

Communities of practice and adolescent speakers in the Basque Country.

Research and transformation face-to-face

Abstract:

In recent years, the relevant data has revealed continuous growth in knowledge of Basque. Formal education has played a significant role in this advance, in which young speakers have been front and center. Yet the levels of Basque-use, especially in regard to informal and relationship contexts, have not mirrored this increase. Expanding our understanding of this phenomenon is an urgent priority at present. But not the only one. One such concern focuses not only on accessing data and describing the situation, but also on creating understanding from within, by means of young people themselves. Specifically, this paper attempts to go more deeply into the topic via such approaches and reflect on the possibilities that the concept of “community of practice” (CofP) offers in this regard. An idea that, as demonstrated in the “D ereduko kirola” project, allows for a research model along the lines of what J.K. Gibson-Graham (2008) term a “performative ontological project”. The present work seeks to document the process that led us from analyzing different CofPs to conceiving them as safe spaces in which young people could try out modifications in their linguistic practices at different levels.

Key words: Basque language, young speakers, community of practice, sport, safe space, linguistic change.

Introduction: Young people, speakers and athletes

Leo, Joseba, and Amaia are three of the teenagers who took part in the ethnographic research we conducted in three sports clubs in the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country (also known as the Basque Autonomous Community)¹. Alongside their teammates, they were the main subjects in a study on linguistic practices in the field of sport that serves as the basis of this paper. Joseba was playing Basque pelota at the Zaramaga club in Vitoria-Gasteiz. It was Leo's first season at the Real Sociedad soccer team. Amaia was a member of the Padura basketball team in Arrigorriaga, a town near Bilbao.

We can classify the three as new speakers in Basque (NS from now on) taking as a reference point the definition by Bernadette O'Rourke, Joan Pujolar, and Fernando Ramallo: "individuals with little or no home or community exposure to a minority language but who instead acquire it through immersion or bilingual educational programs, revitalization projects or as adult language learners (O'Rourke, Pujolar & Ramallo, 2015:1).

They thus match the typical profile of young Basque speakers in the Basque Autonomous Community², whose presence has increased notably in the last decade:

In 1991 the majority of Basque speakers were native, that is, *euskaldun zaharras* [literally, "old Basque speakers"], in every age range. Two decades later, in 2011, the collective of new speakers is very important, especially among young people. Sixty percent of the population between sixteen and twenty-four years of age is Basque-speaking, and more than half are new speakers, who for the most part have studied in immersive educational models (Ortega et al. 2016: 16).

As one can see, the form of language acquisition is the main element used when it comes to defining categories such as native, nonnative, or new speaker. In everyday life, however, the social relationships that are established with the language, how it is learned, used, or the motivations associated with using it, are – we believe- equally, if not more, socially relevant elements of the speakers. Therefore, learning Basque often does not mean using it, at least outside school. In fact, this is a central issue in the language revitalization process in the Basque Country. Exploring in more detail our understanding of the underlying reasons for such low levels of Basque-use among young people -and in particular among young new speakers- is becoming an object of study in the Basque Country (Ortega et al. 2015, 2016; Urla et al., 2017, Amorrortu et al., 2017, Goirigolzarri et al. 2019; Artetxe, 2020) as well as in other sociolinguistic contexts with similar concerns (O'Rourke, Pujolar & Frekko, 2019).

¹ These participants were thirteen at the time of the study. For reasons of confidentiality, the names used in this paper are not the real ones of the people that took part in the research.

² The Basque Autonomous Community is made up of the provinces of Araba, Bizkaia, and Gipuzkoa. The Basque Country or Euskal Herria, besides these three provinces, includes Navarre, Lapurdi, Nafarroa Behera, and Zuberoa.

