

Language and Status:
The Social Stratification of Bilingualism in the
Basque Autonomous Community

The infinitely complex phenomenon that is bilingualism has been and continues to be thoroughly studied by linguists, social and educational research scientists alike.¹ Its links to social stratification, however, are often overlooked. By examining the specific case of Basque-Spanish bilingualism, this paper will attempt to trace a line between language and social status. Building on the dichotomy between folk and elite bilingualism as defined by de Mejía (2002), a possible correlation between knowledge of Euskera (the proper term for the indigenous Basque language), occupational class, and educational level will be investigated. After a brief overview of the history and sociolinguistic context around Euskera, the database and methods employed will be introduced; descriptive and regression results will be then presented and discussed, before summing up the findings in a small conclusion.

The Politics of Basque Literacy

As the Pyrenees descend into the Atlantic, borders get fuzzy, and ethnical differences more controversial. Although many on both mountainsides refer to themselves as *Euskaldunak*, the construction of the Basque ethnical identity is a rather nuanced question. Never united politically, the Basque population regards its language as the element differentiating themselves from Spaniards and Frenchmen. So much so that *Euskadi Herria*, the term used first by centralist intellectuals and then by independentist groups to identify the greater Basque region, literally translates to "the land/people/nation of the Basque language."² When the nationalist front was led by general Francisco Franco to win the Spanish Civil War in 1939, the very existence of the Basque language was at risk. Franco's policies restricted the use of all minoritarian languages in Spain, including Catalan, Galician, and Basque. For each linguistic minority in Francoist Spain, preserving their language became a political act of defiance towards an oppressive regime. Given the central role of Euskera in defining Basque identity, it should therefore come as no surprise that the

Euskaldunak in the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) of Northern Spain engaged in an unabated struggle to defend their language under Franco's dictatorship and have spent the last few decades working relentlessly at its revitalisation. On the one hand, acts of political violence carried out by *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* ("Basque Country and Liberty," ETA) punctuated Spanish and French history from the 1960s up to the 2010s. ETA was responsible for a series of terrorist attacks, including the assassination of Franco's most likely successor, Luis Carrero Blanco, in 1973.³ On the other hand, especially after the regime loosened its grip on the use of minoritarian languages in the 1960s, intellectuals and educators in the BAC began working on the modernisation and diffusion of Euskera.⁴ While the survival of Euskera undoubtedly has strong political implications, especially after decades of violent activities carried out by independentist groups, this political fight does have a much simpler meaning for many living in the BAC. As the Basque writer and poet Bernardo Atxaga put it:

*We want our language to last, not because it's pretty or because it's ancient, but for one simple reason, because it's a language we know well and which is useful to us in our daily lives. [...] Obviously, I could phone my wife and talk to her in Castilian, but she would find that very odd. We've been speaking to each other in euskera for twenty years.)*⁵

Euskera, however, does not exist in a vacuum, rather in a context that could fit into the linguistic definition of *diglossia*, or a *distribution of more than one language variety to serve different communicative tasks in society*.⁶ A diglossic sociolinguistic context could potentially spur a whole range of different kinds of bilingualism, where with this term we identify *the ability of an individual to use more than one language variety*.⁷ Yet, in the specific case of the BAC, diglossia presents itself as the coexistence of a widespread *lingua franca* (Castilian Spanish) and a vernacular, regional language (Euskera). This would most reasonably lead to the rise of *folk* bilingualism, or the involuntary, survival bilingualism of minoritarian ethnic groups. In simpler terms, a Basque shepherd from the Bizkaian hills would most likely need to learn at least some Spanish in order to sell his *latxa* wool to the textile industries of the towns and cities by the sea, whereas the Castilian speakers of Alavan cities might not need to learn any language other than their own.

