

ACADEMIC OPINION

for the defense of doctoral thesis

“Neurophilosophy of Second Language Learning: Conscious and Unconscious Aspects”

of **Venera Russo**, PhD student at the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”,
PHD PROGRAM “PHILOSOPHY TAUGHT IN ENGLISH”
with supervisor Prof. Dr. Sc. **Aneta Karageorgieva**
to acquire the educational and scientific degree Doctor

by Professor PhD. **Daniela Sotirova**,
member of a Scientific jury in accordance with protocol No 2/04.10.2022
of the Faculty council meeting of the Faculty of Philosophy

The dissertation submitted is written **in English in a volume of 189 pages**, of which 146 pages are the text of the doctoral thesis. The text is structured in introduction, three chapters, conclusion and list of bibliography. The latter is rich and precisely designed (on p.147 to p.188 of the dissertation), contains sources in English, including – books and articles translated into this language.

The author has chosen **an interesting and complex topic** - that of the second language, its acquisition and how to understand it in scientific and philosophical perspectives. Venera Russo has described the colorful palette of ideas of linguists and psychologists, biologists, cultural anthropologists and philosophers. Her analysis is prompted by the finding that second language is not problematized in philosophy, and it is motivated by this conclusion.

It is widely believed among researchers (even by N. Chomsky) that the acquisition of a second language is no different than that of the first native language. The present thesis is about such a philosophy of neuroscience that criticizes the reductionism contained, for example, in a phrase like "the brain thinks", as well as in varieties of Cartesian dualism, when the term "brain" is used in a dyad with that of "body" instead of "mind".

The title clearly and specifically defines the focus of the topic. It reveals the aim of the study (or at least one of the aims, as I understand it), which is - to show that philosophy can and should be the conceptual background against which linguists and neuroscientists interpret their debates and results about learning the second language. Second language acquisition itself is a complex phenomenon with intersubjective aspects, collective memory and consciousness, which is why philosophical

"intervention" is inevitable.¹

The structure of the dissertation fully and consistently presents the author's ideas. Each of the three chapters has 6-7 paragraphs, and the second chapter entitled "Neurology and language acquisition: What do we know?" has separate subsections. The doctoral student rightly likens the content to a journey that begins in philosophy and, passing through neuroscience, synthesizes contributions from psychology, linguistics, sociology, cognitive linguistics to lay the foundations for such a theory of second language learning, which takes into account the ontological aspects². Using her metaphor, I would say: by embarking on such a journey, V. Russo shows that the journey called knowledge not only begins with philosophy, but also ends with it, at least when we climb some peak in knowledge.

The language of the doctoral thesis is clear, the metaphors are appropriate and the writing style is with an understanding of the overall complex issues of neurophilosophy. The internal logic, thoughtful interpretation of the different perspectives of linguists, semioticians, and neuroscientists on key issues in each section are hallmarks of a well-conducted study.

The author's abstract of doctoral dissertation of 37 pages offers an adequate summary of the basic topics of the research.

I will support my general **positive impressions** with the fact that the text contains stimulating ideas for philosophers working in other fields as well. I find the thesis of second language linguistic experience as an anthropological experience important. It has to do with how the term "language acquisition" is defined, as well as what "world acquisition" means. It would be interesting to hear the PhD candidate's reflections on these issues during the doctoral thesis defense.

I was impressed by the personal **acknowledgment** of colleagues and mentors from whom Venera Russo learned - something that is not a common practice in our academic mores.

The work is **interesting for academic teaching and research** because it shows to the philologists and philosophers with a research mind the existence of new fields in philosophy of science. The benefit of such a study for language and multicultural teaching is obvious. A concrete example is the thesis discussed in the dissertation about the need to focus not only on the age of acquiring a second language, but on the degree of its acquisition as well.

My notes to the presented work are minor, rather they are formal and editorial. The text would benefit if it was not so fragmented and unevenly divided into paragraphs and sub-paragraphs. The

¹ Here we should set aside the sense of "conscious" and "unconscious" which is usually associated with psychoanalytic interpretations.

² Page 8 of the Abstract.

terminology could be clarified in case the PhD student continues the study of this problematic. For example, nuances of meaning in the terms "neurology" and even "philosophy" should be taken into account, defining the meaning in use more clearly.³

On the topic of the dissertation, the doctoral student has **two publications**, as well as another paper on a philosophical subject matter related to phenomenology and the works of Yulia Krasteva. All of them were published in the Italian magazine "In Statu Nascendi"⁴.

The contributions of the doctoral thesis are formulated in a narrative form, but entirely credible.

In conclusion, I will emphasize that the presented work contains theoretical and applied ideas that are relevant and useful for the interdisciplinary and philosophical understanding of language, as well as for educational practice. My evaluation of the doctoral thesis, abstract and published articles of Venera Russo (whom I do not know personally) is positive.

The presented work has the necessary completeness, academic and practical significance of a dissertation for the scientific degree "doctor" in Bulgaria. I would recommend that the educational and scientific degree of doctor be awarded to Mrs. Venera Russo.

January 5, 2023

Signature:

/Professor PhD. Daniela Sotirova/

³ As far as I know the current research, "neuroscience" seems to be the most accurate term for the field between experimental psychology and neurochemistry these days.

⁴ Translated from Latin, it means "In newborn state"; the Journal of Political Philosophy and International Relations (ISBN: 9783838217376).