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The Boundaries of the Basque Language

The object of this article is to reflect on the concept of boundaries in relation to the Basque language (*Euskara*). The starting point is the Basque endoethnonym and the concepts which point to language as a marker of distinctiveness and a barrier to others. The article discusses the situation of the Basque language as a minority language, which is broken down into dialects, the phenomenon of diglossia and multilingualism in the region, and contemporary challenges faced by the language. Attention is also paid to the importance of knowledge of the Basque language in the studies of Basque culture, and in the integration of immigrants.

Keywords: boundary, border, language, *Euskara*, Basque Autonomous Community

Introduction

The aim of this text is to look at the Basque language (*Euskara*²) in relation to the concept of a broadly defined boundary. I want to draw the reader's attention to the territorial and symbolic boundaries of this language, which is considered as one of Europe's most mysterious. As Robert Lawrence Trask observes: "Few languages have exercised so much fascination upon the collective linguistic consciousness as Basque, and at the same time few European languages are so little known to professional linguists" (1997: xiii). In the past, it was often seen as a tool for creating barriers against others, and its value was supposed to be in its purity, understood as the absence of foreign influences. Today, the language is a reflection of an open and inclusive attitude, and the Basque language policy³ contributes to

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² In the article I will use the terms *Basque* and *Euskara* interchangeably in reference to the Basque language.

³ I am referring to the official policy of the authorities of the Basque Autonomous Community which includes analysis of the situation of the Basque language, the normalization of the use of

the growth of knowledge of Basque not only in the Basque Country⁴. *Euskara* is also becoming an important component of immigrant integration. Indeed, the creation of Basque language courses is supported all over the world, while such courses are also offered in Poland. On the other hand, there are also new challenges related to the use of Basque, and linguistic boundaries are often blurred.

This article is based on analysis of existing data and field research conducted in the Basque region. In the course of the project, the author spent several months in the Basque Autonomous Community, with her stay divided into stages (in the period 2017–2021). She conducted library and archive searches, observations (participatory and non-participatory) and interviews (free, narrative, formalised). Interviews were conducted in Basque, Spanish and Polish (in the case of Polish immigrants living in the Basque Country)⁵. The author also drew on her experiences from previous stays and research in the region (talking to people she has worked with for many years or using the snowball method) and based on her own practice of learning and using the Basque language⁶.

Them and us

Koldo Mitxelena, a Basque linguist, member of the Academy of the Basque Language (*Euskaltzaindia*) and prominent researcher of *Euskara*, has pointed out the importance of language as an element that internally binds a community of its users together, but also distinguishes them and constitutes a barrier to others. The Basque endoethnonym draws a line between the “us” and “them” groups on the basis of the knowledge of *Euskara*, the Basque language. *Euskaldun* means the one who “possesses *Euskara*”, while all the others are called *erdaldunak* – the possessors of another speech (*erdara*, which stands for a foreign language⁷, is used

Euskara, as well as activities aimed at its promotion and cooperation with other cultural institutions. An important element of this policy is the area of education (both for children and adults) (Departamento de Cultura y Política Lingüística online).

⁴ I use the term Basque Country when referring to the seven Basque provinces: Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, Araba, Nafarroa, Nafarroa Beherea, Lapaurdi and Zuberoa (I apply geographical names used in the Basque language).

⁵ The interviewees constituted a diverse group, both in terms of language competences as well as age and origin. The research was conducted on a multi-site basis. The author lived with the inhabitants of the region, which allowed for in-depth observation and participation in everyday practices (including language practices).

⁶ This article was written as part of a project funded by the National Science Centre entitled “Nowa rodzina baskijska? Tradycja, polityka kulturowa i nowe formy życia rodzinnego” (project number: 2016/21/B/HS3/00045).

⁷ *Erdi* means “half”, “middle” in Basque, which perhaps indicated the perception of foreign speakers as knowing the language only partially, “half-speaking” (Mitxelena 1977: 14–15).

by some today mainly to refer to Spanish). However, today's reality is more complex. Despite the fact that, according to statistical data, the knowledge of Basque is increasing, the majority of the region's population still cannot communicate in *Euskara* freely. Many factors have contributed to this, including the dominance of Spanish (and French in Iparralde⁸), the dialectal breakdown (standardized Basque – *Euskara Batua*, was only created in the 1960s), and the situation of the language over the centuries (for example, its absence in education, repression of the use of Basque and the negative image of *Euskara*).