Basque Propagation through Education

The recent history of Basque self-determination was driven not only by the terrorist violence of ETA, but also by the intellectual and cultural efforts of Basque educators, who in the 1960s had already established rebel schools (*ikastolas*), where all teachings were exclusively imparted in Euskera⁸. These later became a consolidated reality in the education system of the BAC, and worked as a reference point for its renewal after Franco's death. Pupils in the BAC have since then been sorted into different schools by linguistic model: Model A where the main teaching language is Castilian Spanish, and Basque language and culture is taught during specific hours; Model B where the teaching language is mixed; Model D (the letter C is only used for loanwords in Euskera) where the teaching language is Euskera, and Spanish is taught only for a few hours a week.⁹ Widespread political support to Basque education led to the proliferation of Model D schools in recent years (Fig 1).

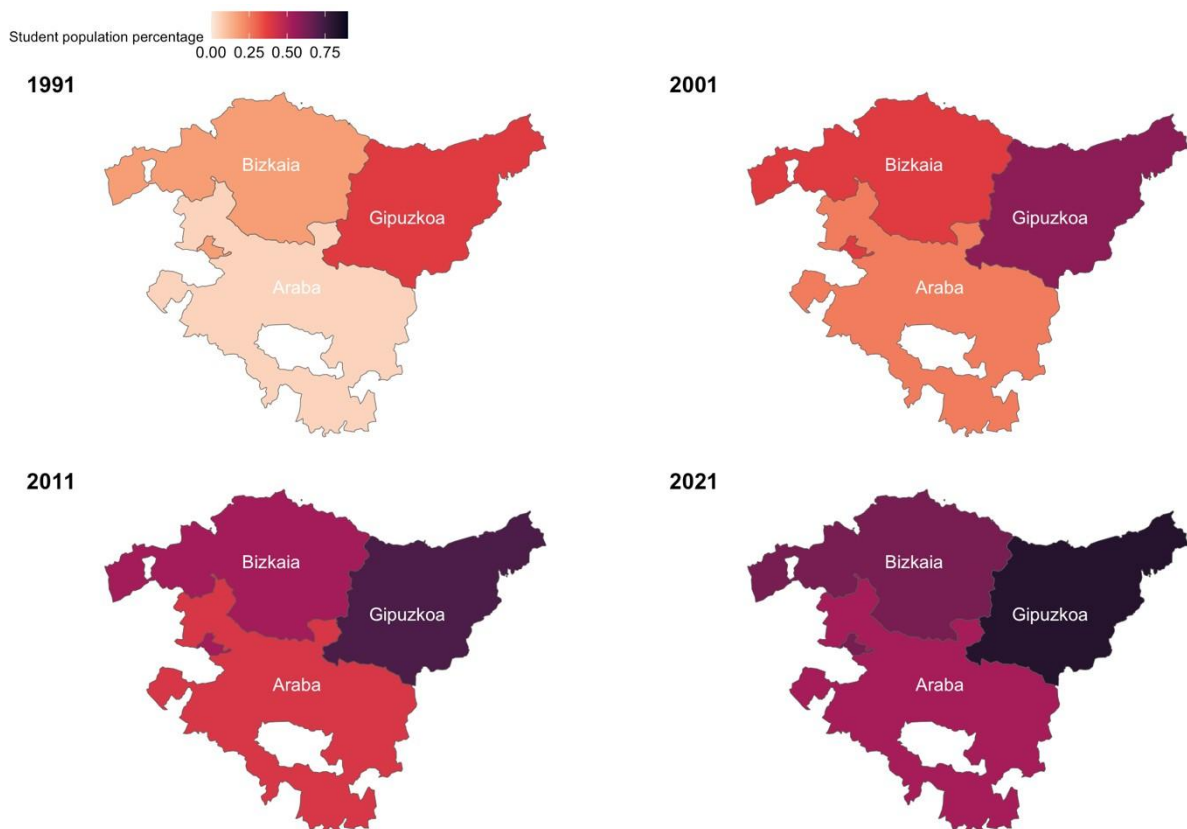


Fig 1: Student population percentage enrolled in model D schools by province (*Territorios Históricos*)

