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# Counting matters: quantifying the vitality and value of Basque

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**Abstract:** Scholars of language policy and politics have increasingly come to appreciate that there is much insight to be gained by scrutinizing data collection practices and the debates around them. What is (or is not) counted and how counting is done has consequence, but in ways that are not always self-evident. Taking the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC) in Spain as a case study, this article examines the historical context in which census and other statistical surveys of language emerged and what the changing forms of quantification can tell us about the evolution of language advocacy discourse and politics more generally. We will look at how concerns with tracking marginalization led minority language advocates to experiment with measures of oral use and linguistic landscapes in the public sphere. The final section examines how economic and quality management techniques have gained traction in recent efforts to quantify Basque value and vitality today. We conclude with a consideration of the insights to be gained by looking at quantification efforts from the point of view of minority language advocacy.

**Keywords:** statistics, Basque, language revitalization, quantification, linguistic landscape, language vitality

## 1 Introduction: language census and statistics as terrains of political struggle

Statistics and the census are often thought of as bureaucratic instruments of the state. But in the contemporary era, gathering language statistics is also a mechanism by which communities of minority language speakers advocate for resources and recognition. Language censuses and statistical surveys

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constitute what Foucault would call a truth regime and a terrain of political struggle that engages many kinds of actors who have stakes in how languages and speakers are understood, and linguistic life is governed.

Quantifying language is fraught with epistemological, political and material tensions, pressures, and challenges. For example, to engage in counting “languages” and “speakers”, there must first exist an understanding of linguistic practice as organized in neatly bounded entities – *things* which correspond to and reify understandings of mutually exclusive and discrete populations of speakers (Moore et al. 2010). This can, as we will see, be as deeply problematic for advocacy as for scholarship. At the same time, we need to be cognizant of the power, both material and semiotic, that quantification seems to afford, the infrastructure and resources it demands, and the pressures brought to bear that necessitate quantification. What is counted, what categories are selected, and what falls off the radar or is unable to be tabulated has consequence, but in ways that might not always be self-evident.

In this article, we will elaborate by way of an exploration of how and why counting has mattered in the sociopolitical field of Basque language advocacy and some of the new directions counting has taken today. What was the census and enumeration more generally seen to offer the Basque language revival movement as it took shape in the post-Franco era? How is it being framed today and what factors shape these framings? We will review some of the shifts in the discourses that surround language survey data in general, as well as the architecture of enumeration that has been put in place with an eye to pinpointing changes in practice, and the changing stakes, purposes, and pressures for quantification.

We will see that while the grassroots language movement has long advocated for the collection of statistical data as a way of objectively measuring the “health” of Basque, they soon came to the realization that the census was an inadequate instrument for capturing some of what they saw happening, namely that numbers of “speakers” could be growing while usage remained stagnant. We will look at how concerns with tracking marginalization led minority language advocates to experiment with measures of signage (linguistic landscape) and oral language use in the public sphere. The final section examines how economicistic and quality management techniques have gained traction in recent efforts to quantify Basque value and vitality today. Our analysis brings into relief quantification as a changing political terrain while also considering the insights to be gained by looking at quantification efforts from the point of view of minority language advocacy.

## 2 Quantifying the health and social status of basque

In the Basque context, efforts at quantification are, not surprisingly, historically linked to nation-state building and moments of intensified social reform at the turn of the twentieth century (Urla 1989) and again in the immediate post-Franco era. At both of these times, the argument for quantification breaks ranks from the more generalized discourse that celebrated Basque as the national language and as unique heritage. The call for numbers was bound up with a conviction in the need to intervene upon and plan the social future of Basque in a rational way. The governance of language, like the governance of other spheres of life, depended on making the population “visible” in and through numbers.<sup>1</sup>

Language planning efforts in the early twentieth century were aborted by the Spanish Civil War. However, when Spain was reconfigured into its current quasi-federal state of autonomous communities in 1979, Basque language revitalization advocacy would once again return with great interest to the question of enumeration. Leftist sociologists of the nongovernmental research group SIADECO (*Sociedad de Investigación Aplicada del Desarrollo Comunitario*) had already begun gathering survey data. In their 1979 report, *Conflict Lingüístico en Euskadi / Hizkuntz Borroka Euskal Herrian*, commissioned by the Basque Language Academy (Euskaltzaindia 1979), language and its measurement were framed as telling a story of the vitality of Basque identity and nationhood. The report is replete with numbers on reported language use in diverse social domains, language attitudes, estimated numbers of speakers and their geographical distribution, numbers of publications, television and radio programs, record albums, and much more. This is a telling and important discursive shift. The situation of Basque, they argued, had to be known via systematically gathered data. “It was necessary to leave behind the impressionistic guesses and biases, those of our adversaries as well as our own, that are also inevitably limited” (Euskaltzaindia 1979: 13). Statistics were the key to the new kind of knowledge that would permit, as we might say today, an “evidence-based” planning to unfold.

