

## Publishing and literary system in Basque literature

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**Abstract** The article outlines the creation of the Basque literary system, the relations of mediation between publishers and readers of literature written in Basque, through its evolution during the 20th Century. Being the Basque literary system of a precarious nature due to diglossia, the lack of schooling in Basque and adverse political conditions, the analysis will focus on the most fragile stages in the development of the literary system so as to cast a light upon the relevance of relationships between factors such as ideology, education and literary creation.

**Summary** 1. 1900-1930. Multipolar publishing: Nationalism and literature. – 2. 1930-1936. Beginnings of a coherent literary system in Basque literature. – 3. 1936-1968. Precariousness under Franco. – 4. 1968-1975. Beginning of modernization and professionalization of publishing houses. – 5. Since 1975. Literature and school

**Keywords** Literary system. Mediation. Publishing history. Basque literature.

The objective of this study is to outline the history of relations of mediation between the publishers and readers of Basque literature, here meaning literature written in the Basque language, Euskara, in order to attempt to discern an evolution within a very precarious literary system, with fragile bases, with the absence of schooling in this language and with a minority readership or a readership in clear ambivalence in a diglossic system, a readership who buys Basque-language books without knowing the language.

To do this we will go through a synthetic review of what can be considered the most notable steps in this relationship:

1. 1900-1930. Multipolar publishing: Nationalism and literature.
2. 1930-1936. Beginnings of a coherent literary system in Basque literature.
3. 1936-1968. Precariousness under Franco.
4. 1968-1975. Beginning of modernization and professionalization of publishing houses.
5. Since 1975. Literature and school.

These five steps will be considered as intrasystemic relationships, such

that ideology, education and literary creation can be seen to be clearly related to each other. Considering the presses, first, and then the publishing houses, allows us to become aware of the various types of publishing, so that we can examine diverse forms of creating space for publishing literature.

## 1 1900-1930. Multipolar publishing. Nationalism and literature

As Luis Mitxelena indicated in his *Historia de la literatura vasca* (History of Basque literature),

Among us, we must situate in the last decade of the last [nineteenth] century the first clear signs of the appearance of a new spirit – already foreshadowed by some precursors – that would transform the characteristics of literature in many aspects. (1960, p. 41)

He was referring to the birth of nationalism in its political creation as Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) by Sabino Arana. By defining the Basque language as one of the basic characteristics of Basque national(ist) identity, the founder of the Nationalist Party made its cultivation one of the most important bases for the creation of a national configuration.

Luis Mitxelena also highlighted the consequences of this appearance: a) now it is not just poetry that is cultivated, b) the predominance of ‘edifying works’ and works for religious education disappears. To carry out his propositions, nationalism, whose base of traditional Catholicism had to be quickly removed, required a wide network of publications which, especially in Bilbao, began to create a widespread awareness about the cultivation of Euskara.

This new situation came into being to accompany a group of publishing houses of a religious nature. We must cite here the thesis outlined by Ibon Sarasola (1971 and 1976) and developed by Jon Juaristi (1988) which suggests that the Basque language was cultivated by the Church in order to stem the flow of liberal ideas, that Euskara was an instrument used to ensure that the speakers of the language (for the most part peasants) remained in the camp of traditionalism and Carlism.

Thus, from an editorial point of view, there are two strong systems, of course relatively, of publishing: one with a religious slant which continued to publish in Basque in its magazines; and nationalism, which from Bilbao, and especially through its newspaper *Euzkadi*, proposed a new, more secular literature.

In any case, the urban-born nationalism – Bilbao was its place of birth – idealized a countryside from which it extracted the motives for its symbolic creation, the country idyll, and the configuration of a traditional(ist)

world. From this circumstance, two elements of tension that would mark the evolution of nationalist literature were created. Firstly, this urban bourgeoisie did not know or barely knew the Basque language, which produced a situation of diglossia, where we aspired to a Basque nation that would (only) speak Basque, but from a different daily practice: this led to the fact that many literary works were published in bilingual editions, and this practice continued in poetry until the 1960s. Secondly, at the request of Sabino Arana's linguistic propositions the first nationalism proposed a linguistic model quite distant from the normal and everyday one, distancing itself from Romance loanwords (mainly Castilian, but Latin as well), thus aspiring to an 'ideal' language, removed from any historical evolution and returned to its roots, that were established by the logic applied by the 'linguist', who created an allegedly original 'neo-language'.

