarkably similar to that of the older cohort. They both share a tendency to ascribe to native speakers a deeper fundamental bond with the language than the one they perceive themselves as having or being able to claim. Our data confirm the widespread tendency to link native speakers with values of authenticity and by extension with a more legitimate linguistic identity (O’Rourke and Ramallo 2011; Bucholtz 2003). Indeed, one can regard new speakers’ references to their inner language and relationship to Basque as performing an implicit contrast with an authentication of native speakers. The definition they give of the *euskaldun zahar* as someone who learned Basque at home cannot, in that sense, be taken as purely technical.<sup>5</sup> Their statements resonate strongly with the ideology of mother tongue that regards family-based learning as inherently more “natural” and authentic (O’Rourke and Ramallo 2011: 138).

### 4.3 “*Ni euskalduna naiz*” ‘I am a Basque speaker’

Other new speakers in our study chose the label *euskaldun*, Basque speaker. From the way the participants used and described this term, it was clear that *euskaldun* signalled for them a stronger and more *real* or complete form of identification with Basque than *euskaldunbarri*. These two terms together with *euskaldun zahar* are perceived along a gradient on authenticity, with *euskaldun zahar* being the most authentic (but unavailable to new speakers), followed by *euskaldun* and *euskaldunbarri*. The *euskaldunbarri* is frequently perceived as a different and in-

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<sup>5</sup> This is not meant to discount the possibility that there may indeed be observable differences resulting from different forms of language acquisition (see De Houwer 2009; Almgren et al. 2008).

complete Basque linguistic identity. For many, then, this gradient is experienced as evaluative, with positive value ascribed to greater authenticity. While for some new speakers, *euskaldunberri* is an identity label they seemed more or less comfortable with, for others it is a transitional phase towards an *euskaldun* status that they were proud to have acquired.

The following extract from ZU-C, a 25-year old woman from Zumaia, a highly Basque-speaking town, whose parents were Spanish immigrants, is clear in her mind that she is not an *euskaldun zahar*. But she is emphatic in rejecting the term *euskaldunberri*; rather, she claims for herself the *euskaldun* identity.

(7) *Ni euskalduna. Ez det esaten ez berri, ez zahar, ez, ni euskalduna naiz euskera erabiltzen detelako. Baina esaten detenean etxian hona netorrela, nere mutilak esan dit, “Baina zu ez zea euskaldunberria”. “Klaro ezetz, baina bai ama aldetik, ama hizkuntza da erdera, orduan horregatik”.* (ZU-C, 56)

‘I see myself as a Basque speaker, not a new or an old speaker, I am a Basque speaker, because I use Basque. When I said to my boyfriend that I was coming to this discussion group, he said, “But you are not an *euskaldunberri*”, “Of course not, but I am on my mother’s side [on my family’s side], my mother tongue is Spanish, that’s why”’.

Interestingly, the above statement suggests the importance that habitual usage of Basque can have for identification with the Basque-speaking community as signalled by the speaker’s adoption of the *unmarked* category, *euskaldun*. Habitual usage, not simply the capacity to speak, appears to grant speakers a sense of legitimacy in claiming this status, balancing, as it were, the effects of mother tongue.

In the following excerpt, a somewhat parallel claim to belonging to the *euskaldun* world is articulated by BE-C, a 41 year old woman who learned Basque when she married into a Basque-speaking family and moved to Bermeo, a very Basque-speaking town. It is not insignificant that the small fishing towns along the coast like Bermeo have historically been regarded as iconic of *euskaldun* culture. Our speaker reflects on the kind of speaker she is and how that has changed over time. In her last sentences a clear claim for legitimisation can be heard that hinges on becoming part of rural or peasant Basque-speaking networks.

