

The focus of the information or galdegaia in introductory sentences (I)

(In the book *Hamaika abere-ipuin*)

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Abstract

Nowadays, following one of Altube's laws (the informationally relevant phrase or galdegaia must be placed in front of the verb) this phrase is usually placed in front of the verb in Basque prose writing. In this article the author shows that some speakers of Bizkaian, or at least the ones in the book *Hamaika abere-ipuin/Bizkaiko herri-alegia*, don't place the galdegaia phrase in front of the verb in introductory sentences of narrative statements. In fact, in most cases they usually place it after the verb.

Keywords: informationally relevant phrase, *galdegaia*, word order, initial sentences, information zone, information complements.

0. Foreword

About 80 years ago, S. Altube gave for the first time a general rule regarding the informationally relevant phrase or focus of a sentence: the focus (*galdegaia*) must be placed in front of the verb, to the left of it and adjoining it. Since then this rule has been widely criticized. The main linguists of the time such as K. Mitxelena, L. Villasante and J.M. Mokoroa, disapproved of it. Recently another two linguists have written their theses on this same subject, the controversial focus or *galdegaia*: E. Osa claimed that it is our best speakers, the peasants, that break this rule the most; B. Hidalgo has recently published an article in the magazine *Senex*, issue 25, in which he, looking at the data and seeing that Altube's rule is no use, proposes a new one. This is his proposal as I understand it:

1. If the focus of the sentence is short, place it in front of the verb.
2. If the focus of the sentence is long, place it after the verb.

Hidalgo has also examined the position of the focus or *galdegaia* in the sentence, whether in front or after the verb, in traditional Basque and modern Basque and he comes to these conclusions:

	After the verb	In front of the verb	Other
Traditional Basque	79,0%	10,8%	10,2%
Modern Basque	20,1%	51,2%	28,7%

Table 1: The position of the *galdegaia*

Considering the data, particularly the data on traditional Basque, we could say that we have not been loyal to our linguistic tradition.

In this context, we too want to revise the position of the focus in the newly published book *Hamaika abere-*

ipuin/Bizkaiko herri-alegia, which gathers a number of fables told by word of mouth by speakers of Bizkaian. However, we will be looking at only introductory sentences in those fables, and whether the focus of the sentence is placed before or after the verb.

We will limit the study to affirmative sentences only (Mikelek 10 euroren frutea jaten dau astero 'Mikel eats 10 euro worth of fruit weekly') and will not consider negative nor interrogative sentences (Mikelek ez dau astero jaten 10 euroren frutea 'Mikel doesn't eat 10 euro worth of fruit weekly'/Mikelek 10 euroren frutea jaten dau astero? 'Does Mikel eat 10 euro worth of fruit weekly?').

We have already stated the main aim of this article. In fact, there is also a secondary objective: we will manipulate the different *galdegaia* phrases in those initial sentences under examination and we will change their position, and that of the verb, in order to see how that affects communication, that is, whether the sentences read easier or, on the other hand, whether they are harder to understand.

These are the steps we will follow in the development of this article: first we will look at the advantages for the understanding of any sentence when placing the focus after the verb; secondly, we will examine initial sentences and see where the focus phrases are placed; then we will change the position of the focus phrases and the verbs, and we will consider the effect of such a change in the understanding of the sentence (whether easier or harder to read); and finally we will draw conclusions.

1. Advantages of placing the focus of the sentence after the verb

In any given sentence, the closer to the front the verb is placed, the easier it becomes to read the sentence, especially when the focus is long or complex. In order to understand better the theory in the practice we will give two groups of sentences (the verbs in between square brackets and the *galdegaia* phrases in bold):

(a)

Atzo [afaldu neban] **neska baltz bategaz**
Atzo [afaldu neban] **20 urteko neska baltz bategaz**
Atzo [afaldu neban] **euskeraz dakian 20 urteko neska baltz bategaz**

(b)

