

READING II

BASQUE LANGUAGE

¹European languages are quite closely related. There are the Germanic languages. They likely started life in southern Sweden over two thousand years ago and now include German, Swedish, Dutch, Danish, English and Norwegian. The Slavonic languages such as Bulgarian, Czech, Russian and Polish came from the East, as did the Baltic languages of Latvia and Lithuania. The Celtic languages such as Welsh and Gaelic are still spoken in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, while the Romance languages primarily Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese and Romanian have conquered more of the world than the Romans themselves ever did. All of these major languages belong to the Indo-European language family and linguists can track their development back through the ages to their parent languages. But one European language stands completely alone: Basque Language. Many linguists believe that Basque is the only language in Western Europe which is not clearly related to any other language. The current Basque language is a language isolate. The Basques have long been supposed to be a remnant of a pre-Indo-European population of Europe. However, this assumption has come under increasing criticism as genetic and linguistic studies have become more sophisticated. No firm conclusion has been reached but there are many theories on the origins of Basque Language.

²Otto Muck, proposes some insight into the origins of Basque, in his book "The Secret of Atlantis". His theory differs considerably from the "language isolate". According to him, Basques are distantly related to the lesser-known languages of the inhabitants of the Mediterranean region and Atlantis belonging to the prehistoric era. He believes that the Basque language provides evidence for a Stone Age origin: the words for knife and axe may come from the root word for stone, suggesting that the language developed when knives and axes were made of stone rather than bronze or iron. However, there are genetic studies which show that the DNA of Basque people are not similar to prehistoric DNA dating back to 5000 BC. According to these studies, Basques are proved to have a component called mtDNA. This genetic component is believed to evolve and spread through some population movement which took place between the 3rd and the 7th century and **it** cannot be present in genetic code of any prehistoric population - ruling out Otto Muck' theory.

³Another theory, the theory of the Basque-Iberism affirms that, somehow, there is a direct relation between the Basque language and the Iberian language, in a way that the Basque would be the result of an evolution of the Iberian language, or that the Basque belonged to the same language family. The first one to point out this theory was Strabo in the 1st century BC. He asserted that the Iberians and Basques were similar physically and it is also possible that they once spoke similar languages.

⁴Wilhelm von Humboldt went a step further in the early 19th century with a thesis in which he stated that the Basque people are Indians, following some studies he conducted. Humboldt based his theory on occasional use of the Indian alphabet by early Basques. Also, he gave examples from old texts in which Julius Caesar addressed Basques as Indians. Apparent similarities between the undeciphered Indian language and Basque have also been cited. However, the theory is not favoured by scholars who think that Basques may have used Indian language just as reference.

⁵Another theory is based on the Old European hydronymy, assuming that the first inhabitants of Europe spoke a common tongue or languages of the same language family. In January, 2003, the magazine Scientific American published a study conducted by Theo

Vennemann, a professor of theoretical linguistics at the University of Munich. In this study, Vennemann analysed the Proto-Basque language which means the first or very early version of Basque language. He concluded that the Proto-Basque language was the “**linguistic stratum**” in which later all Indo-European languages developed from. So according to Vennemann, we do not fall in exaggeration if we say that all the Europeans are Basques. In his study, Vennemann argued that “much of the names of settlements, rivers, mountains, valleys and landscapes in Europe would have their origin in Basque language. He found, among other examples, the Basque words "ibai" (river) and "ibar" (bottom) to repeat continuously in European rivers, or the word "haran" (valley) in toponyms such as Val d'Aran, Arendal, Arnsberg, Aresburg, Ahrensburg.

⁶The Vennemann theory has been criticized by Basque scholars and it is not accepted by most of the linguistics as he did not follow conventional methodologies. First of all, linguists claim that Vennemann’s theory totally ignores the fact that similarities may occur due to contact. The river and mountain names may stem from communication between two different cultures speaking totally different languages. Besides, there is no proof or story to guide the way and to help us understand about specific etymologies. If Vennemann researched on etymology, he would have an idea about the story of Basque words. A study of etymology would enable him to understand where the Basque words come from, and what they mean and how their sounds have changed over time although they are assumed to be similar once. Specifically, Trask, another Basque Scholar who criticize the methods Vennemann used, affirmed that the Proto-Basque language, cannot be simply the source of European languages, as many other linguistic scholars agree. Trask has conducted a research on the Proto-Basque language and he concluded that modern Basque language is far more different than archaic Basque. Although, the Basque is now similar to European languages, there are reasons to believe that originally it was not similar.

⁷However, all hypotheses on the origin of Basque are controversial, and the suggested evidence is not generally accepted by most linguists. The Basque language is a language whose origin is still somewhat puzzling. The fact that it is not an Indo-European, Iberian or a pre-historic language, and shows no resemblance to languages in neighbouring countries, has begun to inspire many scholars to search for its possible relatives elsewhere. Yet there is still a single fact that any scholar studying languages agrees on and appreciates: Although it is a language isolate, Basque language continued its survival with the number of speakers increasing in the younger generations of the areas that the language is spoken. There are schools where the language is being taught all over the world, and there is also a large number of adults who have learned or are learning the language. So, the Basque language is clearly a survivor, which will give linguists more chance to explore it.

Answer the following questions according to the text:

1. Which of the following is true according to paragraph 1?
 - a. There are many languages spoken in Europe which do not belong to any language families.
 - b. Romance languages are spoken only in places where Romans conquered before.
 - c. Germanic languages have been spoken in the world more than a couple of millenniums.
 - d. Linguists agree that Basque language belongs to the Indo-European language family.

2. "It" in paragraph 2 refers to _____.

3. Which of the following is **not** true for those who disagree with Otto Muck?
 - a. Basques' DNA might have spread through some population movement.
 - b. It is not possible that Basques' DNA dates back to 5000 BC.
 - c. Otto Muck' theory could have been right, if Basques didn't have mtDNA in their genes.
 - d. Basques are the ones who created the names for stone-made knives and axes.

There are some theories about the origins of the Basque Language given in the text. Match the theories with their proofs. Write letters in the blanks given. There is one extra.

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| 4. Basque language has prehistoric origins. _____ | a. There are words in Basque language which show that Basques lived in ancient times. |
| 5. Basques are Indians. _____ | b. Basques and Iberians look like each other. |
| 6. Basque language is related to Iberian language. _____ | c. Basques are called Indians in some historical sources. |
| 7. European languages originated from the Basque Language. _____ | d. Both Basques and Iberians have mtDNA in their genes. |
| | e. Many geographical features are called after Basque words. |
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8. "Linguistic Stratum" in paragraph 5 is:
 - a. a language that has been consciously devised by an individual or a small group.
 - b. a language that changes other languages or cause other languages to be born.
 - c. a language with no demonstrable relationship with other languages.
 - d. a language used to make communication possible between people not sharing a mother tongue.

Fill in the blanks according to paragraph 6.

Scientists who study language do not approve of Venneman’s approach because it is different from **9.** _____ approaches. To begin with, the words that are mutual in Basque and European languages may be the result of **10.** _____. Furthermore, linguists think that, Vennemann did not study the **11.** _____ of words to have information about their history, origin, form and meaning. In the same way, according to Trask, contemporary Basque language has nothing to do with **12.** _____ Basque language.

13. Which of the following is true according to paragraph 7?

- a. Scholars are satisfied with the fact that Basque language may be Indo-European.
- b. There are people in the world, who speak Basque language as a second language.
- c. Basque language sounds similar to the languages in neighbouring countries.
- d. Basque language is not acknowledged in the educational institutions.

14. Which word in paragraph 7 means “similarity between two people or things”?
