

Comments on “Evidence for Basque as an Indo-European Language” by Gianfranco Forni

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As one who has been seriously investigating the genetic classification of the Basque language for the past two and a half decades, I have studied Giancarlo Forni's proposal with great interest.

Forni sets out with a number of assumptions that are, at the least, highly questionable. For example, he refers to R.L. Trask's rejection of all external relations of Basque (except the obvious Aquitanian) as if this were an established truth,¹ but in fact Trask's pronouncement that there is “zero evidence” connecting Basque to the (North) Caucasian² family, or any other language family, has itself been rejected, not only by me (see bibliography), but by a number of other scholars (e.g., Blažek 1995, 1999; Blažek & Bengtson 1995; Ruhlen 1994a, 1994b, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2001; Shevoroshkin 1995; G. Starostin 2010; S. A. Starostin 1996a, 1996b, 2005b, 2007; Starostin & Ruhlen 1994; Wescott 1995; Whitehouse 1999). These authors (not to mention several others before them: see below) accept(ed) the Caucasian affiliation³ of Basque as most

¹“Trask ... provides an in-depth analysis of previous attempts at relating Basque to other language families, incl. North-Caucasian, and illustrates why such attempts variously failed ...”

²Since the “South Caucasian” family is now referred to as Kartvelian, the “North” in North Caucasian has become unnecessary and we can simply say “Caucasian,” though its genetic unity is still not accepted by all Caucasologists.

³Here and henceforth, the “Caucasian” affiliation of Basque implies transitive relations with other “Sino-Caucasian” or “Dene-Caucasian” languages, of which see further below. But within this larger realm the Basque-Caucasian relationship is apparently the closest and most

probable, while not necessarily agreeing with my proposals in all details. I must also emphasize that Trask (*e.g.* 1995, 1997) performed a valuable service in his critiques of the Basque-Caucasian hypothesis, weeding out some erroneous comparisons, and also eventually strengthening some others, but it is not necessary to follow him in his conclusion that there is “zero evidence” for a relationship between Vasconic (Basque-Aquitania) and any other language family.

Forni also assumes that the internal reconstruction of “pre-Basque” by Koldo Mitxelena (and seconded by Trask, with some extrapolations of his own) is permanently set in stone and not subject to any further correction. For example, Forni wholeheartedly accepts the hypothesis that Basque “had no */m/ phoneme at all, and it did have */p, t, k, d/, but these phonemes could not occur at the beginning of a word.” I have in fact lauded Mitxelena’s work and found it very useful,⁴ but I have never regarded it as final and immutably canonic. For example, the idea that pre-Basque had no phoneme *m is seriously questioned not only by S.A. Starostin (1996b), who generally agreed with my hypothesis, but also by the respected Vasconist Jacobsen.⁵ Among the proposed Basque-Caucasian etymologies are some sixteen that support the correspondence of Basque *m = Caucasian⁶ *m.⁷

Regarding the supposed absence of pre-Basque initial *p-, *t-, *k-, this assumption has been challenged not only by me but by the Basque expert Hualde (1995: 115), who cites Basque words such as “*ke* ‘smoke’, *koipe* ‘grease’, *kirats* ‘stench’. In a couple of hours, I (or you) could come up with fifteen or so such words which are not obvious

abundantly supported by the evidence.

⁴“Michelena has provided us a tremendous service in cataloguing the diverse phonetic forms of the Basque dialects, and giving us some direction in understanding the changes” (Bengtson 2008f, pp. 184-185).

⁵“... I see no clear evidence that *m- was absent from early Basque. ... I am not convinced that this assumption suffices to exclude from being native Basque several words ... [e.g.] *moko* ‘beak, front, face’ ..., *moto* ‘headscarf, etc.’ ..., *muin* ‘pith, marrow, inner part’ ..., and *mutur* ‘snout, muzzle’ ...” (Jacobsen 1995, pp. 121-122).

⁶Here the term “Caucasian” stands for Proto-(North) Caucasian (PNC), as proposed by Nikolaev & Starostin (1994) = Starostin (2005a).

⁷Bengtson (2007; 2008c: 72-73; 2008f: 153-155).

borrowings.” Again, Basque-Caucasian etymologies include several confirming the correspondence of Basque initial **k-* with Caucasian velars and uvulars.⁸

I could go on at some length about the details of the linguistic problems with Forni’s thesis, but since this is a journal devoted to Indo-European (IE) languages I have to limit the discussion of non-Indo-European material and refer the reader to the extensive Basque-Caucasian literature listed in the bibliography. But it is germane to discuss general methodology. I believe the main problem with Forni’s article is a fundamental misunderstanding of the methods of genetic linguistics, and I suggest that we consider the following points:

- A. Languages are not simply collections of words, but complex systems made up of lexical, morphological, and phonological subsystems. Forni’s procedure in this article has primarily been to take the vocabulary of Basque and generate a series of “sound laws” (convoluted and implausible, in my opinion) that allow him to derive the Basque words from IE roots, often with the help of various suffixes. I suggest that if one makes up enough “sound laws” one can relate a list of words between almost any two languages. But what Forni fails to do is demonstrate a plausible relationship between the Basque and IE phonological *systems*. On the other hand, my studies of Basque phonology (especially Bengtson 1996, 2003, 2004, 2008c, 2008f) have consistently focused on relating the Basque sound system to that of Proto-Caucasian. For many of the correspondences there are multiple examples.
- B. This principle applies not only to lexicon and phonology but to grammar: any successful attempt at “proving” relationships between/among languages/families must show relationships among these *systems*, and not simply parts of them. In Forni’s article grammar is apparently an afterthought, and the grammatical comparisons are very sketchy and no more convincing than the lexical ones. In my work with the Basque-Caucasian hypothesis (especially

⁸The Basque phonetic system is much simpler than that of PNC, due to several mergers of PDC phonemes in Basque but not in Caucasian.

