

# The focus of the information or galdegaia in introductory sentences (and II)

(In the book *Amattoaren uzta*)

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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), the focus is usually placed in front of the verb in Basque prose writing. In this article the author shows that in the book *Amattoaren uzta* the speakers 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:** focus, galdegaia, constituents, verb, complements, word order, variants, initial sentences

## 0. Foreword

In the previous article, after analysing some stories from the oral tradition produced by speakers of Bizkaian and gathered in the book *Hamaika abere-ipuin*, we came to the conclusion that 60% of the Bizkaian storytellers in that book break Altube's rule, which states that the focus of the information must be placed in front of the verb.

In this article too, we shall be looking at texts based on orally transmitted literature but from the French side of the Basque Country. The stories have been compiled in the book *Amattoaren uzta* by Mayi Ariztia. The aim of our study is, let's remember, to examine the position occupied by the focus or galdegaia, whether it is before or after the verb. In other words, we wish to determine how many times the rule of the galdegaia is followed.

In the present article, same as in the previous one, there are two objectives, both equally important:

1. We wish to show how useless the rule of the galdegaia is in the oral stories from the book *Amattoaren uzta* looking at just the initial sentences.
2. We want to manipulate the constituents of the original sentences and change their position to see when they are easiest (or hardest) to read.

Here are the steps we shall take in the development of this article: we shall analyse some examples first, and then we shall draw conclusions.

## 1. Analysing some examples

Having done our best to translate the examples into standard Basque, they have been classified into two main groups, the first of which breaks into two subgroups. Here is how:

1.1. Sentences that don't follow the rule of the galdegaia

1.1.1. The sentence contains the element *bazen(zuen)* 'there was(he/she/it had)'

1.1.2. The focus is a clause

1.2. Sentences that follow the rule

Let's start to develop those points:

### 1.1. Sentences that don't follow the rule of the galdegaia

There are twelve sentences that don't follow the rule of the galdegaia, and as mentioned above, they fall into two groups.

#### 1.1.1. The sentence contains the element *bazen(zuen)* 'there was (he/she/it had)'

In this first group, there are five subgroups.

1.1.1.1. Firstly, we shall examine the examples beginning with a *Ba*-phrase.

There are two:

- *II.Atxular apezarena* 'The story of the priest Atxular'

[Baziren] **hiru apez**, bat Iruñakoa, bertzea Donostiakoa eta bertzea Atxular, Urdazurikoa. (page 18)

'There were three priests, one from Iruñea (Pamplona), another one from Donostia (San Sebastian), and the other one Atxular from Urdazuri.'

- *VIII.Ama-alaba batzuen ixtorioa* 'The story about a mother, her son, and her daughter'

[Baziren], amarekin, **anaia-arreba batzuk**; aitarik ez zuten. (page 50)

*'There were, together with their mother, a brother and a sister; they had no father.'*

In our opinion, the prefix *Ba-* has the function of bringing the verb to the front followed by the focus (in bold). And how smart those sentences are and how easy they read! The following variants don't result as good:

- *Hiru apez [ziren] bat Iruñakoa, bertzea Donostiakoa eta bertzea Atxular, Urdazurikoa.*
- *Amarekin, **anaia-arreba batzuk** [ziren]; aitarik ez zuten.*

1.1.1.2. Secondly, we will look at the sentences starting with the particle *behin* 'once upon a time'.

There are two of this kind:

- *IX.Kuiatxoren ixtorioa 'Kuiatxo's story'*

*Behin [bazen] **gizon bat**; izena zuen Kuiatxo. (page 56)*

*'Once upon a time there was a man; his name was Kuiatxo.'*

- *X Arttoren ixtorioa 'Arto's story'*

*Behin [bazen] **gizon bat** izena zuena Arto. (page 62)*

*'Once upon a time there was a man whose name was Arto.'*

Taking away the prefix *Ba-* and placing the verb after the focus means spoiling those sentences:

- *Behin **gizon bat** [zen]; izena zuen Kuiatxo.*
- *Behin **gizon bat** [zen] izena zuena Arto.*

If the particle *behin* 'once upon a time' (a formula much used at the beginning of tales) was positioned after the verb, the resultant variants would be good choices, as good as the original sentences:

- *[Bazen] behin **gizon bat**; izena zuen Kuiatxo.*
- *[Bazen] behin **gizon bat** izena zuena Arto.*

1.1.1.3. In third place we shall analyse the sentences beginning with *asko bezala* 'like many others'.

There are three examples:

- *I.Mutil baten ixtorioa 'The story of a boy'*  
*Asko bezala, [baziren] Urdazurin **hiru ama-seme**. (page 10)*

