



Towards a history of the Basque complementation system

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The modern Basque complementation system

Complementation system: “set of clausal complement types that language users have available and the principles that determine how they put them to use” (de Smet 2012: 5)

• Modern Basque rather large inventory of complement clauses (CC):

- finite: indicative vs. subjunctive, different complementisers
- nominalised: verbal nouns inflected in different cases
- participial: bare perfective participle (marginal) vs. participial interrogative clauses

→ organised according to semantic complexity and discourse-givenness of the complement as well as coreference relations and temporal ordering between the matrix and the embedded state-of-affairs (cf. Artiagoitia 2003; Euskaltzaindia 2021: 1238-1292; Strauß 2025a; Strauß 2025b)

Distribution of CC types across semantic classes of clause-embedding predicates:

	utterance, attitude	factive	manipulative	intention	implicative	immediate perception	phasal	modal
finite	IND		SUBJV					
verbal noun		ABS/(ERG)/DAT/INS	PUR	ABS/DAT/INS	INE			
participle			+ interrogative					

Finite complement clauses

- Seem to be the oldest CC types (possibly together with the perfective participle)
- Almost no dialectal variation in the form of the complementisers

Origins of the complementisers

- *-(e)n*: general subordinator, probably originally a linking suffix (Azkarate/Altuna 2001: 225)
 - *-(e)n-ik*, *-(e)n-a*: headless relative clauses, dialectally and functionally restricted
- *-(e)la*: originally marker of manner clauses (cf. the same element in e.g. *no-la* PRON.Q-MAN ‘how’, *hone-la* DEM.PROX-MAN ‘so (prox.)’)
 - Cross-linguistically common origin of quotative markers (cf. Güldemann 2008: 317-228)
 - Lafon (1944: 469), on the other hand, sees the locus of grammaticalisation in constructions with perception verbs and ‘know’:

- (1) *gayxteria-a-Ø egui-ti-a-Ø laydo d-ela da-qui-çu*
 malice-SG-ABS do-NMLZ-SG-ABS disgrace be.3SG-COMP 3SG.ABS-know-2SG.ERG
 ‘Doing a naughty thing being a disgrace, you know it.’ → ‘You know that doing a naughty thing is a disgrace.’
 → Quotative origin supported by the fact that with subjunctive CCs, *-(e)la* is generally restricted to verbs expressing a speech act (Goenaga 1996; Mounole 2014: 74, 202)

Verbal nouns

- Newest CC type
- Dated to the Middle Ages by Urgell (2006: 942) based on the dialectal variation in the use of their allomorphs
- First used in the inessive?
 - Two of three allomorphs are related to toponyms
 - Use of archaic inessive without article in (most) complementation contexts
 - Inessive and allative VNs are in almost fully complementary distribution with finite CCs
- In some constructions occupied by VNs in modern Basque, the verb stem is also attested (Trask 1995: 214-215) → VNs replaced verb stem as non-finite CC type?

Origins of the allomorphs

- *-te*: suffix expressing duration or ‘time of’, e.g. *eurite* ‘rainy spell’ < *huri* ‘rain’, *goseste* ‘famine’ < *gose* ‘hunger’ (Trask 1995: 221; Urgell 2006: 925)
- *-tze*: < **(t)zaha*, attested in Araban toponyms (Urgell 2006: 930)
- *-(k)eta*: probably the same suffix as in toponyms (Urgell 2006: 932)

Developments in historical Basque

- Emergence of indicative-subjunctive distinction (Mounole 2014: 328-329)
- Absolutive and purposive VNs lost restrictions since the beginning of the writing tradition:
 - Formerly not used with non-factive utterance and attitude verbs, as a sample of 8 verbs in the Corpus of Basque Classics (EKC) indicates
 - In contexts where they were competing with subjunctive clauses, the latter seem to have been more frequent (Mounole 2014: 81)
 - have been spreading since, replacing especially subjunctive CCs in Southern varieties (Trask 1995: 219)
- Denominalisation or “clause expansion” (Heine 2009): nominal dependent marking of S and P arguments of VNs using the genitive (*TOGEN* and *ISGEN*) gradually replaced by verbal dependent marking using the absolutive (Lakarra 1983; Padilla Moyano 2013) → most advanced in those varieties where VNs are used most frequently

dependent marking	A	S	P	
fully nominal	GEN	GEN	GEN	
↑	ERG	GEN	GEN	old Eastern Basque
↓	ERG	ABS	GEN	modern Eastern Basque, old Western Basque
fully verbal	ERG	ABS	ABS	modern Western Basque

Verb sample studied in EKC (16th and 17th century texts)

Occurrences with CC in at least 3 different authors:

- *aitortu* ‘confess, admit’: only finite
- *frogatu* ‘prove; try’: only finite
- *salatu* ‘report, denounce’: only finite
- *ukatu* ‘deny’: only finite
- *oroitu* ‘remember’: only finite
- *damu izan* ‘regret’ (→ factive): only VN

Occurrences with CC in only one author:

- *gogoratu* ‘remember’: only finite (Axular)
- *ahantzi* ‘forget’: only finite (Pouvreau)

Possible triggers and mechanisms in the spread of VNs

- Economy:
 - TAM and argument marking redundant in contexts where time and subject reference of embedded state-of-affairs are determined by matrix state-of-affairs (= most subjunctive contexts, e.g. *eskatu* ‘ask to’, but also e.g. *aurreikus* ‘foresee’ or *leporatu* ‘accuse’)
- Semantic analogy:
 - Extension from presupposed (e.g. *damutu* ‘regret’) to non-factive discourse-given complements (e.g. *ukatu* ‘deny’) → both backgrounded
- Paradigmatic analogy (de Smet 2012):
 - Absolutive and instrumental VNs copying distribution of nominal arguments
 - Purposive VNs partly copying distribution of subjunctive clauses
 - including requirement for disjoint subject reference in complementation?
- Typological preference for preverbal CCs to be non-finite (Schmidtke-Bode/Diessel 2017)?

Questions for further research

Synchronically:

- In the contexts where VNs appear in addition to finite CCs,
 - is their subject coreferential with a matrix argument or their time reference predetermined?
 - is the content of the complement discourse-given?
 - do the matrix verbs also take nominal arguments in the same slot?
 - are VNs more frequent in preverbal and less frequent in postverbal position?

Diachronically:

- How exactly did the gradual diffusion of VNs from one context to another proceed, which analogies played a role in each step? (cf. de Smet 2012 on the diffusion of non-finite complementation in English)
- Can the loss of ISGEN and TOGEN be directly linked to an increased usage frequency of VNs?