

# Awareness and salience in language contact: the case of Asturian Spanish / *Conciencia y prominencia nel contautu ente llingües: el casu del castellanu d'Asturies*

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**Abstract:** Awareness of a sociolinguistic variable and linguistic behavior are intricately connected, such that the former can influence speakers' use of particular linguistic variants. As a result, exploring awareness and salience as part of linguistic variation is crucial to fully understanding the linguistic choices that speakers make in interaction and the social meaning of the variants they employ. In this article, I investigate how patterns in the production and perception of Asturian features might be explained by examining their cognitive and social salience, and the different levels of sociolinguistic awareness observed in the communities in which Spanish and Asturian are in contact. After an analysis of metalinguistic discourse on public social media, the article explores the effect of cognitive salience and explicit awareness on the perceptions of the Asturian gender morphemes /-u/ and /-es/, as well as how the availability of Asturian "ye" to index interactional stances relates to the speakers' awareness of this sociolinguistic variant, its symbolism, and their control over its use. I show that different dimensions of salience and awareness affect the indexical fields of these contact variants, allowing some features to become markers of Asturian identity and social status, to adopt particular styles, and to be employed as stance-marking units based on the speakers' interactional needs.

**Key words:** Sociolinguistics, Asturian language, awareness, salience.

**Resume:** La conciencia d'una variable sociollingüística y el comportamientu llingüísticu tán intrinsecamente coneutaos, de mou que'l segundu puede influir nel usu de certes variedaes llingüístiques per parte del falante. D'esta miente, l'estudiu de la conciencia y la prominencia como parte de la variación llingüística ye crucial pa entender na so totalidá les escoyetes llingüístiques que los falantes faen na interacción y el significáu social de les variantes qu'ellos empleguen. Nesti artículu, investigo cómo los patrones na producción y perceición de rasgos asturianos podríen esplicase per aciu de la investigación de la so prominencia cognitiva y social, según los distintos niveles de conciencia sociollingüística observaos nes comunidaes nes que l'asturianu y el castellanu tán en contautu. Tres d'un análisis del discursu metallingüísticu nes redes sociales, l'artículu esplora l'efectu de la prominencia cognitiva y la conciencia esplicita de los morfemes de xéneru asturianos /-u/ y /-es/ y cómo se rellaciona la disponibilidá de la forma asturiana «ye» pa indexar actitúes interaicionales cola conciencia del falante

sobre esta variante sociolingüística, el so simbolismu y el control que tien sobre'l so usu. Vemos asina que los distintos niveles de prominencia y conciencia afeuten a los distintos campos indiciales d'estes variantes por contautu, faciendo asina que dellos rasgos se vuelvan indicadores d'identidá asturiana y de posición social, qu'adopten estilos concretos y que s'utilicen como unidaes indicadores d'actitú basaes nes necesidaes sociales del interllocutor.

**Pallabres clave:** Sociolingüística, llingua asturiana, conciencia, prominencia.

## 1. Introduction

Awareness of a sociolinguistic variable and linguistic behavior are intricately connected, such that the former can have an effect on the speakers' use of particular linguistic variants. References to salience or awareness of linguistic variables date back to early sociolinguistic research. Using the notion of attention paid to speech, Labov (1972) proposed that variation that remained under the level of consciousness was not socially meaningful. Based on this idea, he conceptualized three different types of linguistic variables: indicators, markers and stereotypes. Indicators are variables that show social stratification while remaining outside the speakers' awareness. In contrast, markers and stereotypes rise above the level of consciousness and, in addition to social stratification, they show stylistic variation, with the latter also being object of metalinguistic commentary.

Examining awareness and salience as part of linguistic variation is crucial to fully understanding the linguistic choices that speakers make in interaction and the social meaning of the variants they use. This becomes even more relevant in situations of language contact, where speakers' linguistic repertoire contains features from different languages that often have unequal status in the communities that employ them. The linguistic ideologies and attitudes that are present in these situations is likely to result in explicit discussion of specific linguistic forms, the groups that use them and the styles associated with them. The salience of these associations and the speakers' awareness of them can have an influence on how individual variants from the languages involved are employed, which ones become available to do social work and what type of meaning they are able to index.

Focusing on the contact variety spoken in urban areas of Asturias (Spain), this study investigates how variable patterns in the production and perception of Asturian features might be explained by examining their cognitive and social salience, and the different levels of sociolinguistic awareness observed in the communities in which Asturian and Spanish are in contact. First, I analyze publicly available data to elucidate what Asturian features are most frequently object of metalinguistic commentary. Then, I investigate the role that awareness and salience have on various phenomena of linguistic variation observed in Xixón. I do this by re-examining the results obtained in previous analyses of the production and perception of three linguistic variables that originate in the contact between the two languages: the



alternation between /o/ and /u/ in the masculine singular morpheme, /as/ and /es/ in the feminine plural morpheme, and “es” and “ye” as the third person singular form of the verb “ser” (“to be”).

In the following section, I delve into the literature on salience and awareness, laying the theoretical background for the analysis. In section 3, I discuss the outcomes of the Asturian/Spanish contact in Asturias, and, in section 4, I discuss the differences in awareness of various linguistic features analyzing metalinguistic commentary from social media. In section 5, I explore the effect of salience and explicit awareness on the perceptions of the variation in gender morphemes. Section 6 examines how the availability of Asturian “ye” to index interactional stances relates to the speakers’ awareness of this sociolinguistic variant and their control over its use. Finally, in section 7, I offer some concluding remarks.

## 2. Awareness and Salience in Sociolinguistics

Awareness is a theoretical construct that has been employed in sociolinguistic research to describe the level of consciousness that speakers possess with respect to particular linguistic forms and their connection to social categories. In addition to consciousness, awareness is linked to factors like salience, attention and noticeability (a salient or prominent feature is more likely to be attended to and to be noticed). A quick glance at the scholarship on these concepts reveals the complexity of trying to operationalize their relationship to language behavior. As a result, researchers have approached the topic of awareness from a myriad of methodological and theoretical perspectives. One of the first attempts to incorporate awareness into analyses of language variation is Labov’s (1972) distinction between indicators, markers and stereotypes. While the three types of features are correlated with social properties, they differ in the level or type of awareness that speakers have of this correlation. In the case of indicators, the relationship between linguistic form and social properties remains below the level of consciousness. In contrast to this, speakers are normally aware to some degree of the social properties linked to markers and stereotypes, and can deploy them to index different sociolinguistic styles. The difference between them lies in that stereotypes are also subject of metalinguistic commentary and conscious social evaluation. Squires (2016, p. 81) describes this and similar approaches to awareness as “a matter of the raising of internal *knowledge* to the surface of speaker’s consciousness, with a continuum of *awareness* representing a continuum from knowledge that is implicit to explicit”, a differentiation to which I will return in the following sections.

