

Basque is (still) an aspiration language

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Keywords: laryngeal phonology; Laryngeal Realism; Element Theory; underspecification; Basque phonology

Laryngeal Realism (Honeybone 2005; etc.) differentiates two language types: (true) voice, with voiced-voiceless; and aspiration, with aspirated-unaspirated (fortis-lenis). In Element Theory, |L| marks nasality in sonorants and lenis/voiced in obstruents in voice languages; in aspiration systems, fortis/aspirated is marked by |H|. Tenuis obstruents are underspecified.

Basque is often considered an originally fortis-lenis system, which switched to voice in all but its northeasternmost dialects (Martinet 1950; Michelena 1977; Trask 1997; Egurtzegi 2014, 2019). An alternative approach (e.g., Hualde 2018) regards northeastern aspiration as an innovation. The present paper supports the former view, but also argues that *all* present-day varieties of Basque *phonologically* belong to the aspiration type.

The argument and data come from Standard Basque and western varieties (Getxo, Gernika, etc.) (to contrast the eastern dialect area):

(i) “Post-nasal voicing” (widely attested; data (from Standard Basque) in (1)): we regard |H| as floating in the suffixes/clitics; whenever it links, they surface voiceless; or else it deletes, which produces a laryngeally unmarked consonant, phonetically interpreted as voiced. “Voicing” happens in place-sharing, partial geminates (e.g., *irun-go*), where |H| cannot link since that would be incompatible with the nasal in the structure. In heterorganic sequences (e.g., *hil-ko*), nothing prevents |H| from linking.

(ii) “s-voicing” (e.g., Getxo; data in (2)): /s/ has a floating |H|, linked only in licensed positions, i.e., before a filled V-slot or a final empty nucleus (parametrically a licenser – e.g., *burue[s]*), or spread from C2 (e.g., *burue[s] pentsa*). “s-voicing” happens when |H| cannot link in an unlicensed position.

(iii) Coalescence across a word-boundary (e.g., Getxo; data in (3)): since fortis are |H|-marked but lenes are not, when they fuse across a word-boundary they will produce a voiceless outcome. The lenis stop’s empty Lar node inherits the |H| of the deleted consonant. (In *bat naiko* > *ba[n]aiko*, |H| cannot link since that would be incompatible with the nasal.)

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| (1) | <i>irun</i> -[g]o ‘of Irun’ | <i>irun</i> -[d]ik ‘from I.’ | cf. <i>bilbo</i> -[t]ik ‘from B.’ | <i>hil</i> -[k]o ‘will kill’ |
| (2) | <i>e</i> [z]ne ‘milk’ | | cf. <i>burue</i> [s] ‘with a head’ | |
| | <i>arna</i> [z] <i>luse</i> ‘long breath’ | | <i>burue</i> [s] <i>pentsa</i> ‘to think with the head’ | |
| (3) | <i>bat bakarik</i> | <i>ba</i> [p]akarik ‘only one’ | <i>suk dusti</i> | <i>su</i> [t]usti ‘you-ERG everything’ |
| | cf. <i>bat plasan</i> | <i>ba</i> [p]lasan ‘one in the square’ | <i>bat naiko</i> | <i>ba</i> [n]aiko ‘one (is) enough’ |

All three analyses heavily rely on |H| being the laryngeal prime and on underspecified obstruents interpreted by the *phonetics* as voiced, indicating that Basque is (still) an |H|-system *phonologically*, therefore it is (still) an aspiration language.

Acknowledgements

This study is being conducted in the frame of project no. PPKE-BTK-KUT-23-2, supported by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of Pázmány Péter Catholic University, and of the “Laryngeal patterns in synchrony and diachrony” project sponsored by NKIF grant #142498.

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