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## Naturalist conceptions about agglutinative languages: Vinson's ideas about Basque and linguistic Darwinism<sup>1</sup>

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### §0. Introduction: From Astarloa's Adamic primitivism to Vinson's naturalist primitivism

The writings of the linguist and philologist J. Vinson were largely responsible for introducing to Basque studies *la science républicaine* (a curious expression employed recently by Bidart (2001: 198)) in the half-century between 1870 and 1920. The renowned Bascologist's attitude to the Basque language was double-edged, for while he considered Basque to be of great scientific interest as an ancient tongue, study of which would reveal the 'state of the ancient Basque civilisations' (Vinson 1874: 55), socially, on the contrary, he saw Basque as useless in practice and doomed to disappear:

The Basque language, which is of no practical interest, notwithstanding its enormous scientific importance, is clearly on its way to extinction. (Vinson 1882: 66)

This article aims to clarify certain little-known aspects, especially among Bascologists, of Vinson's linguistic views. These views were in fact quite characteristic of a whole current in French linguistic thought and the broader field of anthropology, to which Vinson pertained.

I shall begin by comparing another view of Basque as a primitive language developed by P.P. Astarloa, a scholar intellectually associated with the eighteenth century, in his *Discursos filosóficos sobre la lengua primitiva*, written at the beginning of the 1800s but not published until 1883. We shall see that the theorisations of both authors coincide in viewing Basque as a tongue dating from a pre-historical era in the context of a naturalist, mutationist conception of language. Since, however, their conceptual points of departure were quite distinct, both the denotations and the connotations of their respective notions of primitivism differed to the point of being mutual opposites for all intents and purposes.<sup>2</sup>

According to Astarloa (1752-1806), primitive language (in the singular) refers to the form originally taken by human language. In the opinion of this Bizkaian priest, whose reflections

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<sup>2</sup> A. d'Abbadie's (1836) views reflect this change of perspective and the ambivalence of the notion of a primitive language, which may, depending on one's presuppositions, have either positive or negative connotations; see Oyharçabal 1998.

on the grammatical structure of Basque fascinated Humboldt in his early days because of their originality and ambitiousness, articulate language was neither a gift from God nor the outcome of some form of progressive adaptation from gestural communication, but a natural attribute peculiar to man. In his view, in line with a naturalisation of the Genesis paradigm to which he remains generally faithful, all languages arose from this first language; their appearance and multiplication through mutation bore witness to a degenerative process which brought about confusion and a proliferation of mutually unintelligible codes. Following a long and naïvely biased demonstration, Astarloa identified this first language, or *lengua primitiva*, not with Hebrew as might have been expected from a plain Bizkaian cleric of his time, but with Basque. Thus his understanding of the notion of a primitive language, granted the highly Cratyllic viewpoint which he applied to sounds and their articulatory features,<sup>3</sup> carried for him a positive connotation associated with a notion of primordial integrity in terms of natural adaptation to meaning and the perfection of language (in terms of *propriety*, *economy* and *euphony*: see Gómez 2006: 31-43). Astarloa's primitivist views are included for this reason among those of the Basque apologists for whom they served as inspiration, and were utilised by the radical purist current that became highly influential at the end of the nineteenth century in the western Basque provinces (Laka 1986).

Vinson, separated from Astarloa by a short century, likewise considers languages to represent a natural human property and defends a mutationist view of languages. He further coincides with Astarloa in considering Basque to be a language that takes us back to a 'primitive' state, but his interpretation of this term differs drastically from Astarloa's. As a proponent of naturalist linguistics, Vinson interprets the general evolution of languages not negatively like Astarloa but in terms of an upward progress and the achievement of ever higher degrees of civilisation. He applied this view, borrowed from the German Indo-Europeanist A. Schleicher, to Basque and also to the Dravidian languages which he had studied. In consonance with this overall conception, the linguistic nature of Basque revealed underdevelopment in terms of both language and civilisation. Hence his notion of primitiveness had negative implications for social utility, since it entailed the idea that the language was intrinsically unsuited to the expression of modern civilisation, and doomed to die and give way to 'superior' languages. Despite his significant contribution to Basque studies, Vinson was therefore perceived by his contemporaries to be politically hostile to

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<sup>3</sup> On this and the influence of Beauzée and Court de Gébelin, see Gómez (2006: 32).

Basque, the prompt disappearance of which in modern times was, he held, both inevitable and desirable.

The present study discusses Vinson's work, paradoxically far less well known to Bascologists than that of the more obscure Astarloa, whose biography (Uriarte Astarloa 2002) and writings (Laka 1986, 1989, Altzibar 1997, and specially Gómez 2002, 2004, 2006) have attracted greater attention. We shall begin by considering Vinson's scientific and intellectual environment and that of the school of naturalist linguists to which he belonged, together with certain ideological and philosophical suppositions which characterised this school (§1). Given that the naturalist linguists' approach owed so much to A. Schleicher, next we shall look at some of the latter's central ideas, focusing in particular on a manner of understanding languages and linguistics that underlies many of Vinson's views (§2). Then we shall explore Vinson's application of Schleicherian concepts to the analysis of the Basque language with respect to two issues: the relationship between language types and stages in the development of human groups (§3), and linguistic Darwinism (§4).

### **§1. J. Vinson and naturalist linguistics**

Despite his significant place in Basque studies for over half a century and his many publications, Vinson's intellectual profile is not widely known apart from a few anecdotes and controversies. While the differences he had with other Bascologists of his time, such as Aranzadi, Bonaparte, Campión, Charencey, Dodgson, van Eys and Inchauspe, are familiar on account of his opinions about Basques' language and culture (Granja Pascual 1985, Bidart 2001: 199-205, Gómez 2006: 111-189), Vinson's general scientific approach has received more attention in areas other than Basque studies (Desmet 1996: 397-433). Political and ideological facets of the intellectual current in which Vinson participated have been the subject of a recent comprehensive study chiefly focusing on the scholars involved in anthropological research with special attention to their racist perspective on human diversity (Reynaud-Paligot 2006).

Active until the end of his life in 1926, intellectually Vinson was always a nineteenth century man: all the more so in the field of linguistics, where his training had been autodidactic. Throughout his life he remained faithful to an inherited set of ideas formulated between 1850 and 1865 (see below). He held no official academic position prior to his

admission to the School of Living Oriental Languages, initially as a lecturer (1879) and subsequently as a full professor (1882) of Indian and Tamil languages.<sup>4</sup>

As a child Vinson followed his father, a magistrate, to India where he was appointed deputy chief prosecutor to the Appeals Court of Pondicherry (present-day Puducherry). Between 1852 and 1861 the younger Vinson attended a missionary-run secondary school (Lacombe 1927). ‘That was how,’ he related later, ‘having completed all my education in India, where I studied English and the local languages, I acquired a linguistic vocation’ (cf. Vinson 1905b).<sup>5</sup> Back in Europe, he graduating second from the Ecole des Eaux et Forêts at Nancy, and chose Bayonne as his first destination, deciding in late 1866 to study the Basque language<sup>6</sup> in which, in the course of a few years, he was to become a leading specialist. He never relinquished the interest acquired during his youth in the languages of India and in the history of religion and oriental legends.

