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Variation in the Grammar of Endangered Languages: The Case of Two Basque Dialects

Abstract

Researches addressing variation in language loss suggest that the factors underlining variation in endangered languages differ from the factors that account for variation in healthy languages. The results of this study focused on the patterns of variation across the language use of different speakers of two dying dialects of Basque, also show that differences related with the social status of the speakers do not explain the morpho-syntactic variation found in these dialects. The data indicate that the patterns of variation found in these terminal communities can be better accounted for in terms of differentiation in the degree of language use frequency of the speakers and in the diversity of their acquisitional backgrounds. These results come to confirm King's proposal according to which variation arises in dying languages as a result of a language death process whereby simplified variants gradually replace more complex variants, especially in the speech of semi-speakers (King 1989: 139). Likewise, the analysis of the overgeneralized or new variants used particularly by semi-speakers reveals that linguistic considerations such as scale of morphological complexity of the variant, markedness and semantic and morphological transparency have a relevant importance in order to explain the linguistic nature of this variation.

1. Introduction

One of the most widespread linguistic characteristics of endangered languages is the great amount of linguistic variation that appears within the speech of a single speaker and particularly, across the language use of different speakers of the same speech community. Researches addressing variation in language loss suggest that the factors underlining this variation differ from the factors that account for variation in healthy languages. King (1989) compares the patterns of variation in Newfoundland French with the results of a study of Flikeid (1985) about

variation in the French of Nova Scotia. She concludes that synchronic variation in Newfoundland French does not carry the social meaning one finds in healthier speech communities (King 1989: 146). Also Dorian (ms) defends that what she calls *personal pattern of variation* in the case of Sutherland Gaelic is not related to the social differentiation by age or social group described and analyzed in healthy speech communities (Labov 1972, Trudgill 1974).¹

This study is focused on the patterns of variation across the language use of different speakers of two dying dialects of Basque, the Northwest (NWB) and Southwest Biscayan (SWB) dialects. The results of this research also suggest that variation patterns in the case of these Basque dialects are not age-graded or gender-related and that variation occurs in a population that is socially homogeneous. The data—obtained from the comparison of the answers of different types of speakers to questions of sociolinguistic and linguistic nature—indicate that the patterns of variation found in these terminal communities can be better accounted for in terms of differentiation in the degree of language use frequency of the speakers and in the diversity of their acquisitional backgrounds. Furthermore, interlinguistic and intralinguistic factors seem to have a relevant importance in order to explain the nature of this variation. In this work linguistic considerations such as scale of morphological complexity of the variant, markedness and semantic and morphological transparency are

¹ Dorian suggests that “*personal-pattern of variation* may be a property of relatively isolated speech communities whose members are largely illiterate and whose local language, on account of that isolation and illiteracy, is not susceptible to outside norms” (Dorian (ms): 9). In the case of Northwest and Southwest Biscayan dialects, isolation, and particularly illiteracy can explain the non-susceptibility to an outside norm—the norm of the Standard Basque, for instance. However, these phenomena do not explain the relaxation of inside linguistic norms that regulate linguistic variation. As Dressler explains when talking about massive interference in terminal languages, this relaxation seems to be related to a change in the language attitude of the speakers to the decaying language: “the resultant semi-speakers fail to notice such “corruptions,” while older fluent speakers tend to give up correcting them. This reflects a change in language attitude: the recessive, decaying language is considered worthless and not worthy of being transmitted (for discussion, see Ryan 1979). Such attitudinal change produces a relaxation of social, sociolinguistic, and linguistic norms, and thus permits nonintegration of loans.” (Dressler 1988: 188). This attitudinal change could also explain why the fluent speakers of the analysed Biscayan communities do not correct the new forms used by less fluent speakers of their own community (Elordui 2001).

considered to explain the variants that show overuse of certain pre-existing structures of Basque and the creation of new idiosyncratic variants.

