

A New View of Basque through Eighteenth-Century Correspondence

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Abstract

This contribution deals with a recently discovered Basque correspondence which poses new research questions. The letters, written in Labourdin dialect in 1757, provide insight into the practice of writing, depicting an unexpected panorama of literate women and semi-professional scribes. Because of their nature, these records attest to some linguistic features lacking in the printed tradition of Labourdin. The goal of this paper is to discuss the linguistic importance of these newly discovered letters and, in particular, to show how they change our understanding of the history of the language. To that end, I focus on differences between the language used in literary texts and private correspondence. As an example of this divergence between literary texts and personal letters, I analyze two epenthesis rules: the insertion of a [β] after *u* and the insertion of [ɰ] after *i*.

1. Introduction¹

Our knowledge of the history of Basque is mostly based on literary works, as other types of texts are unfortunately scarce. In this paper I explore a recently discovered set of eighteenth-century correspondence written in the Labourdin dialect, which fills this gap to a certain degree. The interest of this documentation is threefold: firstly, it provides us with a reliable portrait of the Labourdin dialect in the mid-eighteenth century. Secondly, the letters constitute the most illuminating contribution to the Basque written production by members of the medium and lower social strata. Finally, the texts contain several features (both innovations and archaisms) unattested in the literary production.

As an example of insights we can gain from studying these texts, I examine two phonological phenomena: the epenthesis rules after high vowel, with the insertion of [β] after *u*, and [j] after *i*. These anti-hiatus tendencies have not been described in Labourdin dialect and the letters provide evidence that they were productive at the time of the records studied.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2, I briefly outline the written tradition of Basque, focusing on the Labourdin dialect. After describing the correspondence, its importance and its linguistic interest (sections 3 and 4), in section 5 I analyze in more detail the epenthesis rules.

2. On the Basque Written Tradition

Basque is an extremely fragmented language: seven dialects (Figure 1), with a number of sub-dialects, spread over an area of only 10,000 km².² The dialectal fragmentation dates back to the Middle Ages and was further accentuated by the administrative and ecclesiastic division. The phonological, morphological, syntactical and lexical distance has increased during the last centuries to the extent that peripheral dialects are mutually unintelligible today. Historically, four of these dialects have been standardized to a certain degree, hence their consideration as *literary dialects*: Labourdin and Souletin on the French side, and Guipuscoan and Biscayan South of the border. Since the 1960's, Basque has been undergoing a standardization process and in 1982 it was recognized as an official language in the Spanish part of the Basque Country —1986 for Basque-speaking areas of Navarre.

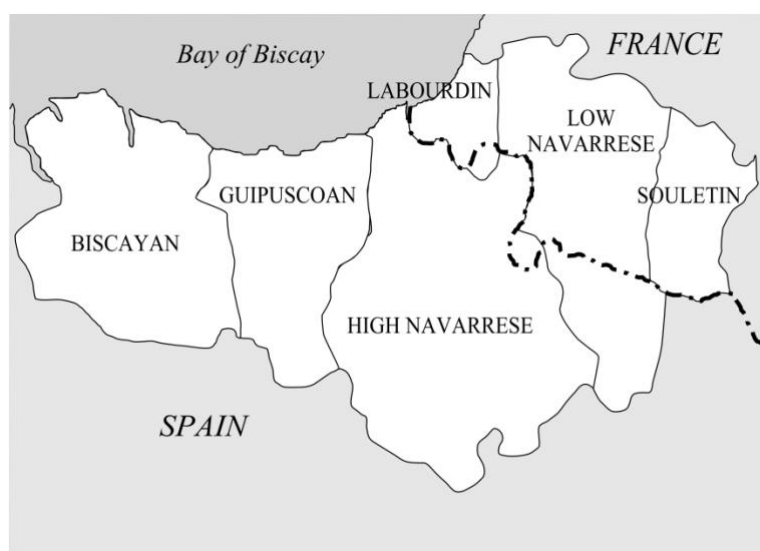


Figure 1. Present-day Basque dialects.

The historical period of Basque officially began with the publication of the first printed work, Bernard Dechepare’s *Linguae Vasconum Primitiae* (1545), a book of poems. For the preceding centuries there are other sources, such as short texts and onomastic data. Regarding the nature of the Basque printed corpus, until 1900 —to establish a more or less arbitrary limit— nearly 90% of the works are religious texts.

