Basque Writing 34

FROM EUSKARA TO THE WORLD AND BACK



This issue of *Basque Writing* traces a journey from the Basque language out into the world, and from other minoritized languages into Basque. Euskal PEN grew out of a commitment to the Basque language, and we have consistently stood alongside both our own language and other Indigenous and minoritized languages around the world.

For the past six years, I have had the privilege of chairing PEN International's Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee. It has been a time to build on and deepen work that was already underway. PEN has internalized that the loss of languages is one of the most serious threats to freedom of expression.

None of this, of course, happened overnight. Thirty years ago, PEN Català undertook the formidable task of bringing the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights into being. Today, it continues to lead efforts to update the document. Fifteen years later, the Girona Manifesto followed. Then, in 2016, Paul Bilbao, one of Euskal PEN's most committed contributors to this work, spearheaded the development of the Donostia Protocol for the Guarantee of Linguistic Rights, working alongside civil society organizations.

By the time I was appointed committee chair in 2020, much had already been accomplished. Soon afterwards, inspired by a proposal from the Kaqchikel poet Miguel Ángel Oxlaj and working with the late Txema Abarrategi of the GARABIDE Association (we miss him so much!), we turned the idea into a video-poetry marathon, bringing together poets from around the world who write in Indigenous and minoritized languages. Miguel Ángel explains in these pages how it all came about far better than I can.

We have also brought to life *Lenguas Vivas*, a wonderful initiative featuring 26 poets writing in Indigenous languages. All being well, we will publish it in Basque in 2027. Meanwhile, a wealth of new ideas and proposals are emerging from the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia and Oceania.

Our friend Wezi Msukwa-Panje has recently taken over as chair of the committee. I wish her every success, confident that she will carry this important work forward with the same dedication and energy.



Urtzi Urrutikoetxea
Basque PEN

Let's gather our languages in a book; let's feed our languages

In 2018, during a specialization course in Euskal Herria with Garabide, I had the opportunity to meet people committed not only to linguistic revitalization, but also to the decolonization of thought, freedom of expression, the fight against oppression, and other legitimate demands of our peoples around the world. One of the people with whom we discussed various topics—and inevitably, literature—was Txema Abarrategi, who at that time was the director of Garabide.

The rumor that I made an attempt at writing had reached the classroom, and during one of the activities, I was invited to read some of my texts. Since the specialization was in linguistic revitalization, I had prepared the preliminary version of the poem "Our Language" and read it in Kaqchikel and also in Spanish. After the reading, Txema approached me and said: "My Basque/European mindset would have never thought that our languages also need to eat; an interesting metaphorical figure. Will you send it to me? Maybe I can translate it into Basque."

I don't remember well if I sent it to him or not. But that opened the door to speaking with him about literature and poetry, personal projects, and perhaps, joint projects. One day, I sent him an email asking: "Do you think Garabide can support the publication of a poetry anthology within the framework of 2019, the International Year of Indigenous Languages? That is a way of 'feeding our languages,'" I added. His response was frank: Garabide does not do that kind of work, but he liked the idea, and if I wrote a specific project proposal, maybe he could find someone who would be interested.

A few days later, I sent it to him. The idea was to create a poetry anthology in indigenous languages whose lingua franca would be Basque, rather than a dominant language. His response was almost immediate: "We are interested. But it would also be good to involve the Basque PEN Center and Erroa Editorial so they can help us with the editorial part," he said. He sent a group email (now that I check, it was the first email where we had contact with Urtzi Urrutikoetxea, chair of the Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee of PEN International), and everyone involved agreed. I was thrilled, and we began. Emails were sent to different indigenous peoples around the world under the slogan "Let's gather our languages in a book." And the poems began to arrive. However, something must have happened. I am not clear (it was in 2019) about exactly what occurred, but we were no longer able to finalize the process. Maybe the pandemic had something to do with it, or I just don't remember.

The idea was to create a poetry anthology in indigenous languages whose lingua franca would be Basque, rather than a dominant language.