In this paper I will first present a general overview of the sociolinguistic situation of Basque in the northwest and southwest of Biscay. By this, I want to show some terminal characteristics of these speech communities and also the complexity of the communication network in Basque from the introduction of the Standard Basque in the educational setting. Second, the methodology used to group the speakers of our research and to collect the data will be explained. Third, by comparing the use of different types of speakers, the variation observed in the data will be described and several hypotheses will be put forward in order to account for the preference for some variants and the creation of new ones. These hypotheses are motivated by previous theoretical and empirical works on language attrition and loss (Dorian 1978, 1981, 1983; Gal 1978; Seliger and Vago 1991; Schmidt 1985), language contact (Andersen 1983; Bailey 1973; Hymes 1971; Thomason & Kaufman 1988, Silva-Corvalán 1994) and second language acquisition (Burt, Dulay and Krashen 1982; Ellis 1985, 1994; Young 1991). To conclude, a comparison of our results with the outcomes of other studies in grammars in contact exhibits the advantage of studying variation in language loss within a framework that takes into account the results of investigations about variation in pidgins and Creoles and particularly about interlanguage variation. Some studies in this field reveal that developing competence in loss and developing competence in acquisition can be seen as related processes (Sharwood Smith 1989; Turian and Alterberg 1991).

2. The Basque language in the Northwest and Southwest of Biscay

From the end of the dictatorship of Franco (1939–1975) to our days and particularly from the officialization of Basque and the elaboration of the Standard Basque, positive attitudes towards this language and the number of Basque speakers have been constantly increasing. The use of Basque in some spheres of social and cultural life as well as in official institutions and mass media has probably promoted this increase. However, it is indubitable that the most determining factor in the growth of the number of speakers is the introduction in the 70's of Basque into the educational system of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (ACBC). The statistical data published by EUSTAT, the Basque Statistical Office

(www.eustat.es), confirms this reality. The biggest percentage of Basque speakers in the ACBC is school children from 5 to 14 years old.² What is more, the vast majority of young speakers of Basque have acquired the Basque language in the school.

Nevertheless, the establishment of Basque in these formal and educational contexts does not impede the diminution of its familiar use in many linguistic communities where the natural transmission network was interrupted from the second half of the 20th century. That is the case of the communities where the NWB and SWB dialects are spoken. In these communities, Spanish is the main language outside of the home and, even in this last domain, Spanish is replacing Basque. As for Standard Basque, while the amount of people that learn it in these areas is also increasing, it already has a very limited presence in familiar and close social spheres of life.³

This language replacement can be better understood if we take into account some sociolinguistic consequences of the transmission interruption that happened 40–50 years ago, in the time of Franco's dictatorship. The main consequence is a linguistic generation gap attributable to this interruption. The majority of the people of the intermediate generations—people that are now from 40 to 60 years old—could not acquire the Basque language. Moreover, among the few Basque speakers of these generations many grew up in a household where the parents spoke Basque to each other, but not always to the children. Other speakers of this generation acquired Basque with grandparents or other members of the family, outside the nuclear family. In any of these cases the children did not have the degree of constant exposure to Basque to acquire a good command of it.

This linguistic generation gap is still today the principal handicap for the revitalization of language transmission within the family. Nowadays nearly all the descendants of the mentioned generations are acquiring Basque, Standard Basque in most cases, in an educational setting, instead

² In the province of Biscay, for instance, 30'9 % of children from 5 to 10 are considered Basque speakers and 31'2% of them passive bilinguals. However, only 17'5% of children between 5 to 10 and 15'2% of those between 10 to 14 acquired Basque within the family (www.eustat.es)

³ The data on the whole province of Biscay also suggests that the use of Basque by educational bilinguals in familiar and close social settings is very limited. Only around 7'8 % of Basque speakers between 5 to 19 use the Basque language in these spheres of life and around 8'1 of them use Basque and Spanish (www.eustat.es)

of learning the local dialect at home. For this reason, in the Southwest and Northwest of Biscay it is very common to find families constituted by SWB or NWB dialect speaking grandparents, Spanish monolingual parents and Standard Basque speaking grandchildren.