Despite the small size and limited demographic weight of its area, Labourdin was the first of the so-called *literary dialects*, and it has outperformed other dialects in literary production throughout its history. Until 1750 (usually considered as the beginning of Modern Basque), around 90% of the editorial production was written in the northern dialects and especially in Labourdin (Table 1).

Table 1. Books printed in Basque between 1545 and 1879 (adapted from Sarasola 1976).

	Printings		First editions		Original works	
	1545-1749	1750-1879	1545-1749	1750-1879	1545-1749	1750-1879
Biscayan	2	74	2	24	1	13
Guipuscoan	8	187	7	69	3	44
Labourdin	53	206	25	53	12	22

Souletin	10	47	6	8	2	4
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Thus, Labourdin is a relatively well-documented dialect: most of the Basque written tradition has been constructed in this variety. However, the nature of its corpus is quite homogeneous: the bulk of its records are religious books, such as bibles, breviaries, doctrines or meditations and the majority of them were translated from Latin or French. In this paper, a corpus of historical Labourdin consisting of 55 printed texts written by 30 authors³ (Table 2) will be compared to the data found in eighteenth-century letters.

Table 2. Corpus of *printed* historical Labourdin

(number of words given in parentheses).

	Writers	Non-religious works	Religious works
17 th century	11	2 (22,000)	15 (543,000)
18 th century	8	2 (10,000)	9 (457,000)
19 th century	11	11 (237,000)	16 (961,000)
Total	30	15 (269,000)	40 (1,961,000)

3. The *Le Dauphin* Correspondence (1757)

The documentation on which this paper is based consists of fifty letters written in Labourdin dialect, dating between February and April 1757. The ship *Le Dauphin* had to carry the correspondence to Louisbourg (Île Royale, present-day Cap Breton Island, Canada). With the Seven Years War (1756-1763), the situation in the French possessions on the Atlantic coast of Canada became complicated. Like hundreds of French ships, *Le Dauphin* was captured and brought to London. Recently, the historian Xabier Lamikiz has found its documentation in the National Archives of Kew in London (Lamikiz, Padilla-Moyano & Videgain 2014).

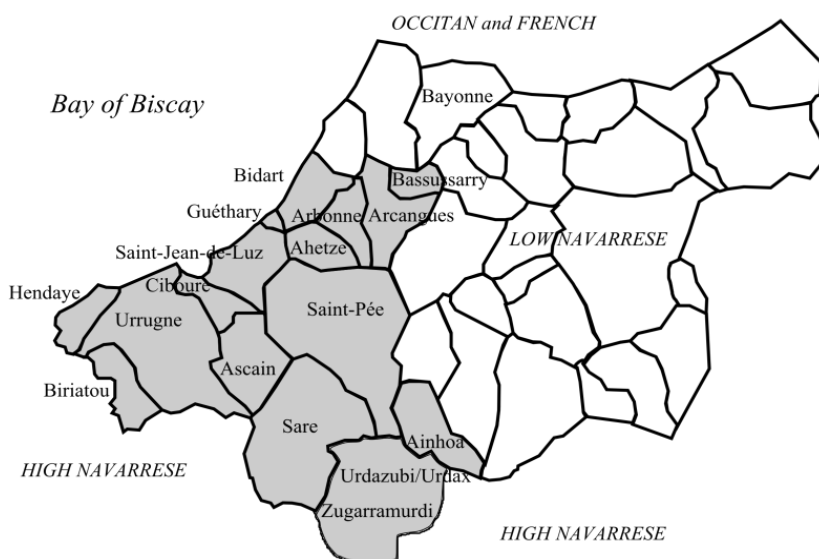


Figure 2. The province of Labourd. The Labourdin-speaking area (shaded) includes the Navarrese villages of Urdazubi and Zugarramurdi.

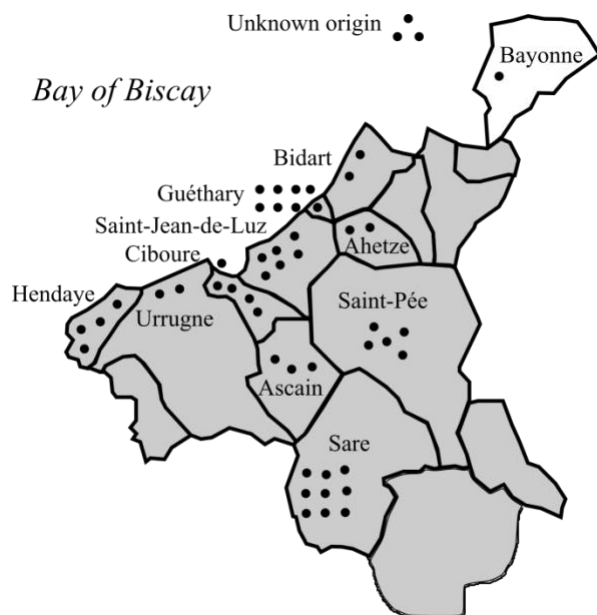


Figure 3. Distribution of the *Le Dauphin* letters within the dialectal area.