According to data from 2016, 41% of the Basque Autonomous Community's (Euskadi) population is Basque-speaking, 15% have passive knowledge of *Euskara* and 44% do not speak Basque (the region's total population is just over two million) (*VI Mapa Sociolingüístico 2016 2020*: 33–34). The Basque language goes beyond national or administrative borders. Not only is it one of the official languages in the Basque Autonomous Community but *Euskara* is also spoken by some inhabitants of Spanish Navarre and the French Basque Country (Iparralde). Those who speak *Euskara* are bilingual (they also speak Spanish or French, depending on where they live). Some members of the Basque diaspora, also have knowledge of Basque. Additionally, in the past, *Euskara* was a language which was not limited by the borders of any particular country. At the same time, it has been pointed out that the boundaries of its occurrence used to be much wider than today (this is evidenced, for example, by toponyms) (Mitzelena 1977: 23–26). Furthermore, in the past, the contacts Basque sailors had with inhabitants of other lands resulted in the evolution of pidgins (Basque-Icelandic Pidgin, Basque-Amerindian Pidgin) (Bakker 1988: 7–15; Hualde 1991: 427–438).

The Basque language is often presented as mysterious and fascinating because of its origins and its relationship with other languages; it has the status of a linguistic isolate as it is not an Indo-European language (Douglass, Zulaika 2007: 41–44). It is also of interest because it has survived, despite the expansion of more powerful languages and the lack of a home state or institutional support, as well as the repression of *Euskara* speakers. Researchers give various reasons as to why the Basque language has not disappeared. These include the fact that for a long time the territory inhabited by the Basques was underdeveloped and unattractive, it resisted numerous foreign invasions, it was Christianized late⁹, or that the

⁸ A term for the French Basque Country (comprising the three provinces of Lapurdi, Nafarroa Beherea and Zuberoa).

⁹ The topic of Basque Christianization has aroused controversy and contradictory theories, which confirm the specific nature of the Basque language and culture. On the one hand, it has been pointed out that Christianization occurred early – in the 1st century AD – while, on the other hand, a later date for this process has been given – between the 11th and 14th centuries (Montero 2008: 52–59). According to Julio Caro Baroja, the beginning of the Christianization of the Basque-speaking lands dates back to the 10th century (2000: 270).

language spoken by the Basques was very different from that of their neighbours¹⁰ (Núñez Astrain 2006: 39–43). During the Francoist dictatorship, the situation of the Basque language was particularly difficult; it was absent from the public sphere and its use was often associated with repression. This began to change in the 1960s, when autonomous status was granted to three Basque provinces¹¹ and then in 1979 when new opportunities were offered in connection with language policy (Watson 2003: 302–318). In 1980, the University of the Basque Country (Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea / Universidad del País Vasco) was opened, and soon Basque-language television and radio and a Basque-language press appeared. The Basque language began to be present in the education of children and adults, while numerous cultural events were also organized to promote and support the Basque language (Zabaleta 2019: 137–140). The fact that the number of people with a greater or lesser knowledge of *Euskara* has grown steadily and that there are now more young people in this group is a testament to the effectiveness of this policy¹² (*VI Mapa Sociolingüístico 2016 2020*: 101–103). On the other hand, it should be stressed that the statistical increase in the number of people who know the Basque language does not necessarily translate into an increase in the use of *Euskara* (this phenomenon will be discussed later in the article).

In the past, the language used to be regarded as an important element that distinguished Basques from other peoples. The nineteenth-century national ideologist Sabino Arana saw it as a form of barrier against foreign influences and pointed out that the language should always be protected from outsiders¹³. He believed that strangers should not attempt to learn the language and that one *maketo*, as he called immigrants from other regions of Spain, who knew Basque could do more harm to Basque than a hundred others who did not know *Euskara*. The Basque language was therefore meant to mark the borders between Basques and outsiders and at the same time to be a tool for defence against “contamination” and the influence of Spanish. It was also an element that confirmed Basque distinctiveness. Arana was also concerned with linguistic purity; the removal of foreign traces from Basque vocabulary to be replaced with local vocabulary. He himself was the author of numerous neologisms, including those referring to key concepts (for example, the flag – *ikurriña*, the name of the state – *Euzkadi*). On

¹⁰ It can be said that in this case its distinctiveness and the tightness of the linguistic boundaries helped the language to survive.

¹¹ Bizkaia Gipuzkoa and Araba formed the Basque Autonomous Community (Euskadi).

¹² Josu Zabaleta writes that the case of the Basque language is treated as a role model for other linguistic policies in the world (in terms of standardization, normalization and recuperation of the language) (Zabaleta 2019: 141).

