Basque and Spanish in 19th century San Sebastián*

Bruno Camus Bergareche & Sara Gómez Seibane
Universidad de Castilla–La Mancha
Bruno.Camus@uclm.es
Sara.Gomez@uclm.es

Abstract

The present paper shows the first results of an ongoing project devoted to explore the castilianization of the city of San Sebastián in Spain. We will offer a series of data and testimonies that show the quantitative importance of both competing languages in San Sebastián during the first three quarters of the 19th century. Drawing from that information, we will also intend to imagine what the linguistic situation of the city was according to some sociolinguistic variables as linguistic situation, social class, literacy or gender. The provisional conclusions thus collected should help us to detect the groups that determined and featured the shift towards Spanish in the last years of the century. By so doing we hope to contribute to a better understanding of a process that needs to be compared with similar language replacements in the 19th century cities of Spain and Western Europe.

Keywords: Linguistic shift, castilianization, Basque, Spanish, 19th century, Basque Country, San Sebastián.
Received: 26.IV.2010 – **Accepted:** 27.IX.2010

Table of Contents

1 Introduction
2 San Sebastián in the 19th century
3 A language shift: From Basque to Spanish
4 Sociolinguistics of 19th century San Sebastián
5 Concluding remarks
References

*This work is a detailed and extended version of a previous paper presented in the 42nd Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea (Lisbon, September 2009). We would also like to thank our colleague Rosario Caballero and Martín Alcorta for their kind review of the English version.

Ianua. Revista Philologica Romanica
Vol. 10 (2010): 223–239
ISSN 1616-413X
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

© Romania Minor

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

1 Introduction

This work presents the first results of an ambitious research project that is devoted to the description and analysis of the process of castilianization or spanicization of the city of San Sebastián[1] —capital of the province of Guipúzcoa in the Basque Country in Spain. Indeed, the linguistic shift received a serious and definitive boost during the final decades of the 19th century,[2] which explains the linguistic situation of the city during most of the following 20th century —i.e., a mainly Spanish-speaking island surrounded by a vast Basque-speaking area.

In the following pages, we will focus on the description of the status of both competing languages from the early 19th century until 1876, that is, before the aforementioned crucial changes really started to gain momentum. In order to draw a clear picture, we have organized this paper as follows. In the first section we provide a brief historical sketch of San Sebastián during the period at issue. That will help us to emphasize the economic, political and cultural specificity of this little society amongst the rest of the cities of the province. In § 2 we describe some contemporary sources and testimonies on the linguistic situation of the city during this period that show the relative importance of Basque and Spanish before 1876, in order to understand the dimension of the linguistic shift that took place during the last quarter of the 19th century. This general panorama will be completed in § 3 with a more detailed analysis of the linguistic behaviour of different professional and social groups of the city during the first three quarters of the 19th century (1813–1876), in order to contribute to the identification of the main locus for the decisive linguistic transformation that was in progress. We will finally present some conclusions and comments about future research on the topic.

2 San Sebastián in the 19th century

San Sebastián is now a prosperous city of about 200.000 inhabitants, and is the capital of the province of Guipúzcoa, one of the three historical territories that form the Autonomous Basque Community or Euskadi. Located on the Northern Spain coast, twenty kilometres from the French border, it has always been, and still is, surrounded by a large Basque-speaking *hinterland*. This fact partially explains why San Sebastian is nowadays the only capital of the Spanish Basque country[3] with an important concentration of native Basque-speaking population, as the following table clearly shows:

[1] The official denomination of the city is now bilingual: Donostia – San Sebastián. Nevertheless, for the sake of simplicity, in this paper we will use only the Spanish name San Sebastián.

[2] All along this work we will use language shift in the sense of Fishman (1964), that is, a language replacement during which a speech community shifts to another language.

[3] Bilbao, capital of Vizcaya, has been in contact with Spanish-speaking areas at least since 17th century, and Vitoria even earlier.

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

TABLE 1. *Native Basque-speaking population in the capitals of the Autonomous Basque Community (2001).*

	INHABITANTS	NATIVE BASQUE-SPEAKING	%
Spanish Basque Community	1.984.958	392.097	19,7
San Sebastián	169.591	33.472	19,7
Vitoria	206.354	6.042	2,9
Bilbao	334.976	15.303	4,5

Source: Basque Government (EAS)[4]

Two hundred years ago, around 1800, San Sebastián was mainly a fortified town, similar to many other Spanish cities near the French border —after Artola (2000), as the rest of this § 1, together with Sada & Sada (1999). Apart from the important military garrison (run by mostly non-native people), there was some significant commercial activity that occupied the majority of the people living inside the fortified area. There also existed a considerable number of peasants living in the numerous surrounding farmhouses outside the city walls, which helped to feed and sustain the population in the city.[5] Altogether, they made up not much more than ten thousand people.

In 1813, following the retreat of Bonaparte's army from Spain, the city was burnt to the ground after a short siege by Wellington's allied Anglo-Portuguese troops. That necessarily meant a new and painful starting point for the city and its inhabitants. It was necessary to rebuild the city completely and the task took several years. Once the reconstruction was finished, the First *Carlista* Civil War (1833–1837) started. The citizens of San Sebastián, aligned with the liberal government of Madrid, had to face the absolutist rebel militias —an overwhelming majority in surrounding rural areas of Guipúzcoa and the rest of the Basque Country. That meant a long siege and frequent battles and military activity all around the place for at least four years. The increasing economic activity was once more put off by the significance of the city as a military garrison and the strategic importance of its fortifications.

