Basques, Particles, and Babytalk: A Case for Pragmatics
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# Basques, Particles, and Babytalk: A Case for Pragmatics*

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Pragmatics is catching on with the speed of a methadrine bat. And, rightly so. For several years we have concerned ourselves with the formalizing of rules, not taking into account the important facts of context that motivate and specify the conditions under which the rule in question may operate at all.

Within the domains of syntax and semantics we have a theory (or theories if you hold that there are real empirical differences between Generative Semantics and Interpretive Semantics) which gives us a basic framework in which to formulate and test data. It is doubtful, however, that such a theory exists in the area of pragmatics. There is Performative Theory (as best discussed in Sadock 1974) which attempts to account for the various forces underlying speech acts, and is thus able to account for a large part of the intent of the speaker. Performative Theory, however, comes dangerously close to bursting its seams if made to account for the more subtle factors of language use, such as deliberate ambiguity (Weiser 1974).

Much of the recent work of G. Lakoff (1971, 1974) is devoted to incorporating facts of context into existing theory, mainly by means of transderivational constraints. It is not clear, however, that facts of context should be included somehow in the derivation of sentences. Lakof leaves the question open, but shows that such facts can be formalized using the transderivational constraints with a set of conditions on their operation.

What follows is not meant to contribute to the development of a theory of pragmatics, but rather offers data from Basque that is shown to be contextually dependent. Whatever develops as a theory of pragmatics will have to account for data like this. Despite the lack of a cogent theory much can be done to uncover and describe facts of context.

There are two independent problems at hand. One is the particle system in Basque, and the other is the use of palatalization in expressive speech. Of the recent work done in the area of pragmatics, most has been concerned with the interaction of syntactic rules and facts of context. The rule which moves Basque particles to their correct surface location (always the position of focus) is probably the same rule that puts the topic into the position of focus. The problem of focus in Basque is a difficult one, but is as interwoven with facts of context as it is in other languages. Thus, the Basque particles are subject to a syntactic rule that is motivated by pragmatic facts. The second problem, that of expressive palatalization in Basque, shows rules of phonology to be quite dependent on context.

## I. The Basque Particles

Basque is an ergative language, exhibiting a complex system of inflection. Being a strong SOV language, Basque is only happy when suffixing. The particles, however, are perversely prefixing, proclitics to the verb. There are two conjugations: one, synthetic, is limited to only a few verbs; the other, periphrastic, consists of the infinitive form of the verb (sometimes marked for habitual or future) and an auxiliary

that carries all the agreement information. This auxiliary form is made up of pronominal markers referring to the speaker, the subject, the object, indirect object, and to the addressee of the utterance. In the second person familiar Basque makes its only gender distinction, using one marker for second person masculine singulars and another for feminine addressees.

The position immediately preceding the verb is the position of focus. Word order aside from this position is relatively free. The particles (with the exception of ba-/ba, bai which will be discussed below) always occupy the position of focus. Their function is similar to that of the modal adverbs in English, but they are not transportable. The particles are ba-/ba, bai 'affirmative', ez 'negative', omen (bide) 'reportedly', ote (othe) 'perhaps', al 'interrogative', and edo 'probably'. The variants in parentheses represent forms present in dialects other than Guipuzkoan, the dialect exemplified here. There are several other particles occurring in the various dialects, but I have listed only those which occur in all the dialects. The particles, depending on their individual meanings, serve to alter the force of the proposition. [1] Omen, ote, and edo are hedges, weakening or indirectly questioning the proposition, ez negates the statement, al (and othe in the Northern dialects) changes a statement to a question, and finally, ba-/ba, bai serves to strengthen the force of the proposition. This latter particle is by far the most interesting and will be the focus of the discussion. Some examples of the other particles:

1) a. Patxi'k lerkai'rekin Franco'ri etorriko da.
Patxi - a bomb-with Franco-for- will come.

b. Patxi'k lerkai'rekin Franco'ri etorriko omen da.
Patxi a bomb-with Franco-for reportedly will come.

