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# Stress on Accent; Errenteria Basque Revisited

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we report an experiment of accentual placement in Errenteria Basque. We compare data from three generations of speakers with the data described in previous literature. The results show a mixed accentual system with marked and unmarked words (as previously addressed in the literature). The relevant fact is that the phonological shape of the current unmarked words is different from the descriptions in the literature since the current one is a stress-accent system and the previous one suggests to be a pitch-accent system. Based on diachronic data, we show the direction of the phonological change and point a possible explanation for the development of the new accentual system based on Hualde's hypothesis [1].

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Errenteria Basque (henceforth EB) is a central (Gipuzkoan) variety of this language that traditionally has not been thoroughly studied in terms of accent (with the exceptions of [2], a few notes in [3], [4], [5], [6], [7] when discussing overall Basque accentuation and [8].

As shown in [9], in today's EB all lexical words are accented, that is, in all words there are F0 movements associated to accented syllables. It can thus be classified as a stress-accent dialect contrasting with the accentual patterns found in the pitch-accent varieties of Northern Bizkaian as described in [10], [11]. In those varieties most roots are lexically unaccented and do not bear an accent unless they occur in isolation or immediately preceding the verb (the syntactic position of focus in Basque). Following [3], [4], [5], [7], [8] we refer to them as "unmarked" words. Besides, there are "marked" words that bear an accent that is lexically assigned and surfaces in all contexts. In the variety of EB there are two main accentual patterns; [+2] (the accent is on the second syllable from the left edge of the word, that is, postinitial accent) and [+1] (initial accent)<sup>1</sup>. Both of them are characterized by a H\* toneme<sup>2</sup>. The two accentual patterns present different distribution depending on the lexical item: [+2] for unmarked words (i. e., the majority of words) and [+1] for marked ones. The existence of a distinction between marked and unmarked words had been already addressed by Mitxelena in some of his writings, but for the unmarked ones he described a completely different pattern from the one found nowadays (he was a native speaker of EB). In [3] (p. 236) he explicitly says that:

*"Noun forms fall, as far as the accentual pattern goes, into two classes: words belonging to the unmarked class, to put in Jacobsen's terms, characterized by a sustained accent, and words with a marked accent, signaled by a falling contour."*

Furthermore, in [5], p. 579, he describes both systems as follows:

*"It is licit to assure anyway that the difference between "basuá" [the forest] and "basuà" [the glass] or "galerá" [the loss] and "galderà" [the question]... ..has nearly nothing in common for instance with Spanish "término" [the term], "termino" [I finish] and "terminó" [he finished]. It isn't the case that there is a syllable that clearly bears the accent, that is, that it differs from the other syllables in the word in that a special emphasis; but there are two different configurations that differ as totalities, one is opposed to the other."<sup>3</sup>*

His main point is that the difference among the two accentual patterns of EB wasn't a different position of the accent in each set of words but that both systems had a completely different accentual pattern; the "sustained" one for the unmarked words and the "falling" one for the marked words. There's no special reason but lexical arbitrariness for an item to belong to one or the other of the sets; yet, the unmarked set is a large and productive set of words and the marked set is a closed and decreasing set of words that are usually Romance loanwords (new and old), certain suffixed nouns (for instance the plurals) or nouns with spatial connotations.

## 2. THE EXPERIMENT

An experiment was designed to test the reality of Mitxelena's description of unmarked and marked sets of words. There's a manuscript by Mitxelena, published *post mortem* as [7], that deals with some issues of the accentual pattern of EB and which we have used as a source of data for making our questionnaire. We ignore the real date of the manuscript, but by Mitxelena's age we can guess that it reflects the speech of people who were born in the first decade of last century. In this manuscript there's a long list of words of which we took 1,080 for our experiment. These words are classified by Mitxelena as marked or unmarked.

The relevant tokens were divided into 563 in the unmarked set and 517 in the marked set, displayed in columns and making minimal or “pseudominimal” pairs<sup>4</sup>:

**Unmarked:**

*basua* ‘the forest’  
*iltzia* ‘the nail’  
*egosiya* ‘boiled’  
*ariya* ‘the thread’

**Marked:**

*basuà* ‘the glass’  
*iltzià* ‘to die’  
*egokiyà* ‘appropriate’  
*ariyà* ‘the sheep’

Thus, 51.05% of the lexical items from the manuscript were interpreted by Mitxelena as unmarked (hence, pronounced with the “sustained” accent) and 48.94% as marked (hence, pronounced with the “falling contour”)<sup>5</sup>. However, since this is an unedited manuscript that was not intended to be published as was, we shouldn’t take for granted the complete reliability of the lists of words (and, in fact, it seems by their typographic shape that some words presented in one of the columns really belong to the other). Unfortunately, the original manuscript seems to be lost and it cannot be compared to the published version [7]. Thus, these asymmetries were taken into account when preparing the questionnaire and when the author (also a native speaker of EB) judged items to be in the wrong column, these items were put in the correct one (see the complete list in [9]).