As a consequence of this, in these communities there are two main groups according to the variety of Basque they use. On one hand, there are the speakers of the SWB and NWB dialects that are mainly over sixty years old. These speakers do not always understand the Standard Basque. They are generally illiterate in Basque and have never learned the standard variety. On the other hand, there is the largest group of Basque speakers of these communities, those speakers between the ages of 5 and 20, that learned the Standard Basque from elementary school or in an academy when they were young. These speakers have either a passive knowledge of the local dialect or do not know the dialect at all.

Undoubtedly, the disparity in the speakers' variety and in their acquisitional backgrounds is detrimental to the improvement of language use between the oldest and youngest generations. The study of the communication network among different generations in the northwest and southwest of Biscay reveals that communication in Basque between these generations is very restricted. In particular, communication among grandparents and grandchildren in these communities is quite complex. Many of these young speakers have no vertical communication with the older generations of their own family. They use Basque among people of their same group, with whom they can communicate in Standard Basque and often their use of Basque is restricted to the school. Likewise, the older speakers use the Basque language almost exclusively with acquaintances of their own area and age.

3. Speaker grouping and data collection

To address the question of linguistic variation in such a complex sociolinguistic situation requires an approach that takes into account considerations of sociolinguistic, acquisitional and linguistic nature. For this reason, I have chosen to use a questionnaire that takes all these different possible factors into account.

I used a sociolinguistic questionnaire to obtain data on the sex, education, occupation and age of the speakers. Moreover, questions related to the speaker's active language usage in Basque were taken into account

as an important issue. The speakers, then, were asked about their language use habits in different social and familiar contexts. The questionnaire also considers the speaker's acquisitional backgrounds. The speakers were asked when they acquired Basque and Spanish, with whom, if they used it daily when they were children, with whom and so on⁴.

I asked these questions to 20 Basque speakers of the SWB and NWB dialects in individual interviews and sometimes to a whole group of speakers, members of the same family or neighbourhood. The data was collected in the course of two years of fieldwork in the Southwest of Biscay—from 1992 to 1994—and in the summer of 1998 in the Northwest of this province.⁵

The results of the questions about the sex, age, level of formal schooling in Spanish and Basque, and occupation of the 20 interviewed speakers can be seen in Table 1.⁶

⁴ The results collected among young people are not considered in this work. While comparison between the use of the old and young Basque speakers reveals interesting similarities in their linguistic behaviors, the dialectal differences between the Standard and the dialects make the analysis of the variation patterns extremely complex. For this reason, I prefer to limit the linguistic analysis to the variation patterns found among the speakers of the dialects.

⁵ During the fieldwork I found it difficult to persuade some speakers of these areas that I sincerely wished to study their dialects. They could not understand why I wanted to study a dialect that, from their point of view, is corrupt and also worthless for the future. Two facts convinced the informants of the Northwest Biscayan dialect of my personal interest in the dialect: first, the fact that some members of my own family are speakers of this dialect. Secondly, I have lived in this area for the last ten years, and I have a daily relationship with some members of the community that introduced me to almost all the informants. In the case of the Southwest Biscayan dialects, I also have a close relationship with some members of the community. I lived in Basauri, the largest town of the Southwest of Biscay, for around twenty-five years and I knew some of the informants of the study from that time. I also had the help of Joseba Rementeria, the priest of Ugao, another town of the same area, who put me in touch with the rest of the informants of this dialect. These strong personal links, together with my reasonable command of these dialects, helped me to be accepted by the members of these communities and also, I believe, to better understand the actual sociolinguistic and linguistic situation of these dialects.