When peace finally arrived, the thriving commercial oligarchy of this still small town started a new battle in order to obtain the appointment of their city as the capital of Guipúzcoa. The absolutist forces of the province supported the town of Tolosa, in the middle of a rural area. But San Sebastián suceeded and became in 1854 the capital of the province, hence the influential headquarters of local administrative institutions. That meant an increase of the political,

[4]Data from the Basque Government webpage: Sistema de Indicadores Lingüísticos de Euskal Herria (EAS) [15/08/2009].

[5]The number of farmhouses (*caseríos* in Spanish, *baserriak* in Basque) that belonged to the territory of the city of San Sebastián was around 350 at the beginning of the 19th century, that is, some 2.000 people lived in rural areas outside the city walls (Artola 2000, 212).

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

economic and, especially, cultural leadership of the city over its surrounding territory. In order to understand what this status meant in those days, we need to have in mind that until 1876 Guipúzcoa —together with the rest of Spanish Basque territories— retained a self-government system that gave it full autonomy with respect to the local economy and social and cultural life.

But other goals were still waiting to be achieved. The enterprising bourgeoisie of San Sebastián also aimed at demolishing the belt of walls that surrounded the city. There were several reasons for this. In the first place, it would put an end to the interference of the army, officers and soldiers in the city progress and interests. It would also liberate a huge area where new and modern neighbourhoods could be raised, with buildings, parks and streets designed to be occupied by the growing upper and middle classes. Although demographic pressure was not threatening —some 15 thousand inhabitants in 1860—, there were signals of changes to come: some new industries had been settled and aristocrats and elegant people from Madrid were beginning to arrive to enjoy the summer and beaches of a city close to fashionable Biarritz in France.

The civilian society won again, and in 1863 the city walls were finally demolished. When the building of the new city beyond these walls started, San Sebastián was still a small and egalitarian society. Everybody knew everybody, met everyone and coexisted willingly with all the neighbours despite the existing social and economic differences.[6] It is true that the people who controlled the political life and economy of the city were just a handful of families whose members were mayors, city councillors and held other public jobs (Muñoz Echabeguren 2006).[7] But the social distance between them and the ordinary people could not be insurmountable given the physical and demographic size of the city.

Once again the city's perspectives of economic growth and progress ended in war. The Third *Carlista* Civil War hit San Sebastián since its very beginning in 1872. A new hard siege kept the city under bombing until 1876. As a direct consequence of the faithful support offered by Basque rural areas to the absolutist cause, in 1876 the Spanish liberal government abolished the Basque traditional autonomous regime: the *Fueros*. This decision shook the Basque society deeply for a long time and determined its subsequent history in every sense. As far as the Basque language in San Sebastián is concerned, it undoubtedly meant a completely new situation, as we will see in the following sections, since educational and cultural ambit started to be controlled by the government in Madrid.

Nevertheless, this new situation brought better perspectives in many other aspects. During the last twenty five years of the 19th century, the city doubled

[6] As the journalist Benito Jamar says in his prologue to the works of Calei-Cale: «reinaba la democracia como dueña y señora; y de tal suerte estábamos exentos de pujos aristocráticos que, en la vida social, aparecían mezcladas todas las clases» (Calei-Cale 1963, 11).

[7] The families Aguirre Miramón, Arizmendi, Bermingham, Bengoechea, Brunet, Collado, Echagüe, Goicoa, Gros, Lasala, Legarda, Queheille, Soroa, etc. appear repeatedly as controlling not only the political life, but also the commercial and economic activities until the last years of the 19th century.

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

its population and reached almost 40 thousand people in 1900. New areas with modern middle class neighbourhoods (the so called *Ensanche*) were incorporated into the city. Industrialization also made important progress and the people from surrounding villages started to settle in the new working class areas of the city. Education, controlled by the Madrid government, began to reach more and more people outside the traditional literate groups. Literacy grew spectacularly during the end of this century, first in the city of San Sebastián and afterwards in other towns of Guipúzcoa (García Abad, Pareja Alonso & Zarraga Sangroniz 2007). The data in Table 2 eloquently illustrate this interesting growth:

TABLE 2. *Literacy in Spain, Guipúzcoa, and San Sebastián (1860–1920).*

	ESPAÑA	GUIPÚZCOA	SAN SEBASTIÁN
1860	19,9 %	19,6 %	—
1877	24,5 %	27,7 %	—
1887	28,5 %	34,0 %	48,1 %
1900	33,4 %	43,4 %	—
1920	46,3 %	62,8 %	77,6 %

Source: Dávila Balsera, Eizagirre & Fernández (1995, 50–51) and Dávila Balsera (1997a, 53).

Finally, a remarkable increase of tourism and summer visitors, headed in 1885 by Queen Regent María Cristina herself, King Alfonso XIII's mother, helped to boost a growing commercial activity (Aguirre Franco 1995). The somewhat provincial and parochial San Sebastián inhabitants of the mid 19th century had turned by 1900 into a rich, active and small cosmopolitan society.