(8) *Hori sasoi baten, beharbada sasoi baten zentzuduna izan zen, baina gaur egun ez nai ez euskaldun berria, ja, ez euskaldun zaharra bez, ze hori inoiz ez naiz izango. Ordun, horrelako sailkapenak oso gatzak direz esaten baietz edo ezetz. Berria ze zentzutuan? Zentzu baten bai, ze ikasi dot, ikasi dot gehiena, guztia ez esate arren, ze egia esan gero, ezkondu eta gero, ba familien eta kalien eta, ba*

*ikasi dot asko entzunez edo, ba hiztegi aldetik batez be, baserritar artien, ze amaginarreba eta aitaginarreba eta hango mundua.* (BE-C, 286)

‘Perhaps that made sense [for me] before [the labels *euskaldunberri* – *euskaldun zahar*] but nowadays I am not an *euskaldunberri* anymore, nor am I an *euskaldun zahar*, that I will never be. It’s difficult to say yes or no to those categories ... *Euskaldunberri* in what sense? In a sense I am, because I have learned it, studied it, but not just like that, as then, when I married, I learned in the family and socially, by listening, even the vocabulary, I’ve learned it from peasants, because my husband’s families come from that world.’

The above speaker’s characterisation of *euskaldun* status as achieved over time through integration into native speakers’ networks is echoed in the following excerpt with interviewee ELK-H. However, his comment makes more explicit than most the hierarchy of authenticity and value that these labels often connote for new speakers. In fact, even if he knows the *euskaldun zahar* identity is beyond his reach, he is so assertive in his claim for legitimacy that he even calls upon it “because he speaks like them”.

(9) *Yo me siento euskaldun, entonces, de ahí para adelante. Y luego, pues para mí, pues igual ser euskaldunberri es una medalla en un momento dado, porque me lo he trabajado yo, o sea, me lo he currado yo y es algo que lo he conseguido yo. Es simplemente parte de ..., es un proceso, ¿no? Euskaldun zaharra tampoco, porque sabes que no eres ... Pero en un momento dado yo igual me metería más, o me gustaría más, o yo igual, a mí mismo ..., sin igual decir a nadie ..., igual sí me metería en el saco de los euskaldun zaharras, porque hablo más como un euskaldun zaharra.* (ELK-H,182)

‘I feel *euskaldun*, at least that, if not more. Then, the way I see it, to be an *euskaldunberri* may have been a medal at a certain moment in time, because I worked for it and it’s something I myself achieved. But it’s just part of a process, isn’t it? *Euskaldun zahar*, I’m not that either, because you know you are not that ... But at times I would include myself [in the category *euskaldun zahar*] ... or I’d like to ... without telling anyone ... because I speak more like a *euskaldun zahar* [than an *euskaldunberri*].’

The potentially stigmatizing or *othering* qualities that some new speakers perceive in the label *euskaldunberri* are expressed in the following quote by ELK-I, a 43 year speaker who learned Basque in his youth and who has an excellent level of competence:

(10) *A mí no quiero que me digan “eres euskaldunberri”, pero sí que veo que hay diferencias. Claro, euskaldunberri éramos los que íbamos al euskaltegi.* (ELK-I, 213)

‘I don’t like to be told “you are an *euskaldunberri*”, but I do see that there are some differences. Of course, *euskaldunberri* were those of us who went to Basque adult education classes.’

## 5 Vernacular and new speaker legitimacy

One of the questions we brought to this study was whether linguistic variety or other features of new speakers’ repertoires had an impact on their self-perception or sense of legitimacy as Basque speakers. The variety most *euskaldunberri* learn is the standard *Batua*. As *the* variety for education, public administration, the mass media and publishing, *Batua* can be considered the “authorised” language (Bourdieu 1991). Virtually all native speakers learn a dialectal variety in the home, acquire *Batua* in school,<sup>6</sup> and tend to use vernacular for oral informal interaction and *Batua* for writing and formal situations. New speakers do not normally acquire a local dialect, nor do they tend to have as much fluency in informal registers. As a result, their oral language can be perceived as artificial and inappropriate. We wanted to know if these differences in repertoire were significant for new speakers’ self-perceptions and/or a source of anxiety.