It was even recently reported that Model A schools are now nowhere to be found in Gipuzkoa (a province in the BAC).¹⁰ In a context in which almost the totality of the population speaks Spanish as their first language, Model B and D schools are believed to have an effect comparable to that of language immersion schools. Already more than thirty years ago, Sierra compared Basque schooling to the French immersion schools of Québec,¹¹ which served as primary venues for pupils' exposition to the French language in predominantly English-speaking contexts. Quebecois schools differed from other contemporary language learning programmes since they did not simply offer French classes but also taught most other disciplines in French from a very young age. The immersion method proved extremely effective and later became a model for European schools.¹²

More recent research, such as Cenoz's comprehensive work *Towards Multilingual Education*¹³ points out that the linguistic distance between Euskera and Spanish (Euskera is not even Indo-European), coupled with the Basque long history of bilingualism, calls for a nuanced approach to the analysis of language education in the BAC. What is more, with the linguistic context of nowadays, BAC would probably fall more easily into the category of *triglossia* as defined by Mkilifi, where in addition to a regional language and a *lingua franca* one is also exposed to a *world language*, which in this case would be English¹⁴. What is undoubtedly true is that Euskera is more widespread now than it used to be thirty years ago, and it does not seem

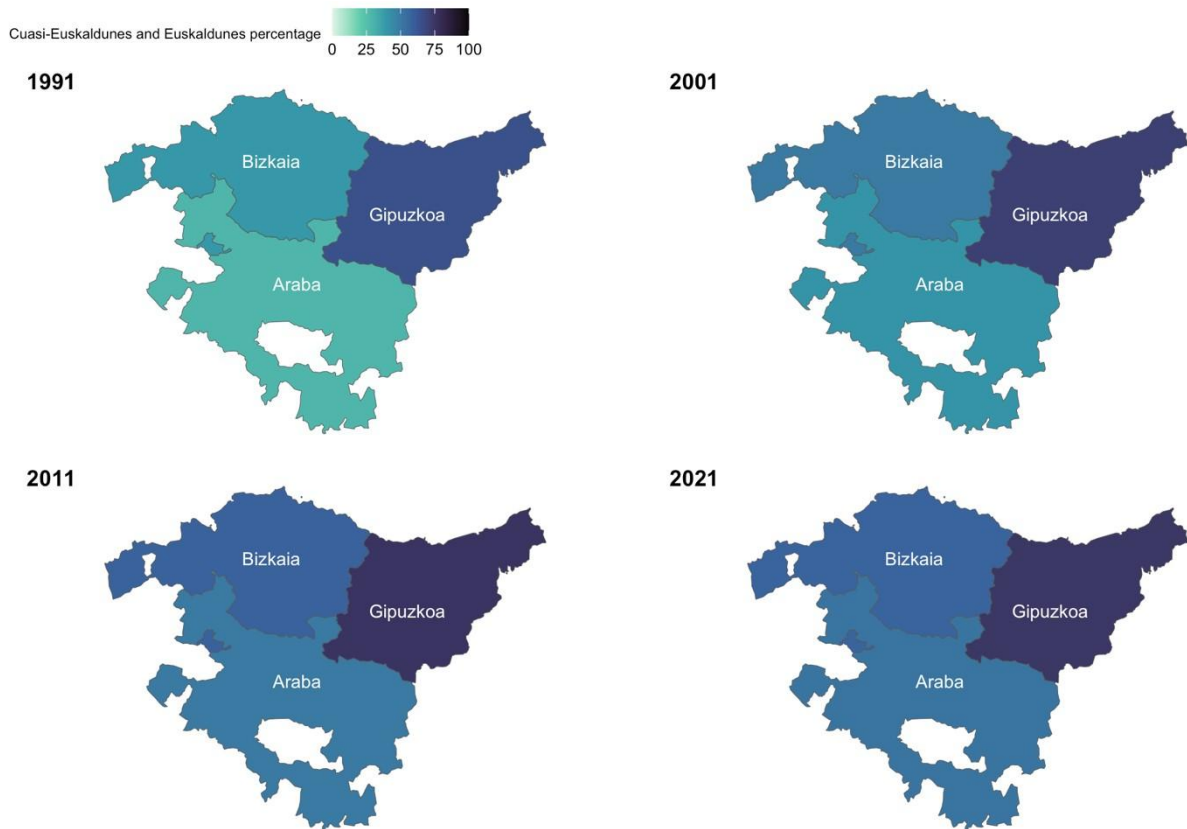


Fig 2: Population percentage declaring a medium to high level of proficiency in Euskera by province

unreasonable to assume that immersive education played an important role in its expansion. Even just by comparing the geographical distribution of model D schools (Fig 1) and of the people who have at least some communication skills in Euskera (Fig 2), one could be forgiven for assuming that the two might be correlated.