⁶ Abbreviations: *Sex*: F= female; M= male; *Level of formal schooling*: A no formal schooling; B incomplete elementary, C elementary D incomplete secondary.; E: secondary; F: high school diploma; G: technical school; *Occupation*: H: housewife, F: farmer; W: factory worker; S seller; O: office worker; SH: shepherd; T: truckdriver

Speaker ID No.	Sex	Age	Level of formal schooling in Spanish	Level of formal schooling in Basque	Occupation
1. ZA4	M	75	C, D	B	S
2. ZA2	F	72	C, D	B	H
3. G1	F	84	A	A	S
4. U1	F	92	A	A	H
5. ZA1	M	87	A	A	SH, W
6. SM2	F	80	A	A	H
7. SM1	F	83	A	A	H
8. ARR2	F	75	A	A	S, H
9. A1	M	89	A	A	W, S
10. U4	M	65	E	A	W
11. SM3	M	79	C	A	O
12. B1	M	70	A	A	W
13. ARR1	M	75	C	A	T
14. U3	F	90	A	A	H
15. B2	F	67	C	B	H
16. U2	M	75	E	A	O
17. ZO1	M	55	F	A	O
18. ZO2	M	80	C	A	F
19. BA1	M	70	A	A	F, W
20. BA2	M	53	G	A	F, W

Table 1. Data about the sex, age, level of formal schooling in Basque, and occupation of the interviewed twenty Basque speakers of the Northwest and Southwest Biscayan dialects.

I believe that the 20 speakers interviewed in this work are quite representative of the whole speaker communities of the SWB and NWB dialects. Regarding the age of the speakers, the youngest speakers of these dialects are almost all in their 50's, like the youngest speakers of our study. Likewise, nearly all the speakers of these dialects have not had formal education in Basque and very few of them studied beyond elementary school in Spanish. As for the occupation of the speakers, men were farmers or shepherds in their youth and became factory workers at the time of the urbanization and industrialization of the biggest towns of the Northwest and Southwest of Biscay. Almost all the women speakers of these dialects have always been farmers and housewives.

By taking into account the answers of the speakers to the questions about their acquisitional histories, we see that the speakers of our study fall into two main groups. Some speakers acquired Basque within the family. They used Basque with their parents and with the rest of their family and

friends (*complete acquisition*). In a second group I include the speakers that declare that, while Basque was their primary language in their early-childhood, they shifted to Spanish as soon as they went to elementary school or in adolescence. After this shift, they used Basque very seldom. Even in their youth, they spoke Basque only with particular members of their family (*incomplete acquisition*).

Besides this classification, the speakers have been categorized into two groups according to the frequency of their language use at present. One group includes the speakers that declare to be habitual users of Basque in their every day life (*habitual users*). In the second group, there are the speakers that speak Spanish in their every day life and use Basque very seldom, only when talking with their older family members on special occasions and in specific situations (*infrequent users*).

Table 2 summarizes the data on all informants in the study from the point of view of their acquisitional history and daily use.

	<i>Complete acquisition</i>	<i>Incomplete acquisition</i>
Habitual user	4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 14, 18, 20	
Infrequent user	1, 2, 3, 9, 19	8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17

Table 2. Speaker classification according to their language use frequency and acquisition history

Considering these parameters we can differentiate between three groups of speakers. Group I contains the speakers that acquired Basque in a familiar setting and now use Basque in their every day life (speaker no. 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 14, 18 and 20). Group II includes speakers that spoke Basque in their childhood and youth but at the present use Basque very seldom (no. 1, 2, 3, 9 and 19). Finally, I include in group III the speakers who spoke Basque in their early-childhood but whose competence never fully develop (no. 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16 and 17). All the speakers of this last group admit to using Basque very infrequently.

As for the linguistic data collection methodology, in order to compare the linguistic behavior of speakers of different groups in clearly similar discourse contexts, I used a set of linguistic questionnaires that include sentences for translation from Spanish designed to include significant features of Basque verb categories and Verb-Object agreement patterns. Also several lists of sentences for evaluation of the different variants obtained in other interviews were given to the speakers.

The sentences for translation and also those for evaluation were read to the informants and the answers were recorded. Furthermore, informal conversations between various members of the speech community were recorded in order to compare the free use of the verb with the forms obtained by translation. Approximately 40 hours of recorded conversations and interviews have been collected and transcribed.

