

# The Power of Culture: Examining the Mysterious and Unique Origins of the Basque Language

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## ABSTRACT

The Basque language and its unique status as a linguistic isolate in Europe have puzzled scholars, linguists, and historians for many years. The following paper summarizes notable works and theories that attempt to either explain the origins of the Basque language or to connect the Basque language with another language, their reasonings, and their fallacies. The paper begins by discussing Biblical theories of Basque's origins from medieval scholars of the 14th to 15th century before transitioning to the various attempts made by contemporary linguists and historians to connect Basque with other languages. Research is encouraged to be done on the subject of Basque's origins and how it got its distinct status as a linguistic isolate. Finally, theories are proposed in the paper which attributes the development and preservation of the Basque language to the nature of its people.

## Introduction

Language is the primary means of communication among humans, and it is a concept on which societies are built. As human societies began to evolve and develop, so too did their languages. The earliest forms of human language can be classified as proto-languages, which are theoretical languages that linguists use to draw connections and similarities to the languages of today. As early human societies settled in different regions worldwide, they experienced geographical isolation from other societies. Through many generations, these groups developed their own cultures and languages which evolved from their proto-languages. As people inhabited lands across the planet, different languages evolved in different regions from their original proto-languages. Today, the map of the world can be visualized in regions where languages share a common proto ancestor. However, within the Westernmost area of the Pyrenees, a small region does not seem to fit into this map. The Basque region is home to Euskara, also known as the Basque language, which is spoken by over one million people worldwide across many dialects and is crucial to the Basque identity.

This language stands out to be a peculiar linguistic isolate that does not seem to be related to any other existing languages despite being surrounded by Proto-Indo-European influence. The origins of the Basque language remain a mystery that has puzzled scholars, linguists, and historians for centuries. It is both grammatically and linguistically distinct from every other language in the world, which has created many origin myths as well as academic theories to find its mysterious origins. However, the true origins of Basque which are similar to all other languages in the world, may only rest in theory. What can be determined regarding the Basque language is its language family and its linguistic ancestor known as Proto-Basque, a hypothetical language constructed through linguistic comparisons from which Basque is derived. Unlike most other languages, today Basque remains as isolated as it ever was. Linguists should continue to pursue research on deciphering how Basque functioned long ago through artifacts such as the "Hand of Irulegi" which contains four undeciphered words with limitless possibilities for further analysis.

Linguists generally compare two or more languages to find relationships between them. When two languages share the same feature, and there is no obvious explanation for this, linguists often theorize that the

feature has been inherited from a parent language. A common ancestor is deduced for many modern languages through this method of linguistic comparison. Almost all European languages that surround the Basque country descend from the Proto-Indo-European language. This is an example of an ancestor language that linguists have reconstructed through the examination of linguistic features common among modern-day languages. Its descendants span from the Gaelic languages of the plains of Ireland to the Bengali language of east India. Branches of Proto-Indo-European include the Germanic branch which has developed into English, Swedish, Danish, Dutch, and German and the Latin branch which has developed into French, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, and Italian. Languages that descend from Proto-Indo-European cover nearly all of Europe, Russia, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. Further east, Uralic languages have evolved into modern-day Hungarian, Estonian, Finnish, and Lapp. Linguists classify Basque as a language isolate because it cannot be related to Proto-Indo-European, Uralic, or any proto-language family in the world. This adds to its cultural and linguistic uniqueness, making it a subject of fascination for linguists, anthropologists, and other scholars since the Middle Ages. These scholars developed many theories, from the belief that Basque originated from the mix of tongues at Babel, to linguistic hypotheses that have either improved upon or omitted over time. With each discovery, debate, or idea comes a new piece of the puzzle that attempts to uncover this mystery.

## How Basque Works and Why Basque is not Indo-European and is Instead a Language Isolate

The conclusion that Basque is a linguistic isolate rests heavily on linguists' inability to relate it to its surrounding Indo-European languages. Why can Basque not be considered part of the Indo-European language family? After all, the Indo-European family includes languages ranging from Welsh, all the way to Sanskrit with words like “*fel hyn*” and “*एवं*” which are considered linguistically similar to English.<sup>1</sup> Surely the Basque language could somehow be included in this family. Additionally, linguists hypothesize that prior to the arrival of Proto-Indo-European, there existed pre-Indo-European language substrates such as a Proto-Germanic substrate and a Greek substrate, which have influenced the development of modern languages. All of those pre-Indo-European substrates have evolved into Indo-European languages today as they took in elements from the Proto-Indo-European language into their own, but Basque has not, even though the Basque language itself has been influenced by Indo-European Latin. Significantly, many of its words are borrowed from Romance languages.<sup>2</sup>

What makes Basque stand out as a pre-Indo-European language is its morphological typology. Morphological typology is an order of language classification that studies how languages build their words. This approach studies morphemes, or the smallest meaningful constituent of a linguistic expression (analogous to how cells are the building blocks of life, morphemes are the building blocks of languages)<sup>3</sup>, and determines if a language is synthetic or analytic. Analytic languages are languages that generally break down large concepts into numerous words, relying heavily on word order and auxiliary words for meaning.<sup>4</sup> Synthetic languages, on the other hand, combine many concepts into one word. Synthetic languages can be further split into two categories: agglutinative languages and fusional languages.<sup>5</sup> Agglutinative languages tend to link multiple morphemes together with each morpheme, which indicates an inflection (case, tense, voice, aspect, person, etc.), while fusional languages use a single inflectional morpheme to indicate grammatical and syntactic features.<sup>6</sup> Basque is an agglutinative language, while Indo-European languages are fusional languages. This tends to make Basque words much longer than Indo-European words. A heavily fusional language such as Latin could combine up to five grammatical attributes with one suffix “-o” (e.g., the Latin “*amo*” meaning “I love,” is first person, singular, indicative mood, active voice, present tense), whereas agglutinative languages could have 2-3 suffixes. For example, in Basque, the ergative form of the article “dog” in the third person plural form, “*txakurrek*,” has two morpheme suffixes, one for plurality (-e-) and one for ergativity (-k). While Basque is an

agglutinative language, making it stand out from Indo-European languages, Basque's ergative-absolutive alignment is what makes it distinct from the average European language including Uralic languages.

