

**Sarhan Dhouib,
editor:
„Sprache und
Diktatur.
Formen des
Sprechens,
Modi des
Schweigens.“**

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The book “Sprache und Diktatur – Formen des Sprechens, Modi des Schweigens” („Language and Dictatorship – Forms of Speaking, Modes of Silence”), edited by Sarhan Dhouib, is the first volume in a series of publications entitled “Experiences of Injustice from a Transcultural Perspective”. As an Arab-German collaboration, the series takes an intercultural and interdisciplinary approach and focuses on the function and meaning of language in the context of authoritarian systems of rule, specifically the two German dictatorships of the 20th century and the post-colonial authoritarian systems in the Arab world. The fact that the volume as a whole appears as a coherent compilation of research can be attributed to the project’s own understanding of *transculturality*, which it defines as the result of intercultural work stemming from an open and patient dialogue among different theories and academic actors (10). In the light of the recent transformations in the course of the *Arab Spring*, it is one aim of this dialogue to explore the possibility of drawing on experiences and methodological and thematic approaches established for coming to terms with past experiences of injustice in the German context when dealing with such experiences in the Arab states (9). The editor considers the critical engagement with authoritarian structures a pre-

requisite for the establishment of democratic institutions and social systems (9). The 18 chapters of this volume are arranged in three segments that approach the use of language in a dictatorship from different perspectives: the first part lays out methods of language regulation employed by dictatorial regimes, the second part deals with counter-discourse and subversion, and the third part considers the role of language in the context of public protest. While a preface by the editor lays out the general aims and thoughts guiding the book, each segment also begins with an introduction summarizing its central ideas. With regard to the structure and length of the book, a general conclusion might have been sensible; instead, the volume ends with a transitional commentary linking the volume at hand to the next volume of the series, which is entitled “Experiences of Injustice from a Transcultural Perspective”. Though the focus of the following volume is on injustice and memory, the last chapter shows the proximity between the two subject areas by drawing attention to the ways in which art can accompany the critical reflection of experiences of injustice (13). In the first chapter, Bettina Bock outlines what could be described as an underlying theoretical framework, which is taken up and applied in several of the following

contributions. Based on Michel Foucault's conceptualization of discourse as a space, she argues that a discourse is not primarily defined by its topic, but rather by the space in which it takes place and the rules determined by/within the space (27-28). Bock aims at overcoming the dichotomous concept of a powerful discourse and a counter-discourse (30-31) and proposes that the discursive dedifferentiation attempted by a dictatorship entails, on the other hand, a differentiation of the discourse, namely the emergence of semi-public communication spaces as a compensation for the disappearance of the public space (33-34). Her convincing argumentation is illustrated by the contributions in the second part of the volume that focus on counter-discourse and subversion; this is an example of the good balance and coordination between chapters focusing on theoretical and methodological approaches and chapters concentrating on analyses. The concept of discourse spaces is also relevant in the contribution by Ina Khiari-Loch, who considers language as a social practice and examines in what way it can reflect social norms by showing the extent to which language regulation influences the way people speak within a dictatorship and even beyond its end. Integrating the concept of communication spaces in her extensive

linguistic analysis, she shows the existing taboos in Tunisia, which cannot be spoken about openly, but are communicated via unofficial codes in order to express criticism, not only verbally but also in many instances by silence. The definition of silence not as the absence of language, but rather as another means of communication, is visible throughout the volume, while considering that both speaking and being silent can have ambivalent meanings. Corresponding with this, Khiari-Loch points out that the obfuscation of the expressed criticism, on the other hand, acts as a tacit acceptance of the criticized circumstances (123).

Illustrating mechanisms for the co-optation of a public discourse, Steffen Pappert analyses the methods of language and information regulation in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), where the government strove for a comprehensive co-optation of language use in order to influence the citizens' consciousness. While the extensive efforts, including the aid of mass media, managed to establish binding language norms in public communication to a high degree, Pappert concludes that this prevalence of political phrases in every realm of daily life ultimately led to a degeneration of the political terms to empty phrases (66-67). Kristina Stock shows another example of manipu-

lation through language by analysing the use of group rhetoric as one of the methods employed by many Arab authoritarian leaders in order to persuade the audience of their interests, but also to create an image of the enemy (71), for example by alluding to ethnic, religious, national, demographic or political affiliations. According to Stock, the strategy is therefore adapted to the Arab cultural context (98). Language regulation not only has an influence on daily communication, but is also incorporated in literary works, as seen in Stephan Milich's analysis of Basma Abdelaziz's novel "The Queue" as an example of a 'docu-fictional' form of writing in which authors incorporate the sociopolitical reality resulting from political repression (151). Milich illustrates the proximity of the situation narrated in the novel to the Egyptian reality and, given that the author of the novel herself is a psychiatrist, applies psychological approaches to elaborate how language can be used by an authoritarian system to dehumanize people by influencing their consciousness through oppression and fear. Altogether, the first part convincingly demonstrates the diverse forms and effects of language regulation and makes understandable the extent to which it can be a powerful instrument of power. It is important to note that all the contributions make it clear that the

regulation and standardization of language often provokes the simultaneous formation of a counter-discourse that subverts these norms.

