



# Basque Writing 27

## A GENERATIONAL SHIFT

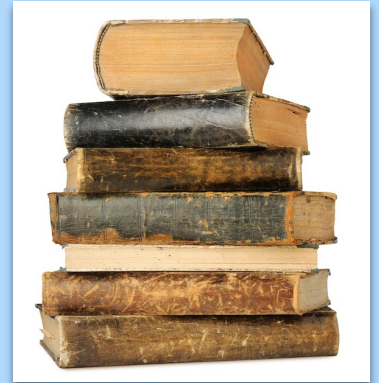
### on Basque Publishing Houses

Basque written literary tradition is fairly new, as oral literature has prevailed throughout our history. However, it is undeniable that having a written tradition is essential for our language, not only to leave future generations a testimony to our linguistic assets, but also to keep the language alive. Thus, this 27<sup>th</sup> issue of Basque Writing is devoted to **the people who compose, improve and catalogue our book industry**: Basque publishing houses and editors.

To that end, we have conducted a discussion with three editors from three Basque publishing houses: **Leire Lopez Ziluaga** (Susa), **Garazi Arrula Ruiz** (Txalaparta) and **Uxue Razquin Olazarán** (Erein). **Ane Eslava**, –who is a journalist and as well as Txalaparta’s editor– and **Maddalen Subijana**, member of Basque PEN, moderated the discussion and edited the transcription.

The Basque book industry has experienced a generational shift over the last several years, and on the

basis of that event, the three aforementioned editors take us behind the scenes of the Basque book industry and explain the sector’s present and short-term challenges and conditions. Various interesting topics are discussed in the article, but they all agree on the following conclusion: everyone involved in the publishing process (writers, printers, book sellers, readers...) must be treated with the utmost care.



Apart from the editors’ discussion, another three articles have been included to delve into the topic. Basque writer **Xabier Mendiguren** starts by looking back at the beginnings of Basque literature to then explain the causes of its current situation. **Xabier Eizagirre**, Jakin’s editor-in-chief, reflects on the future of the Basque book industry and, having analysed the sector for many years, focuses on a very specific issue: our book industry’s lack of balance when it comes to type. Lastly, **Lander Majuelo**, representing Igela publishing house, will share his thoughts on the near future of the Basque book based on the social conditions to which the Basque language is subject.



**Sara Arregi**  
Euskal PEN





## Editors in Conversation

**“There will a visible shift in the catalogue, but the most fundamental changes will occur in the process”**

**All three of you have been working as editors for several years now. What feelings or impressions did you get when you first got into the business? Was it all as you had expected?**

**Leire Lopez Ziluaga:** the thing that I found most striking, and still do, is the fact that writers cannot live off of writing, which I feel is a huge contradiction. This whole industry is built around their books, and still, most of them, cannot earn a living through writing.

**Garazi Arrula Ruiz:** This job is learned as you go. There is no degree, or rather, there has not been one until recently. So, until you start, you do not really know what to expect and your vision is only based on previous knowledge and conjecture. One of the things that really surprised me was the number of manuscripts we receive in the office; I did not expect such abundance. Also, I think that collaboration with other publishing houses and publications is rather scarce. There are a few cases of cooperation, and when they occur, we do support each other, but I get the feeling that each publishing house is doing its own thing, because we are

all up to our ears with work. We lack long-term vision.

**L.L.Z.:** At our publishing house we do not usually have enough time to do bigger-picture thinking, let alone get together and reflect on another level. However, we do look after our relationships with other publishing houses and cherish them. We trust them. That might not be easily transferred to any specific aspect right now, but it will certainly have an effect at some point.

**Uxue Razquin Olazaran:** I must admit that, in the beginning, I had completely romanticised the idea of being an editor. I had been in contact with this world, but I had imagined editing work to be different. For example, there are ego issues, and for me, that is a very difficult aspect to deal with. Aside from that, I was quite surprised to see how long the publishing process takes, and, for me, the hardest part is staying on top of the whole process. However, I would like to highlight that, sometimes, you build lovely relationships with writers. Based on our own criteria, we try to improve their work while enjoying the process.



