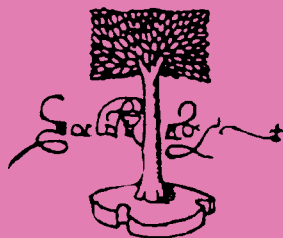


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SEPARATA

Erreseina.

*Forschungsfragen zur
baskischen Sprache*

Peter BAKKER



Forschungsfragen zur baskischen Sprache
[Research questions on the Basque language].

Holst, Jan Henrik. 2019.

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Peter Bakker

Aarhus University

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As reported in the preface, Jan Henrik Holst attended the 50 years celebration of FLV in Iruña in March 2019, where he gave a presentation entitled «Burushaski and Basque: how one case can help the other one». Two years before he had written a book about Burushaski, a language isolate spoken in the Himalaya. In connection with the conference, he decided to write the book under review, which deals with research questions relating to the Basque language. He wrote it in German, and this can be seen as part of a long tradition including writings by Wilhelm von Humboldt, Hugo Schuchardt, C. C. Uhlenbeck, Karl Bouda, Christiane Bendel and others, all writing in German about Basque (Lindeman's Basque bibliography contains hundreds of linguistic titles written in German).

Holst has previously written books about Eskimo-Aleut languages, Armenian, Latvian, Caucasian languages, African languages of the Atlantic family and on the isolate Burushaski, as well as a number of articles about other languages and topics. In his previous work he has sometimes referred to Basque, and this is his first full study of Basque. The book is neither a descriptive grammar, nor a history of Basque, nor a state-of-the-art overview of research on the language, but it has elements of all, and in addition he presents some novel ideas about Basque. The first chapter puts Basque in a typological context (p. 11-32), the second deals with a choice of topics relating to Basque (p. 33-102), the third with several aspects of the lexicon (p. 103-138), and the fourth and final chapter deals with historical linguistics (p. 139-212) – even though grammatical developments also permeate the other chapters.

The book is well written, and probably accessible for people who do not have knowledge of Basque, as the author explains background information relating to the topics of discussion, and then argues against or in favor of certain positions, or declares himself agnostic or undecided. The book is also of interest to Bascologists because of some novel ideas presented in the book.

Readers of this journal do not need an introduction to the language. The typological chapter does a good job in succinctly discussing aspects of phonetics, nominal and verbal morphology and syntax, but always focusing on selected aspects only. As an illustration, the phonetics section contains no discussion of the phoneme inventory or allophony, but

just sums up vowels, diphthongs and further it focuses on the rhotics, sibilants and /h/, as well as word accent and a little about phonotactics. There is no list of case endings in the section on nominal morphology, but the partitive, the definite article and pronominal elements get most attention. Similar selections are made in the other parts of the introduction, presumably because these are being dealt with in the selected studies in the book.

As German is less accessible for a number of Bascologists, I will briefly summarize the topics dealt with in the book. In the section about numerals, Holst deals with the numbers one by one, discussing dialectal differences and suggesting historical developments, language-internal connections, and possible typological and etymological links with other languages, mostly those of the Caucasus but also of North Africa, and Ainu of Japan and Finnish. He mentions the connection between *bat* and *bederatz*, but the possibility of *-atz-* being connected with «finger» is not mentioned. He is skeptical about Celtic or Germanic origins of *hoge* and *ehun*. Of more interest is his section about his reconstruction of a dual in body parts. According to Holst, there are a number of body parts starting in *be-* and *bi-* (e.g. *belarri* «ear», *bihotz* «heart»). Bascologists have noticed this earlier. Trask (1997) called it a body-part prefix, and Uhlenbeck (1927) believed it was originally a possessive prefix, cognate with *bere*, that had fossilized. Holst suggests it could have been a dual prefix, as it is most common with body parts that come in pairs. He also deals with potential counterexamples like *bizkar* «back» (perhaps originally «shoulderblade»?).

In the section about sibilants, he discusses the six sibilants of Basque, and he observes that the apical and the laminal ones almost never occur in the same word (*izotz*, *zuhaitz*, *itsaso*, *sustrai*), suggesting sibilant harmony, and he also quotes some earlier researchers who had described the phenomenon. Holst points out languages in Africa, the Americas, the Caucasus with sibilant harmony, and he contends Basque is the only language in Europe. He mentions a few words where no sibilant harmony is found.