An ergative absolutive language is a language where the subject of the intransitive sentence is the same as the direct object of a transitive sentence.<sup>7</sup> To appreciate this distinction, one must know the difference between a transitive sentence and an intransitive sentence. A transitive sentence has one or more objects (Alex (agent) likes Bob (object)), while an intransitive verb has no object (Alex (subject) eats). Each language has three basic parts of speech: a subject, an agent (the subject of a transitive sentence), and an object. In English, when the subject and agents of these sentences are converted to pronouns, the subject and agent would have the same pronoun (He (subject) eats. He (agent) likes him (object)). This is true for the Indo-European languages, which linguists designate as nominative-accusative languages. For an ergative absolutive language, however, the subject and object are grouped together and thus would share the same pronoun (He (subject) eats. Him (agent) likes he (object)). There are additional differences regarding syntax, sentence structure, and the use of morphemes which separate the two types of languages, but those differences generally stem from this core principle. Once the twelve grammatical cases are added to form a complete sentence, the direct translation of a Basque sentence would look very strange to an Indo-European speaker. For example: "*giznoak umeari liburura eman dio*" meaning "the man has given the book to the child," is directly translated as "man-the-E child-the-D book-the given has." The lurking E stands for the ergative case which only exists in ergative absolutive languages.<sup>8</sup> There are few ergative-absolutive languages in the world, and Basque is the only one in Europe. Other ergative-absolutive languages include various Caucasian languages and the extinct Sumerian language. Even though linguists have connected the Basque language with those languages and also with several ergative-absolutive tribal languages of indigenous peoples in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania (see Sections 3.4 and 3.7), these attempts have failed in their claims to connect Basque with such diverse indigenous languages worldwide.<sup>9</sup>

There are other features that define the Indo-European language family. This includes a set of similar nominal, pronominal, and verbal endings, ablaut in morphemes (change in vowels), and the fact that almost all Indo-European languages vary their nouns to express gender, number, and grammatical case, while a verb is varied to express categories of tense, voice and person. None of these features exist in Basque, and there is no trace of ablaut or grammatical gender in Basque history. Though each individual Indo-European language differs in how strictly they follow each characteristic, none exist that do not show at least several of those Indo-European characteristics. These differences do not stop at typology. Phonetically speaking, the phonology of Proto-Basque as reconstructed by Basque linguist Luis Michelena is very different both in phonetics and in the distribution of morphemes than that of reconstructed Proto-Indo-European. Further, the Basque kinship system, in which there are different words for brother or sister (depending on the gender of the speaker), is virtually unheard of anywhere except for Basque and some Inuit languages.<sup>10</sup>

## Early Theories on the Origins of the Basque Language

Biblical fables serve as a basis for many of the earliest theories on the origins of the Basque language. The theories revolve around one figure in particular, Tubal, the fifth son of Japheth and the grandson of Noah. According to primary sources from biblical historian Flavius Josephus, Tubal is the ancestor of the Caucasian Iberians, located in what is now the country of Georgia. However, other historians such as Saint Jerome, locate Tubal's ancestry in the modern-day Iberia of Western Europe.<sup>11</sup> From this theory, Spanish archbishop Rodrigo Ximenez de Rada of Toledo set the foundation for the Tubalic theory of the origins of the Basque Language. Rodrigo was a medieval author of the Kingdom of Castile who spoke mostly Basque, which was his native language. In his chronicles, he writes that Tubal was the ancestor of the "Iberians, who are also called the Hispani" and the carrier of Iberia's first language.<sup>12</sup> He describes Tubal's son's journey through many provinces

and his settlement in the land farthest west known as Spain. It can be inferred through his chronicles that Rodrigo had an extensive knowledge of the world. At this point in his narrative, Rodrigo takes a break to present a map of Europe that establishes the various language groups in Europe. He then alludes to the splitting of seventy-two languages at Babel:

“After the division of languages, so that they (Japheth’s sons) would go into the regions and escape Nimrod’s tyranny, they were divided into languages and nations and maintained the language that is now called Latin. Japheth’s other sons, who settled elsewhere in Europe, spoke different languages. The Greeks had a language, the Vlachs and Bulgars another, the Cumans another, the Slavs, Bohemians, and Poles another, and the Hungarians another. On the other hand, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden (which took its name from the Suevi and the Scythians), Flanders, and England have a single common language, although dialects are recognized. Scandinavia and the other northern islands in the ocean, which linguists count as belonging to Europe, use other languages. Wales, which is next to England, and Less Britain, near the British coast, have their own languages assigned to them, as do the Vascones and the Navarrese.”<sup>13</sup>

Although the Toledan archbishop mentions the Vascones (Basques) developing their own language, it cannot be deduced that the language he is talking about is Basque. Later on, Baltasar de Echave, a Basque painter, would clarify that “One hundred forty-three years after the universal Flood, at the Tower of Babel, Basque was chosen by Tubal and his family.”<sup>14</sup> Through the biblical tale of Babel, which records the splitting of one common language into numerous distinct ones, theories emerged which held that the Basque language was the original language of the Iberians, as justified by the existence of Tubal. The Italian humanist Lucio Marineo Siculo claimed that “the first inhabitants of Spain, according to what some say, all used the Bizkaian language, until the arrival of the Romans and Carthaginians. Then they all spoke Latin, although through all these centuries and changes of era, the Bizkaians never changed their language or customs, and still less the way they dress, and that way of speaking did not come from the Iberians or Sagii, still less from the Phoenicians, who once lived in Spain.”<sup>15</sup>

After distinguishing Basque as too different to be related to the Phoenician and Latin tongues, Siculo determines that Basque must have carried its own tongue from Babel, stating, “Whoever it may have been who first came to Spain after the building of the Tower of Babel, that person truly brought one way of speaking from among the seventy-two into which Our Lord divided those who built the Tower at the beginning of that new city.” A strong proponent of this theory was Manuel de Larramendi. Born in 1690 in Andoain, de Larramendi is one of the most important figures in the scholarship of the Basque language. He was the writer of the first Basque dictionary and the first summarizer of its grammar. He had a strong patriotic enthusiasm for his language, describing Basque as “the best language and more perfect than the rest, at least than Latin, Romance, French, Italian.”<sup>16</sup> This alludes to his views on the origins of Basque as he believes that the perfect nature of Basque must be a result of God’s creation:

“Basque was always an adult and perfect language, as one finally suggested by God Himself in the division of tongues, and one of the seventy-two primordial and mother languages. Between Basque and the other languages that pride themselves on being cultured languages today, there is a difference that there was between the formation of Adam and that of his descendants. Other languages are formed by human ingenuity and are consequently susceptible to weaknesses, errors, and illogicalities, the effects of a sickly origin. Basque was a language formed solely by the ingenuity of God, Who in His infinite perspicacity imprinted it on the first fathers of Basque in a form so beautiful, so ingenious, so philosophical, logical, courteous, most sweet, and with other ornaments proper to so honored a beginning.”<sup>17</sup>

A historian native to the Basque country, Esteban de Garibay was one of the first people to use place names to prove Basque’s origins in Babel. In his 1628 chronicles which cover the history of Spain, he locates the Caucasian name “Araxes” as an area close to Babel and compares it to the Araica River. He does the same with Armenia’s Ararat, connecting it to Mount Aralar of the Basque Country.<sup>18</sup> An early case of proposing genetic connections between languages even emerged with Basque and Babylonian. In 1587, the early Spanish

linguist Andres de Poca claimed that Basque had entered Spain from Babel in Babylonia along with Greek and Hebrew. He claimed that all Spanish place names have either Greek, Hebrew, or Basque origins and furthered his claim by citing the Assyrian origin of the horn-shaped headdress of Bizkaian women to draw a connection between Basque and the ancient East.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the prominence of the Babel theories among most medieval scholars, a problem arises which challenges its validity. First, it was widely known even then that the Iberian Peninsula was home to many languages in ancient times, meaning either that Tubal was not the only one of Noah's descendants to arrive at the Iberian Peninsula, or that the language that Tubal had carried from Babel was not Basque. Even Rodrigo Ximenez de Rada was aware of this. As he noted: "Yet there are and were from the beginning many languages in Spain, so it would not have been only Tubal who lived in this land, but other peoples would have come with him."<sup>20</sup> Second, from a modern standpoint, it is hard to overlook the fact that Tubal's original place of settlement was located in the Caucasus, thousands of miles away from any association with the Iberian Peninsula. Finally, many scholars dispute the validity of the events recorded in the Bible, and they see the division of tongues at Babel as a fantastical story rather than an accurate recounting of historical events.