The search for a Basque-speaking reader was one of every author's basic preoccupations. The certain paradox that Basque speakers were not literate and that the literate did not speak Basque produced a serious distortion. Thus, nationalist writers like Ebaristo Bustinza, Kirikiño (1866-1929), editor of the daily newspaper *Euzkadi*, opted for short narration, with a humouristic and ethnographic edge, to attempt to reach country readers, which attenuated the purist character of their writing.

The weak character of the system did not escape any writers, who often had to defray the costs of the publication of their books, like in the case of Jose Manuel Etxeita (1842-1915), and Jean Etxepare (1877-1935). Along with the two 'centres' of nationalism and the ecclesiastic tradition, writers who wished to publish books – novels or chronicles – opted to go to publishing houses that functioned as bookstores and publishers at the same time, like that of Florentino Elosua in Durango, or the edition paid for by Jean Etxepare with the following inscription: «Lekornen eta Aldudan salgei, Egilearen etchondoan eta egoitzan» (For sale at Lekorne and in Aldude, in the neighbourhood of the author and at his residence), which indicates the precariousness of publishing at that time. The absent practice of distribution, as the inscription that we have just cited shows, led to the stockpiling of copies in the author's house, which continued until very recently.

The usual, however, was not the publication of books but rather of magazines, which occupied an important place in the publication – fragmented or in instalments – of literary works. Hence, a book is published after its relative success in magazines. The compilations of articles – Bustinza, Etxepare – or the complete edition of a novel that had previously been published in instalments – as in the case of the most important novelist of the period, Domingo Agirre (1864-1920) – were the dominant forms of publication at the time. The magazine *Euskal Erria* of San Sebastián (1880-1918), the *Revista Internacional de Estudios Vascos* (1907-1936, with a modern revival), *Eskualduna* in the French Basque Country (since

1887, 7,000 subscribers in 1907) served as platforms for literary creation (short stories and chronicles) such that, once the author had acquired a certain renown, compilations were published.

In conclusion, in this first period of study, the literary system would be formed around various magazines of religious orders and ideological publications close to the PNV. The weakness of the system can be appreciated through the existence of bookstore-publishers in population hubs, which can be considered county towns.

## 2 1930-1936. Beginnings of a coherent literary system in Basque literature

The multipolar characteristics of the publication of Basque literature would continue in this second pre-War period. Religious orders continue their editorial activity through the magazines that each order maintains, like the *Jesusen biotzaren deya* (1916) of the Jesuits, the order with the most influence in Basque circles of the time. Small publishers have multiplied as a consequence of the increasing importance of nationalism and of economic prosperity. In this period, in urban centres, nationalism manages to maintain a petty-bourgeois and educated militance. Although the word has designated different periods in the cultural history of the Basque Country, we find ourselves in a phase that is called the Renaissance of Basque literature and culture. The Academy of the Basque Language has already been created (1918-1919) as well as the Society for Basque Studies. Thus, small publishers multiply: Casa Baroja in San Sebastián (from the late nineteenth century), Moco-roa and López Mendizábal in Tolosa, Gaubeca in Bermeo, Verdes in Bilbao.

One of the most active institutions was the Sociedad Euzkaltzaleak (1927), and a prominent figure was the priest Jose Aristimuño 'Aitzol' (1896-1936), who would bring coherence to a beginning literary system through the organization of the Olerti Egunak (Poetry Days, 1930-1936), celebrations that recalled a modernized Juegos Florales (Floral games), which were so important in Basque literature of the nineteenth century, and which served as a sort of cohesion for a group of poets: Jose Maria Agirre, Xabier de Lizardi (1896-1933), Esteban Urkiaga, Lauaxeta (1905-37), Nikolas Ormaetxea, Orixe (1888-1961), who were known as Olerkariak, the purist word for 'poet'.

Jose Aristimuño, Aitzol, was a critic and champion of the lyric poetry that these authors produced. It was, broadly, a symbolist and minority poetry, but one which would be providential to Aitzol for the resurgence of national feeling. He predicted that poetry would come to play a role of national awareness as Lönnrot had done in Finland or as, he supposed, would

occur in Provençal with the work of Mistral. Thus, Nicolás Ormaetxea, Orixe, was commissioned to write an epic work that would stoke the fire of Basque identity. The work *Euskaldunak* (Basque speakers) was completed for 1935, but published much later in 1953, and under Franco, Aitzol's priorities had unfortunately gone out of use. The minority character of this poetry made it that its objectives were far from realized, for which reason Aitzol looked for new ways to reinforce national identity through literature, creating Basque Theatre Day or Bertsolari Day (improviser of oral poetry with wide acceptance in popular spheres).