From an era of ad hoc number gathering produced by activist sociologists, the Basque region entered a new moment of official data gathering enabled by the acquisition of political institutions. One of the first acts of the regional Basque Autonomous Community was to create its own statistical

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<sup>1</sup> Key texts on the linkage between governance of social life and statistics include Foucault’s treatise on governmentality (Foucault 1991), Hacking (1982, 1981), and Rose (1999).

service, EUSTAT. Shortly thereafter, in 1981, questions on Spanish and Basque language skills in reading, writing, speaking and understanding were incorporated into the census for this region.<sup>2</sup> In 1982, the *Ley Básica de Normalización del Uso del Euskera*, commonly referred to as the Law of Basque, mandated the creation of a sociolinguistic map for language planning purposes in Additional Disposition no. 2.<sup>3</sup> Political autonomy and the power to shape policy – albeit for only a portion of the Basque territory – provided an important impetus and infrastructure for the quantification of language. The newly approved Law of Basque enabled the formation of the *Hizkuntz Politikarako Sailburuordetza* [Vice Ministry of Language Policy], which was charged with defining language policy and gathering statistical data. Official planning and policy thus ushered in a new era of regionally mandated and regularized quantification. This provided the opportunity and resources to know “Basque” in new ways. It is important not to view the project of enumeration as simply generating more or better data. Rather, statistical knowledge-gathering gives rise to an object that is novel in its own right: the linguistic population as datum (Duden 1992) with trends to be charted. This datum, as we will discuss more below, quickly becomes a critical element in debates that unfold about the health and vitality of Basque. It becomes a way of representing the language and of encouraging individuals to think about their own linguistic choices and behaviors as impacting the trends, either favorably or negatively. Quantification, in other words, has what Foucault (1982) called “subject effects” and language advocacy astutely makes use of this in its consciousness-raising campaigns.

One of the distinctive and enduring features of the Basque case is that data gathering comes not only from government offices, but also from a plethora of public and private entities, municipalities, and privately contracted language consultancies that undertake surveys as a part of implementing Basque language promotion efforts. Quantification is being produced by multiple entities from the very local Basque language group, cultural associations, and schools, to large interregional collaborations. Here, we want to discuss some of the largest data sources that get the most public attention and how they are framed. While these studies are large-scale enterprises, it is important to keep in mind the prolific engagement with numbers that is happening at many scales.

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<sup>2</sup> The province of Navarre is administratively separate from the Basque Autonomous Community. They began to collect similar census data on Basque speakers after 1986.

<sup>3</sup> See Olabuenaga (1984) and Secretaria General de Política Lingüística (1989).

## 2.1 The basque sociolinguistic survey

One of the most high-profile sources of data today is the Basque Sociolinguistic Survey. Created in 1990, this is a mass survey conducted every five years collecting data on the basic demographics, competencies, language attitudes, use habits, and tendencies towards intergenerational language transmission for Basque speakers. In contrast to the census, which is restricted to the Basque Autonomous Community and Navarre, this survey reports on the broader territory of Basque speakers residing in what are considered to be the seven historic provinces of *Euskal Herria*. The first edition of the survey bore the title “The continuity of Basque” (Aizpurua 1995). After this it would be titled more simply as “The Basque sociolinguistic survey”.<sup>4</sup>

Notable in this text is the distinctly biopolitical framing of language and enumeration. As in the earlier SIADECO study, the recourse to enumeration is conceptually likened to science and rationality. But it is also more specifically presented as a diagnostic tool for assessing the “health” of the language. In the preface to the first *Atlas Lingüístico*, the study is described as offering an “*ecografía*” [ultrasound] of Basque. It is also common to find the data described as an x-ray or a means of taking the “temperature” of Basque. Mari Carmen Garmendia, Head of the Department of Culture at the time, opened her preface to the first sociolinguistic survey in the following way: “Just as in the field of medicine, the treatment of illnesses requires an accurate diagnosis, so too in social questions it is not possible to find rational solutions without having conducted a good analysis of the problem and the factors that impinge on it” (Aizpurua 1995: 11). Richard Bourhis, well known for his work on ethnolinguistic vitality and French language planning in Quebec, served as one of the consultants in the design and redaction of this first survey. He describes the survey as an instrument for comparing and contrasting the vitality of Basque in its various territories (Aizpurua: 19). Vitality is a technical term, but it resonates with a strong tendency in popular and activist discourse to conceptualize languages as living organisms. This is pervasive in language endangerment discourses, where the references to the “life” and “death” of languages often rely, as Shaylih Muehlmann (2012) has observed, on an ominous rhetoric of “countdown”, in which numbers of speakers operate as fading heartbeats.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Published versions of the survey are available at [www.euskara.euskadi.eus](http://www.euskara.euskadi.eus).

<sup>5</sup> For critiques of endangerment discourse, see Moore (1999), Hill (2002), Duchêne and Heller (2007), Makoni and Pennycook (2007), Moore et al. (2010). While Basques actively pursue quantification, both Hill (2002) and Muehlmann (2012) draw attention to cases where quantification may be rejected or perceived as contrary to speakers’ understandings of the value of their language.