Yet apart from the increasing number of studies that examine the reality of young speakers, we would like to underscore a clear epistemological-methodological change in recent years. As reflected in this very volume, at present, the main concerns of researchers focus not only on accessing data and describing the situation, but on creating understanding from within, by means of young people themselves (Bucholtz et al. 2016). Specifically, this paper attempts to go more deeply into the topic via such approaches and reflect on the possibilities that the concept of “community of practice” (hereafter CofP) offers within the framework of current studies on young people and language in the Basque Country. We believe that the notion of CofP offers (especially within the sphere of free time and youth sports) a frame that allows for a research model aimed at what J.K. Gibson-Graham (2008) terms a “performative ontological project”. A way of understanding and practicing research that encourages researchers and participants to assess their practices and subjectivities. As Gibson-Graham (ibid: 618) would say, if we want to promote social change, we must change as researchers and academics and create different ways of interacting with and making use of theory. For us, the larger study that served as the basis for this text has implied one step further in that performative ontological project. In particular, our adoption not only of the CofP concept, but also how we conducted our research with participants, taking advantage of a space (in this case, sports teams) rich in possibilities for examining the relationship between young people and language. In the process both participants and researchers are transformed. In this respect, our conceptual approach and goals align with the goals of the abovementioned ontological project in understanding academic research as the search for better ways and methods of functioning as an agent of change and creating new worlds (Altuna & Hernández 2019: 629).

The present paper seeks to document the process that, as part of the research project titled “D ereduko kirola”, led us from analyzing different CofPs to conceiving them as safe spaces in which young people could try out modifications in their linguistic practices at different levels.

The text is made up of four sections. The first contains a brief introduction to the CofP idea and how it was applied to the abovementioned research. The second highlights the main characteristics of the “D ereduko kirola” project, which focused on young Basque sportswomen and men. The third presents some of the most significant results of the study. As such, we explore more deeply those elements of the CofP concept that contribute to a new ontology of language and that -in our opinion- have something to do with an emphasis on the relational and group dimension of language, the importance of analyzing language as a set of situated practices, and its capacity to transcend the theoretical realm and take on a performative dimension oriented toward change. Moreover, we include a section dedicated to the notion of safe spaces, underscoring those aspects of the “D ereduko kirola” project that encouraged us to bring -on the basis of our role as researchers and academics-

new worlds into being (Gibson-Graham 2008:614) for Basque as well. The paper ends with some brief conclusions.

Community of practice: The grounded locus for transformative understanding

As scholars working on language socialization have pointed out (Shieffelin & Ochs, 1986, 1992; Garret & Baquedano-López, 2002), daily activities condition the linguistic practices of each individual, transforming them into one type of speaker or another and shaping one type of speaker in each shared practice. For that reason, we think that the notion of community of practice is a very useful tool with which to appreciate how the different subjectivities of speakers in the collective practices they develop on a daily basis are created, maintained, and modified.

The community of practice concept (hereafter CofP) was conceived by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in their revision of learning systems and knowledge transfer in the business (1991) and school (Wenger, 1998) environment. For their part, Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (1992) adapted it in order to use it in their ethnographic research and anthropological reflections. Both authors define the CofP as follows:

(...) a CofP is an aggregate of people who, united by a common enterprise, develop and share ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, and values –in short, practices. A CofP can develop out of a formally or informally constituted enterprise (...). Once launched, it has its own life and develops its own trajectory. The development of shared practices emerges as the participants make meaning of their joint enterprise, and of themselves in relation to this Enterprise (Eckert & McConnel-Ginet, 1992:464).

In our opinion, this definition highlights distinct important aspects with which to study different linguistic phenomena. We will point out three of them.

On the one hand, the CofP concept invites us to bear in mind context. As Joan Pujolar points out: “the focus on context has led to constructing the CofP concept that allows for reconceptualizing the notion of ‘speech community’ so that it emphasizes its situationality, the contingency of its limits, and its constructed nature” (Pujolar, 2007:08). Ultimately, language and its related practices take place in a specific time and space in which they make sense.

Second, we want to underscore the group and relational dimension present in the CofP notion. The CofP is “the level of social organization at which people experience the social order on a personal and day-to-day basis, and at which they jointly make sense of that social order” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013: 46). By means of CofPs, the social (and linguistic) order comes into contact with the individual (the speaker). It is the social locus in which linguistic practices and ideologies are acquired, maintained, and transformed. And it is, of course, the place in which tensions and negotiations take place among the speakers, in relation to social variables: social class, age, background, sex-gender, and so on.

Finally, a third aspect that we seek to call attention to in the study of CofP is, precisely, what people do. In that sense of doing, people demonstrate their wish to be members of the group and show signs of their involvement with the group. As Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff point out, the CofPs are especially attractive for research, given that they demonstrate the importance of language-related aspects in the processes that lead people to take part in specific communities: “(...) becoming a member of a CofP interacts with the process of gaining control of the discourse appropriate to it” (Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999:175).

