Is Basque an Indo-European language?
Possibilities and limits of the comparative method when applied to isolates

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It is widely held that Basque is a linguistic isolate. Its history is largely a mystery beyond its immediate roots in Aquitania, and it has always been a matter of dispute whether it once (perhaps meaning for thousands of years) spread all over northern Spain or even, as Th. Vennemann boldly claims, all over Europe, and if this happened as a consequence of vast repopulation after the ice age or much later and encompassing a small territory only.

The rather more abstract question concerning us here, however, is not where speakers of Basque come from or when they first met with speakers of Indo-European languages, but whether the language itself can be classified as Indo-European, as G. Forni claims after repeated attempts to connect Basque with other language groups have foundered on the rocks. F. seems quite optimistic about his results, predicting that further research will refine them with explanations about adstrate, substrate, the incredibly fast rate of phonetic change, etc. F. has additionally some advice to give, e.g. to “keep things simple, to foster mutual comprehension between Indo-Europeanists and Vasconists” (p. 101), which simply will not do in my experience. Since L. Michelena and some disciples of his are both things, one wonders at their failure in understanding themselves, something F. shows one can achieve with half a dozen handbooks. This requires a lot of self-confidence if one thinks of the discrepancies in establishing the history of much better known languages.

Since the comparative method is an algebraic device, it is usually comparatively easy for the trained mind to
dovetail a number of changes that would account for the differences among the compared items. Still, appearances are often deceitful. The more the rules required to account for increasing amounts of evidence, the more difficult it gets to check the validity of the whole construct, and as we will see a number of considerations show the whole logical procedure may be vitiated at some crucial points. F. points out that “most of the proposed sound laws should be uncontroversial, since they are based on common phonological phenomena” (ib.). This has to be true, since his laws mostly consist of simplifications and loss of segments. But it also subtly implies that what is possible is true, which is quite another thing.

Some of the objections raised here have to do with the material itself and its closest reliable relatives: Since F. rightly reminds us that Basque is held to be related to Aquitanian, and since Aquitanian is attested comparatively early, it is not understandable that the material is hardly ever quoted and especially that the seminal work by J. Gorrochategui on it is completely ignored. For instance, the relationship of Basque beltz “black” with PIE *swer- is compromised by its likely connection with the Aquitanian name BELEX, but the formal implications of this possibility are never discussed. Ancient Basque personal names preserved epigraphically and discussion on place names as transmitted by the classical literary sources are completely missing, too, although they attest to a stage older by around two millennia than present day Basque. One can hardly carry out this kind of work without at least mentioning the possibility, however discredited, that Iberian is related to Basque. One may say this is complicating things unnecessarily and ultimately pointless because virtually no Iberian inscription has been translated so far, but as we are going to see, the logic behind F.’s theory is largely rooted on spatial relations.

According to F., “rather than working directly from PIE one can employ Proto-Celtic reconstructions and Celtic comparanda. Why Celtic? Simply because the Basque-speaking area is a distinct white spot in a large, compact area that used to be dominated by Celtic languages”. This petitio principii can only mean, as far as reconstruction is concerned, that Basque is either closely related to Celtic
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(which makes it impossible to understand why it fails to look even IE at first sight), or an independent IE dialect, sharing a number of common structural traits with Celtic or some branch thereof as a result of long-term neighborhood or domination. This crucial difference is in my view never thoroughly discussed, however, as if his chosen comparisons and their nature were self-evident. The reader is both uneasy and mystified to see reconstructions constantly “confirmed” by allegedly Proto-Celtic forms without quite getting at the nature of the relationship, which in some cases changes in the course of the reading from inheritance to loan, and then characteristically without specifying how and where they were borrowed, but occasionally from Celtic dialects Basque has never been known to be in touch with: Tracing back forms such as bellaun “knee” from *kENN-NO-GRÚNOS entails the acceptance of inner-Brittonic innovations. If true genetic comparison applies here, this would mean Basque would be more or less an Insular Celtic language, though F. finally concedes it may be a loanword from Brittonic (one wonders how and when they were in contact, however).

And yet, his claim that we had better look at the backyard for cognates instead of China and the Caucasus only applies if one takes into account all the languages in the area. Since we are in the dark about the precise area, that includes at least an evaluation of European river names of dubious Celtic ancestry, too. Celtiberian (in fact, the actual historical backyard) is paradoxically wholly ignored, and in doing this he simply ignores a vast number of Spanish references of the last twenty years on Hispanic material, showing that a large number of appellatives and onomastic items are simply not amenable to a Celtic explanation and find a number of Italic comparanda, which may have different explanations but must be taken into account when the verisimilitude of one’s reconstructions explicitly rests on areal contact. For instance, when explaining Basque seni “son” from IE *S̥UNU-, he finds no Celtic support, which means he does not know the probably Western Hispano-Celtic name SVNVA.