While this issue was not a topic that generated extended discussion for all participants, the commentary elicited pointed unambiguously to the positive symbolic value some new speakers attached to the ability to speak in vernacular Basque. Not unsurprisingly perhaps, this perspective came from individuals who live in areas with high numbers of native Basque speakers. For example, the woman from Bermeo (cf. Excerpt 8) indirectly indexes the relevance of dialect when she alludes to having learned the language of her husband’s family and community as a reason why she now considers she is more *euskaldun* than *euskaldunberri*.

The following extract from an exchange between participants in the Bilbao focus group is an interesting one in this regard. In it, BI-C, a 49 year old education inspector who learned Basque as an adult, reports being perceived as an *euskaldun zahar* by native speakers. Another member, BI-A, suggests that it is because he does not speak in *Batua*. He confirms, explaining that he speaks in the

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<sup>6</sup> The exception to this is a newly created profile, that of children of *euskaldunberri* parents for whom *Batua* is the variety of family transmission.

local variety of Gernika. This use of dialect is then tied to linguistic identification in the concluding two remarks.

- (11) – *Urte asko emon dodaz, esan bezala, Gernika, Gernika inguruan, eta gero Lea-Artibaitik, eta lana dela-eta, eta nik ikusi dot be bai hangoen erreakzioa, eta hainbatetan harritu egiten dira jakitean euskaldun barrixa nazela. (...) igual berba eitxeko era, edo ez dakit, ez dakit (...) Izan leike doinua, izan leike hiztegia ...* (BI-C, 166 / 170 / 172)
- *Batueraz ez duzulako egiten.* (BI-A, 173)
  - *Gernikeraz egiten, edo ... (...) ni pozik, pozik eta harro.* (BI-C, 176)
  - *Eta zuk zure burua euskaldunberrizat daukazu edo etapa hori ja ...?* (BI-M, 179)
  - *Euskalduntzat, ez barrixe, ez zaharra, ez.* (BI-C, 180)
  - ‘I have worked a lot, first in Gernika, then in Lea-Artibai, and I have seen the reaction of the people there, how they could not believe I was a *euskaldunberri*. [...] Perhaps because of the way I speak, [...] it could be the pronunciation, could be the vocabulary I use ...’
  - ‘It’s because you don’t speak in *Batua* (in Standard Basque).’
  - ‘I speak the Gernika way. [...] And I felt happy, happy and proud.’
  - ‘And do you see yourself as an *euskaldunberri*?’
  - ‘As an *euskaldun* (Basque speaker), neither new or old (native).’

A very similar case is manifest by ELK-H (cf. Excerpt 9). He, like the previous participant, identified himself unambiguously as *euskaldun* and spoke with some pride about having learned vernacular Basque and, in particular the informal allocutive system (*hika* in Basque) commonly used by male native speakers in this town. He considered his ability to speak in local vernacular to be a key factor in feeling comfortable interacting with his friends and feeling integrated into the Basque-speaking community.

While none of these speakers went so far as to claim being “native” – pointing again to the fundamental incommensurability that surrounds the native speaker status – they revealed genuine pleasure and pride at being mistaken for one. The acquisition of markers of vernacular Basque thus does appear to operate as a mechanism of authentication – at least for those new speakers living in Basque-speaking environments. From our data one cannot be sure what linguistic features are most emblematic in conveying nativeness: those characteristic of dialect, informal register, or both. What is clear is that in the BAC, as in other minority language revival contexts, the attitudes of new speakers attribute greater authenticity and legitimacy to native speakers and the features of speech metonymically linked to them. (See O’Rourke et al. in the Foreword to this issue.)