4. Linguistic variation patterns

After comparing the structures used by speakers of different groups, one can observe ample similarities in the preferences of the speakers of groups II and III. The variants preferred by these speakers sometimes involve overgeneralization of pre-existing structures of Basque. At times, these speakers use new variants that are generated taking as the basis the unmarked or basic forms of the same verbal category. In both cases, the preferred variants imply reduction of the morphological complexity of the Basque verb.

In this section, I will introduce some examples representative of these two main tendencies. First, I include Table 3 that illustrates the frequency of use of these overgeneralized and new variants by all the speakers of the study.⁷

⁷ Abbreviations: A: the speaker always uses this variant in the collected examples; M: the speaker uses this variant in most of the collected examples; S: the speaker uses this variant in some of the collected examples; N: the speaker never uses this variant in the collected examples.

Speaker ID No.	<i>Overgeneralization of AI+ IND structures</i>	<i>Overgeneralization of periphrastic structures</i>	<i>Overgeneralization of uninflected forms</i>	<i>Elaboration of new subjunctive structures</i>
1. ZA4	N	S	S	N
2. ZA2	M	S	M	S
3. G1	N	S	S	S
4. U1	N	N	N	S
5. ZA1	N	N	S	N
6. SM2	N	N	S	N
7. SM1	N	N	S	S
8. ARR2	M	M	M	M
9. A1	S	M	S	S
10. U4	M	M	M	M
11. SM3	N	N	S	N
12. B1	M	M	A	M
13. ARR1	M	M	M	M
14. U3	N	S	S	N
15. B2	M	M	M	A
16. U2	A	M	A	A
17. ZO1	A	M	M	M
18. ZO2	N	S	S	N
19. BA1	N	M	S	S
20. BA2	N	N	S	N

Table 3. Frequency of use of these overgeneralized and new variants by all the speakers of the study

4.1 Overgeneralization of existing structures

In the use of the Basque verb morphology by the speakers of groups II and III there are many cases that show overgeneralization of some pre-existing structures of Basque. In this paper, I will concentrate on three of them. First, an example of overgeneralization of structures containing free morphemes in detriment of those that maintain bound morphology will be considered (see 4.1.1.). Second, I will deal with a case that illustrates the preference of the speakers of group II and III for the use of analytical structures instead of synthetic ones (4.1.2.). Third, as instance of the preference of these speakers for structures that imply loss of morpho-syntactic differences, I will explain a case that involves loss of person agreement (4.1.3).

4.1.1. The first example concerns the potential mood system of the Southwest and Northwest Biscayan dialects. In the traditional mood system

of the Biscayan dialect, the potential mood can be expressed in two different ways.⁸ In the first way, in the Biscayan dialect, the potential mood uses the auxiliaries **edin* for unaccusative verbs and *egin* for transitive and unergative verbs. The indicative mood uses *izan* and **edun* auxiliaries in the cases mentioned above. Likewise, these potential forms are distinguished from the indicative and subjunctive by adding the morpheme *-ke* to the verb inflection. On the other hand, the potential mood can also be expressed by using the periphrastic constructions formed by the free morpheme *al* ‘can’ + the indicative auxiliaries *izan* and **edun*.

Speakers of group I sometimes use the construction with *al*, especially in the past tense, but generally maintain the conjugated constructions with **edin* and *egin* in the present tense forms. Speakers of groups II and III, however, use the potential periphrastic constructions containing the free morpheme in almost all the cases. The example in 1a) illustrates the construction used by speaker no. 4 of the group I and the example in 1b) shows the common use of speaker no. 17 from group III.

- (1) a. *Bera-k maiye biarko egin l-ei-ke-ø ...*
 He-ERG table for tomorrow do mood/3ABS-*egin*-mood-3ERG
 b. *Bera-k biarko al d-au-ø egin maiye ...*
 He-erg for tomorrow can 3ABS/present-**edun*-3ERG do table
 ‘He can make the table for tomorrow’

The examples are the answers to the same sentence for translation *el puede hacer la mesa para mañana* ‘He can make the table for tomorrow’. In the example in (1a), we can observe that speaker no. 4 uses the traditional potential form containing the auxiliary *egin* and the potential morpheme *-ke*. However, speaker no.17 always makes use of the structure involving less morphological complexity, that is, the potential construction that contains the free morpheme and does not involve auxiliary suppletion.