3 A language shift: From Basque to Spanish

As we have just described, together with the relative social and economic stability until 1876, the linguistic situation during these years in San Sebastián seemed also to suffer no significant variation. There were two languages, Basque and Spanish, co-existing apparently without any problems within their respective and complementary functional areas. A third one, Gascon, brought into the city by some of its first medieval settlers coming from the nearby French region of Gascony, had been used and written until the 16th century in the city administrative documents. It could have been retained for domestic and private usage within some of the principal families of Gascon descent through the 16th and 17th centuries. But already in the 18th century Gascon must have been merely anecdotic, at least in San Sebastián (Ugaldebere & Madina [s.d.], § *Gaskoiak eta Donostia*). For nearby places such as Pasajes and Rentería, nonetheless, the article dedicated to San Sebastián by the *Diccionario Geográfico-Histórico de España*, written by the historian Joaquín A. Camino, still mentions the residual

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

presence of this language: «la lengua gascona, que fue muy corriente y aun se usó en públicos instrumentos; bien que hoy día sólo se habla en Pasages» (Real Academia de la Historia 1802, 320, n. 2).

Despite this long persistence of Gascon among the primitive inhabitants of the city, the core of the original population was constituted by local families whose mother language, as well as that of the province, was of course Basque. This was the native language of the city when the 19th century began, as contemporary sources indicate. Joaquín A. Camino, the most notorious local historian at the beginning of the 19th century clearly states that «el idioma vulgar en San Sebastián es el vascuence» (Camino y Orella 1780 [1963], 247).

There is more evidence from the final years of the 18th century and the three first quarters of the following 19th century which point to this same idea. For instance, preaching at the two main churches inside the walls was frequently in Basque as a priest and an occasional resident explains: «asimismo hay muchos sermones en la cuaresma, domingos en las tardes hay tres, los jueves, viernes misereres y para la gente de los caseríos hay sermones en bascuence» (Ordóñez 1963, 22). Ordóñez himself states some pages ahead that there was «escuela bascongada» and «sermones en este idioma» at the convent of San Francisco (Ordóñez 1963, 28). Other testimonies allude to the same presence of Basque in religious life. For instance, during the last years of the 18th century the Archdiocese of Pamplona, to which San Sebastián belonged, started to prepare the so called *Plan Beneficial* to design the city religious and parish activities for the century to come. When some city representatives happened to know about the Archdiocese plans, they immediately wrote to the king Carlos IV explaining that they needed Basque-speaking priests (Ugaldebere & Madina [s.d.], § *Donostiarrak: eliza eta euskara*).

During the following 19th century travellers such as Cook (1834) or Madrazo (1849, 111) continue to describe exactly this same situation. Later on, other local authoritative voices insist on the point —Eguren (1868) and especially Manterola (1871, 23)—: «El vascuence es la lengua más popular». Moreover, the journalist Mañé i Flaquer in the appendix to his book on the Basque Country, written by Soraluce, even claimed that «hoy las clases ilustradas aprenden su lengua natural [el vascuence] y la fomentan» (Mañé i Flaquer 1879, apéndice B). Contemporary European visitors could also confirm that Basque was still widely used in the city. Van Eys (1927, 10–11) says so after a journey to the Basque Country in 1866: «elle [la langue basque] était parlée partout». And some years later Planté (1886, 79) observes that mass services at the church of Santa María were in Basque and that this was the only language used at the fish market and the harbour.

As for the everyday life, we have some indirect information that indicates a general monolinguism among the middle and lower classes. Benito Pascual (1994, 195) tells us about an interesting report on education, promoted and written by a liberal group of the city called *La balandra*, where it is especially underlined that a deep ignorance of Spanish was the standard situation by 1820, at least in primary schools financed and ruled by the city council, i.e. those schools in charge of working class children.

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

We also have some documents from military environments that insist on the same scenario. In 1823 liberal authorities in the city needed to recruit a militia to face the absolutist French invasion. The officers had to use the only language the civilian members of their troops could speak and, as Muñoz Echabeguren (2006, 362) says, they were addressed to and the orders were explained in «su idioma bascongado». During the First *Carlista* War, General Lacy, from the San Sebastián headquarters in charge of the defence of the city, wrote orders addressed to his Spanish troops (25th of May, 1836) that were at once translated to Basque in order to guarantee their perfect understanding among the local soldiers (Roquero Ussía 2001, 251–254).

As to the third quarter of the 19th century, the best evidence come from a well-known journalist of those days, Eugenio Gabilondo, who used to sign his works with the pen name Calei-Cale. From one of his sketches and portraits of old San Sebastián, written in the 1890's and collected in a book published some years later, it is easy to deduce that Basque was the playground language during his childhood, when the city walls were to be demolished (Calei-Cale 1963, 157–163).

All the reports above quoted are far from surprising since they coincide with figures calculated by some writers of the period. Following Velasco (1879, 484), by 1860 almost the totality of Guipúzcoa's population, 170.000 out of 176.297 (including the capital, San Sebastián) could speak Basque and «entre ellas las 140000 hacían uso casi exclusivo de esa lengua en sus diarias relaciones». Previously, this same author even states that «en Guipúzcoa la lengua del pueblo es el vascuence, y aun las clases altas del país que viven en las capitales y pueblos más importantes, la hablan también, siquiera no la usen siempre en su habitual comercio» (Velasco 1879, 483).