## 6 Ways of being *euskaldun*

Finally, while some of our new speakers expressed no hesitation about their status as (just) Basque speakers, this was not the case for everyone. Doubts prevailed even among younger participants who had learned Basque in immersion programs about the legitimacy of such a claim. The following quote from a young woman in the Donostia focus group gives us further insight into the ideology of nativeness and the kinds of identification struggles it poses for new speakers. She started learning Basque at the age of three. However, encountering few opportunities to use it, she chose to enroll in a number of university courses taught in Basque “in order not to forget the language”. In her comment, she makes a distinction between (a) being able to speak in Basque and (b) being an *euskaldun*. Why would a person that speaks Basque feel that she cannot claim for herself the term for Basque speaker? In line with the tentative interpretation outlined before, the term *euskaldun* ‘Basque speaker’ appears to be charged with a clear sense of legitimacy that not all feel can claim for themselves.

(12) *Eske ez dakit, ez dakit. Aber, ni gehiau erderaz hitz egiten det, baino, eske, euskeraz dakit ta euskeraz hitz egin dezaket, eske ez dakit. Euskalduna ez da ze ez da nere ama hizkuntza eta ez det ordun guztitan ta momentu guztitan euskeraz hitz egiten. Ordun ezin det euskaldun, euskaldun naizela esatea. / Euskaraz pentsatzea, nere ustez hori euskalduna izatea dela, bueno, ni adibidez ezin det hori esan. Ta gero euskaldun izatea naizela hori ez eukita, osea, nire lehenengo hizkuntza erdera izanda ... ba ezin det, ezin det esan. (Gazte-Do-C, 453/455)*

‘I don’t know, I don’t know. Let’s see, I speak more in Spanish, but the thing is that I know Basque and I can speak in Basque ... I don’t know. I am not an *euskaldun*, because it is not my mother tongue and so I don’t always and at all times use Basque. So I cannot say that I am an *euskaldun*. / To think in Basque, in my opinion that is to be an *euskaldun*, and for example, I cannot say that of myself. To say that I am an *euskaldun* when I don’t have that, when my first language is Spanish, well, I can’t say that, I can’t say that.’

Our focus group made up solely of university students provided yet more evidence of the ways new speakers are trying to sort out the boundaries and meanings of their identifications with Basque. At one point, when the participants are busy discussing what an *euskaldun* is, they try to clarify matters by differentiating between two different meanings of the term: “Basque speaker” (as a linguistic identity) and “Basque person” (related to cultural and/or national identity). While the discourse of the language revitalisation movement has consistently

sought to unite the two meanings (Urla 2012), in this exchange we see participants treating them as potentially separable. Participants in the discussion all consider themselves Basque and claim a Basque identity, but some specifically disclaim a Basque *linguistic* identity, as these excerpts suggest:

- (13) *Hizkuntza bakarrik baldin bada, ez, baino orokorrean zu nola sentitzen zean, ba bai, euskalduna, hemengoa, baino euskerarekiko ez.* (Gazte-Do-E, 469)  
 ‘In what refers to the language, no, I am not [an *euskaldun*], but talking in general, what you consider yourself, then yes, *euskaldun*, I am from here. But not regarding the language.’
- (14) *Bai, bai ni adibidez lotzen dut euskaldun izatea lehenengo ideia da Euskal Herrian bizitzea, baina gero hizkuntzarekin lotzen dut gehiago adibidez euskaldun berria deitzea edo. Ni adibidez ez dakit euskaldun berria naiz edo ez, ze euskara ez dut ama hizkuntza bezala eta euskalduna sentitzen naiz Euskal Herrian bizitzen naizelako bakarrik, baino ..., hizkuntzarekiko ez dut lotura handia.* (Gazte-Do-A, 477)  
 ‘Yes, yes, I myself see myself as *euskaldun* in the first sense mentioned, somebody who lives in the Basque country, but then, in relation to the language, I see myself as an *euskaldunberri*. I don’t know if I am an *euskaldunberri* or not, but I have Spanish as my mother tongue and I feel myself Basque because I live in the Basque country, but with regard to the language, I really don’t have that great an attachment.’