4.1.2. The aspect system of Basque distinguishes between progressive aspect and non-progressive or perfective aspect in the past tense. The

⁸ I compare the actual use of the verb system with the system that, according to Azkue (1926) and Zabala (1848), was used in the Biscayan dialect at the end of the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth century. I call this last system “traditional verb system” to distinguish it from the actual use. For this comparison, I also take into account the descriptions about the verb inflection explained in several studies about Basque in general (Gómez 1994, Gómez and Sainz 1995, Laffite 1944, Lafon 1943, Laka 1993, Ortiz de Urbina 1989, Oyharçabal 1992, Trask 1977, 1995).

progressive aspect of a set of verbs (for example the verb *ibili* 'to walk' from the example in 2) uses a synthetic structure containing person agreement, tense and mood and lexical information (the root *bil* in the example) (see Gómez 1994, Gómez & Sainz 1995 and Laka 1993 for more explanations about synthetic and periphrastic constructions in Basque verb). The perfective aspect of all the verbs is expressed by a periphrastic construction that has the lexical verb (*ibili* in the example) and the aspect marker and an auxiliary containing person agreement, tense and mood markers.

Speakers of groups II and III many times use the periphrastic forms that traditionally express perfective aspect instead of the synthetic ones in cases where forms of progressive aspect should be used. The example in (2) represents the use of speaker no. 16 from group III.

- (2) *ni ibili n-in-tz-en* (*n-en-bi-len*) *Pedro topatu ordun*
 I *walk* 1ABS-past-be-past (1ABS-past- *walk*-past) when I met Pedro
 'I was walking when I met Pedro'

In this case, the periphrastic perfective structure *ibili nintzen* 'I walked' or 'I had walked' is preferred over the traditional synthetic one (between brackets in the example *nebilen* 'I was walking'). This preference for the semantically closest periphrastic form is not unknown in the language uses of speakers from group I; they also use them with less common synthetic verbs (*eroan* 'to bring' and *ekarri* 'to carry'). However, they maintain the synthetic forms to express progressive aspect in the past with the verbs most commonly used (*egon* 'to be/stay', *joan* 'to go', *ibili* 'to walk', *jakin* 'to know', *eduki* 'to have').

4.1.3. The third case of overgeneralization of structures involves a loss of morpho-syntactic differences that are often compensated by obligatory free morphemes. The best examples of this tendency are found in the Verb-Object agreement system of these dialects. The variants used by speakers from group I also show loss of object agreement in the most complex agreement patterns, but they maintain the traditional patterns in the most frequently used forms. However, the speakers from group II and particularly those speakers from group III avoid object agreement in nearly all cases. They almost exclusively use basic agreement patterns that only contain agreement with the subject. As an instance of this preference we can see the example in (3) of speaker no. 2 from group II.

- (3) *atzo gu-ABS ikusi al ba-z-en-du-n ...!* (*ba-g-in-tu-zu-n*)
 yesterday we-ABS see can COM-2ERG-past-root-past (COM-1pABS-past-root-
 2ERG-past)
 'If you could have seen us yesterday...!'

In this example, instead of the form *bagintuzun* (between brackets in the example) that contains agreement with first person plural DO (*gu* 'we + ABS), a form containing only subject agreement with the ergative subject (*z-* 2ERG) is used. By doing this, the verb agreement with first person DO is lost. In this example, the DO is expressed by the free pronoun *gu* 'we' in the sentence. However, it is not always like this. Often the agreement is lost and there is no form in the syntactic structure that compensates for it.

4.2 Elaboration of new variants

As stated above, besides the overgeneralization of pre-existing Basque structures, in the analysis of the variants I have also found elaboration of new variants. This tendency can be observed particularly in the tense and mood systems of these dialects. Examples of new past forms that have been generated taking as the basis the present forms and adding to them the past morpheme (*-n*) are quite common (Elordui 1995; Landa & Elordui 1999). The example chosen to illustrate these cases of elaboration in this paper concerns the subjunctive mood.

