

A new perspective on the evolution of mood and negation markers in Proto-Basque

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Recent decades have witnessed an increasing interest in historical Basque linguistics in general, and in reconstructing Proto-Basque (PB) in particular. This has led to meaningful advances in the reconstruction of PB phonology and morphology and, to a more limited extent, morphosyntax. Against that background, this paper addresses the evolution of PB markers of mood, modality and negation, which have not received much attention despite being well documented in textual records.

Early recorded stages of Basque present a complex picture concerning the expression of mood, modality and negation: some verbs are both marked with the suffix *-ke/-te*—which has various temporal, aspectual and modal uses—and accompanied by the modal auxiliary *ahal* (negative counterpart *ezin*), as in *Ayn fuerte eta galanto labradu-ric nola ecin ayn-beste mundu-an al ç-a-te-an* so strongly and beautifully build-PTCP that cannot so-much world-LOC can 3SG.PST-be-te-PST ‘Built so strongly and beautifully that it could not have been possible on Earth’ (Lazarraga 1567–1602, *apud* Bilbao et al. 2020: 76). By contrast, the same suffix seems to suffice as a modal marker when accompanied by the standard negator *ez*, cf. *Bat-a ez=pa-d-a nahi, ez=k-ita-ke-k gudu-ka ni eta hi* one-DEF NEG=SUB-3SG.PRS-PRS want NEG=1PL-AUX-ke-ALLC ‘If one of us doesn’t want to, we cannot fight each other, you and I’ (Oihenart 2003 [1657]: 256). In yet other cases the same functions are indicated only by means of *ahal/ezin*, compare *Ehor-c hura gayxteri-a-z ecin l-eça-n inbia* no.one-ERG 3SG evilness-DEF-INS cannot HYP-AUX-SUB envy ‘So that no one could envy her out of evilness’ (Etxepare 1980 [1545]: 94). All three kinds of verbal forms seem to be largely synonymous.

This state of affairs raises several questions: first of all, the aforementioned variation is suggestive of ongoing change, but it is unclear which marker, if any, originally served to indicate mood in the proto-language. Moreover, the numerous uses of the suffix *-ke/-te*—ranging from potential mood, through future reference, to doubt (conjecture) on the speaker’s part towards the truth of the proposition, among others (Lafon 1970)—provide few clues as to which use is original and what path of change subsequently ensued. According to Rebuschi (1984: 275–276) modal, conditional and conjectural uses are all derived from an initial predicative meaning, whereas Mounole (2014: 340–341), on the basis of cross-linguistically common paths of change (Bybee 1994: 265–266), argues that the shift must have been from modal to temporal. Inherent to these proposals is the view that the use of modal markers *ahal/ezin* is an innovation, i.e., they came to reinforce verbal forms with *-ke/-te* in order to avoid ambiguous modal-temporal readings.

In turn, it has been recently suggested that the suffix *-ke/-te* must have had an original negative meaning, which over time yielded temporal (future) reference (Ariztimuño & Salaberri 2022, from an earlier proposal by Ariztimuño 2016). Following this line of thought, here we put forward a three-stage path of change for the uses of *-ke/-te*:

Stage #1: *-ke/-te* is used as a marker of future tense, whereas the modal auxiliary *ahal/ezin* is the only means of indicating potential mood;

Stage #2: *-ke/-te* undergoes semantic bleaching and develops new meanings, including epistemic modality (conjecture). Consequently, verbal forms with *-ke/-te* become, in some contexts, ambiguous between a temporal and an epistemic modal meaning;

Stage #3: in order to avoid ambiguity, epistemic modal uses of *-ke/-te* are reinforced by the modal auxiliary *ahal/ezin*. As a consequence, *-ke/-te* is increasingly identified with and ultimately takes on a potential modal meaning it previously did not have.

This chain of stages (#1-3) is meant to account for two facts: (a) modal uses of *-ke/-te* seem to stem from an initial temporal meaning, judging by the fact that all other uses of this suffix (predicative, apodosis, conjecture i.e. epistemic modality, etc.) can also be derived by the same path; (b) the existence of rare potential verb forms with *ahal/ezin* but without *-ke/-te*—such as *Eta nehor-c ecin ihardets c-i-eço-yo-n hitz-ic* and no one-ERG cannot answer 3SG.PST-AUX-SBJ-3SG-PST word-PART ‘And no one could answer him a word’ (Leizarraga 1990 [1571]: 367)—in 16th-century Basque and the widespread prevalence of *ahal/ezin* suggest that the modal auxiliary must have been the original means of expressing mood (and negation) in the proto-language. Accordingly, this paper reconstructs a typologically uncommon path of change (temporal > modal) which is, however, supported by a careful interpretation of the data.

Abbreviations

1 = 1st person; 2 = 2nd person; 3 = 3rd person; ALLC = allocutive; AUX = auxiliary; DEF = definite; ERG = ergative; HYP = hypothetical; INS = instrumental; ITER = iterative; LOC = locative; NEG = negator; PART = partitive; PL = plural; PRS = present tense; PST = past tense; PTCP = participle; SBJ = subjunctive; SG = singular; SUB = subordinator.

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