¹³ The objectives of today’s Basque language policy are very different, it aims to support the dissemination of *Euskara* not only in the region but also globally. There are now Basque language classes all over the world, including Poland (Etxepare Basque Institute online).

the other hand, Arana considered race to be the key element of Basqueness. It was race, its purity, as opposed to language, that he believed was impossible to regain once it was lost (Montero 2008: 361–371). Arana's successors moved away from the concept of race as the determinant of what it is to be Basque, turning rather to the language and at the same time extending the range of possibilities for what it means to belong to Basque society. Assigning a key value to the language meant that learning *Euskara* allowed one to break through the border of a restricted group affiliation. Therefore, this vision of identity was open to immigrants, unlike Arana's version. Accordingly, a Basque person was again someone who spoke Basque. At the same time, knowledge of the language as an element of identity is now seen to be the most important factor for belonging to the community of Basque speakers. Some of the region's inhabitants, however, do not consider this condition as a decisive factor. Being Basque, in their perception, goes beyond being simply Basque-speaking – nowadays, it is the fact of living in the Basque region that appears to be crucial (Irazuzta, Martínez 2014: 15–22). Moreover, a Basque-speaking person may not necessarily feel or define themselves as Basque (Mitxelena 1977: 66). On the other hand, for some, speaking Basque was a form of protest, an expression of resistance. This was the case, for example, during the Francoist dictatorship, when measures were taken to remove *Euskara* from the public sphere (among others). Joseba Sarrionandia, a Basque writer described the Basque language as the “Basque homeland”, a “refuge” and speaking it as a cultural and political practice (Sarrionandia 1992: 89, 95).

One of the most frequently highlighted features of the Basque language is its internal differentiation; it can be pronounced in such a way that it is said even neighbouring houses can be characterised by a different vocabulary (Makazaga 2012: 75). Related to this is the significant autonomy of the Basque farm (*baserri*) both economically, legally and symbolically¹⁴. Some of my interviewees referred to words used by their grandparents, or even to the fact that the terms they had learnt from their grandparents were not used or even known in another province, and sometimes even in the same one. In this context, one interviewee recalled several terms for the word “spider” and added that when she used the term from her grandmother's house at school, other children did not understand her. And although some scholars say that the differences between dialects are exaggerated (Zuazo 2010: 69–70), the fact is that dissimilarities within *Euskara* do exist. In the nineteenth century, Luis L. Bonaparte identified eight Basque dialects (and 25 sub-dialects), while in the twentieth century, Resurrección María de Azkue spoke of the existence of seven and Luis Michelena of nine or ten (Núñez Astrain 2006: 57).

¹⁴ The word home/house – *etxe* – is sometimes derived from the word *itxi* – “close”, which, according to some interpretations, is supposed to indicate the closed, separate character of the Basque home, the family (Berriochoa Azcárate 2013: 394).

According to Koldo Zuazo, a modern Basque dialectologist, there are five dialects today (Zuazo 2010: 37).

The standardised Basque language, *Euskara Batua*¹⁵, was developed in the 1960s¹⁶. Despite recognition of the importance or even the necessity of *Batua*, this form is sometimes seen as “artificial” or “cold” Basque. Indeed, it was not uncommon for my interlocutors to define it in this way and perceive it as the language of official communication or education, but not the language of conversation with relatives. In the latter case, dialects were used, which are also seen by some as “real” Basque. One of my interlocutors, an *euskaldun berri*¹⁷, decided to go to the countryside for a while to learn a dialect, because knowledge of standardised Basque was not sufficient for him. An issue that exists, however, is that dialects are sometimes perceived as “erroneous” Basque by some native speakers. *Batua* is the language of education or the media. It is knowledge of the standard form of the language that is necessary to obtain a certificate that is often required in the workplace. Paradoxical situations arise, therefore, when a person brought up as a Basque-speaker takes a Basque course (I have met such people in *barnetegi*, a Basque school for adults). One of my interlocutors, on the other hand, mentioned that during an oral exam in Basque, she regularly corrected the dialectal form replacing it with the one used in *Batua* (instead of *zait*, she automatically used *jata*).

At this point, it is also worth noting the variety of linguistic forms indicating the relationship between the interlocutors. Their use may be a way of expressing respect and emphasising the higher status of one of the parties, an indication of equality between the speakers, or a confidential relationship between them. The latter – *hitanoa* – often appears in conversations between friends (usually of the same sex) or in communication with children (not only in a positive sense¹⁸). In this case, the use of this form is related to how close people are to one another.