## 2.2 The street survey

Health and vitality are also central to the discursive framing of the other major instrument for measuring Basque: the *Kale Neurketa*, or street survey. This is unquestionably the most significant contribution to the landscape of enumeration coming from non-governmental language advocacy circles. With pilot versions beginning as early as 1982, the first full-fledged street survey appeared in 1989 and has been carried out at five year intervals ever since. It consists of sending rapporteurs into the streets, who take note of the language or languages being used in the conversations they hear as they walk along. Recorders spend a designated amount of time, once on a weekday and once on a weekend, walking along an appointed route through the main streets and neighborhoods of a sample of towns and cities. The goal, as they have described it, is to use observational methods to determine the percentage of Basque spoken in public spaces throughout all seven of the Basque Provinces. Today, with over twenty-five years in existence, it is one of the more important and largest measures for tracking the success of language revitalization efforts in making Basque a “public” language.<sup>6</sup>

The street survey is a unique creation of the Basque movement. What concerns us here is not so much the details of the methodology *per se*, but rather what motivated a survey of usage and what this reveals about the particular stakes and challenges Basque and other linguistic minority advocates experience with regard to quantification. Work on developing the survey began very shortly after the Statute of Autonomy and the census were put into place. The Law of Basque was now providing institutional support for Basque in education, media, and public administration. A new era of Basque language normalization and data gathering was on the horizon. Why did advocates feel another measure was needed? Why the interest in documenting the public oral use of Basque? Why do it through direct observation? The historical moment and the insights minority language advocates had about the sociolinguistic dynamics of minoritization are both key.

By all accounts, what most concerned and motivated the advocates of the street survey was to find a way to document something the census could not: the lived reality of sociolinguistic marginalization. It is a convention for language census data to deliver its results as numbers of “speakers” of various languages. As noted, EUSTAT had started gathering data on the self-reported competencies in speaking, reading writing, and understanding Basque. This then results in a variety of categories - e.g. new Basque speakers, semi or quasi

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<sup>6</sup> For a fuller description of the survey’s history and design, see Altuna and Urla (2013).

speakers, monolinguals, active speakers, and passive bilinguals. These categorizations have been disputed and changed over time (Altuna and Urla 2013). But the issue motivating the street survey was not a dissatisfaction with the categories or the questions of the census, but rather with the limitations of competency data for measuring vitality. The census data can measure trends in the number of people who know Basque and can understand it. It can tell us who is studying it and their demographic qualities. But as minority language speakers are well aware, competency does not necessarily align with usage. Long-standing habits of accommodating to the majority language and histories of linguistic insecurity are not automatically undone by declaring a language co-official. Language advocates thought it important to document in numbers what they could observe in everyday life, namely that Basque was lagging far behind Spanish as a spoken language of the public sphere. The results of the very first survey conducted in 1989 showed that only 10.8% of the people in the street spoke in Basque, while rates for Basque language competency ranged around 25% at the time.<sup>7</sup>

Language advocates who had been in the movement for many years had long stressed the importance of not only knowing, but speaking Basque. This was an important theme in the performative view of Basque identity they promoted (Urla 2012a). It was also shored up in the theory of language vitality articulated by Joshua Fishman, an influential interlocutor and consultant in Basque language policy circles at the time. Fishman argued that legal status and schooling was not enough to guarantee the survival of a minority language. His work pointed to oral use of the language as the most critical threshold for the sustained vitality and transmission of a language (see Fishman 1991). In this particular historical context, in which Basque language revival was gaining institutional support, a significant portion of the grassroots language movement was worried that people would become complacent and assume that the situation of Basque was now secure. They were worried that the consciousness-raising efforts and broad civic involvement in language revival might begin to diminish. The street survey was a way of demonstrating that the project of “normalizing” Basque language use had a long way to go.

A second concern that influenced the design of the street survey had to do with the territory to be covered. Many ethnolinguistic minorities see their homeland in ways that are at odds with the administrative configurations that govern enumeration. The Basques are an example. They live in provinces that span both

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<sup>7</sup> Subsequent work by linguist Jose Luis Alvarez Enparantza (2001) showed that, given the large numbers of monolingual Spanish speakers, it was mathematically impossible for public usage to match competency percentages.

France and Spain in what is commonly known as the greater Basque Country, *Euskal Herria*. This national imaginary, however, was at odds with an emergent information regime – a census and linguistic atlas – that was limited to the smaller territory of the Basque Autonomous Community and Navarre. Grassroots organizations, and the Basque nationalist left more generally, understood perfectly how things like census data, maps, and statistical counts solidified a national imaginary. They resisted having the BAC be normalized as the de facto “Basque Country” and in the 1980s, shortly after the BAC’s creation, one finds a number of annual statistical compendia published that covered all of Euskal Herria. Emerging out of the radical nationalist milieu, the street survey can be seen as part of this effort to keep Euskal Herria in view through enumeration. It was the first major quantification project to take on this broader territorial scale. The government’s Vice Ministry of Language Policy followed suit when they launched the Sociolinguistic Survey the following year. As we will see, this broader territorial unit continues to be important in current indicator projects.

## **2.3 Linguistic landscapes and the quantification of language in public**

The study of linguistic landscapes is, in many ways, a close cousin of the street survey. Linguistic landscape measures are relatively recent in the Basque Country, not nearly as well known as the previous two surveys discussed. They first began to be developed in Quebec, but have gained increasing attention in the Basque region (cf. Gorter et al. 2012). The roots and development of the quantitative study of linguistic landscapes can provide us with some insights into the ways minority language advocates attempt to track marginalization through numbers.

