

# Reconstructing negation in a language isolate: Jespersen's Cycle(s) and grammaticalization in Basque

Borja Ariztimuño & Iker Salaberri  
(University of the Basque Country)

Keywords: <morphosyntax, negation, Basque, grammaticalization, Jespersen's Cycle(s)>

In recent decades much of the research on Basque historical linguistics has focused on reconstructing specific features of the proto-language, mostly within the fields of phonology and morphology (Hualde 1997; Manterola 2009; Lakarra 2011; Martínez-Areta (ed.) 2013; Igartua 2015; Aldai 2020). As a result of this trend, the reconstruction of some areas of grammar, particularly pertaining to morphosyntax, has been neglected (with two important exceptions: Mounole (2014) and Krajewska (2017)). This is the case of negation, which is nevertheless a complex and well-documented phenomenon in historical Basque and thus promises to be a fruitful field of study.

Early documented stages of Basque portray an intricate picture concerning the expression of negation. First of all, two *-ke*-suffixes can be observed in 16th- and 17th-century texts: one of them (*-ke*<sup>1</sup>, together with its variants *-ge*, *-ga*, *-ka*) appears as a fossilized caritive/privative-like marker attached to lexical roots belonging to different categories, as in *ukuzka* 'dirty' (from *ukuz(i)* 'to wash') (Anonymous 1996 [1596]: 380) and *ahalge* 'shame, shy' (from *ahal* 'ability, power') (Oihenart 2003 [1657]: 93), whereas the other one (*-ke*<sup>2</sup>) adheres to finite verb forms so as to encode future events (among other uses), as in *Ordu har-tan ixil dau-que triste veghatori-a* hour that-LOC silent be-*ke* sad sinner-DEF 'Sinners shall be sadly silent at that hour' (Etxepare 1980 [1545]: 54). Lakarra (p. c.) traces *-ke*<sup>1</sup> back to a reconstructed verb form *\*gen* 'to lack, not have, take away, deprive' (cf. present-day *ken-du* 'to take away'), and we assume *-ke*<sup>1</sup> and *-ke*<sup>2</sup> to be etymologically related. However, the exact way in which both suffixes may have grammaticalized from the same source remains unexplained. Typological parallels of negation particles coming from a verb meaning 'lack' are found in Bemba, Chinese, Fulfulde and Makwe (Kuteva et al. 2019); indirect evidence for this development also stems from the fact that the original caritive meaning of *-ke*<sup>1</sup> has been preserved in the adverb *bage* 'without' (secondary variants *gabe*, *baga*), usually reconstructed as *\*badV-* 'one' + *-ge*<sup>1</sup> (Mixelena 1961: 335). Second of all, two similar but apparently unrelated words coexist in early Basque: the reconstructed form *\*eze* that is believed to underlie the historical standard negation markers *ez* (cross-dialectal) and *ze* (which only occurs in Old Western dialects, in subjunctive and imperative constructions), and the polarity item *ezer* 'anything'.

In view of these data, and based on an initial proposal by Ariztimuño (2016), this paper aims to reconstruct the prehistory of Basque negation(s) by drawing on a number of well-known generalizations concerning processes of change in the languages of the world. The reconstruction rests on two assumptions: (a) *-ke*<sup>1</sup> and *-ke*<sup>2</sup> should be traced back to a single morpheme, and (b) these forms participate in the evolution of negator *ez*. The proposed path of change involves the following stages:

**Stage #1:** caritive *-ke*<sup>1</sup> first shifts into a lexical negator (cf. English *un-*, *dis-*), then into a sentential negator (cf. English *not*) and, due to a change in contextual implicatures, it subsequently shifts into an aspectual negator (cf. English *not yet*) – a parallel of this development involves Early Middle Chinese *wèi* (Meisterernst 2020);

**Stage #2:** sentential negator uses of *-ke*<sup>1</sup> (cf. Stage #1), which follow the verb, become bleached and eventually reinforced in preverbal position by the aforementioned element *\*eze(r)* ('thing?'), in line with Jespersen's Cycle(s) (Jespersen 1917);

**Stage #3:** *-ke*<sup>1</sup> continues to undergo stages in the grammaticalization path; as the result of previous semantic bleaching, extension in use and the emergence of further contextual implicatures, it moves away from a negative meaning and comes to mean ‘(perhaps) later’, after which it shifts into a future marker (that is: from ‘not yet’ to ‘in the future (yes)’, i.e., *-ke*<sup>2</sup>).