One characteristic most scholars agreed on during this time was that Basque was the original language of the Iberian Peninsula prior to the Roman arrival. An excerpt from Juan de Valdes' *Dialogo de la Lengua* states:

"Although the principal part [of Spanish] is from the language that the Romans introduced, which is the Latin language, it will be well to first examine what language was that ancient one that was used in Spain before the Romans came to it. What the majority of those who inquire about these things hold and believe is that the language that the Bizkaians use today is that ancient one of Spain. They confirm this opinion with two sufficiently plausible reasons. One is that, just as the Romans' arms, when they conquered Spain, were unable to pass into modern-day Bizkaia, therefore their language could not pass into the Basque country despite the fact that they wanted the Roman language to be spoken throughout the country. The other reason is the lack of conformity between the Bizkaian language and all the other languages used in Spain today. Hence it is considered almost certain that this nation preserved its first language together with its freedom."<sup>21</sup>

What is interesting is that Juan de Valdes mentions geography as a key factor that explains the endurance of Basque to this day, which is still agreed upon by many modern scholars. The status of Basque as the original language of Iberia fits perfectly with the Tubalic theory. This would prove that Tubal carried the Basque language from Babel when he settled in Iberia as it was the prominent language of the peninsula that preceded the arrival of Latin through the Romans.

The idea that Basque is the original Iberian language has an interesting history. One proponent is Larramendi, who believed that "The Basques are the legitimate Spaniards, unmixed, descended from the ancient inhabitants of Spain and their successors, who took refuge in those mountains, either from the general drought recounted in the histories or from the flood of other nations that took control of the other provinces of Spain."<sup>22</sup> He then expands on the view of Basque as the primordial language of Spain by citing Basque references which survive in Spanish words. This serves as a precursor to the numerous modern-day scholars who use the same technique to bridge connections from Basque to other languages around the world. Larramendi deduces that the word "*aberevar*" comes from the Basque word "*abere*" or cattle (a Latinism, from *habere* "to have", as if *aberevar* meant "to take the cattle to water," which is what *abrevar* means). Furthermore, he deduces that "*ademán*," meaning gesture in Spanish, seemed to come from "*adi, aditu*" meaning to understand in Basque. "*Badajo*," meaning clapper of the bell, would come from "*jo, badabada, jo*" meaning "strike then strike" and so forth. Larramendi couples these etymologies in his works with a description of the known origins of place names from Catalonia (home of the Aletanos, coming from Basque "*ala*," meaning boat) to Andalusia, home of the Basque names "Eliberri, Eriberri and Yriberri" to Galicia, home of the Basque "Yria." Through this, he concludes that Basque was the universal language of Spain prior to the Romans because references to this language could be found throughout the entire Iberian Peninsula.<sup>23</sup>

Another interesting idea emerged as the world transitioned into the modern era. The “Theory of Natural Sounds” was first proposed by Pablo Pedro de Astarloa in the late 18th century. As a Catholic priest who studied the book of Genesis, Astarloa believed that the first people must have used the perfect language from the instant they were created, a language that was natural to humanity’s earliest natural instincts. Astarloa explains the theory: “Men were sociable beings, as Genesis tells us and their social relationships had to be established not by means of a ‘language of action,’ that is, of gestures, but rather by means of one ‘of articulated words.’” We can take this idea to imagine what it was like for early humans to try to communicate an idea to others. Astarloa supposes that if a man were to attract the attention of someone else, he would make the sound “o”. If he were to refer to a higher being, he would articulate the “g” region of his palate and pronounce “go.” Finally, he would pronounce the “y” sound to direct attention to something above him. This is how one would get the word “*goyco*” meaning upper in Basque. This is one of many of Astarloa’s etymologies of the Basque language.<sup>24</sup>

Astarloa also wrote of a personal experience that spoke to his linguistic interests. When he was at a church in Durango, he recounted that an infant “was doing nothing but crying continuously, and across the entire length of the portico, I heard in that crying the letter a, with the greatest clarity.” After confirming that the infant was a male, he goes on to conclude: “All who are born from Eve will cry out ‘a’ and ‘e’; every male says ‘a’ when he is born, every female ‘e.’” Astarloa uses this logic and states that “in Basque ‘*aarra*’ means what in Spanish is ‘the one of the A’ or ‘the one who says A,’ and that is the noun that means ‘male’ among us. Emma, with which we signify a female, means ‘delicate E’ or ‘delicate crying’.” This analogy is most beautiful.”<sup>25</sup> Astarloa continues to embark on the grammar of the “primordial language.” According to him, “the organ of the mouth cannot produce more than twenty-eight letters,” which are exactly the sounds of the Basque language. Astarloa would also allude to other sounds from other languages. For example, he believed “the French u is simply ‘imperfect,’ and the different classes of ‘e’ in the same language are modifications of the fundamental ‘e,’ that is, his own.” For the letter “v,” Astarloa considered it “indecent” and “nothing but an invention of the Latin grammarians, who were forced to this expedient to differentiate between awkward homonyms in their language, such as *bibo* and *uiuo* and *binus* –a –um and *uinum*.” Astarloa was aware of the fact that there were originally many languages on the Iberian Peninsula in ancient times, and to that he stated: “It is natural for man to multiply languages. Although different languages appear over history for this reason, in the mechanism of the languages spoken in the world today we will find . . . a most beautiful analogy. This analogy arises precisely from those traces of the mechanism of the primordial language that have been preserved in them.”<sup>26</sup> It seemed that Astarloa had an answer for everything that challenged his view that humanity’s “natural language” was Basque. His various books focusing on the idea of a “primordial language” highlighted many place names and grammatical structures of the Basque language, and he even cited diverse languages including Japanese, Quechua, Araucanian, Mochica, Aymara, Guaraní, Tamanacan, Maipure, Turkish, Georgian or Iberian, Tungus, Burmese, and some Aryan languages from India to support his arguments. From this, it can be determined that Astarloa was not blind to the world of linguistics but was instead certainly knowledgeable in this area.

However, it can also be argued that the ethnocentricity that he exhibited toward his Basque homeland must have influenced his views, as his ideas appear to be far-fetched and exaggerated. To Astarloa, every language in the world is simply a vulgar variation of his mother tongue, and most of his arguments on humanity’s “primordial tongue” did not revolve around rigorously presented evidence, but to what he asserted was “natural” to human behavior. It is notable that Astarloa lived in a world before the widespread knowledge of Proto-Languages, and he was most likely ignorant of the fact that the languages of the world today descend from a multitude of proto-languages unique to their region of the world.