But the idea remained. At the end of 2021, Urtzi Urrutikoetxea wrote to me, inviting me to participate in the 2022 Videopoem Marathon organized by the Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee of PEN International, within the framework of

February 21st, International Mother Language Day. I participated happily. When I sent him the video, he thanked me and said, "If you know other poets who want to participate, they are welcome." Since then, I have been convening poets in Guatemala and the region for the videopoem marathon.

Urtzi had taken the idea to another level. What had once been conceived as a physical book, with a limited print run that would be read by a small group of people, the good Urtzi turned into a much more ambitious and beneficial project. Taking advantage of the benefits of technology, the PEN International Videopoem Marathon is giving many authors living in far-off places—who are creating poetry in their native languages—the opportunity to be heard, made visible, and known. More than 300 videopoems featuring more than 250 of the world's minoritized languages, along with thousands of views, confirm this.

And it doesn't stop there. Since they are on the YouTube platform, these videopoems can be subtitled in many languages. Urtzi has translated them into various languages. You only need to click on your language of preference, and you can hear the poem in its original language and read the translation. This is simply brilliant! There is no doubt that Urtzi has done a great job and is leaving an important legacy at the Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee of PEN International.

Thanks to this work by the TLRC, PEN International is taking poetics in indigenous languages seriously to champion freedom of expression; as a way to build a bridge between the languages that have dominated literature and the languages that are trying to survive—which have so much to tell us and many literary aesthetics to share with us.

From there, in 2024, the groundwork began for the *Lenguas Vivas* anthology (Living Languages), which became an important and necessary proposal and contribution across five Latin American countries, as it brought together 26 authors that write in their indigenous languages. Although much remains to be done, I believe that important foundations have been laid to look at otherness with respect and from a position of equality, knowing that each and every one of us has vital things to say and share.

Oinarri important foundations have been laid to look at otherness with respect and from a position of equality, knowing that each and every one of us has vital things to say and share.

Great job, TLRC! Thank you for your work, dear Urtzi.

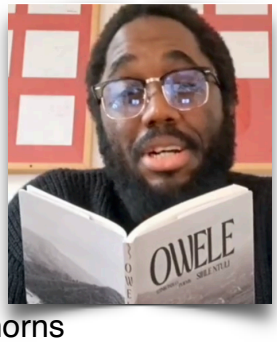


Miguel Ángel Oxlaj Cúmez
Project Coordinator *Lenguas Vivas*

Video-poems

ZULUERA

Sihle Ntuli



Lunga

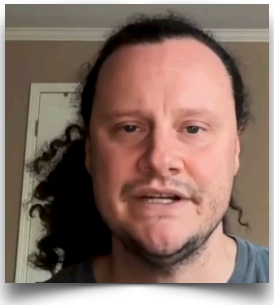
zaqala ziwutshani, zaphenduka ameva
zagwaza amafu, zawisa kwemvula
zasho zathi: nalokhu bekumele kwenzeke
zaphela izinhlungu, sabona sekulunga

It Gets Better

what started as grass, turned to thorns
then poked the clouds, then fell like rain
then it was said: even this was meant to happen
then the pain ceased, as we saw it getting better

MVSKOKE

Tod Hosford



Vn kolēppucē

Vn kolēppucē,
Cehvyayąkusēs.
Nere ofvn opanetsēs.
Ec oh-hoyopetvn cvyacē-mahēs.
Vnkoleppē monkēpvs.

Nereyise cekolepiyen,
Ec oh-hoyopit lihk'towis.
Hvresse facket
Ep oh-hvyayicen,
‘Te folothokēn ep oh-hvyvtiks.

Mocv-nerē, yomockofvn,
Ce hopoyvhan’t owis,
Es ce hecvyat, ce hvlvtarēs,
Cenrecvpvhanvkos.

Nerē ocen cekolēppvrēs.
ec oh-hoyopit likit,
Kóhwit owisen, cesvko tayēt omarēs.
Etektvnkusen aretskvrēs.

