

BASQUE.

1 X 04. HIROMI YOSHIDA: THE CHALLENGE OF THE BASQUE LANGUAGE

HIROMI: My name is Hiromi Yoshida. I'm from Japan. I was born on 28 June, 1960.

OFF: A country's language, with its music and rhythm, constitutes its soundtrack. It is something that has evolved over the millennia into the form in which it is spoken today.

OFF: In this episode of BASQUE, we will forge a link between Japan and the Basque Country, through language. And we will get to know a Japanese teacher who speaks Basque as well as she speaks Japanese.

OFF: Today in BASQUE, Hiromi Yoshida. A Japanese linguist and Basque teacher.

HIROMI: Seen from a certain perspective, the disappearance of a language or languages is a natural process. Recovering what is being lost, however, is something I believe to be very very hard, if not impossible. And the only way to do it is to *make* people do it.

OFF: My name is Oier Aranzabal and this is BASQUE., a podcast by the Etxepare Basque Institute that offers a glimpse into the contemporary basque culture and creativity, in each episode we will visit the home or the workplace of the people who create and shape our culture, we seat down and talk with them about their creative inspirations and ideas.

OFF: We have arranged to meet Hiromi Yoshida in Azpeitia, in the town square.

OIER: Hello, Hiromi, good morning!

HIROMI: Hello, Oier.

OIER: Here we are then.

HIROMI: Indeed. Pleased to meet you.

OIER: And you.

OFF: Hiromi Yoshida learned Basque without ever having stepped foot in the Basque Country. But since then, she has visited many times. She wrote a dissertation on the Azpeitia dialect and has translated several books into Japanese, including the first text ever to be published in

Basque: Bernart Etxepare's *Linguae Vasconum Primitiae*. And as if that were not enough, she has also published a new method for learning Basque in Japan.

HIROMI: Hello, how are you? I only arrived recently. On Wednesday.

OIER: You've just got here and we're already making work for you.

OFF: As we're heading for the library for our interview, she stops to talk to some women.

OIER: Can you tell me about your childhood? When you hear the word childhood, what sort of sounds come to mind?

HIROMI: The sound I most associate with my childhood is that of a river. Also, the sound of water and birds, frogs and other such animals.

HIROMI: We grow a lot of rice in my town. In terms of population, it is similar to Errenteria. But it doesn't feel like there are that many of us. There is a lot of land. There are a lot of rice paddies, all surrounded by mountains. Lots of nature.

OIER: And that's where you grew up?

HIROMI: Yes. That's where I was born, yes.

OFF: She may have grown up there, but she later left to study in Tokyo.

HIROMI: Yes. I moved to Tokyo to do my university degree. There were some universities in the province where we lived, but not many. Just one state one and a couple of private ones, more or less. And I would have had to have moved away to attend any of them anyway. I would have had to have gone and lived in the provincial capital. So, my dad said to me that if I had to move away anyway, I might as well go where I wanted. Tokyo University was my first choice, so off I went.

HIROMI: One of my mother's brothers lived in Tokyo with his family. So, I moved in near him. It gave me a sense of security. But even though it's a big city, you really only go from home to the university, from the university out somewhere with your friends and then back home again. I mean, you end up spending most of your time in a fairly small area. And public transport is pretty complex in Tokyo. But I soon got used to it. I soon learned.

OIER: What a soundscape.

HIROMI: Oh yes! They were. They were indeed! There was more noise. Trains, people... A lot more noise.

OIER: And somewhere in all hustle and bustle, in Tokyo, travelling from home to university and back again, she discovers Basque.

HIROMI: I started studying an English degree, with German as a second foreign language. And I'm not sure exactly why, but I felt the urge to study an unusual language. There were many alternatives. One that was very attractive to me was a language called Ainu. It is spoken on the island of Hokkaido, in the north of Japan. The Ainu people have been living there for a very long time. So, we'll call the language they speak Ainu from now on, ok? That was a great option for me, but there were several people I knew who were already learning it. So, I decided to find a different one. At the university there was a linguist called Suzuko Tamura. She was fairly well-known in the Basque Country and was trying to get a group together to learn Basque. But not as an official subject; it was just something she volunteered to do. So, a group of five or six of us got together (I was the only girl) and we got on really well. And Suzuko's classes were very interesting. We all really liked the language, and I just kept learning.

HIROMI: I learned grammar. I learned a lot of grammar. But I couldn't really speak. And my listening wasn't very good either. So, to improve my Basque, I decided to come to the Basque Country.

OIER: That's a big step.

HIROMI: Yes.

OIER: Not a game anymore.

HIROMI: No, it was never a game. We were very serious, eh?

HIROMI: I mean, it wasn't a subject on our course. Suzuko never gave us assignments. She just taught us because she wanted to. So, she wouldn't forget how to speak the language. So, I decided to travel to the Basque Country and attend the total immersion school in Lazkao. I spent 14 months there. And I'm still learning Basque today. Almost 30 years have passed since then and I have made a lot of friends in the Basque Country. I see it as my treasure trove.

OFF: Having been well and truly hooked by Basque, Hiromi Yoshida did her Master's graduation project on that language, focusing specifically on one of its dialects - the one spoken in Azpeitia.

HIROMI: A Basque dialect is called an *euskalki*. In broad terms, we can distinguish between Bizcayan, Gipuzkoan, Lapurdian, Upper Navarrese, Lower Navarrese and Souletin. But within each one, there are many different sub-dialects. The language changes from town to town. To my mind, the Basque dialects reflect a dynamic living oral language, which is why I was so keen to study one.