Atzo **neska baltz bategaz** [afaldu neban]
Atzo **20 urteko neska baltz bategaz** [afaldu neban]
Atzo **euskeraz dakian 20 urteko neska baltz bategaz** [afaldu neban]

‘Yesterday I had dinner with a black girl’

‘Yesterday I had dinner with a 20 year old black girl’

‘Yesterday I had dinner with a Basque speaker 20 year old black girl’

As we see, in the first group of sentences the focused items follow the verb whereas in the second group, they come in front of it in accordance with the rules. In general, any sentence has two types of constituents: the verb and its complements. The verb carries the main piece of information (nucleus or core) and the complements, as the name indicates, complete the information of the verb. In other words, the complements refer to the verb, they draw from it and are subject to it as satellites to a planet.

Taking all this into consideration and looking at the examples above, it is clear that if the nucleus of the information in a sentence is the verb, the sooner it appears in the sentence, the sooner the message it holds will come across and, therefore, the whole sentence will read easier. On the contrary, placing the verb further away in the sentence, it takes longer to get the main message and, consequently, the whole sentence becomes harder to read. Hence the importance of placing the verb as closer to the front as possible in order to process the information of the sentence successfully and easier. This is exactly why the sentences in group (a) above are easier to read than those in group (b).

When a language gives you the chance to move the verb forward shifting the focus towards the back, as in the case of the Basque language, why not take it? Why make a sentence harder for us to read? Do we prefer walking up-hill to walking down-hill?

2. Analysing some examples

We shall look at the introductory sentences in the fables (which we give in standard Basque) one by one. The verbs are shown in between square brackets and the focus phrases in bold. Let’s start with the first sentence:

2.1. Mirua eta azeria - ‘The Kite and the Fox’

*Behin baten [zan] **Mirua**, eta Miruak [euki eban] zugatz baten bere habiea, eta [euki ebazan] bere kumatxoak han habian.* (page 13)

‘Once upon a time there was a Kite, and the Kite had its nest in a tree, and it had its chicks there in the nest.’

In the first clause, the focus comes after the verb breaking, thus, the rule of the galdegaia. According to the rule the clause would read:

*Behin baten **Mirua** [zan]*

Both this form and the original read similarly as far as the difficulty in the level of understanding is concerned. However, if we had to choose between both, it would be the original clause that we would pick because in it the verb is placed nearer to the front. As mentioned in section 1, the core of the information is given sooner and, therefore, it becomes easier to process the whole clause. This first clause could also be written using the prefix *ba-*:

*[Bazan] behin baten **Mirua**,*

*Behin baten [bazan] **Mirua**,*

The rule of the galdegaia is broken in the second clause too, because the verb precedes the galdegaia phrase. The rule would place the focus in front of the verb like this:

eta Miruak bere habiea zugatz baten [euki eban]

Many would change the order obeying the rule of the galdegaia but putting the complement *bere habiea* after the verb:

eta Miruak zugatz baten [euki eban] bere habiea,

The last two alternatives are slightly harder to read than the original clause, especially the first one. And now let’s look at the third clause within our first introductory sentence. Here also the speaker breaks to pieces the rule of the galdegaia, as the galdegaia phrase is placed after the verb. Many would say:

eta bere kumatxoak [euki ebazan] han habian

This one is easy to read, same as the original clause, but it would be worse if the complement *han habian* was positioned right at the beginning:

eta han habian bere kumatxoak [euki ebazan]

Let’s go on to the second introductory sentence:

2.2. Azeria eta Otsoa - ‘The Fox and the Wolf’

*Aulestiko Zubero auzoan [egoan] **pozu bat**, Legarreko pozuia esaten jakona.* (page 19)

‘In the neighbourhood of Zubero in Aulestia there was a well, which was known as the well of Legarra.’

