# Basque Language Survival in Rural Communities From the Pays Basque, France

by

Raymond and Françoise Mougeon

#### INTRODUCTION

In comparison to the Basque country in Spain, the Pays Basque in France is very small; its three provinces cover an area of only approximately 2,500 square miles, somewhat more than half the total of the "Département" of Atlantic Pyrenees. Furthermore, unlike its Spanish counterpart, the Pays Basque is almost completely devoid of substantial industry as well as of any major urban centers. The only exception is the city of Bayonne.

It has been observed! that rural areas are more favorable to the preservation of minority languages and cultures than urban ones. Thus it may be hypothesized that the chances of maintenance of the Basque language may be higher in France than in Spain.

In order to attempt to evaluate the Basque language's chances of survival<sup>2</sup> on the French side of the border, the authors decided, in 1976, to carry out a survey on the use of Basque and French for communication, by Basque children enrolled in elementary schools and by their parents, in order to compare language use of the two groups. Furthermore, the children's language use was investigated as a function of several extralinguistic variables: age of children, locale of communication, socioeconomic status of the parents, etc.

In all, four elementary French language public schools (écoles communales) were surveyed. They are located in four neighboring mountain villages situated near Donibane Garazi (St. Jean Pied de Port) in the Pyrenees: Bussunaritz, Mendive, Lecumberry, and Ahaxe. Since the population of these villages is composed mainly of farmers and of people of Basque extraction, they may be looked upon as settings most favorable to Basque language and culture preservation. For this reason the results of our study will probably represent a conservative measure of Basque language retention. Because of this, we intend to carry out later a similar survey in the neighboring town of St. Jean Pied de Port, a community which is much more open to the outside world. Such a survey should enable us to see whether, with respect to language retention, the Basque children of a relatively more urbanized community differ from the children of typically rural communities.

Given the geographical limitations of the present survey, it must be regarded as only exploratory. However, since to our knowledge this survey is the first of its kind, its results should be of interest to all those concerned with the maintenance of Basque culture and language.

#### **METHOD**

#### **Data Gathering and Analysis**

The data for the study were gathered through a questionnaire (cf. Appendix) which was administered by teachers to all students enrolled in these schools. The older students completed the questionnaires themselves, and the younger students were read the questions by their teachers.

As can be seen from the questionnaire, the survey

focused on five main points concerning preferential use of Basque or of French: by the parents when speaking to one another (question 1); by the parents when speaking to the child (question 2); by the child when speaking to his parents (question 3); by the child when speaking to his/her sibling(s) at home (question 4); and outside of the home (question 5). In addition, data on fathers' occupation, parents' ethnic affiliation, and children's ages were also

gathered (questions 6, 8, 9, and 10). Variable use of Basque or French in the four communication situations mentioned above was analysed as a function of these last three parameters.

#### 2.2 Presentation of the Sample

#### Breakdown of Pupils by School.

Bussunaritz	Mendive	Lecumberry	Ahaxe	Total
13	29	34	15	91

# Breakdown of Pupils as a Function of the Fathers' Occupations.

Farmers	Craftsmen and workers	Tradesmen	Civil servants	Total
62 68%	17 19%	2 2%	10 11%	91

A comparison of our sample of four communities with the returns of the 1968 national census for the 16 rural communities of St. Jean Pied de Port township (St. Jean Pied de Port excluded) indicated that the data just above are roughly representative of the rural township's active male population. Thus, according to the 1968 census, in the rural township farmers represented 72% of the total population, workers and craftsmen combined represented close to 16%, and tradesmen, 4%. The category 'civil servant' deserves some comment. In France civil servants represent a major section of the work force, since many utilities, agencies, and almost the entire educational system are under government control. The civil service jobs included in our sample are schoolmaster, policeman, customs officer, and mailman.

#### Fathers' Occupations as a Function of Ethnic Affiliation

Far	mers	Crai and V	tsmen /orkers	Trac	lesmen		ivil vants	Tota	I
Bas. 62	Fren. 0	Bas.	Fren.	Bas. 2	Fren.	Bas.	Fren.	91	

The total of 91 exceeds the actual number of fathers, since siblings attending the schools each answered the questionnaire, each child identifying the father and his occupation. Since our questionnaire was anonymous, it has not been possible to establish the correct number. Most noticeable is the fact that all of the farmers are of Basque ethnic origin. However, among the category of civil servants one finds a minority of people of French origin.