The fifty letters were written by thirty-seven different hands to convey the messages of forty-eight senders, and they comprise over 10,000 words. Both senders and addressees belonged to diverse social milieus mostly related to sailing and fishing. Regarding the authorship, I distinguish three participants: (1) *sender*, whose message is conveyed; (2) *writer*, who actually writes the letter, be a relative or a friend; and (3) *scribe*, who writes the letter as a professional task (for a discussion on the participants in letter-writing see Dossena 2012). In the *Le Dauphin* correspondence, most of the times the sender does write the letter. In three cases the sender explicitly states that (s)he has resorted to someone to write the letter. Additionally, certain similarities on graphic *dispositio*, calligraphy and spelling suggest

that, at least, fifteen letters from fifteen senders were written by five *hands*—presumably professional scribes— (Padilla-Moyano 2014, §3.2).

The letters represent ten local varieties, covering most of the Labourdin-speaking area (Figures 2 and 3). As stated above, the printed tradition of this dialect is considered as the basis of the whole of literary Basque. Until now, however, our knowledge of the history of Labourdin was based mostly on religious works. In this context, the *Le Dauphin* correspondence comes to compensate for the scarcity of other types of texts. Furthermore, these records fulfill the requirements established by Schneider (2002, 71) for written documents to be subject of variationist analysis: (1) texts should be as close to speech, and especially vernacular styles, as possible; (2) they should be of different authors from different social classes, age groups, and both sexes, and should represent varying stylistic levels; (3) texts must display variability of the phenomenon under investigation; and (4) they should fulfill certain size requirements, in order to allow quantitative analyses of several phenomena.

The *Le Dauphin* letters are perhaps the only Basque records which fulfill these criteria and, thus, allow us to examine linguistic variation in historical Basque. Firstly, as they are private documents produced with a communicative goal—mainly by humble people—, they reflect the Labourdin actually spoken in the mid-eighteenth century more accurately than any other known source. Secondly, the letter-writers' typology covers any social parameters. It is noteworthy that for the first time, we have a

substantial number of texts written by women: 60% of the letters were composed by them. Nevertheless, our poor knowledge of the writers at the time being, and the limited size of the compilation do not make possible a detailed study of diastatic variation. Even so, noticeable differences can be found between the majority of the letters, written by semiliterate correspondents, and some missives of highly educated people. Finally, the *Le Dauphin* records show a degree of linguistic variation that is hard to find elsewhere in historical Basque. As for the size of the corpus, the linguistic features studied in this paper appear frequently enough to be able to conduct a quantitative analysis, even though the corpus itself is not very large.⁴

Recent contributions have greatly improved our knowledge of private documents (Elspeß et al. 2007; Dossena & Del Lungo Camiciotti 2012; van der Wal & Rutten 2013). Ego-documents, especially those written by members of the medium and lower social strata, have three important qualities. Firstly, they are relatively close to spoken language; secondly, they can fill ‘blank spaces’ in language history; finally, they allow us to undertake a language history ‘from below’ (Elspeß 2012a, 156). In languages such as English, French or Spanish the finding of several dozens of letters from the eighteenth century could be considered somewhat anodyne—at least from a linguistic point of view. In the case of Basque, however, it is a very different issue. Although there are several sets of letters in different dialects, they were written by persons from a high socio-cultural status, or they respond to administrative or institutional needs. No other

letter compilation displays the multiplicity of authors and the geographical variety represented in *Le Dauphin*. What is more, as will be shown in this paper, the language of these letters differs greatly from that found in printed works.

