NATION-BUILDING THROUGH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Abdulvokhidova Mukhayyokhon Lutfillo kizi
University of World Economy and Diplomacy
3rd year student of International Relations
Muxayo0802@icloud.com
Academic supervisor: Husainova Gulnoza Shuxratovna
University of World Economy and Diplomacy
Teacher of the department "Oriental languages"

Abstract: *This article explores how language and culture are used as political tools for nation-building, which is rarely explained in literature by combining language and culture policies with national identity. It draws on qualitative, comparative analysis of historical and contemporary case studies to illustrate how states strategically deploy language and culture .The analysis shows that those cultural and language policies effectively forge a shared national identity and belonging among diverse groups. This article builds on constructive approach, and this can contribute to future research on similar topics.*

Key words: *nation-building; language policy; cultural narrative; national identity; imagined community; minority languages; official language.*

Introduction

Early concept of nation is defined as a group or race of people who shared history, traditions, and culture, sometimes religion, and usually language.[1] But more than geography or shared history language often lies at the heart of national identity. Through language, people imagine themselves part of a common community, as their shared culture, collective memory, and a sense of belonging is reflected in language. In many newly-formed or evolving states, the adoption of an official language is not only just a technical matter, but it becomes a political act, a declaration of who "we" are and who belongs.

By granting one language official or state status, governments intend to unify diverse ethnic or linguistic communities under a shared symbolic identity, thereby constructing a sense of nationhood. As scholars of sociolinguistics stated, language

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[1] View of The role of language in nation-building process. (2025). *Polinema.ac.id*. https://jurnal.polinema.ac.id/index.php/jlt/article/view/247/13

serves not only cognitive or communicative functions, but also as a primary factor that people use to define national belonging.[2]

However, there are some problems in implementing a language policy. Official one language policy can cause undermining minority languages and cultures, exclusion of population, or cultural homogenization. The politics of language which language is promoted and which is suppressed reveals power relations and underlying ideologies.[3]

In the article, I explain the role of language policy and cultural politics in the process of nation-building. Language is not only just a tool for communication, but it can be used as a strategic instrument to shape national identity, consolidate political power, and manage social cohesion. I provide with case studies from history and today about how states have used language to build or rebuild nations, the challenges it creates in multilingual societies and with different ethnics, and what it means for cultural diversity and political inclusion.

Language as a Foundation of National Identity

Language is a heart of a shared national identity. In societies where multiple ethnic or linguistic groups coexist, a common specific language can serve as a powerful symbol by which communities may view themselves as part of a larger collective rather than separate subgroups. And, people define their nationality according to the language they speak.

Choosing and promoting a national (or official) language is a political decision which helps define "who belongs" in the national structure. By setting a standard language for administration, education, media, and public life, states foster a shared linguistic-cultural space. This shared language helps build a sense of collective memory, common values, and a unified national identity.[4]

We can see the case from the Republic of Turkey in 1923 how language standardization reforms became central to nation-building. Under this process, education, media, and public institutions were reoriented around a reformed, purged and standardized national language. Old Ottoman script (which used Arabic script and contained numerous Arabic and Persian loanwords) replaced with a new Latin-

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[2] Grzywacz, A. (2025). The role of language in nation-building process. *Jurnal Linguistik Terapan*, 1–10. https://jurnal.polinema.ac.id/index.php/jlt/article/view/247

[3] Language, Nation and Development in Southeast Asia. (2025). Google Books. https://books.google.co.uz/books?hl=ru&lr=&id=ImjVqAVxO74C&oi=fnd&pg=PA74&dq=related:Tb3suesSyH8J:s cholar.google.com/&ots=kaVFPIHIf1&sig=s6BMvzmCLN826ye__DWRU858rX4&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=f alse

[4] AYDINGÜN, A., & AYDINGÜN, İ. (2004). THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THE FORMATION OF TURKISH NATIONAL IDENTITY AND TURKISHNESS. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 10(3), 415–432. https://doi.org/10.1080/13537110490518264

based alphabet in 1928. This shift was more than a technical change but a foundation for a modern, secular, national identity based on "Turkishness." [5]

Israel case of using language in national construction can also be a great example. Hebrew language was spoken in ancient Israel, from the era of Babylonian exile, which already became dead language and only used in prayer. At the end of the nineteenth century, due to the efforts of Eliezer ben Yehuda modern version of the Hebrew language started to be created. Hebrew was officially declared as a language of newly formed State of Israel in 1948.[6]

Zionist ideology has aimed to create a new identity. The central role of it was assigned to Hebrew language. There were some slogans such as "The Hebrew person speaks Hebrew" and "He will work the Hebrew ground" which reflected how devoted Israel was in spreading the Hebrew language among citizens, immigrants and Arabs as one. Fostering the teaching of the Hebrew language and culture was indicated by the Israel as a fifth goal. All language developments were focused on turning Hebrew into the dominant language of the country and they achieved a high linguistic competence in spoken and written Hebrew. Now this language is used by more than 5 million people.[7]