Like the street survey, linguistic landscape studies were designed to provide quantitative measures of language use in the public domain. Historically, both of these methods emerged in contexts in which language advocates had begun to perceive the limitations of the census and other conventional measures of language vitality. While the street survey seeks to measure the languages people *speak*, linguistic landscape analysis examines the languages that can be *seen* on storefronts, street signs, billboards and posters. Both projects stem from an acute awareness on the part of minority language advocates that the hegemony of a majority language may be so normalized that it goes misrecognized (Altuna and Urla 2013). A second factor uniting these two types of observational measures is their focus on the public sphere. For language speakers and advocates

who have sought greater rights and recognition, hearing their language “in the street” and seeing their language represented on public signs is a way to measure their social status. As Jaffe and Oliva (2013: 101) note, “for minority languages, public signage is a site for the affirmation of language status and rights [...] Signs can counteract the historical exclusion of minority languages from public space by making them visible.” Marten et al. (2012: 1) express a similar point even more succinctly: “being visible may be as important for minority languages as being heard.”

The study most scholars recognize as the catalyst to the subfield of linguistic landscapes emerged in Quebec, where local signage has been a central focus in the struggle for French language rights and representation. In 1977, one of the provisions of the Charter of the French Language (Bill 101) was that French be the language of public commercial signage. As the transition to French dominance in education and workplaces took time, it was the immediate change in visible, physical signs that signaled to the larger public the shifting nature of language policy in Quebec (Bourhis and Landry 2002). Public agencies began tracking the *paysage linguistique* [the linguistic landscape] in various contexts to measure the progress of language planning and policy (CLF 1997, 2000; Bouchard 2012).

Landry and Bourhis (1997: 25) define the linguistic landscape as “the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings”. Measuring this, they argued, could provide useful insights into the vitality of a language and sociolinguistic dynamics more generally. The “LL” as they describe it “may act as the most observable and immediate index of the relative power and status of the linguistic communities inhabiting a given territory” (Landry and Bourhis 1997: 29). In their study, Landry and Bourhis relied on aggregate survey data collected across Canada over the course of 10 years. They concluded that where respondents noted more French language present in the built environment, they also perceived the vitality of the francophone community to be stronger. Higher scores for French language use in the linguistic landscape corresponded to a higher perceived ethnolinguistic vitality, which they further argued may in turn influence language use through a so-called “carryover effect”.

The quantitative measure of linguistic landscapes - similarly to the street survey – was an attempt to supplant potentially subjective impressions about language use with unambiguous observational measures. The first study by Landry and Bourhis (1997) in fact only measured *perceptions* of the linguistic landscape. However, their research launched a great deal of scholarship documenting emplaced language. The majority of early studies that began to appear featured quantitative analyses of the frequency and distribution of certain

languages found in a defined location. Taking advantage of affordable digital cameras, researchers began photographing individual signs and coding them for the languages used, content, font, placement, and the source of the sign. Researchers used these measurements to investigate such things as the globalization of English, the visible impact of language policy and planning, and the way power relations play out in the linguistic marking of public space.

In both linguistic landscape and street surveys, questions arise as to the criteria that should govern the selection and boundaries of the survey area. How representative is the area selected? Can the signs in a particular neighborhood, area, or city be taken to indicate broader patterns of use? Additional problems can arise over what constitutes a public sign. Peter Backhaus (2006: 55) defines a sign in a fairly conventional way, as “any piece of written text within a spatially definable frame”. However, more recent work has expanded this definition to include graffiti and impermanent, mobile texts such as bus signs, flyers, trash, and T-shirts (Sebba 2010; Kallen 2008, 2010; Coupland 2010). It is also not always clear what counts as an instance of “language” or which “language” is being used at a particular moment. Huebner (2006: 35), for example, recognizes the difficulties in parsing various uses of Thai and English in greater Bangkok, as language mixing, translation, and transliteration seem to create ambiguity in quantification. He discusses a sign that reads *“biuti aen”* [Ann’s Beauty], which retains Thai script and syntax (noun + adjective), but features English lexicon. These and other seemingly technical conundrums point to the problems that beset the efforts to render multilayered meanings into tabulations of discrete languages.

Scholars have begun to problematize the relationship between linguistic landscapes and language vitality. For example, numerous studies have demonstrated the disjuncture between the built environment and the languages used by the people who live there (e.g. Ben Rafael et al. 2006). Coupland (2010) notes that in the case of Welsh, its presence in the landscape more reliably points to an aspirational bilingualism than to patterns of use. Often, uses of language in public are not intended to be read for their referential content, but rather for their emblematic associations with group identification, values of authenticity, or exoticness. Recent linguistic landscape analyses have tended to leave enumeration behind, adopting more ethnographic, qualitative methods, informed by a semiotic approach to place, landscape, and emplaced language (cf. Scollon and Scollon 2003; Jaworski and Thurlow 2010; Blommaert 2013). Moving away from quantitative, “snapshot” analyses, linguistic landscapes analysis increasingly investigates what Jan Blommaert calls the semiotization of space, issues of recognizability, power, and meaning in the production of space (Blommaert 2013).

Researchers and advocates who engage in efforts of enumeration often meet with the complexities described above, and yet the need for numbers still persists. For minority language advocates, the value and stakes of quantifiable data often outweigh and justify the difficulties. At their core, these measures are intended to document and - through the brevity afforded by numbers and statistics - effectively communicate the workings of power and persistent marginalization faced by speakers of minority languages. In the Basque context, linguistic landscape analyses have shaped the policy decisions of municipalities with regard to the visible and public use of written Basque (e.g. Cenoz and Gorter 2006; Gorter et al. 2012). In the urban center of Donostia-San Sebastián, municipal officials implemented new signage policy apparently after seeing reports indicating that Basque was only present on 22% of government signs (Gorter et al. 2012).