Elite vs folk bilingualism

A language spoken mainly by the educated, however, does not exactly fit well with the concept of survival, *folk* bilingualism as defined above. It does not help that some jobs are precluded to those who are not bilingual. In the case of public administration and public education, for instance, one needs to fit into the right linguistic profile to qualify for a job position, as Basque is a co-official language of the BAC.¹⁵ A language whose propagation might be tied to educational expansion and which could guarantee better life chances to its speakers rather calls to mind the

concepts of *voluntary* and *elite* bilingualism, as in the *additive* bilingualism of those who choose strategically to learn another language.¹⁶

In the next section, this paper will ascertain whether and how Basque proficiency (which in this specific context implies Spanish-Basque bilingualism) is correlated to occupational class and educational level. This way, this paper will attempt to answer the question of whether Basque-Spanish is closer to *folk* or *elite* bilingualism.

	Erdaldunes	Euskaldunes/Cuasi-Euskaldunes
Occupation		
Company management and Public administration	52.21%	47.79%
Technician and professional, scientific and intellectual	31.01%	68.99%
Support Technician and professional	38.17%	61.83%
Clerical employee (includes Armed Forces)	44.42%	55.58%
Personal services, catering, protection and trade	57.53%	42.47%
Skilled worker, agriculture and fishing	40.55%	59.45%
Skilled worker, industry, construction and mining	58.20%	41.80%
Machine operators, fitters	59.95%	40.05%
Non-skilled workers	73.78%	26.22%
Educational level		
Pre-school/primary	77.74%	22.26%
Professional	71.73%	28.27%
Secondary	52.47%	47.53%
Higher middle	59.26%	40.74%
Higher	32.12%	67.88%
School type		
Public school	60.02%	39.98%
Private school	48.76%	51.24%
Ikastola	0.89%	99.11%
Did not study	43.75%	56.25%
Age cohort		
Born before the Republic	63.19%	36.81%
Born right after Franco's death	42.83%	57.17%
Post Franco	27.93%	72.07%
Zone		
Llanada alavesa	70.15%	29.85%
Rest of Álava	68.64%	31.36%
Gran Bilbao	68.48%	31.52%
Duranguesado	41.11%	58.89%
Gernika-Bermeo, Plentzia-Mungia and Markina-Ondarroa	31.04%	68.96%
Arratia-Nervión and Encartaciones	56.03%	43.97%
Donostialdea and Bajo Bidasoa	44.07%	55.93%
Alto Deba, Bajo Deba and Urola Costa	23.78%	76.22%
Tolosaldea and Goierri	28.59%	71.41%
Gender		
male	55.01%	44.99%
female	53.78%	46.22%

Table 1: Descriptive statistics. Source: EUSTAT, *Encuesta de condiciones de vida*

Data and Methods

The database used in this study is based on data collected by the Basque Institute of Statistics (*Euskal Estatistika Erakundea*, EUSTAT) in the context of the Survey on Living Conditions of 2019.¹⁷ The survey was administered to households selected via stratified design throughout the BAC. In each household, a "reference person" provided data at household and personal level. In this paper, the unit of analysis of choice were individuals rather than households, in order to obtain a more detailed picture of language proficiency levels in the sample. The resulting sample comprises 5378 individuals. This number, however, shrinks all the way to 3866 in the regression design below (Table 2) due to missing data on educational level. All descriptive statistics and regression results below are obtained accounting for survey design.