In sum, the CofP notion allows us to observe language in its context, linked to a sphere of relations and a set of concrete practices. Likewise, we believe that CofPs allow us to access the “real, credible and viable” linguistic practices (Callaghan, Moore & Simpson, 2017) of the youngest generations in a setting -that of sport- of growing interest for sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology (Madsen, 2018), yet studies of which still constitute an exception (Callaghan, Moore & Simpson, 2017) and do not exist in the Basque case.

On the basis of these premises, we decided to keep the CofP notion front and center in the “D ereduko kirola” project, focusing on the options it affords for the study of NS and the possible muda processes that may be activated within the context of group sport. In practice, as pointed out at the beginning of the paper, our method of approach to the analysis of group sports that was the aim of the research led to the emergence of a performative dimension of CofPs, which we had not addressed to date. As we will explain below, the research process carried out with young sportspeople was based on elements that, subsequently, we pointed out (Hernández, Iñarra & Altuna, forthcoming) as basic for generating safe spaces in which to manage and promote muda processes or linguistic change: (1) an emphasis on group relations and work, (2) active participation and experimentation, and (3) accompaniment (Bucholtz, Casillas & Lee, 2016).

But before exploring the possibilities of CofPs as safe spaces, we will explain the basic ideas of the methodological approaches designed for the “D ereduko kirola” project and, thereafter, we will examine some important characteristics of the sports groups analyzed. .

Methods: An ethnography in process

The reflections shared in this paper are based on the material collected in group interviews and participant observations that were carried out in 2017 and 2018 with forty young people in the Real Sociedad soccer club (seventeen adolescent boys), the Padura basketball club (eleven adolescent girls), and the Zaramaga Basque pelota club (nine adolescent boys). In all three cases, it is a question of private clubs without any links to the school or educational sphere and which young people are members of as part of the options available to them in regard to leisure and free time. Belonging to

such clubs usually implies paying an annual quota, although in the case of Real Sociedad, because it is a professional club, it may also involve economic benefits for the young people involved therein. This data come from a research project titled “D ereduko kirola”³ that was carried out over three years (2016-2018). This is one of a number of different research projects we have been carrying out since 2014 with children, adolescents, and young people (Altuna 2015, 2017; Altuna and Hernández 2018, 2019; Hernández and Altuna 2017) that we have termed *ethnography in process*. This is because we understand that social actors are “subjects in process,” people in a constant state of personal transformation that can proceed at different speeds, sometimes faster (such as during childhood and adolescence) and sometimes slower (MacDougall, 2005). Indeed, this parallels the way that our research progresses (and, on occasion, “goes backward”) at different rates.⁴

It is a process that shares some similarities with the notion of what Tim Ingold (2020) terms “ambulatory knowing” as well as the abovementioned Gibson-Graham’s approach to academia “‘as a vast uncontrolled experiment’, continually producing information about how it could be improved as an agent of change” (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 629).

The goal of the “D ereduko kirola” project was twofold. On the one hand, it was about exploring the discourses and linguistic practices of adolescents active in sports. On the other, it was an attempt to design an experimental program in order to augment and/or reinforce the use of Basque in sports teams. Within this ethnographic kind of research three techniques were used: participant observation, reflections via group dynamics, and group interviews.

The technique of participant observation was of great help when it came to collecting the practices and experiences of the people that took part in these groups. We had the opportunity to spend time with the different groups and experience sports practice (both training sessions and games). There were twenty-three participant observation sessions (lasting on average two hours) over six months. The second method was activity-based workshops. These sessions were a key aspect in developing the project. Over the course of eight months, we carried out seven sessions or workshops. In this relaxed, playful, and trusting setting, the researchers and young sportspeople were able to exchange impressions and reflect on the importance of communication in sport, their own communicative abilities, the role of Basque in their day-to-day lives (including that of their sports group), and their linguistic resources applied to sports practice. In order to encourage this group work, different tools were designed such as, for example, creating murals, role playing, analyzing and commenting

³ “D ereduko kirola”: The title refers to the immersive school model termed *Model D* that has been implemented in the Basque Autonomous Community and the Foral Community of Navarre since the 1980s. Within this model, the working language of instruction is Basque with the exception of the subjects of Spanish language and literature and English or other languages.