As part of his work on perceptual dialectology and folk linguistics, Preston (1996) proposes a more detailed description of the relationship between awareness and language use, utilizing four “modes of awareness” to refer to the types of “internal knowledge” about linguistic variables that speakers possess. A linguistic fact might be more or less available to speakers as a topic of explicit discussion (*availability*). Their descriptions of linguistic forms or patterns might be more or less scientifically accurate (*accuracy*) or include various degrees of *detail*. Finally,



speakers may or may not be able to *control* their own use of a linguistic form or variety. These modes of awareness are relatively independent of each other (an individual might be able to discuss a particular linguistic topic but only in global terms) and largely depend on sociocultural factors particular to each linguistic community.

What many sociolinguistic approaches to awareness have in common is that they tend to describe it as the speakers' ability to discuss specific linguistic features. However, research on this topic has demonstrated that there are many other dimensions of awareness. For instance, as Drager and Kirtley (2016, p. 1) explain, “[s]ometimes researchers use the term to refer to an awareness of a social category (e.g. Jock) or a linguistic variant (e.g. fishin’), and other times they refer to the awareness of a relationship between a social category and a linguistic variant (e.g. Midwesterners say ‘pop’).”<sup>1</sup> There are also different levels of awareness. For example, McGowan and Babel (2020) employ different experimental techniques to investigate the role of *implicit* and *explicit* awareness in the perceptions of Spanish and Quechua speakers speaking Spanish. Specifically, they test how the respondents' perception of the language dominance of the speaker influences vowel discrimination (implicit level of awareness) and metalinguistic comments (explicit level), despite hearing the same auditory stimuli. While the authors recognize that all dimensions of awareness cannot be reduced to this distinction, their study shows that, on the one hand, there are different qualities of awareness and, on the other, that those qualities affect language behavior.

Another important aspect of awareness brought up in previous research is that its role can only be understood in light of the larger social environment and local societal structures. For instance, Babel (2016) finds that women in a Bolivian community use different strategies to resist engaging in a particular male-dominated oratorical style of language in the context of public meetings. The use of these strategies is the result of a type of awareness that is highly dependent on an understanding of the sociolinguistic norms of the community and the power relations that exist within it. In addition, elements from the specific interactional contexts in which speakers participate also impact sociolinguistic awareness. Silverstein (1981), for instance, argues that awareness is influenced by language properties, and contextual and interactional factors, both of which can have an effect on the salience of specific features.

Drager and Kirtley (2016, p. 12) define salience as “the degree to which something stands out relative to other, neighboring items.” As I mentioned above, and as Silverstein (1981) points out, salience is intricately connected to awareness. Salient linguistic elements are more likely to be noticed, and, as a result, speakers are more likely to be aware of them. Racz (2013) differentiates between cognitive and social salience. While cognitive salience is a property of linguistic features that facilitates their perception, social salience implies that a linguistic form is used for social indexation. In other words, the cognitive salience of a linguistic form is

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<sup>1</sup> “Midwesterners” refers to English speakers from the American Midwest



independent of the social meaning indexed by it. Racz (2013) explains that a feature is cognitively salient as a result of its low probability of occurrence (or surprisal), due to its dissimilarity to the rest of the linguistic structure or its unexpectedness in a particular context. In contrast, a feature is socially salient when it indexes social meaning; that is, when there exists an association between that linguistic form and a social category or characteristic. The author argues that cognitive salience is a prerequisite for social salience, such that all sociolinguistic variants that are socially salient are also cognitively salient (but not vice versa).

Both awareness and salience have been demonstrated to influence the choices the speakers make in speech production. For instance, speakers of stigmatized language varieties might avoid features from those linguistic systems in some contexts or use them to index in-group solidarity in others. Carmichael (2017) found that r-lessness, a salient but declining feature of a particular dialect of New Orleans English, was more frequently employed by individuals who wanted to express a connection with the neighborhood where that dialect is spoken. Speakers might also restrict their use of particular linguistic forms in certain registers, in response to their interlocutor's speech or to perform particular styles. Sharma's (2011) analysis of the use of British and Indian phonetic variants by British-born second-generation South Asians illustrates this phenomenon. The author finds that young women in the study reserved the use of salient phonetic features of Indian English for home interactions. In contrast, in the context of an interview, the speakers shifted to the British variants.

Experimental research has shown that awareness and salience can also affect linguistic perception. For instance, Juskan (2018) finds that priming listeners with social information about the speakers they hear only affects linguistic perception when respondents are aware of the sociolinguistic variable under study. In what follows, I discuss how patterns in the production and perception of Asturian features might be explained by examining their salience and awareness in the communities that employ them.

### 3. Language Variation in Asturian Spanish

The contact between Asturian and Spanish in Asturias has led to various phenomena of linguistic transfer or interference. In the urban centers of the region, speakers of Spanish have incorporated into their speech features from the regional language. This incorporation, however, is not categorical. Instead, intra-speaker variation exists and speakers alternate, sometimes in the same interaction, between Asturian forms and their Spanish equivalents. The result is a hybrid system that can be situated in a continuum of contact varieties. D'Andrés (2002) provides a detailed characterization of this continuum, including the urban variety that he names Minimal Asturian, an originally Asturian system that has experienced massive influence from Spanish. According to the author, this system is characterized by the presence of a set of "differential features" from Asturian. Speakers in the urban areas of Asturias are often aware of the fact that they speak a linguistic variety that



combines forms from the two linguistic systems that are present in their community. When asked to describe their speech, their answers include characterizations like the following:

- (1) “Hablo castellano aunque a veces utilizo alguna palabra en asturiano”  
(‘I speak Castilian although sometimes I use some words in Asturian’)
- (2) “Lo común para mucha gente, un castellano lleno de expresiones en asturiano”  
(‘What is the norm for a lot of people, Castilian full of expressions in Asturian’)
- (3) “Buen castellano con toque asturiano”  
(‘Good Castilian with an Asturian touch’)