This second sentence we are examining does not follow the rule of the galdegaia, because the galdegaia phrase is after the verb. The following variants are also possible in the Basque language:

*Aulestiko Zubero auzoan Legarreko pozua esaten jakon **pozu bat** [egoan].*

*Aulestiko Zubero auzoan **pozu bat**, Legarreko pozua esaten jakona [egoan].*

*Aulestiko Zubero auzoan **pozu bat** [egoan] **Legarreko pozua esaten jakona**.*

The first alternative is the most common one. We reckon that it is quite a bad choice: on the one hand, it is difficult to read (the reader reaches breathless the end, where the verb stands last in position), and on the other, the question is not HOW MANY wells by that name were there?, but WHAT was there? The writer of this first variant does not show a good command of the discourse and does not give an appropriate answer to the needs of communication.

The second variant is not all that suitable either: it is nearly as awkward to read as the first one in our opinion.

The third one is right and as easy to understand as the original sentence. However, in the original sentence there is a perfect bond between both complements *pozu bat* and *Legarreko pozua esaten jakona* because the complements are adjacent. The bond between them in the third alternative is not as strong because the verb separates one from the other.

Let's start with the third introductory sentence:

2.3. Azeriaren hiru egiak - 'The three truths of the Fox'

*Muruetako Telleria lekuan **bateldun bat** [egon zan], Agiña izena eukana. (page 27)*

'In the district of Telleria in Murueta there was a man, called Agiña, who owned a small vessel.'

This sentence follows Altube's rule, i.e. the focus precedes the verb. Many would use one of these alternatives:

*Muruetako Telleria lekuan Agiña izena eukan **bateldun bat** [egon zan].*

*Muruetako Telleria lekuan **bateldun bat**, Agiña izena eukana [egon zan].*

We have already pinpointed the disadvantages of such changes. This is what the producers, that is, the speakers, of the second sentence would say:

*Muruetako Telleria lekuan [egon zan]**bateldun bat**, Agiña izena eukana.*

The pros and the cons of each alternative have been commented upon and we went on into it again.

Let's go on to the next sentence:

2.4. Txolin Sierra - 'Txolin Sierra'

*Urriolan **Txakurra** ei [egoan], Urriolako Sierrean, Txolin izena ebana: Txolin Sierra. (page 31)*

'In Urriola, in the mountains of Urriola, they say there was a Dog called Txolin: Txolin Sierra.'

This fourth introductory sentence follows the rule of the galdegaia (the focus is in front of the verb). Many would use one of the following two alternatives:

*Urriolan Urriolako Sierrean, **Txakurra**, Txolin izena ebana ei [egoan]: Txolin Sierra.*

*Urriolan Urriolako Sierrean, Txolin izena eban **Txakurra** ei [egoan]: Txolin Sierra.*

They read slightly worse, more painfully, because the verb is too far towards the end of the sentence. Other speakers would give the following variants (using the prefix ba-):

*Urriolan, Urriolako Sierrean, [ba ei egoan]**Txakurra**, Txolin izena ebana: Txolin Sierra.*

*[Ba ei egoan] Urriolan, Urriolako Sierrean, **Txakurra**, Txolin izena ebana: Txolin Sierra.*

Both are correct in our opinion. They are preferable to the previous two variants, in which the verb was too far towards the end.

Let's deal with the next sentence:

2.5. Abereen batzarra - 'The assembly of the animals'

*[Esaten dabe]antxina baten **egon zala abereen artean gaxo handi bat**, eta hilten ei ziran hamabinaka asto, hamabinaka tigre, hamabinaka lehoi, hamabinaka itso. (page 37)*

'They say that long ago there was a terrible disease, and that donkeys, tigers, lions, wolves died by the dozen.'

In this introductory sentence, the components of the first clause are not organised to suit all tastes, as the galdegaia phrase follows the verb and the clause itself starts with the verb. Altube's followers would put it this way:

*Antxina baten **abereen artean gaxo handi bat** egon zala [esaten dabe],*

The focus answers to the question WHAT?, so the verb must go last and the other elements in front of it; that is, the order of the elements in the answer depends on the question itself. The variant above is rather unfortunate and could be improved shifting the main verb to initial position (this is how it appears in the original sentence):

[Esaten dabe] antxina baten **abereen artean gaxo handi bat egon zala**,

.There is still room for improvement: the nucleus of the information (the verb) is in end position within the *that*-clause. Why not move it forward?

