

An aspect of the function of prefix vowels in basque

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By *prefix vowel* is here meant a vocalic element preceding a nominal (or more commonly) a verbal stem, characteristically supporting a prefixed person-indicating consonantal morpheme ('my', 'your', 'our'; 'me', 'your', 'us'; 'I', 'you', 'we', etc.), as in Nahuatl *n-o-calh* 'my house' (*calli*), *n-i-cab* 'I am' (verbal stem *-ca-*) or Basque *n-a-go* 'I am', *n-e-(n)goan* 'I was', *n-a-kus* 'sees me', *n-e-kusan* 'I saw (him)', etc., or Georgian *v-a-k'et'eb* 'I make (it)', *m-a-k'et'eb* 'makes me', *m-e-k'et'o* 'I had made (it)', etc.¹ If the prefix vowels are typically ligatures joining a personal prefix to a concrete (noun or verb) stem, this is not its only function; one merely has to consider such Basque forms as *a-tor*, *a-toz* ('come'; imperative), *e-torri* '(to) come'; infinitive), *e-kusi* (*i-kusi* '(to) see'), *i-duri* (*i-rudi* '(to) appear'), etc., or Nahuatl *i-calh* ('his or her house'), etc.

The function of the prefix vowels in Basque, when occurring with a person-indicating element, has been treated by the present writer in a previous article in *Fontes Linguae Vasconum* (cf. Note 1), where it was suggested that the *-a-* in Basque is active-imperfective, while the *-e-* is passive perfective (cf. the difference between Latin *faciens* and *factus*²). Otherwise, the exact concrete meaning of these vocalic elements is in many respects obscure, having been described by various authors in a rather abstract way (for instance as indicator of «*version*» in Georgian). One would think that the original function of the prefix vowels would become more evident in cases where they occur isolated or as the *only* morphological determinant of a verbal stem (that is without the person-indicating element), but unfortunately this hardly seems to be the case.³ In an article which appeared in *Pacific Linguistic Studies in honour of Arthur Capell* and with the title *Traces of Australian-Amerindian Morpheme Categories in East Asia* (Sydney), pp. 70-71 (*The Prefix Vowel System*), the present author has

1. For a further analysis, compare earlier articles by the present writer: *Ibero-Caucasian as a Linguistic Type* (*Studia Linguistica*, vol. 1, N.º 1. Lund 1947), pp. 27-31; *A Historic-Comparative Analysis of the Structure of the Basque Language* (*Fontes Linguae Vasconum*, vol. 2, N.º. 4. Pamplona 1970), pp. 27-36.

2. Cf. *A Historic-Comparative Analysis* (see Note 1), p. 31, Note 89.

3. The «prefix vowels» do not, a priori, seem to be either related to *adnominal* or *pronominal* formatives (according to the author's terminology, described in *The General Structure of Language* (*Linguistic Contributions*, vol. 5, N.º. 23. Lund 1966), §4.5 (p. 30). Since however these elements occur in one linguistic type (Type I) only, the author has never attempted to establish their likely position among morphological elements elsewhere.

examined a very particular aspect of the function of prefix vowels, when occurring alone as prefixed to a verbal stem. According to this investigation the prefix vowel *i-* is found to occur in a number of languages of our Type I (to which Basque also belongs), where it indicates the absence of an expressed direct object of a normally transitive verb. This construction occurs in Gilyak (*i-n(i)d'* 'he ate' and *t'uz-nid'* 'he ate meat', etc., see *loc. cit.*), Ainu (*i-ku* 'smoked' and *tambaku ku* 'smoked tobacco') and in certain American Indian languages (Cuna *i-makka-* 'make (something)' and *kor-makka* 'make a sound', etc.)⁴.