He also had influence in the editorial sphere, publishing the winning poems of each Poetry Day (in the series *Euzko Olerkiak. Poesía Vascas*), founding the daily newspaper *El Día* (The day) of San Sebastián, which would serve as a counterpoint to *Euzkadi*, and carrying out the publication of a magazine of cultural prestige: *Yakintza* (Popular literature, 1933-1936).

Nationalist circles had started the magazine *Euzkerea* (1929-1936), which, like the magazine *Yakintza*, sought to be a distinguished publication, as much from the point of view of the graphic design as from that of the selection of literary works that were published in it.

The literary and social movements created around the Renaissance movement led to significant literary output, and also, although the publication of magazines is not inconsiderable, to the publication of books, in which we can already see an embryonic literary system taking its first steps with a certain social cohesion. There are authors, mediators, in the editorial and critical spheres, and there is also a reception, although this would be estimated at around the 300 readers with which Aitzol measured the sphere of reading in Basque, and which probably reflected the number of sales of his poetry publications, his compilations of the poems competing during the Poetry Days.

However, writers became social agents that attempted to socialize literature through a Writers' Association (Zumaia 1933) and through the creation of the Detxepare prize for the best Basque-language work published during each year. The organization of the first schools in Basque and the quest to introduce teaching in Basque into schools led to the publication of the first textbooks in Basque and to an incipient children's literature and literature for young readers. All these initiatives, and the incipient Basque literary system, were cut short by the outbreak of War in 1936. Aitzol was executed in 1936, Lauaxeta in 1937, and many of the writers and supporters of culture were forced into exile.

### 3 1936-1968. Precariousness under Franco

As of 1936, the panorama of Basque literature and its mediators goes through a difficult period and a period of censorship. Joseba Intxausti distinguishes two periods during the dark years of Franco's rule:

1937-1956: Years of persecution and of prohibitions following the war. Especially during the immediate years, even the use of the language was persecuted, particularly in the big cities [...]

1957-1975: These are the years of the organization and development of social initiatives. In the decade between 1956 and 1965, the language found itself in a more dynamic and changing situation: some new conditions of cultural resistance would produce new and consolidated conditions [...]

Toward 1956-1964, the young generation that had not known war brought new blood. We could detect a true passion for the language: magazines, groups, organizations, investment...interest for the spoken language, the written, for teaching, songs [...] Seminars and radio programs appeared [...] cultural weeks and fortnights were organized, bertsolari contests, festivals. (1992, p. 158)

In this agit-prop panorama, the author does not miss an opportunity for publication. In the early years of Franco's regime, Basque literature saw a significant production in the South American exile. Jon Andoni Irazusta's novels (1881-1952) and Eizagirre's (1881-1948) were published there; in Buenos Aires the publishing house Ekin was set up (1940), which, mainly in Castilian, would publish books about Basque themes, and in Guatemala, Jokin Zaitegi, prize-winning poet of the 1933 Poetry Day, would carry out the most important publication of the Basque exile: the publication of the magazine *Euzko Gogo* (Basque soul, 1950-1960), with a first series in Guatemala and a second in Biarritz.

The magazine, published entirely in Euskara, aimed to modernize the Basque language through culture. In that sense, it was the continuation of the cultural propositions of the period of the Second Republic and Aitzol's work. It brought together writers like Nikolas Ormaetxea, Orixe and Andima Ibinagabeitua, and took on the translation of Classical Greek and Latin works into Euskara. The magazine aimed to have enough solvency to be at the disposition of future university studies.

In the Basque Country on the Peninsula, the difficulties were extreme, and in that period, the religious orders put their publishing houses in favour of Euskara. Thus, it would not be the Jesuits who would lead the publication in Basque, but rather, the importance of the Carmelites and Franciscans that would be determinant.