#### Breakdown of Pupils as a Function of Age.

	Age in Years								
. 4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total
7	10	18	16	9	10	12	5	4	91

The relatively lower number of four- and five-year-old pupils reflects the fact that elementary education becomes compulsory only at the age of six. Similarly, the low numbers of eleven- and twelve-year-old pupils can be accounted for by the fact that by age eleven pupils can go to a secondary school if their parents so decide.

#### **RESULTS**

We shall first present the results concerning variable use of Basque or French by the parents and their children as a function of the parents' ethnic affiliation.

Table 1.
Use of Basque Between Parents as a Function of Their Ethnic Affiliation.

		ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER	TOTAL
BASQUE COUPLES		39	35	5 .	6	85
MIXED Mother COUPLES Basqu	French Mother	-		-	1	1
	Basque Mother	-	1	1	-	2
FRENCH COUPLES		-	-	-	3	3

Table 2.
Use of Basque by the Parents to Their Children as a Function of Ethnic Affiliation

		ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER	TOTAL
BASQUE COUF	LES	12	30	18	25	85
MIXED	French Mother	-	<b>-</b>	-	1	1
COUPLES	Basque Mother		-	1	1	2
FRENCH COUPLES		. <b>-</b>			3	3

Table 3.
Use of Basque by the Children to Their Parents as a Function of Ethnic Affiliation.

		ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER	TOTAL
BASQUE COUPLES		9	10	28	38	85
MIXED	French Mother	_	-	-	1	1
COUPLES	Basque Mother	-	-	-	2	2
FRENCH COUPLES		<b>-</b>	-	_	3	3

Table 4.
Use of Basque at Home by the Children to Their Sibling(s) as a Function of Ethnic Affiliation.

		ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER	TOTAL
BASQUE COUPLES		3	4	9	66	82
MIXED Moths COUPLES Basqu	French Mother	-	<u>-</u>	-	1	1
	Basque Mother	-	•	-	2	2
FRENCH COUPLES		-	-	. •	3	3

109

Table 5.

Use of Basque by the Children to Their Sibling(s) Outside of the Home as a Function of Ethnic Affiliation.

		ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER	TOTAL
BASQUE COUPLES		2	3	5	72	82
MIXED M COUPLES B:	French Mother	•	~	· -	1	1
	Basque Mother	-	. <del>-</del>	_	2	2
FRENCH COUPLES		-	- -	-	3	3

N.B.: Only 88 pupils answered the question on child-to-sibling language use. This is probably due to the fact that the others did not have any brother or sister when the survey took place.

Two main points emerge from the preceding tables: (1) Basque parents communicate in Basque between themselves much more frequently than do their children; (2) linguistically mixed couples and their children would seem to use much less Basque than Basque couples and their children. As regards the first point, one can note that 87% of the Basque parents communicate always or often in Basque between themselves, whereas only 9% of their children do so at home, and 6% outside of the home. The fact that such a low proportion of Basque children communicate among themselves in Basque may be taken as an indication that French is fast becoming the dominant language of communication of a large number of Basque children in the area under study. The difference of about 80% found between the Basque parents and their children is a dramatic illustration of the rate at which language shift is taking place. If one regards the fact that only 6% of the Basque children communicate mostly or always in Basque outside the home (i.e. where their language behavior is least influenced by that of their parents) as any indication of the children's future pattern of language use, Basque's chances of survival in the region under study look rather grim. Several explanations can be offered for the obvious disaffection toward Basque shown by the younger generation. As will be seen shortly, a substantial proportion of Basque parents do not always seem convinced of the necessity and/or usefulness of handing down Basque to their children (see Table 2).4 Also, the state public schools in which the children are enrolled cannot be said to be settings in which use and cultivation of the Basque language are encouraged. This, coupled with the fact that public municipal schools are better attended nowadays than in the past, offers an additional explanation for the low level of Basque use found among the children.5 Other explanations worth mentioning are the increasing influence of radio and television (two media which locally function almost totally in French) and the recent yearly

influx of tourists (who rent accommodations from the locals, and whose children play with the local Basque children).

Regarding the second point, we can only regret that our sample does not include more linguistically mixed homes. Their number is much too low to establish any firm hypothesis about the language use of their members. Let us simply note that only one of the three mixed couples communicates mostly in Basque, and that none of the children of linguistically mixed couples use Basque to communicate among themselves. These findings suggest that there seems to be an overall lower retention of Basque in linguistically mixed families (for similar findings about the role of linguistically mixed marriages in a Canadian setting, see Mougeon 1973, 1976, 1977). We are hopeful that a study based on a larger sample can further explore this interesting question. If our hypothesis is correct, in areas where mixed families represent a substantial proportion of the local population (the more urbanized intergroup contact communities), one should find an overall higher level of language shift than was found here.