Even though d’Andrés (2002) claims that these features appear as a cohesive block in the speech of urban Asturians, the existence of inter- and intra-speaker variation in metropolitan speech communities is well documented in the literature (Sánchez Álvarez, 1979; Barnes, 2016). Some studies have shown that this alternation is regulated by linguistic and social factors, such as sex, education and occupational prestige. For instance, in Barnes (2016) I found that male speakers from Xixón were more likely to use Asturian final /-u/ for the masculine singular morpheme than women. In addition, those with lower education levels and in professions with lower occupational prestige were also more likely to produce the Asturian variant. Some features from Asturian are also incorporated into speech more frequently than others. Barnes and Schwenter (2013) found that, in a sample of 16 speakers from Xixón, the great majority of them employ Asturian /-u/ in the masculine singular morpheme and the Asturian forms of the verb “ser” (“to be”), while other Asturian forms are less frequent. Production data from these same communities, as well as the metalinguistic observations reported above, also reveal that the inclusion of Asturian features in an individual’s speech does not occur in a categorical manner. This intra-speaker variation highlights the stylistic nature of the alternation between Spanish and Asturian. In the early research on the interferences between the two languages, Prieto (1991) described the system as a continuum of stylistic choices in which the presence of Asturian forms was highly dependent on the communicative context and the type of interlocutors involved in the exchange. The author explains that the presence of Asturian features normally increases in relaxed situations in which jokes are exchanged. She mentions four stylistic factors that can affect the choice of one variant over the other: topic, level of formality, channel and the purpose of the conversation. Fernández Lorences (2011) also reported on the stylistic use of the switches between the two languages, explaining their pragmatic and communicative functions, and emphasizing the gradual nature of the phenomenon. Speakers are also aware of the stylistic nature of their alternation between Asturian and Spanish linguistic forms, often commenting on the specific contexts in which they use each language:



- (4) “En ámbitos formales hablo un castellano casi perfecto. En ámbitos más desenfadados lo que llamamos amestao, una mezcla de castellano y asturiano”  
(‘In formal situations I speak almost perfect Castilian. In more relaxed situations, what we call “amestao”, a mixture of Castilian and Asturian’)
- (5) “Uso el español adecuando mi registro a cada situación. A veces mezclo palabras o estructuras asturianas si estoy hablando de forma natural en un contexto relajado” (‘I use Spanish changing my register according to each situation. Sometimes I mix Asturian words or structures if I’m speaking in a natural way in a relaxed context’)

As the descriptions above indicate, speakers frequently claim to use Asturian in informal situations and when there exists a close relationship with their interlocutors (such as friends or family). These overt comments about language practices demonstrate that there exists a level of explicit awareness not only of the hybrid nature of the linguistic varieties spoken in these communities, but also of the specific styles that speakers associate with the use of features from the languages in contact. This type of knowledge falls under what Preston (1996) described as “global awareness”. Speakers can globally characterize their linguistic variety by identifying what linguistic systems they generally employ and in what contexts and styles they associate with each.

#### 4. Explicit Awareness of Asturian Features

The existence of the types of global awareness described above does not imply a lack of detailed knowledge of the Asturian linguistic system. In fact, metalinguistic commentary on specific features of Asturian can often be found in public fora like social media. The examples collected from Twitter and reproduced in (6) - (10) illustrate this phenomenon:

- (6) Guía para hablar asturiano: 1.Acabar las palabras en u. 2.Decir ye de vez en cuando. 3.Soltar un ho al final de las frases  
(‘Guide to speaking Asturian: 1. End words in u. 2. Say ye every once in a while. 3. Throw an ho at the end of sentences.’)
- (7) Cómo hablar asturiano: acaba todas las palabras en u. Fin.  
(‘How to speak Astuiran: end all words in u. The end.’)
- (8) Es llegar a casa y empezarme a salir el “asturiano” de hablar con el ye y acabar las palabras en -u o en -in(a) XD.  
(‘I get home and “Asturian” starts coming out, speaking with ye and ending words in -u or in -ina’)
- (9) Asturiano= acabar las “o” en “u” y las “a” en “e”. Luego “es” es “ye” y poco más.  
(‘Asturian= ending “o” in “u” and “a” in “e”. Then “es” is “ye” and little else.’)



- (10) Lo primero que tienes que saber es que YE = ES. Es básico, en Asturias da igual que la persona no sepa hablar asturiano, que el ye usalo si o si. Y los tiempos compuestos aquí ni se tocan. ('The first thing that you need to know is that YE = ES. That's basic, in Asturias it doesn't matter if the person doesn't speak Asturian, they must use ye. And perfect tenses, here we don't even touch them')

In these examples “u” refers to the Asturian masculine singular morpheme /-u/; “e” refers to the vowel present in /-es/, the feminine plural morpheme in some Asturian varieties; -in(a) is an Asturian diminutive; and “ye” is the diphthongized Asturian form of the third person singular in the present tense of verb “ser” (“to be”). Aside from the simplification that is evident in statements like these, which, on the one hand, reduce the linguistic system of Asturian to a handful of features and, on the other, overgeneralize their use, it is also apparent that 1) individuals are capable of identifying certain linguistic features as Asturian, and 2) there are forms from the regional language that are more likely to be object of metalinguistic commentary than others. Thus, while some of these descriptions might lack accuracy, they are detailed in their inclusion of specific linguistic detail. Some comments also hint at the existence of a ranking of features in the minds of speakers. For instance, the user in (10) presents the use of Asturian “ye” as “basic”, and a form that is employed even by speakers who do not have any knowledge of Asturian.

In this section, I further explore this dimension of awareness, with the goal of determining what specific features speakers most frequently highlight and what types of associations they make. In order to do so, I used the software Octoparse to extract the results of a Twitter search that returned all the tweets from 2013 to 2022 that included the expression “hablar asturiano” (‘speak Asturian’) and one of the following: “ye”, “u”, “es”, “ho” (an Asturian interjection [Prieto Entrialgo, 2015]), “oh” (a common misspelling of the interjection “ho”), “prestar” (‘enjoy’) or “guaje” (‘child’). Unlike other social media, the public nature of Twitter allows us to collect vast amounts of real-world language data. In addition, interactions on this platform touch on a wide variety of topics, and the short format of tweets creates a uniform and comparable corpus of utterances. However, we should bear in mind that only a subsection of the population interacts on this platform, and that this group might not be fully representative of the entire community under study. Despite this limitation, Twitter is a useful tool for examining metalinguistic commentary.