**In recent years, a younger generation has taken over some of the main positions in Basque publishing houses. Editors with long careers have handed their duties over to new editors and new faces are appearing in the industry, many of them women. What**

**Editors and  
journalist at LABA space**



**effect could these changes have on our editorial reality?**

**G.A.R.:** It is true that there has been a generational shift; it is part of every lifecycle. Men used to outnumber women, and that is now changing. It is not a local phenomenon; it is a global one. Obviously, there will a visible shift in the catalogue, but I would say that the most fundamental changes will occur in the process. In the past, a publishing house was represented by its editor, who happened to be just one male person, and therefore, if the editor left the house, a vast amount of knowledge left with him. I believe the process is now more polyphonic, that the path we are taking is richer and longer lasting.

**U.R.O.:** You mentioned a generational shift, and, in fact, the main difficulties that I had to face at the beginning were related to age or gender. It takes great effort to explain why you were chosen for the position. That reality is changing little by little, because we have been given the chance to do things. Our presence in the industry is very important.

**G.A.R.:** That is why I devote all my effort to the process. Having a female editor is a change in itself, but if the way of doing things and the way of making decisions does not change, it is useless.

**L.L.Z.:** For us, having women in certain positions is not the most important thing, because we have grown into a political culture that questions the very idea of sacralising positions. For us, the main objective is to change the whole structure below. Also, I think this change is broader, not only in the editing world. For example, the way Basque literature is received has changed significantly in the last few years, as more and more readers are reading from a feminist

perspective. These aspects will bring changes to the catalogue, since there is still a mismatch between Basque society and its literature: one part of our society has been over-represented in our literature, and that needs to be adjusted.

**We are talking about houses that publish in a minority language here. From your point of view, do or should Basque publishing houses have a special responsibility towards their society?**

**U.R.O.:** Since we publish Basque books, we do have a duty towards Basque society, and it is a political, social and cultural one. It is a great responsibility to decide what books will comprise the catalogue, and therefore, Basque literature. We would like to bequeath future generations an enriching selection.

**G.A.R.:** There is also a duty towards our language. Basque is a minority language, and as such, each decision requires an inclination. This does not mean that Basque books cannot be published with sales in mind. In fact, in the Spanish state more and more houses are buying the rights to publish in the state's four official languages, even though they may not go on to use them. That is to say, some are choosing to publish Basque books based on mere commercial interests. The question is: is that valid? We do not think it is. We publish in Basque and Spanish, and our yardstick is different for each language, not only when we choose projects but also when we decide the number of resources we will invest in each project. And I believe that is essential.

**L.L.Z.:** Choosing to publish in Basque still involves a political inclination, and beyond the language, deciding what to publish -which texts, which topics, how to approach them, etc.- is somehow a political intervention. For example, from my point of view, continuing to publish poetry is a political decision,



Uxue Razquin



Ane Eslava





because even though we know that it will not be a great success commercially, it is important to keep poetry in circulation.

**Considering the diglossic reality of the Basque Country, what are the biggest difficulties you face in the publishing industry? And, on the other hand, what are the advantages or positive aspects?**

**L.L.Z.:** The number of potential readers is rather small, and to make matters worse, there are still some Basque speakers who have the habit of reading in Spanish. Regarding the positive aspects, ours is a small country, and word of mouth works very well. This means that a collection of short stories can slip in among the bestsellers or top borrowed. Another advantage is that a 20-year-old who has had no previous contact with the publishing industry can send their manuscript to the office and it might be published.

**G.A.R.:** With regard to the positive aspects, as we are part of a small community, it is easier to collaborate, and our relationship with all the various players in the process, such as printers and readers, is much closer. On the other hand, we take greater risks than big publishing houses or hegemonic languages when we put our faith in a certain project. As for translations, there are numerous masterpieces that have not yet been translated into our language; it is beautiful to complete the process of bringing great books into Basque.