The questionnaire for the experiment was made up of the complete list of the manuscript by Mitxelena with the exception of some proper names that are not widely used anymore. A total amount of 1,080 lexical tokens was presented to each speaker (999 different lexical items + 81 repetitions). Since every speaker of Basque is (at least) bilingual, the Spanish translation of the target item was presented to the speaker like “How do you say X?” so that she could utter the target form without any influence from the interviewer.

Six native speakers of different ages were the subjects of the experiment:

Speakers A and B, older than 75 years.

Speakers C and D, around 45 years old.

Speakers E and F, younger than 25.

The main aims of the experiment were two:

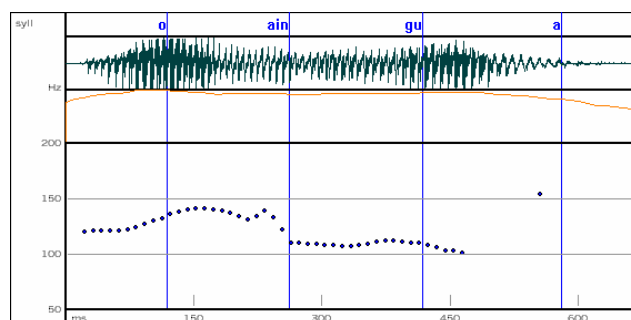
1-To prove whether the sets described by Mitxelena exist as such in nowadays EB. That is: 1a) Whether there was a distinction of marked/unmarked items in today’s EB. 1b) What was the phonetic/phonological difference between them. 1c) Which and how many of the lexical items described in Mitxelena’s manuscript were still today in the set of marked/unmarked that Mitxelena assigned to them.

2-To see the potential direction of the change in the word-“markedness set” association by comparing the accentuation patterns in EB in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the accentuation patterns of different generations of today’s EB speakers.

### 3. THE RESULTS

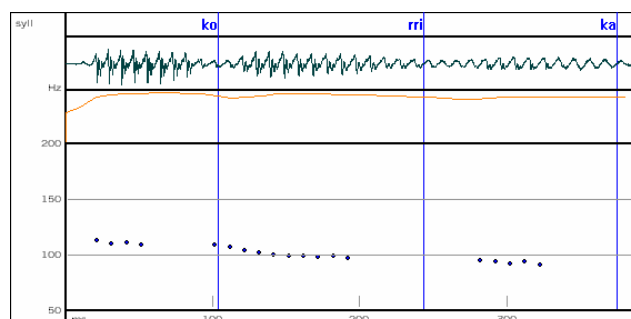
The data obtained clearly show that in EB there is still a distinction between lexically marked and unmarked words. However, the tone structure of today’s EB is significantly different from the pattern described by Mitxelena in that today’s EB’s unmarked words don’t show a “sustained” accent but, as pointed in the introduction, a [+2] accent. On the other hand, marked words do have the same tune as that described by Mitxelena, that is, a pitch fall from the first syllable.

Fig 1. unmarked accent in today’s EB:



As can be observed in Fig (1) (*oáingua* ‘the current one’) uttered by speaker A, >75) today’s EB’s unmarked accent is very different from the description in [3]. There is no “sustained accent” but a falling contour from the second syllable (the accented one).

Fig 2. marked accent in today’s EB:



In the marked words (e. g., Fig (2) *kórrika* ‘running’, also uttered by speaker A), the accentual pattern is akin to that described by Mitxelena, that is, a “falling contour” from the first syllable (the accented one).

Thus, although there’s a distinction between lexically unmarked and marked words in EB, the tone shape of the unmarked pattern is different from that described by Mitxelena (a change that I’ll try to explain in section 4).

To respond to the aim (1c) of the experiment the answers were grouped by the age of the speakers so that we could compare the percentage of production of marked and unmarked words by the different groups/generations of speakers. In the lists below I present the absolute results and percentages of the answers to the questioned tokens by these relevant groups of speakers<sup>6</sup>. “AbsX” stands for the absolute number of null responses (the speaker didn’t utter

the target form for whatever reason). “PosAns” is the absolute number of “positive” answers, that is, all the answers but the null ones (the 81 repetitions of items were ignored). “Rel[+2]” denotes the absolute number and the percentage of this kind of answers in the complete set of positive answers (as do “Rel[+1]”, “Rel[-2]” and “Rel----”). The accentual pattern [-2] (accent on the penultimate syllable) appears with some accent-attracting suffixes. On the other hand, the results under “Rel----” are those of the “prominenceless” *o(d)olkiya*:

#### A-B Speakers (>75)

AbsX: 293

PosAns: 1,705

Rel[+2]: 1,086 (63.69%)

Rel[+1]: 615 (36.07%)

Rel[-2]: 3 (0.17%)

Rel-----: 1 (0.05%)

#### C-D Speakers (25-75)

AbsX: 430

PosAns: 1,568

Rel[+2]: 1,270 (80.99%)

Rel[+1]: 297 (18.94%)

Rel[-2]: 1 (0.06%)

