

# Becoming an active Basque speaker during the Bilbao festival week

Hanna Lantto  
University of Eastern Finland  
hanna.lantto@uef.fi

## Abstract

This paper presents the first results of an ethnographic study conducted in the festivities of Bilbao, Aste Nagusia, in the summer 2017. Several new speakers of Basque were observed and interviewed to examine how their experiences in a grass root organization that focuses on the promotion of the Basque language can lead to a *muda* (Pujolar and Puigdevall 2015), a performative change in linguistic habits. The student experiences are diverse, as are their stances towards the Basque language. The relationships and the linguistic patterns established in the organization can be limited to the physical space of the festive building, *txosna*, or they can become highly consequential in the lives of the new Basque speakers. Aste Nagusia is organized every year, which provides the participants with the opportunity to come back and re-establish the relationships and language patterns that could otherwise dissolve in the course of life.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** new speakers, Basque, linguistic *mudes*, bilingual practices

## 1. Introduction

Aste Nagusia, 'the Great Week' in Basque, is a nine-day, nine-night festival organized in the city of Bilbao, the Basque Autonomous Community. Originally a Catholic holiday, Aste Nagusia is organized for the festivity of the Assumption of Our Lady, and it is celebrated during the third week of August. During this one long week, the party atmosphere extends over the whole city, and the Bilbao populace and visitors can participate in diverse cultural activities such as concerts, dance shows, poetry slams, street theatre and street picnics, mostly for free. An integral part of the festivities are grass root organizations called *konpartsak* in Basque, (*comparsas* in Spanish) that, according to their own description, "hacen y viven la fiesta en Bilbao", make and live the party in the city. The *konpartsas* represent different districts of Bilbao, and many of them have a socio-political agenda.

This paper explores the concept of a linguistic *muda* within the context of Aste Nagusia, and examines how the linguistic choices of four current and former students of Basque are linked to the activities of one specific *konpartsa*, Algara, during the festival week. *Muda*, pl. *mudes* (Pujolar & Puigdevall 2015) is "a linguistically-bound performative change", which are often connected to important life junctures, such as starting the studies in the university, entering the work life, or starting a new family. The *mudes* have been studied within the new speaker framework, a recent field of study that focuses on non-native speakers of minority languages in revitalization contexts (O'Rourke et al. 2015). New speakers of Basque, *euskaldun berriak*, are individuals who have not learned the language in their primary socialization, but acquired it in classroom contexts. New speakers often struggle with issues of legitimacy, and they face special challenges to use the language they have acquired. Their language practices are often found lacking and "half-empty" when measured against the target set by the traditional, native speakers (O'Murdacha et al. 2017).

The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the activities of Algara during the 2017 celebrations of Aste Nagusia. I observed and documented the activities starting from the preparations for Aste Nagusia, such as paintings and planning the leaflets, to the closing ceremony and taking down of the *txosna*, the festival building. The events are documented in field notes, semi-structured interviews with the core informants, and in recordings of naturally

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<sup>1</sup> Los resultados presentados en esta contribución son parte del proyecto de investigación "El neohablante como sujeto social: el proceso de conversión lingüística en Galicia, Euskadi, Aragón y País Valenciano" (ref. FFI2016-76869-P), cofinanciado por la Agencia Estatal de Investigación (AEI) del Ministerio de Economía, Industria y Competitividad y por el Fondo Europeo de Desarrollo Regional (FEDER, UE).

occurring conversations in the car, at the work site, and at lunches and dinners in the txosna. The Whatsapp group of Algara provided information about the inner workings of the group and the whereabouts and activities of the members during the celebrations.

In the following section 2, I will describe how the current sociolinguistic situation and the linguistic power relations in the Basque Country are reflected in the celebrations of Aste Nagusia and describe the methods that Algara employs to integrate Basque students into their activities. Section 3 collects the experiences of four current and former Basque students during the party week. The implications of these experiences are discussed in section 4.

