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THE SPANISH STATE'S LINGUISTIC ABSOLUTISM

Introduction

As in the case of other European countries, Spain's attitude to multilingualism is influenced by the predominance of the state's official language (Spanish) thanks to the processes aimed at promoting this language that are directly dependent on the central government and use all the political, cultural, educational, economic, legal and communicative means to do so. This has led to an obligatory bilingualism for all those in this country whose mother tongue is not Spanish.

Such a process of promoting a state's official language, if sufficiently successful, results in the language becoming considered the common tongue, the language of communication par excellence, the language of understanding and obligatory use, and this justifies and reinforces the linguistic absolutism in favour of the official state language. Thus, the process of extending bilingualism in the autonomous communities that have a second language is not compensated for by a process similar to that of the extension of bilingualism in the autonomous communities whose native tongue is the official state language. The result is a country where part of the population is bilingual in the official state language and their own native language, but with a majority of monolingual individuals: those whose native language is the official state language.

This is the case in Spain today, where the vast majority of the population only speaks one of the state languages (Spanish) and where there are several million people who are bilingual in Spanish and one of the languages spoken in the current autonomous communities (basically, Galician, Basque and Catalan, including Valencian).

This results in a lack of harmony between the various nations that make up today's Kingdom of Spain. Since the Middle Ages at least, Spain has been both a plurinational and plurilingual geopolitical entity. However, above all since the 18th century, Spain has officially been considered mono-national and monolingual, in the sense that all the central government's policies are aimed at establishing, ensuring and strengthening the hegemony of the official state language across all its territories. They are also aimed at preventing – or at least at not promoting or encouraging – people for whom one of the varieties of the

official state language is their mother tongue (Spanish in this case), from learning or using the other languages, with the pretext that the official state language (Spanish) is the common language of communication and that, therefore, it is considered by Spain's linguistic absolutism as the only one that can be used for generalised understanding.

Furthermore, from this absolutist perspective it is considered very negative and counterproductive in an autonomous community in which the native language is not Spanish, for the regional language to occupy or manage to occupy a preferential, pre-eminent or dominant position over the official state language. Bilingualism is only considered positive when the official state language dominates over the native language in each of the autonomous communities that has a tongue other than Spanish as a co-official language.

One of the fundamental points underpinning Spain's linguistic absolutism is the idea that the Spanish language has become the common language in this state thanks to a natural process of expansion across the whole of Spain, and of enthusiastic acceptance by the autonomous communities in today's Kingdom of Spain that have a second, regional language.

This idea is not only apparent in political speeches and state institutions, but is also a constant feature in a Spanish monolingual way of thinking that not only fails to admit that it is absolutist, but instead considers itself to be free of the sins of particularism and secession, which it attributes to those in Spain who promote and defend one of the regional languages (Catalan, Galician, Basque, Asturian, Aragonese).

Of course, the idea that Spanish never dominated in Spain is clearly false, since for several centuries – before and after Franco's dictatorship – teaching for example was generally carried out entirely in Spanish across Spain, without any time being devoted to the other languages spoken in the different parts of the country. The same can be said of the official state institutions, where Spanish has been the only accepted language for centuries.

The transition to democracy

After Franco's death (40 years ago today), democratic perspectives opened up for Spanish society, based on working class and social struggles against the dictatorship and for political and trade union freedom, movements that had in fact started before the dictator died. Faced with these opportunities, the possibility of redefining Spain arose. So, the country went from being a dictatorial monolithic state to a plural state that recognised the various nations it contained and, therefore, the different local languages and cultures that characterised them, and put them on an equal footing.

From the very beginning of the Spanish transition to democracy there were proposals aimed at recognising on an equal basis all the nations and languages

that make up today's Kingdom of Spain, which was to be recognised as a plurinational and plurilingual state.

However, from the very outset, in this new state that aspired to be democratic, this type of proposal clashed with centralist, absolutist monolingualism, the basic objective of which is to maintain Spain as a state in which the Spanish nation and language dominate in all spheres.

For Spanish linguistic absolutism, any indication that the national language (Spanish) was being placed on the same or a similar level of officialdom as Spain's regional languages could only lead to disintegration and, therefore, constitute the path towards the dissolution of the Spanish nation. It is this concern that explains the reaction of the centralist intellectuals and institutions when faced with the possible consequences both of the co-officialdom of languages such as Catalan, Galician and Basque (Aragonese and Asturian do not enjoy co-official status), and from the promotional work aimed at converting this legal co-officialdom into a real co-officialdom where these languages have a position comparable to that of the Spanish language in each of their corresponding autonomous communities.