Both the street survey and linguistic landscape studies underscore the special symbolic meaning and status accorded language in public space. This is a function of language ideology that plays itself out in quantification. We cannot assume that measuring language in public spaces is only or merely a function of practical concerns. It is not just because it is easier than measuring in private spaces. Rather, the division between public and private language and space is itself an ideologically constructed one (Gal and Kligman 2000). At stake in many minority language movements like the Basque is an effort to lay claim to the values of authority and anonymity habitually accorded to standard and official state languages (Woolard 2008; Gal and Woolard 2001). Efforts to quantify the public use of Basque in signage have to be understood as an integral part of this ideologized struggle for equality in public status, authority, and recognition.

### **3 Enumeration in neoliberal times: calculating economic value, vitality, and the efficacy of planning**

In the twenty-first century, language normalization in the Basque Autonomous Community is awash with numbers. In addition to the census, the quinquennial Sociolinguistic Survey, and the street survey that cover broad territories, many municipalities and provincial governments collect statistical data on language at a smaller scale for purposes of language planning. The social status and “life” of Basque is told in numbers, in percentages of speakers, enrollments in schooling

tracks, categories of competencies, and longitudinal demographic trends. Quantification is an integral part not only of planning, but of virtually any public event, press conference, or meeting to discuss the social status of Basque.

At the same time, the broader sociopolitical context has shifted significantly in Europe, bringing about changes in the kinds of quantification that advocates seek and the discursive frameworks of policies and funding in which they must engage. This context, alternately described by scholars as neoliberalism or late capitalism, is marked by the expansion of market reasoning to virtually all spheres of social life, along with the increased questioning of the state's obligation to provide for its citizens. Both trends have accelerated precipitously with austerity plans that followed the economic crisis of 2008.

Duchêne and Heller (2012) argue that late capitalism is characterized by material, political, and discursive changes that have directly impacted the place language has in the economy and the frameworks of value in which minority language advocacy works. The dramatic growth of the service sector, call centers, tourism-related industries, niche marketing and branding, as well as translation and other language-centric industries, have brought language and communication skills to the fore, even if such skills are not always recognized or fairly compensated. Language is increasingly construed and sold as a skill an individual cultivates and trades on the market. Along these lines, they describe a shift that is particularly pertinent for our inquiry into quantification, namely a shift in policy frameworks that increasingly demand minority language advocacy to articulate the value of language promotion in terms of economic development.

Minority language advocacy must now accommodate and reproduce discursive frameworks distinct from those that previously informed language promotion. Rather than asserting the importance of preserving linguistic diversity on the grounds of rights, shared cultural and national values, or identity, the dominant framework of value is now one of economic growth and increasing competitiveness. Minority languages throughout the world are increasingly keyed as "added value" to be exploited in tourism industries and marketing (Heller et al. 2014; da Silva and Heller 2009).

As part of this broad discursive shift, we think it important to note not only the mechanisms of commodification, but also and quite specifically the increasing prominence and spread of quality management discourse, values, and practices of audit. Cris Shore and Susan Wright (2000) masterfully describe the spread of what they call the new "managerialism" in the field of public education. Audit culture (Strathern 2000), characterized by the terminology and logics of quality management, swot analysis, continuous improvement, and best practices is now no longer limited to the world of accounting from which it

originated. These traits are now the ubiquitous tools of policy and social reform, including language. This began to make its presence in Basque advocacy in the 1990s (Urla 2012b) and is in clear evidence in the most recent quantification projects we will discuss below.

### 3.1 Assessing economic value

In the Basque context, such ways of framing the value of language and the practice of language planning are abundantly evident and impactful for the practices of quantification. Basques are leaders among minority language advocates in what we could call the “total quality turn” in language planning and its attendant forms of enumeration. Here, we examine two recent projects initiated by the Vice Ministry of Language Policy of the Autonomous Community. The first of these is a report released in 2015, entitled *The value and economic impact of Basque* (SIADECO 2015). Carried out by SIADECO, the study’s goal – announced at the press conference when it was released - warrants extended citation:

The objective of the study has been to understand the contribution of Basque to the economy of the Basque Autonomous Community, measure the economic wealth it generates, and quantify the extent and the economic value of the Basque language sectors. There have been many sociological and philological studies of Basque; however there have been very few from the perspective of economic science that aim to analyze the market relating to Basque and measure its impact in the economy of the Basque Autonomous Community. This study clearly demonstrates that Basque is indeed a sector of the Basque economy.

(Gobierno Vasco / Eusko Jaurlaritza 2015: 1)

The power of numbers to convey truths succinctly is on display in the study. Within the “small” territory of the BAC (2.2 million inhabitants), the study showed that Basque was central to thousands of jobs (56,000) and that a large amount of wealth from wages and VAT taxes was generated in relation to the Basque language: in education, in services, in cultural productions, and in media. In Spain’s dramatic economic crisis, these numbers would clearly have extra resonance. The report was careful to show that this was not simply a phenomenon of public subsidies. Basque brought added value to both the private and public sectors. The percentages corresponding to Basque – 6.3% of all jobs and 4.2% to the Gross Domestic Product (2.8 million euros) – put Basque on par with some of the Autonomous Community’s most dynamic economic sectors: education (5.8% of GDP), and tourism (5.5% GDP).