He discusses ergativity, most of it unsurprising. He discusses antipassives in this connection, and gives a correct example from Greenlandic. In an antipassive construction, the object of a transitive sentence is demoted, by putting the object in an oblique case, for instance instrumental, and the subject in the subject case, typically the absolutive as the phenomenon is especially frequent in ergative languages. According to Holst, the phenomenon has not been discussed for Basque, which is not correct. De Rijk (2008, p. 768-769) gives examples like *Beste zerbaitetaz ohartu nintzen*, with an intransitive auxiliary, a transitive verb and an object in the instrumental case. Ortiz de Urbina (1989, p. 203, note 15) is mentioned by De Rijk as the first one to use the term for Basque. The example of something that comes close to an antipassive given by Holst is *ni harria ekartzen ari naiz*. Here, the object is not in the instrumental but in the absolutive case and the sentence is indeed intransitive, but that is because the durative verb *ari* is always intransitive. The object is not demoted, and therefore this is not an antipassive construction. Holst believes it can have originated in an antipassive.

The next topic is highly innovative, and Holst has an interesting suggestion about the history of Basque, but I doubt whether it is correct. In some languages, most famously

in Algonquian languages, a special morpheme, called direct/inverse marker, is used to indicate who is subject and who is object. This morpheme can either indicate a direct, or an inverse, relationship between core arguments, and the choice of the morpheme depends on whether subject and object accord or do not accord with the person hierarchy $2 > 1 > 3$. Thus «I see you» gets an inverse marker *-iti-* and «you see me» gets a direct marker *-i-* in an otherwise identical verb in Cree: *ki-wâpam-i-n* «you see me», *ki-wâpam-iti-n* «I see you». Such markers, of different shapes, are used throughout the transitive paradigms in Algonquian languages. Holst suggests that Basque once had inverse markers, *cfr. ne-n-karr-en* «he carried me» and *ne-Ø-karr-en* «I carried him». The *-n-* element is usually analyzed as a preterit marker, but he points to the remarkable but not complete overlap between Basque past transitives and inverse systems. There are two challenges to his analysis, which he is aware of. The «you-me» form has *-n-* but should not have it, and intransitive preterit verbs also have the *-n-* infix. The affix would have spread through analogy to other parts of the verbal paradigm. He labels the element «ex-inverse-prefix» throughout the book.

It is well known that verbal plural markers like *-z*, *-tza*, *-del-te*, *-rel-ra* are found in verbs, and Holst tries to account for them and their position, suggesting that some changed position with regard to the stem.

The next topic is the verbal prefix *e-* and *i-* as in *e-da-n* and *i-ger-i*. He cannot find a meaning difference, and assumes they are allomorphs, and he believes the original form was *e*. The final topic in chapter 2 is the stem (?) vowel alternation *etxe/etxajabe*, found in many nouns in compounds. The same phenomenon is found in Georgian, Finnish and especially Japanese, but he tends to think this is due to chance.

The chapter about the lexicon deal with kinship terms, words for ‘moon’, ‘month’, ‘sun’ and ‘day’ and other terms for celestial bodies. Furthermore, he discusses ‘give’ and ‘take’, a discussion of compounds (*aurpegi* «face» would be etymologically a compound «mouth-eye»), *ez-* in the names of trees, the diminutive suffix *-ko*, no longer productive but attested in Aquitanian. Further he tries to make sense of the words for «tomorrow» «yesterday» and the like, where he thinks sound symbolism could have played a role. He does not discuss the terms for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, which have been interpreted by a three-day cycle in early Basque society. Also discussed are color terms, and terms for «gold», which are subject to sound symbolism, as well as some terms for stench and demonstratives as well as reduplication.