My little Firefly

My little firefly,
You are so bright.
In the night you dance.
I love to look upon you.
Keep on flashing for me.

The other night you flashed,
I sat gazing upon you.
The moon became full
And shined upon us,
And all night long we circled around each other.

Tonight, when it’s dark,
I’m going to search for you,
and when I find you I will hold you,
and I’m not going to let you go.

There will be a night when you will flash.
I will sit and gaze upon you,and though I’ll want to I won’t be able to catch you.
You will go about freely.



NORTHERN SÁMI

Helga West

Snahpastingo?

Nohkkengo oba?
8 diimmu seaŋggas ja leago vejolaš vajálduhttit beaivvi stuorámus ipmaša, nohkkama.
Don bidjet dán munnje, naba assimilašuvdna? Sohkabuolvvat, geat manahedje dievas ijaid.
Oainnat lea sáhka suomaiduhttima vuosttas dávdamearkkas, váttisvuođas oažžut nahkáriid.
Váttisvuođas rohttet nahkáriid, dásiid 2, 3 ja 4.

Did I nap?

Did I fall asleep?
Eight hours in bed and is it possible not to remember if the biggest miracle of the day happened;
the sweet moment of falling asleep.
You put this on me – what about assimilation? Generations who lost their whole nights.
We are talking about the first symptom of forced assimilation, the difficulty of falling asleep.
That is what we are talking about: the difficulty of catching sleep, steps 2, 3 and 4.



DAKOTA LAPI

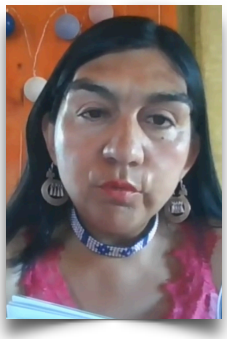
Gwen Westerman

Oyaṫe Waṡaḳaṗi

Ded oyaṫe waṡaḳa maniṗi tka
Ticaġaṗi k'a caŋḳu ḳaġaṗi itoḳab
Maka ḳiŋ wouŋḳ'uṗi
Su ożupi hena uŋkiyeṗi
Okṗaza k'a ożaŋżaŋ eṫaŋhaŋ wouŋḳ'uṗi
Naṗe hena maka ḳiŋ ḳicaŋyaṗi
Tohaŋ maka ṗuza, mniṫaŋ, ḣewaŋḳe ḳ'a ṫaḳu ide
Ḳ'aṡ ṫaḳu owas icaġe
Wasutoŋṗi k'a waoḳiyaṗi uŋspeṗi
Hnuḣ ded oyaṫe waṡaḳa maniṗi

Strong People

Strong people walked here
Long before concrete and steel
Nourished by the earth
We are the seeds they planted
Fed by darkness and light
Hopeful hands work soil
In drought and flood, frost and fire
Growing together
Sharing their harvest with love
Strong people are walking here



MAPUDUNGUN

M Isabel Lara Millapan

Mapudungun Mew

Mapudungun mew üytuafuin ko, kürüf ka mapu.
Mapudungun mew
mütrümafuin wingkul
ka kimtukuafun relmu ñi dungun.
Mapudunguli, allkütuafun tralkan,
fey kimafun, chem dungu mew ñi femün
ka kimafun dewma tripapale antü
tañi chumngechi mongelen.

In Mapudungun

In Mapudungun, I can name the water, the wind, the earth.
In Mapudungun,
I can call upon the mountains
and understand the message of the rainbows.
If I spoke Mapudungun,
I could understand the storm as an answer
and the rising sun
as the origin of life.

Writing the future in Indigenous languages

The 1996 World Conference on Linguistic Rights in Barcelona and the proclamation of the **Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights** (UDLR) sparked an explosion of activity for the Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee within PEN International. Three aspects stand out: the conceptual strength of the UDLR, relations with the United Nations, and the spread of PEN Centres worldwide.