On the contrary, the position of Spanish was different. It was, of course, the language used by most of the people coming from elsewhere in Spain: the soldiers and officers of the garrison and some other civilian employees connected with the Spanish central administration. They were most probably the principal portion of those 7.000 inhabitants of Guipúzcoa that could not speak Basque in the figures quoted above from Velasco (1879). There were also some non-native religious personnel and maybe a few foreign businessmen. Altogether they made up a small but very influential number of people. But Spanish was also known and used by groups of native people as claimed by the same sources that inform us about the extension of Basque. For instance, in Ordóñez (1963, 54) we find that: «aunque hay muchos hombres y mujeres que en los pueblos grandes hablan en castellano», and, later on, Manterola (1871, 23) states that: «hoy se ha generalizado bastante el castellano, especialmente en San Sebastián» —which is also pointed out in the report of Soraluce reproduced by Mañé i Flaquer (1879, apéndice B). Once again, this is what we should expect: Spanish was in fact the only written language among those few citizens who could write. Every document produced by any authority, from the central or local government, the city, the Church or the Court and, of course, the commercial firms, was written in Spanish. Even the public or private letters were written in Spanish. This is not surprising since Spanish was the only

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

language seriously taught in schools.[8] Therefore, people who could reach a certain level of education were able to speak and write in Spanish. It is the case, obviously, of the adult members of the few families who controlled the city politics —i.e., its oligarchy. These people, especially the men, could more often attend university and that meant going abroad, mainly to Salamanca. But, even if they did not expect to obtain any university degree, they usually travelled and visited, for example, Madrid. Spanish was then inevitable and therefore a useful and decisive tool outside the city area anytime these people got in contact, which they often did, with their Spanish equivalents for private, political or commercial reasons.

But even more people in the city could at least make use of some spoken Spanish as the chronicles of Calei-Cale (1963) again testify. For instance, the employees and servants of rich and foreign families had some access or contact with Spanish. There were also those few people who really profited from school and got jobs where Spanish was needed, that is, clerks of commercial firms or public employees at the city or in the central administration. Other jobs, such as the city officers or *alguaciles*, also allowed to get a certain command of Spanish. Once again, Calei-Cale illustrates vividly the linguistic habits of this sector of the population of San Sebastián when describing a scene featured by one of these characters: «el citado alguacil, persona allegada a mi familia [...], no se distinguía por el fácil manejo de la lengua de Cervantes, y como tuvo que hacer uso de ésta, porque uno de los querellantes era de allende el Ebro, mi buen pariente se vio negro para pronunciar el fallo en aquel asunto» (Calei-Cale 1963, 68). And, finally, there were of course the abundant priests, monks and nuns who, due to their specific training, could always grasp a sufficient command of this language.

Some figures concerning the diverse degrees of bilingualism in the city can be estimated taking into account the school attendance rates at the end of this period. According to current research (Dávila Balsera, Eizagirre & Fernández 1995; García Abad, Pareja Alonso & Zarraga Sangroniz 2007), in 1876 these school attendance rates could reach a little less than 40 % of San Sebastián's total population. As we have already explained, we can be reasonably sure that most literate people had a sufficient command of Spanish but we need to add to that figure the illiterate group that could at least speak a little of that language —i.e., enough to be understood. All in all, we would dare to claim that the native inhabitants of the city who had some knowledge of Spanish and were bilingual in very different ways amounted to no more than 50 % by 1876, that is, we are talking about some 10 thousand people out of 20 thousand.

Indeed, the number of people who were able to communicate sufficiently in Spanish had been after all constantly growing since 1800. As a matter of fact, this can be described as the only significant change on the San Sebastián

[8] After Benito Pascual (1994) we know that at least until 1876 it was not strange to use Basque at school to make the access to Spanish easier, specially with younger children and when teaching religious topics. But the main goal of education and school at that time was undoubtedly to reach some degree of literacy in Spanish. To have some idea about how this system worked, see Calei-Cale (1963, 62–66).

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

population's linguistic behaviour. Anyhow, as late as 1876 half of the population of San Sebastián was still practically monolingual in Basque, as we have just calculated in the previous paragraph. And that is the relevant idea to be drawn after the different reports and data presented so far.

Everything started to change after those years. Coinciding in time with the date when the Basque autonomous regime or *fueros* were abolished, a critical language shift began to take place. During the years between 1875 and 1925, the economic progress, the strengthening of administrative bonds with central authorities, a progressive opening to Spanish and European culture, and literacy growth favoured the access to Spanish and the neglect of Basque. A partial picture of this new society and its attitude towards the old native language can be obtained if we study with some detail the data of nowadays census in San Sebastián, available at the Basque Government webpage (see note 4). They clearly show how an important part of the children born in San Sebastián in the last decade of the 19th century had already no other language but Spanish. The census of 1986 was the first one in which people were asked to define themselves in linguistic terms. If we take into account the answers of those people born before 1900 and living in the *Ensanche* area,[9] the first one to be affected by the castilianization, we will see that approximately forty per cent of them consider themselves as monolingual in Spanish. They represent the first generations of monolingual Spanish-speaking native men and women in San Sebastián.