Vinson’s scientific, philosophical and even political leanings were in broad terms those of the group of linguists to which he belonged, referred to by Desmet (1996) as the *Ecole de linguistique naturaliste*. (In this article I will adopt this term for convenience, abbreviated as ELN, even though this was not in use in Vinson’s time.) Scientifically the ELN was associated with the Société d’Anthropologie de Paris founded by Broca in 1859; philosophically with the so-called scientific materialism movement,<sup>7</sup> described by one of its ideologists as ‘the avant-garde of free thought’ (Lefèvre 1881). As for politics, members were often involved in the republican cause, as in the case of one of the group’s founders and its leading figure, A. Hovelacque, who later became president (1886-1887) of the Paris Municipal Council and twice ran successfully as a radical socialist deputy (Reynaud-Paligot 2006: 116).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Besides an important number of articles and reviews on these languages in the *RLPC*, Vinson published *Le verbe dans les langues dravidiennes : tamoul, canara, telinga, malayala, tulu, etc.* in 1878, *Manuel de la langue hindoustani (urdu et hindi). Grammaire, textes, vocabulaire* in 1899, and *Manuel de la langue tamoule. Grammaire, textes, vocabulaire* in 1903.

<sup>5</sup> At the age of 21, Vinson, still a student at the school of forestry, was entrusted with the classification of Tamil and Telugu manuscripts of the Imperial Library in 1864, cf. Vinson (1909).

<sup>6</sup> Vinson (1922a) dates to October, 1866 the start of his efforts to learn and study Basque, on which he published his first article the following year (Vinson 1867).

<sup>7</sup> The term ‘scientific materialism’ is not to be confused with Marxist materialism. It was a current of thought rooted in the Freemason movement (Desmet 1996: 182) which had met with some success during the last years of the Second Empire and grew after the war of 1870, being represented in both the Municipal Council of Paris and the French Parliament as well as within the (mainly radical) republican movement.

<sup>8</sup> There was a group inside the Paris Municipal Council known as the ‘communal autonomy’ group that favoured a less centralised administrative structure organised on the basis of large, highly autonomous urban areas as opposed to the state’s Jacobinic and Napoleonic structure. Hovelacque was its unsuccessful leader. Vinson was highly sympathetic to Hovelacque’s ideas, as is shown by his words on the subject in the obituary he wrote for Hovelacque in the *RLPC*: ‘Is it possible to call oneself a liberal if one obstinately maintains centralist, protectionist, in a word, authoritarian views?’ (Vinson 1897).

The ELN formed part of an intellectual current growing out of the positivism that took shape in the 1860s in anthropology and linguistics, characterised by a highly coherent philosophical, ideological and political stand comprising three more or less fundamental tenets: i) scientific materialism; ii) free-thought; iii) republicanism. The presence of all three in Vinson's thinking is illustrated by the fact that when Hovelacque founded a lodge in Paris affiliated to the Fédération du Grand Orient called *Le matérialisme scientifique*, Vinson figured among its members, together with various other members of the Société d'Anthropologie de Paris (Reynaud-Paligot 2006: 112).<sup>9</sup>

A number of questions such as attitudes to human diversity, the monogenesis-versus-polygenesis controversy or the dispute between fixists and evolutionists were closely related to the broader debates current in mid-nineteenth-century French political and intellectual circles over issues such as slavery, colonialism and the relationship between science and religion. Linguistics, comprising a more or less autonomous branch of anthropology (depending on one's theoretical leaning), was no exception. To some extent, the founding of the Société de Linguistique de Paris represented a conservative reaction to the creation of the Société d'Anthropologie de Paris by P. Broca in 1859 (Bergounioux 1996), in turn the response of positivist scientific circles to the Société de Biologie's refusal to permit the exposition of polygenist theses (Reynaud-Paligot 2006: 34).<sup>10</sup>

Thanks to Vinson, it was Basque studies that benefitted most from the ELN's activities.<sup>11</sup> However, the ELN is not well known, and mostly ignored by Bascologists aside from a small group of specialists on the history of linguistics. Indeed, the naturalist school has only been collectively identified recently thanks to an enormously rich and detailed

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<sup>9</sup> When at the beginning of the twentieth century, following Hovelacque's death, the failure of the naturalist programme became evident, Vinson was not accorded by his anthropologist colleagues the recognition that he expected. At the death of Lefèvre, Hovelacque's successor in the chair of Linguistics at the Ecole Anthropologique, he called on the board of directors to reinstate the teaching of real linguistics as the name of the chair implied, on the assumption that the post would now fall to himself, given that for several years he had been covering the need to teach linguistics through his lectures. Turned down, he made no secret of his anger: 'When one is counted among the specialists of Europe and indeed of the whole world, it is hardly tolerable to be confused with beginners and, if I may say so, apprentices' (see Vinson 1905). The fact that Vinson soon afterwards (from 1907 on) acquired ownership of *RLPC* was probably a consequence of this divorce and the isolation entailed by the loss of the ELN's hitherto principal bastion of support.

<sup>10</sup> Broca (1870) put forward a highly instructive account of the development of anthropology in the first two thirds of the nineteenth century, noting the relevance of the slave question to the construction of an autonomous anthropological discipline, initially in a positive sense, later in a negative one because it interfered with certain issues that Broca wished to exclude from the political-ideological debate, such as the polygenist question.

<sup>11</sup> Other acknowledged Basque specialists played an important part in the journal of the ELN, most notably Hyacinthe de Charencey (1832-1916) and Edward Spencer Dodgson (1857- 1922), but the journal did not limit itself to publishing the work of the members of the ELN and neither of the scholars referred to is to be identified with this current. With the exception of Hovelacque's extremely minor contributions to Basque studies, Vinson was the only naturalist Bascologist. Nonetheless, Unamuno's early ideas on the Basques and their language seem to have been much influenced by this school of thought, cf. Unamuno (1884).

monographic study published about ten years ago (Desmet 1996). Previously, most general works on the history of linguistics, including Malmberg (1991) who concedes a place to nineteenth-century French linguistics, fail to mention the school as such, perhaps because it was seen as too limited geographically (almost exclusively French), too short-lived (covering the last two or three decades of the nineteenth century), lacking in professionals, and above all, practically sterile as far as linguistic theory is concerned, given its consistent anthropological bias associated with an overt hostility towards the principles of historical and comparative linguistics,<sup>12</sup> the current that contributed the most to the development of historical linguistics from the 1870s onwards.

The birth of the ELN is associated with the founding in 1867 of the *Revue de Linguistique et de Philologie Comparée (RLPC)* by Honoré Chavée (1815-1877) and Abel Hovelacque (1843-1896). J. Vinson played a notable role as coeditor from 1873 on, joint chief editor from 1879, and sole chief editor from 1892 until the last issue in 1916 (Desmet 1996: 397), and he actually became its owner from 1907. Apart from Chavée and Hovelacque, Desmet (1996) names seven main members of the ELN, all pertaining to the same generation and born during the so-called *July's Monarchy* with one minor exception. These are Lucien Adam (1833-1918), Antonio de la Calle (1843-1889), Julien Girard de Rialle (1841-1904), André Lefèvre (1834-1904), Paul Regnaud (1838-1911), Julien Vinson (1843-1926) and Sigismond Zaborowski (1851-1928). However, the intellectual figure who inspired the ELN's theoretical approach to language was the German August Schleicher (1821-1868), who died at the very time the ELN was taking shape in France under the influence of his ideas (in Germany, the rapid spread of the Neogrammarians impeded the birth of a comparable school). Vinson (1902), who referred to the ELN as *l'école scientifique*, presented it in the following terms a few years after the death of its leading figure, A. Hovelacque:

