

University of Pannonia
Faculty of Humanities
Multilingualism Doctoral School

EVALUATION
of *Ibtissem Smari's* Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

Title:

**The Role of Language in Shaping National Identity in Post-
Revolutionary Tunisia**

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Assessor: *István Csernicsekó*

We, living in Central and Eastern Europe, take it for granted that language, identity and nation-building are closely related concepts. We know from our own experience that a standardized and codified language plays a decisive role in the construction of identity and the consolidation of the nation-state. We have also seen on numerous occasions that language conflicts between the nations of Europe are not uncommon. The armed conflict that broke out in the former Yugoslavia at the end of the 20th century, and since February 24, 2022, we have witnessed how Moscow used the language issue as a pretext for military aggression against Kiev. As a researcher of language policy, Ibtissem Smari's thesis on the role of language in the construction of identity in Tunisia, North Africa, was particularly interesting and exciting for me. It is clear from the work that what we often think of as a European characteristic is also true for other continents. Using his own research, the author of the dissertation demonstrates that language problems in Tunisia shed light on the relationships between social hierarchies, language customs and nation-states. Based on the thesis, it is also clear that different parts of the North African Arabic dialect continuum are faced with not exactly the same linguistic and social problems.

Ibtissem Smari's thesis convincingly demonstrates that it is crucial to understand how language contributes to the construction of identity and how it affects people's daily lives in Tunisia. The author presents the language policy as a dynamic model. She analyzes the

linguistic situation of Tunisia and the language policies and models applied in the country in a broad historical and social context. Ibtessem Smari's research also reveals that language plays a significant role in shaping the cultural identity of Tunisians, reflecting their historical and social background. Particularly impressive is the part of the thesis that highlights how language use reinforces or challenges power structures in different historical and political contexts and situations. After the events of the Jasmine Revolution and the Arab Spring, it is important that such analyzes are made of the language policy situation in the North African region, which help to navigate the linguistic conditions that have developed after the post-colonial legacy. We can also get closer to understanding the question, what implications did the revolution have in raising the question of Tunisianity.

In Tunisia, an overview of the status and functions of English and French is obviously unavoidable, and one cannot forget about the regional variants of the Arabic dialect continuum. The parts of the thesis that show that Tunisian Arabic, *tūnsī* as they call it, is a different variety from Modern Standard Arabic and from other Arab dialects are also valuable. Contemporary Tunisian literary production is the symbol of the gradual disappearance of the differentiation of the social functions between dialects and Modern Standard Arabic, not only at an oral level, but also at a written one (La Rosa 2020).

While reading the thesis, I remembered what Ahmed Ech-Charfi (2019: 19-20) wrote: "we are apparently witnessing the birth of a Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian, etc. language out of the Arabic continuum as a result of the Western discourse about language and nation" (see also, e.g., Gibson 2002). It would be interesting to know what the researcher of this topic, the author of this remarkable thesis, thinks about this.

The complexity of the language situation is indicated by the fact that the situation of minority languages is also a factor that a good and thorough description of language policy must take into account. It's unfortunate that Tunisia continues to ignore Amazigh linguistic and cultural rights. The 'post-revolution' constitution privileges 'Arab-Islamic identity' to the detriment of Amazigh, exacerbating longstanding exclusion, discrimination and linguistic impoverishment (Kabel 2023: 386).

The author's research shows that Tunisian youth are able to cope in a variety of linguistic and cultural environments. The research results also show that language use is a complex and dynamic process that is influenced by various factors. These research findings can provide a basis for the development of language education policies and practices that better reflect the multilingual reality of modern societies, including Tunisia. The research also reveals that language practices provide a more accurate and up-to-date picture of how linguistic diversity in social media challenges dominant national discourses supporting monolingualism.

Based on the research data, the author presents a model of linguistic identity specific to Tunisia. The researcher has organized the findings into a linguistic identity model, which suggests that linguistic identity is constantly changing. In line with modern theoretical orientations in sociolinguistics, she shows that individuals are constantly constructing and reconstructing their linguistic identity through their own experiences in multilingual environments, then they reproduce it. In contrast to the nation-state model of linguistic homogeneity, the author draws attention to the importance of recognizing and valuing linguistic diversity. Recognition and promotion of linguistic diversity can have a significant impact on an individual's linguistic behaviour and cultural identity. Recognizing the influence of language proficiency on identity can lead to policies that not only celebrate linguistic diversity but also promote a robust sense of national and cultural

belonging among the populace. Ibtessem Smari's research clearly shows the need for a language policy in Tunisia that supports multilingualism and promotes language learning opportunities. A consistent application of such a language policy model in Europe would also be useful..

The author's research includes social history and sociopolitical approaches, and the dissertation examines language ideologies and language attitudes. Compared to the previous version of the thesis, the researcher developed the section on the theoretical foundations of the research more thoroughly, and paid more attention to the issues of language policy and language rights.

The author is well versed in the international literature on the subject. However, during the preparation of the thesis for publication, it is worth paying attention to minor shortcomings. In my comments to the previous version of the work, I wrote, for example, that the bibliography definitely requires editing before finalizing the thesis. Well, that didn't quite work out. For example, on page 31, there is a reference: Gabsi (2020). However, only Gabsi (2011) and Gabsi (2022) are listed in the bibliography (p. 149). It is unlikely that the author had this work in mind, but it might be worth reviewing this article in the future: *The language of hip hop and rap in Tunisia: Socio-cultural mirror, authenticity tool, and herald of change* (Gabsi 2020). On page 33 there are references: Lawson & Sachdev (2000) and Walters (2011). However, we look for them in the bibliography in vain. The article by Sarah Lawson and Itesh Sachdev (2000) is useful reading for those who deal with the linguistic situation in Tunisia.

On the basis of the above, it can be concluded that Ibtessem Smari's thesis meets the professional requirements for a PhD thesis. The methods used in the research are in line with the research topic and purpose, and the conclusions drawn from the research findings are not only worthy of attention in the context of Tunisia's language situation and language policy, but are also relevant in a broader context.

I support the public discussion of the thesis. Based on the results of the research, the author drew conclusions that can also be used from a practical point of view. I congratulate the author, as she has done remarkable research and produced an exciting thesis.

References

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'István Cserniczkó', written over a horizontal dotted line.

István Cserniczkó