## Theories for Linguistic Connections Between the Basque Language and Other Languages

In more recent times, the most logical approach for scholars to construct hypotheses about the origins of the Basque language is to find connections to other languages by examining common grammar, etymology, sounds, and vocabulary, among other linguistic patterns. The idea of attempting to connect Basque with other languages is not new; there were medieval scholars who formulated ideas of connecting Basque to Babylonian, Greek, Latin, etc. But there were no serious attempts to linguistically bridge languages together until the modern era. Even with this approach, most works on the subject have been dismissed and disproved in the linguistic field. The problem is that many of these ideas follow what is referred to by linguists as the “Bongo-Bongo” approach. Basically, “Bongo-Bongo” is when one finds a few words from one language that looks similar to a few words from another language, which could seem to suggest a convincing case that there is a linguistic connection between them. But the reality is that this approach produces a collection of random similarities between any two given languages that is practically meaningless.<sup>27</sup>

As the linguist Robert Trask argues in *Towards a History of Basque*, “given sufficient patience and a sufficiently large dictionary, one can always find random similarities between any two languages.” Another problem inherent in the “Bongo-Bongo” approach is that many linguists who have attempted to crack this linguistic mystery often worked with information derived from bilingual dictionaries and secondary sources. As a result, they invariably connect Latinized, Romanized, and even modern words that have clearly been integrated into Basque in the modern era with other languages, effectively invalidating their works. Additionally, many linguists have tried to justify their conclusions by discarding unknown prefixes and suffixes in order to extract portions of Basque words that could be connected with other languages. This method is dismissed by most linguists who see no valuable contribution to the field. Finally, a portion of works on the origins of the Basque language have biases generated by their authors. For example, some linguists tend to match segments of Basque words with segments of words from other languages with no convincing evidence to back them up. If segments do not precisely line up with the order in Basque, then linguists simply say it was because of a transposition of sound or letters through the evolution of language. And of course, all segments of words that do not match with Basque are nowhere to be seen in their works.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the biggest underlying problem overall among these hypotheses is the disregard for prehistoric Basque phonology, which is the branch of linguistics that deals with systems of sounds. Much of this can be explained chronologically: before the 1950s, prehistoric Basque phonology had not been understood by linguists. Enter Luis Michelena. Born to the name Koldo Mitxelena, Michelena taught Philology at the University of the Basque Country. He has been hailed by Robert Trask as “the greatest Basque scholar ever seen.” As mentioned in section 1, in the 1950s, Michelena reconstructed the phonological system of Proto-Basque through linguistic comparison, spoken around 2000 years ago. From there he identified almost every subsequent phonological change, and with this method, he was able to trace the evolution of modern Basque. Michelena’s work is generally accepted as the valid source for all prehistoric Basque linguistics as it is abundantly documented, and uses linguistic data from various time periods. Even after the publication of Michelena’s work, some recent investigators have either overlooked its importance as the primary resource of early Basque linguistics or may not have known about its existence. In his works, he demonstrated a profound understanding of not only the Basque language but of the field of linguistics in general.<sup>29</sup> Thus, as will be covered later on in this paper, we see that Michelena and his works would serve as an important mediator for the various theories presented about the Basque language.

The following discussion is a review of languages that have been connected with Basque by scholars from the Middle Ages to the present day. For each language, the attempts that scholars have made to connect the language, its reasoning, and fallacies will all be examined.

## The Pre-Indo-European Substrate Theory

One theory revolves around the concept of “Old European.” Historically, it is certain that Europe had been inhabited for thousands of years before the arrival or existence of the “Proto-Indo-European” language. Thus, there must have been numerous languages in Europe before the dominance of “Proto-Indo-European” that have been lost to history, owing to the absence of a writing system and adequate record keeping of the time. Although we have no direct evidence for the existence of these languages, linguists have constructed indirect evidence that can perhaps prove the existence of such languages. Linguists have theorized that the diffusion of Proto-Indo-European into the hundreds of languages of today was influenced by the languages spoken by indigenous European peoples before Proto-Indo-European was imposed on them. This is known as a “substrate theory” which has gained favor among certain linguists, especially those trying to find an answer to the origins of the Basque language.<sup>30</sup> The lack of evidence for “Old European” languages is beneficial to linguists, as it allows linguists to be unrestricted in their thinking about what pre-Indo-European languages were like. Many who try to explain substrate languages use non-Indo-European lexical items such as place names and lexical mutations to prove their existence. It follows that many linguists have used Basque as “direct evidence” for the existence of substrate languages because it is the only surviving pre-Indo-European language in the world.

For many years, scholars have tried to identify features in Romance languages that hint at a connection to Basque to strengthen their theory of Pre-Indo-European substrate languages. The German linguist Johannes Hubschmid published many studies, including three books that attempted to highlight these features. Hubschmid rejects the validity of associating many “Basque” words seemingly apparent in Romance languages before he finishes with a list of Pre-Indo-European words that can likely be identified with Basque. In doing so, he implies that there was indeed the existence of an ancient substrate language.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, even Hubschmid’s list of Pre-Indo-European words is plentiful with its fallacies where certain words do not agree with the phonological forms of Proto-Basque. Examples include the words “*tutur*”, “*kukur*”, “*kosko*” and “*pentoka*” which each have word initials and word medials, which are morphemes in the middle of a word that undermine Hubschmid’s original claim, as they serve as evidence of words that have entered Basque in post-Roman times.<sup>32</sup>

Another striking occurrence is the resemblance of the Basque word “*adar*” meaning horn, with the Old Irish “*adarc*” meaning the same thing. Additionally, the Basque word “*gorosoti*,” meaning holly, is extremely similar to the Sardinian word “*golostru – golostru – colostru*,” meaning the same thing. Both words have no known Proto-Indo-European etymology and are probably the most genuine examples of substrate words surviving in Basque.

Recently, the German linguist Theo Venneman proposed connecting Basque with Old European through river names. He focuses on a series of rivers north of the Alps with notable similarities in their names and assumes that they must have all been derived from a single language. The following is a list of river names Venneman gathered, displaying obvious linguistic patterns among themselves:

Ava, Ara, Ala, Sala, Aura, Alara, Salara, Auma, Arma,  
Alma, Salma, Avania, Arantia, Atlanta, Salantia

From this, Venneman points out two characteristics of these river names: the high frequency of initial a- and final -a, which are characteristics also found in Basque. With these names, Venneman was able to formulate the theory that the river names came from an “Old European” that was the ancestral form of Basque. This theory too is diminished by a plethora of inherent shortcomings. First, the final -a- in Basque has no connection with other proposed Pre-IE languages and is not even used in nouns in the Eastern dialects of Basque, meaning it most likely entered Basque in post-Roman times. Second, the “Old European” suffixes Venneman proposes have no correlation with Basque whatsoever, so it is quite outlandish to propose a connection between the two languages within his own work. Third, many of the roots identified by Venneman are phonologically impossible in proto-Basque.<sup>33</sup>

In Venemann's other works, he considers Basque elements in central European place names, particularly Munich (Munchen). He proposes, astonishingly, that the name is derived from the Basque word "muno: meaning "hill or slope." This theory is invalid as it is generally agreed by scholars that the name stemmed from the straightforward German word for monk, *Munichen* which bears much more resemblance to the name Munich.<sup>34</sup>