The *école scientifique* starts out from no *a priori* assumptions and is not averse to polygenism; it refrains from supporting any more or less likely views but considers only facts, observes them, discusses them, and attempts to deduce logical and natural conclusions from them. This is the school of our most venerated masters, of whom I shall only name Aug. Schleicher, the eminent Jena professor; Honoré Chavée, the learned Belgian linguist whose erudition prompted him to lay down his priestly robes; and Abel Hovelacque, whose masterpiece [probably *La linguistique* 1876, which saw several editions] is in everybody's hands, and

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Vinson's bitter criticism following the publication in 1906 of the first lesson of Meillet's *Cours de grammaire comparée* by the Collège de France (where he succeeded Bréal), *L'état actuel des études linguistique générale*. See Vinson (1907).

among whose colleagues and friends I am honoured to have been counted for nearly thirty years past. (Vinson 1902)

Vinson contributed little to the ELN's characteristic epistemological and philosophical foundations<sup>13</sup> (see however §3 and footnote 30) but supported without reservation and unwaveringly throughout his life. However, it soon became clear that the rival historical and comparative approach was winning out not just in Germany but also in France, owing in no small part to the activity of Bréal (from 1868 secretary of the ELN's opponent, the *Société de Linguistique de Paris*; cf. Bergounioux 1996).<sup>14</sup>

Progressively losing influence from the 1880s onwards, the ELN nonetheless retained a significant place until the end of the century with support from the educational and organisational structure established by the *Société d'Anthropologie de Paris* and affiliated bodies. Subsequently, once publication of the *RLPC* ceased in 1916, it survived mainly owing to Vinson. Institutionally members of the ELN were relegated to a somewhat marginal status and excluded from the more prestigious contemporary academic institutions of linguistic research such as the *Collège de France* or the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes*.<sup>15</sup> No doubt the oblivion into which it subsequently fell is explained by the fact that no linguistic school or tendency can trace even an indirect scientific ancestry to repercussions of the ELN given its fringe status vis-à-vis the institutions and the perception that their linguistic conceptions were inoperative. Already in 1932, Meillet only mentioned the ELN anecdotically, referring to it as a group of 'enlightened amateurs' (Meillet 1932).

Vinson contributed substantially to the work of the ELN. He was far and away the most copious contributor to the school's journal, in which 237 articles, a third of the total of 710 published by 154 contributors during the *RLPC*'S lifespan, bore Vinson's signature (Desmet 1996: 400). Many of these were related to Basque studies, but by no means all: Vinson also published on Indian or Dravidian languages and culture, besides which he was an

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<sup>13</sup> The addition of a fourth component of grammar, named *fonctiologie*, by the side of phonetics, morphology and syntax can hardly be attributed to Vinson. This was a sort of diachronic semantics of radical lexical units which 'aims to account for the exact, precise sense primitively attributed to each expression composed of sounds (root) and the alterations, modifications of sense, undergone by this root in the course of its life' (Vinson 1874). The notion had been borrowed directly from Schleicher, as was Chavée's (1867) *idéologie positive*.

<sup>14</sup> Desmet (1996: 40) observes: 'From the start, the proponents of historical and comparative linguistics systematically excluded the naturalists from their own publications and endeavoured for their own followers to occupy all the key positions in the field, thereby forcing the naturalist linguists to set up a parallel, less institutionalised network.' See also Aarslef (1979).

<sup>15</sup> A scathing attack on the Neogrammarians, referring to 'students trained at the Collège de France and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes' who had 'abandoned themselves hopelessly to this road', may be seen in Vinson (1916: 54-57).



avid reviewer, conversant with an impressive range of languages and subjects.<sup>16</sup> Around 1910, nearing the end of his career, Vinson summarised as follows his work, which, in the spirit of the ELN, he considered not to have been devoid of a certain moral ideal:

Since then [1867, when he wrote his first article about Basque], I have never lost interest in Basque, but have nonetheless resumed my Indian studies, and I have occupied myself with literature, history, teaching, administration,... politics! Everywhere and always, I have endeavoured to work in accordance with the strict rules of the positive method; everywhere and always, I have done my best to follow, with firm and determined step, the narrow and arduous path that leads upwards towards the absolute ideal of truth and justice. (Vinson 1910b)

The effect of age on a personality in need of recognition? At the end of his long career even Basque studies seemed not to acknowledge its debt to him. He did not attempt to conceal a degree of resentment at the prestige enjoyed by certain German Bascologists, which he felt to be an affront both to himself and to naturalist linguistics. On the day after the Great War broke out, he wrote:<sup>17</sup>

Indeed a number of people, especially in Spain, think and say that the scientific study of Basque was only taken up by Germans thirty-five or forty years ago at the most. This is quite inaccurate, besides which the Germans in question belong to the modern school of Neogrammarians formed beyond the Rhine after 1870, who, disdainful of the work of their predecessors and ignorant of the true character of linguistics which is a purely natural science, confuse the facts and accidents of evolution and, through an evident methodological misapprehension, all too often draw conclusions from the simple to the composite. (Vinson 1922a)

As a matter of fact, the Neogrammarians had very little to do with Basque studies since Basque, as an isolate, was considered to lack sufficient variety to offer the time-depth necessary for significant historical analysis. In any case, Schuchardt, who is certainly alluded to here, can hardly be called a proponent of the Neogrammarian theses towards which, quite on the contrary, he was highly critical. But Schuchardt's criticisms originated from precisely the opposite viewpoint from Vinson's: he reproached the Neogrammarians for insisting on

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<sup>16</sup> His scientific correspondence has never been collected but was clearly also very copious. In his obituary in the *Revista Internacional de Estudios Vascos*, this journal's founder and editor, Julio de Urquijo, noted that Vinson had sent him 76 letters in 1905, 53 in 1906 and 38 in 1907 (Urquijo 1927).

<sup>17</sup> His bitterness after the war seems to have been responsible for some of his more caricaturesque expressions of chauvinism, e.g. 'Linguistics is a very young science that may be said to be exclusively French' (Vinson 1921: 11).

presenting laws of phonetic change as if they were laws of nature, for unlike the naturalists, Schuchardt defended the thesis that linguistics should be included among the human sciences.

The important influence of the fledgling science of anthropology on the conceptions of the ELN cannot be overemphasised. Moreover, the chief members of the ELN were also members of the *Société d'Anthropologie de Paris*, to whose materialist sector they belonged.<sup>18</sup> This corresponded to an approach to linguistics that saw it as a natural science, in line with the views of Schleicher (see §2 below) who posited a precursor of mankind that occupied an intermediate position between anthropoid simians and humans. The missing links were to be sought amidst the diversity of human racial groups.<sup>19</sup> The blurring of limits between species entailed by the hypothesis of intermediate precursors, plus a whole observational apparatus (involving craniometry, prehistoric research, ethnographic pathology, languages, customs, religion and so on) associated with a Lamarckian-Darwinian interpretation of evolution,<sup>20</sup> extended and reinforced the theoretical and empirical basis of modern scientific racism as it appeared from early on in the century (Richard 1993, Duvernay-Bolens 1995). One of the features of this anthropological current was its espousal of a polygenist hypothesis associated with a racial hierarchy of population groups moving as a whole towards ever higher levels of civilisation.<sup>21</sup> In this conception, the totality of anthropological parameters were integrated into the evolutionary process, which was analysed in Darwinian terms as driven by vital competition, and was considered to concern also both morality (Letourneau 1887) and language.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The *Société d'Anthropologie de Paris* also had members who were not part of the scientific materialism current. Although generally referred to as positivists, they did not really comprise a homogeneous group (Desmet 1996: 219, contra Koerner 1982). In practice the positivists were less fully committed to the anti-religious struggle. In the 1880s this actually correlated with a political division in which the positivists were moderate republicans and the materialists were radical republicans (Harvey 1984).

