1. Introduction

The Basques, together with the Portuguese and Bretons, were among the first to frequent the shores of North America to fish for cod and whales. In this paper I will discuss the pidgin language on Canada's east coast that grew out of the contact between coastal Algonquian nations and Basque fishermen from about 1540 onwards. First I will say something about the Basque people (section 2), then about the Basque-Amerindian trade and the nations involved in it (section 3). I will then provide historical evidence for the Basque-based trade language of Canada (section 4). After that I will give some examples of this language, focusing on the Basque pidgin in use by the Micmac in contact with Europeans (section 5). Finally I will outline some areas of possible future research (section 6).

2. The Basques

The Basques live in Europe, in the southwest of France and the north of Spain, along the coast of the Gulf of Biscay and the western Pyrenees. Their culture differs significantly from French and Spanish culture. There are about 2.5 million Basques of whom some 700,000 speak the Basque language, called euskara by themselves. The Basques are traditionally shepherds, farmers, steel makers and fishermen.

According to conservative scholarly opinion, the Basques have lived in their present area for at least 20,000 years, having succeeded during this time in preserving their language, with no known affiliations to any other language. Though the language has preserved its unique grammatical structure, the vocabulary of all dialects has undergone considerable influence from neighbouring Romance languages — Gascon, French, and
Spanish — as well as Latin. It has been estimated that about 40 percent of Basque words are borrowings from Romance languages.

The Basques played important roles as seafarers in the past. In the late Middle Ages their shipbuilding techniques were among the most advanced of Europe (Baroja 1971:95). The Basques were also the inventors of a number of whaling techniques. Whaling has been practised in the Gulf of Biscay since the Middle Ages. The Basques' search for codfish has been bringing them to the North American coast, together with Portuguese and Breton fishermen, since at least the first decades of the 16th century (Turgeon 1982). The early presence of Basque whalers and cod-fishers in the New World is confirmed both in documents (Barkham 1974; Turgeon 1982) and in archaeological findings (Thurston 1983). Some Canadian place-names have a Basque etymology (Bélanger 1971; Zeller 1915). Though fishing always remained the primary activity of the Basques, they also developed extensive trade contacts with the Canadian natives.


There is ample evidence for Basque-Amerindian contact prior to 1600. In Spanish and French archives many documents can be found relating to Basque fisheries along the east coast of North America. A number of the documents are registers of vessels recording the shiploads which regularly mention merchandise taken with the express purpose of trading with the natives. The early Jesuit missionary reports and early travellers' accounts corroborate the extent of the Basque trade in Canada. It is mentioned that the Basques had better contacts with the natives than did any other European nation.

There has been no systematic research on the nature of the Basque trade. As far as it is known now, the Basques bartered hides and furs for metal tools, kettles, clothing, bread, liquor and small boats (Bourque and Whitehead 1985; Turgeon 1982; Barkham 1980). There are also indications of a number of common activities between Basques and natives, such as feasting, meals, and possibly games. These contacts might have been more intense than was hitherto suspected. Although there may have been mutual influence in a number of areas of culture I will limit here myself to language.

There is evidence that a Basque-Algonquian pidgin was used in a wide area and during at least 100 years. On the map the shaded area outlines the area visited by the Basques around 1600. Within this area the Basque trade language was spoken in a number of places (cf. Bakker 1988). In Labrador there were Inuit and Montagnais; in Newfoundland there were Beothuk, though there is no clear evidence of Basque-Beothuk contact; and there were Abnaki and Maliseet along the Atlantic coast. Along the shores
of the St. Lawrence River there were Montagnais and Laurentian Iroquois. Basques probably traded with all of these peoples. I will focus here on the Basque contacts with the Montagnais and the Micmac.

4. Language Contact

The influence of the Basque language among the native tribes was noticed by the French writer Marc Lescarbot in his 1618 *History of New France*, who remarked: “[The tribes of New France] have been so long frequented by the Basques, that the language of the coastal tribes is half Basque.” (Lescarbot 1907:2:394–395). Other contemporary authors also mention the importance of the Basque language in trade contact. I will first cite some Basque or Basque-related sources, then some from early visitors to Canada.

The first one is the French inquisitor Pierre de Lancre in his 1613 report on Basque witchcraft. He remarks “that the Canadians did not trade with the French in any other language than that of the Basques.” (de Lancre 1613:29).

