

# From Words to Power: Exploring Tunisian Presidential Speeches through a Critical Lens

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**Abstract-** This research paper aims to examine the presidential speeches delivered in Tunisia through a critical lens. It seeks to analyze the language, rhetoric, and power dynamics employed by two Tunisian presidents in their speeches and uncover the ways in which these speeches contribute to the consolidation and exercise of political power. By critically evaluating the content and context of these speeches, this study intends to shed light on the relationship between language, power, and governance in Tunisia, offering valuable insights into the political scene of the country.

**Keywords:** language, power, politics, Arabic, Tunisia.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The language employed in political discourse in Tunisia reflects a rich tapestry of historical, cultural, and linguistic influences (Maalej, 2012). Situated at the crossroads of various civilizations, Tunisia's linguistic landscape embodies a blend of Arabic, French, and indigenous Berber elements. This linguistic diversity is mirrored in the country's political sphere, where nuanced rhetoric and linguistic strategies play a crucial role in shaping public opinion, mobilizing constituents, and navigating complex socio-political dynamics.

Arabic is the primary language of political discourse in Tunisia, reflecting the nation's Arab heritage and cultural identity. Standard Arabic, or Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) (referred to also as Fusha), is utilized in formal settings such as parliamentary proceedings, official statements, and media broadcasts. However, the linguistic landscape is characterized by the prevalence of Tunisian Arabic (also known as Derja), a distinct dialect with regional variations that holds significant sway in everyday communication and grassroots political engagement (Maalej, 2012). Tunisian Arabic's colloquial nature enables politicians to establish rapport with diverse constituencies and convey messages with authenticity and resonance.

Furthermore, the legacy of French colonialism has left an indelible mark on Tunisia's linguistic fabric. French remains widely spoken, particularly among the educated elite and in official capacities. Consequently, French terms and phrases frequently permeate political discourse, especially in domains such as law, diplomacy, and academia. Bilingualism is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a socio-political one, as proficiency in French is often associated with education, sophistication, and access to opportunities, thus shaping power dynamics within the political arena (Maalej, 2012).

In Tunisia, the language used in political discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing political outcomes. The discourse is characterized by a blend of persuasive strategies, rhetoric, and cultural nuances that reflect the country's political landscape. References to historical events, cultural symbols, and appeals to national identity are common features in Tunisian political speech.

One notable aspect of Tunisian political discourse is the use of persuasion techniques to convey messages effectively. Leaders often employ rhetorical devices to sway public opinion, such as emphasizing compassion, sending political messages, and addressing social crises. For instance, former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali utilized persuasive language in his speeches to address issues like injustice, terrorism, and political reform (Jarraya, 2013).

Moreover, the language used in Tunisian political discourse reflects a transition from authoritarian rule to a multi-party democracy. Following the 2011 revolution that ousted Ben Ali and dismantled the ruling party, new faces and voices emerged in political communication. This shift brought about changes in the tone and content of political speeches, emphasizing themes of democracy, freedom of speech, and social justice.

Political discourse is a powerful tool for political actors to shape public opinion, mobilize support, and negotiate societal power dynamics. The language employed in political discourse not only reflects the ideologies and values of political elites but also plays a crucial role in framing public narratives and shaping collective identity (Van Dijk, 1998). The language used in Tunisian political discourse is a dynamic interplay of persuasion, rhetoric, and cultural references that shape public perceptions and influence political developments. By analyzing the linguistic strategies employed by Tunisian leaders, one can gain insights into the evolving nature of politics in the country and its impact on

society. Understanding the linguistic aspects of political discourse is essential for comprehending political systems' evolution and societies' transformation.