*'Like many others, there were in Urdazuri a woman and two sons.'*

- *IV.Arotzaren ixtorioa 'The story of the carpenter'*

*Asko bezala, [bazen] **gizon xahar bat**; bakarrik bizitzen zen bere etxean, eta bazuen anaia bat arotza. (page 28)*

*'Like many others, there was an old man; he lived alone in his house and had a brother who was a carpenter.'*

- *XI.Hartzkume(r)en ixtorioa 'The story of the baby bear'*

*Asko bezala, [baziren] **senar-emazte batzuk**. (page 72)*

*'Like many others, there were a man and his wife.'*

Placing the verb (without the prefix *Ba-*) after the galdegaia phrase would spoil the sentences:

- *Asko bezala, Urdazurin **hiru ama-seme** [ziren].*
- *Asko bezala, **gizon xahar bat** [zen]; bakarrik bizitzen zen bere etxean, eta bazuen anaia bat arotza.*
- *Asko bezala, **senar-emazte batzuk** [ziren].*

In the previous section, we mentioned that the particle *behin* 'once upon a time' is commonly used after the verb. However, we cannot say that the opening formula *Asko bezala* 'like many others' can be moved after the verb. We have never heard nor read such a thing.

1.1.1.4. Finally, let's examine the sentences beginning with an expression other than the ones seen up till now.

There are four examples:

- *VII.Itsasoar baten ixtorioa 'The story of a man from Itsaso'*

*Itsasun [bazen] **jauregi bat**, nehork hartan bizitzen ahal ez zena. (page 46)*

*'In Itsasu (Itxassou) there was a castle, in which nobody could live.'*

- *XV.Hiru anaia-arreben ixtorioa 'The story of a brother and two sisters'*

*Etxe batean [baziren] **seme bat eta bi alaba**; aita lanerat joana zuten. (page 116)*

*'In a house there lived a son and two daughters; the father had gone to work.'*

- XVI. Errege itsu baten eta bere hiru semeen istorioa 'The story of a blind king and his three sons'

Munduan bertze asko den bezala eta orain ere hobe bailiteke holako bat izatea Frantzian, gauzak ongi joatekotan, [bazen] **errege bat alargundua** eta denbora berean itsutua zen; eta diaroetan, erran nahi baitu kazetetan, atzematen zuten bazela ur bat itsuak sendatzen zituena. (page 122)

'As happens in many places in the world, and it would be better if there was one in France now so that things went well, there was a king who lost his wife and his sight at the same time; and the diaries and records stated that there was a water which cured blind people.'

- XIII. Gizon pobre baten istorioa 'The story of a poor man'

Gizon pobre-pobre batek [bazuen] **anaia arras aberats bat**, eta arto buruxkak bildu zituen pobre hark, eta joan zen bere anaia aberatsarenganat ea gaitzirua prestatuko zion bere arto buruxken neurtzeko. (page 94)

'A very poor man had a very rich brother, and that poor man gathered some corn cobs and went to his rich brother to ask him for the measure to weigh his corn cobs.'

Taking away the prefix *Ba-* in those sentences and moving the verb after the focus, we would spoil them and make them harder to read. The sooner the verb appears in the sentence, the easier it reads.

The sentences of this group have different constituents at the start, and it is not always possible to move them along. In the first two cases, the adverbial phrases *Itsasun* and *Etxe batean* can be placed after the verb:

- [Bazen] *Itsasun* **jauregi bat**, nehork hartan bizitzen ahal ez zena.
- [Baziren] *etxe batean* **seme bat eta bi alaba**; aita lanerat joana zuten.

In the last example, the prefix *Ba-*, contrary to what happens in the other sentences, appears with the verb *ukan* 'to have' inflected. This is it again:

- XIII. Gizon pobre baten istorioa

Gizon pobre-pobre batek [bazuen] **anaia arras aberats bat**, eta arto buruxkak bildu zituen pobre hark, eta joan zen bere anaia aberatsarenganat

*ea gaitzirua prestatuko zion bere arto buruxken neurtzeko.* (page 94)

In the other two examples, the focus comes before the verb in the first one and after it in the second instance. In this one the *galdegaia* phrase follows the verb. This is how it would come up nowadays:

- *Gizon pobre-pobre batek* **anaia arras aberats bat** [zuen], eta arto buruxkak bildu zituen pobre hark, eta bere anaia aberatsarenganat joan zen ea bere arto buruxken neurtzeko gaitzirua prestatuko zion.

Some would even make matters worse following the wrong practice of putting the main verb in end position and all the subordinate clauses before it like this:

- *Gizon pobre-pobre batek* **anaia arras aberats bat** [zuen], eta arto buruxkak bildu zituen pobre hark, eta ea bere arto buruxken neurtzeko gaitzirua prestatuko zion bere anaia aberatsarenganat joan zen.