Basque fishermen from Saint Jean de Luz themselves wrote a document in 1710 which is highly interesting, though written relatively late:

> When the Basques first started fishing for cod and whales in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, they made friends with the savages of this area, and traded with them, especially with a nation called Eskimos, who have always been hostile to all other nations. Since their languages were completely different, they created a form of lingua franca composed of Basque and two different languages of the savages, by means of which they could understand each other quite well; the settlers of the French colonies in Canada and from the Northern part of Acadia, found this language already well established when they arrived. (Michel 1857:159)

This citation is corroborated in detail by other sources, though it must be assumed that the term “Eskimos” refers to Montagnais rather than Inuit (Taylor 1978). A Basque chronicle, written in Spanish in 1625, mentions the Montagnais as trade partners:

> In an area as far away as Newfoundland the Montagnais savages learned our language, because of the relations they have with the Basque sailors. The latter go there every year to fish for codfish and, among other things, ask them in Basque: “nola zaude?” [how are you]. They answer politely: “apaizak hobeto” [the priests are better] . . . . They talk and trade with our people, and help them exploit the fish on the coast in exchange for a little cider and a piece of bread, things that they don’t have there. (Bélanger 1971:86)
It is unlikely that the Indians acquired a thorough knowledge of Basque, since the contacts were mainly limited to the summer season. It is likely that they would have learned a reduced form of Basque, a Basque pidgin if you will. The existence of such a pidgin is confirmed by authors who spent some time in Canada early in the 17th century. They distinguish two different languages in use by both the Micmac and the Montagnais: their own native language and a contact language used when speaking to Europeans. Lescarbot reports that “[the Micmac] have also a language of their own, known only to themselves . . ., though for sake of convenience they speak to us in language which is more familiar to us, with which much Basque is mingled.” (Lescarbot 1907:3:125).

The Jesuit missionary Paul Le Jeune, who worked among the Montagnais in the 1630s, refers in his report of 1633 to a pidgin in use between the French and Montagnais: “I have noticed in the study of their language that there is a certain jargon between the French and the Savages, which is neither French nor Indian. And yet, when the French use it, they think they are speaking the Indian tongue, and the Savages, in using it, think that they are speaking good French.” (Thwaites 1896:5:63). Though this has been interpreted as a French pidgin (Hancock 1977), one must ask why the French thought it was the Indian language. Furthermore, the three words explicitly quoted from this “jargon” by Lejeune, are Basque rather than French: *ania* for ‘brother’ Basque *anaia* ‘brother’; *cabana* ‘hut’, Basque *kabana*, French *cabane*; and *capitana* ‘leader’, Basque *kapitana*, French *capitain*. Unfortunately we lack sufficient linguistic data about the pidgin used by the Montagnais.

5.1. **Words Attributed to Basque**

Lescarbot and the Jesuit missionary sources attribute a number of words as used by the Micmacs explicitly to Basque, rightly or wrongly. Other words recorded by them as spoken by the Micmac cannot be other than Basque, although not recognized by them as such. According to these sources the following words are Basque: *origna(c)* ‘moose’, Basque *or-ein(ak)* ‘deer’; *pilotoua* ‘shaman’, Basque *pilotua* ‘pilot’; *bakalaos* ‘codfish’, Basque *bakalau* ‘codfish’;¹ *tabaguia* ‘banquet’, Basque *tapakia* ‘shelter’; *caracona* ‘bread’, a pidgin word, possibly from the Basque root *garau* ‘cereal’, but it might be Iroquois as well (cf. Lounsbury 1978:340); and finally the short utterances *endia chave normandia* ‘The French know many things’, Basque *(h)andia* ‘big’, *chave* Romance *saber* ‘know’ (cf. “savvy”);

¹In Bakker (1988) I suggest the natives borrowed this term from Portuguese rather than Basque.
Normandia ‘Normandy’, Basque Normandia; and Maloes mercateria ‘those from Saint Malo are unfair traders’, Basque ez ‘no’, and merkataria ‘trader’.

5.2. Phonological Processes

Basque words undergo some minor phonological changes when used by the Algonquian-speaking Indians. The Basque liquids /l/ and /r/ both become /r/ in the Micmac pidgin. Early Micmac had only /r/, unlike modern Micmac which has only /l/. Some examples: samaricois for sanmalokoa ‘person from Saint Malo’; maria for Basque balia ‘whale’.

The Basque initial labial stops /p/ and /b/ become /m/ in the pidgin, as in the above-mentioned maria and in macharoa for Portuguese passarao ‘large bird’, and probably mouscoucha from Romance Basque bizkotxa ‘biscuit’. The reason for this sound transfer is unclear and it is possible that Basque dialectal differences play a role.