The resulting 65 tweets were analyzed individually and coded for what Asturian features they contained. Even though many reference lexical items like “guaje”, “prestar” and “mancar” (‘hurt’), I consider those separately. Additionally, comments that only cited lexical examples that contained Asturian forms, as in “les vaques” (‘the cows’), were excluded unless the example was accompanied by a mention of the specific feature, as in “es”. The bar graph in Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of each of the Asturian forms recorded in the data:



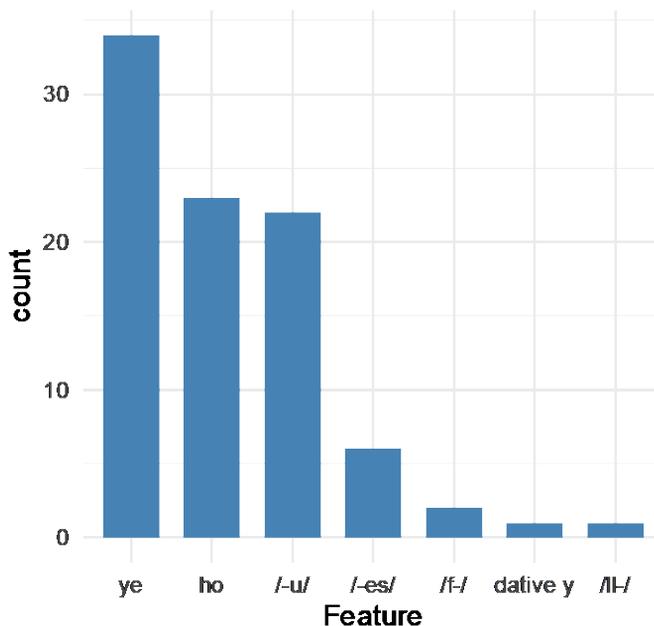


Figure 1. Frequency distribution of Asturian features

As Figure 1 indicates, the most frequently mentioned feature in the Twitter data analyzed is “ye” (n = 34), followed closely by “ho” (n = 23) and /-u/ (n=22). While the use of /-es/ is alluded to occasionally (n=6), its mention is not as common as that of the top three forms. Among all the lexical items that are referred to as Asturian, the only ones that are recorded more than once are “guaje” (n = 6) and “prestar” (n = 4).

The tweets that include these features can be classified in three different topic categories. The first and most common is the delegitimization of Asturian as a language often in response to calls for its co-official status, claiming that reports on the use of Asturian overstate how widespread the language is.

- (11) Esos números no se los cree nadie. Un 73% hablando bable???? Si acabar las frases con una “O” y usar “ye” es hablar asturiano, entonces OK, pero el resto, es imposible.

(‘Nobody believes those numbers. 73% speaking Asturian???? If ending sentences in “O” and using “ye” is speaking Asturian, then OK, but the rest, it’s impossible.’)

- (12) 55 años viviendo en Asturias y sólo he escuchado hablar en Asturiano cuando es políticamente de interés hacerlo —una entrevista, una intervención política... —, en la calle, nunca, en un bar, nunca, en el mercado, nunca... Salvo que usar “ye” y “préstame”, sea hablar asturiano...

(‘55 years living in Asturias and I have only heard people speaking in Asturian when it’s politically beneficial —an interview, a political intervention...— in



the street, never, in a bar, never, at the market, never... Unless using “ye” and “préstame” is speaking Asturian...’)

We can also include in this category examples like those in (6), (7) and below in (13), which simplify the Asturian system in order to exaggerate its typological similarity with Spanish and, as a result, devalue the regional language.

- (13) A ver, tonto del culo...hablar Asturiano es acabar todas las palabras en U. Ahi tienes tu mierda de idioma. (‘Look, dumbass...speaking Asturian is ending all words in U. There is your shitty language’)

A second category of tweets include statements in direct response to the claims that attempt to downplay the use of Asturian. These comments denounce the types of simplifications illustrated above and aim to explain that speaking Asturian goes beyond the use of a handful of features:

- (14) pero tu te crees que hablar asturiano es hablar castellano con el "ye" de por medio? que inculdo eres hijo mio.  
 ‘but do you believe that speaking Asturian is speaking Castilian with “ye” in the middle? you’re so ignorant, buddy’)
- (15) Los locals: hablar asturiano es cambiar todos las -as por -es y -o por -u  
 El asturiano: \*tiene tres géneros gramaticales en los que se diferencia masculino -u de neutro -o; y dos formas dialectales de hacer el plural femenino: centro-oriental -es y occidental -as\*  
 (‘The locals: speaking Asturian is changing all -as for -es and -o for -u. Asturian: \*has three grammatical genders that can differentiate masculine -u from neuter -o; and two dialectal forms of marking the feminine plural: central-eastern -es and western -as\*’)

Finally, a third category ridicules the use of these features by outsiders. For instance, in (16) a user denounces the incorrect use of “-us” for the masculine plural morpheme:

- (16) Cuando alguien que no es de aquí intenta "hablar" asturiano y pluraliza las palabras que terminan en "u" como fatu por ejemplo, fatus.  
 (‘When someone that is not from here tries to “speak” Asturian and pluralizes words that end in “u” like fatu for example, fatus.’)

In addition to the three thematic categories described above, the tweets analyzed in this study illustrate some of the associations that speakers make between the use of Asturian and Asturian features, and various social meanings. In (17) for example, the user denounces the Galician’s inauthentic use of Asturian forms, equating their forced incorporation of “ho” to other cultural markers of out-group identity, like calling “sidra” by the incorrect name and drinking it without pouring it.



- (17) Lllaman a la sidra Sidriña y la beben sin escanciar, fuerzan el “ho” después de las frases para “hablar Asturiano”  
 (‘They call cider Sidriña and they drink it without pouring it, they force “ho” after sentences to “speak Asturian”’)

Asturian features are also often mentioned in relation to experiences of linguistic repression, which highlight the connection between the use of the language, and regional and local identities. For instance, in (18) the user first denounces the attempts to delegitimize Asturian, to then call for continuing “the fight for what’s ours”, in reference to the regional language.