#### E-F Speakers (<25)

AbsX: 392

PosAns: 1,606

Rel[+2]: 1,294 (80.57%)

Rel[+1]: 310 (19.30%)

Rel: [-2]: 2 (0.12%)

Looking at the data, we can easily conclude that first, in EB there are two kinds of words; unmarked words (that are characterized by an accent in the second syllable) and marked words (that bear the accent on the first syllable). Second, the set of marked words is decreasing very fast since they were 48.94% of the words in Mitxelena’s manuscript, for Speakers A-B it is 36.07% of their positive answers and for Speakers C-D and E-F it’s only 18.94% and 19.30% respectively<sup>7</sup>. At this point, we should ask the question of what triggered the change in the set of unmarked words from “sustained accent” to [+2] and the heavy decrease in the marked word set.

#### 4. DIACHRONIC DEVELOPMENT

The accentual pattern that Mitxelena describes for EB is akin to the one in Northern Bizkaian Basque dialects. In these pitch-accent varieties most of the words are unaccented and there are some accented words and accent-assigning morphemes. Besides, the data presented by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Gipuzkoan grammarian Larramendi show that at that time the Gipuzkoan dialect had the same accentuation pattern as some of the varieties of Northern Bizkaian Basque show nowadays, as pointed out by [14]:


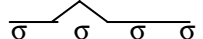
##### Larramendi (18<sup>th</sup> Century Guipuscoan):

<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
ABS: <i>gizoná</i>	<i>gizónak</i>
ERG: <i>gizonák</i>	<i>gizónak</i>
DAT: <i>gizonarí</i>	<i>gizónari</i>
GEN: <i>gizonarén</i>	<i>gizónen(a)</i>

##### Today’s Getxo (Northern Bizkaian) Basque:

<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
ABS: <i>gisoná</i>	<i>gisonak</i>
ERG: <i>gisonák</i>	<i>gisonak</i>
DAT: <i>gisonarí</i>	<i>gisonari</i>
GEN: <i>gisonán</i>	<i>gisonan</i>

Thus, with this piece of evidence and the data provided by Mitxelena we can conclude (following [14], [15], [16], [1]) that not too long ago EB was a pitch-accent variety. In these varieties, unaccented stems have a phrasal rise in pitch in the second syllable not related to an accent. The pitch level is thus sustained until an accent is met, where the F0 falls:

<u>Mitxelena’s “Sustained”</u>	<u>Today’s [+2]:</u>
No prominence	H*
	
o    ain    gu    a	o    áin    gu    a

[15], [1] suggest an explanation for the change in the accentual system as a reinterpretation by the speakers/listeners of the postinitial phrasal rise as accentual prominence (probably due to influence from Spanish, where prenuclear accents are intonationally realized as rises in F0). This idea is been confirmed by [17] who have tested the perception of the accentual prominence of Northern Bizkaian words by native speakers of other dialects. This innovation could account for the changes in the amounts of “unmarked/marked” stems (since in the younger generations around half of those words are now unmarked or [+2]. The appearance of a default strategy to interpret and utter postinitial accents could have lead to a fast overgeneralization which seems to have affected earlier marked words with initial accent (as seems to have happened among the speakers C-D-E-F).

#### 6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, there are some accent-attracting suffixes that are not relevant for the purposes of this study. There is also an emphatic accent-shift operation making unmarked words like marked ones, that is, [+1]. This operation is much more widely used by elder speakers than by young speakers.

<sup>2</sup> During the experiment we found one item that for one of the eldest speakers and in several repetitions and different contexts seems to have no prominence whatsoever; *o(d)olkiya* 'the blood sausage'. This item is uttered by Speaker A with a flat contour and [+2] by the rest of the speakers. However, a speaker of 87 years old that was not regarded for this study (Speaker G of [9]) also pronounced this item without any prominence.

<sup>3</sup> Translation of the author.

<sup>4</sup> We use Mitxelena's notation (taken from Jacobsen): "aaaaa" for unmarked words and "aaaaà" for marked words.

<sup>5</sup> There were 81 repetitions of items in the manuscript for expository purposes of the pairs, their data have been ignored when counting and extracting percentages.

<sup>6</sup> It is specially relevant to have in mind the sociolinguistic reality of the Basque Country. The age of the speakers is relevant since Basque is an endangered language that was prohibited to use in Spain during the largest part of the life of Speakers A-B and part of the life of Speakers C-D. The language standardization process of the seventies has started to trigger the homogenization of the dialectal varieties, so we should expect relevant differences among the speakers. Before the seventies the differences between dialects and even local varieties were much bigger since there was no possibility of receiving instruction in Basque or of having access to Basque in printed form.

<sup>7</sup> Mitxelena's lists of words are not meant to represent the quantitative relation between marked and unmarked words in EB, as there are many more unmarked words than marked ones. That is, our results should not be taken to mean that nowadays in EB, marked words represent 20% of the vocabulary. The manuscript was just created to show minimal and "pseudominimal" pairs.