## The Basque-Iberian Hypothesis

The Iberian language was the language of Western European peoples on the Iberian Peninsula that is referenced in some ancient Greek and Roman sources. Like Basque, the origins of Iberian are unknown with no known Proto-language or related languages. Iberian is found inscribed on stone, metal tablets, and coins, and some of these inscriptions use Greek letters. The Basque-Iberian hypothesis states that the Basque language is directly related to the Iberian language, meaning that Basque had either evolved from the Iberian language or shared the same language family as Iberian. Proponents of this hypothesis have suggested that the region where Basque was formerly spoken was geographically close to the region where it is believed that Iberian was once spoken. Although the presumed area of the Iberian language does not appear to be Basque-speaking, scholars have long suspected that the language could be related to Basque. This hypothesis has a long history, first suggested by the Greek geographer Strabo in the first century BC. Strabo claimed that the Iberians (who were still speaking Iberian) spoke a language similar to the Aquitanians (people of Aquitaine, a region incorporated by the Basque country).<sup>35</sup>

Interestingly, Larramendi was the first person to suggest that Iberian was an ancestor of Basque. Nevertheless, the theory was popularized in modern times by Wilhelm von Humboldt in his 1821 book, *Prüfung der Untersuchungen über die Urbewohner Hispaniens vermittelt der vaskischen Sprache*. Despite its success in the early world of linguistics, the Iberian scripts upon which the book bases its theory, were undeciphered at the time of its publication, meaning much of its claims relied on assumptions of the meanings of Iberian texts which scholars have deemed incorrect. As parts of the Iberian script slowly became deciphered, Humboldt Hugo Schuchardt published the book *Die iberische Deklination* in 1907, supporting the Basque-Iberian hypothesis. Here, he tried to identify Iberian case endings that matched Basque case endings. The conclusions made were impressive at the time of its publication: Schuchardt was able to find striking similarities between the singular and plural endings of four noun cases, the singular ending for the adjectival case, and the plural ending for the inert case. Unfortunately, later on, many of these claims would be dismissed as more progress was made in deciphering more of the Iberian script, which quickly rendered many of Schuchardt's readings false. Linguists would later find out that the texts Schuchardt had interpreted were not written in the Iberian language but in Celtiberian, a separate language descended from the Celtic branch of the Proto-Indo-European language family.<sup>36</sup>

Toward the middle of the 20th century, Spanish linguist Manuel Gomez Moreno successfully deciphered the Iberian script. Thanks to the work of Moreno, Iberian texts could now be read at a phonological level which caught the attention of both Spanish linguist and historian Antonio Tovar and Luis Michelena. Tovar and Michelena discovered that the phonology of Iberian was strikingly similar to that of Basque, and especially to that of Proto-Basque.<sup>37</sup> They both had five vowels, a great number of voiced plosives (sounds that are caused by the blockage of the vocal tract such as "b" and "g"), a rarity of the "m" sounds, the absence of the "p" sound, and few consonant clusters that start without plosives. There were also similarities between the phonology of Iberian and the affixes of Basque, such as the Basque suffixes *-tar* and Iberian *-tar*. However, Tovar did note that Iberian and Basque were grammatically and structurally different and that similarities in phonology are not sufficient to prove a relationship between the two languages.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, it should be noted that although the symbols of the Iberian texts were deciphered, the meaning of the text was still uninterpretable, which meant that these phonological similarities could be coincidental. In his 1988 publication, Anderson reaffirmed Tovar

and Michalena's conclusion that no parallels or areas of significance could be drawn from the comparison of Basque and Iberian.<sup>39</sup> This conclusion would remain unchallenged for decades before the Spanish linguist Juan L. Roman del Cerro claimed that he had successfully deciphered another complete reading of the Iberian texts. Through his reading, he came to the profound conclusion that Iberian was virtually indistinguishable from Basque. With all the pessimism around the Basque-Iberian hypothesis following Tovar and Michelena, Cerro's conclusion shocked many linguists. Reactions were mixed. Some linguists believed that Cerro had proved the validity of the Basque-Iberian hypothesis, while others, including Trask, disagreed with Cerro. Trask noted that Cerro often chopped up Iberian words into segments and then identified these segments with Basque. An example he cites is the segmenting of the Iberian word "*starienmu*" to "st-ari-en-mu" with st- relating to the Basque suffix -zto, -ari- relating to Basque word *hari* meaning thread, -en- relating to the Basque genitive suffix -en, and -mu with the Basque word *muin* meaning pith, which is likely a loan from Latin. What this would translate to in Basque is "a thread's pith," which seems nonsensical as it does not define anything that could be found in the real world. Cerro, however, would alter the meanings of the Basque elements he identifies later in his text, interpreting "*starienmu*" to mean "extract from the rich vein of ore" which bears no resemblance to the translation "a thread's pith".<sup>40</sup> Trask concludes that there is no grammatical structure within Cerro's interpretations, no defined noun, verb, or adjective, no structures for roots, stems, or affixes, and most important, Trask noted, was that Cerro had not translated a single word in Iberian within his work. For these reasons, Trask believes that Cerro's work could not be valid proof of the Basque-Iberian hypothesis.<sup>41</sup> More recently, in 2021, a flat, life-size bronze hand that was dated between 80- and 72 BC was uncovered near Pamplona, which featured engravings with dozens of strange symbols. Known as the Hand of Irulegi, experts believe that the hand is the oldest known example of written Proto-Basque, which had previously been assumed to not have a writing system. The first word of the bronze has been identified as "*sorioneku*" which is said to have evolved into the Basque word "*zorioneko*," meaning good luck or good omen. The word is written in a script derived from the Iberian script, although it has some additional features to mark sounds in Basque that do not exist in Iberian. Excitement surrounded this discovery and it has revived interest in a possible ancient connection between the Basque and Iberian languages. The meaning of the rest of the four words remains a mystery for scholars.<sup>42</sup>

## The Basque-Minoan and Basque-Pictish Connections

Minoan and Pictish, which are undeciphered ancient languages of Europe, have all been considered relatives of Basque at some point. In 1900 the British archeologist Sir Arthur Evans discovered texts written in the ancient "Linear A" writing system of ancient Crete which remains undeciphered to this day. Due to the script's mysterious nature, it was inevitably connected with the Basque language by British scholar F.G. Gordon. Gordon takes a peculiar approach in his interpretation of Linear A texts. He treats each syllabic character as a complete word, allowing him to form a complete Minoan language with a relatively small number of words. Furthermore, he sometimes cuts in between characters to form words splitting single syllables into two. In his readings, he arrives at seventy-eight characters, seventy-two of which he identifies with individual words in Basque, while the other six have no suitable Basque relative.<sup>43</sup> Upon a simple examination of the reading, one will realize that thirty-four of his so-called "Basque" words are completely nonexistent, and an additional seventeen of the words do exist in Basque but have mismatched meanings. Many of his words end up being compounds that do not exist in Basque. A compound word is a single word made up by directly combining two existing words in a language. An example in English is the word "scarecrow" which is a compound of the words "scare" and "crow." Gordon states that the word "*edukardo*" means wine holder in Basque from the words "*eduki*" meaning contain, and "*ardo*" meaning wine. However, these compounds do not exist in the Basque language. Gordon's interpretation of Minoan is too narrow. He reads almost every line of Minoan as a form of poetry. With all these fallacies lying within Gordon's work, his attempt to connect Minoan with Basque depicts more fantasy than

reality. As the linguist R.L. Trask states, “I don’t think that Gordon’s interpretation of Minoan or Basque is one of the monuments upon which the reputation of the Oxford Press has been built.”<sup>44</sup>

The Pictish language itself is a mystery for linguists and it has proven vexing for those who have attempted to decipher it. Regarding the Basque language, Welsh scholar Sir John Rhys suggested that since Pictish seems like a pre-Indo-European language, it might be related to Basque, though he quickly withdrew this argument. This is not surprising, as Pictish inscriptions looked nothing like Basque and Basque has not helped in deciphering Pictish. In 1968, the French scholar Henri Guiter made a bold statement in announcing that he had successfully deciphered Pictish through Basque and found the two languages to be nearly identical.<sup>45</sup> Like many of Henri Guiter’s previous bold statements, this one is universally rejected by all linguists. His readings of Pictish differ from those accepted by Pictish specialists, because some of the inscriptions he had been “reading” from are so badly weathered that they are unreadable, and the Basque word forms from which he relates Pictish with Basque are of modern Basque which is different from ancient Basque. Additionally, Guiter’s readings completely disregard Basque syntax. Finally, like Gordon, his readings of Pictish itself are overly poetic and out of touch with reality.