<sup>19</sup> Some naturalists traced linguistic divergence to this human precursor, or rather, for Hovelacque, to a multitude of precursor races: 'This expression, precursor of man, should also be understood, wherever we have employed it, in its broadest sense, in the sense of a human precursor genus. This genus, by all accounts, comprised several distinct races, and this diversity of races of the precursor is, as we understand it, the effective cause of the original plurality of human races.' (Hovelacque 1877: 43)

<sup>20</sup> The naturalists emphasised that Lamarck had anticipated Wallace and Darwin in the theory of transformationism, and were irritated by the term Darwinism: 'Some have gone so far as to give the name of Darwinism to the doctrine of the evolution of species. If one needed to create such a word, which is unnecessary anyway, it is not Darwin's name that ought to be used but Lamarck's.' (Hovelacque 1877: 6)

<sup>21</sup> It may be that the naturalists' insistence on the theory of polygenesis was at least partly due to the fact that it was contrary to the doctrine of the Church. Given that the Church was radically opposed to polygenism, defending it was, in a manner of thinking, a way of preserving science against the influence of religion. Vinson narrates that this was why Chavée abandoned the priesthood and his religious beliefs after finding in the study of languages proof of the plurality of human origins: 'Like many others, Chavée had sought to demonstrate the unity of the creation of human races through the comparison of languages; what he found, however, was irrefutable proof of human polygenesis, and all at once the blindfold fell from his eyes.' (Vinson 1897)

<sup>22</sup> Cf. e.g. Hovelacque (1877: 8): 'We must attribute to [the precursor of man], in general, less developed characteristics than those which differentiate man, as the primate specifically characterised by the faculty of

## §2. Conceptions of languages and linguistics: August Schleicher's legacy

Although developed over the preceding decades, the essence of naturalist theoretical conceptions regarding language was formulated most precisely between 1850 and 1865, and traces its origins to the work of the German Indo-Europeanist, A. Schleicher (1821-1868), who synthesised the contributions of historical linguistics to the reconstruction of the Indo-European system. Schleicher's ideas entered Basque studies mainly through Vinson (cf. Gómez 2006: 115-126), although Schleicher's monograph on Indo-European languages (1850, translated from German to French two years later) was already mentioned by Aizkibel in a 1856's manuscript (Gomez 2007). Vinson made no secret of his naturalist affiliation in his programmatic article *Sur la méthode de la science du langage et de ses applications à l'étude de la langue basque* (1874). The first part of this summarises Schleicher's main ideas (curiously, without any reference to either Chavée or Hovelacque), while the second part outlines their application to Basque.

Schleicher, who proposed that languages should be defined as natural organisms, developed a set of principles based on the idea that the study of languages should be pursued, as far as their specifically linguistic aspect is concerned, in accordance with the rules and methods of the natural sciences. The effect of the *naturalisation* of languages was to exclude from the specific field of linguistics, at a stroke, whole traditions of language study that could not be reduced to naturalist terms. This was particularly the case for anything concerned with conscious language use, especially in written form, but also applied to syntax, which was thought to be controlled by the speaker. Moreover, from 1850 on Schleicher distinguished between two branches of language study: linguistics, a natural science which he considered to correspond to physiology, and philology, corresponding to history. Thus he wrote in *Les langues de l'Europe moderne* (1850 [1852]):

It is not such a long time since the science which takes language as its general object separated into two distinct branches. One, called philology, studies language with the aim of achieving knowledge of the intellectual essence of nationalities. Philology pertains to history. The other, called linguistics, does not occupy itself with the historical life of nations but pertains to the physiology of man. (Schleicher 1850 [1852: 1-2])

Schleicher accorded a privileged status to linguistics as a science because it applies 'in the sphere of immutable laws, outside the domain of human volition' (1850 [1852: 3]). Yet he

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articulate speech, from the great apes. Here a comparison between the inferior and the superior races of mankind may serve as a guide.'

also recognised the importance of philology, needed to achieve an understanding of ‘the spiritual life of peoples’:

Philology can only exist where there is literature; it employs language as a means for studying the intellectual and moral life of a nation. (Schleicher 1850 [1852: 2])

This duality in Schleicher’s theoretical approach is mirrored in the title of the ELN’s journal (*Revue de linguistique et de philologie comparée*). Vinson himself (1874: 41) adopted the same dichotomy, repeating a comparison already made by Schleicher:<sup>23</sup>

The philologist can be compared to a gardener, a florist, a lover of special plants; the linguist, to a naturalist to whom the smallest blade of grass is quite as important as the most magnificent tree; in fact, the latter may be less interesting. (Vinson 1874: 41)

Schleicher did not explain just how he viewed languages as ‘phonic organisms’ in the naturalist, organic conception of languages, but tended to dismiss metaphorical interpretations and alluded, on the contrary, to organic reality. When his short 1863 work was contested on this issue, he returned to it two years later in a brief publication titled *Über die Bedeutung der Sprache für die Naturgeschichte des Menschen* (‘On the meaning of language for the natural history of man’) in which he insisted on the ‘material existence’ of languages:

Indeed my right to treat languages as real beings of nature, with a material existence, as I had presented them with no further proof in my short work [*Die darwinshe Theorie und die Sprachwissenschaft*], has been called into question. The aim of the following pages is, above all, to demonstrate that they are such. (Schleicher 1865 [1980: 79])

I would argue, *contra* Desmet (1996: 58, note 26), that an inconsistency in the conception of languages and language defended by Schleicher and the naturalists results from their confusion of the notions of *langage* understood in physiological terms, and the related sense usually attributed to the term *langue* in ordinary usage, where it designates, as in structural linguistics, an abstract entity of an institutional and social nature. This distinction, incorporated into theory and expressed by present-day Chomskyan terminology (Chomsky 1986: 19-24) as the opposition between ‘i-language’ (internal, intensional language) and ‘e-language’ (external, extensional language), was lacking in Schleicher who consequently skips back and forth, willy-nilly, between either sense.

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<sup>23</sup> We may note that Vinson’s contributions to Basque studies, of great importance in the domain of bibliography in particular, pertain chiefly to the field of philology in the broad sense in which the naturalists used the term. As a linguist, he acted principally in the capacity of a critic.

Schleicher describes the phonic organ from a physiological point of view as including a specialised area of the brain as its mental component<sup>24</sup> and diverse organs of speech as its articulatory and acoustic components. Language (fr. *langage*), then, was defined as ‘the organ of audible thought’. Thus one may conceive of how Schleicher was able to speak of the phonic organ at the level of the individual (i.e. as i-language, in modern terms). This organic material, let us note, did not imply a physically distinct organ,<sup>25</sup> but rather a combination of different organs working together in the performance of a specific activity: speech (and hence, for Schleicher, thought). Schleicher is very explicit about this, comparing the organ of language to that of digestion or of circulation, which are also functionally defined organic systems: ‘Function, the activity of the organ, is as it were merely a manifestation of the organ itself’ (Schleicher 1863 [1980: 61]).

