

Accent shift in Basque

José Ignacio Hualde

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Among geographical varieties of the Basque language, we find a surprising diversity of accentual systems (see Hualde 1997, 1999). On the other hand, it is now generally accepted that dialectal variation in Basque is not ancient and that a common unified ancestor of all present-day Basque dialects was spoken in the early Middle Ages (Michelena 1981, Lakarra 2011, Zuazo 2010). This means that substantial diversification in accentual systems has taken place relatively quickly.

The application of the Comparative Method leads us to postulate a proto-language that combined two prosodic features that are now found in separate geographical areas: a distinction between accented and unaccented words (now only found in parts of the Western Basque area) and a further contrast between rising and falling accent (now only found in some Navarrese varieties) (Hualde 2012).

A feature that clearly distinguishes Navarrese Basque from other dialects, besides the existence of a contrast between rising and falling accent in some local varieties, is the use of duration as a cue to accentual prominence (Hualde, Lujanbio & Torreira 2008). I will argue that this is a Navarrese innovation that has allowed for the contrast between falling and rising accent to be preserved. In Western Basque, where accentual prominence is instead cued essentially by pitch only (Elordieta & Hualde 2001), the contrast between the two tonal accents was neutralized. On the other hand, the loss of the contrast between accented and unaccented words in Navarrese was a consequence of a reinterpretation of boundary tones as accentual rises, as has happened in other areas as well (Hualde 2003, Elordieta & Hualde 2003).

In this presentation, I will argue that the main mechanism that has driven prosodic diversification in Basque has been reinterpretation and accent shift due to ambiguity. I will distinguish two types of ambiguity phenomena: phonological ambiguity in the accent assignment rules and phonetic ambiguity in the acoustic signal regarding the position of the accent. After discussing several examples of both types, I will focus on a particularly puzzling case in Eastern Basque, where, as Michelena (1977) argued, reinterpretation of the directionality of the assignment rule (from post-initial to penultimate) caused the stress-accent to shift in many cases leaving some of its correlates behind and giving rise to contrastively aspirated stops, e.g. *akhér, akhéra* (with stress-conditioned aspiration) > *ákher, akhéra* 'billy goat, uninfl. /abs. sg.' (where aspiration and accent no longer coincide).

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