A press conference was held to explain the purpose behind the study as well as publicize the findings. The results were clear in the easy-to-read graphs and pie

charts presented - an important feature of the politics of numbers to which we will return. The web-published summary painstakingly defines its terminology and describes the methodology used to define the economic sectors impacted by language, how value added was calculated, and how the contribution to the Gross Domestic Product was tabulated. While references to concepts like “value added” is not new, this is the first to actually attempt to calculate it. The pioneering role of the Basques in this endeavor was praised by the president of the European Network for the Promotion Language Diversity at the press conference.

We do not have the expertise, nor is it our intent to evaluate the accuracy of these calculations; rather, we wish to understand the economicistic framework of value in which minority language advocacy works. In an era in which expenditures on all public services, let alone minority languages, are scrutinized, numbers of jobs and the GDP have increasingly become prized measures of value. In his public presentation of the report, Patxi Bartzarrika, the head of Language Policy, interestingly used the findings to challenge what he called commonplace language “prejudices” that assume that minority languages have no real economic value or future in a world of globalization. It is an assumption that draws on a familiar contrast between languages of “power” and languages of “solidarity”, between languages that have instrumental value and can provide mobility vs those with cultural, sentimental or integrative value. As Susan Gal has argued, the opposition between instrumental and integrative values operates as an axis of differentiation that has deep roots in European language ideology. It reappears in what she calls “the ocean of writing” about language diversity “within and around” the European Union (Gal 2012: 31).

For Bartzarrika, the problem is that statehood seems to be what shapes which end of the axis a language ends up on. Although the EU recognizes linguistic diversity as a core value, its policies and discourses tend to only consider the official languages of its member states as languages of globalization and efficiency. In a (2016) blogpost about the study, Bartzarrika writes that, contrary to common stereotypes, many regional languages “are experienced like first languages by millions of Europeans, and widely used as languages of education, university, business, administration, cultural creation, information technology [...]. They are living languages, and in some cases, very dynamic, but they do not have a secure future” (Bartzarrika 2016). He goes on to provide a series of rankings to prove his point: Basque is ranked 44 in languages used on the internet; it is one of the 33 languages used on Twitter; it ranks 34th in languages used on Wikipedia. With the findings of the current study, he says, prejudices about the uselessness of regional languages can be challenged. It will no longer be possible to deny what reality tells us: that regional languages have demonstrable social and economic value (Bartzarrika 2016).

The calculations, pie charts, and bar graphs of the SIADECO study represent a tour de force in producing what Roland Barthes (1982) might call a disruptive “reality effect”. The report does not reject the logics of commodification Duchêne and Heller (2012) see as characteristic of late capitalism, but rather claims these for Basque, using the techniques and forms of value that have legitimacy in world of business and bottom-line policy for the purpose of legitimating an unlikely cause: language advocacy.

### 3.2 The basque indicator system: measuring vitality and auditing audit

A second project currently being developed, the *Euskararen Adierazle Sistema* [Basque system of indicators], hereafter EAS, takes enumeration in the direction of another one of the key functions statistics are asked play today: audit. The aim of the project is to identify a set of data points which can be compiled to provide a reliable periodic measure of the vitality of the Basque language. The architecture of the system is still under construction. A technical consultant involved in the project generously agreed to be interviewed and shared drafts of the unpublished proposal that allowed us to understand how the project was presented for EU funding, the general features of its design, as well as some of the practical and political challenges. As it is currently conceived, EAS will collect data on attitudes and the relative knowledge, use, and presence of Basque in ten domains of social life, including the workplace, family, schooling, public administration, informal language use, social media, and the internet. Data will be collected and compiled for such things as the language of inter-generational transmission, hours of Basque language instruction in schools, achieved levels of competency, the amount of Basque language cultural production, rates of consumption of Basque language media, and the language adolescents use in and outside of school. Like the Sociolinguistic and street surveys, the proposed scope for EAS is the broader Basque-speaking territory spread out across both Spain and France.

In initiating this project, Basques looked to their peers in Catalonia and Quebec, who already have language indicator systems in place. Catalans developed a survey specifically for the indicator system. But the Basque EAS project will be attempting as much as possible to work as a team of partners to utilize and consolidate already existing sources of data. This is where the dispersion of Basque speakers across different states and provinces presents real challenges for adopting this increasingly common form of quantitative assessment. Statistics and data collection on language are highly variable across these

territories. In France there is some survey but no census data on language (Arel 2002). Nor is there anything comparable in either France or Navarre to the Arrue project in the BAC, that collects extensive data on the language practices of youth in and out of school. The diverse political histories of France and post-Franco Spain with regard to language and ethnic diversity, as well as their distinct language policies, have given rise to very different statistical regimes of knowledge. Basque language planning is significantly more developed in the BAC than in either Navarre or the French Pyrenees, and consequently data collection on language there is much more elaborate. Thus, one of the stated objectives of the EAS project is to secure agreements from the various partners to put in place the mechanisms for equivalent and standardized information gathering practices.