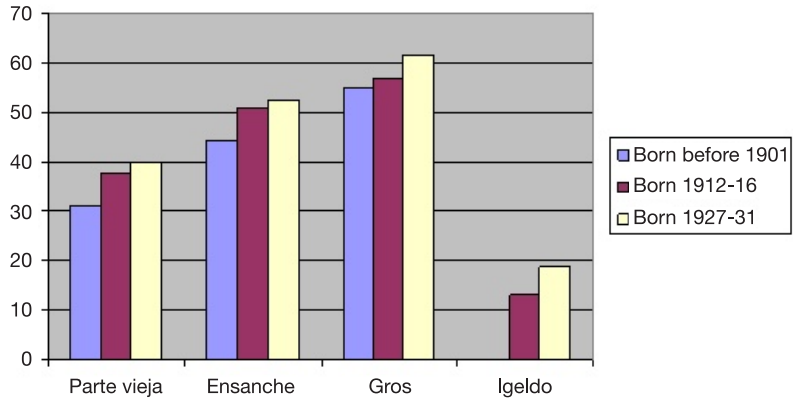


FIGURE 1.
Citizens of San Sebastián belonging to three consecutive generations who define themselves as monolinguals in Spanish in 1986 census, classified according to their neighbourhood.[10] *Source: Basque Government (EAS) [15/08/2009].*

[9] As we explained before, this area of the *Ensanche* or *Erdialdea* was the first one to be built beyond the old walls and was occupied by the city bourgeoisie. Since its construction it has always been the most cosmopolitan and elegant part of the city —i.e. the upper class neighbourhood.

[10] We include the answers of people living in the *Ensanche* or *Erdialdea*, as we have already

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

As we show in Figure 1 with data from Basque Government again, the number of people who did not continue to speak their parents' language kept growing among the upper classes and soon also inside the middle and working class families. It should not be forgotten that these were the years when an increasing group of non-native Spanish-speaking immigrant labourers started to occupy some of the new neighbourhoods: Gros or Antiguo. At the time of the Civil War (1936–1939) Spanish had already become the only spoken language for most of San Sebastián's upper and middle class citizens. Thus, approximately 65 per cent of the inhabitants of the city's bourgeoisie areas born between 1927 and 1931 define themselves as monolingual in Spanish in 1986 census, as shown in Figure 1. Things had changed definitively for Basque in San Sebastián.

4 Sociolinguistics of 19th century San Sebastián

Any attempt of explanation for such a dramatic change must begin with a detailed sketch of the previous sociolinguistic situation until 1876. If we leave aside the small group of monolingual Spanish-speaking minority, consisting of non native people, most of them just occasional residents in the city, we have mentioned so far at least two different groups in terms of linguistic skills. As described above and often mentioned by some informers (Ordóñez 1963; Cook 1834; Mañé i Flaquer 1879, Apéndice B; Velasco 1879, 485–488), there existed a monolingual Basque-speaking group, most of them peasants living outside the old walls. Once again, Calei-Cale comes to help us by referring in his memories of old San Sebastián to some rural characters incapable of using a language other than Basque (Calei-Cale 1963, 163–166 or 227–230). We can also add to this text previous testimonies such as those quoted above on San Sebastián militia in 1823 (Muñoz Echabeguren 2006) or General Lacy's Basque troops in 1836 (Roquero Ussía 2001).

But the most interesting portion of the population is the bilingual one: that growing group of people who could speak Spanish together with Basque. Indeed, this Calei-Cale is a perfect representative of those individuals who, coming from a lower class environment, could get a certain level of literacy through an improved education and dominated Spanish. They clearly represent a typical case of Fishman's extended or broad diglossia where Basque is the native language and stands for the low or informal variety and Spanish for the high or formal variety (Swann, Deumert, Lillis & Mesthrie 2004, 82, s.v. **diglossia**), as we will try to explain below.[11]

The choice between both languages among these diglossic speakers seemed to be controlled mainly by the linguistic situation. This is illustrated by different

explained, a bourgeoisie area, in the *Parte Vieja* or *Alde Zaharra*, the old city inhabited by the local middle and popular class, in Gros, a neighbourhood with the earliest Spanish-speaking immigrant group, and finally in the rural area of Igeldo.

[11] This concept lets us to extend classical Ferguson's definition of *diglossia* to include bilingual or multilingual situations, with two or more different languages fulfilling different functions (Fishman 1967).

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

sources, most especially Calei-Cale (1963), as well as by the abundant anecdotes collected by Murugarren Zamora (1987) and Izagirre (1998). Formal linguistic exchanges, including every written interaction, were always done in Spanish. That meant political and administrative questions, particularly those held with some higher authorities, and most of business matters. The most consistent evidence in favour of what we have just claimed is the fact that no document from any of these instances was ever written in Basque. Even the exact words of people who used nothing but Basque were usually quoted in Spanish if they were to be collected and filed by the different civil services.

As we have already said, the first goal of the school was to teach Spanish and therefore this language was absolutely dominant in the classrooms, despite the fact that at least until 1876 most of the teachers were recruited in Guipúzcoa and could speak Basque (Benito Pascual 1994).[12]

Spanish was also compulsory when dealing with foreign people, for instance, members of the garrison (Calei-Cale 1963, 110). And this interaction with people from outside the Basque Country was becoming more and more frequent every year as tourism and commerce grew. Moreover, many leisure activities were done in Spanish. It is the case of the most popular of them all, theatre. After the city's reconstruction, there was one theatre located in Main Street which regularly received the visit of Spanish companies that always performed in Spanish. The city's bourgeoisie, but also the middle class, used to enjoy this theatre season very much and attended *en masse*, as Calei-Cale (1963, 91–94) testifies. Other hobbies of literate people such as reading novels, journals or newspapers at home or in the *tertulias* or gatherings at the cafés were also done in Spanish.