On the other hand, one cannot start such work as if the language had been extracted from the sands of the
desert just yesterday. This kind of out-of-the-hat solution never works because as with the rest of the scientific world, comparative linguistics proceeds by adding bricks to previous knowledge or challenging current views, not by working miracles. In spite of this, F. avoids discussion of former theories on the nature and structure of the Basque root, for instance that by J. Lakarra. Finally, after one is informed about what reconstruction of pre-Basque F. is using (or correcting), that of L. Michelena and R. L. Trask, one is often at a loss as to whether some changes are widely acknowledged or just F.’s hypotheses, and his leap from pre-Basque to earlier proto-Basque (the terminology is somewhat misleading) raises some questions, since it seemingly rests uniquely on his own chosen comparanda. Note that here characteristic alternations within words and across lexical fields typically underpinning internal reconstruction in lack of external evidence are missing, so that an utterance like “intervocalic –s- is lost in Greek as shown not only by comparison but because of γένος vs. γένεα” does not apply, as shown by (Trask’s) Pre-Basque forms being often nearly identical to the attested ones.

The bibliography used for PIE reconstruction is short and somewhat ‘Leiden biased’; it includes hardly any short monographs and relies heavily on the summarized results in English dictionaries. But such second-hand approaches, useful as they are, must be handled with care, since they not only do not represent the state of the art as faithfully as they claim, but their contents are never encompassing enough. On the other hand, the reader is led to believe the invoked PIE reconstructions are to be found as such in the quoted works, which is often inexact. Matasović’s dictionary can hardly be the ultimate authority on Proto-Celtic, since following the usual practice he takes it to be Insular Celtic writ large, which has been in turn now and then suspected of deep substrate influence and even extreme structural makeover. This opens the way to all sorts of misconceptions: for example, when tracing Celtic *enātro- back to *H₁en-H₁eH₁-tor- to account for Basque ezur/azur “bone”, he has drawn the information from Matasović’s EDPC, where in fact phonetically possible *H₁en-H₁oH₁-tro- is posited as the ancestor of Old Irish
inathar “entrails”. However, any PIE preform is hardly anything else than a transposition reuniting the different parts of a compound at a fictitious primitive level where they existed separately if at all, which immediately suggests that, if there is a primitive relation, one would have to posit a sort of Pre-Proto-Celto-Basque system to account for the compound. Far-reaching correspondences, like “-\(r\) - > -ra- is shared with Celtic” are completely wrong.

To tackle such a thorny business on the grounds of previous reconstructions one has to be very sure that these reconstructions are common knowledge and currently agreed upon. Unfortunately this is hardly possible, witness the disagreement in the basics of the PIE vowel system and the stop system. One can make guesses about the relationship of two well known phonemic systems, not of two particular individual reconstructions of two phonemic proto-systems. Additionally, in doing this one is bound to stick to one particular reconstruction, not quote from different places that simply have quite different standpoints; for instance, reconstruction of four laryngeals /H_{1-4}/ instead of the usual three without explanation (apart, perhaps, from circumventing some problems posed by Anatolian, which is beside the point here), and then /H_a/, and moreover a PIE /a/ as in *wad\(b\)- instead of the usual laryngeal, only leads the reader to perplexity.

F. sometimes propounds unaccounted for phonetic changes, designed to conform to “good IE” etymologies: When the sequence -e\(H_2\)- or \(H_2e\)- is involved we seem to get a variety of results: /a/, /i/, /e/ (e.g. ibai vs. antzin from *\(H_2e\)-). According to him, \(i\)- is due to pretonic position, but the two examples above contain the same suffix, so the different results beg the question. Sometimes the accent of presumed cognates is invoked, but often it is a mystery why syllables are accented or not (presumably so as to suit the proposed etymology). The same goes for the preposition *\(H_2ed\)- yielding \(i\)- or \(a\)- according to F.’s criterium. He resorts to exceptions when needed, witness sw\(V\)- > b\(V\)- (except *sworo- > sorwi > zorri). The very idea that word initial voiced aspirates collapse into a single \(h\) and then disappear is questionable and has no parallels, besides departing from phonemes whose exact
articulatory nature is still very much debated. As far as Celtic is concerned, one would expect their behavior to team up with that of voiced phonemes. Some laws are contradictory: why does *dwenos yield on with loss of “regular” b-? or why is –p- in zazpi “seven” preserved?. Most laws have a single example to support them and are not always well motivated, like –l> lu or –r> -er > -el. Relative chronology is sometimes difficult to follow: Why is su “fire” from Proto-Basque *aitsú > Pre-Basque (*aisú > *esú >) *su and then itsu “blind” from proto-Basque *etsú > Pre-Basque itsú? F. says the sibilant in the first case has undergone palatalization, which should have equally happened in the second, as well as ‘regular’ loss of pretonic e, which he consistently locates after proto-Basque, if we agree that differences in former steps (resp. *aitsús and *entsú) cannot be relevant any longer.

