

ON THE EVOLUTION OF THE GENITIVE PRONOUNS IN NORTHERN BASQUE

This paper has three parts. In the first one, I will describe the opposition between weak and strong genitive pronouns in Early Northern Basque (mid-16th to mid-17th centuries). In the second part, I will show the evolution of this system in literary Labourdin, the dialect spoken on the Atlantic coast on the Northern side of the Spanish-French border, from 1650 to 1750. Finally, I will discuss the implications of this evolution for contemporary theoretical research in diachronic linguistics.

1. EARLY NORTHERN BASQUE: CLASSICAL LABOURDIN

Classical Labourdin (CL) has two parallel series of genitive pronouns (GPs), morphologically distinguishable by the presence of a diphthong in the strong one:

(1)	1sg	2sg	3sg	1pl	2pl/pl	3pl
Weak genitives:	ene	hire	haren	gure	zure / zuen	haien
Strong genitives:	neure	heure	bere	geure	zeure/zeuen	bere

(The genitive case marks the (broadly defined) "possessor" in NPs, the complement of some postpositions, and the definite direct object of nominalized verbs.)

Here are the main properties of the opposition between the two series.

(a) The distribution of the two classes is strictly complementary. As a first approximation, one can say that when the minimal NP or the PP which contains a GP α has a coargument (i.e. an absolutive, ergative or dative NP – cross-referenced in the finite verb if there is one) coindexed with it, the strong form is compulsory. In every other configuration, only the weak form is licit.

(b) This opposition does not correspond to the anaphoric/pronominal distinction, since a strong form is licit (hence compulsory) even if the GP modifies the subject NP of the clause, and the coargument consequently does not c-command it. It is not either an instantiation of the independent notion of Dependency as developed by Fiengo & May (1994), since the latter is not locally constrained, in contradistinction with the clause-mate condition just summed up.

(c) No WCO effects are produced when the coindexed argument is a QP lower on the functional scale than the NP which contains the GP, cf.:

- (2) BERE_i gorputzeko gaitzak emaiten baitio BAT-BEDERARI_i egitekorik asko [Axular (1643)]
 //z. 'Because his_i body's pain[SG,ERG] gives everyone_i[DAT] plenty to do.'

(d) (General) Basque has no reflexive pronouns or anaphors: when two arguments corefer, the non-subject NP surfaces as a nominal expression of the form *my/thy/his head*; needless to say, the strong GPs are then required. The relevance of this observation and the next will appear later.

(e) When an argument is complex, one of its constituents cannot serve as antecedent for a GP within the other (see Reinhart & Reuland (1994)):

- (3) Prometatu zerauen gure Jaungoikoak [ABRAHAM_i eta HAREN_i ondokoei], emanen zerauela Judeako erresuma on hura. [Axular]
 'Our Lord promised Abraham_i and his_i followers that he would give them that good land of Judea.'

2. THE BREAKDOWN OF THE SYSTEM

2.1. The evolution of the 1st & 2nd p. GPs

The Labourdin authors that followed Axular and J. Etxeberri of Ziburu did not respect the clearcut partition described above. However, up to 1720, only the non-3rd p. GPs were affected. As might be expected, the strong forms became optional in the local contexts in which they were previously obligatory. On the other hand, I have found no example of a strong form substituted for a weak one in a non-local context. By 1742 (J. Haraneder's translation of the NT) the strong forms corresponding to the discourse pronouns had altogether disappeared, except in the specific case of the reflexive expression mentioned in (d) above, where they were still more common than the weak ones. Here is an example of the contrast thus created:

- (4) ...eta maita zazu *pro*_i ZURE_i lagun proksimoa ZEURE_i burua bezala. [Mt 19:19]
 '...and thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.'

