

Approaching the polysemy of Old Basque genitive

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The case system of Basque is built upon three main pillars: i) the so-called grammatical cases —absolutive, ergative and dative—; ii) the genitive; and iii) the locative cases —inessive, ablative and allative—; apart from these, there are also the partitive and the instrumental. Furthermore, the agglutination of suffixes resulted in the grammaticalization of some additional and more specialized cases, such as the comitative, the motivative and the benefactive —all the three added to the genitive—, or the directional and the terminative —both based on the allative (see Martínez-Areta 2013 for a general account on the evolution of the case system of Basque).

The development of the case system of Basque took place before the historical period of the language —i.e. before 1545—, probably in the early Middle Ages. All the case markers are well attested in all dialects since the oldest written records of each variety; that is, the case system of Basque was more or less made up when the first texts arose. However, significant changes occurred during the last centuries. On the one hand, morpho-phonological evolution can be observed in the shape of many case markers. On the other hand, and more interestingly, certain case markers acquired new values and lost others.

In this paper we will focus on the genitive. Today Basque genitive expresses typical values such as possessor, patient or experiencer (examples 1-3).

- (1) *Itsasontzi hori enpresa norvegiarr-aren-a litzateke.*
ship that company Norwegian-GEN.SG-DET be.3SG.HYP
'That ship would own to a Norwegian company.'
- (2) *Assange-ren estradizio-a.*
Assange-GEN.SG extradition-DET
'Assange's extradition.'
- (3) *Margarita-ren tristezia sakon-a.*
Margaret-GEN.SG sadness deep-DET
'The deep sadness of Margaret.'

Texts written in Souletin —the easternmost Basque dialect— show that the genitive marker could convey not only its usual core meanings, but also benefaction or malefaction (ex. 4 and 5), cause and motive (6), recipient (7) or temporal values (8). Even one of the suffixes which form the prospective participle in Eastern Basque happens to be the genitive marker *-(r)en* (7). All Basque dialects have specific case markers for these values.

- (4) *Pharadiüsü bat hon-en, eta ifernü bat gaizto-en.* (1706)
paradise one good-GEN.PL and hell one bad-GEN.PL
'A paradise for the good people, and a hell for the bad people.'
- (5) *Bena zer da hori hainbeste jente-ren?* (1873)
but what is that so many people-GEN
'But what is that for so many people?' [French source: *Mais qu'est-ce que cela pour tant de gens?*]
- (6) *Nor-gatik hil da? Gizon güzi-en.* (1706)
who-MOT dead.PFVE AUX man all-GEN.PL
'Because of whom is he dead? Because of all the men.'

- (7) *Jinko hun-aren alagrantzia diizü eman-en.* (ca. 1800)
 God good-GEN.SG joy AUX give-PROSP
 ‘You will give joy to the good Lord.’
- (8) *Zortzi urthe-ren behar deizüt erran dolore-z adio.* (ca. 1845)
 eight year-GEN need AUX say.PFVE grief-INSTR goodbye
 ‘With grief I have to say you goodbye for eight years.’

Semantic connections like possessor/beneficiary or beneficiary/recipient are not a surprise (Malchukov 2010). Nevertheless, the remarkable polysemy of Old Eastern Basque genitive does not always match with the values described for this case. In our interpretation, the stated examples are traces of an earlier stage of the case system of Basque —before the arising of complex case markers—, in which the genitive could express by itself a wider range of meanings. This view is reinforced by the fact that the genitive is typically a polysemic case (Nikiforidou 1991; Lander 2009). To put it differently, the case system of Basque has evolved toward an increasing of the number of markers, and hence in the direction of a higher degree of specialization. Based on a corpus of historical Souletin —but not limited to it—, this paper will argue that conservative Eastern Basque varieties provide us with solid evidence of how the case system would look in the centuries after the dialectal split (circa 10th century; Mitxelena 1981).

References

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