A third aspect of the data tabulated above deserves comment, namely the situation when parents and their children communicate among themselves. In examining the data of Table 2 one is struck by the fact that 51% of the Basque parents address their children always or often in French (cf. our remarks about the possible influence of parental attitudes, note 4). Furthermore, the proportion of Basque children who are either unwilling or incapable of addressing their parents always or often in Basque is even higher (78%; Table 3). This finding is consistent with the overall low level of Basque use found when Basque children communicate among themselves.

Let us now turn to the results concerning variable use of Basque and French by Basque parents and their children as a function of the fathers' occupations.

Table 6.
Use of Basque by Basque Couples as a Function of the Fathers' Occupations

	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER	TOTAL
FARMERS	34	25	1	2	62
CRAFTSMEN WORKERS	4	8	4	1	17
CIVIL SERVANTS	<u>-</u>	2	-	4	6

Table 7.
Use of Basque by Basque Parents to Their Children as a Function of the Fathers' Occupations

	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER	TOTAL
FARMERS	10	25	11	16	62
CRAFTSMEN WORKERS	2	4	6	5	17
CIVIL SERVANTS	-	1	1	4	6

Table 8.
Use of Basque by Basque Children to Their Parents as a Function of Their Fathers' Occupations.

	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER	TOTAL
FARMERS	9	7	25	21	62
CRAFTSMEN WORKERS	-	2	3	12	17
CIVIL SERVANTS	-	1	-	5	6

Table 9.
Use of Basque by Basque Children to Their Sibling(s) at Home as a Function of Their Fathers' Occupations

	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER	TOTAL
FARMERS	3	3	6	47	59
CRAFTSMEN WORKERS	-	1	2	14	17
CIVIL SERVANTS	-	<u>-</u>	1	5	6

Table 10.

Use of Basque by Basque Children to Their Sibling(s) Outside of the Home as a Function of Their Fathers' Occupations

	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER	TOTAL
FARMERS	2	2	5	50	59
CRAFTSMEN WORKERS	-	1	-	16	17
CIVIL SERVANTS	-	-	1	5	6

The main point which emerges from the results tabulated above is that Basque farmers and their children communicate among themselves in Basque more often than do the craftsmen or workers and their children, who in turn do so more than the civil servants and their children. Bearing in mind our previous remark about the relationship between language and culture (note 2), we find this result to be consistent with the views of Redfield' and others on the role of peasantry in the preservation of traditional cultural values.

Focusing on the use of Basque between parents (Table 6), the proportion of members of the civil servants group who communicate mostly or always in Basque (33%) appears small in comparison to the proportions of farmers (95%) and members of the craftsmen and workers groups (71%) who do so. However, given the low number of civil servants included in our sample, the above proportion can only be taken as a crude indication of the language behavior of that group. Given these reservations, the lower proportions of Basques communicating always, or between themselves, in Basque found among the craftsmen or workers group and among civil servants lead us to hypothesize that in a more urbanized area one may find an overall lower level of Basque retention among Basque adults. We hope to verify this in our proposed study of language use in

St. Jean Pied de Port.

The results of Tables 7, 8, 9 and 10 confirm those of Table 6 regarding (a) variation in the use of Basque as a function of socioeconomic affiliation, and (b) the fact that Basque children use Basque much less often than their parents. Thus, for example, one finds that if 95% of the farmers communicate between themselves always or mostly in Basque, only 10% of their children will use Basque always or often when communicating at home with their siblings. Likewise, as noted earlier, 33% of the members of the civil servants group communicate always or mostly in Basque between themselves, whereas none of their children does so either at home or outside of the home.

Finally, when parents and children communicate between themselves (Tables 7 and 8), one finds results similar to those found in the preceding section (Tables 2 and 3). Thus, if 57% of the farmers address their children always or mostly in Basque, only 26% of their children reciprocate. Likewise, 35% of the parents belonging to the craftsmen or workers group address their children always or mostly in Basque, whereas only 12% of these children address their parents always or often in Basque.

Finally, let us examine the influence of the children's age on variable use of Basque and French.

Table 11.
Use of Basque by Basque Parents to the Child as a Function of the Child's Age

AGE	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER	TOTAL
4	-	4.	1	1	6
5	4	3	1	3	10
6	2	7	1	7	17 .
7	3	5	Ź	6	16
8	-	4	1	3	8
9	. 2	3	5	· •	10
10	-	•	5	5	10
11	1	1	2	1	5
12	-	3	-		3

Table 12.
Usage of Basque by Basque Children to Their Parents as a Function of the Children's Age.