The concepts of the UDLR can be read in the articles (and even between the lines) of the language laws passed over the following decades in Mexico, Bolivia, Paraguay, Colombia and elsewhere. Within PEN, to give two examples, these concepts gave rise to intense reflection among the African Centres, which led to the publication in 2016 of the report ***Culture's Oxygen***, proposing good practices for publishing in African national languages (with a foreword by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o written in Kikuyu). Another example: in the foreword to its report *The Systematic Replacement of* ***Tibetan Language with Mandarin Chinese***, the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy acknowledges its debt to the concepts of the UDLR.

To show the relationship with the UN, consider two moments from the last decade. In 2019, UNESCO and PEN marked the **International Year of Indigenous Languages** in San Cristóbal de las Casas. That gathering, entitled "Writing the Future in Indigenous Languages", confirmed and strengthened the presence of Indigenous literatures of the Americas within PEN. The following year, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Fernand de Varennes, opened PEN's international congress in the Philippines with a call to respect all the languages spoken in the archipelago.

After the 1996 conference, we maintained ties with the Tibetan monks who had come to Barcelona until the **Tibetan PEN in exile** was created in 2000. In its wake, a **Uyghur PEN**, also in exile, was founded in 2006. In 2004, at an international congress in Tromsø, a new **Basque PEN** was founded, followed the next year by a **Chechen PEN in exile**. **Afrikaans PEN** came next in 2012, and a new **Welsh PEN** in 2014, and **PEN South India** in 2017. In 2020, **PEN Chiapas Pluricultural** was founded, and the following year, in PEN's centenary, **Quechua PEN**. In PEN's second century, it has become usual at our international congresses for a Maya Kaqchikel writer to be a delegate of **PEN Guatemala**, a Selk'nam writer of **PEN Chile**, a Mapudungun-language poet of **PEN Argentina**, or an Iban writer from Sarawak of **PEN Ma-laysia**. In 2025, the Kraków congress welcomed PEN **Languages of Russia** and **Low German and Frisian PEN,** and in 2026, **Astu-rian PEN** and **Romani PEN**. Indeed, litera-ture knows no borders.



Carles Torner

PEN International-eko presidenteordea

The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights and Its Updating Process

The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, adopted in 1996, represents a fundamental reference instrument for the protection of linguistic diversity throughout the world. However, since its adoption, the social, political and technological context has changed profoundly. At the same time, systematic violations of linguistic rights and assimilationist policies, both explicit and covert, continue to be common practices in many states, including those that define themselves as democratic and profess respect for human rights. This situation has highlighted the need to promote a participatory process to **update the UDLR and adapt it to the realities of the twenty-first century.**

The updating process, which will take place between April 2026 and June 2028, is being promoted by Catalan PEN and CIEMEN, with the support of numerous organisations from the Catalan linguistic domain, Spain and the international community. The first step towards the update has been the publication of the book *The Right to Language. Towards a New Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights with a Forward-Looking Perspective*, coordinated by Vicenta Tasa i Fuster, with contributions from the following experts in linguistic rights: Simona Škrabec, Víctor García Tur, Pit-roig Vinyals i Tasa, Carles Torner Pifarré, Oriol Ramon i Mimó, Isidor Marí Mayans, Eva Pons Parera, Anna M. Pla Boix, Júlia Ojeda Caba, Jordi Martí Monllau, Sebastià Portell Clar, Pere Comellas Casanova and Eloi Bellés Boeta.

The fundamental objective of this update is to fully and directly integrate linguistic rights into the human rights system defended by the United Nations. To achieve this, **an international expert debate is envisaged, with the active participation of civil society,** so that states may ultimately turn the resulting text into a UN declaration. The participatory process begins on 15 April 2026 and concludes in December of the same year.