Drawing a line today between *euskaldunak* and *erdaldunak*, a line between “them” and “us” based on language is not so easy. At the same time, it has to be pointed out that divisions of this kind are a simplification, both in terms of people and territory. The level of freedom of the use of Basque varies. For example, for some it is their mother tongue, for others it is not, some have active and passive

¹⁵ *Bat* means “one”, *batu* – to “unite”.

¹⁶ Opinions about the necessity to unify the Basque language and the initiatives undertaken for this purpose were voiced earlier. However, there were also opponents of linguistic unification. For them the variety of dialects was a treasure and they feared that they would disappear if unified (Hualde, Zuazo 2007: 143–168; Zabaleta 2019: 140–141).

¹⁷ *Euskaldun berri* is a person for whom Basque is not their mother tongue, *euskaldun zahar* is a user whose first language is *Euskara* (*berri* – Basque: “new”, *zahar* – Basque: “old”).

¹⁸ One of my respondents recounted that for her *hitanoa* was not a “language of friends”, but something that was not very positive, as her mother would switch to this form when reprimanding her children.

knowledge, while others understand a great amount but find it difficult to speak. Additionally, in places (provinces or towns) defined as Basque-speaking not all are *euskaldunak* (Ugalde 1979: 16–17). Moreover, today, Basque culture is not only the Basque-speaking culture (Baztarrika 2010: 137).

The village, the home, childhood

Many of my Basque respondents recalled situations when speaking Basque was a source of shame or provoked negative reactions from those around them. Even today one can see the existence of a negative linguistic identity, a certain complex connected with the mother tongue. One Basque person told me that as a child he was very ashamed when, during a visit to a large city, his father asked for coffee in Basque and the waiter replied in Spanish that he did not understand. On the other hand, an older woman I spoke to recalled that when she and her cousins went to the city to dance, they would change their shoes and language. It was not appropriate to speak Basque in the city. The boundary between rural and urban space was also very much a boundary of language and ethnicity. Relations between these areas were characterised by distance. Farmers from the village were reserved about people from the city, while marriage to someone from the city (*kalekua*) was treated as a misalliance. In the national ideology, the countryside was the essence of Basque identity. More so, because it was in the cities that immigrants settled (Mirgos 2018: 57–66). Today, these boundaries are blurred and in the life stories of many people both the countryside and the city play an important role (as in the song by the band Kaleko Urdangak entitled *Nortasuna* – “Identity”¹⁹).

For a long time, the Basque language was used mainly for oral communication, and longer written texts were not produced. Luis Núñez Astrain states that they did not appear until the sixteenth century (while in Spanish, French or Catalan, for example, texts had appeared in the 10th century) (Núñez Astrain 2006: 31)²⁰. It was also a language associated with the private, domestic sphere, whereas Spanish was associated with official sphere; it was the language of public office, but also of culture and science (López Basaguren 2012: 39). Interestingly, this perspective was also adopted by some Basques. Miguel de Unamuno, for example, wrote about Basque as a linguistically interesting but impractical language. He believed that the choice of Spanish was justified for someone who wanted to create something eternal. A metaphor for this situation is provided by Ignacio Elizalde (1988: 77) who

¹⁹ An excerpt from the song is as follows: *Baserri eta kale, daramatzat odolean* (*Farm and street, I carry in my blood*) (Kaleko Urdangak, 2018).

²⁰ In 1545 the first book in Basque was published. It was *Linguae Vasconum Primitiae* written by Bernat Etxepare.

writes of the man who leaves his mother (*Euskara*) to be with his wife (Spanish). It can be said, therefore, that the departure from Basque to Spanish was meant to be a transition to an adult, autonomous life. Cameron Watson notes that the repression during the time of Franco and the removal of Basque from the public sphere had an impact in that Basque became the language of the home and private space (like family, friends, local church) (Watson 2003: 310). At the same time, Basque was sometimes presented as the language of uneducated and ill-mannered people²¹. The humane, “Christian” language²² was supposed to be Spanish (Douglass, Zulaika 2007: 41). Today, *Euskara* is a language present in the cultural sphere and yet its choice as a language of creativity still carries with it a certain dilemma, related to the author’s identity or “sense of mission”, but also a question concerning the readership of such a publication (a book written in a minority language will reach a smaller audience) (Mirgos 2018: 147–158).