On the contrary, informal exchanges within the family or with friends, servants, waiters, shopkeepers, the working class and, particularly, peasants were in Basque, mainly because it was the only shared language. For the same reason, all these people always used this language when talking to each other in their daily life. Calei-Cale (1963) reflected this situation abundantly in many of his sketches. Thus, we can find land owners (33–34), judges (45–46), lawyers (183–184), politicians (144 and 183) or factory managers (188 and 192) that made use of Basque when talking to ordinary people. Even French shopkeepers had to translate their adverts to attract customers (90). Informal conversations among equals or in the family are also portrayed by Calei-Cale (1963). For instance, he described himself talking to his friends or to a peasant in Basque (50 and 228–229), or the servants and maids chatting by the city fountains (p. 83), the children playing in the streets (137, 139, 143 and 157), the whores (143), and peddlers, grocers, bartenders, tailors who used Basque with their customers (88, 96–97, 163–166 and 185).

Some other activities outside these more private interchanges were also held in Basque as sources already mentioned clearly show. This is the case, for exam-

[12] The so called *anillo escolar* was at the time regularly used as a punishment by teachers at school. This ring passed from pupil to pupil any time someone was caught while talking in Basque. In this context, the effect of some tolerance to the use of Basque with the youngest students should have been very little (Dávila Balsera 1997b).

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

ple, of civil or religious festivals. Murugarren Zamora (1987) is a good guide to this aspect of the city life during the first three quarters of the 19th century. And there we find a description of the personality and works of the writer and musician José Vicente Echegaray as the most significant evidence. He was in charge of preparing the music and writing the lyrics of every civil or religious festival maintained by the city council from the first years of the century until around 1840. So in Christmas, *Reyes* or Epiphany, Carnival, Easter or any other event Echegaray usually wrote some songs, mainly in Basque, to be sung and enjoyed by everyone in the city. But also other activities where the participation of the middle and lower classes was the rule, such as local sports and games —the famous *jai-alai*, church services, dancing or singing in the weekend evenings, were developed mainly in Basque. It is the atmosphere reflected by the Basque compositions of local poets and especially the most famous of them all, Indalecio Bizcarrondo, called Bilintx, whose life, conversations and adventures are also narrated by Calei-Cale (1963, 188–189) and Murugarren Zamora (1987, 307).

Finally, Basque was inevitably the only possible language when the inhabitants of San Sebastián had to get in contact with people living in the countryside and this, given the small size of the city, could happen at any time and for every possible reason (Calei-Cale 1963, 183 or 228–229). Anyhow, the best and most typical place for these meetings of the city inhabitants, farmers, peasants and rural people was, and still is, the *sidrería*, a farmhouse which produced cider and by so doing also functioned as a tavern —i.e., a place to eat, drink and dance. Calei-Cale (1963, 163–166) describes perfectly one of those popular trips to the countryside and shows clearly that Basque was there the only language used.

Apart from that, other variables such as social class and occupation, age or gender seemed to determine the knowledge and command of the two competing languages. A high degree of literacy and education and the habit of reading and writing guaranteed the best command of Spanish. Therefore, upper class adult men were among those who spoke better Spanish, above all businessmen, politicians, jurists, lawyers, doctors, engineers, architects, etc. They were responsible for the great part of the written official documents of the city which were always, as already mentioned, written in perfect Spanish. This is also the case with the majority of the books, brochures, leaflets, journals produced in San Sebastián through all these years, once again always written in Spanish.

Regarding these upper class men, it might be interesting to reflect upon the actual status of Basque in their minds and lives since it seems it was their family language and therefore, their first and native tongue. Nevertheless, despite that upbringing, Basque was not the language they used primarily in most of their interaction (Siguán & Mackey 1986).[13] That is because all along their adult life they surely spoke Spanish most of the time —and, surely, more often than Basque— and Spanish was also the language they wrote best. This would mean

[13]The primary language is defined as the language that is best known and therefore usually considered one's own. Often but not always, the language of the primary personal relationships, the one with which someone feels identified.

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

a better command of Spanish, something which can be proved by the very good quality of the language of the documents they produced, usually very neutral and devoid of any regional or vulgar trace. Consequently, in terms of familiarity and competence in Spanish, they show a behaviour equivalent to that of monolingual native Spanish speakers. As a good illustration of these linguistic habits of San Sebastián male *élites*, one of the newspapers of San Sebastián by 1865, *El Látigo*,[14] includes four or five long pages filled with serious information from all around the world in the most beautiful Spanish, obviously addressed to its cosmopolitan and very well educated readers. But among these serious contents they also used to find a crosswords small section in Basque for the sake of their rest and entertainment.

Women, even from the upper classes, did not usually form part of this selected group until they gained general access to education and literacy, something that had to wait some time. It was during the second half of the 19th century and, specifically since the abolishment of *fueros*, from 1876 onwards, when general education began to be controlled by the government in Madrid and thus started to improve considerably. As a result, women had a larger access to education, mostly those from the upper classes, who not only benefitted from this improvement, but also from the arrival at the city of the first private schools run by French religious orders (Ostolaza Esnal 2000, 185–252). The effects of this little revolution can be seen in the following table:

TABLE 3. *Men's and women's literacy in San Sebastián and other villages of the province of Guipúzcoa (1887–1920).*[15]

	MEN		WOMEN	
	1887	1920	1887	1920
San Sebastián	52,0 %	78,3 %	44,2 %	77,0 %
Elgoibar	34,0 %	54,2 %	24,8 %	51,0 %
Azpeitia	35,7 %	60,0 %	23,7 %	61,0 %
Cestona	29,4 %	51,0 %	22,7 %	50,0 %
Fuenterrabía	28,9 %	55,4 %	24,0 %	55,5 %
Tolosa	49,3 %	70,8 %	36,4 %	65,3 %
Villafranca	53,8 %	69,0 %	54,6 %	67,1 %

Source: Dávila Balsera (1997a, 53).