## **2. Aste Nagusia and Algara in the Basque sociolinguistic context**

The sociolinguistic situation in the Basque Country has changed dramatically in the last thirty-five to forty years. Whereas in 1981 only 6,4% of the population in Bilbao were estimated to speak Basque, the percentage thirty years later was up to 22,1%. (Basque Government 2011). This type of statistics have made the Basque Country a point of reference for successful language revitalization and a model for many other minority language communities. The shareholders in the Basque revitalization have understood that boosting intergenerational transmission of Basque is not enough for the minority language renaissance, and non-native speakers need to be part of the equation. However, the statistics of theoretical language competence do not automatically turn into language use. In the kale neurketa of 2016, a street survey of observed language use conducted in the Basque Country since 1989 (Altuna and Urla 2013), showed that the use of Basque has stagnated or even slightly decreased despite the constant rise in the language competence (Soziolinguistika klusterra 2017). Especially the young people who have Spanish as their home language but who have been educated in Basque-medium models, seem not to use Basque outside of the classroom. (Martínez de Luna and Suberbiola 2008). In the city of Bilbao, where one in four speaks Basque and 75% of the Basque-Spanish bilinguals are new speakers of Basque, Spanish is the default language choice in most circumstances. The Basque speakers in Bilbao live scattered among the monolingual Spanish-speaking majority, and Spanish is seen as the modern and unmarked language that belongs to everyone, particularly in informal contexts.

Aste Nagusia seems to change the linguistic power relations in the city, and not only because people from the surrounding Basque-speaking town and villages come to visit. The linguistic landscape in the main festival area is overwhelmingly Basque. Even though now mainstreamed by institutional support and educational policies, the use of the minority language is still a clearly leftist stance. In the atmosphere of the txosnas and konpartsas, the support and use of the minority language merges with other themes of social justice, such as welcoming refugees and opposing war, homophobia, and sexual harassment. For Algara and a few other konpartsas, the promotion of Basque language and culture is their main socio-political cause. Algara also has an explicit mission of integrating language learners into their activities and introducing them to the Basque-language culture.

The konpartsa Algara, meaning ‘laughter, cackle’ in Basque is one of the branches of the cooperative Zenbat Gara, which hosts various services promoting Basque language and culture in the city of Bilbao. Another important branch of Zenbat Gara is Gabriel Aresti euskaltegia, a Basque language school for adults. Most of the core members of the konpartsa are teachers of the language school and other employees of Algara. Even though the konpartsa organizes program throughout the year, Aste Nagusia is the main event, and the students of the euskaltegi are invited to participate in the activities. There are various ways to participate: the students can help in the preparations for Aste Nagusia, such as painting and building the txosna. They can

go to the organized activities such as talks and concerts or do a txanda, a work shift in the txosna during the Great Week.

In the most concrete manner, Algara's aim of integrating the students into the Basque language and Basque culture starting from the day one could be seen on Monday, 21 of August. On Ikasle Eguna, the students of the euskaltegi were the honorary guests of Algara, and they participated in a range of activities organized just for them. The following excerpt is from my field diary.

21.8. This group is at A1-level. They are cooking a vegetarian paella. A group of three is chatting with plastic beer mugs in their hands. One of the people is from Burgos, another one from Bolivia, one is from Bilbao, they seem to be having fun. The girl from Burgos wants to go as "anónima". She has only studied Basque for two weeks, but she's truly making an effort. Javi is from Bilbao, in his late thirties. "Ayuda, nola esaten da euskaraz?" Ayuda, how do you say that in Basque', he asks. "Laguntza" I answer. "Alkohola laguntza handia da", Javi says and raises his beer, alcohol helps a lot." Their conversation seems to be going fine.

The festive atmosphere helps the students to relax and overcome the low linguistic self-confidence from which many non-native Basque speakers suffer, and which often seems to be a major obstacle in taking the first step to speak Basque. The atmosphere in Algara is linguistically tolerant. Basque is preferred, even requested, but everyone uses the linguistic resources that they have in their repertoire, and they can always ask for help. The buying and selling interactions of the txosna are an easy way for the students to put their learned language skills into practice, as they consist of fairly simple transactions that repeatedly follow the same pattern. With the help of their teacher and their classmates, they can cross the language border and initiate the first interaction with unknown people in Basque.