Yet at the same time and without distinction, Schleicher considers languages in their trans-individual (historical, social) dimension (as e-languages in modern terminology). Even in this sense Schleicher developed a naturalist analysis and spoke of languages (fr. *langues*) in this respect as ‘natural organisms’, although he failed to explain how to conceive of this, merely stating that languages evolve through a life cycle that is independent of the will of their speakers:

Languages are natural organisms that are born, grow, develop, grow old and die independently of human will and in accordance with certain laws; thus they too manifest the series of phenomena encompassed by the word ‘life’. (Schleicher 1863 [1980: 61])

On the twofold grounds of the physiological basis of language and the character of languages as objects evolving beyond individuals’ control through a ‘life cycle’, Schleicher proposed to establish linguistics as a natural science, defining languages as natural organisms. As we have observed, this resulted from the confusion of two very different facets of languages (*langues*) and language (*langage*), and this confusion persisted in the naturalist doctrine as a whole. Let us note, however, that Hovelacque realised that it was unrealistic to define external languages like Basque, Chinese or French as natural organisms other than as a

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<sup>24</sup> By 1861 Broca had identified an area of the brain especially involved in language production, now known as Broca’s area.

<sup>25</sup> Hovelacque held a subtler position that might be described as pre-Chomskyan. He distinguished the faculty of language from the exercise of that faculty. Only the former could be delimited organically and, significantly, only in the brain; he excluded, that is, the organs of speech, which Hovelacque regarded as only active when exercising the faculty.

mere metaphor,<sup>26</sup> yet declined to draw the obvious conclusion, which would have undermined the very foundations of naturalist analysis:

It is doubtless nothing more than an abstraction to consider language as an organism, yet unquestionably it behaves just like an organism. (Hovelacque 1885)

Vinson, who refrained from any such questioning, was quite happy to echo Schleicher's ideas on this matter verbatim, notwithstanding manifest contradictions such as in the treatment of languages' external history (see §4 below).<sup>27</sup> Hence one occasionally encounters in his writings, referring to languages, the term 'phonic organisms' which sounds odd and rather opaque to modern ears.

### **§3. Linguistic typology and the advance of civilisation**

Schleicher's view of anthropology assigned a central place to language, considered the chief specific attribute of the human species and inseparable from thought: 'language is the audible expression of thought; the very process of thinking manifested through sounds' (Schleicher 1860 [1980: 82]). This notion, which had much earlier roots and has known various formulations, notably in the context of Cartesian rationalism (Chomsky 1966), underlies the ELN doctrine, and is also discussed by Vinson:

It is only through language that man really becomes man and is distinguished from the higher animals that share with him the top of the scale of organised beings. But language is nothing but audible thought, the audible expression of thought. 'No language without thought' is an empirical fact acknowledged by modern science; but it is no less true to say: 'without language, there is no thought'. (Vinson 1874: 37)

Granted the centrality of language, Schleicher divided the history of human development as a species into three periods:

1. the period of development of the physical organ in its essential features;
2. the period of the development of language;
3. the historical period.

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<sup>26</sup> Use of the organic metaphor in the study of languages had many precedents in Germany, including Schlegel, Humboldt and Bopp. Richards (2002) credits Schelling with its creation.

<sup>27</sup> Analogies with classifications used in biology are still used in linguistics today to express several ideas related to historical comparison. But if we wish to employ categories borrowed from biology to characterise, by analogy, historical relations between languages, the qualification that should be attributed to them is undoubtedly that of a category that brings together individuals as a group (directly or indirectly). Thus for instance idiolects would correspond, in language, to such individuals whereas languages would be comparable to species in population genetics; cf. Mufwene (2006).

In a way, the period of the development of language plays the role of intermediary between the animal stage represented by the anthropoids and full humanity in Schleicher's evolutionary schema, and is considered necessary in terms of a progressive, linear understanding of anthropological evolution according to which language is what *makes man*. Conceiving thus of the development of language as a progressive, linear process inevitably implies a classification of human communities according to the degree of their progress in terms of linguistic development. In this theory the final phase, when groups enter the historical period, is only reached by groups speaking 'worn down' languages, i.e. those that have reached the final stage of linguistic development. Schleicher employed the typological distinctions between isolating, agglutinating and inflecting languages to evaluate the evolutionary stages of different languages, distinguishing three stages within what he called the *vorhistorisch* (prehistoric) phase, corresponding to three language types<sup>28</sup> according to the ways in which meaningful and functional units are arranged:

1. Prehistoric phase

- Isolating languages
- Agglutinating languages
- Inflecting languages

2. Historical phase

- Languages in decay (analytic languages)<sup>29</sup>

Schleicher believed that the historical phase into which humanity had entered commenced after languages had begun to adopt inflections. Clearly he was referring to the Indo-European and Semitic languages, 'worn down' languages that had entered a state of 'decay' associated by the naturalist linguists with analytic languages.

Where this was not the case, peoples speaking non-inflecting languages were considered not to have reached the stage of evolution that corresponds to the historical period, and this fact would inevitably lead to their extinction. The great hardships of indigenous peoples faced by the colonisation of North America were thus seen as the necessary consequences of an intrinsic handicap resulting from their incomplete linguistic development, since their languages remained at a prehistoric stage of evolution. Schleicher seemingly failed

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<sup>28</sup> Typology is sometimes attributed to Schleicher (Malmberg 1991: 302), but it had certainly existed earlier. Hovelacque (1878b: 22) attributed it to W. Schlegel (1818). It was also used by Humbolt and Bopp (Richards 2002).

<sup>29</sup> The term 'decay' is used in a technical sense here. Decay is defined as the loss of the semantic transparency of morphemes, especially functional morphemes: 'formal decay chiefly comes from forgetting the primitive sense of relative affixes and a tendency to simplify and abbreviate their pronunciation' (Vinson 1874: 39). The characterisation of analytic languages is found in Hovelacque & Vinson (1878: 8).

to recognise a need to examine other factors that might possibly have contributed to the dire fate of these peoples and their languages (Hoenigswald 1990):

We see some peoples, the Indian races of North America for example, cast out of history as a simple result of the infinite complexity of their languages which absolutely swarm with forms, and are consequently condemned to disintegration and even destruction. (Schleicher 1865 [1980: 89])

Vinson (1874) explicitly invoked Schleicher's ideas and principles although he introduced a few changes in their application. He retained the opposition between prehistoric and historical periods:

Thus there has been in every language a prehistoric period of formal growth and a historical period of formal decay. (Vinson 1874: 39)

But rather than associate the three types of language with three successive stages of development, he presented them as having no natural connection. He also introduced the contrast, absent in both Schleicher or Hovelacque, between isolating and inflecting languages on the one hand and agglutinative languages on the other.<sup>30</sup> According to Vinson, only the former kinds of languages were capable of evolving naturally to the historical phase; agglutinating languages lacked this capacity and could only accede to the historical phase through the influence of an isolating language (as in the case of Japanese through contact with Chinese) or of an inflecting language (as Basque and Tamil did through contact with the Celtic or Latin languages in the former case, and Sanskrit or its descendants in the latter):

Solely languages of the first [isolating] and the third [inflecting] groups have reached historical life spontaneously, whereas the agglutinating languages have only achieved this in cases where they have entered into contact with phonic organisms of a different species. Japanese has become historical through Chinese; the decay of Dravidian has commenced through the derivatives of Sanskrit; the efflorescence of Basque has ceased possibly because of Celtic, and certainly thanks to Latin and its descendants. (Vinson 1874: 39)

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<sup>30</sup> Apparently Vinson's modification was a consequence of the status accorded to Chinese. Chinese, a typical example of an isolating language, belonged to the first phase of formal development and was thus, in a Schleicherian analysis, quite incapable of reaching the historical phase. Yet for Vinson, Chinese could have evolved in a different way to reach this phase. There can be no doubt that this divergent point of view resulted from a different assessment of Chinese civilisation and indeed Asian civilisation generally. The self-same divergence also showed up outside the field of science in the context of debates over French colonialism in Indochina (Ageron 1983).