The role of these upper class women with respect to the preservation of Basque was then very different than the role of men we have described before. As long as they reached just a limited literacy, until 1876, they surely could have helped and played a decisive role to maintain Basque as a family language

[14] Document is available at Hemeroteca Municipal de San Sebastián [15/08/2009].

[15] We copy the traditional Spanish place names as they appear in Dávila Balsera (1997a, 53). In three cases (Cestona, Fuenterrabía and Villafranca), the official denomination nowadays is the Basque one: Zestoa, Hondarribia and Ordizia.

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

in their environments. We cannot forget that, as housekeepers and mothers, women, not men, were the primary references for the children at home and within the family. And for the same reason, once they got standard education, and we know they did so significantly during the last quarter of the 19th century, they probably played then a crucial role in the break-up of transmission of Basque throughout generations within San Sebastián's bourgeois families. New interests, new relationships and a completely redefined society gradually pushed them to abandon Basque in favour of Spanish.

The previous tolerant atmosphere towards Basque and a close attachment to it began to disappear at the same time that Basque started to lose ground in the bourgeois families after 1876. We have no testimony of a negative attitude before this date but it is not difficult to find them during the late 19th century, together with many other symptoms of a displacement of Basque in favour of Spanish. For instance, Izagirre (1998, 162) finds examples of rejection of their family language in some political decisions of those years. This author describes a revealing voting session in 1891 at the city hall where some representatives from the oligarchy families were against considering the knowledge of Basque compulsory to get certain public jobs. Some of their contemporaries bitterly disagreed and the city newspapers criticized this attitude because they considered it as a betrayal to the language «que oyen desde que se levantan hasta que se acuestan en el seno de sus familias» (Izagirre 1998, 162). Moreover, some rich fathers of the period overtly forbade the use of Basque at home, as some contemporary descendants can still recall. It is what we can infer from current statements of the Spanish politician Mayor Oreja, member of European Parliament, *El País*, 12/05/2009: «Mi bisabuelo se esforzó para que sus hijos no se encerrasen en el granero. Prohibió que hablaran el vasco en casa, para que aprendieran bien el español». As we can see, during the last quarter of the 19th century many things conspired in favour of a language shift in San Sebastián.

5 Concluding remarks

We hope this brief overview may contribute to gather some of the pieces that form the puzzle of San Sebastián's linguistic situation in the 19th century:

The historical context may help us to understand the evolution of the linguistic scenario of the city. First of all, the fire in 1813 and the subsequent reconstruction of San Sebastián marks a shift towards considering the inhabitants' interests over the military ones. The demolition of the city walls in 1863 confirms the new direction chosen by its citizens and marked the starting point of its economic expansion. Finally, the abolition of the *fueros* in 1876 meant San Sebastián's adoption of a modern political regime and meant a definitive development of a new society that substituted the original Basque for Spanish.

The quantitative extension throughout the 19th century of the two languages in competition allows us to see a monolingual Basque-speaking majority and a growing and more influential bilingual minority in Basque and Spanish.

The definition of the sociolinguistic situation of the nineteenth-century San

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

Sebastián corresponds to broad diglossia, that is, two languages used for different purposes: Spanish in formal or higher interaction and Basque in informal or lower situations. The distribution according to sociolinguistic variables and inside the bilingual group of Basque and Spanish shows us the particular position of the adult men from the upper classes —Basque native speakers who probably had Spanish as their primary language— as well as the decisive role towards maintenance of Basque played by the upper class women before and after 1876.

This scenario may help us to determine further objectives of our research project. We need, for instance, to find, analyse and study documents such as private correspondence in order to determine the status of Basque and Spanish inside literate families more accurately. It will also be of great interest to collect individual stories from 19th century written sources or the testimony of their descendants. We hope future research will shed some light into this specific language shift and, by so doing, will connect it with similar changes in the same period that have already been studied —Alicante, see Montoya (1996; 2000)— or are waiting to be analysed (other Basque cities, Galicia, etc.). And not only in Spain but also in other European countries such as France, Belgium, Netherlands, Finland, etc. where there existed a conflictive relationship between local and state languages, especially along the 19th century.

References

Aguirre Franco, Rafael (1995): *El turismo en el País Vasco. Vida e historia*. San Sebastián: Txertoa.

Artola, Miguel [ed.] (2000): *Historia de Donostia–San Sebastián*. San Sebastián: Ayuntamiento de San Sebastián; Nerea.

Benito Pascual, Jesús (1994): *La enseñanza de primeras letras en Gipuzkoa (1800–1825)*. San Sebastián: Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa.

Calei-Cale [Eugenio Gabilondo] (1963): *A través de Iruchulo*. San Sebastián: Ayuntamiento de San Sebastián.

Camino y Orella, Joaquín A. (1780 [1963]): *Historia civil, diplomática, eclesiástica, anciana y moderna de la ciudad de San Sebastián: con varias noticias particulares concernientes a la provincia de Guipúzcoa*. San Sebastián: Ayuntamiento de San Sebastián.

Cook, Samuel E. (1834): *Sketches in Spain during the years 1829–30–31*. Paris: A. & W. Galignani.

