

Sunday, November 18, 2007

Dear friends from the Wall Street Journal,

Please accept this article written, approved and signed by 180 individuals, representing twenty different institutions, media, and universities in eight countries. We are scholars, researchers, writers, librarians and professionals whose paramount objective is to correct the misinformation and inaccuracies of the Keith Johnson article regarding the Basque language. Among us, there are specialists in linguistic legislation, sociolinguistics, minority languages and endangered languages. We also represent different aspects of science, from nuclear physics to cellular biology and we conduct our investigations and publish our research in Basque among other languages. One eminent politician is included in the list, Pete T. Cenarrusa, former Secretary of State of Idaho (1967-2003) for the Republican Party. Mr. Johnson's piece has ignited an international network of specialists that believe a resolute and official retraction is appropriate and required from the Wall Street Journal out of respect to its readers and minority peoples around the world.

We would suggest a supplementary follow-up article, based on facts and data which we would be more than happy to facilitate from the European Union, the EBLUL, the United Nations, the EUSTAT and numerous scholarly research projects conducted in the Basque territories and those with minority language users around the world. Our attached statement gives an indication of the gross errors introduced into the minds of your readers when Mr. Johnson's article was given front page status. The corrections and amplifications of November 7, 8 and 15 included in the online version of the WSJ are not sufficient; nor the article "Euskera, the Very Ancient Basque Language, Struggles for Respect", published on November 16. Indeed, the readers are the ones that deserve respect. We would hope that our statement or another article be published also on the front page, demonstrating that corrections are given equal importance to previously published erroneous and misrepresentative stories. The WSJ must maintain its reputation of international excellence and serve as an example of responsibility, dependability and accuracy in journalism.

We are making a public request to you. This letter and your response to it will be published in several American and international academic journals, in the Basque, Catalan and other presses, and for many years to come in the future research conducted in sociolinguistics and endangered group identity issues. We are certain the WSJ will accept the obligation to correct itself and we look forward to collaborating and being a part of a solution by writing a new guest article for you, or assisting Mr. Johnson in writing a follow-up piece.

We look forward to your response and a discussion of possibilities for a positive outcome.

Sincerely,

## The Basque Language among other world wide endangered languages

Having read the article entitled “Basque Inquisition: How Do You Say Shepherd in Euskera? Through Fiat, Separatists Bring Old Tongue to Life...” published on November 6, we enclose an answer based on the facts and the laws of the Basque Country, since it seems that the author of the article has based it on only one biased testimony without any further research and without a minimum knowledge of the facts.

Let's start with the map; the article includes a really “original” map of the Basque Country according to which the Basque Country is about 550 miles (880 kilometers) wide. Without looking any further than Google, you will find out that the Basque Country is not even 100 miles wide.

Now to focus on the main idea of the article: Mrs. Esquivias, a math teacher at a school in the Basque Country, is going to be dismissed from her job if she does not learn Basque.

This is simply false.

The Spanish constitution states in its preamble that it will *protect all Spaniards and peoples of Spain in the exercise of human rights, of their culture and traditions, languages and institutions*. Article 3 states as well that:

1. *Castilian is the official Spanish language of the State. All Spaniards have the duty to know it and the right to use it.*
2. *The other Spanish languages shall also be official in the respective Self-governing Communities in accordance with their Statutes.*
3. *The richness of the different linguistic modalities of Spain is a cultural heritage which shall be specially respected and protected.*

According to Spanish law, every Spanish citizen has the right and the duty to know Spanish and only the right to know Basque, Catalan or other official languages of the Spanish state.

In virtue of this constitutional rule and according to the Law 10/1982 of November 24, on the normalization of the Basque language (article 14.2), *the authorities will determine the places for which it is prescriptive to know both languages* (Spanish and Basque). That is to say, there are certain positions for which it would be compulsory to know “both languages” (Basque and Spanish). An example of these positions is “Basque language teacher,” for which, as everyone will understand, it is compulsory to know Basque. The law 10/1982 was reviewed and approved by the Spanish Constitutional Court, the institution in charge of examining the adaptation of the laws to the Constitution. (Anyone can search the resolution 82/1986, on June 26, by the constitutional court on the internet, available only in Spanish).

The law that determines the use of both languages (Spanish and Basque) at any public job in the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) is the *Basque Civil Service Law, la Ley de Función Pública Vasca* 6/1989, of June 6, according to which each one of the positions in the Basque administration will have a “Linguistic Profile” (LP). Based on the requirements of the job, it will be necessary or not for the person applying for the position to know Basque, but it will always be compulsory to know Spanish, for it is a constitutional requirement (article 3.1). By virtue of the requirements for each job, there are four different LPs: LP1, LP2, LP3 and LP4 (LP1 being “no knowledge of Basque” and LP4 being “full knowledge of Basque”). Each public job at the BAC has been assigned an LP. It could happen that according to the requirements of the job, the requisite linguistic profile may change from LP1 to LP2. In such a case the public officer may either increase their proficiency in Basque or be transferred to another position in which he/she maintains his/her LP. However, he/she would never lose his/her job. Another serious error in Johnson’s article.

There are two fields of the BAC administration that are out of the LP system: health care and law enforcement (police). In neither case is it required to know Basque or to have a basic LP in Basque.