Variables

The dependent variable in this analysis is the level of Euskera. Its value (categorical, one among extensive, some and no knowledge of Euskera) is declared directly by the survey respondents, and was recoded into a binary variable in order to simplify the analysis. The values displayed are therefore Erdaldunes (no competence in Euskera) and Cuasi-Euskaldunes (middle to high level of Euskera).

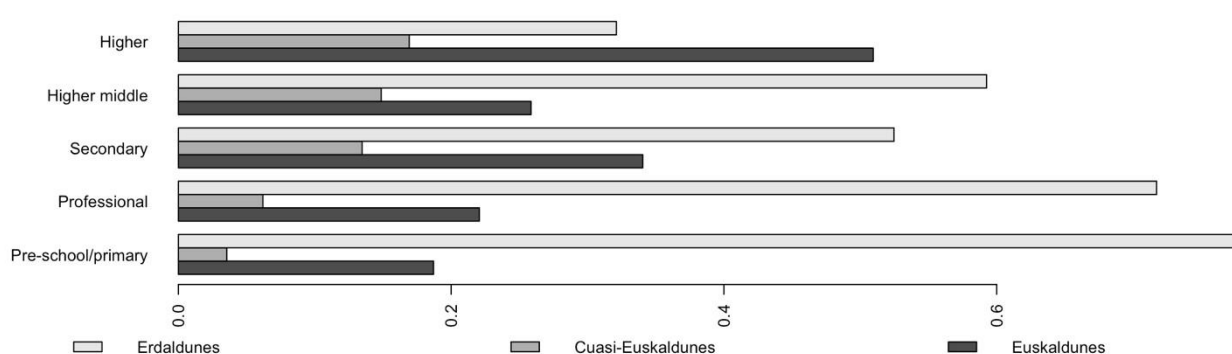


Fig 3: Proficiency in Euskera by educational attainment. Source: EUSTAT, *Encuesta de condiciones de vida*

The independent variables are occupation and educational level. Occupation categories follow those defined by EUSTAT. From the point of view of the present study, the biggest

shortcoming of this classification is the coupling of public administrators (to whom certain language skills are required by law) with private managers. As the Spanish educational system is not entirely "linear," all individuals holding a vocational or, more generally, non-university tertiary education title are categorised under "higher middle." This could lead to observations which fall into this category showing results in contrast with overall trends.

In order to account for the overall trend of propagation of Basque speakers, age is introduced as a control variable. Three age cohorts are identified: those born before the Republic (before 1975), those born right after Franco's death (1975 to 1985), and those born in what will be here called the "Post Franco" period (after 1985), when the BAC (founded with the 1978 Constitution) was already an established reality. Gender is also used as a control variable. A geographical variable is used solely in the descriptive analysis, in order to further contextualise the regression findings. The variable chosen is "zone," based on the conventional grouping of *comarcas* (groupings of municipalities inside a province or *Territorio Histórico*) defined by EUSTAT.

A summary of descriptive statistics is available in Table 1. These will be discussed at the beginning of the next section.