Vinson thus sees agglutinating languages as pertaining to inferior states of civilisation and only successfully evolving to a ‘relatively advanced’ stage through the effects of other languages:

No matter how remote, no matter how isolated may the recollections of agglutinating language speakers be in this regard, it is quite impossible to separate such peoples entirely from the rest, that is, from those whose languages are either simpler [= isolating] or further developed [= inflecting]. All such languages have come to adopt words indicative of a relatively advanced state of civilisation and moral culture; they have no truly original written monument of their own. (Vinson 1874: 39)

According to this view, peoples entering the historical phase adopt their whole range of cultural elements (religion, customs, social organisation etc.) from more advanced languages, so that if their language does not immediately die out, it constitutes, in a very altered form, the sole original characteristic to have survived from an earlier situation.<sup>31</sup> According to Vinson there is no other element of continuity, hence Vinson’s belief, unlike most of the Bascologists of his time, that Basque idiosyncrasy was only manifested in the language and in nothing else. The point recurs throughout his writings, from his programmatic article of 1874 all the way down to his last publications in the 1920s:

The only great originality of the Basque Country lies in its language; it has neither a distinct political existence nor a particular social organisation. (Vinson 1874: 49)

Vinson maintained that the study of Basque vocabulary confirms the very primary nature of the states of society with which the primitive Basques were to be associated, provoking thereby a heated debate with the anthropologist Aranzadi (1911a,b, 1922). The type of arguments Vinson employed is well known. For example, he appealed to the lack of words other than loanwords designating abstract concepts and general ideas (the latter being considered markers of advanced stages of civilisation): thus *arbola* ‘tree’ is a generic term, hence borrowed, whereas Basque has its own names for specific tree species (Vinson 1919). On the basis of a study of the vocabulary of marriage relations in which he offered his own

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<sup>31</sup> Vinson’s analyses of Basque are strikingly similar to those he applied to the Dravidian languages. His statements about primitive Dravidian civilisation and its evolution mirror those concerning Basque precisely: ‘Indeed the original language [from which the Dravidian languages developed] were, without any doubt, of an astonishing grammatical simplicity and a poverty of vocabulary very difficult to imagine. Very little time had yet passed since the inhabitants of southern India had reached the condition of humans — very little time, that is, relative to the history of mankind, of course — when there occurred a great event: the arrival of Aryan people in the plains and forests at the end of the peninsula. Only then did the history of these regions commence. Of the primitive Dravidians, only their language remains, mutilated, altered, invaded by the language of the civilisers, but sufficiently tenacious, still sufficiently rebellious, to have conserved its most important original traits.’ (Vinson 1876)

interpretation of lexical comparisons such as *senar* ‘husband’ versus *seme* ‘son’ and *ar* ‘male’ versus *eme* ‘female’, Vinson proposed that primitive Basque civilisation prior to the introduction of cattle raising had been polyandrous and had probably practised the killing of new-born children. In such a hypothetically polyandrous family organisation (considered by Vinson a corollary of prepastoral societies), he posits the etymological meaning ‘daughter’ for *seme*, on the assumption that the term originally contains the root *eme* ‘female’:

Collective polyandry was the natural consequence of primitive promiscuity limited to human groups dwelling in caves or natural shelters. Men’s only food consisted of products obtained from hunting and fishing and some wild fruit, but such resources were precarious and any increase in the population made it necessary to economise. This was achieved by eliminating the weakest individuals, namely women, of whom only one was kept per dwelling. Now if that were the case among the Basques, then the girl who was kept, the *seme*, was the most important child, an object of constant attention and great care comparable to the queen in a beehive. [...] Simple polyandry came to an end when cattle-raising commenced.’ (Vinson 1921: 47)

Thus Vinson tried to reconstruct, on the basis of lexical analysis (of the calendar, political vocabulary, family relations etc.), the state of civilisation associated with the language, and the result yielded by this exercise was a series of prehistoric caricatures:

Only one thing is certain: the Basque language is the oldest in Europe; it has survived *in situ* since prehistoric times and has slowly evolved since the time when the country’s first inhabitants, of whom Juvenal paints such a striking picture, found shelter in the mountain caves, attired in animal skins, armed with carved stones, rude and uncouth, only interested in obtaining food. (Vinson 1910a)

Clearly, however, if the language takes us back to such primitive states of civilisation, Vinson is forced, despite himself as it were, to re-establish the very relationship between race and language that, as we shall see, he took pains to rule out:

The Basques are an ancient race belonging to a very rudimentary civilisation with an underdeveloped mentality consequent upon the poverty, or rather simplicity, of their vocabulary. (ibid.)

These quotations give some inkling of the deep changes in representations of linguistic primitivism separating Astarloa’s Adamic naturalist point of view and Vinson’s historical-transformist perspective.

#### **§ 4. Linguistic Darwinism.**

Darwin, who believed in monogenesis and the unity of the human species, thought it implausible to suggest that mankind lacked language from the start of his expansion, although he assumed it to have been ‘much less perfect’ than historically attested languages, thereby implicitly admitting some sort of progressive evolution that gradually led up to modern languages.<sup>32</sup> Schleicher hypothesised the integral polygenesis of languages (and hence also of thought according to his theory, let us recall):

The origin of linguistic forms in the world, that is, the development of the speech-producing organ, thus appears to depend on certain particular conditions. There are grounds for assuming that in neighbouring, significantly similar regions, similar languages came about independently of each other, while in other parts of the world different types of languages developed. (Schleicher 1865 [1980: 88])

Despite this difference Schleicher was a keen Darwinist, all the more so because he held that a Darwinian-type theory of linguistic evolution of his own had preceded Darwin’s formulation (Richards 2002). Shortly after the publication of *The origin of species* (1859), Schleicher published a short work titled *Darwinian theory and the science of language* (1863) presenting his own ideas, where he wrote:

Indeed, similar ideas to those expressed by Darwin concerning living things are quite widely accepted with regard to linguistic organisms, and I myself discussed in 1860, the very year in which the German translation of Darwin’s work appeared, the ‘fight for existence’ in the realm of the science of languages, the disappearance of older forms, the enormous ability of a single species to spread and to differentiate, ideas which barely differ from, but rather coincide remarkably with Darwin’s. (Schleicher 1863 [1980: 60]).