The diverse ways in which language can be subversively used to take a position against a dictatorship are explored in the second part of the volume. Drawing on examples from the German context, Sven Kramer demonstrates different methods of criticizing an authoritarian regime and its co-optation of language while also highlighting the challenges of authors torn between the poles of employing language on behalf of the ideological fight, on the one hand, and unideologically, on the other. Kramer also points out other limitations, like the ambiguous effect of writing in exile, which limits the influence of the writers' political interventions (185) while offering relative autonomy – according to Foucault a prerequisite for literature to serve as a counter-discourse (qtd. in Kramer/Aghsain 178). With his analysis of an extensive work of language criticism as well as of a novel, both analysing and criticizing the language of the Nazi regime, he comes to the conclusion that language can be criticized and utilized at the same time and notes that, ultimately, language is in control of us rather than vice versa (198). Similar to the works analysed by Kramer, a critical perspective on language

and ultimately its liberation is the main objective of the Moroccan literary magazine *Souffles*, founded in 1966. Kenza Sefrioui portrays this periodical as a subversive political project aiming at decolonizing culture through an artistic and intellectual approach to the liberation of verbal expression by not only deconstructing, but also inventing new forms of writing and opening up new artistic ways. The German poet Durs Grünbein, on the other hand, is an exponent of a 'third way' between committed literature and apolitical writing (267), as Andreas Jürgens points out in his contribution. He argues that Grünbein criticizes existing social injustices by commenting on them with his poetry while not portraying the lyrical speaker as an activist against these deficiencies (274) – a reasonable argument, which might not seem entirely convincing given the author's own rejection of committed literature (267), but, on the other hand, this point of view reflects the book's approach of taking silent forms of protest into consideration as part of the counter-discourse.

The notion of silence as a means of communication that, in certain contexts, can be as expressive as the act of speaking is one of the fundamental premises of the volume and one of the aspects that sets it apart. Abdellatif Aghsain's chapter on

Syria, often dubbed the 'kingdom of silence' (247), most notably shows this, drawing on theoretical approaches like Adonis' differentiation between speaking freely and what Aghsain calls 'restitutive speaking', which is not critical and works for the maintenance of boundaries instead of trespassing them (249-250), therefore substantiating the ambiguity of both speaking and being silent. Aghsain also mentions Fethi Meskini, who deals with 'silence' retrospectively in light of the Arab uprisings (250-251). These theoretical reflections are illustrated in the analysis of several literary works from Syria that convincingly show the potential of silence and its inversion from negative to positive through fictionalization (256). Sarah Schmidt comes to a similar conclusion in her analysis of literary works by the German-Romanian author Herta Müller, who uses silence as a way out of the disorientation and speechlessness caused by the system of fear produced by the surveillance state under the rule of Ceausescu. While showing the ways in which fear can destroy the alliance between language and world, Müller opposes this consequence of the repression, not least by writing between the lines and letting what is implicit speak as loudly as the written sentence itself (130). The ambiguous roles of language and silence are highlighted

once more in Sarhan Dhouib's contribution on a Tunisian prison novel. Dhouib shows that their meanings can vary according to the context and that not only the function of language itself, but also its aesthetic form are relevant in the prisoner's process of subjectivization with which he opposes the repression (360). Sonallah Ibrahim's novel "The Committee", analysed by Ibrahim Abdella and Sarah Schmidt, could be an example of what Fethi Meskini calls "the language of public silence" (qtd. in Aghsain 251), since it portrays writing as a transformation of one's own voice and existence (298). Though writing between the lines in many instances and utilizing absurd and surreal elements, with these techniques and a partially Kafkaesque writing style, Ibrahim conveys a clear criticism of censorship and language regulation, as well as of neo-colonial exploitative structures, as the authors argue (282).

In distinction from the subversive criticism in the second part, the last part of the book deals with public resistance and protest. It is initiated with a chapter by Ulla Fix, who categorizes different types of public and semi-public protest in the GDR, ranging from active and open dissent to withdrawal from participation by refusing to use the language prescribed by the state, and thereby demonstrates the diversity of

possibilities to express dissent in the public space. She thereby adopts Foucault's concept of discourse to show the relevance of language and knowledge as a type of power (308-309). Stephan Milich and Leslie Tramontini analyse the works of the Iraqi Muẓaffar an-Nawwāb and the Syrian Muḥammad al-Maghūṭ as examples of poets who reject any artistic restriction (393) and work with the breach of taboos by openly expressing criticism in a semi-public space. The importance of the interaction with the audience is especially highlighted by Nawwāb's emphasis on public performances (364). Their poetic transgression of boundaries, which has a shocking effect on the audience, is supposed to clarify that the structuralization and normalization of injustice and oppression is the real scandal (296). The public character of protest is also highlighted by Azelarabe Lahkim Bennani in his contribution on committed literature and cultural criticism in Morocco. At the same time, he notes that in all of the mentioned forms of resistance, criticism of the past is an important element, as it shows continuities in the structures of power and injustice (413). The last chapter of the third part focuses on protest songs as part of a language game in the context of a public uprising. Pappert and Maataoui compare songs from Syria, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia during the Arab