- (18) exactamente, mucha gente piensa que hablar asturiano es decir "esto que ye" o "que tal ho" pero no es así, es usar ciertos vocablos derivados, pero bueno hay que seguir luchando por cuidar lo nuestro y ponerlo en valor  
 (‘exactly, a lot of people think that speaking Asturian is saying “esto que ye” o “que tal ho” but it’s not like that, it is using certain derived words, but whatever we have to keep fighting and caring for what’s ours and giving it value’)

In (19) the user describes their experiences of linguistic discrimination to respond to a tweet in which someone states their opposition to what they see as the linguistic imposition of Asturian. The user in (20) also recalls being forbidden to use the minority language, including the sporadic incorporation of individual features like “ye” and “ho”.

- (19) Imposición lingüística es que desde pequeña me hayan llamado "paleta" por hablar asturiano y que en la uni nos den toques de atención por decir "ye"  
 (‘Linguistic imposition is being called a hick since I was a child for speaking in Asturian, and being reprimanded in the university for saying “ye”’)
- (20) no sé si vos conté que de guaje mi señora madre prohibíame hablar asturiano (incluso decir "ye" u "ho") pero si no pues vos lo cuento agora  
 (‘I don’t know if I told you that when I was a child my mother forbade me from speaking Asturian (even saying “ye” or “ho”) but if I didn’t, I’m telling you now’)

In describing how people called her “paleta” for using Asturian, the user in (19) also highlights the association between the use of Asturian and rural identities. This association is indirectly alluded to in tweets where those that are against the official status of the language claim to not have not heard it spoken even in rural areas.

- (21) Creo que no ha leído ud la parte de que en #Asturias sólo se entremezclan algunas palabras.  
 Decir ye en lugar de es, no es hablar asturiano.  
 Unas personas usarán un 3% de palabras asturianas y las menos, un 35% y ese es todo el asturiano que escuchará ud incluso en las aldeas.



(‘I think you haven’t read the part where in #Asturias people only mix some words.

Saying ye instead of es, is not speaking Asturian.

Some people will use 3% of Asturian words and the minority, 35% and that’s all the Asturian that you will hear even in the villages.’)

In all, the metalinguistic commentaries included in the tweets analyzed in this section demonstrate that, in addition to being able to identify some features as part of the Asturian linguistic system, speakers are aware of the value of Asturian as a marker of in-group and regional identity, and the socio-indexical link between the language and rural status. Furthermore, we see that not all the features that constitute what d’Andrés categorized as “Minimal Asturian” have an equal degree of availability, with “ye”, “ho” and /-u/ being more frequently mentioned in metalinguistic commentary.

## 5. Implicit Awareness, Salience and the Social Meaning of Asturian Features

The data presented in section 3 raises some important questions about awareness and linguistic behavior. How do these dimensions of explicit awareness correlate with awareness at a more implicit level? What effect do the differences in feature availability and the speakers’ ability to provide linguistic detail have on the perception of these variables? To answer these questions, I reanalyzed the responses to a perception experiment that I conducted in 2015, in which I used a matched guise task to compare the perceptions of Asturian /-u/ to those of Asturian /-es/.

While /-u/ and /-es/ can be considered similar linguistic variants – they are both gender morphemes that involve the raising of a vowel with respect to the Spanish equivalent – there are notable differences between them. The Twitter analysis reveals that /-u/ is more frequently mentioned in explicit discussions of Asturian features, indicating that /-u/ is more likely to be identified by speakers as an Asturian form (i.e. more available). It is possible to attribute this difference in awareness to a difference in noticeability and salience between the two morphemes. If we recall, Racz (2013) contends that cognitive salience is a pre-requisite for social salience. He states that “A segment is cognitively salient if it has a large surprisal value when compared to an array of language input” (Racz, 2013, p. 37). This approach is based on an information-theoretic framework, according to which items that are less likely to appear in a particular position, are more surprising to the language user and, as a result, more salient. If we compare the Asturian and Spanish phonological systems we observe that, while /-u/ is indeed a productive morpheme in Asturian, unstressed /u/ rarely occurs in word-final position (only in a handful of lexical items, such as “espíritu” [“spirit”], “tribu” [“tribe”] or “impetu” [“momentum”]). In contrast to this, word-final /es/ is frequent in both languages. In Spanish, /-es/ is not only used as the plural morpheme in words that end in a consonant (as in “mujeres” [“women”] and “trenes” [“trains”]) but it is also employed as a second person singular morpheme in the verbal paradigm (as in “bebes” [“you drink”] and



“cantes” [“you sing” subj.]). The fact that the majority of speakers in Asturian metropolitan areas are dominant in Spanish would explain why, for those individuals, word-final /-u/ is more cognitively salient than /-es/. The probability of encountering /-u/ in monolingual Spanish is much lower than that of hearing /-es/, making the former more surprising. Racz (2013) examines a similar phenomenon in Hungarian. He finds that, between two different types of hiatus resolution in the language, only the one resulting in the string [ɛj] is socially salient. After comparing the overall transitional probabilities of the resulting vocalic sequences ([ji], [ij], [ɛj], [jɛ]), he determines that clusters with [j] and [i] are much more frequent than those with [ɛ] and [j], making the latter more cognitively salient.

In order to compare the social characteristics that listeners from urban areas of Asturias associate with each variable, I reanalyzed the responses to the matched guise experiment I conducted in 2015. In this survey, which was distributed among 300 participants from Xixón, listeners were asked to rate 8 voices according to a series of relevant social characteristics. For each voice, there were two different guises or matched pairs, recorded by the same speaker, that only differed on whether the Asturian or a Spanish variant was used. Of the 8 recordings, 4 contained either /-o/ or /-u/, and the other 4 contained either /-as/ or /-es/. After hearing only one of the guises in each matched pair, respondents were asked to rate the speakers according to how intelligent, familiar, wealthy, masculine, formal, urban and educated they sounded by either evaluating them in a Likert scale or by selecting a response from a list of pre-set options. Even though in the 2015 study I performed a factor analysis to combine traits that behaved similarly into grouped categories, here I consider them separately to provide a more nuanced description of the social meanings linked to each of the linguistic variants. Thus, I conducted a series of mixed linear regression models, using the *lme4* (Bates et al., 2015) package in R (R Core Team, 2022), where I tested the effect of the language of the variant (i.e. whether the guise included the Asturian variant or the Spanish one) on each of the categories included in the survey. The responses to the multiple-choice questions (or checkbox variables) were converted to numeric values and all scales were centered and standardized (see Barnes [2015] for a complete description of the methodology).