The second part of the chapter deals with possible loans, and with so-called Wanderwörter, common to many languages but the origin is often unclear. This term from German has also been used for South American indigenous languages in which some animal names are found across the continent. The words Holst discusses are words for «apple», «dog», «silver», «barley» and «liver», with similar forms across Eurasia, and beyond. The fact that some handpicked languages from North America, Africa and East Asia, show similar forms is not very convincing, as least not in the listing of look-alikes for the word *gibel* «liver», but some of the examples are at the least intriguing. Further he investigates connections between Basque and Albanian, an Indo-European

language with a large proportion of non-IE vocabulary, and concludes that this could be a path worth pursuing. He ends with discussion of roots that show chance similarities, like Dutch *elkaar* and Basque *elkar*, both with their own local etymologies.

The final chapter relates both to methodology and to Basque facts. Here Holst argues against early Basque as having had no /m/ in its phoneme inventory, on empirical and theoretical (typological) grounds, and in my view he argues well. The other assumption about Proto-Basque that Holst attacks, is the proposed absence of voiceless plosives. Again, he argues against this on typological grounds, mentioning also the existence of a considerable number of roots with voiceless plosives and he points to the behavior of loans from Latin and even Aquitanian. He pleads for a reconsideration. He also discusses root structures briefly.

For a reconstruction of Basque, one needs to use the comparative method internally (between Basque dialects), the behavior of loans from Latin, internal reconstruction and the comparative method beyond Basque, Holst writes. Here he briefly discusses Iberian and Aquitanian, Basque dialects (*e/a* alternation, front rounded vowels, diphthongs, voiced-voiceless contrasts, *s/rz/rs* alternation). Further he briefly discusses the position of the numerals, following Trask (and others) in the idea that they originally followed the noun. The section on Latin loanwords is of more interest, as the author pleads for the earlier presence of ejectives in pre-Basque, which developed into voiced stops. This is reminiscent of the glottalic theory for Indo-European. Evidence is found among others in Medieval Basque where forms like *caray* /karai/ have cognates in modern Basque as *garai*, as well as in Latin loans showing developments like /pake/ to *bake*. It is an intriguing idea, worth investigating in more detail. Further he discusses internal reconstruction, with no revolutionary insights that would be new for bascologists. Finally, he discusses possible deep genetic connections, which he has pleaded for between Burushaski and Kartvelian/Caucasian, but Holst considers Basque, at least on the basis of our current knowledge, an isolate.

It was interesting to read the book, and in the above I have summarized the contents and highlighted the novel and potentially controversial ideas. There are a number of weak points, however. The author is clearly not someone whose sole occupation in life has been Basque. Twice he mentions Basque utterances by a nameless woman in Pamplona he witnessed, which seems to be his only field experience, and the rest of the information is apparently extracted from published works. Among those, we find as his main sources masterpieces like Mitxelena (1977/1961), Trask (1997), Martínez-Areta (2013), but also more obscure works like Schwerteck (1984) and Kühnel (1999). The literature list in the book contains almost 200 references, some 70 of them about Basque, the others about other languages and general linguistics. What is immediately striking is that many important and relevant studies are not referred, just to mention a few: De Rijk's impressive grammar (2008) and his other works (1998), the Basque dialect atlas (Leizaola 1984), Blevins (2018), a daring and controversial study about Indo-European-Basque connections, and much of the work by Joseba Lakarra, Ricardo Gomez, Joaquín Gorrochategui and many others. Knowledge of relevant studies would have improved the author's insights in the matters under discussion.

It is also strange, that Holst does not refer to Basque etymological dictionaries, like Agud & Tovar (1988-1995) or Trask (2008). He refers (once) to the first part of Löpelmann's etymological dictionary (1968), which was received rather negatively by the scholarly community at the time.

Sometimes Holst mentions properties of language found in a few selected languages, chosen somewhat randomly, perhaps unaware that there may be typological databases that can shed light on such issues as languages without nasal consonants, languages with or without antipassives, numbers of sibilants in languages, etc. Although Holst considers himself a typologist, he did not seem to be aware of valuable overviews of typological properties of languages, such as the *World Atlas of Language Structures* (Dryer & Haspelmath 2013) or Phoible for phonology (Moran & McCoy 2019), which allow more informed statements about frequencies and rarities. Holst informs me that he is well aware of WALS.

In short, this book is no masterpiece, but it certainly contains food for thought and ideas worth spreading.

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