Jon is a teacher in his early thirties. He has been working at Gabriel Aresti for the last nine years. He is one of the core members of Algara, and a regular figure in all the activities and festivities organized at the euskaltegi. Jon wants to give his students the experience of a Basque-speaking Aste Nagusia, so he regularly brings his group of students to the txosna and works with them at the bar. When asked about his former students, Jon tells that some of them come to the events regularly. One of his former students came to work two txandas in 2017, and participated in the Basque Rural Olympics. The profile of those who come during the week and decide to come again is clear: "Usually those that come and stay are young people, people who like to party." Even though not all of the students stay in Algara as regular members, Jon believes that the Algara model of engagement is successful and fits its purpose. The proportion of the students who keep coming year after year is high enough – and even for those students whose participation in the activities of the Great Week remains a one-time experience, the experience is still valuable and unique.

### **3. Students' linguistic trajectories and their experience in Aste Nagusia**

Several current and former students were interviewed in the 2017 festivities. The following four descriptions were chosen to showcase the diversity of new Basque experiences brought to the same physical space by Algara during this one long week in August. The four new Basque speakers are at different stages of their speaker trajectories. They take different stances towards Basque, and their language practices differ considerably.

Mikel<sup>2</sup> is a twenty-five year old bartender from the Uribarri neighbourhood of Bilbao. Mikel's grandparents are Basque speakers, but as in so many other families, the intergenerational transmission was interrupted during the times of the dictatorship, and his parents do not speak

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<sup>2</sup>Names changed.

Basque. Mikel studied in a Basque-medium model D during his childhood, but at age 16, when he went to finish his high-school diploma, he changed to a Spanish-medium school. In the last nine years, he has not studied nor spoken Basque. He took to studying Basque again one month ago in the euskaltegi.

Mikel had never heard about Algara before, but when his teacher (Jon) spoke in class about the history and the aims of the konpartsa, he decided to participate. He did one shift, txanda, as a bartender in the txosna. After he finished his txanda on Thursday night, he was happy and full of energy. After Mikel finished his txanda at 11pm, he went out to party with another student from his class, and they spoke Basque with each other during the entire night. It was easy to find a common ground, as they share the experience of not being able to practice Basque with the people of their surroundings.

*I would like to do these turns again. I had so much fun. And my classmates also. I want to do this again next year... We were there with Jon and speaking in Basque all the time and with the other students we were there as friends and colleagues.*

On the Monday after the party week, Mikel was still excited about his experience, and planning to come back next year. Mikel had nothing but praise for his experience during Aste Nagusia. He thought that all his classmates enjoyed their time at the txosna, and he believes that other Basque language schools should use similar methods of taking Basque out to the streets. Algara's model of engagement works very well, he says, and truly helps the students to overcome their hesitations and say the first word in Basque.

Iker is 40 years old. He took up to studying Basque three years ago, when he became unemployed. Alazne, Iker's former teacher tells that Iker "was always active, he always tried to organize get-togethers and dinners with the other students, so I asked him to join our konpartsa." This is Iker's second year as algarakide, member of Algara, and he has become an active participant. Iker is present at several activities throughout the summer. On konpartsakide eguna, a get-together organized for the members of all konpartsas one month before the big party, Iker is cooking a paella in the park. He is at the farmhouse painting the wall panels of the txosna in the summer heat as a volunteering member of the preparation crew. He is building the txosna in the center of Bilbao during the week before the party week. On the first day of the party, he is arranging tables for the lunch of the members of Algara. During the kalejira, 'street party' and konpartsen jaitsiera, 'the parade of the konpartsas' he drives Algara's bike with a box full of beers and ice. During the week, he manages the night shift that continues until 7am. On the morning, he takes the train back home to sleep during the day, and comes back for the next night.

Iker has the aim of passing a Basque B2 exam this year, but his motivations go far beyond that. Iker does not speak Basque completely fluently, but he aims to get there.