Verb mood system in Basque distinguishes indicative and subjunctive first, by auxiliary suppletion: the subjunctive mood uses **edin* auxiliary for unaccusative verbs and *egin* for transitive and unergative verbs whereas the indicative mood uses *izan* and **edun* auxiliaries in the cases mentioned above. Second, the subjunctive, unlike the indicative and potential, takes the complementizers *-n* or *-la* and adds them to the inflected verb.

In the variants generally used by the speakers from group II and almost always by the speakers from group III the process of auxiliary suppletion has disappeared. The addition of the complementizers *-n* or *-la* is maintained but they are added to the corresponding indicative auxiliaries instead of added to the subjunctive auxiliaries.

- (4) *esan eusten aitek ez n-i-n-tz-e-la* (*n-i-n-te-la*) *joan solora*
 (my) father told me not1ABS-past-past-*izan*-COM (1ABS-past-past-**edin*-
 COM) go to the garden
 'My father told me not to go to the garden'

The example of speaker no. 9 from group II in (4) illustrates the loss of auxiliary suppletion. In this example the form *nintzen* of the auxiliary *izan* is used instead of the forms containing the auxiliary **edin* (between brackets in the example *nintean*) and the complementizer *-la* is added to this indicative auxiliary (*nintzen + la*).

5. Explaining the preferential use of some variants

The analysis of the variants preferred by speakers of groups II and III gives us interesting information about the features of the language that survive the incomplete acquisitional histories of the speakers of group III and the functionally restricted performances of the speakers of group II.

The cases of overgeneralization of the variants constituted by the free morpheme *al* 'can' + the indicative auxiliaries and of the variants that contain the most basic agreement patterns (see 4.1.1 and 4.1.3) illustrate how grammaticalised distinctions marked by bound morphology are disfavored in situations of linguistic stress. This is probably because of its higher processing complexity as Dressler proposed in 1981 for other cases of language loss.

The cases of overgeneralization of analytic forms show an example of a more general tendency to select variants with a minimum of morphological or syntactic opacity (Giacalone Ramat 1983: 504). For example, the periphrastic constructions that express past perfective contain in their first part the basic lexical item of the verb without inflection. This fact makes them more transparent and cognitively less complex than synthetic structures that contain the lexical root, the tense, mood and person markers in one single form. Likewise, the fact that with periphrastic constructions the same auxiliaries are used for all verbs appears to lighten the cognitive load of having to remember all the complex synthetic paradigms (as proposed by Silva Corvalán 1994 to explain simplification and loss processes in the Spanish of Los Angeles).⁹

⁹ The substitution of the synthetic forms by periphrastic ones is not unknown in the history of Basque (Lafon 1943) and it is a common change in healthy languages. However, the fact that this phenomenon is much more extended among the use of the speakers in groups II and III shows a generalization of the simplest variant that correlates with a more general tendency in the use of these speakers to select variants with a minimum of morphological or syntactic opacity. Also the non-existence in the

As for the cases explained as elaboration, they are also associated to reduction of morphological complexity. The new structures are elaborated by using more basic, unmarked forms and generating in them the more complex forms. Basic forms, such as present and indicative forms, are better maintained and have become the basis to generate new paradigms (Elordui, 1995, 1999, 2001). Also more common and unmarked morphological structures (in the sense of Dressler 1985 and Wurzel 1989), such as the ones symbolized by addition are better maintained. An example of this is the addition of the complementizers *-n* or *-la* to express the subjunctive. However, marked morphological structures (for instance, auxiliary suppletion in the mood system) are lost first.