This chain of stages (#1-3) is conceived here as the sole means to account for the aforementioned scenario observed in Basque from the 16th century onwards. Therefore, this typologically informed reconstruction opens a new path in describing the prehistory and early history of Basque negation. In addition, it presents a methodology for reconstructing unattested morphosyntactic changes in a language isolate, where the lack of relatives implies an impossibility to reconstruct by drawing on the Comparative Method.

## References

- Aldai, Gontzal. 2020. Complex predicates, simple inflecting verbs, and “uninflecting verbs” in Pre-Basque. *Linguistics* 58(6). 1609–1658.
- Anonymous. 1996 [1596]. *Refranes y sentencias (1596): ikerketak eta edizioa* (ed. by Joseba A. Lakarra). Bilbo/Bilbao: Euskaltzaindia.
- Ariztimuño, Borja. 2016. Euskal ezeztapena(k) ‘Jespersen Zikloen’ argitan [Basque negation(s) in light of Jespersen’s Cycles]. Talk held at the *Monumenta Linguae Vasconum mintegi irekiak* conference, University of the Basque Country, Vitoria-Gasteiz, 05/12/2016.
- Etxepare, Bernard. 1980 [1545]. *Linguae vasconum primitiae* (ed. by Patxi Altuna). Bilbo/Bilbao: Euskaltzaindia, Ediciones Mensajero.
- Hualde, José I. 1997. Aitzineuskararen leherkariak [Proto-Basque plosives]. *International Journal of Basque Linguistics and Philology* [ASJU] 31(2). 411–424.
- Igartua, Iván. 2015. Diachronic effects of rhinoglottophilia, symmetries in sound change, and the curious case of Basque. *Studies in Language* 39(3). 635–663.
- Jespersen, Otto. 1917. *Negation in English and other languages*. Copenhagen: A. F. Høst & Søn.
- Krajewska, Dorota. 2017. *Euskararen sintaxi diakronikorantz: egitura konplexuak* [Towards a historical syntax of Basque: complex constructions]. Vitoria-Gasteiz: University of the Basque Country PhD dissertation.
- Kuteva, Tania, Bernd Heine, Bo Hong, Haiping Long, Heiko Narrog & Seongha Rhee. 2019. *World lexicon of grammaticalization* (2nd edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lakarra, Joseba A. 2011. Erro monosilabikoaren teoria eta aitzineuskararen berreraiketa: zenbait alderdi eta ondorio [Monosyllabic root theory and Proto-Basque reconstruction: some aspects and conclusions]. *Fontes Linguae Vasconum: Studia et Documenta* 113. 5–114.
- Manterola, Julen. 2009. Erakusleak berreraikitzen: arazoaren beste alderdi bat [Reconstructing demonstratives: another side to the problem]. *Lapurdum* 13. 261–275.
- Martínez-Areta, Mikel (ed.). 2013. *Basque and Proto-Basque: language-internal and typological approaches to linguistic reconstruction*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Meisterernst, Barbara. 2020. Possibility and necessity and the scope of negation in Early Middle Chinese. *International Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 7(1). 1–44.
- Mitxelena, Koldo. 1961. *Fonética histórica vasca*. Donostia/San Sebastián: Gipuzkoan Provincial Council.
- Mounole, Céline. 2014. Le verbe basque ancien: étude philologique et diachronique. *International Journal of Basque Linguistics and Philology* [ASJU] 48 (1/2). 1–506.
- Oihenart, Arnaud. 2003 [1657]. *Euskal atsotitzak eta neurtitzak* [Basque proverbs and poems] (ed. by Patxi Altuna and Jose A. Mujika). Bilbo/Bilbao: Euskaltzaindia.