In the specific case of Mrs. Esquivias (education) there are only two existing LPs: LP1 (only Spanish is required) and LP2 (Spanish and Basque are required). In this specific case LP2 is required when the class has to be taught in Basque (Basque language or any other subject to be taught in Basque). The law that regulates the LPs in education is the Decree 47/1993, of March 9, and anyone can find it in the internet ([http://www.euskadi.net/cgiin\\_k54/ver\\_c?CMD=VERDOC&BASE=B03J&DOCN=000009334&CONF=/config/k54/bopv\\_c.cnf](http://www.euskadi.net/cgiin_k54/ver_c?CMD=VERDOC&BASE=B03J&DOCN=000009334&CONF=/config/k54/bopv_c.cnf)).

The problem Mrs. Esquivias has is not that she is going to be removed from her job if she does not learn Basque (This is as false as it is illegal), but that she is running out of students. Most of the students are taking math in Basque. In other words, more and more students are electing to have math taught in Basque and not in Spanish, so there is a need for Basque-speaking math teachers. However, according to the law, Mrs. Esquivias cannot be removed from her job for not learning Basque.

Indeed, she has the opportunity to take a two year sabbatical, with full salary, in order to learn Basque. She has elected to do so, not because it has been imposed to her (which would be illegal under Spanish law), but because she has elected to do so. To suggest otherwise should be considered an exaggeration or a plain lie.

Moreover, the author should have added that the Basque language is completely banned in public administration (including, naturally education) in the southern part of the Historical Community of Navarre (HCN), more precisely in the area named the “non-Basque speaking zone.” The author should have mentioned that in the Basque territories of the French state (*Pays basque*) the Basque language is not official at all.

However, apart from the main point of the article, which is that “Basque inquisitors are abolishing the right of citizenship to speak Spanish,” which, in our opinion, can only be said from a complete ignorance of the rule of law or with a clear political bias, the article makes comments on several linguistic or sociolinguistic principles that have to be clarified.

The author of the article states that only 630,000 people speak Basque while 450 million speak Spanish. We can be certain that the author does not mean by that that it is not worth it to speak or to learn Basque... For, according to that line of reasoning, we all should be speaking Chinese or Portuguese, or maybe English. However, again, the data are quite inexact perhaps because, even if the author does not cite the source of information being used, data as old as that of 1996 has been used to write the article. In any case, in 1996, the Basque Country had nearly 3,000,000 inhabitants (accurately 2,098,055 of them living at the BAC) and according to the official statistics in 1996, 60% of the population in the BAC had an average or good mastery of Basque (far from the 30% expressed in the article). The statistics by Eustat and other agencies are available on the internet. No further research was necessary in order to have accurate data for 2007: <http://www.eustat.es/indice.asp?idioma=i> and almost everything is available in English. There is no excuse not to know. Statements such as “Euskera just isn’t used in real life” are quite an exaggeration or simply a lack of knowledge of contemporary reality.

From the point of view of the history of language (concretely history of semantics) the statement expressing that words such as “Airport, science, Renaissance, democracy, government, and independence,” are all newly minted words with no roots in traditional Basque, is certainly curious. Clearly, the author does not know Basque, for he does not know that “Renaissance” is “Berpizkunde” in Basque, or “govern” is “jaurlaritzza” or “independence” is “askatasuna.” As for the rest of his examples, it is noteworthy that “airport” is “aeropuerto” in Spanish, “aéroport” in French, “aeroporto” in Italian, “aeroporto” in Portuguese... and so on. “Democracy” is “democracia” in Spanish, “démocratie” in French, “demokratie” in German, “democrazia” in Italian, “democracia” in Portuguese... and so on. But, is not that the beauty of language? Is not it delightful to have words like “democracy” or “telephone” or “penicillin” constructed with ancient Latin and Greek roots? Over the centuries, languages have given words to each others and the author may not know that Spanish words such as “bizarro” (bizarre in English), “izquierda” (left), “chalupa” (boat), “escarcha” (frost), “landa” (field), “mozo” (guy), “sidra” (cider), “silueta” (silhouette) or “zoquete” (silly), among some 200 others, are of Basque origin. Should not communication among languages and cultures be celebrated? Should not human civilization promote the exchange of knowledge instead of defending isolationism? We are sure that more than one specialist in semantics would answer affirmatively.

It is simply sad to hear Basque referred to as “an ancient language little suited to contemporary life...”. We lament knowing that there are still people defending the idea that there are classes among languages; that some languages are fossils that no longer evolve. Everything evolves in life; we are sure that all Basque people who work in schools, Basque writers who have had their original Basque novels translated into more

than 30 languages (Atxaga...), Basque engineers working at technology industries (Mondragon, CAF...), people working at the edge of technology in the Aeronautic industry (Aernnova, ITP, Sener, MTorres...) or even developing revolutionary scientific theories in Basque (Etxenike...) would take issue with Mr. Johnson's statement. Moreover, people living in Basque every single day of their lives may think it erroneous to state that to say "I love you" in ancient Basque is no longer "suitable." But we all know who Leopoldo Barreda is (not Barrera as it appears in the article, another error) and what political party he works for.

We hope that the author of the article has read, one by one, Basque textbooks before formulating the accusation that "Basque-language textbooks used in schools never tell students that the Basque Country is part of Spain." And, if he has, we suggest he should do it again. He may find himself quite wrong.

Also, the author should review a few books and archives on Basque history, as the statement "Basque separatists have been waging a struggle for independence from Spain for 39 years..." appears to be some 200 years off. In fact, the government of Gipuzkoa asked for independence in 1793, almost 214 years ago, more accurately the claim for independence in the Basque country is as old as the Spanish and the French states. Just another error.

We are sure that the *Wall Street Journal* demands accuracy, seriousness and responsibility from its collaborators because the *raison d'être* of an article is to inform and to provide precise, correct and exact data. We hope that the errors of this politically biased article will be corrected.

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