

In favour of the Basque gendered address form: Why assume the risk of having a sexist language?

The Basque language is considered a gender-neutral language because it does not show grammatical gender. Nonetheless, language sexism can be within the language itself as well as in the use made by the speakers. In this respect, Basque is no exception compared with other languages. In fact, Basque has some traits in which gender-markers are present. The most prominent could be the informal form of address *hika* (from second-person personal pronoun “hi”), in which the addressee’s gender needs to be encoded within the verb.

However, the use of *hika* is quite limited these days, specially the forms used to address women. More formal and gender-neutral second-person pronoun “zu” has prevailed in most communicative contexts, and the majority of Basque speakers only use *zuka* forms (derived from the pronoun “zu”) in the 21st century, which has become the default choice in most areas of the Basque Country (Alberdi-Larizgoitia, 2018). Moreover, in areas where the address form *hika* is widely used, it is more and more restricted to men-to-men communication due to various historical reasons (see Bereziartua & Muguruza, 2021).

It also has to be born in mind that the use of *hika* can bring about other sexist issues that are more and more common: using male forms as if they were neutral, addressing a mixed group of people using male forms, and even addressing a single female interlocutor with male forms, which seems to be a relatively new trend (Azkue, 2000).

These last years, we are witnessing efforts to revitalise *hika* forms, many of them with a clear focus on female forms. More and more women, many of which members of the feminist movement, have started to promote the use of *hika*, especially its female forms, by organising courses for learning how to use it, by creating practice groups, and also by discussing both the possibilities and risks of these forms. This is taking place for a reason: some have recently considered that female forms of *hika* may work as a tool for women’s empowerment. At the same time, this conception may be a contradiction in itself: the binary division of gender does not respond to the needs of current society, and *hika* forms inexorably differentiate between women and men. The resulting dilemma would be how to find a balance between these two ideas that seem to contradict each other.

The senior cartoonist Antton Olariaga started to combine both feminine and masculine morphemes in a comic strip called *Zakilixut*, where made-up gender-neutral *hika* forms have been employed for about 20 years. This proposal has made some impact over the last years in different settings, and only time will tell whether this form will take root within the Basque language. However, considering the vulnerable situation of Basque and the precarious situation of the address form within the language, it does not seem easy to spread any new form with such a short tradition.

The research was carried out in Azpeitia, one of the few towns with a considerable population (about 15,000 inhabitants) where the use of *hika* remains current –also among women, although to a lesser degree–. To gather data we organized 10 focus group discussions and conducted three dyadic interviews. A total of 38 people participated in the study. We collected the participants’ perspectives about how to disentangle this dilemma between promoting an address form that can bring about a sexist use of the language on the one hand, and taking advantage of this address form to and help construct a relationship of confidence and sisterhood, on the other hand, a form of address that women once lost or were denied and want to recover now with a new meaning.

The declining use of *hika* is not usually regarded as a priority at the macro level neither among policy-makers nor among language activists, considering the otherwise vulnerable position of Basque.

However, the increasing importance bestowed to breathing spaces within the revitalisation process of minority languages and the growing awareness of gender-inclusive language have made an issue out of the informal form of address *hika*.

References

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Contact

Dr Beñat Muguruza
Associate Professor in Basque Studies
Department of Basque Language and
Communication
University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU)
Maria Díaz de Haro kalea, 68
Portugalete, Bizkaia
Spain
benat.muguruza@ehu.eus

Dr Garbiñe Bereziartua
Associate Professor in Primary Education
Department of Language and Literature Didactics
University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU)
Oñati plaza, 3
20018 Donostia-San Sebastian, Gipuzkoa
Spain
garbine.bereziartua@ehu.eus