Very many writers produce things like that.

1.1.1.5. We want to give further advice about some of the examples seen to. Let's take some of them again:

- VIII. *Ama-alaba* batzuen istorioa  
*[Baziren], amarekin, anaia-arreba batzuk;* aitarik ez zuten. (page 50)
- IX. *Kuiatxoren* istorioa  
*Behin [bazen] gizon bat;* izena zuen *Kuiatxo.* (page 56)
- X. *Arttoren* istorioa  
*Behin [bazen] gizon bat* izena zuena *Artto.* (page 62)
- IV. *Arotzaren* istorioa  
*Asko bezala, [bazen] gizon xahar bat;* bakarrik bizitzen zen bere etxean, eta bazuen anaia bat arotza. (page 28)
- VII. *Itsasoar baten* istorioa  
*Itsasun [bazen] jauregi bat,* nehork hartan bizitzen ahal ez zena. (page 46)
- XVI. *Errege itsu baten eta bere hiru semeen* istorioa  
*Munduan bertze asko den bezala eta orain ere hobe bailiteke holako bat izatea Frantzian, gauzak ongi joatekotan, [bazen] errege bat alargundua* eta denbora berean itsutua zen; eta diaroetan, erran nahi baitu kazetetan, atzematen zuten bazela ur bat itsuak sendatzen zituena. (page 122)

In each of those sentences, we are presented with one item, respectively:

*anaia-arreba batzuk* ‘a brother and a sister’

*gizon bat* ‘a man’

*gizon bat* ‘a man’

*gizon zahar bat* ‘an old man’

*jauregi bat* ‘a castle’

*ur bat* ‘a water’

In the last sentence, two items are introduced – *errege bat* ‘a king’ and *ur bat* ‘a water’–, but in order not to get things muddled up, we shall consider only the second one.

After and only after those items come the complements:

*aitarik ez zuten* ‘they didn’t have a father’

*izena zuen Kuiatxo* ‘his name was Kuiatxo’

*izena zuena Artto* ‘whose name was Artto’

*bakarrik bizitzen zen bere etxean* ‘he lived alone in his house’

*nehork hartan bizitzen ahal ez zena* ‘in which nobody could live’

*itsuak sendatzen dituena* ‘that cured blind people’

As we can see they follow the pattern:

introduced element + complement(s)

Nowadays the practice, contrary to that used in storytelling, changes the order:

complement(s) + introduced element

If we apply this order to the sentences above the result is:

- [Baziren], *amarekin, aitarik ez zuten anaia-arreba batzuk*.
- Behin [bazen] *Kuiatxo izena zuen gizon bat*.
- Behin [bazen] *Artto izena zuen gizon bat*.
- *Asko bezala, [bazen] bere etxean bakarrik bizitzen zen gizon zahar bat, eta bazuen anaia bat arotza.*
- *Itasun [bazen] nehork bizitzen ahal ez zen jauregi bat*.

- (...), *atzematen zuten bazelaitsuak sendatzen zituen ur bat*.

Put this way the sentences read slightly worse than the originals. Unfortunately this is the writing trend nowadays; and even worse moving the verb (without the prefix *Ba-*) to the end:

- *Amarekin, aitarik ez zuten anaia-arreba batzuk* [ziren].
- *Behin Kuiatxo izena zuen gizon bat* [zen].
- *Behin Artto izena zuen gizon bat* [zen].
- *Asko bezala, bere etxean bakarrik bizitzen zen gizon zahar bat* [zen], *eta bazuen anaia bat arotza.*
- *Itasun nehork bizitzen ahal ez zen jauregi bat* [zen].

Nowadays, at least in the Basque Country –and certainly in the Bizkaian dialect–, in such sentences the verb *egon* ‘to be/ to stay’ (*zegoen* ‘he/she/it was/stayed’, *zeuden* ‘they were/stayed’) is more widely used than the verb *izan* ‘to be’ (*zen* ‘he/she/it was’, *ziren* ‘they were’).

We also want to make a comment about the following sentence:

- *X.Arttoren ixtorioa*  
*Behin [bazen] gizon bat izena zuena Artto.* (page 62)

It would be a sin these days to produce that sentence, because nobody (apart from exceptions) would place the constituent *Artto* after the verb thus breaking the rule of the galdegaia. Besides, there is another unfortunate rule which claims that the subordinate mark *-en* has to go in end position. According to this, in the sentence above, *Artto* would come before the verb:

- *Behin [bazen] gizon bat Artto izena zuena.*

And there is a third note we would like to make, this one on the sentence:

- *VIII.Ama-alaba batzuen ixtorioa*  
*[Baziren], amarekin, anaia-arreba batzuk; aitarik ez zuten.* (page 50)

We believe that there is nothing wrong with it. However, there is an illegitimate rule in some grammars which states that a known antecedent (in our example *aita*) requires the definite article, not the partitive:

- [Baziren], *amarekin, anaia-arreba batzuk; aita ez zuten.*

In our language the partitive (*-rik*) is commonly used also when the antecedent is known, such is the case of proper nouns:

Gaur ez dator Keparik ala?

