Semantic Fieldwork Project: The Indefinite –Ren Bat in Basque

1. Introduction to the Main Puzzle: Bat vs. –Ren Bat in Basque

Some of the Basque sentences below are marked with #. This means that they are syntactically well formed, but not appropriate in the scenarios that they are paired with.

(1) Scenario:
You are in a cat shelter, playing around with a bunch of cats. They’re crawling all over you, and your attention is moving from cat to cat. One of the cats bites you, but you didn’t see which one. It could have been any of the cats crawling over you right now.

a. Katu batek kosk egin dit.
cat INDEF.ERG bite do AUX
A cat bit me.

b. Katu-REN batek kosk egin dit.
cat-REN INDEF.ERG bite do AUX
A cat bit me.

(2) Scenario:
You are in a cat shelter, playing around with a bunch of cats. They’re crawling all over you, and your attention is moving from cat to cat. One of the cats bites you, and you did see which one. It was the fat, white Persian over by your foot.

a. Katu batek kosk egin dit.
cat INDEF.ERG bite do AUX
A cat bit me.

b. # Katu-REN batek kosk egin dit.
cat-REN INDEF.ERG bite do AUX
A cat bit me.

(3) The following dialog is a natural one to have in Basque:

your friend INDEF.ERG call AUX
A friend of yours called.

b. Karlos: Nork?
who.ERG
who?
The following dialog is not a natural one to have in Basque.

- What Jon Ander says is fine. Karlos’s response, though, is not appropriate.

   your friend-REN INDEF.ERG call AUX
   A friend of yours called.

b. Karlos: # Nork?
   who.ERG
   who?

Scenario:
You are eating soup at a restaurant, and see a wriggling black speck floating in your bowl. You stop your waiter to let him know about the problem.

a. Zomorro bat dago zopan.
   bug INDEF is soup.in
   A bug is in the soup.

b. Zomorro-ren bat dago zopan.
   bug-REN INDEF is soup.in
   A bug is in the soup.

c. Euli bat dago zopan.
   fly-REN INDEF is soup.in
   A fly is in the soup.

d. # Euli-ren bat dago zopan.
   fly-REN INDEF is soup.in
   A fly is in the soup.

The Puzzle / Challenge

- You can take for granted that bat in Basque is an indefinite article like a in English

- But what about –ren bat?
  - You can’t use it in all the places that you can use plain bat or English a.
  - What does it mean, such that it’s not possible to use it in those contexts?
2. Some Notes on Procedure and Methodology

(7) Some Things You Can’t Ask the Language Consultant

a. Remember that it’s a bad idea to ask the language consultant to do any kind of linguistic analysis for you. Thus, it’s a bad idea to ask them questions like:

   (i) What (do you think) –ren bat means?
   (ii) What are the situations where you’d use –ren bat?
   (iii) Does –ren bat mean <blah blah blah>?

   It’s your job to answer these questions, not the language consultant’s!

b. It’s also not fair to force the language consultant to make up the crucial example sentences for you. Thus, it’s a bad idea to ask them questions like:

   (i) Can you use –ren bat in imperatives?
   (ii) What syntactic positions is –ren bat possible in?
   (iii) Can you use –ren bat in negative sentences?

   It’s your job to come up with the example sentences that would answer these kinds of questions, not the language consultant’s!

(8) How Best to Proceed with the Language Consultant

a. Create a simple context (scenario) description, and a simple target English sentence to translate into Basque.

b. Ask the consultant to translate the English sentence, given the context.

c. The consultant writes the Basque translation on the board.
   • At this point, you can ask the consultant questions like “Which word in this sentence means (e.g.) cat?”

d. If the sentence does not contain bat or –ren bat, construct the parallel sentence yourself, and then ask the consultant to judge its acceptability in that context.

e. Write down in your notes all this information:
   (context, English sentence, translation, altered translation, judgment)
Some Advice on Designing Contexts / Scenarios

a. Use simple, short context descriptions that contain just enough information to be useful for the hypothesis you’re testing.
   • If you put too much, extraneous information into the context description, it can tax the consultant’s memory, and their judgment may be impacted by that rather than the grammatical status of the sentence.

b. For this same reason, it’s best to describe the kind of commonplace scenarios that the consultant is likely to have experience with (and not necessarily the ones that are typical for you yourself).

c. Also, try to use simple names for the characters, ideally from the consultant’s own language/culture.

3. The Plan for Today

a. Students will form groups of 3-5 members.

b. Groups will formulate a hypothesis concerning the meaning of –ren bat, which will account for some (possibly all) of the data in Section 1.

c. Groups will then formulate two scenario/target-sentence pairs to test the hypothesis:
   (i) One such pair will be predicted to be acceptable with –ren bat.
   (ii) The other pair will be predicted to be unacceptable with –ren bat.

d. The hypothesis, scenarios and target-sentences will be written up on the included worksheet.

e. Every group will be allowed to test their two scenario/target-sentence pairs with the consultant. The results of the interview will be recorded on the work sheet.

f. Everyone is also expected to keep a record of everyone else’s interviews.
   • These will be useful resources when the time comes for you to revise your hypotheses.
Semantic Fieldwork Worksheet

1. Names of Group Members:

2. Hypothesis Concerning the Meaning of –Ren Bat

3. First Context / Target-Sentence Pair

   Scenario:

   Target Sentence:

   Translation of Target Sentence:

   Alteration of Translation (If Applicable):

   Judgment and Comments of Consultant:
4. Second Context / Target-Sentence Pair

Scenario:

Target Sentence:

Translation of Target Sentence:

Alteration of Translation (If Applicable):

Judgment and Comments of Consultant:

Be sure to keep careful record of everyone else’s contexts, sentences, and judgments! Those will be very useful when you have to revise your hypotheses!