In Ainu, hence, we have an opposition of an intransitive construction consisting of a verbal stem with a prefixed element *i-* and a transitive construction consisting of a verbal stem without this element. This opposition recalls the contrast of Basque *e-gile* ('maker, doer') and *-gile* (*idem*) used in compounds with a preceding nominal stem marking the direct object of the verb stem *-gi-* ('make, do'), as in: *lan-gile* 'workman', *on-gile* 'benefactor', *gaiz-kile* 'malefactor', etc. In a similar way *-gin* (from the same verb stem *-gi-*) is found: *ar-gin* 'stone mason', *okin* (*og(i)-gin*) 'baker', *zur-gin* 'carpenter'. The opposition *lan-gin* (to) do work' and *e-gin* (to) do or make (anything)' is also to be taken into account. If *e-* consequently marks the absence of an expressed object in such cases as those above, this, however, is evidently not its basic function, as *e-* occurs in nominal forms of intransitive verbs as well in Basque: *e-torri*, *e-gon*, *e-gan* ('fly'), etc. Of the same kind is evidently the suffix *-garren*, of which the verbal character is rather clear from the use of the ergative in, for instance, *ilbertzak bigarren* (*ean*) '(on) the second of January' ('(on) which January makes two'), although the verbal stem (*-gar(r)-*) has not survived; the meaning of *bigarren*, *irugarren*, etc. would consequently be 'which makes (?) two, three', etc.

Some of the examples mentioned above lead us on to another feature in languages of our Type I. This is the apparent suppression of the final *-i* in *ar-gin* (from *arri* 'stone'), *okin* (from *ogi* 'bread'), *gal-buru* 'ear of grain' (from *gari* 'wheat'), etc. This particularity has been dealt with by Michelena (*Fonética histórica vasca*, ed. 1961, pp. 416-17 and elsewhere; ed. 1977, p. 584 and elsewhere), on the basis of an internal analysis of Basque phonology, namely in connection with, or as interdependent on the primitive accentuation of Basque words. The question is, however, whether it is actually, and in every case, a matter of *suppression* of a vowel (as in *argin* from **arrigin*). Looking at the matter from a comparative point of view, one will find that in Georgian a great number of nouns end in *-i* which is clearly not part of the stem, since it does not appear in inflected or derived forms: *c'ol-i* 'wife' (cf. *c'ol-s*, dative, *c'ol-švili* 'wife and child(ren)'), *k'ac'i* 'man' (cf. *k'ac'-dre* 'dayli work, a day's work'), etc. What is interesting in this connection is, however, that a change of the final vowel in the first component in compounds of the above type in Basque may take the place of the presumed «suppression» of the same final vowel, as in: *emakume*

4. Regarding indefinite *i-* in Ainu, cf. Suzuku Tamura in *Studies in General and Oriental Linguistics presented to Shirô Hattori on the occasion of this Sixtieth Birthday* (ed. by Roman Jakobson and Shigeo Kawamoto. Tokyo 1970), p. 578, and in *Ainugo to Nihongo* (in *Nihongo 12: Nihongo no keitô to rekishi*. Tokyo 1978), p. 211.

'woman', *emazte* 'wife' (cf. *eme* 'female'), *etxagile* 'architect' (cf. *etxe* 'house'). If we may assume that the underived forms actually represent primitive **emai*, **etxai* (cf. Biscayan *neko*, Guipuzcoan *naiko* 'enough', *apez* and *apaiz* 'priest', *amaika* and *ameka* 'eleven', etc.), we should have exactly the same alternation of independent forms in *-i* and forms in compounds without this vowel ⁵.

If there is reason to include-on the basis of morphological criteria-both Basque and Georgian in the same typological group (our Type I), along with a considerable number of other languages or linguistic stocks, and there is further reason to think that a typological affinity brings with it a certain number of concrete morphological analogies on a primitive level, ⁶ we should perhaps be allowed to point to the occurrence of the mentioned *-i* in nominal stems as an item in further support of an «Ibero-Caucasian» primary affinity.

Curiously, a very similar peculiarity occurs in Japanese: compare *sake* '(rice) wine' and *sakazuki* 'wine cup', *me* 'eye' and *mabuta* 'eyelid' and in a similar way *kami* 'God' and *kamukaze* 'Divine Wind' (cf., regarding *kamu-*, Susumu Ono, Akihiro Satake and Kingori Maeda, *Kogo jiten* (Iwanami, Tokyo), p. 331 (C), and, regarding phonetic generalities, *op. cit.*, p. 1434 (A left), with references); for the case of *kami* ~ *kamu-*, compare the loanword in Ainu *kamuy* ('God'), which then would seem to represent the original form of Japanese *kami*, so that the actual alternation *kami* ~ *kamu-* would be reducible to an original alternation **kamuy* ~ **kamu-* ⁷.