Schleicher (1863 [1980: 76-77]) defends a strong linguistic Darwinism, i.e. the idea that variety in the linguistic domain is governed, like that of living organisms, by the laws of natural selection and the fight for existence. After quoting a long passage from *The origin of species* explaining the spread of dominant forms at the expense of other species in a perpetual

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<sup>32</sup> Darwin takes up this point in Chapter VII of *The Descent of Man* (1871), at a time when he was acquainted with Schleicher’s writings, particularly those of 1863 and 1865: ‘From the fundamental differences between certain languages, some philologists have inferred that when man first became widely diffused, he was not a speaking animal; but it may be suspected that languages, far less perfect than any now spoken, aided by gestures, might have been used, and yet have left no traces on subsequent and more highly-developed tongues. Without the use of some language, however imperfect, it appears doubtful whether man’s intellect could have risen to the standard implied by his dominant position at an early period.’

struggle for survival, Schleicher goes on to assert that, in the realm of languages, those of Indo-European stock are the victors in this struggle:<sup>33</sup>

Not even a single word need be changed to apply this to languages. In these lines Darwin depicts briefly and exactly the ways of languages in their fight for existence. In the present period in the life of mankind, the languages of Indo-Germanic stock are the victors; they continuously spread, already having conquered the domain of a great many other languages. (Schleicher 1863 [1980: 77])

As we have seen, Vinson shared Schleicher's conception of languages as 'phonic organisms' subject to the same laws as other 'natural beings':

Linguistics is a natural science. The phonic organisms that constitute its object of study are the spontaneous, unconscious products of human organs, subject as natural beings to the great law of variation under the influence of the environment, climate, society, isolation etc., but also impervious to modification by the external or internal will of any of the surrounding organised beings. So much is this so that all attempts at creating languages have been doomed to failure. (Vinson 1874: 41)

Given such a view, logically the chief factor guiding the evolution of living organisms, natural selection through the fight for existence, was in Vinson's opinion also present in the linguistic domain, inexorably entailing the extinction of more poorly adapted languages:

Linguistic beings are likewise subject to the inexorable law of competition for life which has led to the disappearance of a great many unknown languages, besides those extinct languages whose names at least we know. (Vinson 1874, *ibid.*)

It was in this light that Vinson considered the fate of the Basque language, deeming its extinction inevitable owing to the 'formidable vital competition exercised to its detriment by powerful, superior organisms' (Vinson 1874: 56). Notice the term 'superior organisms' employed here by Vinson to designate the languages destined to do away with Basque and replace it. In keeping with the naturalist approach, the vocabulary used tends to de-socialise linguistic competition as Schleicher had done when referring to Native American languages. Basque, as an agglutinating language, has no chance to survive in contact with the inflecting languages with which it must compete in the fight for life.

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<sup>33</sup> Schleicher, quoting Darwin, opened a parenthesis in which he alluded to Basque as an illustration, in the linguistic domain, of the slowness of the process of extinction where certain species manage to survive in protected environments: 'In the case of languages such cases are found in the mountains, cf. the example of Basque in the Pyrenees, the vestige of a language clearly once spoken over a vast area.' (Schleicher 1863 [1980: 77]). For a recent formulation of this view of Basque as a protected remnant, see Vennemann (1994, 2003).

And yet, in the course of this discussion, Vinson has clearly admitted the possibility of an agglutinating language being carried into historical life on contact with languages of a different type (as has been the case, aside from Basque or Tamil, of Japanese, Finnish, Hungarian, Turkish and other languages), thereby implying that the *automatic* extinction of ‘inferior languages’ that the Schleicherian doctrine predicts is far from self-evident after all.<sup>34</sup> In general the naturalists, as proponents of the polygenesis of languages and human populations, were confronted by such contradictions whenever they tackled the known histories of attested languages whose fates were not, by all accounts, determined by linguistic factors.

This issue was first raised in connection with the relationship between race and language, a thesis maintained radically by the early naturalists Schleicher and Chavée — so much so that, at a time when the fledgling field was overwhelmingly dominated by physical anthropology, resorting to factors such as skin colour, cranial morphology or prognathism in the racial classification of human groups, Schleicher gave precedence to linguistic over physical criteria.<sup>35</sup> And Chavée<sup>36</sup> cerebralised, so to speak, the category of race, laying down the dictum *telle tête, telle langue* (‘as the head, so the language’):

*Telle tête, telle langue*, and by ‘tête’ I mean here the range of cerebral forms and forces of an entire race. (1868: 443)

Hovelacque rejected this radical view, as did Vinson, by making a distinction between the period of formation of languages and races, during which they considered the two notions inseparable, and more recent times when historical circumstances could dissociate them entirely, as attested by countless examples.<sup>37</sup> Vinson, for example, took no stand on the

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<sup>34</sup> This raises the problem of hybrid languages. The naturalists, on account of their ‘organicist’ viewpoint, ruled out the idea of mixed languages, maintaining that hybridisation could only occur in the lexicon without affecting the true nature of the substratum language. This question interested Vinson when writing about Creoles (Baggioni 2004).

<sup>35</sup> This surprising position is illustrated by the following quotation: ‘The shape of the cranium and other distinctive racial features are so inconstant! Language, on the other hand, is a perfectly constant characteristic. It is conceivable that a German might rival the most highly characterised negro with regard to his hair and prognathism of the head, but never will he speak the negro’s language to perfection. That so-called distinctive signs of race are of little consequence is put into relief by the observation that men pertaining to one and the same language stock may present divergent racial features.’ (Schleicher 1865 [1980: 83])

<sup>36</sup> Chavée had a very anthropological, and hence a very racial, understanding of linguistics: ‘Anthropology is the science of human races. Linguistics is the science of the syllabic organisms of thought, which are to each other as the races who have spontaneously created them. Thus linguistics is the highest branch of anthropology, just as anthropology is itself the most noble and most useful of the natural sciences.’ (Chavée 1878: XI, quoted by Desmet 1996: 84).

<sup>37</sup> In Europe at least (see in particular Hovelacque 1875 and 1878c). The republican ‘raciologues’, to use Reynaud-Paligot’s (2006) term, held that racial mixing had taken place in Europe, whence the absence of the myth of the pure race in their case. Reynaud-Paligot (2006: 92) also notes that these anthropologists did not bring up the issue of inequality among European population groups at the expense, for instance, of the Jewish,

question of continuity between the Basque-speaking people of historical times and the earliest Basque population, and dismissed as pointless studies claiming to take language as their starting point to determine ‘the origin of the Basques’:<sup>38</sup>

Those who base such research on the Basque language are in a great error: there are numerous examples of races that have become extinct through a gradual decline, incessant crossbreeding, and prolonged interferences from a long series of foreign elements, yet which passed their languages on to the populations that replaced them. (Vinson 1874: 54)

Similarly Hovelacque, in a dissertation expounding the theses of French rationalist nationalism, espoused a position that allowed for the possibility of a historical disjunction between languages and races (and nationalities). As far as Europe was concerned he thought this phenomenon had been general, with the sole conceivable exception of the Basques of Spain:

Where, then, in western and central Europe, do race and language coincide? Perhaps in the case of the Basques, or at least the Basques of Spain, for those of the department of Basses-Pyrénées are very mixed. Anywhere else, it seems highly unlikely. (Hovelacque 1875)

Secondly, the problem of competition between the naturalist explanation and the historical explanation arose with regard to the decline of the Basque language in modern times. On this issue Vinson had two different discourses. He upheld a naturalist explanation of the phenomenon (strangely he never asked why, then, Basque has not already become extinct!)<sup>39</sup>, and forecast Basque’s impending end as the inevitable outcome of a fight for life between superior and inferior organisms:

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Latin or Slavic peoples. So they were not anti-Semites, and indeed Hovelacque was a Dreyfus supporter. But when it came to other continents, they often adopted very different points of view, and some of their dicta were of a stunningly brutality: ‘The Australian is so impossible to civilise that he couldn’t even become a slave’ (Hovelacque 1881: 119). Such racial prejudice towards other peoples in remote lands manifests itself in Vinson’s attitude to Creoles, which he defined as the adaptation of a language, particularly Indo-European, ‘to the grammatical and phonetic genius of a linguistically inferior race’ (Vinson 1889). Clearly the subject lent itself well to such naturalist simplification (for a critical reflection on prejudices associated with Creole languages, see Degraff 2005). Although not going equally far and with less theorising, Vinson often made no attempt to disguise his obvious contempt for southern Europeans (such as the population of the Iberian Peninsula). The statements in the preface to his *Essai de bibliographie de la langue basque* (1891) shocked L. Michelena over half a century later when re-editing this important work; the book collector considered the French-Spanish border to be the limit beyond which all civilisation and progress abruptly disappear.