This study reflects the shift in language use by Tunisian political leaders. We chose to compare the language use of two Tunisian leaders whose rhetoric sparked a debate among Tunisians: former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali during the pre-revolution period and current President Kais Saied in the post-revolution era. The analysis delves into the linguistic strategies these leaders employ to understand how their discourse shapes public perceptions and influences political dynamics in Tunisia. By examining the evolution of language use from the authoritarian era of Ben Ali to the populist approach of Saied, this study aims to shed light on the changing political landscape in Tunisia. The contrasting language styles of these leaders offer insights into the transition from a regime characterized by control and censorship to a period marked by calls for transparency, accountability, and democratic governance.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Tunisian revolution of 2010-2011 brought about a significant shift in Tunisia's political landscape, creating a fertile ground for examining the language used in political discourse. Before the revolution, Tunisia experienced decades of autocratic rule under President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, during which political discourse was highly controlled and limited to the ruling party's rhetoric. The language used in official speeches, state-controlled media, and public addresses often reflected a top-down approach characterized by authoritarian tendencies and the suppression of dissenting voices (Bell, 2016). However, the revolution triggered a seismic shift in the political landscape, dismantling the monopoly of power and opening up avenues for new voices and ideas to emerge.

Tunisian political discourse has always given a prominent place to MSA in official situations requiring a formal register. However, on some occasions, a few politicians and heads of state have delivered speeches in other varieties of Arabic, namely the vernacular (*'āmmiyya*), and a third variety referred to as "mixed," characterized by dialectal or dialectalizing elements (Blau, 2003). The use of this "mixed" language, where linguistic varieties gradually transition from *fushhā* to *'āmmiyya* and cannot be clearly delineated (Lentin 1997, 2004), maybe a deliberate or unconscious choice made by the speaker.

In the first case, although the audience of the monologue remains the people, when the occasion and goals of the discourse change, the head of state opts for a different register that tends to fluctuate between the higher and lower ends of the linguistic continuum, depending on the chosen discursive strategy (Maalej, 2012; Kesseiri, 2015). This shift in the register is often used to convey a sense of authority and power and connect with the audience on a more personal level. It requires mastering language and understanding the cultural context in which the discourse occurs.

In the post-revolution era, Tunisia witnessed a surge in political pluralism, with an array of political parties, civil society organizations, and independent media outlets gaining prominence. This pluralistic environment diversified political discourse, marked by a greater emphasis on democratic values, human rights, and the inclusion of previously marginalized voices (Bouris, 2013). The language used by political actors became more inclusive, participatory, and reflective of the aspirations of a society striving for democratic governance.

The article employs a political-linguistic analytic framework to conduct a comparative analysis of the language used in political discourse in Tunisia before and after the revolution. This framework integrates qualitative analyses and sociolinguistic approaches developed by prominent scholars such as Abu-Lughod, Bassiouney, Versteegh, and Holes, who have made significant contributions to the study of language and politics. By examining the evolution of political discourse through this lens, the article aims to provide insights into the transformation of political systems and the changing role of language in shaping public opinion, mobilizing support, and negotiating societal power dynamics. This comparative analysis is crucial for understanding how linguistic strategies have adapted to the shifting political landscape in Tunisia, particularly in the context of the revolution and its aftermath.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The political-linguistic analytic framework is based on qualitative analyses and sociolinguistic approaches developed by scholars such as Abu-Lughod (1986), Bassiouney (2009), Versteegh (2001, 2006), and Holes (1983), who have contributed to the development of this framework, through their research on topics such as language and nationalism, language policies, and language and power. Abu-Lughod's research on language and nationalism has shed light on the interplay between language, identity, and political mobilization (Abu-Lughod, 1986). Bassiouney's work on language policies has explored the relationship between language planning, ideologies, and societal power struggles (Bassiouney, 2009). Versteegh's contributions have encompassed the study of language policies, language shifts, and the impact of language on power structures (Versteegh, 2001, 2006). Holes' research has focused on the sociolinguistics of Arabic dialects and their role in political discourse (Holes, 1983).