Dávila Balsera, Paulí (1997a): *Las escuelas de artes y oficios y el proceso de modernización en el País Vasco 1879–1929*. Bilbao: Universidad del País Vasco.

——— (1997b): «Los libros escolares en euskera.» In: Agustín Escolano Benito [ed.]: *Historia ilustrada del libro escolar en España. Del Antiguo Régimen a la Segunda República*. Madrid: Fundación Germán Sánchez Ruipérez, 599–620.

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

Dávila Balsera, Paulí; Eizagirre, Ana; Fernández, Idoia (1995): «Leer y escribir en las escuelas de Euskal Herria.» In: Paulí Dávila Balsera [ed.]: *Lengua, escuela y cultura. El proceso de alfabetización de Euskal Herria siglo* xix *y* xx. Bilbao: Universidad del País Vasco, 45–78.

Eguren, Juan M.ª de (1868): *Guía-manual del lenguaje para uso de viajeros en el País Vasco*. Vitoria: Imprenta del Seminario Católico Vasco-Navarro.

Eys, Mathilde van (1927): *Souvenirs d'un voyage dans le Pays basque en 1866*. San Sebastián: Diputación de Guipúzcoa.

Fishman, Joshua A. (1964): «Language maintenance and language shift as a field of inquiry: A definition of the field and suggestions for its further development.» *Linguistics* 2(9): 37–70. DOI: 10.1515/ling.1964.2.9.32.

——— (1967): «Bilingualism with and without Diglossia; Diglossia with and without Bilingualism.» *Journal of Social Issues* 23(2): 29–38. DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-4560.1967.tb00573.x.

García Abad, Rocío; Pareja Alonso, Arantza; Zarraga Sangroniz, Karmele (2007): «"¿Sabes leer?, ¿sabes escribir?": El proceso de alfabetización en el País Vasco (1860–1930).» *Revista de Demografía Histórica* 25(1): 23–58.

Izagirre, Koldo (1998): *Euskararen historia txikia Donostian: 1800/1998*. Zarautz: Susa.

Mañé i Flaquer, Juan (1879): *El oasis. Viaje al país de los fueros. Tomo 2. Guipúzcoa–Álava*. Barcelona: Jaime J. Roviralta.

Madrazo, Francisco de Paula (1849): *Una espedición [sic] a Guipúzcoa en el verano de 1848*. Madrid: Imprenta Gabriel Gil.

Manterola, José (1871): *Guía-manual geográfico-descriptivo de la provincia de Guipúzcoa*. San Sebastián: José M.ª Arzanegui.

Montoya, Brauli (1996): *Alacant: la llengua interrompuda*. València: Denes.

——— (2000): *Els alacantins castellanoparlants: una generació interrompuda*. Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Catalans.

Muñoz Echabeguren, Fermín (2006): «El trienio liberal (1820–1823) y la invasión francesa en San Sebastián (1823–1828).» *Boletín de Estudios Históricos de San Sebastián* 40: 239–529.

Murugarren Zamora, Luis (1987): «El uso del euskera en San Sebastián durante el siglo xix.» *Boletín de la Real Sociedad Bascongada de los Amigos del País* 43(1–4): 299–312.

Ordóñez, Joaquín de (1963): *San Sebastián en 1761. Descripción de la ciudad, sus monumentos, usos y costumbres*. Donostia: Ayuntamiento de San Sebastián.

Ostolaza Esnal, Maitane (2000): *Entre religión y modernidad. Los colegios de la Congregaciones Religiosas en la construcción de la sociedad guipuzcoana contemporánea, 1876–1931*. Bilbao: Universidad del País Vasco.

Planté, Adrien (1886): *San Sebastián. Notes de Voyage*. Pau: Léon Ribaut.

© Romania Minor
http://www.romaniaminor.net/ianua/

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)

Real Academia de la Historia (1802): *Diccionario Geográfico-Histórico de España. Sección 1: El Reyno de Navarra, Señorío de Vizcaya y provincias de Álava y Guipúzcoa*. Madrid: Vda. de Joaquín Ibarra.

Roquero Ussía, M.ª del Rosario (2001): «La primera guerra carlista a través de sus protagonistas. La línea de San Sebastián.» *Boletín de Estudios Históricos sobre San Sebastián* 35: 153–253.

Sada, Javier M.ª; Sada, Asier (1999): *Historia de San Sebastián*. Donostia: Txertoa.

Siguán, Miguel; Mackey, William F. (1986): *Educación y bilingüismo*. Madrid: Santillana; Unesco.

Swann, Joan; Deumert, Ana; Lillis, Theresa M.; Mesthrie, Rajend (2004): *A dictionary of sociolinguistics*. Edinburgh: The Edinburgh University Press.

Ugaldebere, Tomas; Madina, Mikel [s.d.]: *Donostiarrak eta Euskara. xvi–xvii mendeak*. Donostia: Donostiako Udala. URL: <http://www.euskaraz.net/Argitalpenak/EuskararenHistoria/> [03/07/2009].

Velasco, Ladislao de (1879): *Los euskaros en Álava, Guipuzcoa y Vizcaya*. Barcelona: Oliveres.

Bruno Camus Bergareche & Sara Gómez Seibane
Universidad de Castilla–La Mancha
Facultad de Letras
Avda. Camilo J. Cela s/n
E-13071 Ciudad Real
España

BDD-A5285 © 2010 Romania Minor
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:58:07 UTC)