F. makes incorrect assumptions as to the nature of PIE morphonology, so that he freely posits the grades he needs for his own reconstructions: A participle *yoH1-to-“thrown” is an invention, and it is remarkable that so many verbs are traced back to (even dubious) past participles, which would be enough to make anybody suspect the sequence –tz- in Basque verbs is not really related to IE –to-. There is no *dweH1(u) “two” possibly yielding *bew-a. IE *weH2k-to- probably does not exist as such, it is a deduction from what EDCP speculates about the Celtic form *waxto-“bad”. If F. were familiar with IE phonotactics, he would know why it is unlikely that *gH-eto- forms the base of neska. Segmentations and presumed meanings are not convincing because they have been gleaned from dictionaries without really understanding what lies behind: IE *dew-wos does not mean “day” and the segmentation is wrong; IE *makre-los does not exist and *mHkros means “long”, not “thin”, all of which F. is randomly projecting back from Latin. One does not understand why his *Haeus-“ear” does not yield *aus- like everywhere else, but eus-. The same applies to the unjustified evolution *H2ew- > eu-“away” and *gweH3u- > beu-“cow”. That a PIE root *bend-exists cannot be taken for granted, since it violates the combinatorial rule forbidding two voiced stops. It is in fact Celtic and Germanic, which poses some questions, but F.,
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relying on EDCP, omits a sizable number of WHC. composite place names in –bendă. PIE *steH₂ng-ro- is an unattested and difficult form designed to explain the –n- in Basque zingira “lake”. In order to explain Basque hamar “ten” from PIE, he has to posit a Proto-Basque compound meaning “ten fingers”, which makes hardly any sense. IE *mgêhu-o-lo- “short” accounting for Basque labur does not exist, nor does *mud-so-ko-, which is again his own projection from a clearly secondary OIr. mosach “dirty”. Deriving the pervasive verbal prefix e- from the PIE pronoun *H₁e- is much too optimistic, since it is poorly attested in post-Anatolian IE except when embedded in the paradigm of other anaphoric pronouns. An augment would similarly posit comparative problems.

Some reconstructions are slyly biased to comply with the required vocalism in spite of vast counterevidence: Thus, PIE *tiH “you” is unwarranted. There is no demonstrative PIE pronoun *se-. PIE *swi- “own” does not exist. At some places there is crass overvaluation of monoglottic innovations: Sudur “nose” from *H₁ens-H₃od-o-ro-s “having smell inside” is not only irregular, but requires a prefix that matches Greek directional *ens. Bizi “alive” from alleged *gʷiHwo-to- is supported only by Greek Βίοτος).

According to the usually accepted methodology, uncovering sound laws is a task usually resting on a good number of prima facie formal matches; and once established, they have to apply everywhere, not on some dozens of items, unless interfering laws, borrowing or any kind of reason for abnormal evolution can be brought to bear. One obtains the impression that F. starts from semantics and finds a suitable origin for the word in point, which always complies because half the root has been swept away by the combined action of blind phonetic loss and accent rules acting on words accented as one pleases, which has the air of hidden mass comparison. A suffix or enlargement is then chosen so as to match the result to one’s satisfaction. In fact, in spite of his defence of his method because he finds “identical meanings”, it is astonishing that the meanings often, if not always, meet the requirements so fully. F.’s reconstruction is intentional
and usually finds a way of meeting its goal by crafty manipulation of phonetics and especially word formation. Since he departs from the basic assumption that many sounds were forbidden in absolute initial position in (Pre-)Basque, this opens the way to more or less any etymology: you only have to posit a PIE word, always beginning with a consonant, and claim it has been lost (if unaccented, the whole syllable is finally lost), which demonstrates it was PIE after all. This bears fruit because it is designed never to fail to do so. But even if loss of most consonants in Anlaut is accepted, and then any etymological hypothesis is in principle possible, this proportionally precludes safe deductions the higher the number of items that have merged or been lost. Summing up, I think there is a long way to go before Indoeuropeanists and Vasconists can take Forni’s generous offer to live in harmony.

References

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