**U.R.O.:** Ours is indeed a small country, but we have extremely devoted readers; they try to read almost everything that is published in Basque. Moreover, there is a greater awareness of the importance of our work. Also, as there are fewer of us and we publish fewer books, the published items get greater visibility.

literatura  
**Susa**



Leire Lopez Ziluaga

**The current outlook of the publishing industry is not particularly optimistic: the number of publications is increasing; most publications are concentrated in certain categories and, in that whirlwind of activity, it is hard to stand out or keep books in the catalogue for longer periods. In view of this situation, how do small and independent publishing houses manage to get off the ground?**

**G.A.R.:** The situation is not easy, and big companies are getting bigger every day. However, the rest of the market is atomising, and independent publishing houses are proliferating, which is a positive thing. Apart from that, today's pace of life is frenetic, and books do not last as long as they used to in the catalogue. In fact, a book that was published only six months ago might not be considered new anymore. We should try to keep books in the catalogue longer and bring some titles back.

**U.R.O.:** Readers are only interested in new titles. We ourselves are caught in that whirlwind, and it is frightful. Loads of books are published every year, and bookshops have no space for all of them. However, considering all the hard work writers put in the process, all books should be given their moment, but sometimes that moment only lasts for two weeks. It is quite sad. They are not given enough time, and it is rather ironic, as a book represents just the opposite; reading requires calm and time to embrace its content.

**L.L.Z.:** Fortunately, there are some bookshops that protect our literature. Many books are published in Basque every year, but many more are published in Spanish, and yet, some shops still make room for Basque language. Basque literature has a decent number of readers, and those are the ones who support our



Garazi Arrula

 txalaparta



Uxue Razquin, Leire Lopez Ziluaga, Garazi Arrula and Ane Eslava at LABA space in Pamplona

literature. In recent years, numerous readers under 30 have joined the community, which means that there is transmission to the younger generation. Taking care of our readers and bookshops is especially important for small and independent publishing houses such as ours.

**Beyond the direction set by trends and the market, what do you look for in your work as editors?**

**U.R.O.:** I look for the type of book I like to read. Something that has been written with passion, a work that contributes something new. I look for good stories that are packed with magic and excitement.

**G.A.R.:** At our publishing house we try to cater to

needs and debates of the day. We also aim to make space for social associations and movements, as well as new aesthetics and new imaginaries. Other than that, I believe that we should make a greater effort to strengthen our processes and collaborations. We need to pay attention to every link in the chain, and take care of each other, so that nobody is left behind.

**L.L.Z.:** I totally agree with Garazi; paying attention to every detail of the process is crucial, being mindful that the financial aspect also plays a role. I try to make writers feel comfortable throughout the whole process, as I do with cover art designers, printers, layout editors and booksellers.

Editors: Ane Eslava and Maddalen Subijana



## The Beginnings of Basque Written Tradition

Every time we prepare a history of the Basque written tradition, it seems mandatory to start off by apologising for our literature's appalling state. After that, we tend to mention the scarce, late-blooming and religious nature of our literature.

It is undeniable that those three features are, in fact, part of our literary history, but that affirmation focuses on the outcome, **concealing the causes**, not to mention exposing our complexes and guilt. Thus, **I would like to highlight another three elements** that may help readers properly understand our history: we live in a nation oppressed by two states, the elites of our nation have never believed in their people, and we lacked the means to overcome dialectal separation until very recently.

- **During the Renaissance**, as nation-states began to emerge in Western Europe, the Kingdom of Navarre was dissolved, most of its land having been domineered by Spain and what little remained taken up by France. Even though it is true that the Kingdom of Navarre had not paid much attention to the local language, having our own administration could have ensured protection and advancement. However, foreign authorities instituted systemic prohibition and disdain.

- Historically, our population has mainly been comprised **of farmers, fishermen, shepherds and blacksmiths**, most of whom were humble, monolingual, illiterate working-class people. The few notions they had on writing and reading came from Christian doctrine. The few who had the opportunity to get further education, tended to admire French and Spanish cultures, study their languages, follow their example and find a little place under their wing. Our nation has

therefore been culturally colonized and our local bourgeoisie has been complicit in this process.

- **Just like any other natural language, Basque has experienced dialectal separation until recently. For most languages, the means to overcome this separation** has been provided by governments, education and the media, but Basque language has not had any of those pillars to support it.

It was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that—not exactly thanks to external assistance but to the **strength built up within our community**—we started to mend those shortfalls and achieved **political sovereignty, became a self-confident, empowered nation** and created a standard language model to help us **overthrow our language's dialectal separation**.