Working across different states/provinces, and thus information regimes, presents the indicator project with sizable challenges that requires time-consuming meetings and negotiations across a host of entities.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the project leaders, based in the BAC, recognized their linguistic community's dispersion as an opportunity to apply for EU funding. They successfully secured support for the EAS project under the rubric of the EU inter-regional program POCTEFA, for the cross-border region of Spain-France-Andorra. POCTEFA forms part of Interreg, a funding division of the European Commission charged with supporting joint actions between national, regional, and local actors from different member states of the EU. For this, the contemporary advocates for enumeration had to pitch their project very differently from how SIADECO called for statistics in 1979. At that time, the argument for statistical data was bound up with measuring and mapping the vitality of Basque and the Basque nation in a rational, evidence based assessment. The preservation of Basque identity and nationhood predominate as the stated goals at this time. In the EAS project, however, references to Basque nationhood or the territory of *Euskal Herria* [the Basque Country] is absent, as is any reference to rights. In its place, the project is presented as serving the “cross-border territory of Basque” within this otherwise arbitrary geographic unit: France-Spain-Andorra. The link between language and a meaningful homeland is definitively absent from this project in measurement.

Enumeration in the EAS has a significantly different purpose from the SIADECO (2015) *Report on the Economic Value of Basque* discussed earlier. In the latter, the aim as we saw, is to quantify the economic value of the language.

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<sup>8</sup> The EAS Project has a steering committee with representatives of language policy entities from the BAC, the Basque Language Office of Navarre, and the *Office Publique de la Langue Basque* (France). It is presided over by the Basque Government. Technical assistance is provided by the independent research institute *Soziolinguistika Klusterra*.

But as drafts of the funding proposal showed us, in EAS quantification is presented as an instrument for ensuring quality language policy that articulates the project of minority language promotion to “smart” economic growth. Interreg funds require applicants to demonstrate how their cross-border ventures align with the broader aims of the Europe 2020 plan to enhance sustainable economic growth and the pursuit of excellence. Interreg has a division of funding for projects in the preservation of local or regional cultural patrimony, not as an end in and of itself, but rather as a means towards two of Europe 2020’s key targets: smart growth and social cohesion (European Commission 2010).

In the proposal for the indicator project, the preservation of Basque as a local cultural patrimony is presented as a means of enhancing both social cohesion and economic development. It exemplifies the tendency to frame language preservation in the economic terms that public funding increasingly requires. But there is more than simple commodification at work. The EAS project also illuminates the growing hegemony of quality management practices and concepts. The indicator system is itself presented as an example of innovation in planning technology, a means toward developing a reliable, scientifically sound database, technically rigorous, that will make for more effective strategies for Basque language preservation and promotion. EAS is itself, then, not simply a way of measuring vitality or taking the pulse of Basque - although it does aim to do that via an extensive range of indicators. It is justified on the grounds of total quality management goals of sustainable and continuous evaluation of the efficacy of policies. Best practices, efficacy, innovation, sustainability, transferability, cooperation, smart growth, innovation; continuous evaluation and continuous improvement: these are the watchwords of total quality management and they are mobilized with great skill for the presentation of this quantifying project. Funding from the EU requires this, but we have been witnessing this in Basque language promotion efforts in the Basque Autonomous Community for some time (Urla 2012b).

What we see, then, in examining this newest endeavor in quantification, is a coupling of the long-standing interest in measuring Basque vitality with the measurement of policy efficacy. EAS is intended for both. It points to how quantification has evolved from a tool for asking “how is Basque doing?” to one for asking “how are we (the policy makers) doing?” And, to add yet another layer of measurement, POCTEFA requires that funding recipients pinpoint the economic value of the indicator system and commit to a regular accounting of their progress in meeting their project goals; monitoring, as it were, the performance of the monitoring effort. The fact that the project had EU backing was decisive, explained our consultant, in gaining the collaboration of the French Basques. Yet it also clearly brought to the project an extensive amount of reporting.

## 4 Conclusion

In their essay “Governing by numbers”, Cris Shore and Susan Wright (2015) describe the tremendous proliferation of international indicators, measurements, and rankings. Virtually every aspect of professional life and organizational activity, they argue, is now subject to elaborate systems of audit and inspection functioning as forms of “global governmentality”. Similarly, Sally Engle Merry writes that “Indicators are rapidly multiplying as tools for assessing and promoting a variety of social justice and reform strategies around the world. There are indicators of rule of law, indicators of violence against women, and indicators of economic development, among many others” (Merry 2011: S83). Much of what these and other scholars have written about quantification and audit has been highly critical, pointing to the resulting increased workloads, a culture of surveillance, a mandate for constant self-monitoring, and lack of trust. Numbers tend to be fetishized, performance indicators displace professional judgement, and rarely are the decision-making processes by which variables are chosen made transparent or discussed beyond a limited number of experts. A worrisome and illiberal form of managerialism is taking shape, say Shore and Wright, as we are increasingly governed by and through numbers, indicators, algorithms, and audits which can be coercive and corrosive in their effects, yet exceedingly difficult to challenge (Shore and Wright 2015: 25; cf. 2000).