The analysis of language use in political contexts, rooted in qualitative and sociolinguistic approaches, provides valuable insights into political dynamics by understanding the social and cultural context in which language is employed. By applying a political-linguistic analytic framework developed by scholars like Abu-Lughod, Bassiouney, Versteegh, and Holes, this study aims to delve into the linguistic strategies used by political actors in Tunisia. The

focus is on examining the implications of language in political discourse for democratic consolidation, nationalism, and power dynamics in both pre-and post-revolutionary Tunisia. This approach emphasizes the nuanced understanding of language as a tool that shapes political narratives, influences public opinion, and reflects the evolving socio-political landscape of the country.

Through a qualitative analysis of key speeches, political debates, and media coverage, this research seeks to unravel the intricate relationship between language, politics, and social change. By utilizing sociolinguistic approaches within a political context, this study contributes to our understanding of the linguistic dimensions of political discourse and its impact on democratic transitions, language policies, and the negotiation of power in post-revolution Tunisia.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of President Ben Ali's speeches during the Tunisian Revolution by scholars, political commentators, and protesters sheds light on the significance of language in addressing public concerns and shaping political discourse. The variation observed in the three political speeches during the mass protests in Tunisia highlights the diverse linguistic strategies political figures employ to communicate with the public and respond to the evolving political landscape. In the political sphere, the prevalence of Standard Arabic, even in spoken discourse, underscores the traditional dominance of this language in political communication, as evident in politicians' speeches and news media reports that adhere to the standard written form (Khalil, 2011). This linguistic observation reflects the enduring influence of language in political contexts and its role in conveying messages to diverse audiences within the Tunisian political arena.

The first and second addresses of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali were delivered in MSA, with a literate and controlled delivery. The use of MSA as a unified language in Tunisia aimed to promote national unity and understanding among Tunisians of different socio-economic backgrounds. Despite the efforts of former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to promote national unity and address the protesters' concerns through his speeches, the anger and frustration of the protesters continued to grow. Many Tunisians felt his promises were not fulfilled, and their economic and political grievances were not addressed.

On the eve of his departure on 13th January 2011, Ben Ali delivered a speech in TA rather than MSA for the first and last time. He repeated "ana fahimtku" ("I have understood you") over and over, pointing his finger at the camera. This phrase appears to be an allusion to a similar phrase used by French leader Charles de Gaulle in 1958 during the Algerian War of Independence. In a speech addressing French Algerians, de Gaulle famously said, "Je vous ai compris" which roughly translates to "I have understood you" in English. By alluding to this phrase, Ben Ali may have been trying to convey the message that he understood and was responsive to the concerns of the Tunisian people. Ben Ali's use of this phrase was intended to emphasize his commitment to the cause of Algerian independence and evoke the same sympathy and understanding that de Gaulle had expressed in his speech.

Ben Ali's use of dialect, rather than the more formal Arabic language, was a symbolic gesture to his people. Although the use of the dialect was a powerful gesture that spoke volumes about his commitment to the nation, the next day, the people answered him back in Fusha: 'al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nidham!'. Indeed, as Jerad (2013) puts it, "authority had switched camps. The president spoke the language of the people, and the people spoke the language of power". This was a remarkable display of agency from the people; to answer the president in Fusha, the language of power and authority was to remind Ben Ali that he held his power at their mercy. This served as a symbolic reminder of the power dynamic; speaking in Fusha, the people of Tunisia recognized that they had reclaimed their agency and authority.

The BBC has recently acquired recordings of the phone conversations made by former President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali as he departed Tunisia by plane in 2011, eleven years after his escape from the country. The recordings commenced on the evening of January 13, 2011, and were scrutinized by audio specialists, who detected no signs of tampering or manipulation. The focus of our attention in this particular situation is his initial communication with a trusted companion, allegedly Tariq Ben Ammar, a prominent figure in the media industry who played a role in persuading filmmaker George Lucas to film the original Star Wars movie in Tunisia.

