Is Monolingualism Possible?

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The Problem

In present-day Spain, bilingualism is a problem in many respects, including literary: Writers can be (and are) sometimes the object of attack due to their linguistic choice. In recent years the public discussion on this issue seems to be slowing down, a welcome development, but the rejection of the non-Castilian Spanish languages in certain areas of the country continues, a rejection that is sometimes genuine and popular but that frequently is the artificial creation of the media and some nonnationalist, right-wing political groups or the opposing hard-core nationalistic groups, whether right or left wing. The first group, of course, rejects bilingualism and defends the exclusive use of Spanish, whereas for the second group Spanish has to be rejected and it is the exclusive use of the vernacular that is the object of their political and cultural struggle, so much so that some people even propounded abandoning the teaching of Spanish at school in favor of English, so that children would be taught Catalan or Basque and English as the second language, whereas Spanish would continue to be acquired naturally (through contact with Spanish speakers, the media, etc.), but no formal instruction in it would be provided. This proposal—which didn’t go beyond the stage of wishful thinking among some nationalist groups, mainly in Catalonia—makes full sense in any independent nation; the degree of independence or self-government is therefore an issue that has not been solved yet.

But even if bilingualism has always been there and a serious problem was historically made of it in a recurrent fashion, the situation was made much worse during Franco’s regime. As is well enough known, the exclusive use of Spanish in all public affairs, including education,
was made mandatory. As the rightist groups in Spain are trying to forget as much as possible of the country’s recent history (including the nineteenth century) and a rewriting of earlier historical figures and events is currently underway (although fortunately not on too systematic a basis), much in the spirit of present-day revisionist history-writing, something similar is happening with this issue, so that the linguistic politics of Franco’s regime seems to be in the process of revision, too, so that a speech by King Juan Carlos, obviously written by the government, included a reference to the Spanish language having been voluntarily accepted by many peoples of the world and never imposed on anyone. These words, in addition to offending many people¹ and opening a major debate that lasted for several months, were simply false, and unfortunately not only for the period of the Generalissimo’s dictatorship.

But let’s leave these more general problems aside for the moment. It is frequently forgotten, however, that Franco’s regime not only opposed the use of the non-Castilian Spanish vernaculars;² what mattered was that Spanish should be the only language around: Foreign movie pictures had to be dubbed into Spanish, a tradition now so firmly entrenched in the Spanish public that it has lead to the opposing swing of the bilingual pendulum, dubbing in other languages of Spain now being favored instead of, or in addition to, Spanish, although fortunately the times have not made it possible to declare such dubbing legally compulsory and exclusive. Teaching and using foreign languages was also rejected, or at least suspected: In an article published in 1952 in a literary journal published by the Consejo Superior the Investigaciones Científicas,³ José de Entrambasaguas, one of the leading Spanish literary scholars, explained in rich detail how and why learning foreign languages is something that only Jews and other apatrids would do, while it is wholly unnecessary in imperial nations as Spain and England:⁴ “Casi todos los tontos tienen una veneración supersticiosa por el conocimiento de otros idiomas ajenos al suyo... [L]os judíos, apátridas, incrustados circunstancialmente en tantos países, valoran el poliglotismo tanto como el dinero, su lengua universal.”⁵ The fact is that until the late 1950s no degrees in foreign languages existed at any Spanish university and the teachers of French, which by then was practically exclusive at the Spanish secondary schools, and later those of other languages (English, German, Italian), had salaries much lower than those earned by teachers of more serious subjects, including Latin and Greek (Lorenzo 10). Some languages entered our universities extremely late, mainly for political reasons, as in the case of Russian; others are simply not there yet.