These are concerns that we and other scholars share when it comes to the use of quantification and indicators in minority and endangered language advocacy and planning. Like much of the broader critical work on enumeration and governance, we are concerned with “knowledge effects”. Critics point to the ways that complex realities are inevitably simplified in enumeration, reduced to a percentage or a score to be rendered in standardized tables that aim to offer at-a-glance comparisons. Indeed, that is exactly what they seek to provide policy makers: quick and easy to comprehend assessments. But we think it is also important to recognize at a deeper level the way enumeration contributes to a rather relentless “thingification” of language (Silverstein 1996). Counting speakers, tabulating the percentages that one language or another is spoken contributes to an understanding of languages as discretely bounded things. This may be one of the more pernicious effects of the quality management techniques that depend on enumerables and indicators. It works against an understanding of language as repertoire, as an assemblage of resources and a mode of symbolic action through which actors construct social worlds and relationships (Agha 2007; Moore et al. 2010). We are concerned that the pressure to conform to

measurable quality management outputs encourages an impoverished view of language that has long-term negative effects for language revitalization. Equally worrisome is the way the notion of the countable speaker brings with it “a package of suggested competences and skills that is presented as ‘ideal’ and ‘complete’, and against which people’s actual language skills can be perpetually measured” (Moore et al. 2010: 11). In short, enumeration is not just describing the linguistic capacities of speakers, but is itself a process that contributes to sedimenting hierarchical typologies and gradations of speakers.

To take an example, we are seeing that many of the youth schooled in Basque do not speak it in their everyday lives. The street survey can tell us how much “Basque” is spoken, but the kinds of questions that we need to ask to understand why that is – what “kind” of Basque, or what speaking Basque means to youth – are not questions that numbers can answer. Naming and counting “languages” or language choice will not get us closer to understanding how youth are using linguistic resources to express and create their social worlds. We share with other scholars a concern with how the policy world’s focus on enumeration leads to a narrowing of research questions and agendas that sidelines the qualitative study and appreciation, for example, of “messy” yet richly creative translinguistic practices. As Moore, Pietikäinen, and Blommaert argue in their very insightful and trenchant critique of endangered language discourse, numbers dominate as the preferred way that experts are asked to provide knowledge about sociolinguistic change. In the current milieu, there is little space given to understanding the complexity of actual language-in-use and, ironically, “the speech-community dynamics of language contact and change that we know to have been central to virtually every documented case of language shift or replacement” (Moore et al. 2010: 2). A more nuanced view of language and these dynamics can help to productively rethink the goals of language revitalization and language justice efforts.

These are questions that need to be brought to the practices and effects of relentless enumeration. What we have wanted to do in this essay, however, is to provide some of the sociopolitical and historical context in which a particular language advocacy movement has engaged in quantification. The Basque case we have presented here shows us that quantification has not come either from above or below, but from both and all directions. While the regional government’s Vice Ministry of Language Policy is today playing a leading role in the latest statistical projects, historically, grassroots advocates have been some of the innovators in the application of quality management techniques in language. In neoliberal economies, quantification is a prized resource that can give language advocates leverage for the programs they seek to advance. We see this kind of case study as helping us to gain a more complex understanding

of enumeration as a political resource and the varying ways it is framed and used. Indicator systems, as Merry writes, “typically conceal their political and theoretical origins [...] they rely on practices of measurement and counting that are themselves opaque” (Merry 2011: S84). This is central to producing the aura of factual objectivity that statistics convey (Bourdieu 1990; Porter 1995). Situating this knowledge production, providing context, understanding the constraining factors and pressures is one of the ways we can bring the agency of social actors into view. It demystifies the rhetorical power of quantification, which is all too often presented as simply “data”, there to be retrieved. Interviewing and attending to the motivations and challenges articulated by the advocates and designers gives us a less monolithic understanding of enumeration as a strategic process. Leila Kawar (2014) has made a similar argument with regard to legal activism, showing how practitioners sometimes creatively and successfully use technocratic devices like charts and questionnaires to bring what has been invisible into view. Looking at the debates over what to count is not an apology for enumeration, but rather an important aspect of understanding quantification as a political – not simply a technical – process. Enumeration, indicators, standardization, or even quality management schemas can be put to different ends, can be produced in different ways, and case studies are a way of revealing this. What practical or material factors make certain ways of counting difficult or impossible? What histories and ideological factors weigh in on the proxies (e.g. public language) that are used to use for measuring vitality? How do the experiences of marginalization, as we have seen, sometimes lead minority language advocates to seek alternative kinds of measures?

Just as we should examine the context and process by which numbers are produced, our understanding of the politics of numbers can benefit from examining how they are put into circulation. Where and how do statistical reports and rankings get released? How are they framed for the public? What contexts, if any, are there for discussion or debate? And if so, among whom? Are there counter enumerative projects? The Basque case is interesting in this regard because survey data and reports on language are not concentrated solely in the hands of government experts, and they do get significant popular coverage. The existence of a still active language movement in Basque civil society has meant a significantly wider social circulation and engagement in the production of numbers and, very importantly, discussion of what they mean. As Paul Robert Gilbert notes, accountancy scholar Michael Power has argued that not all audit systems are alike. Power suggests that it is possible to design audit in ways that invite and support dialogue and deliberation rather than the simple delivery of “facts” (Gilbert 2015: 85). It is possible, he argues, for the ecology of audit to serve the “critical imagination of alternative futures” (Gilbert 2015). We believe this is worth

exploring and that minority advocates might be some of the people to show us how. If numbers and indicators are the sea in which we swim these days, if audit is virtually unavoidable in any program for social justice and reform, then we have to somehow chart a path that neither naively romanticizes resistance, nor embraces resignation. Looking at enumeration efforts from the points of view of minority advocates, who can ill afford to turn their backs on such methods, leads us to see the value for scholars to dive into the varied histories of accountancy and explore the different ways they are practiced and why.

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