Bengtson 2008c) I have taken pains to show that several of the peculiarities of the grammatical system of Basque (from the standpoint of IE) – fossilized noun prefixes, noun stem variants, case endings, pronouns and pronominal affixes on verbs, templatic verbal morphology, negative morpheme, preverbs, valence-changing verbal prefixes, etc. – are readily derivable from the Proto-Dene-Caucasian morphological system.

- C. Principles held by anthropological linguists such as Edward Sapir and Morris Swadesh require that the conclusions arising from lexical, phonological, and morphological evidence should normally lead to the same external relationships; and, since genetic linguistics is a branch of anthropology, any genetic linguistic hypothesis should be anthropologically as well as linguistically plausible. It nearly goes without saying that Forni's theory deviates very widely from these principles.
- D. An hypothesis connecting Basque with languages of the Caucasus region has been gradually developing over at least a century. Note the work by Bouda, Dumézil, Lafon, TAILLEUR, Trombetti, Uhlenbeck, Vogt, and others (much of it conveniently catalogued by Trask 1997); since the 1980s (beginning with a brief article by the Abkhazian Sadz Çirig = V. A. Chirikba 1985) the focus has been narrowed to the (North) Caucasian family. Forni completely ignores this large body of scholarship, accepting Trask's pronouncement, quoted above, as gospel truth.
- E. A competing hypothesis (or series of hypotheses) connects Basque instead with various Afro-Asiatic languages (usually Berber: see Blažek 1991, 1992; Trask 1997). I have carefully examined this alternative and concluded, for lexical and grammatical reasons, that it is not as probable as the Basque-Caucasian hypothesis (Bengtson 2009).
- F. Any proposed hypothesis connecting Basque to IE should show that it is *superior* to other proposed hypotheses, since classification of languages is not a matter of absolute YES or NO, but determining *relative closeness*. In other words, an hypothesis of genetic relationship between Basque and IE, if it is real, should explain the facts better than the Basque-Caucasian hypothesis and the Basque-

Berber/Afroasiatic hypothesis, which are the two major alternatives that have been discussed for more than a century. In my opinion Forni has failed to show that his hypothesis is a better explanation (Bengtson 2008d) than these other hypotheses.

The crux of the problem seems to be that during the latter half of the twentieth century, and continuing to the present day, some linguists have developed an unfortunate misunderstanding and distortion of the principles of the Neogrammarian school of the late nineteenth century. While the ideas of the *Junggrammatiker* were undoubtedly important to the development of truly scientific methods in historical linguistics, some linguists have made the error of thinking that “sound laws,” in and of themselves, “prove” the validity of a language family. Let us then consider the words of one of the leading Neogrammarians, Berthold Delbrück (1882: 47):

Of course all such laws have only a provisional value. For since *obvious etymologies* form the material from which the phonetic laws are derived, and this material can perpetually increase and change, it is always possible that new phonetic laws should be recognized, or old ones transformed [emphasis added].⁹

So “sound laws” (phonetic correspondences) are *secondary*, arising from the *obvious etymologies* already recognized as plausible evidence for a linguistic relationship.¹⁰ It seems that Forni has reversed the logical order of these steps, comparing Basque words with IE words of a similar meaning, and forcing them into “cognacy” with a series of implausible “sound laws.” Thus, in his scheme, Basque *beltz* ‘black’ is “cognate” with German *schwarz* ‘black’, Basque *mehe* ‘thin’ is “cognate” with German *schwank* ‘pliable, unsteady, wavering, tottering’, Basque

⁹I am grateful to Greenberg (1995) for calling my attention to this quote.

¹⁰“Taxonomy and reconstruction are two separate and distinct enterprises. Taxonomy identifies families at all levels; reconstruction seeks to reconstruct the proto-language of a family that has already been identified by taxonomy” (Ruhlen 2005: 345).

adar ‘horn’ is “cognate” with German *Horn* id., and so on. Almost none of Forni’s “cognates” are obvious, i.e., transparently similar. Of course, we know of many cases of non-obvious cognates: Armenian *erkow* ‘two’ is frequently cited, but nevertheless Armenian also has plenty of obvious IE cognates such as *dowr* ‘door’, *dowstr* ‘daughter’, *anown* ‘name’, *kow* ‘cow’. In contrast to Forni’s Basque-IE “cognates,” Basque-Caucasian cognates are often much more obvious and transparent, phonetically and semantically.¹¹

This discussion can serve as a lesson in the scientific methods of linguistic taxonomy. A language is a holistic entity made up of lexicon, grammar, and phonology. A taxonomic proposal must take into account all of these features and formulate a plausible hypothesis that provides the *best explanation* for the genetic affiliation of a language, in this case Basque. It is quite apparent to me that Forni’s hypothesis has not accomplished this.

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¹¹ E.g., Bsq **minhi* ‘tongue’/Andi *mits’i* ‘tongue’; Bsq **śu* ‘fire’/Andi *ts’a* ‘fire’; Bsq **kee* ‘smoke’/Andi *k’woy* ‘smoke’; Bsq **očo* ‘wolf’/Andi *bots’o* ‘wolf’; Bsq **haNa’* ‘worm’/Andi *habara* ‘worm’; Bsq **la’ain* ‘threshing floor’/Andi *loli* ‘threshing floor’, etc. Andi, like other languages of the Andian subgroup, and like Basque, preserves an archaic syllabic structure: see especially the words for ‘tongue’ and ‘wolf’ (and others: see Bengtson 1996; 2008c: 79-81).

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