2) a. Zure aitona joan da? Your grandfather went.

b. Zure aitona joan ote da. Your grandfather perhaps went.

3) a. Lerkai aundi bat dezu. You have a big bomb.

b. Lerkai aundi bat al dezu? Do you have a big bomb?

4) a. Sorgiña mendi'tik etorri da. The witch came from the mt.

b. Sorgiña mendi'tik etorri edo da.
The witch mt.-from probably came.

5) a. Sorgiña LSA'ra Florida'n joango da.
The witch LSA-to Florida-in will go.

b. Sorgiña LSA'ra Florida'n ez da joango.
The witch LSA-to Florida-in not will go.

In the case of omen, ote, and edo, the particle indicates the speaker's evaluation of the proposition in which it appears. Omen, removes from the speaker the responsibility of the content of the proposition. It is similar semantically to 'they say' in English. Ote lends a sense of doubt as to the liklihood of truth of the proposition, and tends to indirectly question the proposition.[2] The nearest equi-

valent to the function of ote in English is that of the rhetorical tag questions, with falling intonation. (R. Lakoff 1972) Edo assigns a degree of likelihood to the truth value of the proposition. Al is clearly interrogative and ez negates.

It could be claimed that omen, ote, and edo act like sentential adverbs in English and could therefore be accounted for in a Performative Theory similar to that discussed in Corum, 1974.[3] There are problems with such an analysis.

Omen, for instance, cannot really be accounted for in such a framework. Omen is translated as 'reportedly' or 'they say'. In order to use omen, both the speaker and the hearer must share a common understanding, sometimes called pragmatic presupposition (Keenan 1971), of who is responsible for the reporting, who the they of 'they say' refers to. In most cases the they of 'they say' does not have a specific referent, but the speaker is expected to be able to come up with a source should he be asked to do so. This notion of pragmatic presupposition cannot be accounted for in any existing theory of semantics. While the truth values of both 1) a. and b. are the same, one of the sentences may be appropriate under certain contextual conditions, whereas the other may be inappropriate, so the use differs, even though the two sentences have the same truth values.

Ba-/ba, bai is the most interesting of the Basque particles. It is also the most difficult to translate. It has no direct translation into English, and has many, many different uses and associated meanings in Basque. It also combines with other particles and other parts of speech to form idiomatic expressions that are likewise difficult to translate. Of the variants I have listed, ba- is proclitic, attached to synthetic verbs. As I mentioned above, there are two conjugations in Basque; the synthetic, or strong, conjugation is a single verb form, carrying tense and person information; the periphrastic conjugation contains a relatively stable verb form and an auxiliary form. Synthetic verbs cannot stand alone, or begin a sentence without the ba- proclitic.

6) Badator nere maitea.
Is coming my sweetie-pie.

7) Badakizu sorginak etorriko direla.
You know witches will come they-that (complementizer)

The synthetic verb forms are greatly limited in the language today, and for most of them there is a semantically equivalent periphrastic equivalent. When both a synthetic and a periphrastic variant do occur, the synthetic variant is felt to be the stronger. The frequency of the ba- proclitic with the synthetic verbs contributes to this stronger reading.

The other variants, ba, and bai, are free forms. They are semantically equivalent and are merely dialectal variants. In most dialects bai means 'yes', while in some dialects ba means 'yes'. I have not been able to determine if dialects using bai 'yes' use the bai form for the affirmative particle, and those with ba 'yes' use the ba form for the

affirmative particle, though I suspect this to be the case. Ba or bai, I will use ba in examples here unless they are examples quoted directly from a text written in a dialect that uses bai.

While ba- is a proclitic and thereby always in the position of focus, the free form ba occurs independently and is not restricted to the position of focus as the other particles discussed above. It often follows the proposition and serves to reinforce the proposition, to strengthen the force of the assertion.

8) a. Nekane'k lerkaia ekarri du.
Nekane bomb-the brought it.

b. Nekane'k lerkaia ekarri du ba!
Nekane bomb-the brought it, for sure!

9) Utzi ontzia, nik jasoko det bai! (from Alzo, pg. 177)
(You) left vase, I take care for sure!
You've left the vase, and I'll be sure to take care of it.