The call dealt with Tariq's comments on Ben Ali's last speech to the Tunisians, where he seemed reassured when Ben Ammar seemed to shower him with praise. "You were exceptional; this is the Ben Ali we had anticipated," Ben Ammar states in the recording. Ben Ali displayed self-deprecating behavior by acknowledging that his speech lacked fluency, but his confidant provided reassurance. "Absolutely not..." It is a momentous comeback. You are a populist. "You are fluent in their language," his friend asserts. From the call, we could understand that the language of Ben Ali's last speech was a subject of discussion between him and his confidants. Ben Ali was not comfortable delivering his speech in TA. His confidants suggested that he needed to speak the language of the people to communicate his message effectively.

Despite his confidants' advice, Ben Ali was not satisfied with how he communicated in Darija, as he felt it "incoherent". Looking at Ben Ali's speech attentively, one can notice that more than half of his vocabulary was mainly in MSA. This is confirmed by Jarraya (2013)'s analysis of Ben Ali's last speech, where he found that the usage of the dialect constituted only 23% of Ben Ali's speech. This indicates that even though Ben Ali was trying to communicate

with the people on a more personal level, he still could not forget his classical training in MSA. This is unsurprising given that most educated Tunisians are still trained in MSA and have been for generations. It can, therefore, be argued that Ben Ali's attempt to use more colloquial language in his speech was an attempt to make himself appear more down-to-earth and relatable to the Tunisian people. However, he failed to do so.

The President of the Republic, Kais Saïed, has chosen to express himself in MSA during his media appearances: he seems to want to apply Article 1<sup>1</sup> to the letter, even if this means setting up a linguistic penitential stumbling block (Eco, 1985) that is likely to create an identity gap among Tunisians who do not recognize themselves in this language or even do not understand it. Often criticized and mocked through speeches, primarily produced on digital social networks, he excludes many Tunisians, unable to recognize themselves in his rigid language, often described as pedantic.

On the Facebook page of the Presidency of the Republic, on the occasion of the President's speech on March 20, 2020, announcing the total containment of the country as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, many Internet users posted comments regarding MSA used by the President of the Republic asking him to use the dialect to address the people. Some argued that using MSA made it difficult for many people to understand the message, while others defended the President's choice, stating that it was essential to preserve the language and encourage its use in official settings. The debate over whether the President should use MSA or dialect in his speeches highlights the importance of language and communication in shaping public opinion and policy. It also raises questions about the role of language in promoting social cohesion and inclusivity.

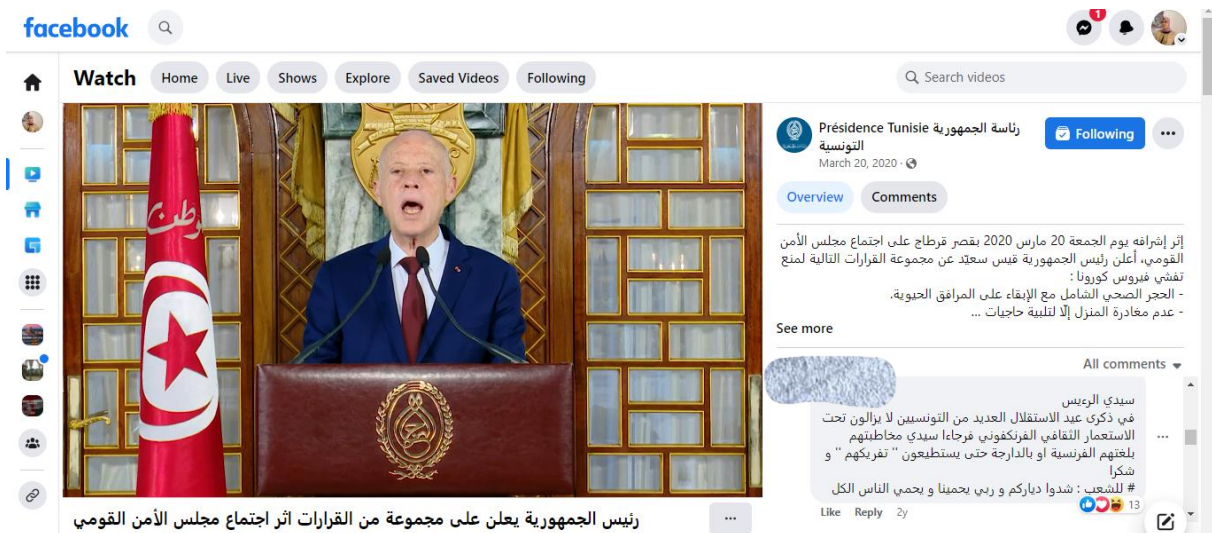


Figure 1 Screenshot of the post of the President's speech on March 20, 2020, Presidency of the Republic official Facebook page