Paradoxically, the *Le Dauphin* documentation attests both to the existence of semi-professional Basque scribes, and to an extended practice of writing in eighteenth-century Labourdin society. On the one hand, I estimate that one of every three letters was written by a person other than the sender, whether a relative, a friend or a scribe. Until now, the mere existence of professional scribes was an unknown phenomenon in the history of Basque. They could be schoolteachers or even notary publics who wanted to improve their incomes, but the topic requires further study. On the other hand, the letters confirm Oyharçabal's thesis (2001), who postulates the existence of a Basque-speaking alphabetization system in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which was gradually relegated to the lower strata of society, as French was entering the most cultivated circles. Unlike in modern-day Labourd, in the eighteenth century the vast majority of the population was Basque-speaking, many of them monolingual speakers. Apart from French, there was Gascon Occitan, a Romance neighbor to the northern dialects of Basque. For the non-monolingual Basque, the introduction of French was detrimental to the knowledge of Gascon. In addition, the most elevated strata knew also Latin.

It is important to note that the ship *Le Dauphin* carried more letters from Labourd written in French than in Basque (107 and 50, respectively). The study of these French letters could provide us with valuable sociolinguistic information — this, however, remains a subject of further research. Nevertheless, the proportion of Basque letters is very high when compared to other contemporary correspondence corpora in France. For instance, only some decades later, the Béarnese soldiers' correspondence (Staes 1979–1992) was written completely in French. Even assuming that the comparison between such different sets of documents could be unsuitable, the absence of Béarnese (a variety of Gascon Occitan which benefited from more prestige and longer written tradition than Basque) is significant. Thus, the correspondence from *Le Dauphin* shows an effective, habitual use of written Basque in eighteenth-century Labourdin society, which reinforces the idea that literacy rates were significantly high in the region (Grosperin 1984, 159). The massive use of epistolary formulae might give us some clues to understanding the acquisition of literacy skills in the Northern Basque Country of the time; this element has been related to less-experienced writers (Elspeß 2012b; Rutten & van der Wal & 2013).

4. New Linguistic Insights

This section provides an overview of the linguistic interest of the letters, in spelling, phonology and morphology. As a general consideration, because of the dialogue that familiar letters establish between writer and addressee, they create favorable conditions for the colloquial use of the language, especially when an unskillful correspondent writes the letter. Semiliterate people often show characteristics such as: (1) traces of the pronunciation in the spelling; (2) hesitating morpheme-limits and/or agglutination of words; (3) approximate orthography (Montgomery 1995; Martineau & Tailleux 2012).

With regards to the orthography, in the *Le Dauphin* correspondence almost every writer uses different rules, which often could be termed as *idiosyncratic spelling systems*. For instance, whereas in literary Labourdin tradition the phoneme /k/ is spelled as <c> before *a, o, u* or <qu> before *e, i* (apart from the less frequent *k*), in *Le Dauphin* it may also occur as <qu> before *a, o* (*oquasione* ‘opportunity’, *ondoquo* ‘next’), <c> before *e, i* (*nuce* ‘I would’, *cintal* ‘quintal’), <cc> (*occasione*), <ch> (*eschribatu* ‘to write’), <q> with any vowel (*oqasione*, *esqer* ‘gratitude’, *iguriqi* ‘to hope’, *Jainqo* ‘God’, *iqussy* ‘to see’) or <k> before *a* (*okasione*, *Katalin*). Similar variability is found in the case of sibilants or palatalized consonants.

The nature of the texts favors the appearance of some phonological changes rarely encountered in the printed works of that time. To begin with, some well-known vowel interactions occur, such as *e+a > ia*: (*egitea > egitia* ‘the doing’) or *o+a > ua* (*hauzokoa > hauzukua* ‘the neighbor’). Additionally,

there are two principal epenthesis rules after high vowel, both synthesized in this example: *perfezionatua* > *perfeziyonatuba* ‘perfected’. Second, the fall of intervocalic fricative consonants, which likely denotes vernacular uses, starts with *d*: *baditugu* > *baitugu* ‘we have (them)’, *comoditate* > *comoitate* ‘occasion’; and continues with *g*: *gastiga* > *gastia* ‘to advise/inform’, *nagusi* > *nausi* ‘boss’. In the same vein, some verbal contractions are well attested, such as *ditut* > *tut* ‘I have (them)’.

On a morphological level, auxiliary verbs exhibit great variation; for instance, some forms of the ditransitive auxiliary **eradun* have up to six variants. Finally, some archaisms must be mentioned as well. In a few letters *egin* ‘to do’ is used as an auxiliary verb (ex. 1), which would be normal in western dialects, but not in eighteenth-century Labourdin. Intransitive genitive subjects in non-finite clauses are also attested (ex. 2). This genitive marking of S withdrew to eastern dialects, and for the eighteenth century is difficult to find in Labourdin.