OIER: Where do you teach Basque in Japan? Where can people learn the language?

HIROMI: In Tokyo, at the University of Waseda, you can study levels one and two. You can also learn Basque at the state university in Osaka. I visit Osaka twice a year: in winter and in summer. I live in Tokyo, so I can't really go to Osaka very often. They suggested that I go twice a year, once in winter and once in summer, to give an intensive three-day course. And then in Tokyo, you also have the TUFS (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies), which has close ties with the Etxepare Basque Institute.

OIER: Yes.

HIROMI: Yes. I used to teach Basque there. But they have a time limit. I taught there for five years, so I'm not allowed to teach there anymore. But the university has an academy for the general public. Not university students, just anyone who wants to learn. So, I teach Basque there too. Online.

OIER: What kind of people take Basque classes?

HIROMI: Well, people attend my classes for many different reasons. Some say they come because of football, for example. Spanish league football is very popular in Japan. The Japanese love football, you know? But at first, they had never heard of Real Sociedad or Athletic Club, and so on. But later on, they realised they were both Basque teams. And then they started learning about the Basque Country and the fact that Basques speak a different language. Others say they come because of the food.

OIER: The food?

HIROMI: That's right. Three or four years ago, Basque cheesecake became immensely popular. You know the one, right? It's like the one they serve in 'La Viña' in San Sebastian. And suddenly, the name 'Basque' became very well-known. And then of course you have those that are simply interested from a linguistic perspective.

OIER: So, football, Basque cheesecake and linguistic interest.

HIROMI: Yes, that's it so far. Well, there's also the odd person who comes because of music. For example, I had a student once who really liked Fermin Muguruza.

OIER: Really?

HIROMI: Yes! Fermin has visited Japan a number of times. And that student used to go to listen to him.

OIER: And do they actually learn Basque?

HIROMI: Well... They start learning. But it's hard to carry on, because we stop after level one. If they want to continue learning, they need to find another way of doing so. But I think that if they are really keen, what with the Internet and all, there are many ways they can keep learning. That wasn't the case in my time. There was no Internet. Young people nowadays have a lot of tools at their disposal, a lot of ways to learn Basque or any other language.

OIER: How do you see the situation of Basque today?

HIROMI: I'm actually a bit of a pessimist. I'm not too hopeful. Why? Because of the level of Basque use. For example, statistically speaking, there are more Basque speakers now than before. When we started learning Basque, back in 1982 more or less, there were only about half a million Basque speakers left. Not one and a half million, eh? Half a million. There are apparently many many more today. That's a miracle, a spectacular rise in numbers. It's miraculous. So, yes, people can now speak the language. But do they actually use it? No. That's so sad, it's such a shame. And it's concerning too. A language needs to be used if it is to survive.

HIROMI: From a certain perspective, the disappearance of some languages is a natural process. Recovering what is being lost, however, is something I believe to be very very hard, if not impossible. And the only way to do it is to *make* people use it. By law. Just like Franco did with Spanish in the Basque Country. But you can't do that today. Even if you pass a law making it obligatory to speak a language, it won't work unless you punish those who don't. You have two official languages, right? Spanish and Basque.

OIER: And French too.

HIROMI: In the Northern Basque Country yes. And that's what the law establishes. But even so, the language with fewer speakers will always end up slightly marginalised. It's called diglossia, right? When there are two languages spoken in a society. Well, this is a diglossia.

OIER: But the situation is never symmetrical.

HIROMI: No. Never. That never happens. For example, the Basque Country is in a situation of diglossia. You have both Spanish and Basque, right?

OIER: Right.

HIROMI: In that situation, for Basque, diglossia means its gradual disappearance.

OIER: That's diglossia?

HIROMI: Seen from one perspective, yes. If there is no balance, if no correct balance is reached, then the language with fewer speakers has a very hard road ahead of it.

OIER: So, you are pessimistic?

HIROMI: Yes. Very. Because I've seen what has happened in Japan with Ainu. The last speaker died some years ago. So, it's something very close to home.

OIER: What must a minority language do to survive in today's globalised world?

HIROMI: Wow! That's a hard question! Well, the most important and most basic thing is for the speakers to use the language amongst each other all the time. That's where you start. Then, you should make the world aware of your works of literature, music and everything else. There has to be funding available for all that, of course. But the most basic thing is for speakers to speak the language amongst themselves, all the time, non-stop, at all times and in all settings. Everything, absolutely everything should be in Basque. That's the starting point, in my opinion.

OIER: That's your main piece of advice.

HIROMI: Yes, definitely.

OIER: Use the language. Exactly. Yes. But for real, right? For example, this morning I spoke Basque and this afternoon, I spoke to someone else in Spanish. That's not good! I mean, if the person you are talking to doesn't speak Basque, then you have no choice. But otherwise, any conversation between Basque speakers should always, always, always be in Basque. No matter where they are; always, always in Basque.

OIER: Thank you so much for chatting to me.

HIROMI: Yes. Thank you. But I don't know... I don't know that it went well.

OIER: Do you think it went badly?

HIROMI: That's for you to decide!

OIER: It was great.

BASQUE. is a podcast produced by Ulu Media for the Etxepare Basque Institute.

Oier Aranzabal is the director and sound designer. Translations by Diana Draper. Voice over by Diana Lindsay. Cristina Tapia Huici is the producer. If you like BASQUE., please share and follow us wherever you get to your podcasts. You can also explore more stories about the basque culture and creativity on our websites, at basqueculture.eus and etxepare.eus.

Thanks for listening. Until the next episode!