The linguistic boundary in relation to *Euskara* was not only drawn between village and town, home and street, but also between childhood and adulthood. A phenomenon often observed and discussed in relation to the Basque language is that it used to be treated as a language appropriate for domestic, unofficial communication²³, and geared to the child interlocutor. A popular saying stated that one speaks *Euskara* to children and to dogs²⁴. Empowering the Basque language is about overcoming such beliefs. It is also necessary to change the behavior of some parents who switch to Spanish outside the home, a linguistic practice that is imitated by their children. In such cases, therefore, although the adult tells the child about the value of the Basque language, this is immediately relinquished by the way she/he acts (Suay, Sanginés 2015: 45–46)²⁵. In connection with this, the teenage

²¹ This attitude is also apparent today (Suay, Sanginés 2015: 78, 110–119).

²² *¡Habla cristiano!* – “Speak Christian!” was a phrase used during the Francoist era to those who used Basque instead of the “civilised”, “Christian” language, i.e. Spanish.

²³ It is worth mentioning the phenomenon of family language (or home language), which is to be understood as a set of expressions or words understandable and meaningful to the members of a given family, constituting a kind of “secret language”. It may include diminutives, nicknames, sayings, jokes and neologisms which refer to family experiences and only in this context do they acquire meaning. In this case, a specific linguistic form marks the boundary between the private and the public. Family language is also a reflection of the relationship between family members. According to Kwiryna Handke: “In simple terms, family language could be defined as intra-family communication, and, paraphrasing, as a portrait of the family inside, expressed in speech”. The author also points to the existence of a “language of love and tenderness” often used in communication with children (Handke 2009: 75–80, 130–131 – transl. KM).

²⁴ For a child, Basque could be a childhood language in a positive sense (memories of being a child), but also a negative one (Basque is not a language in which serious, “adult” matters are spoken).

²⁵ The reasons are different, for example, someone in the group does not speak Basque (then the language of communication becomes Spanish or, in Iparralde, French), some also say that they do not want to be perceived as radical (Suay, Sanginés 2015: 16–19, 69, 158). One of my interlocutors pointed out that he does not always have the strength to be “a *Euskara* fighter”.

daughter of my interlocutor noticed, when we were spending time together, that her dad always reminded her to speak Basque and he himself still spoke Spanish.

For a long time, Spanish was the language of education (this can be seen today when, for example, at the market, elderly sellers, Basque-speaking farmers, state a price in Spanish). In connection with this, some of my interviewees recalled their often uneasy encounters with Spanish when they went to school. They first spoke *Euskara*, and going to school meant immersion in a different linguistic reality. José Miguel de Barandiaran, a Basque scholar, writes about such an experience himself, about the child's fear of school and of learning by heart the content delivered by the teacher without understanding it (Berriochoa Azcárate 2013: 470). Today, the situation has changed fundamentally. This is mainly due to the fact that *Euskara* is present in the various models of Basque education²⁶. Thus, unlike their parents, more young people, to a greater or lesser extent, now speak Basque²⁷. However, this success has come at a price – Basque is beginning to be seen by some as the “language of school”, or even the language of constraint. In accordance with this, data shows a decline in the use of Basque in social contacts among young people²⁸. The same applies to literacy in terms of Basque literature – having completed their education, graduates only rarely read Basque-language books (*Diagnóstico de la situación* 2019: 69–72). Additionally, the main language of media consumption for many young people in Euskadi is Spanish (Martínez de Luna et al. 2013: 72). Therefore, the challenge today is to make Basque an attractive language and one that is present in leisure and personal life practices. Hence, emphasis is put on the importance of initiatives aimed at encouraging the use of *Euskara* in leisure time.

Euskañol and other paradoxes of today

“Oye, ama, nik ez dakit, llamame cuando puedas (...) Es que ni saiatuko naiz (...)” – riding on the Basque metro, I overhear the telephone conversation of a female passenger in which expressions in Spanish and *Euskara* intermingle. This

²⁶ There are different models of education in the Basque education system with regard to the language of instruction. In addition to schools where Basque is the main language, there are also Spanish-dominated and Basque-Spanish schools (Model D, A or B). A trilingual Basque-Spanish-English model is becoming increasingly popular. There are also schools where the Basque language is not used (Departamento de Educación online).

²⁷ Sometimes a child will help a parent learn Basque; when the parent needs to acquire this competence for professional reasons, for example. I have come across such cases during my research in the Basque region.