(1) *Çato ahal ba-daguiçu etche-rat.*
 come.IMP can if-do(AUX) home-ALL
 ‘Come home if you can’.

(2) *Desiratu dut çu-en by-en hemen yçate-a.*
 desire AUX you-GEN two-GEN here be.NMLZ-DET
 ‘I have desired that both of you were here’.

5. Epenthesis in Labourdin: the Witness of *Le Dauphin*

In this section I will analyze two phonological phenomena detected in the *Le Dauphin* letters, comparing their environments and frequencies with data from the corpus of printed historical Labourdin described in section 2. This choice is motivated by the fact that Basque dialectology has traditionally focused on verb morphology, but very little, if anything, has been said on the existence of epenthesis rules in Old Labourdin.

Except for Souletin, the easternmost dialect, Basque has a five-vowel system with a reduced number of diphthongs. Some phonological changes, such as the falling of intervocalic fricatives, have significantly increased the number of vowel sequences. Apart from that, the suffixation of the determiner *-a* or the complementizers *-an/en* and *-ala/ela* to vowel-ended stems has led vowel sequences to an extremely high frequency. Besides, Basque has developed a certain aversion to hiatuses. Vowel interaction rules are therefore among the most prolific phonological phenomena in Basque, to the extent that “They determine the physiognomy of the different varieties of Basque” (de Rijk 1970, 149). In fact, vowel sequences are subject to alteration in almost every Basque village: Hualde & Gaminde (1997) describe up to twenty nine patterns.

More interestingly, the change of *ea* and *oa* into *ia* and *ua*, respectively (*etxea* > *etxia* ‘the house’, *itsasoa* > *itsasua* ‘the sea’) —to state the outcomes that are pertinent in Labourdin—, has provoked a chain shift, with

the emergence of two kinds of epenthesis after high vowel. These epentheses, which behave as anti-hiatus tendencies, are found in the *Le Dauphin* records under the following rules: (1) the insertion of a pre-palatal glide after *i*, commonly graphed as <j>: *berriac* > *berrijac* ‘news’, *guztiek* > *guztijek* ‘everyone [ERG]’, *bi(h)otz* > *bijotz* ‘heart’, or *amudiua* > *amudijua* ‘the love’; and (2) the insertion of an approximant bilabial after *u*, graphed as : *datatua* > *datatuba* ‘dated’, *diruen* > *diruben* ‘of the money’, *zuok* > *zubok* ‘you [PL]’.

With respect to the geographical distribution, the epenthesis after *i* is attested particularly in Biscayan —with the insertion of a voiceless or a voiced pre-palatal fricative— and Guipuscoan —pre-palatal glide. The second kind of epenthesis, i.e. the insertion of a bilabial approximant after *u*, has been “general in Biscay, Gipuscoa and Navarre, and was also found in coastal Labourdin” (Hualde & Gaminde 1997, 216). This epenthetic [β] has been a receding phenomenon, and it seems to be lost in most of the area (Hualde & Ortiz de Urbina 2003, 48). Therefore, while the existence of the epenthetic *b* has been proposed for Labourdin, the epenthesis with *i*-final stems has been, thus far, ignored in this dialect. The data from *Le Dauphin* confirm that Labourdin had epenthesis after *u*, as suggested by Hualde & Gaminde. More importantly, though, they provide evidence for the existence of the epenthesis after *i*. The frequencies of both phenomena are given in table 3. While the frequency of any epenthesis never reaches 1% in printed Labourdin and there are no examples for the hiatus *io*, *Le Dauphin*

offers very different data. The insertion of *b* after *u* occurs in around 45% of cases, and the glide after *i* is inserted in almost one of every four words where it could be used.

Table 3. Frequency of epenthesis in the corpus of historical Labourdin

	<i>ua > uba</i>	<i>ue > ube</i>	<i>ia > ija</i>	<i>io > ijo</i>
17th century	0.7	0.6	0.003	-
18th century	0.96	0.14	0.005	-
19th century	0.81	0.25	0.0018	-
<i>Le Dauphin</i>	42.1	47.4	25.8	20.5

With regards to diatopic variation, both epenthesis rules are best found in the coastal area of Labourd (Figure 4), and they appear to have spread from two foci: Hendaye, on the western end of the region, and Saint-Jean-de-Luz, located in the center. Theoretically, the further propagation of the epenthesis after *u* can be explained in two ways: (1) its spreading is earlier; or (2) the rest of the region was reluctant to adopt the epenthesis after *i*.