In the years following Franco's death, as the statutes of autonomy of the different autonomous communities were developed, especially those of Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia, languages such as Galician, Catalan and Basque were recognised as official *de jure* on an equal footing with Spanish – from a legal point of view at least.

Present situation

However, when in subsequent years (especially after the 1980s) some of the governments of these autonomous communities tried to carry out the actions required to promote the corresponding regional languages in order to make legal co-officialdom become a real, effective co-official status in both public and private institutions, the institutions and personalities of centralist Spanish linguistic absolutism raised their voices stridently and intervened to condemn these actions insistently and prevent them from becoming effective, since they believed that they were aimed at marginalising and undermining the Spanish language, which they viewed as the only and exclusive language that could enable all Spanish citizens to understand one another.

Spanish linguistic absolutism is characterised by the exaltation of the concept of *common language* and the discrediting of the concept of *regional language*. Both aspects are inextricably linked. Due to the very exclusive imperatives of this absolutism, the alleged obviousness of the common character of Spanish may lead to the attempt to eliminate one of the fundamental cultural characteristics of the other nations: their linguistic characterisation, recognised, as we have seen, in the respective statutes of autonomy. Moreover, this would help justify their contention that certain communities do not themselves

constitute a nation and that they are therefore incapable of dismembering or dissolving a monolithic and exclusive Spanish nation.

Spanish linguistic absolutism's discourse is particularly clear and transparent and has not changed substantially for several centuries. The same clichés keep on being repeated based on the idea that Spanish is a language that is intrinsically superior to the others: it is easier to understand and use, more useful and more universal.

Spanish politicians have not promoted Spain's multilingualism and plurilingualism, but instead encouraged monolingualism in Spanish and bilingualism with one of Spain's regional languages, but only in the populations whose native tongue is not Spanish. Therefore, the official central policy, still in force, on the languages of Spain is: monolingualism for the majority of the population and bilingualism with dominance of the Spanish language for people whose native language is not Spanish (Moreno Cabrera 2008, 2014 and 2015).

At present, Spain's Congress of Deputies' regulation forbids the use of any language other than Spanish, which means that individuals representing parties in the autonomous communities with their own regional language are forbidden from expressing themselves in this language, despite this being the tongue used on a daily basis by the millions of people whom they represent. This representative and democratic deficit, directly inherited from Franco's dictatorship, still exists in Spain today and shows only too clearly the linguistic absolutism of Spain's fundamental institutions.

Today, Spain's judiciary, executive and legislature are strictly monolingual. This represents a resounding rejection of the plurinational and plurilingual character of the state in which they operate. The education system controlled by the central government is still strictly monolingual in Spanish (marginalising Spain's regional languages), just as it was under Franco's dictatorship. Spain's majority parties still abide by this convention on the pretext that, after the death of the dictator, there was a consensus to make the country a democracy.

However, the process that gave rise to the Spanish Constitution of 1978, which is still in force, was carried out under the threat of action by the pro-Franco military leadership, which materialised itself in several attempted coups d'état, the most famous of which was in February 1981, and ended in the dictatorship's power structures remaining totally intact. The result of this is that in today's Spain a large number of phenomena directly inherited from Franco's dictatorship still prevail: one of the main aspects is the lack of recognition that Spain is a plurinational and plurilingual state.

Two fundamental institutions

Spain's policy of linguistic absolutism is embodied by two fundamental institutions devoted to the Spanish language: the Royal Spanish Academy (Real Academia Española, RAE) and the Cervantes Institute (Instituto Cervantes, IC),

with both institutions supporting, disseminating and promoting Spain's linguistic absolutism with regard to culture (they are to a great extent funded by the Spanish Government). The RAE encompasses Spain and the IC the rest of the world. The RAE attempts to maintain the prestige and authority of European Spanish over Latin American Spanish in order to justify its status as a leading and founding institute in the face of the American academies and so as to control the Spanish language worldwide. The IC attempts to ensure that the Spanish spoken in Spain is the dominant version taught to students abroad, rather than Latin American versions. Moreover, it promotes the expansive policy of Spanish by presenting this language as the only international tongue that can counteract the influence of English in both areas.

An alternative model?

The Spanish Government's absolutist linguistic policy is clearly not the only linguistic policy possible. Another approach would be to promote the plurilingualism in Spain's languages to the entire population, so that the vast majority of people could become fluent in at least two of Spain's languages. It would be important for all the state powers to accept and promote state recognition of the nations and languages that currently make up Spain, something impossible within the present constitutional framework. The latter objective, which could be achieved through linguistic education and policies, would contribute greatly to the cohesion and harmony of the nations that make up the Kingdom of Spain today. On an international level, it would be necessary to recognise that the internationality of Spanish lies in the varieties of the language spoken in the Americas and not in those spoken in Spain, which are today both minority and residual.

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