⁴ For further discussion of our methodology and its linkage to the anthropology of childhood and feminist epistemology, see Altuna and Hernández (2019).

on audiovisual material, and creating a list of terms that the young people used typically in their sports practice. As a corollary to this process, the young members of the three sports groups offered to take part in a “challenge”. They voluntarily promised to develop several training sessions entirely in Basque. At the end of the challenge, the young people’s impressions were recorded on a video that served, moreover, to demonstrate their assessment of what had taken place throughout the whole process.

As well as the observations and workshops, we conducted semi-structured interviews⁵ with the three coaches and all of the adolescents in the teams under study, thirty-seven in total: girls and boys, ranging in age from 12 to 15, from different contexts and sociolinguistic profiles⁶, with different youth interests but with the same basic commitment toward sport and, in particular, toward their team.

The interviews with the coaches were individual, but with the adolescents we used the group interview technique, opting in most cases for a triangular interview (Ruiz, 2012). For our final analysis, we drew upon these interviews, the data from participant observation (e.g. field diaries), as well as diverse materials created by the adolescents in the different workshops (short videos, graphic and written material, and so forth). On the basis of this material, we will now explain the different elements that helped us to contextualize the linguistic practices of these young people within the CofPs and to detect some of the changes that came about during the 2017-2018 season.

Results

Group identity: Pelota, soccer, and basketball unite us

Basque is present in the school environment and in some juvenile leisure activities. Yet, as noted, its acquisition does not necessarily lead to its use in informal settings. For that reason, we believe that the CofPs that take shape around sports, music, dance, and other leisure and free-time activities constitute fundamental spaces for developing linguistic identities.

In the cases studied we see that group identification is constructed via a shared interest in practicing a specific sporting discipline (basketball, soccer, or pelota); practices that differ from those normally undertaken within the institutional setting of schools (Madsen, 2018:19). Ways of behaving, roles, values, common beliefs, and also forms of communication emerge out of group work. Group identity does not correspond so much to some abstract characteristics or to the place in which it is

⁵ The interviews were carried out in Basque, but allowing those interviewed to change language and express themselves in any way in which they felt most comfortable. As such, as one can see in the extracts of the interviews included in the text, the use of words and expressions in Spanish was common.

⁶ Twenty-six of the thirty-seven adolescents who took part in the study were new speakers, following the previously mentioned definition of O’Rourke, Pujolar, and Ramallo (2015).

located. For example, as Jon, one of the nine adolescents within the Zaramaga Basque pelota club, explains, the game of pelota is the identification that unites the youngsters:

Ba entrenatzen gauden guztiok batzen gaitu, elkartzen gaitu, ideia berak. Gu etortzen gara hona jolastera pilotara gustatzen zaigulako.

[All of us that train together are united by the same idea. We come here to play pelota because we like it].

Our data showed that the club, the neighborhood, gender, social class, and other cultural and social aspects lend the group some complementary identity characteristics, but collective identity is constructed, above all, through the practice of pelota. The remaining elements did not impede the identification with the CofP: there are differences in socioeconomic level, differences in gender, and even in background, but the principal mark of group identity was the practice of pelota, soccer, or basketball.

On the basis of this practice-based group identity, the formation of sportspersons becomes the main objective of these CofPs: the practices of each team “construct” soccer players, pelota players, known as *pelotaris*, and basketball players. Moreover, the process of becoming an athlete involves becoming a speaker in a particular realm. As Mary Bucholtz points out, identity “is achieved and maintained through language and other social practices (Bucholtz, 1999:204),” but at the same time, the shared sports practices come to define this shared linguistic identity. Both learning processes are interrelated because, among other things, communication is an essential element in sport. It is during this process of “becoming” when we have seen the possibility to create or improve new identities related not only to sport but also to language.

We observed that talk among peers on the same team, is a very important element in their practice. In training sessions and games one typically hears expressions that denote this relevance: “Hitz egin behar dugu **constantemente**” [We have to speak **constantly**!] or “Hitz ein!, hitz ein!. Atzen gaudenak hitz ein behar deu, bestela ezin da ezer ein!” [Speak, speak! Those of us at the back must speak, if not, nothing can be done!]. In team sports, direct and constant communication among the players helps to improve the results. Indeed, it is an issue that is worked on in groups and that, according to the coaches interviewed, improves if it is implemented.

As regards one of the main functions of the clubs to which the CofPs under study belong—that is, to craft soccer players, basketball players, and *pelotaris*—we see that this process is based on the accumulation of, above all, two kinds of capital: corporal capital and cultural (sporting) capital.