In the examples above I have translated the ba or bai as 'for sure', but it could mean 'certainly' or 'really' in the intensifier sense.

While ba is commonly attached to the end of a proposition it can appear near most any constituent in the sentence and serves to emphasize that constituent. Here again, ba shows a function similar to that of certain sentential adverbs, and some particles in English. (see Corum, to appear, and James 1973). Consider the following examples:

10) Elurra asi zan, bai laster etorri ziran aurrak. (Alzo)
Snow began to fall, very quickly came they the children.

11) Oiek bai direla gauze makurrek. (N'Diaye)
These certainly are things unlucky.

Unlike most sentential adverbs in English, ba can appear in questions. As was mentioned above, the position of focus is that position directly preceding the verb, and in a question the question particle al appears in the position of focus, as in 3) b. above. When ba occurs in a question, however, it takes the position of focus, and the al moves up one slot. The presence of ba serves to question the truth value of the whole proposition, not just question a particular constituent.

12) a. Patxi al dator sorgiña'rekin? Bai, Patxi dator.
Patxi ? is coming the witch with Yes, it is Patxi who is coming with the witch.

b. Patxi ba al dator sorgiña'rekin? Bai, badator.
Patxi ? is coming the witch with

'Is it the case that Patxi is coming with the witch?'
'Yes, it is' (Lit. He is coming)

Note that if ba occurs in the question that it will appear in the answer.

A semantic note about the meaning of ba.....the verb 'to know' in Basque is a synthetic verb and for this reason takes ba more frequently to begin with, but we note that 'know' always occurs with ba. Given a moment's thought it is noted that 'knowing' is not something that can be hedged, you either know something or you don't, so it is not so unexpected that the affirmative particle came to be associated with the lexical entry of this verb. Ba can be used to strengthen a negation as in c. below:

13) a. Badakit. I know it.
b. Ez dakit untsa. I don't know for certain.
c. Bada nik ezdakit. It is for sure that I don't know it!

In the c. example above the ba lends a sense of absolutivity to the negation. [4]

There exists a strategic function of certain sentential adverbs in English, like 'obviously', 'surely', 'certainly', and some adverbial phrases like 'no doubt', 'needless to say', and 'of course'. In some contexts they function to coax the hearer into believing the proposition to which they are adjoined.

14) Obviously, / No doubt, / Surely, / Needless to say, } Patty Hearst is in Guatemala.

The speaker may not be certain, or even believe, that Patty Hearst is in Guatemala, but for whatever reasons he may have, he wants the hearer to believe this, and uses the sentential adverb or adverbial phrase as a strategic device to lend strength to the force of the assertion. (See Corum, to appear, for a more detailed discussion of this function)

Ba has many different functions and associated meanings. One of these functions appears to parallel that of the sneaky use of sentential adverbs and adverbial phrases in English. The subtle differences in the meaning of ba are very dependent on the context in which it is used. Because ba is so context-dependent, it is often difficult to elicit examples without setting some sort of context where the ba might naturally occur. I have found Basque poker games to be one of the best "contexts" for gathering examples. [5] Recently I tried using ba in the following situation.....the betting in Basque poker goes from player to player, first betting on the high card, then the low card, then on pairs. In order to bet on a pair you must first declare that you do have a pair. The dealer askes: "Pareja al dezu?" 'Do you have a pair?' to which you either reply: "Bai, pareja det." 'Yes, I have a pair.' or "Ez, ez det pareja." 'I don't have a pair.' When it came my turn to bet on a pair I was asked if I had a pair, to which I hazarded the reply: "Bai, pareja badet!" Following this, my partner proceeded to bet a great deal on our hands, somewhat to my horror, for while I did indeed have a pair, it was only a pair of threes. In the rage that ensued following my exposure I was accused of cheating, of declaring that I had had a "good" pair. When I argued that I had only said that I had a pair, my partner yelled that I had said "Pareja BAdet!" with such strong stress on the ba that there was

little doubt that he had understood the ba to have a very strong intensifying function.