The above careful parsing of the two meanings of *euskaldun* shows us a certain ambivalence in fully claiming a Basque linguistic identity among some young new speakers and a keen interest to make distinctions that can describe their varied ways of living Basque. Their adherence to the term *euskaldunberri* marks a sense of not being *fully* attached to Basque and by extension, that their claim to a Basque linguistic identity is not entirely legitimate. Whether this is a source of concern to the speakers above or something that they would like to change is not entirely clear.

At the same time, others saw using Basque as an avenue towards acquiring a deeper attachment and identification. Indeed, many participants agreed that usage had the potential to be transformative, as summarised by this speaker:

- (15) *Euskera erabiltzea. Ba jakitea, baina baita ere erabiltzea, euskeraz erabiltzen dezunen ba zure hizkuntza bihurtzen da.* (Gazte-Do-F, 486)  
 ‘It is using Basque. It is knowing the language, yes, but also using it. When you use Basque it becomes your language.’

Of special note is the possessive used by this young woman: it becomes *your* language, suggesting that usage brings a sense of a greater legitimacy to claim ownership of the language.

## 7 Conclusions

This article presents results from an ongoing research project on the attitudes, learning experiences and self-perceptions of Basque new speakers in the BAC. Our focus here has been limited to the domain of self-perception and how speakers situate themselves in relation to one of the three linguistic labels currently in use in the Basque context: *euskaldun zahar*, *euskaldunberri* and *euskaldun*. The explanations participants gave for their mode of identification shows that achieving competency in Basque is not regarded as automatically conferring a Basque linguistic identity. For these new speakers, it is clearly not the same to *know* how to *speak* Basque and to *be* a Basque speaker (an *euskaldun*). The distinctions they make between themselves and other speakers draw from a set of ideological assumptions about the nature of linguistic identity as a deep and enduring attachment and the determining role ascribed to family-based language learning in giving rise not only to greater competency, but also to an inner language that is perceived as central to one's sense of self.

This study shows that Basque new speakers, like new speakers discussed in other contributions to this volume, presume an impermeable boundary between themselves and native speakers. The characterisations of their chosen forms of identification with Basque suggest a perceived lack of “realness” in comparison to the native speaker leading many of them to sustain an attachment to a distinct “new speaker” label, *euskaldunberri*. In this way, new speakers reflect and reproduce the ideology of the native speaker as someone in possession of a more legitimate claim to Basque linguistic identity. However, the fact that some new speakers choose to use the *euskaldun* category, Basque speaker, shows that the ideology of mother tongue notwithstanding, there are other ways to authentication for new comers to the language. Bucholtz and Hall (2004:381) emphasise that studies of language and identity repeatedly reveal a disjuncture between dominant cultural ideologies that often characterise identity in reductive and inflexible ways and actual social practices that are more complex and malleable. Our study reveals a similar disjuncture in finding that Basque linguistic identity, while frequently described as an essential and unchanging quality, is experientially accessed by some new speakers through social practice.

Our study sought to answer the question many language planners have: what are the key factors that make a new speaker of Basque consider him or herself to

be an *euskaldun*? According to our data, such individuals have some or all of the following characteristics: they tend to be persons with ample opportunities to use Basque and for whom Basque is present in their close social context, especially family and friends; they are people who are even able to “live in Basque”; they have a good level of communicative competence, especially in oral informal registers, and have access to and use a vernacular form of Basque.

In the efforts to reverse the decline of Basque, a great deal of effort has been invested in learning the language by people without the opportunity for family transmission. The success is undeniable, as figures for the number of Basque speakers show. However, the Basque-speaking community has become more heterogeneous incorporating people with varied identifications and ways of living their relationship to the language. The challenge remains for new speakers to gain a greater sense of legitimacy and deeper attachments to Basque that can help them to become full participants in Basque-speaking communities. This study shows some ways found by new speakers to consider themselves as legitimately *euskaldun*.

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