AGE	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER	TOTAL
4	-	1	. 1	4	6
5	1	1 .	3	5	10
6	3	2	2	10	17
7	2	4	4	6	16
8	-	~	5 .	3	8
9	1		8	1	10
10	2	<u>.</u> .	1	7	10
11	-	-	3	2	5
12	-	2	1	•	3

Table 13.
Usage of Basque by Basque Children to Their Sibling(s) at Home as a Function of the Children's Age.

AGE	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER	TOTAL
4	<b>-</b> .	1	-	5	6
5	1	1	1	7	10
6	1	1	3	12	17
. 7	1	-	2	11	14
8	-		•	8	8
9	•	1	2	7	10
10	*	_	-	10	10
11	•	-	-	4	4
12	-	. <b>-</b>	1	2	3

Table 14.

Usage of Basque by Basque Children to Their Sibling(s) Outside of the Home as a Function of the Children's Age

AGE	ALWAYS	OFTEN	SOMETIMES	NEVER	TOTAL
4	-	1	-	5	6
5	1	+	-	9	10
6	-	1	2	14	17
7	1	-	-	13	14
8	-	•	•	8	8
9	-	1	2	8	11
10	-	÷	1	8	9
11	-		-	4	4
12	-	•	1	2	3

114

As can be seen from the above tables, there were few subjects within each age group. In order to assess the influence of age on the children's language behavior it has been necessary to group the various age strata. Since we do not have any three year olds in our sample, it is not possible to group the age strata into two equal categories. We therefore arbitrarily propose to use age seven as the cut-off point. Examination of the four tables above indicates that there are slightly more children who use Basque always or often within the four-to-seven age group than within the eight-to-twelve group. The X2 test, however, reveals that these differences are not significant as regards child-to-sibling language use at home and outside of the home, and child-to-parents language use. As regards parents-to-child language use, the difference is only weakly significant.10 The absence of difference in the usage by Basque children between the two age groups is understandable in view of the fact that the number of young Basque children (four and five years old) who use Basque always or often is already

too low to differ significantly from the number of older Basque children who do so (see Tables 13 and 14 in particular). Admittedly one would have expected (or hoped) to find a significantly higher number of the older children using Basque. However, it should be stressed that all of our subjects are school children (see our previous remarks on the role of French schools in assimilation). A sample including young pre-school children as well as children older than 12 might yield significant differences between the language behavior of these two groups. The fact that we found significantly more parents addressing children aged four to seven always or often in Basque than children from eight-to-twelve is perhaps an indication that Basque parents find it easier (less resistance from the children) to use more Basque when addressing younger children. Needless to say, given the small size of our total sample, more research needs to be done before one is able to weigh with enough certainty the influence of age on the language behavior of young Basque children.

#### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In summary, the main hypotheses concerning predominantly Basque rural communities which the findings discussed above lead us to formulate are:

- (a) There seems to be a much lower overall level of Basque language retention among Basque elementary school children than among their parents.
- (b) Linguistically mixed homes would seem to be less conducive to Basque language preservation than monolingual Basque homes.
- (c) Within the Basque community farmers and their children seem to show the highest level of Basque language retention, and civil servants and their children the lowest.
- (d) From age four to twelve there does not seem to be any significant variation in the low number of children who report communicating always or often in Basque. However, a sample including younger (less than four) and older

children (more than twelve)<sup>11</sup> may yield significant differences, especially if the sub-sample of children aged less than four includes children enrolled in *ikastolas*.

Hypotheses (b) and (c) further lead us to posit that:
(e) In communities with a higher ratio of linguistically mixed homes and lower proportion of farmers (the more urbanized contact communities) one will find overall lower levels of Basque language retention among parents and their children.

If hypotheses (a), (b) and (e) are confirmed by future studies, one will be entitled to express serious concern about the survival of Basque in French territory.

We hope that the present study, in spite of and because of its limitations, will inspire other research that will enable one to further probe the crucial question of Basque language survival.