The point of this is the indication that ba can be used similarly to the sentential adverbs in English in their sneaky use, that of coaxing the hearer into accepting or believing the content of the proposition to which they are adjoined.

Finally, ba can occur with other particles. In the dialect of the Northern provinces, ahal is a modal meaning 'can, possibility' and is not the same as the al I discussed above, which had interrogative force. The particle with interrogative force in these dialects is othe, as was mentioned above:

15) Ba ahal da bertze holako joiarik. (Lafitte)

There are other such pearls.
'There are other pearls, I think, of this type'

16) Ba othe da bertze holako joiarik. (Lafitte)

Are there other such pearls.
'Do there really exist other pearls of this type?'

The translations given above do not clearly indicate the subtle ways that ba interacts with the other two particles. In 15) ba affirms the modal 'can'. Whereas 'can' is somewhat of a hedge, more clearly understood if the sentence had been translated 'There can be, etc.', the ba strengthens, so the hedge and ba are contradictory in the ways that they affect the proposition. The translation, given by Lafitte expresses this combined force as a parenthetical.

The example in 16) is similar to the example 12) above where ba occurs in a question. In 16), however, the ba does not occur in the position of focus, i.e. immediately before the verb da, in which case it would serve to question the truth of the whole proposition, but rather it occurs in the position of secondary focus, in front of othe. Here it seems to indicate that the speaker expects a positive answer, the 'really' of the Lafitte translation is a request to confirm what the speaker already suspects to be the case. That the use of ba with othe indicates the speaker expects a positive answer is further confirmed by the following:

17) Ba othe da nehor? (Lafitte)

Is there really someone (there)?

18) Ez othe da nehor? (Lafitte)

Isn't there anyone (there)?

In the above examples the 'someone' and 'anyone' interpretations of nehor are determined by the presence of the affirmative ba or the negative ez. In 17) the speaker is assuming that there is indeed someone there, and is asking to confirm his belief. In 18) the speaker is assuming that there isn't anyone there, and expects a negative answer. A neutral way of asking if there was anyone there would not employ either the ba or the ez:

19) Nehor <u>othe</u> da?

Is anyone there? (No expectations)

In the discussion of <u>ba-/ba, bai</u> I have shown that this particle can be used to affirm or strengthen the force of an assertion, it can intensify a constituent within a proposition, can change the scope of a question from a constituent to the whole proposition, can be used in a way such as to coax the hearer to accept or believe the content of the proposition, can be used in combination with other particles, and finally, can be used in a question when the speaker expects a positive answer. Some of these various uses are dependent on context and on the reasons the speaker has for using them. Such facts cannot be wired into an analysis using a Performative Theory model. They could be accounted for using transderivational constraints that would hold over both the derivation underlying the surface structure and the derivation that is implied by the meaning of that derivation, Such an account implicitly claims that pragmatic information must be included in the derivation of a sentence, and given what little work has been done in the area of pragmatics, this is a premature claim.

As was previously mentioned, the other particles depend on facts of context as well. <u>Omen</u> requires that the speaker and the hearer share a common understanding of 'who' the 'they' of 'they say' can refer to. There are various reasons why a speaker may wish to remove from himself the responsibility of the content of the proposition. With <u>ote</u>, the force of the assertion is so weakened as to turn it into an indirect question. This is a case of an utterance having a double illocutionary force. It was also noted that despite the weakening effect of <u>ote</u>, the speaker still expects a positive answer or response.

The truth values for the sentences with or without the particles will be the same, but the conditions determining when they can be used appropriately differ. Although they have the same truth values there will be certain contexts where one will be appropriate and the other will not, e.g. in a poker game. While no widely-accepted theory of pragmatics exists to date, the kind of data discussed here is the sort of thing such a theory will have to account for.