⁷ In the case of the transcriptions, the Spanish words used by the informants are in bold. In this regard, one should highlight the fact that all interaction with them took place in Basque. Yet, as one can see, the use of words and expressions in Spanish was common.

The training sessions are, above all, spaces in which to improve and work on corporal techniques. Each sport implies working on specific corporal techniques. This is accompanied by the accumulation of cultural capital, especially related to values in the field of sport. For example, in Padura some of those values were pointed out to us: teamwork, effort, discipline, and the fact that not everything is competitive. A young athlete in this group, on being asked what was needed to become an athlete, replied: “Gogoak, gogoak eta entrenatzera joaterakoan kaso egitea.” [“A will, a will, and paying attention in training”].

Within this process of accumulating corporal and cultural capital, there are two influential agents. On the one hand, people who are a social reference such as, in this case, professional athletes. And on the other, people in the more immediate setting: the coaches. They teach the young people how to do things and conduct themselves.

The role of coaches is also very evident in the process of becoming an active speaker in each sports team. In the three cases under study, the language the coaches mostly use is Basque, thereby endorsing the decision of the clubs to be spaces in which to promote the use of the minoritized language. The fact that Basque is the main linguistic option favored on the part of the coaches helps to create favorable dynamics regarding its use in these small CofPs. This does not mean that the coaches do not speak Spanish occasionally; in our observations, we recorded moments in which they did so. These situations allowed the coach to get closer to the informal conversational mode of these adolescents and achieve a relaxed and close atmosphere; distinct from the school environment in which, in many cases, the obligatory use of Basque is perceived by students as part of school discipline.

Throughout the 2017-2018 season, we were able to verify that the reflection with the young people on the importance of language and communication in sport, and the involvement of the coaches when it came to creating a dynamic favorable to the use of Basque, could encourage significant changes. These were transformations that affected the way in which the young people perceived themselves as speakers and that promoted greater use of the minoritized language. In an interview with the Real Sociedad players, one of the adolescents pointed out the efforts of the sportspeople who were less accustomed to speaking Basque: “Euskeraz ez zekitenak asko saiatu dira” [“Those who didn’t know Basque made a great effort”] (Arkaitz. Young athlete. Real Sociedad).

In the Padura team, they also noted a change in attitudes in regard to linguistic uses and even the possibility that these changes could be even greater in the future:

Honi esker, nik uste dut, euskera gehiago bai erabili dugula. Gaurtik aurrera uste dut erronka bezala jartzen badugu egunero euskeraz hitz egitea lortu dezakegula [Thanks to this, I think, we have used Basque more. From now on, I reckon, if we accept it as a challenge, we can manage to speak Basque every day] (Izaro. Young athlete. Padura).

Linguistic practices, teamwork

Despite the singular importance of the coaches, we cannot ignore the fact that the processes of becoming athletes and active speakers in the CofPs are carried out in groups. The position and development of these young people, both as athletes and as speakers, depends on others. As Charles Goodwin points out: “Language is constituted not only as a public sign system but also through the mutual use of public practices for building action and meaning in concert with others” (Goodwin 2004:166). We recall that most of the subjects in our research are NS. In exploring more deeply the self-perception of the participants as regards their linguistic competence, 60 percent of them stated that they were equally comfortable in Basque and Spanish. Only 13.3 percent mentioned that they got along better in Spanish, and 26.6 percent remarked that they were better in Basque, a figure that coincides with the percentage of adolescents that acquired Basque in their family environment.

Our observations confirmed that, although they were able to speak either of the two languages, in the sports practices under study the young people demonstrated a clear tendency to use Spanish and indicated this was also the case in most of their daily activities.

Ba normalean nabaritzen da zeinek hitz egiten duen nabariago euskeraz, baina normalean, beti aritzen gara gazteleraz.

[Usually you can tell who speaks Basque more, but usually we always speak Spanish].

(Joseba. Young athlete. Zaramaga)

Why this majority use of Spanish? In the words of one adolescent: “Da hazi garena, **es con lo que hemos crecido**” [It’s how we grew up, **it’s what we grew up with**] (Andoni. Young athlete. Zaramaga).