The results of the statistical analysis reveal that, while the language of the variant had a significant effect on all the ratings when the matched pairs contained [-o] and [-u], respectively, in the guises that contained [-as] or [-es], this effect was only significant for ratings of familiarity, masculinity and urban status. The graphs in Figure 2 and Figure 3 illustrate the differences in the evaluations of each social characteristic by linguistic variable. In the boxplots, each box shows the interquartile range of the distribution of the rating. The horizontal line represents the median, the squares inside the boxes represent the mean, and the red squares indicate a statistically significant difference between the means. Finally, the dots above and below the boxes are outliers.



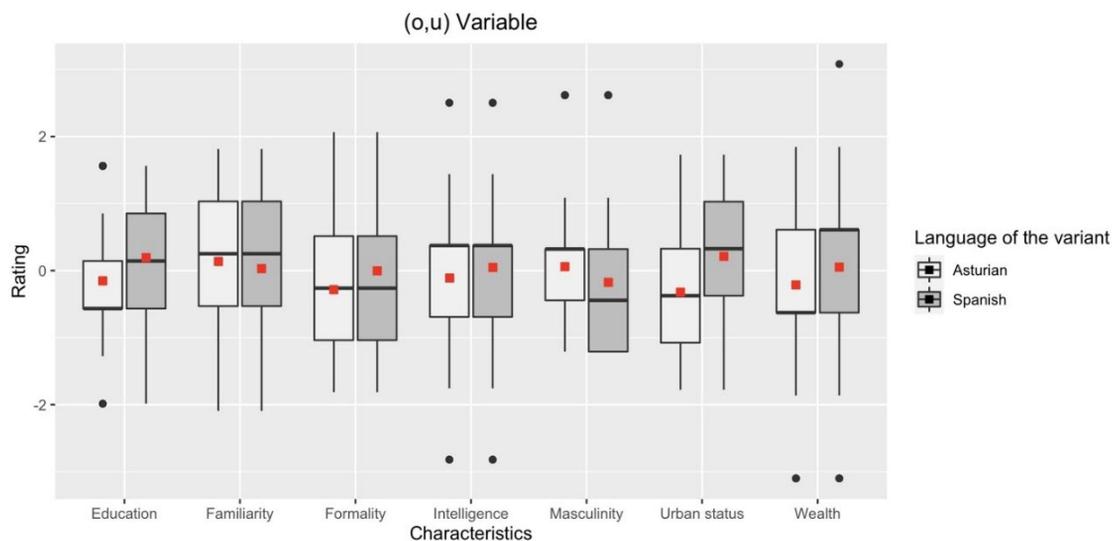


Figure 2. Social ratings of guises containing /-o/ and /-u/ by language of the variant

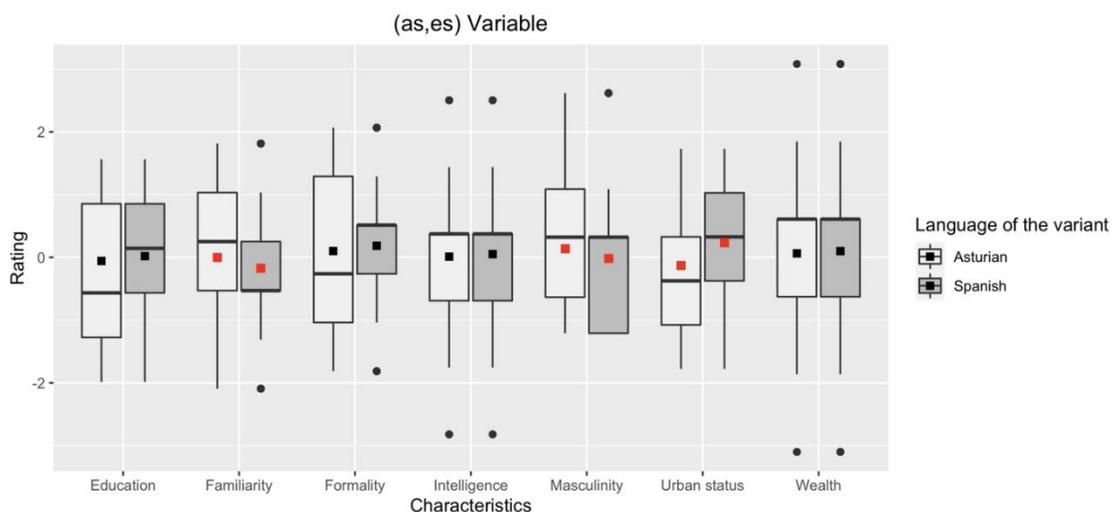


Figure 3. Social ratings of guises containing /-as/ and /-es/ by language of the variant

The boxplots indicate that the use of [-u] and [-es] triggered significantly higher ratings of familiarity and masculinity, while the use of [-o] and [-as] resulted in significantly higher urban status scores. For the latter, however, the effect of the language of the variant was greater when the (o, u) variable was used than when the recordings contained the (as, es) variable. In other words, both Asturian variants were associated with rural status, familiarity and masculinity, and the link between rural status and the Asturian variant was more robust in the case of /-u/. The use of this variant also resulted in significantly lower ratings of education, intelligence,

wealth and formality, while the use of /-es/ did not have a significant effect on the scores given in any of those categories. Taken together, the findings clearly indicate that, for listeners from Xixón, /-u/ is more socially identifying than /-es/.

The differences in the perception of the two Asturian variants parallel the observations from the analysis of metalinguistic commentary on Twitter<sup>2</sup>. The linguistic feature that users more frequently comment on is also the form that significantly affects listener evaluations of speakers across multiple social traits. To put it differently, while both Asturian variants seem to index rural status, masculinity and familiarity to a similar degree, respondents from Xixón are more likely to rate speakers lower in categories like intelligence, education and wealth when they use the feature that is more stereotypically associated with Asturian. Other experimental studies comparing multiple dialectal features have observed similar patterns. For instance, in their examination of the production and perception of English vowel shifts among speakers from Memphis, TN, Fridland et al. (2004) found that shifts that involved front vowels were more consistently identified as Southern. The authors explain this result by comparing it to the production patterns of these vowels, since the shift that is most regionally identifying is also the shift that occurs most frequently in the community under study. In contrast, the vowel shifts that are more widely present in other dialectal varieties (including the one under study) are the least socially identifying as Southern.