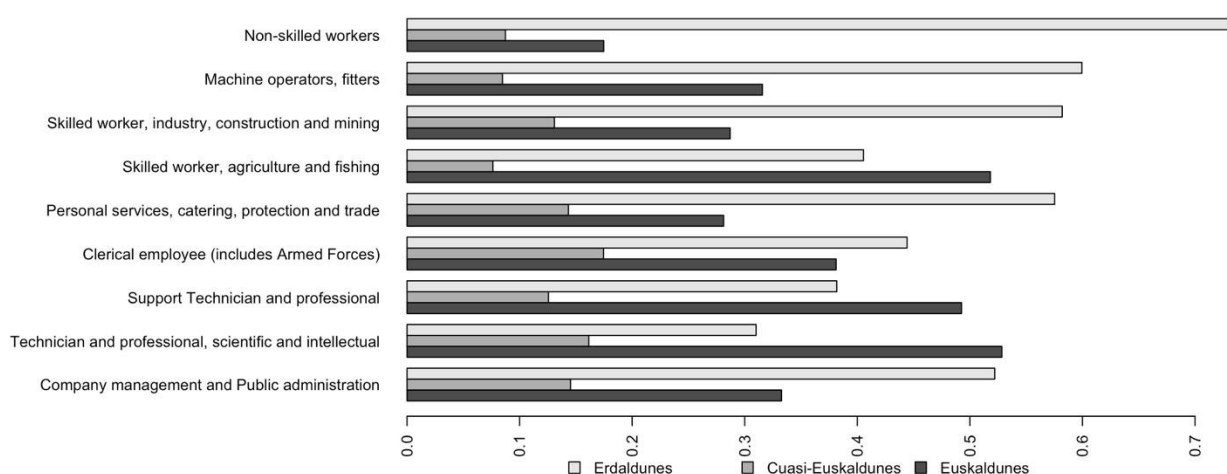


Fig 4: Proficiency in Euskera by occupational class. Source: EUSTAT, *Encuesta de condiciones de vida*

Estimation Strategy

To obtain more robust evidence of possible correlation between the independent variables and level of Euskera, multiple linear probability regressions are employed. Starting from a basic bivariate model (M0), featuring occupation as the only regressor, educational level, age, and gender are added stepwise-mode in models M1 and M2. Due to collinearity concerns, school type was not included in the regression models. Because of possible self-selection problems (a proficient Basque speaker might move to a traditionally Basque speaking area), geographical variables will also be excluded from regression analysis.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive results

Just by skimming through the values shown in Table 1, one can easily see how much variability in level of Euskera there is between individuals employed in different sectors: while almost 70 percent of technicians, professionals, scientists and intellectuals declare at least some communication skills in Euskera, the percentage drops to less than 27 percent for non-skilled workers. A remarkable difference can also be detected between support technicians and professionals (around 60 percent) and machine workers and fitters (40 percent). The occupational classes which tend to show higher percentages of *Euskaldunes* seem to be those connected with a higher educational level. The connection between educational level and level of Euskera appears to be confirmed by further descriptive evidence, as shown in Fig 3. The type of school, however, looks not to have any dramatic impact on Euskera language skills, with the sole exception of *ikastolas*, the "descendants" of the rebel schools of the 1960s. Nevertheless, the difference between academic and non-academic higher educated individuals, together with a considerable gap within skilled workers over different sectors, suggest that other factors might have a significant effect.

	M0	M1	M2
Occupation (reference: Company management and Public administration)	<i>Ref</i>	<i>Ref</i>	<i>Ref</i>
Technician and professional, scientific and intellectual	0.212*** (-0.051)	0.112** (-0.054)	0.049 (-0.050)
Support Technician and professional	0.140** (-0.056)	0.118** (-0.056)	0.043 (-0.054)
Clerical employee (includes Armed Forces)	0.078 (-0.053)	0.103* (-0.055)	0.062 (-0.052)
Personal services, catering, protection and trade	-0.053 (-0.051)	0.062 (-0.053)	-0.029 (-0.051)
Skilled worker, agriculture and fishing	0.117* (-0.068)	0.253*** (-0.072)	0.234*** (-0.062)
Skilled worker, industry, construction and mining	-0.060 (-0.055)	0.064 (-0.058)	0.023 (-0.054)
Machine operators, fitters	-0.077 (-0.052)	0.063 (-0.055)	0.008 (-0.052)
Non-skilled workers	-0.216*** (-0.050)	-0.044 (-0.054)	-0.124** (-0.051)
Educational level (reference: Pre-school/primary)		<i>Ref</i>	<i>Ref</i>
Professional		0.073 (-0.044)	0.052 (-0.043)
Secondary		0.242*** (-0.047)	0.167*** (-0.046)
Higher middle		0.178*** (-0.051)	0.099** (-0.050)
Higher		0.420*** (-0.051)	0.317*** (-0.051)
Birth cohort (reference: Born before Franco's death)			<i>Ref</i>
Born right after Franco's death			0.139*** (-0.024)
Post Franco			0.317*** (-0.024)
Sex (female)			0.051*** (-0.018)
Constant	0.478*** (-0.045)	0.169** (-0.066)	0.199*** (-0.064)
Observations	3,866	3,866	3,866
Log Likelihood	-2,576.598	2,484.492	2,368.656
Akaike Inf. Crit.	5,171.196	4,994.983	4,769.313

Table 2: Stepwise regression results. Source: EUSTAT, *Encuesta de condiciones de vida*

To further support this suspicion, the amount of *Euskaldunes* among skilled agricultural workers is even high enough to match that of scientists and intellectuals, when de-coupled from the number of *cuasi-Euskaldunes* (Fig 4).