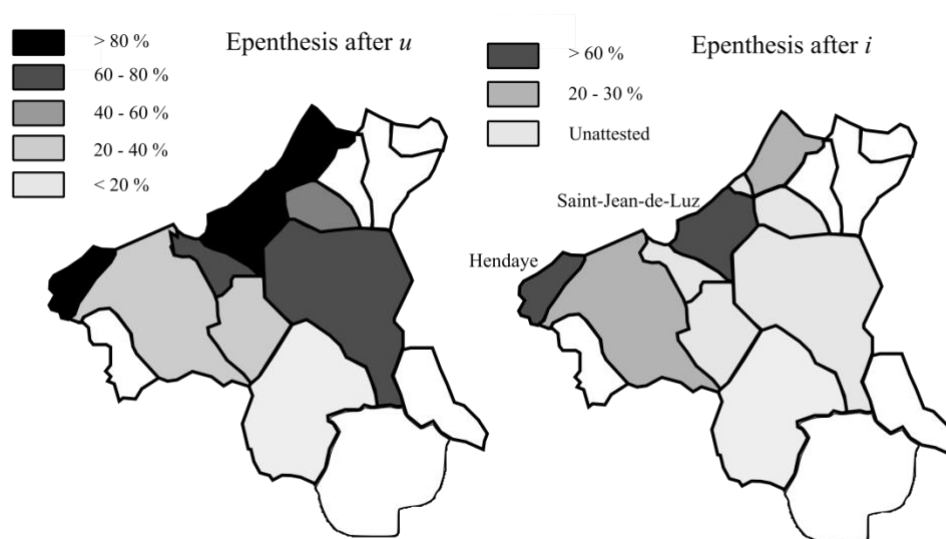


Figure 4. Diatopic variation of the epenthesis phenomena in *Le Dauphin* within the Labourdin-speaking area.

These facts stand in stark contrast with the Labourdin printed tradition. Table 3 above lists the frequencies of the phenomena in question for literary Labourdin and *Le Dauphin*. There are very few attestations of epenthesis in the literary tradition: thus, for the insertion of pre-palatal glide after *i* the occurrences out of *Le Dauphin* are due to some negligible exceptions. As for the insertion of *b* after *u*, we find it in very few writers' works. Figure 5 compares the only Labourdin authors using any epenthesis rules with the data from the *Le Dauphin* correspondence. For different reasons, these three authors happen to not represent the classical tradition of the dialect. Both Piarres Etcheverry and Alexander Mihura wrote in their marked coastal variety; in addition, Etcheverry, a sailor who translated a treatise on

navigation, had not the slightest literary concern. Finally, Wentworth Webster was an English bascologist particularly interested in folklore collection.