The Carmelites, and especially, the main driving force behind publication in the Basque language, Santiago Onaindia (1909-1996), would keep alive the esthetic traditions created out of the presence of symbolism in pre-war poetic esthetics. Onaindia would be a tireless Basque-language editor, after publishing his first texts in the 1930s. Continuer of the poetry of Esteban Urkiaga, Lauaxeta, Santiago Onaindia would create diverse editorial platforms for a circle of writers which eventually would remain in the most traditional sector of esthetic and also linguistic positions, at the time of the unification of the Basque language in 1968. Although the nucleus would be described as nostalgic with symbolism in the esthetic and with a traditional notion in the moral, its generous position would open the way for writers that would change the panorama of Basque literature, like Aresti. Santiago Onaindia was the driving force behind the religious magazine *Karmel*, also open to cultural topics, he composed the anthology *Milla esuskal olerki eder* (A thousand beautiful Basque poems, 1954), a book which, composed in the style of the *Mil mejores poesías de la lengua castellana* (Thousand best poems of the Castilian language), rendered visible the history of Basque poetry, its existence and its capacity for creation in a delicate moment in the social history of the language, for which reason its importance to the affirmation of identity would be capital. He also drove the magazine *Olerti* (Poetry, 1959-1970, but which continued to be published into the 1980s).

The Franciscans brought esthetic and ideological renewal to Basque language and literature through various very important initiatives like the creation of the magazine *Yakin* (Knowledge – later, with the unified spelling, *Jakin*; 1956-1968 and 1977-present). At first, it was an internal magazine for Franciscan seminarians in Arantzazu, which promptly opened itself to the debate about modernization that would come about from the thaw of Franco's regime to the mythical year of 1968.

The Franciscan congregation's publishing also drove the publication of the poetry that was being written during those dark years, mainly by brothers of the order like *Arantzazu: euskal federaren poema* (Arantzazu: Poem of the Basque faith, 1949) by Salvatore Mitxelena (1919-1965) and years later, *Elorri* (Thorn, 1962) by Bitoriano Gandiaga (1928-2001).

If we turn our attention to the secular side of literary society, we can observe that, as of 1952, the publishing house with the symbolic name Itxaropena (Hope) in Zarautz carried out the publication of a collection of books that would serve to visualize the narrative production of the 1950s and 1960s. In it would appear the most important names in Basque literature, due to the efforts of Francisco Unzurrunzaga (1906-1984), an editor committed to Basque literary creation. To this publishing house we must add the work of Ellacuría in its Gráficas Bilbao imprint, where many Basque books of the period were printed.

In the world of magazines, we must mention the literary magazine

*Egan* (1954-present), which began as a Castilian literary supplement but became a monolingual Basque magazine under the direction of Luis Mitxelena, Arrue and Aingeru Irigarai. It made possible the meeting of writers that came from the esthetics before the Civil War and the promotion of the 1950s as well as the young values that would develop their creative work in a flurry of activity after 1968, with the evolution of reformist, Marxist, and radical nationalist ideas, with the relaunch of nationalism that was taking place at that time. Among the pragmatic foundations of the magazine were its vocation of modernity and union with its time, the look at the city, with the abandonment of ruralism and idyllic ideas, the establishment of debates on topics of interest, which, necessarily, would clash with the ruling regime.

#### **4 1968-1975. Beginning of modernization and professionalization of publishing houses**

As of 1968, a generational and literary renewal takes place in the Basque literary space. The new writers come from an urban middle class, are university graduates with academic training completed abroad, who know the consequences and approaches of France's May 1968, who debate about Marxism and literature, about existentialism and novels, who, in contrast to a Francoist social reality, grey and stagnant, hope for a modernization, looking to France. They quickly break with previous generations and their esthetics and, from the socialist realism that was the work of Gabriel Aresti (1933-1975), they get involved in the creation of esthetics that connect to the *nouveau roman*, nihilism and structuralism, with the hippy avant-garde, and with the assumption of cultural modernization.

Gabriel Aresti, who had published his famous *Harri eta Herri* (Stone and people, 1964), the confirmation of the break with realism and purism in favor of a search for social-realist, plural poetry, near the register of normal speech, which reclaimed the city of Bilbao for Basque poetry, in the publishing house Itxaropena, created his own imprint Kriseilu in Bilbao, to merge promptly with the new Basque-language writers like Ramon Saizarbitoria (1944-), Ibon Sarasola (1946-), Arantza Urretabizkaia (1947-), and also with Enrique Villar, who put up the capital for the venture, to create an editorial initiative of great importance: the publishing house *Lur*, which maintained an important commitment to quality (the cover art was by Alberto Corazón, for example).