Though it is always interesting when an undeciphered ancient language emerges from an archeological find, it would be unreasonable to conclude that, just because it is a mystery in and of itself, this mystery is somehow relatable to the origins of the Basque language.

## The Basque-Caucasian Connection

Bridging Basque with languages far from the Basque region is not uncommon among linguists. The most studied connection of the Basque language with other languages is the Basque-Caucasian connection. As mentioned in Section 1, Basque shares its ergative morphology and its system of verbal agreement with most Caucasian languages. These characteristics convinced many linguists that there must be a connection between the two, although the source of this connection remains unknown. However, typological resemblances in languages have rarely proved any genetic connections within languages. The theory was first put out by Schuhardt who, in his quest to find a connection between North African languages and Basque, drew some parallels between Caucasian languages and Basque. Since this effort, many works have been published in support of the Basque-Caucasian connection, most of them based on lists of potential Basque-Caucasian cognates identified by many linguists.<sup>46</sup> While these works can be considered serious, they do not follow the standards of establishing genetic relationships in languages. The French Vasconist Rene Lafon attempted to identify systematic similarities between Basque and Georgian, yet once again, this approach, relating Basque words and morphemes with those of the thirty-eight highly divergent languages ranging from Abkhaz to Chechen, proved to achieve nothing. All of these works were done before Michelena’s publications on Proto-Basque, so it follows that many of the connections drawn do not align with those of Proto-Basque from 2000 years ago.<sup>47</sup> Michelena did not put down the possibility of a Basque-Caucasian connection; in fact, he would contribute to the lexico-statistical study of Basque and Caucasian with Tovar.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, Michelena would go on to strike down the Basque-Caucasian theory in his review of German linguist Karl Bouda’s list of 500 putative cognates. In his review, set forth in a series of papers, Michelena stated that nothing of any significance could be derived from Bouda’s works and that any Basque segment was matched with a remotely similar Caucasian segment.<sup>49</sup> Following Michelena’s review, there was a lack of interest in the Basque-Caucasian connection. This changed in 1985 when the Abkhazian linguist V.A. Chirikba published another list of morphemes. Once again this approach proved to be flawed, as Chirikba’s lack of knowledge of the certain histories of words and his failure to identify a systematic correspondence between the two languages became apparent. Despite the countless promising identifications and lists of similar morphemes, words, and other linguistic devices, today there is still no evidence of a genetic link between the Basque and Caucasian languages.<sup>50</sup> The published works that follow this approach demonstrate a similar pattern: they are

invalidated by other linguists in the field due to their reliance on coincidental similarities between Basque and one of the thirty-eight Caucasian languages. It seems that each new Basque-Caucasian comparative work reinforces Michelena's conclusion on the matter which should serve as a reminder to all linguists that just because Basque and Caucasian are both morphologically ergative, this does not mean that they are related in any way.

### The Basque-Berber Connection

Languages that are somewhat geographically closer to the Iberian Peninsula such as Berber, also have been connected to the Basque language by some linguists. The idea is both old and persistent, even though Basque is structurally different from most African languages and there is almost no chance Basque was spoken along the Mediterranean Sea. The first to propose the Basque-African connection was Hugo Schuhradt, whose motivation to connect the two languages stemmed from his belief that the Basque language and Iberian language were the same, which rested on his assumption that the Iberians made their way to the peninsula by migrating through Africa. In 1913, Schuhradt published a list of Basque words which he compared with a dozen assorted African languages, with each language seemingly bearing no relation to any other. In this publication, Schuhradt pushes the connection between Basque and Berber possibly because of the Iberian Peninsula's proximity to North Africa, which is where Berber is spoken.<sup>51</sup> This comparison is weak, because the linguistic typology of Basque is extremely different from Berber and because it is accepted among linguists that Berber is a branch of the Afro-Asiatic family, bearing no relation to Basque whatsoever. After Schuhradt, the theory was revived by Hans Mukarovsky, whose flawed approach demonstrated a series of errors common among the proponents of the Basque connection, including the citations of loan words from Romance languages, a lack of understanding of the phonological history of Basque, and arbitrary segmentations, among other shortcomings. Some credit should be given to Mukarovsky, as he at least attempted to identify systemic correspondences between Basque and Berber including the Basque -t- with Berber -t- and -f-, the Basque -tz- with -t- and -d- as well, and the Basque -s- with the Berber -s- and -z-.<sup>52</sup> Most of his correspondences do not involve more than a single segment of a word, and this cannot prove any major connection between the two languages. Thus, the Basque-Berber and Basque-African connection once again fails to hold up under close scrutiny, and thereby it shares the common mistake that disproves other linguistic connections with Basque.

### The Basque-Aquitainian Connection

Of all other proposed genetic connections between Basque and other languages, the Basque-Aquitainian connection is the most plausible. In the Aquitaine region incorporating the French part of the extended Basque country lies the Aquitanian language, derived from approximately four hundred names of people, seventy names of divinities, and several Latin texts. Although knowledge of the Aquitanian language is limited, there is strong evidence that Aquitanian word fragments can reveal a language very similar to Basque. In Luis Michelena's 1954 publication "De Onomastica Aquitania", which surveyed all known resources of the Aquitanian language, he found forty stems and affixes that appear to be related to Basque, a phonological system that is very similar to that of the Basque language, and a pattern of word formation that is identical to the one of Basque.<sup>53</sup> What separates Michelena's findings between Basque and Aquitanian from those previously mentioned for connections between Basque and other languages, is that Michelena is a foremost expert of Basque, and thus he has a sufficiently deep knowledge of the language. This allowed him to avoid the common mistakes made by other linguists who are unfamiliar with Basque who often mis-define Basque words, who incorrectly or randomly segment them, and who incorrectly determine the etymologies of Basque words. Additionally, the Aquitanian elements Michelena identifies are not simply random or vague resemblances of Basque within Aquitanian; rather, the elements between the two languages are almost identical. Furthermore, in 1960, a steele bearing

Aquitanian names was found within the Basque country, which reinforced the idea that the two languages were related.<sup>54</sup>

Regarding the phonological system of Aquitanian, Michelena was able to draw parallels between Aquitanian and Proto-Basque rather than solely modern Basque. In fact, Michelena's publication of Proto-Basque predates the findings of Aquitanian scripts, but the findings supported Michelena's proposed Proto-Basque forms. The similarities he found include the rarity of the letter "p" and letter "m," the high frequency of geminates, which are the repetition of sounds in words, the great frequency of the letter "h", the absence of word-initial clusters, and the unsystematic fluctuation of -s-, -ss-, -x-, and -xs-. Further, the structure of Aquitanian names consisting of a single stem followed by two stems or a suffix is very similar to the formation of Basque surnames.<sup>55</sup> The abundance of evidence relating the various linguistic aspects of Aquitanian and Basque, coupled with the geographical proximity of the regions in which the languages were spoken, has led linguists to make the firm conclusion that Aquitanian is a direct ancestor of the Basque language.