2.2. The evolution of the 3rd p. GPs

It began at the time (Haraneder 1742) when the disappearance of the 1st and 2nd p. strong forms was almost completed. But the direction of the evolution was the other way round: from this date on, the strong form *bere* replaced the weak form *haren* (sg) or *haien* (pl) more and more often. Two main contexts allowed this wider use of *bere* in Haraneder's text. The first one is the context described in (e) above:

- (5) Jakobek jendratu zuen [JUDA_i eta HAREN_i anaiak] (Mt 1:2)
 'Jacob begat Judas_i and his_i brethren'

- (6) Har zazu [HAURRA; eta BERE; ama] (Mt 2:13) 'Take the child; and his; mother'

The second context is provided by nominalized clauses:

- (7) *prq prq* otoiztu zuen [*PRQ* etortzeaz HAREN; etxerat] (Lk 8:41)
'He; besought him; [*PRQ* to come to his; house].'
(8) *prq* ez zuen utzi [*PRQ* BERE; kien sartzerat] nihar; (Lk 8:51)
'He; suffered no one; [*PRQ* to go in with him;].

Thus, at first glance, the variation seems to be free. A closer look at the context, however, reveals that the syntactic constraint may be violated when, but only when, the coreferent NP that licences the strong form is in fact the *main discourse topic* (Jesus here). From the 19th century on, the discourse condition has been relaxed, and even a local, or secondary, topic may now licence *bere*.

3. SOME THEORETICAL CONSEQUENCES

3.1. The progressive disappearance of the 1st and 2nd strong GPs is functionally quite natural, since their functional load was nil. Four points must however be underscored.

(i) If functional considerations were the only forces at work in the history of languages, there would be no way of accounting for why the CL system came into existence at all.

(ii) In the same vein, note that the distinction exemplified in (4), which potentially allowed for the disambiguation of CL *zeure burua* 'yourself' or 'your head' (the literal interpretation of the expression), and of Modern Northern Basque *zure burua* (same ambiguity), did not help salvage the quasi-doublets.

(iii) J. Etcheberri of Sara (early 18th C.) systematically used the strong forms in emphatic or contrastive contexts, and in those only. Again, this way of providing quasi-doublets with semantic or pragmatic content did not suffice, since the strong forms survived only very marginally in Haraneder, as shown above.

(iv) Last but not least, a careful perusal of the texts published in the second half of the 17th century shows that the free choice between strong and weak forms in the contexts that required the former in CL is much more statistical than real, in the following sense: once the regular system breaks down, the behaviour of the strong GPs becomes highly idiosyncratic in both senses of the word: *every single author* has a particular system in which the *individual* lexical items do not behave homogeneously. For instance, Argaiñaratz (1665) has lost the complementary distribution between the two forms for each person and number, except in the 1st p. sg., where the classical distinction is maintained. But Gasteluçar (1686) has lost all the strong forms except... in the 2nd p. pl. Such phenomena clearly vindicate Chomsky's thesis that knowledge of language is a mental, hence individual, phenomenon; as a consequence, statistical results such as Kroch (1989) are then best interpreted as socio-linguistic, rather than linguistic, studies.

3.2. The fate of the opposition of *bere* and *haren/heien* teaches us another lesson: the discourse-grammar factors that allowed a widening of the use of *bere* must have been present all the time – but I have found no correlation between the actual extension of this use and other grammatical phenomena. Hence, mere chance does play a role in the evolution of languages, just as it does in biology. Moreover, the specific change undergone by the 3rd p. GPs clearly shows that all discourse factors are not equivalent: the contrastive content of the opposition in Etcheberri of Sara, which concerned the first two persons, has left no traces, whereas logophoricity proper never seems to have been a decisive factor (compare (7) and (8)), as opposed to what happened in the southern dialects, as they have been described by Abaitua (1991).

3.3. (*Post-scriptum*.) Ironically, in the neighbouring dialects (Lower-Navarrese, Souletine), the system of GPs never was as regular as in CL, since the first two plural persons have never had strong genitives. It is, however, in those "ill-balanced" dialects that the classical opposition has best survived in the third persons, where the "emphatic" use of *bere* is generally ignored even today.

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