The publishing house functioned through a number of subscribers who ensured the continuity of the project, a formula that was used by other publishing houses of the time. The publication of literature of the period (it was they who published the first work – a play – by Bernardo Atxaga,



for example) combined with the translation of works that were considered classics, of literature and of materialist philosophy.

Soon the editorial landscape changed, with the greater presence of literary publishers, such as Elkar and Gero, who later became Elkarlanean and Etor. The publishing houses began to see the time of professionalization through a series of initiatives. Bookstores had grown, and intense activity in the Basque language was occurring: like the multiplication of Basque-language weeklies, the significant multiplication of the ikastolas, the Basque-language schools – still private, and often under the legal mantle of ecclesiastic organizations – the appearance of the new Basque song and the group *Ez dok hamairu*, the beginnings of radio shows in Basque. All of this coincided with a period of significant activity in the field of plastic arts: in painting and in sculpture, with names like Txillida and Oteiza, whose international production was already at the time an indisputable fact.

## 5 Since 1975. Literature and school

As of 1975, and during the first transition in the Basque literary system, multiple initiatives are carried out. The publishing houses are prepared for that which will change the situation of the literary system: the Basque Language Normalization Law (1982) and the incorporation of the teaching of Basque language and literatures into public schools, such that the introduction of literature into schools would radically change the functioning of mediation in the literary system.

At that time, editorial networks enter into agreements with educational networks, such that the education system serves as solid ground in which to support itself in order to be able to publish literature, the unprofitable sector of the system. The union of literature and school system is a fact, a two-faceted process that must be considered in both its aspects. Firstly, we must speak of mandatory readings in the various courses, which means that the most well-known writers sell in the school system. Secondly, an interdependence has been established between the editorial and education systems, which means that if a publishing house is important, it is linked to a school system. Hence, the publishing house Elkarlanean maintains clear connections with the federation of Ikastolas, the private network, secular, I should point out, of the school system. The publishing house Ibaizabal, dependent on a religious order, supports itself on its own learning institution, which keeps the name Ikastola, but which combines teaching in Euskara with the ethical order conferred by the religious order, that is to say, it is a private network with references to a religious order. The public network turns out to be a special place in which these and other publishing houses move, who claim to legitimately combine textbooks which can later finance Basque literature.

This has produced two phenomena which we must mention. The first is of an extra-literary nature: the presence in this system of the large Spanish publishing houses that make a parallel case to be present in the education system: Giltza-Edebé would be an example of participation in the two networks.

The second phenomenon is literary and has to do with the creation of literature for school. It leads to the presence of various elements in the systemic configuration. The fact that visitors from the publishing houses go to educational institutions leads to books being sold on that circuit and lowers the percentage of books sold in bookstores; this phenomenon is mitigated by the creation of editorial groups (the aforementioned Elkarlanean and, to a lesser extent, Ibaizabal) who own the entire chain of production of books: they own the publishing house, the distributor and the bookstores, thus creating a network of total access to the benefits, if there were any, at all levels of the production chain. In this phenomenon that we call literature for school, we can see, unsurprisingly, the great production of works for children and young readers, and the importance of the so-called children's-young readers' literature, which has created the detestable phrase which says that this literature exists, and another literature exists for adults. In another sense, and coinciding with some technical and stylistic elements owing to postmodernity, works with a simple structure and which are easy to read and can be consumed by a young readership are preferred. Certainly, there exist authors who do not renounce literary development and the complexity of their ideas (nor should we assume that all authors of children's literature and literature for young readers opt for 'easy' writing) and their presence is related to another type of parameters that confer prestige, such as literary prizes (the National Narrative Prizes awarded to Bernardo Atxaga and Unai Elorriaga), continual allusions to them in the media or in authors' discussion groups, and also, their reading in classrooms, but not in an occasional manner and not in a hegemonic manner.

Small publishing houses like Susa, Alberdania and Pamiela focus their efforts on giving prestige to the literature written in Basque, supporting themselves to do so on the publication of children's literature, but maintaining a more widespread presence in schools.

These days, Basque literature is undergoing an attempt to internationalize its work and to attract the attention of publishing houses outside the Basque Country, to enable the translation into other languages (Spanish, English, French, German) of works created in Euskara.

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