Esaten dabe antxina baten gaxo handi bat egon zala abereen artean,

The subordinate verb and its affix (-eLA) can still be placed closer to the front and, this way, we would come back to the original clause, which is in turn the one we prefer, the one we like the most.

In the second clause the rule of the galdegaia is not respected either, and if it was this would be the result:

*eta **hamabinaka asto, hamabinaka tigre, hamabinaka lehoi, hamabinaka otso** [hilten ei ziran]*

Unfortunately for the Basque language such clauses do actually occur.

Let's deal with the sixth introductory sentence:

2.6. Astoa, Txakurra, Katua eta Oilarra - 'The Donkey, the Dog, the Cat and the Cock'

*Baten Asto bat [egoan] **bere etxean**.. (page 43)*

'Once a Donkey was in his house.'

In this initial sentence the verb is placed after the galdegaia phrase, contrary to the most popular usage nowadays, which would be the following:

*Baten Asto bat **bere etxean** [egoan].*

In this variant the verb is further away (last in position), and the sentence reads a little bit worse than the original one. If the difference between the two versions was indeed so small why then would, and actually do, the most proficient speakers move the verb to the front disapproving of this major fixation on the galdegaia phrase?

Some other speakers would enunciate this sixth introductory sentence using the prefix *ba*-:

*[Baegoan] baten Asto bat **bere etxean**.*

*Baten [baegoan] Asto bat **bere etxean**.*

Let's get our hands on the seventh initial sentence:

2.7. Gizona eta Otsoa - 'The Man and the Wolf'

*Gizon bat [joan zan]**biajean**, eta bidean kantara baten aurretik igarikeran, Otsoa topau eban etxunda kantara etxean, harri bat lepoan ebala, ha altxau ezinik. (page 49)*

'A Man went on a trip, and on the way, as he passed by a quarry, he met the Wolf lying at the side of the quarry, with a stone on his back, struggling to carry it.'

Already in the first clause, the rule of the galdegaia phrase is violated, even if it is a short sentence (the verb and two other small constituents). We have come across other instances in which the focus followed the verb in spite of the sentence being short.

According to the traditional canons, the clause in question would read:

*Gizon bat **biajean** [joan zan],*

Following the coordinator *eta*, in the subordinate clause (*eta bidean kantara baten aurretik igarokeran*) the focus is in front of the verb; and in the next clause too (*Otsoa topau eban etxunda kantara ertzean*) the focus (*Otsoa*) is to the left of the verb.

Let's move on to the next initial sentence:

2.8. Azeria eta Amiamua - 'The Fox and the Stork'

*Azeriak [konbidau eban] Amiamua edo Zikoinea **bere etxera**. (page 55)*

'The Fox invited the Stork to his house.'

In this sentence, same as in the fifth one, the focus is not in front of the verb firmly fixed at its side; it doesn't even come immediately after it, but further back, last in position. This is hard going for those who write with the galdegaia rule in mind. The great majority of the people would nowadays arrange the sentence this way:

*Azeriak Amiamua edo Zikoinea **bere etxera** [konbidau eban].*

We feel that the verb is too far and that is why the sentence is harder to process. There is another way to make the sentence easier yet respecting the rule of the galdegaia:

*Azeriak **bere etxera** [konbidau eban] Amiamua edo Zikoinea.*

In many cases, in which the rule of the galdegaia is obeyed, the sentence can still be produced quite quickly and be easy to read as shows the last given variant and many more.

Let's pass on to the next sentence:

2.9. Astoa eta Txerria - 'The Donkey and the Pig'

*Behin baten Astoa eta Txerria **haserretu** [egin ziran], sarri ibiltzen ziran alkarregaz eta. (page 59)*

'Once upon a time the Donkey and the Pig had an argument because they spent a lot of time together.'

