

The history of the Basque pronoun *zuek* ‘you.all’ in relation to similar Romance developments

1. Introduction

Historical Basque has the following personal pronoun system: 1sg *ni*, 2sg familiar *bi*, 2sg formal *zu*, 1pl *gu* ~ *guk*, 2pl *zuek* (~ *zuok*). Although essentially this system is found since the first extensive documentation of the language (in the 16th century), leaving aside secondary developments, a somewhat different and simpler system can be uncontroversially reconstructed for an earlier stage from strong morphological evidence (Azkue 1923-1925: §641, Trask 1997: 196): 1sg *ni*, 2sg *bi*, 1p *gu*, 2pl *zu*. That is, *zu* ‘2sg formal’ used to be ‘2pl’ and the modern 2pl form *zuek* is a more recent creation; the less successful —it is no longer in use in Modern Basque— 1pl *guk* is likewise an innovative form. As stated by Alberdi (1995: 280), “[i]t is impossible to date the proposed evolution for *zu*: 2pl > 2pl & 2sg formal > 2sg formal”; however, in what the emergence of *guk* and *zuek* is concerned, this paper offers some anchors that may contribute to the establishment of the temporal and geographical axes in which this innovation occurred.

2. Issues regarding the emergence of *zuek*

The emergence of new 1pl and 2pl forms sketched above mirrors that from Latin to Spanish, Catalan and Occitan, and Romance influence on Basque is generally assumed. In order to determine the details of this influence the following points need to be borne in mind:

- a) Whereas Romance *nosotros*, *vosotros*, *nosaltres*, *vosaltres*... is a grammaticalization of ‘we/you others’, the Basque pronouns *guk*, *zuek* involves the affixation of a demonstrative.
- b) The 1pl form *guk* is actually attested (in a Basque gloss to an 11th c. Latin document) before Sp. *nosotros* ‘we’ and *vosotros* ‘you.pl’ became grammaticalized (12th-15th c., de Jonge & Nieuwenhuysen 2012: 249-250). If Romance influence is to be invoked, other sources need to be considered.
- c) Unlike in Romance languages, in Basque the innovative second plural *zuek* has given rise to distinct agreement marking on verbs, e.g. *zu zara* ‘you.sg are.sg’ vs *zuek zarete* ‘you.pl are.pl’, with the exception of a few Western dialects, where *zara* has remained ambiguous as for number up to the 20th c.

3. The grammaticalization of *zuek* and the historical development of its Romance counterpart

Language internal and external facts may serve to the establishment of the temporal as well as the geographical axes of the emergence of the new Basque pronouns.

- a) *Zuek* is most plausibly the continuator of the collocation **zu hek*, with the demonstrative used as an emphatic element (Manterola 2015: 340). The grammaticalization of this distal demonstrative *hek* ‘those’ is to be considered under the more general panorama of the emergence of the Basque nominal definite inflection, e. g. *lagun hek* ‘those friends’ > *lagunek* ‘the friends’. The closest Romance parallel would be early plural forms like *vos mesmos* ‘yourselves’ (which were outcompeted by *vosotros* in Romance).
- b) The pronoun *zuek* is present in all Basque dialects; it therefore qualifies as a feature of the old Basque medieval koine as propounded by Mitxelena (1981). Both the emergence of the definite inflection and the process of “koinefication” are generally believed to have started/occurred around the 6th-8th c.
- c) According to Gomila (2022), the new 2pl Romance pronouns spread westward in the Iberian Romances from the Occitan/Catalan area, with early examples in the Kingdom of Navarre (12th-13th c.).

4. Conclusion

This paper argues that the emergence of the new pronoun forms may therefore be set within a time span around the 10th century, and points to the Eastern Basque area (Navarre) in contact with Occitan as its origin. This complies with the historical description that also the new verbal forms spread westward within Basque, and fits with observations beyond (pro)nominal inflection, such as the fact that the ground zero of a well defined layer of old Romance lexical borrowings shares similar times and geography. On an additional note, the development of unambiguous 2pl agreement verbal forms in Basque (unlike in Romance) is explained as resulting from certain properties of Basque verbal morphology, which allowed for analogical transfer of the number distinction from 3rd person forms.

References

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