



**PERCEPTIONS OF LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN  
ASTURIAS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR  
LANGUAGE POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT**

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## ABSTRACT

Bable (also known as Asturianu) is the Romance vernacular of the Spanish region of Asturias. Surveys suggest that up to 40% of the population claim oral competency in the language, with much lower figures for literacy. Unlike Catalan, Gallego and Euskera, Bable has not yet achieved official status. During the period 1981 to 1998 there was a strong debate, often intensely conflictive, on the language's future which led finally to the promulgation of a law on the promotion of the use of Bable, rather than co-officiality. Taking into consideration, amongst others, sociolinguistic theories such as Kaplan's on language planning, Smolicz's on core values, Mühlhäusler's on language ecology, Giles' *et.al.* on ethnolinguistic vitality as well as the work of J. and L. Milroy on social networks (and also G. Williams' critique of the latter two theories), this study argues that the case of Bable represents at once a unique but also an exemplary model for understanding key issues in the development of language planning and education in situations of marginalised languages.

In the lead up to the 1998 law in Asturias, issues of language status, planning, usage domains, codification and educational implementation were all the subject of debate whose participants were not solely linguists, educators or government policy makers, but included many in the community. After outlining the historical origins of Bable and the context of the language debate, this study sought to collect and analyse primary data on language use and opinion in relation to Bable principally over the period 1994-98, but with some additional data from the preceding six years. Two methodological tools were used in the study. The first was a study based on the principal daily newspaper of the region, *La Nueva España*, analysing the incidence of Bable and references to the language; a key part of this study was the analysis of 463 letters to the editor written over the period in question. Other articles in the newspaper relevant to Bable were also analysed. The second research instrument was a survey of 122 attendees of a training conference on the teaching of Bable, held in 1995 and organised by the *Academia de la Llingua Asturiana*. The survey questions sought their views on the significance of Bable, the history of their experience of the language and their views on normalisation and officiality.

The data showed notable differences in domain usage and attitude. Various respondents attributed different meanings to their shared cultural and linguistic lexicons (such as culture, identity, patrimony, *Asturianismo*, *Bablista* and even the pronoun

*nuestro/nueso*). Opinions were diverse not just about what the word *Bable* signifies, but also the character of Asturias and of being Asturian.

The analyses of the letters and other material from *La Nueva España*, the survey of conference attendees and the interviews all gave some degree of support to the notion of a core value of *paisañin* (in the mold of, but characteristically distinct from, the concept of *das gentlemanideal* first proposed in 1922 by Wilhelm Dibelius, writing of the English context); a core value which was wider than, but included, language. In contrast to this romantic notion, the material also revealed the more recent development of an “identity of the alienated” whose relationship with their language reflected their own perceived marginalisation by the mainstream of society. A third orientation evident in the data, that of the *mineru* (based on a long regional mining tradition), became a bridge between the former two. The respondents’ attitudes to subjects such as language normalisation and officiality, the origins of *Bable* and the status of its dialects were seen to be related to these ideological orientations.

These findings invite the development of language and education policies which reflect the needs of the respondents in the three different ideological groups rather than opting for a lowest common denominator approach which would satisfy none and fail to ensure *Bable*’s future vitality. The study also notes that there will be significant sociodemographic impacts on any chosen policy array. Considering these aspects the thesis concludes proposing a ‘double helix’ model of policy development for language.

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