‘Is Kepa not coming today?’

This is how we use it even if there is just a Kepa in the context of the message.

### 1.1.2. The focus is a clause

In the second group of sentences that don’t follow the rule of the galdegaia, we have included those in which the focus is a subordinate clause, whether the subordinate verb is inflected or not.

These are the examples:

1.1.2.1. The subordinate clause is a nominal clause and the subordinate verb is inflected.

- *III. Atxular oraino* ‘More about Atxular’

*Atxularrek [manatu zion] bere beattarrari hil zezan, Meza ematen ari zelarik, kontsekratzioneko hitzak erraten zituen denboran. (page 24)*

*‘Atxular told one of his choir-boys to kill him while he was saying Mass, while he was saying the words of the consecration.’*

- *VI. Mutil gaizo baten eta birjina Maria neskatzaren istorioa* ‘The story of a poor boy and Mary the virgin’

*Asko bezala, mutil batek [deliberatu zuen] sehi joan behar zuela. (page 36)*

*‘As many others, a boy decided that he should go work as a servant.’*

As we see, and contrary to what happens in the way the language is used these days, in each of the two examples we are analysing, the subordinate clause, that is, the focus, comes after the verb. Nowadays those sentences would be more commonly written placing the subordinate clause or focus just before the main verb:

- *Atxularrek bere beattarrari hil zezan [manatu zion], Meza ematen ari zelarik, kontsekratzioneko hitzak erraten zituen denboran.*
- *Asko bezala, mutil batek sehi joan behar zuela [deliberatu zuen].*

These variants read slightly worse than the original sentences, because in them the main verb comes up later on.

1.1.2.2. The subordinate clause is a nominal clause and the subordinate verb is not inflected.

- *V. Fede ukatu baten istorioa* ‘The story of a renegade’

*Bi mutil kofesatzerat [joan ziren]. (page 32)*

*‘Two young men went to confess.’*

Who would write something like this nowadays? Any proof-reader would with a stroke of the pen change it into:

- *Bi mutil kofesatzerat [joan ziren].*

However, orally transmitted texts and written ones too (classical works and those coming from the oral tradition published in the *Auspoa* collection) are full of sentences like the original.

## 1.2. Sentences that follow the rule of the galdegaia

There are only two examples:

- *XII. Kamelu baten istorioa* ‘The story of a camel’

*Mundu honetan bertze asko bezala gizon zaharsko bat [abiaru zen] piaia (bidaia) luze bati buruz. (page 88)*

*‘There was an oldish man, like many others in the world, who set off for a long journey.’*

- *XIV. Errege baten istorioa* ‘The story of a king’

*Errege baten semea ihizirat [joan zen]. (page 100)*

*‘The son of a king went hunting.’*

Both are excellent sentences: for some, because they follow the rule of the galdegaia, and for others, because in them the verb appears very early. In any case, it wouldn’t surprise us to see the focused phrases placed after the verb:

- *Mundu honetan bertze asko bezala [abiatu zen] gizon zaharsko bat piaia (bidaia) luze bati buruz.*
- *Errege baten semea [joan zen] ihizirat*

## 2. Conclusions

Looking only at the initial sentences, in 12 out of 14 the focus appears after the verb (breaking the rule of the galdegaia), and in 2 it comes before it (as the rule states). In percentages, 85% of the storytellers in the book *Amattoren uzta* break the rule of the galdegaia and prove that the rule is illegitimate.

The storytellers in this book break to pieces the rule of the galdegaia in a percentage that comes close to the data on traditional Basque provided by Bittor Hidalgo

(*Senez* magazine, issue number 25), which were shown in our first article. Let's recall it:

	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 focus

It is not necessary for the focus to be long and complex in order to be placed after the verb. Certainly such elements are always placed after the verb, but there are examples where the focus is just one item and also comes after the verb.

For these French speakers of Basque the priority is, in our opinion, to mention the verb as early as possible in the sentence, rather than the position of the focus (before or after the verb). As in 85% of the initial sentences the French storytellers place the focus after the verb, it is reasonable to think that the rule of the *galdegaia* will also be broken in a similar percentage in any other sentence.

### 3. References

Ariztia, M. (1982). *Amattoren uzta*. Elkar publishers.