²⁸ Some studies show a decline in the use of Basque generally, as well as in the classroom (Hernández 2013: 265).

linguistic phenomenon is sometimes referred to as *Euskañol* – a combination of Spanish and Basque (from *Euskar* – Basque language and *Español* – Spanish language). Nowadays, it is becoming more widespread. The change of language code is sometimes even unconscious and the boundaries between the two languages are becoming increasingly blurred²⁹. Even those who emphasize their attachment to the Basque language sometimes express enthusiasm or swear in Spanish, and many Spanish speakers in the region refer to their parents in Basque as *ama* (mum) and *aita* (dad). For some, *Euskañol* is a negative phenomenon; they speak of a “polluted” *Euskara*, and denounce the presence of such expressions in the media. Others consider these changes as natural or as a sign of a change in attitude towards the Spanish language. Regarding this linguistic phenomenon, Jasone Cenoz has rightly observed:

Apart from the minority situation of Basque, there are two other facts that explain this hybridity: the increasing number of speakers of Basque who have Spanish as their first language and the fact that everybody in the BAC understands Spanish. The term “euskañol” (*euskara* + *español*, Basque + Spanish) is sometimes used to refer to this codemixing and codeswitching in a similar way as “Spanglish” in the USA. Boundaries between languages are softer in daily communication than in textbooks and classes. New technologies are contributing to softening boundaries between languages and between oral and written language (2009: 76).

Cenoz also refers to the slogan used in one of the campaigns aimed at encouraging the learning and, above all, the use of Basque, which is a combination of words in Spanish and Basque (*Pixka bat es mucho* – “A little is a lot”). *Pixka bat* means “a little” in Basque, the Spanish word *mucho* means – “a lot”. The aim of the campaign was to convey the message that even a little knowledge of *Euskara* is important and that there is no need to wait until you have advanced competence to use it in everyday communication, as well as to promote *Euskara* in an attractive form (song, video) (*Presentan la canción*, 2008). Other incentives are aimed at those who know Basque but do not use it when meeting other people for the first time as they do not know if their interlocutor is or is not Basque-speaking. Not wanting to offend the stranger, they often choose a safe language of communication, i.e. Spanish. Hence the call: *Lehen hitza euskaraz* (“First word in Basque”) and the encouragement to start a conversation in *Euskara* or at least to include Basque phrases (for example, to say hello or goodbye)³⁰. In many venues in public spaces

²⁹ Another situation is when in a group of Basque and Spanish-speaking people, an individual speaks Spanish with some people and Basque to others (due to habit, for instance) (Suay, Sanginés 2015: 17). My interlocutors also commented upon this issue.

³⁰ This incentive also extended to the virtual sphere, promoting the use of *Euskara* online (see *Lehen Hitza* online).

in the Basque Autonomous Community there are also notices stating that it is possible to communicate in *Euskara* in that particular place (for example: *Hemen, euskaraz atseginez* – “Basque spoken here”), or stickers depicting the redwing – *txantxangorri*, whose image (as a small but lively bird) was part of a campaign to encourage the use of *Euskara* in the workplace, professional sphere, and public spaces (Eudel online).

Today, linguistic diversity is valued, something which is noticeable and also remarked upon by a number of my interlocutors. This is a situation in which interlocutors use Basque and Spanish interchangeably, understand each other and choose to respond in the language that is closer to each of them. It is a phenomenon which emphasizes a person’s right to use their chosen language. It is also a phenomenon in which active bilingualism is essential (Baztarrika 2010: 291–302, 41–422). It is also more frequently noted that, if it is to survive, *Euskara* must become the language of all Basque inhabitants (including immigrants) (Mirgos 2018: 205–211). If the new inhabitants of the region do not recognise it as “their” language, as a personal and important form of speech, if they do not speak it or encourage their children to learn it, then legal regulations will not suffice.

The presence of immigrants in the Basque region and their relationship with the Basque language is of particular interest. *Euskara* is sometimes presented as a problem in this context. Some immigrants are surprised that another language is present in the region, they point to the dilemma of “which culture to integrate into” (Mirgos 2018: 21). On the other hand, the effort to learn Basque is met with very positive reactions from the locals, facilitating acceptance, and *Euskara* is also sometimes a bridge between immigrants and those in the region for whom Basque is also not their mother tongue. One of my interlocutors, an immigrant woman, remarked that when she uses *Euskara* in the playground it facilitates her communication with local parents, who previously, seeing her foreign appearance and hearing a foreign language, rarely approached her:

I got the idea that since I know Basque and very often here the first language of communication for adults with children is Basque, then I should use it. Often even people who don’t speak Basque every day at least try to address their little ones in Basque. So somehow I sensed that people had a more positive attitude towards me and looked at me more favourably when they heard me say something in Basque (...). And the Basque language turned out to be such a bridge connecting all these links, and I managed to break down the barriers³¹.

Returning to the beginning of this article and the idea concerning language as a marker of distinctiveness and a barrier to others, it can be said that in the

³¹ The interview was conducted in Polish in July 2021, in the Basque Autonomous Community.