Yet, despite this tendency toward peer relationships in Spanish, the predisposition of the clubs’ organization toward the use of Basque and its promotion through the coaches makes the adolescents relate sports practice in their teams to Basque. This is relatively unusual. While sports are widely perceived as a predominantly Spanish-speaking domain, as one of the members of Padura explained, basketball practice was, next to school, where she most encountered Basque:

Orain arte lotzen nuen [saskibaloi] erdararekin, ze zen aktibitate bat erderaz. Baina aurten ba ya euskaraz. Euskaraz hitz egiten dute entrenatzaileak batez ere, orduan euskaraz bai baina gure artean gehiago erderaz.

[Up to now, I related basketball to Spanish, because it was an activity in Spanish. But this year it’s now in Basque. The coaches mostly speak Basque, so Basque yes, but we speak more in Spanish among ourselves].

(Irati. Young athlete. Padura)

The pelota players in Zaramaga said that they spoke more Basque in the court than in the street (where they rarely used that language), although less than at school. Linguistic practices are different at Real Sociedad,⁸ given that close to half the adolescents in the team are not NS and they are used to using Basque on a daily basis. This means that the NS in that CofP have more opportunities to speak Basque in their sports practice than in other everyday settings.

As we have been pointing out, one of the virtues of CofPs is their emphasis on a vision of language as a collective element that, specifically, contributes to reaffirming group identity and its commitment to shared objectives (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992: 464). Yet, what happens when the very language and register demanded in order to express oneself as a collective (in this case, young sportspeople) appear among the most highlighted characteristics within the linguistic capital of the speakers?

As Kike Amonarriz has pointed out, collective identity related to youth culture is expressed, above all, via informal oral language (Amonarriz, 2005). Informal oral language provides them with the necessary linguistic capital to “be young people.” As we have seen, our young sportspeople -and mainly those characterized as NS- have acknowledged that Spanish is their usual language in everyday informal relations. Indeed, the more informal the practices become, the more evident the presence of Spanish. One of the most common resources to increase discursive colloquialism is code switching: that is, the use of Spanish and Basque within the same conversation and even sentences. We observed that code switching is very common, but it was not an exclusive recourse of the new speakers in our study, as certain research carried out in the Basque Country in recent years demonstrates (Lantto, 2015).

Finally, we want to highlight the relationship between code choice and emotions in the context of sports. In the Basque context, one of the arguments that is most often used to explain the scant presence of Basque in the sports world is the lack of “technical” materials (manuals, dictionaries, etc.) in the language, taking for granted that the lack of vocabulary in Basque impeded or hindered its presence in sports. However, we have been able to observe that one of the greatest obstacles to the use of Basque was related to (spontaneous) expression of emotions – clearly, one of the central aspects within the sports context.

Throughout the research, young sportspeople and coaches have underscored the difficulty in changing linguistic habits related to expressing emotions such as anger or joy. Yet it does not appear to be an unsurmountable obstacle given that -as the protagonists themselves recognized- one outcome

⁸ Real Sociedad is a professional soccer club in the city of San Sebastián, Basque Country, founded in 1909. Its youth section has been very successful in developing internationally renowned players, such as World Cup winners Xabi Alonso and Antoine Griezmann.

of the work undertaken during the 2017-2018 school year was an increase in the use of such expressions in Basque:

Niretzat zailago izaten da, adibidez, haserretzen naizenean. Azkenean ez duzulako pentsatzen eta ateratzen zaizu beti hitz egiten duzun hizkuntza [baina] ikusten da ere entrenamenduetan haiek hasi direla gehiago erabiltzen [For me, it's hard, for example, when I get angry. In the end, because you don't think and the language you always speak comes out [but] one can see in training sessions, too, that they have also starting using it a lot more] (Itsaso. Coach. Padura).

Sport is an activity that implies many emotions, and we need to know more about how emotions can influence, positively or negatively, processes of linguistic conversion in favor of Basque (Goirigolzarri et al. 2019:38).

From CofPs to Safe spaces, exploring possibilities for linguistic change

The notion of “safe spaces” originated in late 20th-century American feminist activism (The Roestone Collective, 2014), which, among other demands, called for safe environments at the emotional and ontological level for “gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex people”. In our case, we equate the notion of a safe space with what Fernando Ramallo (2020: 245) points out as secondary conditions that function to either stimulate or hinder “muda” processes or linguistic change. We would like to underscore the fact that, as Ane Ortega, Jone Goirigolzarri and Estibaliz Amorrortu point out in this very edition, when we speak about “muda” or change, we do so in a very widespread sense, bearing in mind different degrees and ways of understanding or practicing transformations, but always taking into consideration that it implies an opportunity to advance or, if it continues, to complete a muda.