Resumen:

Un aspecto de la función de prefijos vocálicos en euskera.—Por «prefijos vocálicos» entendemos aquí ciertos elementos morfológicos en la conjugación del verbo vasco (como se ven en *n-a-go*, *n-e-(n)goan*, también en *egon*, *etorri*, *irudi*, *atoz*, etc.; en otras lenguas del mismo tipo también en la flexión nominal (nahuatl *n-o-calb* 'mi casa', *i-calb* 'su casa'), etc.

La verdadera función de estos prefijos vocálicos en euskera queda poco clara, tanto en la época actual como en su origen. Ocurren también en las lenguas caucásicas (v. gr. en georgiano), donde se ha hablado de exponentes de «versión» en la conjugación del verbo, en que desempeñan un papel análogo.

Un aspecto de la función de los prefijos vocálicos se observa en ciertos idiomas del extremo Oriente (guilyaco, ainu) así como también en algunas lenguas amerindias, a saber para indicar la ausencia de un objeto directo en formas

5. There are also cases of an interchange of other vowels as well, as seen in: *gogo* 'mind' and *gogatu* 'have in mind, intend', *eza* ~ *eze* ~ *ezo* 'humid, humidity', perhaps to be explained in an analogous way.

6. Cf. the author in the paper referred to above (*Traces of Australian-Amerindian Morpheme Categories in East Asia*), regarding the function of an element *i-* in very diverse languages.

7. The mentioned alternation in Japanese is to be kept apart from such cases as *Saitama* (from **Sak-tama*, **Saki-tama*), which represent a later regular phonetic evolution, incidentally matched and entirely paralleled in the Cuna language (Panama) and seen in such cases as *saila* 'chief', from *sakla*, *sakila*, etc.

de la conjugación transitiva, expresando así la idea de 'alguien' o 'algo' en español. Así se expresa, por ejemplo, en guilyaco *i-n(i)d'* 'comió' (algo)' al lado de *t'uz-nid'* 'comió carne'. En todas estas lenguas (del tipo I) dicha función se expresa por el mismo prefijo vocálico *i-* (*e-* siendo una variante fonética en guilyaco).

En euskera encontramos un caso en cierto sentido análogo, aunque aquí se trate de formas nominales de un tema verbal transitivo. Nos referimos a la alternancia de formas con un prefijo vocálico (en este caso *e-*) y formas sin él, como en *e-gile* (de **eginle?*), al lado de *-gile* (en compuestos), *e-gin* al lado de *-gin* (en compuestos). De este modo tenemos: *egile* al lado de *langile*, *ongile*, *okin* (de **og(i)-gin*; véase más adelante); especialmente se notan casos sueltos del tipo *egin* 'hacer (algo)' al lado de *languin* 'hacer trabajo, trabajar', que más directamente recuerdan las construcciones en guilyaco, ainu, etc. Si hay una base común para las mencionadas construcciones en los casos señalados arriba, habría que entender *egile* como 'hacedor (de algo)' y *langile* como 'hacedor de trabajo' y asimismo *egin* como 'hacer (algo)' y *largin* como 'hacer trabajo'

Con esto, sin embargo, no queremos decir que el sentido original de *e-* sea el de 'objeto general o no especificado', ya que la misma *e-* ocurre también en temas intransitivos (*egon*, *etorri*).

En conexión con las formas arriba mencionadas *ar-*, *o(k)-* por *arri-*, *ogi-* (*argin*, *okin*, etc.) se hace referencia a una analogía singular en japonés, a saber la alternación de la vocal final en compuestos del tipo (japonés) *sake* 'vino' al lado de *sakazuki* 'copa de vino' (compárese en vascuence *eme* al lado de *emakume*, etc.), aunque en casos como éste pueden entrar otros factores de carácter meramente fonético (para los que se menciona un paralelo interesante en lenguas amerindias).