*It has been hard for me to speak in Basque, but this is my personal barnetegi (immersion school), and I don't have to pay. We speak in Basque and they can correct me, if I don't do it right.*

Iker actively seeks for opportunities to use Basque. He is interested in different dialects and language features, and regularly asks the native Basque speakers about the words and expressions that they use in their speech. However, in deeper and more intimate conversations with people he knows from the euskaltegi, such as with his closest friend, he mostly speaks Spanish.

Janire is 30 years old and from Santutxu, a tightly-populated neighbourhood of Bilbao. Her family does not speak Basque. Janire studied all her school years in a Basque-medium model, but in the university, where she studied business administration, she chose Spanish as the language of education. In 2016, she started studying at the euskaltegi to become more fluent in the language she had not used since leaving school. She wanted to pass a Basque diploma mostly for work motives, and thought she needed practice for the oral part of the exam. Last year her teacher asked in the class if the students wanted to join the preparation crew. Unlike the others, Janire did join. Janire is now a paid member of the crew building the txosna. She is building, painting and organizing the kitchen with confident moves.

Even though Janire studied in the Basque medium model of education, she is not confident about her language competence and feels very self-conscious when speaking Basque. She does not use much Basque outside of the Great Week and Algara. In Algara it is different, she says. “Here it doesn’t matter if I screw up. They are all teachers. They know I’m not a native Basque speaker, so it’s OK.” Janire speaks in Basque to all the Algara members during the preparations, using frequent code-switching to Spanish as a relief strategy when she does not know how to express something in Basque. Yet with Iratxe she speaks mostly Spanish. Iratxe is a member of Algara from a nearby town, and Janire and Iratxe became friends the previous year. Janire is generally not very engaged in language issues. “I think Iratxe knows to speak a vernacular dialect of Basque, I don’t really know.” What connects them is a joint interest in anime, manga, and computer games. Even though Iratxe and Janire speak mostly Spanish when they are alone, with most of the other members of Algara, Janire speaks Basque. When we go out in a group on the opening night with Janire, Janire speaks in Basque. Janire goes out “every night, every night” during Aste Nagusia. She has a plan of repeating this in the years to come.

Laura is a 37 year old graphic designer who now works at the communications office of Algara. She started studying Basque after she left university in 2003. She started the classes on the very first level, “but not only because I wanted to get a diploma. I really wanted to learn Basque”, so her motives were mostly integrative. During the following years, she formed a very close group of friends with her classmates and her teacher, who encouraged them to join the konpartsa. Ainara, the former teacher tells that the students in that class, “happened to be of the same age and had similar interests. Now they travel together, they go to each other’s weddings.” The group of friends from euskaltegi does a txanda each year, always the same shift on Thursday night from 11pm to 3am. After they finish their txanda, they go out to party in the festival area. For some of the people in the group, these gatherings are among the few occasions where they regularly use Basque. Others, such as Laura, use Basque also in other relationships of their life, such as with their partners, children, or with their colleagues at work.

Through her networks in Algara, Laura was hired as a graphic designer at the communication office Atoan, one of the branches of Zenbat Gara. She is now one of the core members of the konpartsa. “They call me Marijaia. You’ll see why during Aste Nagusia.” Marijaia is the symbol of Bilbao’s festivities. Laura is right: just like Marijaia, she can be seen everywhere during the preparations and the party week. She is at the communication office planning the party leaflets and their distribution. She helps painting the walls of the txosna. She participates in soka-tira, ‘tug-of-war’ and in other playful sports, such as the sack race in the Basque Olympics. Laura does several txandas throughout the week, cooking, cleaning up, making sandwiches, working at the bar. She clearly lives up to her nickname as the party symbol.

Laura uses Basque all the day in her work. It is a natural language choice for her, as Basque is the default language of Zenbat Gara. She is fully immersed in the Basque culture world hidden in the building of Zenbat Gara in the center of Bilbao, and Basque is also the language of many of her close friendships established through Zenbat Gara and Algara.