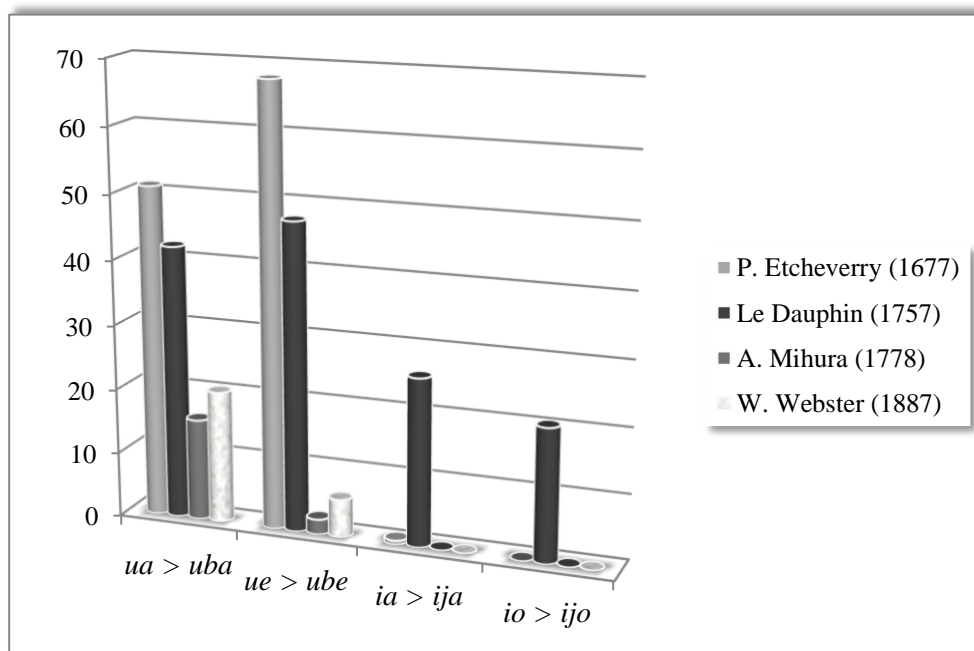


Figure 5. Frequency of the epenthesis phenomena in *Le Dauphin* and the few Labourdin writers attesting to them.

We must conclude that the epenthesis rules described in this section were common in eighteenth-century Labourd, at least in a part of its area. Nevertheless, the phenomenon was most probably perceived as a vernacular feature, set apart from prestigious uses of the language, which might explain why it does not appear in literary texts. This particular case indicates how the authors who molded what is usually called *classical* Labourdin (Urgell

2013) made choices between variants that they could consider as more adequate —whether *élite* usages or features from prestigious varieties— or less adequate, i.e. vernacular.

6. Conclusions

In this paper I have shown how the finding of unknown records can provide us with unexpected data in the history of a language. This is especially true when dealing with private documents written by people from the lower social strata, since both the nature of the texts and the social milieu of the writers make them the most reliable sources for the study of the evolution of the spoken language.

The eighteenth-century correspondence analyzed in this paper changes our understanding of Basque in many respects. Firstly, it depicts an unknown panorama of semi-literate writers and semi-professional scribes for whom Basque, and more specifically the Labourdin dialect, was an available tool for written communication. Secondly, the letters reveal the occurrence of some linguistic features that can hardly be found in the printed tradition of Labourdin. Thirdly, the representativeness of the sources enables us to make a quantitative analysis of certain phenomena which takes into account diatopic variation.

The study of two types of epenthesis after high vowel —almost unknown in historical Labourdin— places the origin of this phenomenon in the coastal area. Moreover, it illustrates the distance between the language attested in the letters and that reflected in contemporary printed works. This kind of analysis might be applied to further linguistic variables, some of them pointed out in section 4.

Finally, the construction of a literary language based on Labourdin needs further research, even though it never led to a fully standardized variety. The questions posed by van der Wal with reference to Dutch ego-documents are pertinent here: “Did the previous linguistic variation largely vanish from usage? Did literate people in everyday life write according to the norms of the preferred variants?” (2007, 85). Given that eighteenth-century Basque correspondence fills some gaps in the history of Basque, lending itself to a variationist and historical sociolinguistic-based approach, the ultimate question is to what extent is possible to undertake a history of Basque ‘from below’.

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¹ This work has received the support of the Basque Government by means of the scholarship BFI 2010-018. I am grateful to Dorota Krajewska, Bernard Oyharçabal, Blanca Urgell, Charles Videgain and three anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on this paper. I also thank Xabier Lamikiz for offering his finding to linguists.

² In this work I assume the traditional dialectal division of Basque, which distinguishes eastern and western Low-Navarrese. Note that an eighth dialect, Roncalese, has disappeared.

³ This corpus of *printed* historical Labourdin consists, century by century, of works of the following authors: Materre, Voltaire, Etcheverry of Ciboure, Haramburu, Axular, Pouvreau, Harismendy, Argaignarats, Etcheverry *Dorre*, Arambillaga and Gasteluçar (seventeenth century); Etcheverry of Sare, Chourio, Haraneder, Urte, Larreguy, Mihura, Baratciart and the anonymous tract *Jaun Dauphinen errelacionea* (eighteenth century); Duhalde, Hiribarren, Duvoisin, Goyhetche, Elissamburu, Dasconaguerre, Webster, Joannatéguy, Arbelbide, Diharasarry and the anonymous brochure *Escualdun cocinera* (nineteenth century). All these texts are available at <http://klasikoak.armiarma.com/alfa.htm>.

⁴ There are some corpora composed of several thousands of letters. That is the case of the Corpora of Early English Correspondence, with 6,039 letters (Nevalainen, & Raumolin-Brunberg) or the 38,000 Dutch confiscated documents of the *Letters as Loot* project (van der Wal, Rutten & Simons 2012).