For example, the Internet user C.Y. posts the following comment : « Désolé les amis, je ne peux vous traduire ce charabia. Ce discours n'est pas adressé aux Tunisiens car cette langue n'est pas leur langue » (Sorry friends, I cannot translate this gibberish for you. This speech is not addressed to Tunisians because this language is not their language). Another Internet user M.B.S. expresses his annoyance regarding the expressions used by the President of the Republic during his speech « !!! كل ما يتكلم يلزم معجم باش نفسروا ونفهموا القرارات مش واضح دخولها حيز التنفيذ مش محدد ما هذا » (Whenever he speaks, we need a dictionary to explain and understand the decisions. It is not clear that it enters into force. It is not specific. What is this !!!). Commenting on the president's language and speed, S.I posts: « بالله نداء و رجاء لسيادة الرئيس قيس » «سعيد.. بالله تعمل معمولك لربي احكي معنا فيسع فيسع وبالدارجة يرحم ولديك.. مش وقت تفلسيف» (In Allah, appeal to and please Mr. President Kais Saïed. Please speak fast and in dialect. It is not time for philosophy). In the same context, and with a justification, internet user Y. T. adds: « الدول لا تسيّر بالنيات الطيبة و لا بالتقريب و لا بلغة سيبويه... و الخطاب في الازمات يخضع لشروط » (Countries do not proceed with good intentions, with approximation, or with the Sibawayh<sup>2</sup> language... In times of crisis, the discourse and clarification of procedures in a simple language accessible to citizens may become more important than the procedures themselves.)

<sup>1</sup> Article 1: Tunisia is a free, independent, sovereign state; its religion is Islam, its language is Arabic, and its system is republican.

<sup>2</sup> The Sibawayh language is named after Ab Bishr Amr ibn Uthmn ibn Qanbar Al-Bar (أبو بشر عمرو بن عثمان بن قنبر البصري), also known as Sbawayh (سبويه), an influential Arabic grammarian. His seminal work, Al-Kitab ("The Book"), was the first written grammar of the language. The internet user refers to the Sibawayh language to say that the president uses a historical language that most 21st-century speakers may no longer understand. Yet, its influence remains in the Arabic language today.

By invoking the Sibawayh language, the user is implying that the language used by the president should be plain and easy to understand, as opposed to a complex language like Sibawayh. He points out that communication in times of crisis should take place in a simple language close to the citizens, rather than one difficult and elderly.

The example of the Internet user H. W. is more explicit about the language used by Kaies Saïed: « في ذكرى , سيدي الرئيس: عيد الاستقلال العديد من التونسيين لا يزالون تحت الاستعمار الثقافي الفرنكفوني فرجاءا سيدي مخاطبتهم بلغتهم الفرنسية او بالدارجة حتى يستطيعون " (Mr. President, On the anniversary of Independence Day, many Tunisians are still under Francophone cultural colonialism. Please, sir, address them in their French language or dialect so they can "mock" and thank you. # For the people: Stay at home and may my Lord protect us and protect people all). This internet user indirectly supports the president's choice of language and mocks other commenters scoffing at Saïed's use of MSA instead of TA.

Many commenters on this and other posts urged the president not to use classical Arabic, especially when the subject of his speech is serious, such as Internet user R. A., who advised the president to use a simpler version of MSA to be understood: « معادش تحكي بالعربية الفصحى متع التعابير الشفاهية براس اميمتك احكي عربية فصحى عادية راك رئيس دولة مش أستاذ عربية ولا » (Do not speak in literary Fusha, please speak normal Fusha. You are the president of the state, not an Arabic teacher. You bothered us!). Many commenters echoed this sentiment, arguing that speaking in a language that most people understood, instead of a more complex version, would effectively convey the message.