#### **4. Discussion: making space Basque in the interaction**

Even though some language competence is a requisite for language use, what has become clear in the context of the Basque revitalization is that focusing on speaker numbers is not enough. The numbers collected in the Basque sociolinguistic surveys often reflect theoretical competence for language production, not the actual linguistic practices of those bilingual speakers that have both Basque and Spanish in their repertoire. The focus has to be equally on the linguistic choices that the speakers of the minority language make outside of the classroom.

In this paper, I have described the efforts of one grassroots organization to provide new Basque speakers with opportunities to use Basque during the festivities of Bilbao. The participation in the activities of Algara has had a role in their language choices. Even though with the exception of Laura, the new Basque speakers described in the previous pages do not speak Basque in their daily life outside of the classroom and Algara, all of them use the language in this particular space. In Algara, the new speakers of Basque can establish personal relationships, in which the use of Basque does not feel forced or out of place, as it is what is expected of them here. Through Algara, the new speakers' of Basque also have access to the social networks of traditional Basque speakers, which has been shown to be an important predictor for new speakers' language use (Ortega et al. 2015). Algara offers them a safe space to practice with the linguistic resources that they have, and learn more in the process. Their productions in Basque do not have to be grammatically correct or resemble the language use patterns of native Basque speakers. The language practices that they establish in the physical space of the txosna can then be transferred to other spaces, at least to the other txosnas in the festive area.

Pujolar and Puigdevall (2015) note that mudes lead to bilingualism, not monolingualism, and the changes in language choices usually come about not by replacing the language of the previous relationships, but by establishing new patterns and new relationships. The changes in linguistic behaviour of the new Basque speakers described in this article are relatively subtle. The participation in the activities of Algara does not transform a person with a passive knowledge of a language to an active speaker of it, but offers the new speakers of Basque a space to introduce Basque into their active linguistic repertoire in a relaxed, festive atmosphere. For many students, this is the first time that they have to consider their linguistic choices, as they cannot default to Spanish as the language of informal interactions. This alone constitutes a significant change in their linguistic practices.

After Aste Nagusia, Mikel was happy to have found people in the same situations as he is in – wanting to practice, yet not having had Basque-medium relationships in their life before, and he was planning to come back next year. Janire was already a second-time participant in the process, and Iker had become an active member of Algara. Laura found work via her social networks in the konpartsa. Yet despite all the effort that Algara puts into learning and using Basque, Basque does not automatically become the default language choice even in those relationships that are established in the txosna and in the euskaltegi. The changes in language use must be observed on the level of single instances of interaction to fully capture the complexities of the changes in linguistic habits. The bilingual society with its linguistic power relations is reflected in the hybrid language practices of the new Basque speakers. The people who previously had a bilingual competence but monolingual language practices are now bilinguals both in their competence and performance. The interactions that are labelled as “Basque” are often bilingual, as frequent code-switching is an important part of colloquial Basque speech.

If the focus of the revitalization efforts is on increasing the use of Basque, Algara's model of engagement can be considered a success. The option to inconsistent use of Basque might not

be consistent use of Basque, but no use of Basque at all. The role that Basque has in the daily life of new Basque speakers such as Mikel and Janire might be limited, yet without Algara Basque would have no role in their language practices. The fact that Aste Nagusia is celebrated every year gives the new Basque speakers a motive to come back, and provides a place to re-establish relationships that might otherwise dissolve during the course of life. Laura and her group of friends have maintained their connection for over a decade, and Algara brings them together every year. Even though for Laura, her social networks at Algara have led to a *muda* in the fullest sense of the word, some of her former classmates see their get-togethers more directly as rare opportunities to use and practice Basque. Many students who start learning Basque in the *euskaltegi* for instrumental reasons, for example to achieve a diploma to work in the Basque public administration, acquire integrative motives for language learning and use on the way. The personal relationships established within the *konpartsa* become an important motive to stay in Algara and thereby within the Basque cultural and linguistic sphere. This mixture of instrumental learning and affective attachment to the *konpartsa* and its members is reflected in the words of Iker, *hau da nire barnetegi pertsonala*, ‘this is my personal immersion school’ to describe Algara.

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