The data seems to confirm that a considerable expansion of the Basque speaking population has taken place in the last few decades: less than 35 percent of people born before the Republican Constitution was signed are able to speak Euskera, in stark contrast with the 74 percent of Post-Franco individuals. When it comes to the geographical variable, a great deal of differences between areas can be detected, with percentages of Euskaldunes ranging from less than 30 percent in the historically and ethnically Castilian area of the *Llanada alavesa* to over 75 percent in the coastal area around Donostia-San Sebastián (Alto Deba, Bajo Deba and Urola Costa). These findings are more or less consonant with the historical distribution of Basque speakers in mountain areas and coastal towns. As previously explained, the geographical variable is included in Table 1 as context for the regression result and will not be included in the regression models.

Regression Results

As one might expect from the previously examined results, the effect of education on the probability of being a Basque speaker is probably the strongest of those analysed in this paper (Table 2). The effect of education completely overshines the occupation effect in M1, where almost all occupation coefficients are not statistically significant. In the complete model (M2), age cohort coefficients are significant at 99 percent confidence levels, confirming the previous impression that proficiency in the Basque language is becoming increasingly common.

Further Considerations

The most interesting regression result in terms of occupational class is the marked difference in the effects of being a skilled worker employed in the agricultural sector, as compared to a non-skilled worker. While the former has a much higher probability of being a Basque speaker, the latter is the only occupational category connected to a negative coefficient. Through further descriptive analysis (summarised in Table 3), the main difference between the two groups seems to be the zone of residence. Although, clearly, it is no surprise that people employed in the agricultural

		Skilled worker, agriculture and fishing	Non-skilled workers
Educational level			
	Pre-school/primary	7.34%	4.90%
	Professional	44.76%	55.77%
	Secondary	31.47%	21.29%
	Higher middle	7.47%	12.78%
	Higher	8.97%	5.26%
Age cohort			
	Born before the Republic	79.26%	72.54%
	Born right after Franco's death	8.34%	15.47%
	Post Franco	12.40%	11.99%
Zone			
	Llanada alavesa	5.29%	14.41%
	Rest of Álava	8.53%	0.72%
	Gran Bilbao	21.65%	44.48%
	Duranguesado	4.15%	5.76%
	Gernika-Bermeo, Plentzia-Mungia and Markina-Ondarroa	16.61%	5.33%
	Arratia-Nervión and Encartaciones	7.15%	3.48%
	Donostialdea and Bajo Bidasoa	24.12%	15.97%
	Alto Deba, Bajo Deba and Urola Costa	8.46%	4.75%
	Tolosaldea and Goierri	4.04%	5.12%

Table 3: Skilled workers in agricultural sector and non-skilled workers' educational attainment, age and zone of residence. Source: EUSTAT, *Encuesta de condiciones de vida*

sector live outside urban areas, the fact that non-skilled workers are concentrated in more urbanised areas is not as obvious. Skilled workers in the agricultural sectors seem to be scattered more or less equally throughout the region, a good percentage of them being based in traditionally Basque speaking areas, such as Gernika-Bermeo, Plentzia-Mungia and Markina-Ondarroa. Conversely, non-skilled workers are extremely concentrated in urban areas, almost half of them being based in Gran Bilbao (Table 3). It is unclear, however, whether and how this is correlated with Basque proficiency. If Bilbao is, in fact, a very Castilian speaking area, Donostia-San Sebastián is actually

among the areas with the highest percentages of Basque speakers (Table 1). In short, although one could somewhat safely put forward the hypothesis of a sector-effect or social closures favouring proficiency in Euskera among agricultural workers, the problem of identifying the nature of bilingualism among non-skilled workers is still very much open.