Basque-speaking community, while the language remains an important component of one's identity, a knowledge of *Euskara* is also an important element of inclusion. At the same time, it is increasingly common nowadays for Basque to be spoken by someone who looks "foreign" to the locals. One of my respondents talked about his Muslim girl students talking to each other in a Basque dialect. However, not everyone is comfortable with this. Its appearance is viewed by many people as a way of influencing the choice of the language of communication and, if someone looks like a foreigner, Spanish is usually the chosen language. One immigrant said he would like people to understand in the future that the color of his children's skin does not automatically mean that they do not know Basque (Suay, Sanginés 2015: 123–131). At the same time, one can recognise the influence of the native languages of the "new users" of *Euskara* on Basque vocabulary or grammar.

Some people remark that today, when Basque no longer needs to be fought for (at least not as much as in the past), when it is present in the public sphere and especially in education, the challenge is not so much to know it as to use it, because a good grade on a school certificate or a course completion certificate does not mean that there is now another Basque speaker. As mentioned above, sometimes young people, obliged to learn *Euskara*, ostentatiously give it up when they leave their Basque-speaking school. This is all the more true when one considers that fashionable songs and films are often in English or Spanish. In the numerous courses I was involved in at *barnetegia*, a Basque language school for adults, I met students who were only interested in obtaining a formal confirmation of their competence in *Euskara* – a requirement of their employers. At times, the need to learn even caused an aversion to the Basque language, although there were also people who put great effort into learning Basque because of their personal motivation to learn the language of the region. The paradox of the success of the Basque language policy is that nowadays it is often a personal choice whether to abandon *Euskara*, and this also applies to young people from Basque-speaking backgrounds. On the other hand, one of my interlocutors, an *ikastola* teacher, stated that from her observations it appears that such a departure is temporary, and that students from Basque-speaking schools, even if they give up speaking Basque as a result of fashion, rebellion or peer influence, do return to *Euskara* later in life (Mirgos 2020: 270–271).

In addition to measures to encourage the use of Basque outside school and to integrate immigrants, the issue of multilingualism and globalization is also highlighted today. The challenge is to combine support for the minority language – Basque – and the importance of competences in the use of other languages:

Indeed, in a globalised society such as ours, it is impossible to maintain and promote a minority language if it is considered to be the only language in society. The future that lies ahead for we Basques is a multilingual one. For the Basque language

to survive, it must be the main language within its linguistic sphere of influence, although at the same time we Basque speakers must also be able to speak other languages – otherwise, the Basque language will be at risk. As a consequence, the main aim is to combine these two ideas: on the one hand, that the Basque language should manage to achieve the full development it needs within its linguistic sphere of influence and, on the other, that Basque speakers be capable of speaking other languages (...). Ikastolas have drawn up a proposal for a minority language-based multilingual education system – in other words, they are trying to ensure that students reach a level of foreign language learning needed by 21st century Basque citizens, albeit while always giving priority to the Basque language in all spheres of use (Confederation of Ikastolas 2009: 70–72).

At the same time, according to some, Basque language policy at present discriminates against the Spanish language. For instance, they point to the requirement of a knowledge of the Basque language in some workplaces, which is a problem for people who do not know *Euskara* (Baztarrika 2010: 313–330). Regarding this debate, the opinion of the Spanish professor Juan Carlos Moreno Cabrera is interesting. He draws attention to the necessity of supporting a minority language by users of the dominant language. He also points to the existence and invisibility of linguistic nationalism and linguistic domination in connection with the latter (in this case, Spanish). The linguistic policy of the dominant language is seen as rational and right, and action to support the minority language as harmful and oppressive. With regard to the requirement of knowledge of *Euskara* in the labor market, Moreno Cabrera adds that no one objects to the requirement of knowledge of English. He discusses the belief that one language is better than another (for example, knowing Spanish or English is more valuable than knowing Basque or Catalan). He also points out that love for one's own language and its support do not mean linguistic supremacist nationalism. Rather, it is related to the depreciation of other languages as, according to Moreno Cabrera (2015: 14–41, 117–119), linguistic conflicts are the result of a long-term imbalance between languages.