Spring, based on an analysis of several key words such as *sha'b* (people), *damm* (blood) and *ḥurriyya* (freedom) in different contexts. Similar to what Kristina Stock finds in her analysis of the rhetoric of ruling politicians, words that indicate group affiliations serve as important elements in constructing a group and in dissociating it from other groups in these songs. Pappert and Maataoui's chapter is one of several contributions to the volume that offer the analysed material, i.e. the texts of the protest songs, in an appendix, giving the reader an opportunity to follow the authors' convincing conclusions with the analysed texts themselves.

Moez Maataoui also conducts a linguistic analysis of Tunisian 'whispered jokes' as another form of subversively challenging the dominant language rules in an authoritarian system. These jokes are characterized by being directed against a totalitarian regime or its representatives and by being told only within a private space (225). While Maataoui contends that the jokes are a reflection of their time from the unofficial perspective of the dominated population, in his analysis he focuses on the creative forms of the jokes and works out that the use of lexical ambiguities as well as intertextual references are two main characteristics present in numerous jokes (243). He addresses the point of

view that considers privately told jokes to function merely as safety valves to let off steam, though he agrees with Ulla Fix's approach, which views political jokes as part of a resistance discourse, due to the risk taken by the teller (227). Though the linguistic analysis is very informative and insightful by itself, this is one of the instances in the book where readers from literary or political studies might have been interested in a more in-depth discussion of the effectiveness of linguistically challenging and subverting a powerful discourse in a private (or semi-private) space. By drawing attention to intertextual references in jokes taken from Nazi Germany and the GDR and adapted to the Tunisian context, Maataoui draws visible parallels, which are especially interesting with regard to the transcultural concept of the volume. Bock and Maataoui further underline the transcultural parallels between the German and the Tunisian uprisings (1989 and 2011) in their common chapter in the last part of the book, showing that intertextuality is found not only in subversive and privately expressed criticism during a dictatorship, but also in the context of public protest. The authors show how intertextual references can provide revolutionary slogans and expressions of protest with an additional layer of communicative meaning, while there is no

limit to the type of text they can be derived from (436). By comparing slogans from Tunisia and the GDR, Bock and Maataoui are able to highlight parallels in the functions and types of intertextual references in revolutionary slogans, thereby substantiating the reasonableness of the transcultural approach guiding this volume. The editor's aspiration of providing a transcultural perspective is impressively accomplished, as many parallels between the examples from different regional contexts are drawn. These are based not only on tangible examples, such as the intertextual references in political jokes or revolutionary slogans, but also on other levels, as similarities appear also in the way authoritarian regimes strive to regulate language use, on the one hand, and in the subversive methods employed to oppose and contest the repressive system, on the other hand. In contrast to other comparative perspectives, especially in comparisons between Europe and the Arab world, this volume avoids a Eurocentric perspective by opening a dialogue in which it lets different actors and theories speak, instead of focusing on one dominant discourse that is applied to various contexts. This is especially the case with regard to the use of silence as a means of communication, which seems to be more emphasized in the examples from the Arab world,

but can offer another approach to the analysis of the German texts. While each reader might find different contributions more interesting than others depending on his or her own research focus, the volume as a whole is seamless, despite the wide range of countries and scientific disciplines of its contributors. Not only do all of the chapters deal with language as a field of the struggle for power, but most of them also incorporate Foucault's concept of discourse as one of the underlying theories. In addition, it is obvious that the various contributors are familiar with the work of the other authors, as many internal references to other chapters or the work of the other contributors in general can be found throughout the book. In line with this, the argumentation is coherent, for instance owing to the fact that speaking and being silent are not portrayed as a dichotomy, but in a more multifaceted way by acknowledging that both can be ambiguous in their functions and their meanings. While speaking out is often regarded as the only expression of an opinion, whereas silence is considered merely a deficiency, this volume is able to open a different perspective on ways of taking a position towards an authoritarian regime by taking into consideration the significance of silence. Generally, the book is very comprehensive with regard

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to the forms and functions of language and silence in the context of authoritarian systems and reflects the subject's complexity extensively. It is therefore a significant contribution to the discussion of the role of language and literature in the context of authoritarian rule.

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