<sup>38</sup> Without radically altering his position, Vinson later qualified it by considering it surprising that, in the event of contact followed by linguistic absorption in the remote past, it should not have been Basque that had ‘succumbed’ given its agglutinating character: ‘I also think that the case of Basque, if it had displaced entirely the Basques’ original language without leaving so much as a trace, would be quite extraordinary, for the organism of the Basque language is one of those that ought to succumb in the battle for life.’ (Vinson 1900)

<sup>39</sup> Vinson raises the question in one of his last articles, but only to provide a thoroughly anti-naturalist explanation. After pointing out the fargoing influence exerted on the Basques by their neighbours since the eighth century AD, he continues: ‘Since then the Basques have possessed nothing peculiarly theirs other than

Such a situation [the impending extinction of Basque] imposes on linguists an urgent need to make haste to study this remarkable vestige from the past immediately, before the ruthless logic of things wipes it off the face of the earth; when, still resisting the overwhelming competition for life exercised at its expense by superior organisms, it has not yet given up the fight once and for all, like so many other languages, patois or dialects that have gone before it. (Vinson 1874: 56)

In the last resort, since Basque is associated typologically with a primitive, hence inferior, civilisation, it is a matter for rejoicing to Vinson that its end should be nigh.<sup>40</sup>

All indications augur [Basque's] complete elimination in a future that is perhaps less remote than one might imagine. We believe that there are more reasons for rejoicing than for weeping at the impending death of a language whose great antiquity goes back to a far inferior stage of civilisation. (Vinson 1874: 56)

Yet in the meanwhile, and apparently without noticing any inconsistency, Vinson appeals to social nature to explain this phenomenon's causes, alluding to factors that tend to favour language loss independently of any naturalist arguments and, rather surprisingly, glossing over any hint of a conflict:

In France, there is no need for coercion [referring to the punishment of the ring practised at schools in the provinces of Spain since the eighteenth century]; in any village, one can often hear children out of school address each other in French. There are numerous causes for this decline: frequent contact with strangers, the return of emigrants, sojourns of youth in town for the yearly military service, the passage of a railway, the opening of a road or the establishment of a spa, purchases of land or property by outsiders, a growing number of civil servants not locally born, mixed marriages, and lastly, the custom among families inhabiting neighbouring villages of sending off their sons and daughters to stay on Gascon or Bearnese farms for several months or years. (Vinson 1882: 66-67)

Nowhere in all his writings does Vinson, a linguist genuinely solicitous for the education and emancipation of the individual through access to wider knowledge, admit the possibility that the Basque language might itself be used as a means of giving Basque speakers access to such knowledge — clearly the simplest solution. One might well ask why not, since precisely such a programme had been supported increasingly ever since the first decades of the nineteenth century within a context of the democratisation of teaching: first of

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their language, which has survived because it is too different in its grammar from the Romance languages to be able to be absorbed by them.' (Vinson 1922b)

<sup>40</sup> On occasions Vinson qualified his position on this by admitting some use of Basque, limited to the confines of the private household (Vinson 1879).

all by J-D. Garat in a report to the Emperor dating from 1811 (Casenave 2006),<sup>41</sup> and on the part of the provincial authorities on the other side of the border not long afterwards (Zalvide 2006a,b). Of course we could put this down to Schleicherian tradition and naturalist principles, viewing the Basque language as an inadequate or inappropriate medium by its very nature for the expression of higher degrees of civilisation, and for that precise reason a language condemned to death according to the ruthless laws of the struggle for existence. Then again, we may wonder to what extent, apart from such naturalist explanations, Vinson's ideological and political views, strongly marked by republican nationalism, impeded him from conceding that the Basque population of France could gain access to the fundamentals of modern-day knowledge directly through the medium of their own language.

On the whole, Vinson exercised discretion on practical issues of language policy, since he assumed that competition for survival was supposed to develop *naturally*, whence his silence on the punishment of the ring which is known, despite his denial, to have been practised just as widely in French schools (in the Basque Country or elsewhere) as it was in Spain. In Vinson (1879) he gave his public support for a prefectural order prohibiting school-teachers to use Basque at school, and proclaimed his satisfaction at the continuity of Barère, recalling his infamous report of year II. For Vinson, the primary purpose of education was evidently the production of Frenchmen:

We do not propose to destroy an ancient, respectable language that has in any case become an imperfect and awkward instrument: we know perfectly well that time will do the task naturally, and will soon bring to completion its irreversible action on this last vestige of past ages. But we intend that our young fellow citizens of the western Pyrenees, though they still conserve their ancestors' traditions, customs and language in the midst of their families, be Frenchmen and take an interest in the affairs of their country. (Vinson 1879)

## §5. Conclusion

The foregoing discussion allows us to situate the works of the Bascologist Julien Vinson in their scientific and ideological context. Contrary to what some might think, he was

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<sup>41</sup> J-D. Garat, from Ustaritz, was a member of the group of the *idéologues* during the French Revolution. He had an important role in defining the basis of public instruction at this time. In his 1811's report, he was clear in his recommendation of primary and secondary education in Basque for the population of the Basque Country, with a strong technical orientation: 'It would be difficult to list all the advantages that would surely result from teaching such a language in the primary schools in all the lycées in the departments formed by all the Basque counties of France and Spain. (...) It will not be very difficult, to begin with, to find in the seven Basque provinces men in a position to provide good translations of the best treatises of hydrography and mechanics, the best works on natural history and chemistry, in a word, all the books that would be necessary for these provinces whose essential destiny is the cultivation of the land and service at sea.' (Garat, *Les recherches sur le peuple primitif de l'Espagne, sur les révolutions de cette Péninsule, sur les Basques Espagnols et françois*, 1811)



no isolated linguist setting out to study languages that were exotic or little known in his time (Basque, Dravidian languages, Creoles) and standing in a peripheral relation to the scientific community of his day, as in the case of Louis-Lucien Bonaparte. Vinson was far from isolated within the ELN, an important current in France for two or three decades at least. As we have seen, he was not only an active, loyal member of this current but one of its pillars and most productive participants, especially in view of the length of time he remained active.

Vinson's position with regard to Basque — an affirmation of its scientific interest paired with the denial of any social value and a wish for its extinction, founded on the theme of primitivism in a context of a negative evaluation of older traditions — was based on both the ELN's Schleicherian foundations in linguistic matters and the philosophical and ideological principles the school defended. The expression *science républicaine* used at the beginning of the present study to characterise Vinson's contribution to Basque studies is unusual, yet has the merit of bringing out, at the same time, the importance of Vinson's anthropological conceptions and his ideological and political background together with the distortions that this produced in his development.

The thesis favoured by the naturalist linguists and the entire scientific and intellectual current to which they pertain promoted, with important exceptions depending on the choice of continent and population, a brand of anthropological and linguistic racism rooted in transformism, polygenism and a primary evolutionistic understanding of linguistic diversity. Today this is viewed as largely in contradiction with the principles of equality and emancipation supposedly championed by progressive republicans, but that contradiction was not perceived then owing to the force of racist representations very much in tune with the ideological requirements of the state. For these anthropologists, the ethnic and cultural hierarchicalisation of human groups, in linguistic or any other terms, was based on facts and had a scientific explanation. In Basque studies, less susceptible to direct racist arguments than, for instance, that of Creole studies given their European context, it is Vinson's ideas about or based on language that most clearly reflect such a position.

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