There is no clear distinction between alveolar sibilants and palatal sibilants. This might be an influence from both Basque and an Algonquian language. Some examples: Basque ezpata ‘sword’ is rendered echpada, presumably [ešpada]; passarao ‘big bird’ is rendered macharoa, presumably [mašaroa]; and bizkotxa ‘biscuit’ is rendered mouschcoucha, presumably [muškuša]. Basque intervocal voiceless stops tend to become voiced, as is a general rule in Algonquian languages. Some examples: Basque tapakia ‘banquet’ is rendered as tabaguia, presumably [tabagia].

5.3. Two Basque Morphemes

Almost all pidgin words end in -a. This is the Basque definite article -a, which is suffixed to all nouns and adjectives in isolation. It is also a typical feature of Basque pidgins. For further examples, see Bakker (1987) for an Icelandic Basque pidgin and Bakker (1988) for the Basque-Amerindian pidgin. Also general is the suffix -quois, also spelled -cois or -coa. I suspect this to be the Basque suffix -koa, which is used to denote most often ethnic origin. Some examples are: pidgin canadaquois for Basque kanadakoa ‘Canadian’, samaricois ‘person from Saint Malo’ for Basque sanmalokoa and souriquois ‘Micmac’, possibly from Basque zurikoa ‘that of the whites’ or ‘person from the Souris River’ in New Brunswick, which was a Basque trading place. This interpretation might have some important implications. Many of the tribal names in the early contact period end in -koa, the most intriguing being Iroquois. One would have to find meaningful Basque etymologies for these names. Iroquois, for example, might involve the Basque root hil- ‘to kill, to die’. Though the h is not pronounced in all Basque dialects, the earliest source lists hirocots. The Basque term hilokoa could be something like ‘killer tribe’, which would make sense from the viewpoint of
the Algonquians of the Northeast. Other tribal names give more problems, however. I will attempt elsewhere to give Basque sources for these.

5.4. The Vocabulary

I list here Basque and Basquized Romance lexical items as far as they have been identified. The meaning of the words is the meaning given in the sources. All words have been recorded as used by Micmac and Montagnais in the first decades of the 17th century. Basque words follow the standardized spelling as proposed by the Basque Academy. All Basque words are common to all Basque dialects, unless otherwise mentioned, and can be found in any Basque dictionary. The Basque borrowings from Romance languages, however, are sometimes omitted in the dictionaries by purist lexicographers. Unless mentioned otherwise, these borrowings are integrated into the language. The list is divided into two parts: pure Basque words and Romance Basque words.

5.4.1. Basque Words


ania ‘my brother’, Basque anaia ‘brother’ (Thwaites 1896:5:59, 63, 88, 115).


chimonutz ‘as thickly planted as the hairs on the head’ (Thwaites 1896:1:177) Basque txima [cima], or xima [śima] ‘shock of hair’.


escorken ‘drunk’, Basque moskor ‘drunk’? (Lescarbot 1907:3:177).


orignac ‘moose’, Basque orein(ak) ‘deer’ (Thwaites 1896:2:167, 262; Lescarbot 1907:2:322). This was borrowed into Québecois French as orignal via this pidgin.

souricoa ‘Micmac’, Basque zurikoa ‘that of the whites’?

5.4.2. Romance Basque Pidgin Words

bakalaos ‘codfish’ (Lescarbot 1907:2:24, 395).
cabana ‘hut’ (Thwaites 1896:5:63).
gara ‘war’, Basque gerra, from Romance guerre or guerra (Thwaites 1896:2:29, 211).
macharoa ‘big bird’. Apart from the -a suffix, the word is not Basque, but Portuguese.

mercateria ‘trader’, Basque merkataria ‘trader’ (Lescarbot 1907:3:253).
mouscoucha ‘cake’, Basque biskotxa ‘cake’ (Lescarbot 1907:3:120).
samaricoa ‘person from Saint Malo’ (Thwaites 1896:1:162).

Although originally borrowed into Basque from the Romance languages, these words should not be considered French or Spanish, since in all cases the forms they assume in the pidgin are basically Basque, diverging in significant ways from both Spanish and French.

6. Conclusions

The contacts between the natives and European fishermen in general and the Basques in particular have been largely underestimated. I have shown that the earliest written sources mention these long established contacts and that a pidgin Basque was the language used rather than an Amerindian language or French. There is no evidence for a French pidgin in northeastern North America prior to about 1650. There were already significant and regular trade contacts for a century before the first settlers came, so that they met with natives that had been under the influence of the fishermen for almost a century. The area of contact languages is not exhausted with Basque. The Basque pidgin may very well have been accompanied by a Portuguese pidgin as well. Furthermore, much of the language material given in the early sources is more than a combination of Basque and Micmac. Possibly other native languages were involved too.
perhaps Inuit (cf. Dorais 1980). The works on the early contact European-Amerindian contacts that do not mention the Basques miss one of the most important aspects of these contacts.

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