While a unified national language can strengthen national identity and cohesion, it often results in serious political, social, and ethical challenges. Firstly, when government emphasizes one "official' language, speakers of minority languages may feel excluded, which makes them feel devalued or ignored. This later can threaten the nation's cultural heritage and collective identity, and even lead to societal divisions and discrimination which cause conflict between groups. [8] Secondly, For multilingual states, there is a persistent dilemma: promoting a single national language might foster cohesion, but it risks suppressing diversity, and promoting full linguistic pluralism may make coordination, administration, and strong national identity harder.[9]

[5] Ahn, E. S. (2024). Using language in boundary-making: nation-state building in the early years of the Turkish Republic (1927–1965). *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2024(288), 11–42. https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2023-0015

[6] Dilouya, B. (2024, July 17). *Ulpan Integraliah*. Ulpan in Tel Aviv & Online. https://integraliah.com/was-the-hebrew-language-ever-lost-historical-insights/

[7] *View of The role of language in nation-building process.* (2025). Polinema.ac.id. https://jurnal.polinema.ac.id/index.php/jlt/article/view/247/137

[8] *Language Policy in Multilingual Countries: Between Consolidating National Identity and Achieving Social Integration (@imcra) - SciUp.org.* (2025). Sciup.org. https://sciup.org/language-policy-in-multilingual-countriesbetween-consolidating-national-16010751

[9] *Финансовый университет при Правительстве РФ | Языковая политика в многонациональных государствах: между интеграцией и сохранением идентичности.* (2025). Www.fa.ru. https://www.fa.ru/university/structure/university/uso/press-service/press-releases/yazykovaya-politika-v-mnogonatsionalnykh-gosudarstvakh-mezhdu-integratsiey-i-sokhraneniem-identichno?

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We can see it from the case of Inner Mongolia, where decline of language and ethnic protests occurred. In recent years, the government of People's Republic of China has been promoting the national language Putonghua. However, there are ethnic minority regions such as Mongolian-speaking area of Inner Mongolia, where local languages helped preserving ethnic identity and cultural heritage. In 2020, educational reforms were announced to replace Mongolian-language subjects with Chinese in this region. Eventually, it caused mass protests, with thousands of ethnic Mongolians marching in the streets, claiming it threatens mother tongue and cultural identity.[10]

Culture and Nation-Building

Culture which is often reflected in history, heritage, art, collective memory, myths, and symbolic practices is central to consolidate national identity and legitimizing political communities. Through cultural narratives and heritage, states can transform a diverse population into a unified "nation." People seeing themselves as part of a cultural continuum of generations strengthens unity and national consciousness. By preserving and promoting cultural heritage states can form continuity, and legitimacy internally and globally. So, governments tend to invest in infrastructures which promote culture, such as museums and historical objects, and cultural programs, which helps them build a positive national image and foster national pride.[11]

This can be backed by the theoretical framework of Benedict Anderson. According to "Imagined communities" theory, "nation" is not a naturally given group, but a socially constructed community, where people imagine themselves as part of a larger "political community" without even meeting most of its members. Anderson coined the term "print capitalism" to describe his theory. He believes that after the invention of printing press, larger geographical units could be united around a shared language. For example, French gradually replaced regional languages like Breton, Burgundian, and Gascon, which then eroded political and cultural divides between these regions. So, printing press, through books, newspapers and mass media, helped create a common language and shared discourse, enabling people from different regions to imagine themselves as part of one nation.[12]

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[10] Davidson, H. (2020, September). *Inner Mongolia protests at China's plans to bring in Mandarin-only lessons.* The Guardian; The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/01/inner-mongolia-protests-china-mandarin-schools-language

[11] Tsang, R., & Eric Taylor Woods. (2014). *The Cultural Politics of Nationalism and Nation-Building.* https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315886916

[12] Okun, G. (2020, April 8). *Print-Capitalism Created Modern Europe.* Libertarianism.org. https://www.libertarianism.org/columns/print-capitalism-created-modern-europe

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So, those cultural items and languages help building "imagines communities". It can be seen in the example of National Museum of Tajikistan, which was used as a political institution to help build a national identity for the "Tajik nation". The museum frames unique national history through historical artifacts, artworks and exhibitions presenting Tajik culture as a unified heritage that belongs to all citizens.[13] It does more than preserving heritage, it constructs a narrative about who "we" are, defining national unity and belonging.

In conclusion, language and culture are not only tools of communication or heritage, but they are central for political power and nation-building. By promoting a single national language and cultivating shared cultural narratives, states shape collective identity, create a sense of belonging, and define who belongs to "us." The case studies about language reforms and cultural consolidation in different societies show that these policies can successfully unify diverse groups under a common national object. But, the marginalizing minorities by privileging one language or cultural narrative can be the risk of reducing pluralism and social tensions. Therefore, while language and culture can serve as tools for nation-building, their political use must be balanced with respect for pluralism and cultural rights.

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