Conclusion

Through descriptive evidence and stepwise regression analysis, a clear correlation between educational level and proficiency in Basque emerged. The effect of occupational class on the overall level of Euskera is less evident, and generally not statistically significant. Skilled agricultural workers and non-skilled workers are the only two classes which seem to be connected to higher or lower proficiency in Basque. These two groups mainly differ in the zone of residence: agricultural workers (associated with a higher probability of speaking Euskera) are mostly located in Basque-speaking areas, hinting to the existence of some sector-effect on Basque proficiency; non-skilled workers, on the other hand, appear to be concentrated in urban areas, regardless of the number of Basque speakers in the area.

The strong correlation between (especially higher) education and level of Euskera could be taken as a hint of Basque-Spanish bilingualism having become a form of *elite* bilingualism. In a somewhat Bourdieusian sense, being able to speak Basque could be considered an added symbolic capital in a context of widespread political support for its teaching.¹⁸ The absence of a tangible connection between Basque proficiency and occupational class, however, seems to contradict this thesis. If anything, the apparent persistence of some form of identification of skilled agricultural workers with their ethnical roots goes in the opposite direction. It would thus be irresponsible to define Bilingualism in the Basque Autonomous Community as *elite*, although it might possibly have become more *voluntary* in recent years. Its propagation, albeit being put into place via educational expansion, appears to be able to cut through vertical class distinctions. Some horizontal inequality in achieving bilingualism, however, does appear to exist. Further research would be needed to determine whether a sector-effect exists in agriculture, encouraging (or forcing?) agricultural

workers to reach a high level of Basque, and discouraging non-skilled workers from achieving high communication skills in Euskera. In order to be able to make any considerations on the geographical dimension of Basque in the BAC, a more detailed socio-linguistic analysis would be needed.

ENDNOTES

¹ Gabriella D'Aprile e Maura Tripi, «Treasure trove of words. A proposal for multilingual education to train future educators», *Educazione interculturale EI* 19, fasc. 2 (01 2021): 193–203, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2420-8175/13910>; Wenjun Yu e Hao Xu, «Multilingual Education Policy and LOTE Teacher Development: Focusing on China's LOTE Programs in Higher Education», *Education Sciences* 13, fasc. 8 (2023): 844, <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13080844>; Ping Zhang e Bob Adamson, «Multilingual education in minority-dominated regions in Xinjiang, People's Republic of China», *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 44, fasc. 10 (2023): 968–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2020.1850744>.

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³ Jon Juaristi, *Historia mínima del País Vasco*, 2013.

⁴ Ibidem

⁵ Bernardo Atxaga, quoted in: Jasone Cenoz, *Towards Multilingual Education: Basque Educational Research from an International Perspective* (Multilingual Matters Limited, 2009).

⁶ Anne-Marie De Mejía, *Power, Prestige, and Bilingualism: International Perspectives on Elite Bilingual Education* (Multilingual Matters, 2002).

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¹¹ Sierra, J. (1991). La inmersión y la enseñanza bilingüe en el País Vasco. *CL & E: Comunicación, lenguaje y educación*, 10, 47–56.

¹² Ibidem

¹³ Cenoz, J. (2009). *Towards Multilingual Education: Basque Educational Research from an International Perspective*. Multilingual Matters Limited. http://books.google.it/books?id=WMUetQEACAAJ&hl=&source=gbs_api

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¹⁶ John U. Ogbu e Herbert D. Simons, «Voluntary and Involuntary Minorities: A Cultural-Ecological Theory of

School Performance with Some Implications for Education», *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 29, fasc. 2 (1998): 155–88; De Mejía, *Power, Prestige, and Bilingualism: International Perspectives on Elite Bilingual Education*.

¹⁷ EUSTAT, «Encuesta de condiciones de vida», 2019.

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu e Loïc Wacquant, «Symbolic capital and social classes», *Journal of Classical Sociology* 13, fasc. 2 (2013): 292–302, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795x12468736>.