Between languages – an anthropologist in the Basque Country

I have been doing research in the Basque region for twenty years. It started with the Basque language, when I began to learn it, and over the years I have repeatedly discovered how important its command is in the context of Basque studies. From a practical point of view, doing research in the Basque Autonomous Community does not require knowledge of Basque. All inhabitants of the region speak Spanish, while Basque speakers are always bilingual (except perhaps for

young children)³². However, competence in Basque makes a dramatic difference to a person who comes to the Basque Country and has a significant impact on the possibilities to do research in the region. Knowledge of Basque makes it possible to cross the border between being “a foreigner” and “one of us”, “It’s like you’re half Basque”, I have sometimes heard. In one shop in a small town, when I used *Euskara* to answer a question asked by the salesman in Spanish (which he used due to my different appearance – he spoke Basque with the locals), the salesman laughingly said (now using Basque): “Sorry, I thought you were a foreigner”.

Language is also, in my opinion, an important element of research in this region, allowing us to see the specific nature of the local culture and its diversity. Language can be a valuable subject for cultural studies (a linguistic image of the world, or key words). A separate issue are phenomena that exist in the Basque language which are not easy to translate (for example the improvisation of songs – *bertsolaritza*). The language occupies an important place in national discourses or in policies towards immigrants. The language takes on a special significance in the region in which it is situated but was also threatened, where it was an important part of the local identity. At the same time, as I mentioned earlier, in relation to the Basque region, we can speak of Basque cultures rather than a single Basque culture, while the Basque language is only one part of this. When conducting research among Basque-speakers, Spanish-speakers or immigrants, I have sometimes had the feeling of being in very different communities, with the impression that the borders between them are sometimes so impenetrable that they know little about one another. Indeed, one of my Basque-speaking interlocutors said that he lives in a different city than the Spanish-speaking inhabitants, because he participates in different events and frequents other places. Another pointed out that her children live in a completely different reality from the children of her Spanish-speaking neighbour. At home they hear Basque, they read Basque fairy tales, they watch Basque television, and their favourite characters are Pirritx and Porrotx³³. The children next door do not know these characters or the content of the tales or television programmes. On the other hand, contact with another language and culture can also be unexpectedly dynamic and sometimes surprising. The same mother noticed that her daughter was saying the names of colours in Spanish whilst colouring and nobody knew where she had come across the vocabulary. There are also people who decide to learn the Basque language, who want to know Basque culture and be part of this world (Suay, Sanginés 2015: 74–75).

³² Although one of my female interlocutors pointed out that people who function in a Basque-speaking environment on a daily basis (town, family, friends, work) have difficulties in speaking Spanish freely and correctly. She gave her friend’s son as an example.

³³ Popular clowns in the Basque Country.

Conclusions

Language is an important element in constructing the boundary between the group to which a person belongs and a foreign group. However, it can also become a bridge between foreign groups or be influenced by other languages. The use of language can also reflect the perception of others and the relationships between groups. In the case of the Basque language, in the past, this boundary was part of a national ideology based on difference. However, contemporary language policy is inclusive and promotes the learning of *Euskara* outside the Basque Country. Furthermore, in the Basque region, in daily communication, language codes are often mixed, while *Euskara* is also influenced by the presence of immigrants. At the same time, Basque remains a minority language, as most conversations take place in Spanish (in He-goalde³⁴) or French (in Iparralde³⁵). In 2022, a report was published on the use of the Basque language in the public sphere in the Basque Country (*Hizkuntzen erabileraren kale neurketa*, Sociolinguistika Klusterra). The results showed that more young people now use the Basque language, while it is also frequent in communication between adults and children. This indicates the success of the policy to increase knowledge of this minority language in the younger generation, although for many young people *Euskara* is not their first language. It is also apparent that many parents want to communicate in *Euskara* with their children. In spite of this, however, today only one in eight Basques speak *Euskara* in everyday communication. This is influenced by the level of language knowledge as well as the linguistic competence of the interlocutors. As a result, according to the authors of the report, in the Basque Country it is possible to communicate in Spanish or French in almost all areas, and in Basque in only some of them (Altuna Zumeta et al. 2022: 39–42).

To conclude on a positive note, as well as the greater use of *Euskara* among inhabitants of the Basque Country, more people from around the world are now becoming interested in the Basque language. International Basque Language Day is celebrated on December 3. It is accompanied by a series of cultural or educational events, and not only in the Basque Country itself. It is a holiday which brings together people learning *Euskara* and those for whom it is an important language, including people in Poland. During the last Basque Language Days in Gdańsk and Poznań (2021), one could listen to or even learn Basque and become acquainted with Basque cinema and literature. At one of the meetings, Poles and Basques reflected together on a Basque text (by Lurdes Oñederra), and on what it means when we say that the Basque language is “ours”. By doing this they also showed how elusive it can be to set limits (or boundaries) to the scope of the Basque language.

³⁴ The Spanish part of the Basque Country.

³⁵ The French part of the Basque Country.

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