#### NOTES

- 1. Hofman, 1966; Fishman, 1971.
- 2. Since it is generally admitted that the language of a national group is an essential component and transmitter of that group's culture, it can be argued that the future of the Basque language will directly affect that of Basque culture. Thus the results of our study can perhaps be looked upon also as an indirect measure of Basque culture maintenance in rural areas.
- 3. This survey was preceded by several stays by the authors in the Basque country (France and Spain), and in particular by an intensive period of two and a half months' participant observation in the village of Bussunaritz, one of the communities included in the survey which is reported here.
- 4. A number of the people we interviewed in Bussunaritz, while they were deploring the fact that the majority of their children preferred to communicate in French, "understood" it in view of the overall low functional value of Basque in France. Its usage is restricted to the Pays Basque, a region suffering from severe economic underdevelopment, and within the region, it is excluded or restricted in several important domains of communication (the school, the media, industry and commerce, government administration, etc.)
- 5. A small proportion of the Basque parents in the communities under study send their young children to the Basque language pre-elementary school (ikaštola) located in St. Jean Pied de Port. Private pre-elementary education in languages other than French is allowed by the French

- government. It would be interesting to see if the children enrolled in the *ikastola* differ significantly from the children studied here as regards the use of Basque.
- 6. The role played by tourism in acculturation should not be underestimated even in small and relatively isolated villages like the ones studied here. One could cite many cases where the locals have to change their normal patterns of behavior to accommodate the tourists. A telling example of this is the fact that in Bussunaritz, from June to September (tourist season), Sunday masses are said in French instead of Basque.
  - 7. Redfield, 1955, 1956.
- 8. The fact that one finds a low level of Basque retention among the civil servants group is perhaps related to the orientation toward centralization which is prevalent in many civil service agencies in France.
- 9. We have chosen p<.05 (with one degree of freedom) as the level of significance.
- 10. We have found a  $\chi^2$  of 2.75. With one degree of freedom, a level of significance of .05 is reached when  $\chi^2$  is superior to 2.71.
- 11. In several Ontarian communities where French Canadians are in the process of being rapidly assimilated, Schneiderman (1975) established empirically and R. Mougeon observed personally, that in late high school grades, certain students develop attitudes which are favorable to the preservation of French culture and language. Such an attitudinal shift may be taking place among older Basque students in France.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

#### Fishman, Joshua A.

1971 The Impact of Nationalism on Language Planning: Some Comparisons Between Early Twentieth-Century Europe and More Recent Years in South and Southeast Asia. In Joan Rubin and Björn H. Jernudd (eds.), Can Language be Planned?: Sociolinguistic Theory and Practice for Developing Nations. Honolulu: The University of Hawaii. Pp. 3-20.

#### Hofman, John E.

1966 Mother Tongue Retentiveness in Ethnic Parishes. In Joshua A. Fishman (ed.), Language Loyalty in the United States: The Maintenance and Perpetuation of Non-English Mother Tongues by American Ethnic and Religious Groups (Janua Linguarum, Series Maior, 21). The Hague: Mouton.

#### Mougeon, Raymond

1973 Malbay: A Sociolinguistic Community Survey. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, McGill University, Montreal.

- 1976 Bilingualism and Language Maintenance in the Gaspe Peninsula, Quebec, Canada. Anthropological Linguistics 18:53-69.
- 1977 French Language Replacement and Mixed Marriages: the Case of the Franco-Ontarian Minority of Welland, Ontario. Mimeo, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

#### Redfield, Robert

- 1955 The Little Community: Viewpoints for the Study of a Human Whole. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 1956 Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

#### Schneiderman, Eta

1975 Attitudinal Determinants of the Linguistic Behavior of French-English Bilinguals in Welland, Ontario. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo.

## **SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE**

1. Dans quelle la	ngue est-ce que tes paren	ts se parlent entre e	ux?	
	Tout le temps	souvent	parfois	jamais
En basque:				
En français:				
2. Dans quelle lar	ngue est-ce que tes paren	ts te parlent?		
	Tout le temps	souvent	parfois	jamais
En basque:				
En français:				. 🗆
3. Dans quelle lan	igue est-ce que tu parles	à tes parents?		
	Tout le temps	souvent	parfois	jamais
En basque:	. 🗖			
En français:				
4. Dans quelle lan	gue est-ce que tu parles a	à tes frères et soeurs	s à la maison?	
	Tout le temps	souvent	parfois	jamais
En basque:				
En français:				
5. Dans quelle lan	gue est-ce que tu parles a	à tes frères et soeurs	en dehors de la maiso	on?
	Tout le temps	souvent	parfois	jamais
En basque:				
En français:				
6. Quelle est la pre	ofession du père?			
7. Quelle est la pro	ofession de la mère?			
8. Le père est-il ba	asque?			
9. La mère est-elle	basque?			
10. Quel est l'âge	de l'élève qui a répondu	à ce questionnaire?		
11. Dans quel villa	ge habite cet élève?			