These examples and more show the linguistic identity cleavage experienced by many Tunisians, who demand the recognition of the Tunisian dialect as a language for the official speeches of the President of the Republic. This linguistic cleavage represents the greater struggle for recognition and identity many Tunisians feel. This situation ignited debates among people, politicians, and even linguists on the legitimacy of the Tunisian dialect as a language. The constitutionalized MSA is increasingly at odds with their Tunisian identity aspirations. Thus, discursive practices in MSA "reveal in truth, at the same time as a negation of oneself, an organic impediment to moving towards democracy" and that through the choice of MSA as the official language, "one poses an affirmation of oneself in order to achieve a negation" (Ben Achour, 1995).

In brief, this debate has highlighted the importance of linguistic identity to Tunisians, demonstrating how language can be an integral part of people's identities and how a language's recognition by society is essential for its preservation. Even with the support of many linguists and the Tunisian people, it is still unclear whether the Tunisian dialect will become an official language.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The use of TA in political discourse serves specific persuasive functions. Overall, TA in political discourse is a persuasive tool that enhances audience connection, widens the message's reach, adds authenticity, and challenges the linguistic hierarchy associated with formal political communication. Additionally, employing TA can be a strategic choice to distance oneself from official politics' formal and often detached language. This can be perceived as rejecting the elitist linguistic norms associated with the political establishment and moving towards a more inclusive and accessible communication style. However, it is essential to note that the use of TA in political discourse is not limited to persuasion alone. It can also reflect cultural and linguistic pride, as well as reclaim local identity and heritage in the face of globalization and dominant linguistic influences.

Prior to the 2011 revolution, MSA was often utilized to deliver official speeches and public statements. Nevertheless, following the revolution, there has been a noticeable change in the linguistic preferences of Tunisian presidents, as they have increasingly integrated TA into their speeches. This shift towards TA has been seen as a way for presidents to personally connect with the Tunisian people and demonstrate their commitment to the country's cultural identity. Additionally, TA has been viewed as a means of promoting linguistic diversity and inclusivity in Tunisia. In this process of shifting, the current president of the republic, Kais Saïed, was the exception. He appears with a different linguistic ideology, advocating for using MSA as the official language and promoting its importance in preserving Tunisia's historical and religious heritage. This has sparked debates among Tunisians about the role of language in national identity and the need for a balance between modernization and cultural preservation. These debates reflect the complex dynamics between language, culture, history, and societal changes.

Indeed, the promotion of the Arabic language in its various forms in Tunisia extends beyond the language itself. It is intertwined with the preservation and celebration of Tunisia's rich cultural heritage. Language plays a significant role in shaping and expressing a nation's identity, and Tunisia's linguistic diversity reflects its historical, cultural, and religious legacy.

Finding a balance between modernization and cultural preservation is a common challenge many nations face. It involves navigating the complexities of societal change, technological advancements, and globalization while safeguarding and valuing cultural traditions and heritage. Language is a crucial aspect of this balance, as it carries historical, social, and cultural meanings.

By promoting the Arabic language in its different forms, Tunisia recognizes the importance of preserving its linguistic heritage and maintaining a strong national identity. This allows Tunisians to connect with their roots, express their

cultural uniqueness, and reinforce a sense of belonging and pride. At the same time, it is important to adapt and embrace modernization in a way that does not undermine cultural preservation, allowing Tunisia to participate actively in the global community while maintaining its distinct cultural identity. The pursuit of this balance requires ongoing dialogue and engagement among Tunisians, policymakers, scholars, and various stakeholders. By valuing and cherishing their cultural heritage, while also embracing the benefits of modernization, Tunisia can forge a path that safeguards its national identity and fosters a vibrant and inclusive society.

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