In the first clause, the focused element is the verb itself, which is emphasized with the use of the auxiliary verb *egin*. And we don't think that anybody would find the following variant surprising or strange:

*Behin baten **haserretu** [egin ziran] Astoa eta Txerria,*

However, the word order in the original clause makes better sense because the element referred to, that is, the constituent *Astoa eta Txerria*, is introduced in the first place. So, the first clause follows the rule of the galdegaia and we cannot say that the verb is too far back that we reach breathless to it.

In the second clause (we dare not say that it is a subordinate clause as this is a matter that has given rise to much controversy) *sarri* is the focus and it is placed in front of the verb following the rule of the galdegaia. Some find it odd that the particle *eta* does not follow the verb directly like this:

alkarregaz sarri ibiltzen ziran(-)eta.

In spoken language the word order of the original clause is quite usual. And when it comes down to writing it, that is, *eta* after *alkarregaz*, should we use a hyphen, or not? We prefer to use the hyphen and above we put it in between brackets because the Royal Academy of the Basque Language (*Euskaltzaindia*) gives us the choice. Apart from the original clause and our variant of it, there is another alternative frequently used:

sarri ibiltzen ziran(-)eta alkarregaz.

Lets analyse the next sentence:

2.10. Zazpi Ahuzkume - 'The seven Young Goats'

[Izan zan] behin Ahuntz bat. (page 63)

'Once there was a Goat.'

A lot of people would consider this sentence to be rather awkward; indeed the focus is after the verb, in second position after it, and to make matters worse, in front of the verb there is nothing, nothing whatsoever. This is how most of us would put it:

Behin Ahuntz bat [izan zan].

or

Behin [izan zan] Ahuntz bat.

Let's look at the next introductory sentence:

2.11. Ondo eginaren pagua - 'The reward for things well done'

Egun baten Gizon bat basora [joan zan], eta basoan zehar doala Lukiaren zulora jausi zan. (page 67)

'One day a Man went to the woods, and in the woods he fell into the Fox hole.'

In the first clause the rule of the galdegaia is followed because the focus precedes the verb. However, looking at some of the previous examples, some speakers would have no problem to move the focus after the verb in this way:

Egun baten Gizon bat [joan zan] basora,

In the second clause too the rule by the man from Arrasate is followed and it is fine, although here too the same can be said about changing the position of the focused element: that in the collection of short stories that we are studying some speakers would put the focus (*Lukiaren zulora*) after the verb. Here is how:

eta basoan zehar doala jausi zan Lukiaren zulora.

3. Conclusions

Here there is a brief account of the conclusions we have come to:

1. Away from a preceptive grammar point of view and only with the primary objective of this article in our minds, that is, how many of the analysed sentences break the rule of the galdegaia, 6 out of the 11 sentences examined follow the rule, 4 don't, and another one is especial, example number 9, because in it the verb itself becomes the focus (*...haserretu egin ziran...*). Therefore, in the book *Hamaika aber-ipuin* Altube's rule is broken 60 per cent of the times.

2. In the examples we have studied it is not necessary for the focus phrase to be long in order to be placed after the verb. We have examples where the focus is short and also examples (in fact the majority) where it is just one item.

3. Another important fact is that in most of the sentences which follow Altube's rule, if not in all of them, and contrary to what most writers nowadays do, the story tellers place the verb early in the sentence. By doing so, they avoid major information units occupying end positions (end-focus or end-weight) and unnecessarily overloading the back end of the sentence (which is a sign of poor discourse competence), and they manage to come up with texts that are easy to read and understand. We reckon that in practically all the sentences the priority is indeed to place the verb as early as possible in the sentence, rather than devoting ourselves to obey the rule of the galdegaia.

4. As in the majority of the cases the focus of the introductory sentences in the fables follows the verb, it is reasonable to think that the focus of most of the sentences in the fables will also follow the verb.

5. A last thought: when it comes down to writing why don't we follow the example of the story tellers bringing the verb forward and letting us free from the submission of recent years to the rule of the galdegaia if that results in sentences that are easier to process?

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