Once the updated declaration is approved, a roadmap featuring three timelines will be set. In the short term, the aim is to promote, within UNESCO and the UN General Assembly, a universal declaration defending linguistic rights with symbolic value, which will be necessary to advance the recognition of these rights. In the medium term, efforts will be made to encourage the various UN committees to issue general observations affirming the linguistic dimension of human rights and consolidating the perspective that linguistic rights are human rights, a line of work that has been developed by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on minority issues. **In the long term, the objective is to negotiate an optional protocol to an existing treaty, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), that would make these rights enforceable before states.**

The protection of linguistic rights constitutes a fundamental test of democratic quality, given that **these rights have both an individual and a collective nature**. Despite normative advances at the international level, linguistic rights are systematically violated by many states, posing concrete challenges for lawyers and legal practitioners when it comes to making use of oversight mechanisms and comparative case law.

The initiative to update the UDLR represents a unique opportunity to place linguistic rights at the centre of the international agenda and to consolidate a more coherent and demanding normative framework. Without linguistic rights, there can be no full enjoyment of human rights; and without effective guarantees, linguistic rights become mere declarations of intent. The process launched in April 2026 must serve to turn this principle into a tangible reality.



Vicenta Tasa i Fuste
Director, Chair of Linguistic Rights, University of Valencia. Head of PEN Català's TLRC

PROTOCOL: Empowerment of Social Actors

On December 17, 2016, the conclusions of **the largest reflection process ever undertaken by social actors in favor of minoritized languages in Europe were presented** in a packed Kursaal Palace in Donostia-San Sebastián: the **Protocol for the Guarantee of Language Rights.**

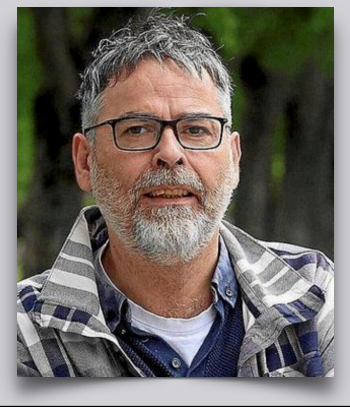
Until then, we were aware that international institutions had not taken any truly bold steps to recognize the subjective nature of language rights, nor to create effective tools or mechanisms for their development. On the contrary, it was through social actors that the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights **(UDLR) was presented** on June 6, 1996. This was a historical milestone because, **for the first time, a document was published that treated language rights as subjective rights,** bringing about a major shift in the field of language rights.

In 2016, Donostia-San Sebastián held the European Capital of Culture title, and in the Council of the Basque Entitites we believed this capital status should make a gesture toward languages in a minoritized situation, like ours. We demanded not only a gesture, but the need to make a tangible contribution. For that very reason, we proposed launching a process whose ultimate result would be the document known as the Protocol for the Guarantee of Language Rights—specifically, a document that would gather the measures needed to comply with the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights.

To guide the process, we established an Organizing Group and invited six internationally renowned and **highly experienced organizations: CIEMEN, LINGUAPAX, UNPO, ELEN, PEN INTERNATIONAL, and ECMI.** In addition, we formed a Scientific Committee made up of international experts from various fields.

However, **the core of the project was formed by social actors,** specifically those working in favor of minoritized languages. We traveled across all of Europe to work with these social actors: dozens of presentations, hundreds of contributions… As mentioned, it was the largest exercise ever carried out by social actors in Europe within the framework of language rights. In the end, we presented a document agreed upon by **more than one hundred actors from over thirty European language communities.**

It was an incredible process, and as demonstrated in the closing event, we, the social actors working for minoritized languages, have proven that WE MATTER (BAGARA NOR). Our commitment was made clear, as was our passion. However, we know that this is not enough. If a language in a minoritized situation is to be normalized, **it requires effective language policies in addition to social alignment**. Through the Protocol for the Guarantee of Language Rights, we contribu-ted to defining the direction of those language policies. Nevertheless, creating policies is not in our hands; that belongs to public institutions. Consequently, we will have to continue exerting influence so that, in the field of language as well, true equality can be achieved. **We will not give up!**



Paul Bilbao
Head of the Protocol for the Guarantee of Language Rights

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Supported by: ETXEPARE EUSKAL INSTITUTUA