II. Expressive Palatalization in Basque

Other than altering sentence stress or using nasalization for purposes of irony, I am not aware of the existence of any phonological rules that are completely dependent on context. In Basque, however, such an example exists. When speaking to a good friend, a child, or anyone with whom you share a certain amount of solidarity, Basques will palatalize several consonants which are not otherwise palatalized. Fir I should mention that palatalization does occur automatically given a strictly specified phonetic environment. These rules are given in the generalized schemata below:

20) Automatic Palatalization

$$k,g,x, \longrightarrow \text{front} / \_\_ i$$

$$\left.\begin{matrix} t,n, \\ l,r, \end{matrix}\right\} \longrightarrow \begin{matrix} t' & n' \\ & l' \end{matrix} / i \_\_ V$$

An example of this rule can be found above in the word sorgiña 'witch'.

In the case of expressive palatalization, however, there is no specific environment for the change. It is simply triggered by the feelings of the speaker. The following consonants undergo expressive palatalization:

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 21) | l → l' | Example: | polit | polli̇t | 'pretty' |
| | n → n' | | onon | oñȯn | 'bonbon' |
| | s → š | | neska | neška | 'girl' |
| | t → t' | | tipi | ttipi | 'little' |
| | tz [c] → č | | tzar | čar | 'naughty' |
| | z [s] → š | | zakur | šakur | 'dog' |
| | d → j | (No. dialects) | eder | ejer | 'beautiful' |

Unless we are to say that phonological rules can 'look back' to semantic structure to find out how the speaker 'feels', there is no way to account for the facts of expressive palatalization in Basque. Even if the rule were able to look back to another level of the derivation, it isn't very clear how such information as to the speaker's feelings would be included in any level of derivation. We are faced with a case of a phonological rule completely dependent on the context of the utterance for its environment.

I mentioned early in this paper that the rule that moves NPs to the position of focus, immediately before the verb, would depend on pragmatic factors. The different meanings associated with ba when it is in final position, in the position of focus in a question, in the position of secondary focus in a question, or in the immediate environment of a particular constituent, indicate that the rule that delivers ba to its surface address is indeed dependent on facts of the context in which the utterance is made.

In conclusion then, we have found a syntactic rule and a phonological rule in Basque which both interact with pragmatic factors.

## FOOTNOTES

* I am grateful to Maria Etchamendy of Gardnerville, Nevada and Eugene Azpetia of San Francisco, California, for their patient help. My poker partners prefer to remain anonymous, but their help in providing the proper "contexts" necessary for a study of the particles was invaluable, and costly.

1. A recent paper by Frances Karttunen shows the system of Finnish clitics to have several functional properties similar to those of the Basque particles.
2. The variant othe occurs in the Northern dialects and has a fully interrogative force.
3. This account derives sentential adverbs from a conjoined structure where the performative verb of the proposition is ASSERT. The second conjunct consists of the semantic structure of the adverb with its own illocutionary force based on the speaker's evaluation. I no longer consider this to be a viable analysis for all sentential adverbs. The use of evaluative adverbs is pragmatically more complex than

just saying they represent the speaker's evaluation of the proposition. This type of analysis does not capture the more subtle facts of use. The transportability of such adverbs is quite dependent on facts of context, such as speaker assumptions, previous discourse, etc. (See Chapter Two of Corum, to appear, for a detailed revision of the treatment of evaluative adverbs.)

4. Ba can be used to add strength to either an affirmative or negative reply:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| i) | Gezurra esan al dek? | Bai, ba! |
| | Lie-a say ? you(masc. sg.) | |
| | 'Did you tell a lie?' | 'I sure did!' |
| ii) | Gezurra esan al dek? | Ez, ba! |
| | 'Did you tell a lie?' | 'Absolutely not!' |

In ii) the reply 'Ez, ba!' gives the answer, no, and then the ba serves to affirm, or strengthen the answer.

5. Basque poker is called Muz, meaning 'face'. The game is played by four, forming two pairs of partners. When the hand, four cards, is first dealt, the partners can exchange information as to which cards they hold by a quick series of facial signals, such as a wink, raising an eyebrow, a quick smirk, etc. The signals are fixed and you are not allowed to signal something that you do not have. In a split second you must signal to your partner the contents of your hand, receive his signals, and at the same time try to catch the signals being exchanged by the other two partners.

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