This deeper analysis of all these linguistic phenomena exhibits the similarity between the explained preferences and the preferences of speakers that also live in a sociolinguistic context where irregularity in the acquisitional histories of the speakers and functionally restricted performances are common. For instance, the recourse to free morphemes to express modal and agreement relations is one of the most clear features of the formation of pidgin and Creole languages where adverbials are often used in place of the bound morphology of the source language (Andersen 1982: 102). Also these variants preferred by the speakers of groups II and III seem to be governed by universal markedness principles. These speakers favor cognitively and formally simple constructions, preferences proposed also for other language types such as pidgins (Mühlhäusler 1986, Muysken 1981; Thomason & Kaufman 1988) and child language (Bybee & Pardo 1981, Bybee & Slobin 1982).

Likewise, in a study of L2 learners of Basque (Elordui 2002) we find similar patterns of morphological reduction. For instance, the overgeneralization of the use of potential forms constituted by the free morpheme and the loss of person agreement in the verb are common tendencies among second language learners of Basque. This confirms the

analyzed data of replacement of analytic constructions by synthetic ones supports this conclusion. As Dressler (1988) points out “. . . the replacement of synthetic by analytic constructions occur in “normal” language change, as well as the reverse process (consider the development of the future ‘I’ll sing’ from Latin to French: *canta+b+o>(ego) cantare habeo> je chanter +ai>je vais chanter*). But interestingly the replacement of analytic by synthetic constructions has never been observed in language decay” (Dressler 1988: 187-188).

proposals of Turian & Alterberg (1991). These authors, after comparing the linguistic strategies used in child first language loss and in child and adult language acquisition, conclude that the same compensatory strategies are used in first language attrition and in second language acquisition (1991: 217).

6. Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that variation in dying languages differs very sharply in its particulars from the sort of linguistic variation found in healthy languages. An analysis comparing the frequency of the explained variants in speakers' use, in Table 3, with the data about the speaker's sex, education and occupation, in Table 1, shows that differences related with the social status of the speakers do not account for the morpho-syntactic variation found in these dialects. Also the evaluations of the speakers to the variants presented in the questionnaire confirm this reality. When speakers of the analyzed Basque communities are asked about the different morpho-syntactic variants in the questionnaire, they never made social judgements in connection with them. In their evaluations, they usually refer to dialectal differences or simply accept most of the variants as other ways of saying the same thing, even in the cases where they admit to not using them.

Probably, as Dorian (1982: 32) points out when talking about the same phenomenon in the case of Sutherland Gaelic, the principal reason for the absence of social evaluation must be the fact that the speaker communities of the Northwest and Southwest Biscayan dialects constituted until very recently a uniform social group. Nearly all present-day speakers of these dialects grew up as farmers and all are people with a minimum of formal education. They share a similar status in the local social hierarchy.

As for the age of the speakers, it is an important factor that can help us to explain the patterns of variation but only in the sense that it is related with the acquisitional histories of the speakers and also with the frequency of their use of Basque. Table 2 illustrates that the youngest speakers of our analysis (those that are in their 50's) are the speakers that use the language less frequently and also the ones that more commonly have an incomplete acquisitional history.

The comparative analysis indicates, then, that the patterns of variation found in these terminal communities can be better accounted for in terms of differences in the degree of language use frequency of the speakers and

in the diversity of their acquisitional backgrounds. All the speakers of the study make use of the explained overgeneralized or new variants, to a greater or lesser degree. The difference lies in the frequency of use of these forms. While the speakers of group I use the simplified variants very seldom, the speakers of groups II and III make use of these forms more frequently than the other forms. This fact comes to confirm King's proposal according to which variation arises in dying languages as a result of a language death process whereby simplified variants gradually replace more complex variants, especially in the speech of semi-speakers (King 1989: 139).

In addition, the fact that similar simplified structures are found in other contexts with irregularity in the acquisitional histories of the speakers and functionally restricted performances corroborates the relevance of these sociolinguistic phenomena in the explanation of the patterns of variation. This similarity also reveals that the study of variation in language death within a framework that takes into account other phenomena of acquisition (Andersen, 1982: 86) can provide vital insights into the interrelation between developing competence in loss and developing competence in acquisition (as Sharwood Smith 1989: 188 points out).

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