## Basque and Dene-Caucasian

Working beyond the scope of regionalized language families, linguists have proposed the existence of linguistic mega-families that can span two or three continents. These families include the Nostratic, Eurasiatic, Austric, Amerind, and Dene-Caucasian groups. In light of these proposed large linguistic families, offering limitless potential for study, it should follow that someone would have connected Basque with all of these families. This has not exactly happened. Surprisingly, these mega-families have attracted little attention from those who study the origins of the Basque language, with the exception of the Dene-Caucasian family. This mega-family group originates from its core of Sino-Tibetan languages, extends far west to the Caucasian language regions, and extends far east to the indigenous languages of Alaska, Canada, and the southwestern United States. Proponents of this theory have also considered a range of linguistic isolates both old and new into the language family, including Iberian, Etruscan, Hattic, Hurrian, Urartian, Sumerian, Burushaski, and Nahali.<sup>56</sup> With the number of linguistic isolates added to this proposed language family, it was inevitable that linguists would add Basque at some point. This was exactly what happened when the linguists John Bengston and Merritt Ruhlen, collaborating through a long series of publications, claimed with confidence that Basque was part of the Dene Caucasian language family.<sup>57</sup> In support of this claim, they cited Chirikba's previously mentioned attempt to relate Basque to North Caucasian. They also put forward a list of Basque cognates with the various languages within Dene-Caucasian, which spanned from the indigenous North American languages of Tlingit and Apache to the Siberian language of Yenesian to the Burushaski language of North Pakistan. Once again, the proponents of this theory displayed a total lack of understanding of the Basque language: they incorrectly segmented words and put forward non-existent roots. It should be no surprise, then, that the phonology of Proto-Basque has been completely ignored in this process. Beyond the numerous flaws connecting Basque and Dene-Caucasian, the Dene-Caucasian theory itself is widely rejected by nearly all linguists.

It should be noted that the Basque-Sumerian connection was theorized by German linguist Martin Lopelmann in 1968 before the Dene-Caucasian theory existed. The theory was put down because Sumerian contains many monosyllabic roots, which differs from the structure of Basque, which has very few monosyllabic roots.<sup>58</sup> The Basque-Sumerian connection was revived by John Bengston while he was trying to prove that the Basque language was part of the Dene-Caucasian family. He published a list of approximately three dozen vague resemblances between Basque and Sumerian with no grammatical parallel which can resemble nothing more than coincidental similarities between the two languages.<sup>59</sup>

## Basque and the “Proto-World” Hypothesis

There is one last theory that incorporates the entire world of languages into one common ancestor. Similar to Astarloa’s Theory of Natural Sounds, the Proto-World theory proposes that there was once a language that was naturally spoken by humans when they first developed the ability to communicate, almost as if “Proto-World ” was the Adam and Eve of languages. The theory claims that people began developing their own variations of Proto-World through migration and isolation which evolved into the languages of today. Thus, remnants of Proto-World can be found in every modern language. It is no surprise that Basque is a language linguists relate to “Proto-World,” making up the Basque-Proto-World hypothesis. Though the theory is debatable within the field of linguistics, it has been defended by linguists such as Vitaly Shevoroshkin<sup>60</sup> and the notable mega family enthusiasts Merritt Ruhlen and John Bengston. In 1994, Bengston and Ruhlen collaborated to publish a list of seventy-two possible Proto-World etymologies, eight of which produce cognates from Basque. The following is a table listing proposed Proto-World etymologies and their supposed Basque relatives.<sup>61</sup>

### *Proposed Proto-World Etymologies of Basque Words*

| Proto World Etymology | Basque Word                    |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Cunga (nose)          | su-dur (nose) sun-da (smell)   |
| Kati (Bone)           | gar-khotxe (nape) gara (skull) |
| Kuan (Dog)            | haz-koin (badger/bear dog)     |
| Mana (stay)           | min (to place, set up)         |
| Mena (To think)       | mun (medulla) munak (brains)   |
| Puti (vulva)          | potorro (vulva)                |
| Tsuka (hair)          | zamar (wool)                   |

Unfortunately, a problem exists with every one of these etymologies. Once again, we have a case demonstrating a basic lack of knowledge of the Basque language. The Basque words for nose and smell are arbitrarily segmented and have no relation to each other within the Basque language. The Basque word for nape combines the word “gara,” which only means height in Basque, rather than skull with -khotxe, which seems to be a representation of a Romance word for nape. The word “potorro,” meaning vulva in Basque, is also an obvious Romance loan word. The problems of this approach only deepen, as the words “haz-koin” for badger and “zamar” for wool are mis-defined, the Basque word “min,” (meaning to place) does not exist, and the word “mun,” meaning medulla, is only found in a very localized dialect of Basque.<sup>62</sup> Finally, it is necessary to mention that the Proto-World theory itself is not well received by the vast majority of linguists and remains nothing more than just a hypothesis in the linguistics field. As the linguist Lyle Campbell points out, given the time that has elapsed since the origins of human language, it is possible that every word from that time has been manipulated beyond the recognition of languages today.

## Conclusion

Through all the research that has been conducted on the origins of the Basque language, there has been significant progress made in its linguistic history. It is generally agreed that Basque is a close relative of Aquitanian and that Aquitanian could be an ancestral form of Basque. In fact, the remains of Aquitanian match so well with Basque that some linguists have claimed that Aquitanian is simply ancestral Basque. Thanks to Luis Michelena, there is also a fair amount of knowledge on what Basque looked like 2000 years ago in the form of ancestral Proto-Basque. This would be enough to prove the origins of the Basque, a language that is descended from Proto-Basque which is similar to how English is descended from Proto-Indo-European. Still, there has not been any persuasive evidence that connects Basque to any other languages that have ever existed in human history. Despite these advances, many questions remain unanswered regarding the origins and connecting points of the Basque language.