**elkar**

**Xabier Mendiguren**  
ELKAR Publishing House



## Where is the Basque Book Industry Going

Since Joan Mari Torrealdai began researching the Basque book industry in 1976, **the team at Jakin has completed an analysis and produced a report on the topic every year** (see the 'Liburu Behatokia' section on our website). Our analysis covers all the books comprised in the Basque catalogue, and with the passage of time, this compilation of studies has afforded us a privileged view of the industry, with which we have been able to identify the major issues and challenges facing the Basque book industry: the production of textbooks and the need to develop a Basque curriculum, the atomisation of the publishing industry, the lack of reprints, etc.

This time, I will address a pernicious trend that needs to be corrected in order for our book industry to have a healthy future: the imbalance of book production by type.

After having analysed various aspects of book productions and producers, our report focusses on what is probably the most significant part of the study: the analysis of thematic production or classification by book type. **We classified the books into six types or categories:** educational (mainly textbooks), children's and YA, humanities and social science, adult literature, science and technology, and leisure. Let us note that, due to the absolute volumes produced of each type, the categories are arranged in that same order every year. Crucially, the first two categories, which make up about 65-70% of total production, are aimed at the same audience: children and teens, i.e., **adults are left with only 30-35% of total production.**

If we look at **the hegemonic languages around us**, we can see that their proportions are the complete opposite, **as two-thirds of their**

**production are aimed at adults.** Although the percentage of Basque adult literature is equivalent to these neighbouring languages (about 15%), the other three types of books (humanities and social sciences, science and technology, and leisure) make up a much smaller portion of the industry, as they barely amount to 20% altogether. **We find the case of the humanities and social sciences particularly noteworthy**, considering the number of topics and disciplines encompassed in this category: from philosophy to geography, including history, sociology, ethnology, politics, economy, law and linguistics.

In the end, these figures demonstrate **the way we consume Basque books is absolutely diglossic, unbalanced, shallow and limited to certain fields.** Truth be told, sociolinguistic studies on Basque language do not suggest anything different. Thus, we are convinced that in the future, Basque language and Basque books will evolve in lockstep, for better or worse.



**Jakin** <sup>eus</sup>

**Xabier Eizagirre**  
JAKIN Publishing House



## Where is the Basque Book Industry Going

In short, **our book industry's prospects are quite discouraging**; the near future appears to bring a lot more dangers than benefits. The two social conditions to which Basque language is subject are also the major threats to our book industry: on the hand, **the extreme diglossic conditions** in which Basque geographically coexists with Spanish and French, and, on the other, the economic relationships required for the book industry to progress.

Beyond the brief and neatly choreographed celebrations of Basque culture held every year on special dates, the Basque book industry seems unable to overcome the **chronic precariousness** of its day-to-day activity. Although there was once hope that the recovery from the 2008 economic crisis and the end of the armed struggle would pave the way **from cultural activism to cultural professionalisation** and would make Basque culture equivalent to others in Europe, when it comes to our book industry, **that has not been the case**.

That is thus how the Basque book industry is making its way, enfeebled by past deficiencies and difficulties, but also hindered by contemporary obsessions: the excessive desire for personal success spread by social media, the competitiveness imposed upon us – in spite of how small our writers' community is –, the yearning to turn authors into a system of little stars, the zeal of our institutions to blindly internationalize their authors, the insatiable hole of digitalisation, the need to make our book industry a "competitive" economic sector and other neoliberal traps.

Meanwhile, the **Basque book chain, as small as it is, is becoming more and more uniform**. In the last two decades, bookshops, distributing companies, printing houses and publishing companies have become fewer in number, **diminishing this industry's diversity**. That general loss of autonomy fosters a heavy reliance on big publishing companies, and therefore, the Basque book industry has become even more vulnerable to being knocked around by the whims of the current market.

Though the level of cultural offerings is high, the direction is the same as it ever was: with small projects closed, the big companies become more insatiable and indomitable. And, on the contrary, the elements that we really need are barely mentioned: **a national plan** combining language and culture and **promoting books not only through subsidies**, but with the kind of support and safety nets to promote diversity within the book producing chain and cooperation within the culture sector.



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