In addition to the differences in the cognitive salience of /-u/ and /-es/, it is possible that the disparities in their sociolinguistic perception and their availability for overt commentary lie in the geographic distribution of these features in Asturian. While /-u/ is used as the masculine singular morpheme in the entire region, the marking of feminine plural morphology varies geographically, such that /-es/ is used in central and eastern varieties of Asturian and /-as/ in occidental ones (for instance, the Asturian lexical item for “houses” is “cases” in the central and eastern varieties of the language, but “casas” in the occidental ones). As a result, the link between /-u/ and the regional language might be more robust than that of /-es/. In all, the associations explored in this section and the quantitative analysis of the discussion of Asturian features demonstrate that the differences in explicit and implicit awareness of /-u/ and /-es/ as Asturian features affect the social meaning indexed by these forms. These differences might affect how speakers from the region utilize /-u/ and /-es/ in their everyday interactions, to adopt different styles or construct a particular persona. In the following section, I explore the connection between awareness, control and stance marking, by discussing the stylistic use of “ye”, the most frequently mentioned Asturian feature in metalinguistic discussions.

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<sup>2</sup> Even though Twitter users only represent a subsection of the population, the Asturian features that are frequently object of metalinguistic commentary in this platform are reflective of what I have also observed in sociolinguistic interviews.



## 6. Sociolinguistic Awareness, Control and Stance Taking in Asturian Spanish

The concept of sociolinguistic awareness is intricately connected to that of control. This link is already apparent in Labov's description of indicators, markers and stereotypes, since, in this model, increased awareness leads to greater control over linguistic variation. However, more recent research has demonstrated that the relationship between awareness and control is anything but straightforward. Some scholars contend that some level of awareness is necessary for speakers to control their linguistic behavior, while others have shown that individuals can exhibit control over their language practices even if they are unaware that they are doing so, whether they are motivated by the social identity of their interlocutors (Bell, 1984) or by contextual information that triggers unconscious associations (Hay & Drager, 2010). Nycz (2016) finds that while explicit awareness of a linguistic form in a situation of dialect contact is not a requisite for speakers to acquire it, this awareness might contribute to suppressing the adoption of some stigmatized features in particular lexical items. Some studies have also found that awareness does not necessarily lead to greater control. For example, Johnstone and Kiesling (2008) found an inverse relationship between the production of monophthongized /aw/ in the speech of speakers from Pittsburgh and their awareness of the indexical meaning of this feature, such that individuals who monophthongize /aw/ do not associate it with local identity and those who identify it as an index of localness are less likely to produce it in their own speech. In the context of Asturian, Sánchez Álvarez (1979) found that, even though some speakers from Xixón were aware of the rural/urban opposition in Asturias and the existence of linguistic differences between the two types of communities, they were not able to control the presence of Asturian features in their speech. In the following quotes, participants in her study incorporate Asturian forms (in bold) while they state that the use of this language is restricted to rural areas:

- (22) ¿Aquí?, ¿en las ciudades?; el bable no se habla. Eso **ye en les aldees**.  
(‘Here? in the cities?; Asturian is not spoken here. That’s in the villages’)
- (23) **Eses cosas** no son de aquí. **Hablen** muy aldeano. Claro, boba, críar**onse** en la aldea.  
(‘Those things are not from here. They speak very rural. Of course, silly, they grew up in the village’)

Despite these observations, there are situations in which greater sociolinguistic awareness does lead to more control over an individual's own language behavior. For instance, in her study of Bolivian women's interactions in community meetings, Babel (2016) found that women's awareness of particular discourse styles and social expectations related to language behavior led them to control in what situations they participated, demonstrating the multifaceted nature of awareness. Stylistic variation has been tied to sociolinguistic awareness and control. For instance, Labov's (1994) notion of “attention paid to speech” directly links the speakers’



awareness of sociolinguistic variation to their ability to control what features they employ and which they avoid in different communicative situations. Bell's (1984) "audience design" also connects markers and stereotypes to the existence of intra-speaker variation. In this section, I examine the use of "ye" to adopt specific sociolinguistic styles. I argue that the different levels of awareness (global and specific) of the use of Asturian in general and the socio-indexical symbolism of this specific feature, facilitate its use in interaction to mark particular stances.

The first level of awareness is the speakers' knowledge of the relationship between the use of Asturian and Asturian features, and specific social categories. The most relevant socio-indexical link for Asturians seems to be the association of the regional language with rural communities. This awareness is manifested at both, implicit and explicit levels. The results of the matched guise experiment reviewed in Section 5 showed that speakers are rated as significantly more rural when the use the Spanish variants of each matched pair of utterances. At a more explicit level, comments like the ones reported by Sánchez Álvarez (1979) in (22) and (23) show how this association is present in overt commentary about language behavior in the region. In addition, metalinguistic discussions with speakers in the context of a sociolinguistic interview, also reveal this connection (Barnes, 2016):

- (24) "si hablabas en asturiano no solo no te entendían, sino que te miraban mal, ... '¡yes de pueblo!', 'ye que...' no, 'es que así hablan los del pueblo', digo yo, 'ya, ¿y?', digo, 'yo hablo como se habla en mi tierra'. Es más, yo cuánto mas me decían que era de paletto, yo mas cerrao en asturiano les hablaba"  
 ('If you spoke in Asturian not only did people not understand you, but they also looked at you wrong... 'you're a hick!', 'it's (ast.) just that...' no, 'it's (span.) just that that's how hicks talk', and I say, 'ok, so?', I say, 'I speak like people speak in my region'. Not only that, the more they told me that that was rural, the more Asturian I spoke to them')

The second level of awareness is the association of Asturian and Asturian forms with particular styles. Aside from the comments from speakers and descriptions from previous research reported in Section 3, in his sociolinguistic surveys, Llera Ramo (1994, 2017) reported that speakers claim to use Asturian in interactions with people that they know, such as friends and family, and to talk about "personal topics". The last level of awareness is the specific recognition of "ye" as a feature belonging to the Asturian linguistic system. Even though, as we saw in Section 3, it is not the only form that individuals associate with the regional language, it is more likely to be object of metalinguistic commentary than other Asturian features. "Ye" has also become an overt symbol of local identity that is employed in marketing materials to appeal to Asturians' regional pride. A recent manifestation of this practice is the branding of "Ye Cerveza", a new beer made in Asturias, which directly adopts the verb form as its name. The display on their website, reproduced in Figure 4, explicitly connects "ye" with regional identity, stating that the beer is "obviously" from Asturias and repeating "ye" across the slogan, which does not include any other Asturian features. In addition to the name, the label on the beer



bottle states that the beverage is “100% de la tierra”, a nickname for Asturias that also evokes Asturians’ emotional attachment to “their land”.



