

Basque subordinate clauses: a diachronic study
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Abstract

The subordination marker *bait-* is one of very few grammatical prefixes found in Basque, a predominantly suffixing language. While its functions are well understood, its diachrony has not been studied in detail. The goal of this paper is thus to (1) analyze diachronic changes in the use of the prefix, (2) establish diachronic relations between its functions, and, (3) revise the traditional hypothesis on its source and grammaticalization. The study is based on a corpus of 16th-20th cent. texts.

The marker, which attaches to the finite verb, is found in a wide array of subordinate constructions (Oyharçabal 1987, 2003). Firstly, it is employed together with several clause-initial conjunctions in adverbial clauses or with a pronoun in relative clauses. Secondly, it can be used on its own (i.e. without any conjunction) in reason and relative clauses, and in complements of a rather limited class of verbs. Here, the clause type is not marked overtly and the sentence can be ambiguous. *bait-* also occasionally appears in independent clauses (e.g. in exclamatives or to express contrast).

The corpus data show that important changes in the use of the marker have taken place since the 16th century. With regards to clauses with conjunctions and relative pronouns, their use has decreased significantly. Their high frequency in old texts, however, could be explained through influence of the Romance subordination strategies. As for the constructions with *bait-* only, in modern texts the marker is mostly found in reason clauses, whereas in the 16th century relative clauses predominated and complement and reason were infrequent.

Lafon (1966) argued that *bait-* developed from the affirmative particle *bai* 'yes' through an emphasis marker. This hypothesis is problematic, though. It is unclear how an emphasis marker could end up marking subordination. Also, the only evidence Lafon provides is questionable. According to him, independent clauses with *bait-* are relicts of the old emphasis marker. A closer look at such clauses reveals that they are better seen as innovations rather than archaisms: in some cases insubordination seems likely; in others, a confusion with *ba-* affirmation/emphasis marker could explain the use of *bait-*.

Even though *bai* 'yes' and *bait-* could be related, it is unlikely that the subordination marker developed from the affirmative particle. I will propose instead that *bait-* was initially a relative clause marker, which later spread to other types of subordinate constructions. The extension from relative clause to complement clause is cross-linguistically well attested. Similarly, it is common for a relative clause marker to become a general purpose subordination marker. The only change that is not typologically usual and would require more explanation is the specialization of *bait-* as reason marker. I will propose that the reason interpretation of *bait-* clauses originated in contexts that were ambiguous between relative or reason reading.

References

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