First, tracing the Basque language beyond the 2000-year timespan of Proto-Basque is still an open question. In fact, all we really know of proto-Basque is its phonology and the changes it underwent in its evolution into modern Basque. With the nature of linguistic change, it is currently impossible to determine what Basque must have sounded like before Proto-Basque, and how Proto-Basque itself functioned in practice. Thus, the Hand of Irulegi could be a glimpse of the Basque language during Proto-Basque times and beyond and could be a gateway to a further origin, not only to Basque but also to languages such as Iberian. As mentioned in section 3.2, only one of the words on the Hand of Irulegi has been identified, while the other four remain undeciphered. Those four words are a compelling representation of a language before or during the era of Proto-Basque which linguists have since deemed undecipherable due to linguistic change. In fact, analysts are currently studying pieces of the inscriptions such as the morpheme “*es*” which resembles the Basque adverb “*ez*” meaning not, and “*egin*” which resembles the Basque verb for “to do”. This can provide clues not only to the development of Proto-Basque but to the script of the Hand of Irulegi, which can also revive the possibility of Basque being connected with Iberian, which has only been rejected based on what Proto-Basque does not allow. The Hand’s script may also reveal the nature of Pre-Indo-European intercultural interactions in the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>63</sup> This is similar to how the Rosetta Stone revealed the linguistic nature of Ancient Egyptians, or how the Aquitanian scriptures revealed the existence of Aquitanian. Therefore, the Hand of Irulegi could be a major clue to help better understand Proto-Basque, the evolution of the Basque language, and what Basque may have looked like before Proto-Basque. The four undeciphered words contain endless linguistic possibilities and more research should be done on the matter.

Second, what is most interesting about the Basque language is its ability to survive as a linguistic isolate against the influence of Proto-Indo-European, and to maintain its uniqueness under the growing influence of modern media and globalization which threaten to erode cultural distinctions. Although scholars claim that it is due to the mountainous nature of the Basque region, clearly there is more at play than simply geography. After all, if mountains were the only explanation for linguistic isolation, then the people of the far steeper Alps would not speak French and German, and Etruscan would still be spoken in the mountainous parts of Italy. Instead, it is culture and not geography, that is the true explanation for Basque’s survival: it is the nature of the Basque people. One of the main reasons for linguistic extinction is conquest, as seen with the disappearance of Ancient Egyptian in favor of Arabic spoken by its conquerors, and the various indigenous languages worldwide that have been and still are being replaced by the expansion of English. The Basque people, however, have made it their priority to preserve their language at all costs. In the modern-day era, 50.2% of schoolchildren in the Basque region are enrolled in education that is purely in the Basque language, and a further 20.3% of schoolchildren are enrolled in education that is mostly in Basque, with Spanish only being used for mathematics, reading and writing classes.<sup>64</sup>

Additionally, many parents in the Basque region have made Basque the first language for their children, allowing them to fully learn Basque before picking up Spanish through the dominant Spanish society. The

Basque people have many convincing reasons to convert to the Spanish language: it is spoken by a vastly larger number of people, it is more international, everyone around them speaks it, and it is easier to learn, among other reasons. Despite these factors, the Basque people have continuously pushed for the expansion and preservation of their own language for their people. Earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Franco regime banned the Basque language and culture, and people were forced to give up their Basque identity and language in favor of Spanish. Despite these policies, the Basque people continued to secretly speak and spread Basque in their homes, allowing the language to thrive in the modern era. This demonstrates the Basque peoples' ability to withstand and fight back against external attempts to threaten the Basque culture. In consideration of these trends, the obvious conclusion is that the nature of the Basque people is a cultural response carried from Roman times. Notably, on maps of the Roman Empire, the Basque region is clearly marked as a part of the Roman province of Tarraconensis, which indicates that it was under the direct influence and rule of the Roman Empire. Though this influence is shown through the presence of Romance loan words in the Basque language today, the language itself managed to survive while other languages such as Etruscan, various Celtic languages, and the surrounding Iberian language died out due to Roman influence. To repeat, it is not by the presence of the Pyrenees that Basque survives, but instead by the nature of its people. The perseverance of preserving one's identity through the temptation of assimilation and the growing and sometimes forced influence of surrounding people has been a central component in defining what it means to be Basque.

Although the following argument is a stretch relative to the available evidence (and in acknowledgment of the lack of linguistic evidence to back this up) it is possible that the Basque's prioritization of personal identity impacted the development of the Basque language. Similar to Astarloa and his "Theory of Natural Sounds", the lesson here is that human tendencies could have an influence on the development of a language. Identity is obviously important for the Basque people, and thus it may have an impact on Basque word order, its abundance of cases, and its agglutinative nature.

First, the Basque language follows a subject-object-verb word order in which the head noun is always first in each scenario. This also applies to adjectives because they always come after the subject (with few exceptions such as some numbers and the word "not"). The only part of speech that precedes the main noun is a genitive noun of possession such as "my" or "his." To better understand this, here are some Basque sentences, their English translations, and their literal English translations.<sup>65</sup>

### *Basque Sentences, Their English Translations and Literal English Translations*

| Basque Sentence    | Literal English Translation | English Translation |
|--------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| Etxe txikia        | House little                | Little house        |
| Nire etxe txikia   | My house little             | My little house     |
| Etxe hau txikia da | House this small is         | This house is small |

In each case the main noun comes first, followed by either an adjective or a noun. The last word of a Basque sentence is usually the verb with the object usually sandwiched between the subject and verb in basic Basque sentences. By doing this, the emphasis is placed on the subject and verb because they are usually the first and last words in a sentence. The genitive precedes the nominative which is emphasized when it is in a sentence in which possession is conveyed. In the Basque language, the person who does something or possesses something along with their action can more easily be identified with its word order, while the object or the person or the thing of which the action is being performed is blurred. This pertains to the importance of identity in Basque

culture as in a society Basque's word order would make it easier to identify people from one another through their actions and their possessions.

Another development in the Basque language that alludes to the importance of identity is its abundance of noun cases and agglutinative nature, which are identified through a variety of suffixes. Basque has up to seventeen different cases for nouns which can be further modified in four different ways by adding more suffixes based on definiteness and number. This totals up to sixty-eight potential forms for a noun, which can also be modified based on other parts of the sentence. By focusing on the case of a noun, it can be determined whether someone possesses something (genitive), something is intended for someone (benefactive), from something (ablative) or to something (allative), if something is caused by another thing (casual) among many other cases. Although the abundance of cases is not unique to Basque (some Caucasian languages have up to forty-eight noun cases) it may exist as a result of the importance of identity in the Basque people, because early Basque peoples may have strived to be as specific as possible when identifying something using a small number of words. These cases would be combined with further suffixes that indicate plurality, pertaining to Basque's agglutinative nature. The abundance of markers in a word makes it easier for people to communicate and identify exactly precisely without having to speak with an excess of words.

## Summary

Like the origin of language itself, it is impossible to determine with certainty how a language was formed unless a time machine could be built to travel to the exact time when humans first began to communicate verbally; in the present day, we can only imagine these developments through the use of scientific theories. Even if such a scenario was possible, the development of language is not sudden but a gradual process that leads into the modern era. Thus, the true origin of the Basque language, like all other languages in the world, may never be known. Still, it can be known that most languages spoken today have their origin in a proto-language such as Proto-Indo-European. Therefore, it can be determined that Basque's origins are of the Proto-Basque language family which may incorporate the Aquitanian language as well. Despite these findings, Basque maintains its status as a language isolate, with no persuasive evidence that can connect it with any other language that ever existed. Right now, someone can create a new list of similarities between Basque and a random tribal language, which succeeds in creating a false connection simply by improperly splitting words from within each language so that they can be comparable. This has been the exact approach of many scholars who have spent decades trying to piece together long lists of similarities between Basque and other languages to no avail: each and every one of these proposed "connections" are just as linguistically flawed as the other. Thus, Basque continues to occupy a unique status among the world's languages given its endurance as a truly isolated language.

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