In Ireland, Bernadette O’ Rourke and John Walsh (2020) have used the same concept to refer to “conversation circles”: “dedicated social spaces where those wishing to use Irish may do so in an environment where speaking Irish is normal and encouraged” (O’Rourke & Walsh, 2020:168). These safe spaces are also those described by Maite Puigdevall, Alba Colombo, and Joan Pujolar in their research with *Colles de Diables* in Barcelona (2019) when they speak about public spaces that afford NS the opportunity to speak the language, not as a (formal) learning activity, but as “a safe space that offers the possibility of practicing as a new speaker of the language in fairly ideal conditions, without being too exposed to the customary linguistic scrutiny on the part of society in general” (Puigdevall et al., 2019:128).

In our research, we find that the sports team may also function like a safe space or what Wacquant (2006) calls “protected sociability.” We think that in places like Vitoria-Gasteiz, Arrigorriaga, and, to a lesser extent, Donostia, in which there are insufficient conditions in which to speak Basque in public, these clubs try to offer safe spaces in which to use the minoritized language. Through sports practices, feelings of solidarity and belonging to a community are activated. Furthermore, the commitment of the clubs, especially through the coaches, makes it possible to create that safe space so that new speakers and speakers that, in general, would be willing to modify their linguistic habits. It is not obligatory to use either language, but certain conditions are created so that in that physical and social space priority is given to Basque. We are alluding to what -following Ramallo (2020)- we have already defined as “secondary conditions” and what, in some cases, may be related to aspects that, as academics and researchers, concern us (Gibson-Graham, 2008:615): “How can our work open up possibilities? What kind of world do we want to participate in building? What might be the effect of theorizing things this way rather than that?” In our case, the research has shown us that a theoretical concept like that of CofPs can be converted into a tool that contributes to performing change.

Conclusions

In the fieldwork we verified that the Zaramaga pelota court, the Padura basketball court, and the Real Sociedad soccer field are not linguistic oases: Spanish is also a language that one hears in these sports spaces. The abovementioned clubs are sports organizations but also contexts in which there is “relational work” (Clark-Parson 2018: 2130): closeness, cooperation, friendship, respect, and so forth. Hence, language can be observed as part of what makes us into a “team”, in which, based on the abilities of each speaker, one may explore new linguistic possibilities, reinforce or activate *mudas* collectively, and/or create new “habits.”

This is the context in which the process associated with the research created the option to reflect on and share opinions and experiences in a non-typical way in spaces in which young speakers come together. There was collective reflection on communication and language in the sports environment, there was work on linguistic recourses linked to the sports environment, and, above all, a space and an opportunity were offered so that the adolescents could use Basque in a setting that they did not always identify with that language. We believe it is important to underscore the collective nature of the linguistic dynamics: speaking is teamwork that requires a safe space in which each speaker may experiment, reinforce, or activate new habits.

In this project, we have worked with young adolescents. One of the goals of the research group was to maintain front and center both the specific characteristics of the people at this stage of their

lives and those of the specific environment in which they are getting along: the CofPs (sports groups in this case). The main conclusion of the “D ereduko kirola” project has been its capacity to expand the CofP concept to the point of converting it into a learning and transformative tool both for the young speakers and the research team. In this sense, we think that the notion as defined by Eckert and McConnell (1992) involves implicitly an ontological challenge. Any work on trying to understand CofPs may lead in research and academic practice to reformulating definitions of language and speakers and, in the case of the young speakers themselves, to being more aware of their capacities and potential as Basque speakers.

The words of one of our young speakers, when asked to describe the process she had experienced throughout the research, serve as a means of bringing this text to a close:

Liga hau hasi ginenean piska bat esfortzu egin behar genuen euskeraz mintzatzeko. Egia da gure entrenatzaileak saiatzen ziren guri esaten ‘*venga*, mesedez piska bat euskeraz’, guri hitz egiten ziguten euskeraz eta...Erronka hau egin eta gero esfortzua ez dugu egin behar eta ondo egiten dugu, moldatu egiten gara!

[When we began the season we had to make an effort to speak in Basque. It’s true that our coaches tried to tell us ‘**come on**, a little bit in Basque please’ and that they spoke to us in Basque. After meeting this challenge we don’t have to make an effort and we do so fine, we get by!]

(Leire. Young athlete. Padura)

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