Figure 4. Home page of the Ye Cerveza website (<http://www.yecerveza.es/>) and image of a sample beer bottle.

While the awareness and symbolism of “ye” as an index of Asturianness does not imply that all speakers can control its use, I argue that its social salience as an Asturian feature and the awareness of the indexical links between the regional language and certain social categories make it a productive linguistic resource to mark interactional stances among some groups of speakers. These speakers are normally individuals that are dominant in Spanish and that live in urban communities, where the national language dominates.

In 2018, I conducted a study that explored the use of “ye” for stance marking, using quantitative and qualitative methods. While stance and style are not synonymous, sociolinguistic research on stance contends that styles are constructed via a process of stance accretion, or the repetitive use of specific linguistic features to mark particular stances (Podesva, 2009). Snell (2010, p. 650), for instance, suggests “a circular chain of indexicality in which meaning flows from local interactional stances to styles, personas and macro-level identity categories, and then back to local interactional use.” Thus, examining the relationship between linguistic variation and stancetaking contributes to our understanding of the stylistic choices speakers make in a particular speech community. Even though definitions and categorizations of stance vary across disciplines (Du Bois, 2007; Englebretson, 2007; Jaffe, 2009; Kiesling, 2009; Moore & Podesva, 2009; Snell, 2010), the analysis presented here understands stance as “the expression of the speaker’s relationship to the content of their utterances and to those involved in the same speech situation” (Barnes, 2018, p. 2).

The quantitative analysis of the correlation between the use of “ye” and speech activity (Kiesling, 2009) in the interview data collected from 12 speakers from Xixón, revealed that speakers were more likely to use Asturian “ye” over Spanish



“es” in personal evaluations, when they were commiserating with their interlocutor, posing a question or joking. In addition to these correlations, when considering the types of stances that speakers adopted in their utterances in relation to their use of “ye”, I found that the Asturian variant was more likely to co-occur with linguistic markers of uncertainty (25), disagreement (26) or negative affect (27).

- (25) *Eso ya... sabe Dios, paez que ye un poco complicaoc*  
(‘That... God only knows, it seems like it’s a little complicated’)
- (26) [Disagreeing with my previous statement that it must have been hard to do all the work the speaker did to establish her business]  
No, no ye nada porque yo no hice nada... no no yo nada.  
(‘No, it wasn’t much because I didn’t do anything... no no, nothing’)
- (27) *Como el fumar ye malo, bueno pues una bañera en una casa es atroz, ¡atroz!*  
(‘The same way smoking is bad, well, then having a bathtub at home is atrocious, atrocious!’)

In the second part of the study, I performed a qualitative analysis of the speech of two speakers across a variety of interactional contexts, with the objective of contextualizing the quantitative results and obtaining a clearer picture of the interactional and stylistic functions of “ye”. I found that, across their interactions, the use of the Asturian variant was limited to the expression of personal evaluations and joking. Adopting Heritage & Raymond’s (2005) analysis of linguistic behavior in evaluative assessments, I show that “ye” is employed in contexts in which speakers are trying to limit face-loss and maximize social solidarity, as a way of mitigating potentially controversial assessments or personal evaluations. In other words, “ye” contributes to soften statements that might be seen as divisive, in an attempt on the part of the speaker to be regarded positively by their interlocutor. This pattern explains why, in the quantitative analysis, “ye” was more likely to co-occur with expressions of negative affect and disagreement. The qualitative analysis also revealed that the Asturian variant was used when the speaker did not have epistemic rights to the object being evaluated, in order to express uncertainty or downgrade claims that are not based on first-hand knowledge. To summarize, “[w]hether speakers are providing negative assessments, ceding epistemic rights to their interlocutors or showing disagreement with a prior evaluation, the use of ‘ye’ contributes to reducing the impact that an utterance might have on social relations” (Barnes, 2018, p. 21).

In all, the results from both analyses show that Asturian “ye” can be used to index stances of low epistemic commitment, lack of seriousness and social solidarity, as a linguistic resource that is deployed to minimize interpersonal conflict. The repetitive use of “ye” in these interactional contexts, results in the construction of a particular sociolinguistic style, one in which the speakers present themselves as laid-back, easy-going and relaxed. Here, I propose that the availability of “ye” to perform this interactional work is connected to the local symbolism of this feature in the community under study, and the speakers’ awareness of the socio-indexical



meaning of “ye” as a marker of Asturianness. This relationship is bidirectional, such that the repetitive use of “ye” for specific stylistic purposes contributes to its sociolinguistic salience, solidifying its association with a relaxed, easy-going identity that is rooted in the social distribution of the two languages in the community.

## 7. Conclusions

In this article, I have shown that examining the connection between linguistic variation, awareness and salience can inform our understanding of the social meanings of linguistic variants, how speakers utilize those resources to position themselves in interaction and how they deploy them to construct their identities. Considering awareness and salience is particularly fruitful in situations where language ideologies are as prominent as in the Asturian sociocultural context. The correlations discussed in this paper support the idea that, in order to have a deeper understanding of the influence that factors like salience, awareness and control have on linguistic behavior, we must consider the local social structures and larger social environment in which the language varieties are employed (Babel, 2016). Finally, it also demonstrates that salience and awareness should not be understood as dichotomic concepts but as continua that involve explicit and implicit information, conscious and unconscious mechanisms and different levels, types and dimensions of knowledge.

Examining speakers’ production and perception of Asturian and Asturian features in relationship to their awareness of these forms might help us understand the effect that sociohistorical developments and public discourses on the language have on the social meaning of Asturian and the value that individuals, implicitly or explicitly, attribute to it. It also demonstrates the complexity of the indexical meanings of Asturian features and the fundamental role that they have in the daily interactions that take place in the region. While this study focused on a few linguistic forms, there is much to be learned from further exploration of the entire linguistic repertoire of Asturians from a perspective that integrates linguistic analysis, speaker knowledge, societal structures and language ideologies.



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