

Review

On the proposed public defence of Alexander Georgiev's dissertation "Language Reform Policies and Their Reflection in the Bulgarian Media: Reconstruction of the Culturally Sensitive Language Resource Based on Media Practice" for the award of the ONS "doctor" in 3.5 Public Communications and Information Sciences

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The dissertation was developed under the scientific supervision of Prof. Andreana Eftimova, Dr. Hab.

The presented study consists of an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion and five appendices. The total volume is 247 pages, of which the main text is 201 pages. The bibliographical sources are 183, of which 95 are in English.

Achievements of the dissertation

The topic of language reform policies and their reflection in the Bulgarian media continues to be relevant. The public language of the media is an extremely influential tool for creating intersubjective reality, and hence for constructing lasting understandings and representations and subsequent practical actions in society. The topic is in an interdisciplinary field of overlap between different traditional research fields: linguistics, media studies, semiotics, sociology and political science. My competence as a reviewer allows me to assess, above all, the significance of this study in the field of political sociology.

In the title, Alexander Georgiev has indicated the main content of his work – reconstruction of the culturally sensitive language resource based on media practice. Such reconstruction is undoubtedly a current scientific task that can be very useful for other researchers.

The presented study demonstrates enviable thoroughness in the use of relevant theoretical sources. I cannot judge how comprehensive they are in the several scientific fields where this work is located, but even the quickest glance at them convinces that the author has studied all the theoretical publications significant for his research in the languages he used (Bulgarian and English).

The research subject of the work is “language reform policies that are related to the media representation of different communities in society.” Such policies can, in principle, lead to opposite consequences, both equality and social inclusion, and opposition and social exclusion in the relations between the different communities that constitute society. This is precisely the reason for considering the work from a political perspective, as a tool for organizing common life between different individuals and social groups.

It is striking that the goal of the study is formulated as legitimizing the use of politically correct language in relation to oppressed and/or marginalized social groups. This is undoubtedly a legitimate political goal, but the research goal would rather be an answer to the question of the extent to which politically correct language in relation to rejected social groups has become a reality in the Bulgarian media under the influence of certain policies.

The presented dissertation examines three main thematic areas of language reform policies related to the representation in public discourse of three social groups: women, Roma and LGBT people. Regarding the first group, the main focus is the use of feminine names – a debatable and unresolved problem, which is largely well-studied, although there is no, as the author rightly believes, systematic study of the dynamics over time in the use of feminatives. Regarding the second group, the focus is on the use of endo- and exonymic terms for naming Roma. Regarding the third group, the focus is on a problem that has yet to be resolved in the Bulgarian context – the designation of persons with non-binary gender identity, which poses a serious challenge to languages with grammatical gender.

Of course, this is a matter of choice, because among the groups that are often subject to linguistic discrimination are also refugees, migrants, foreigners in general, but also people with disabilities or mental disorders, not to mention ethno-religious communities such as Jews, for example. But the choice is justified, insofar as it concerns the most frequently discussed topics in the Bulgarian public space.

This choice is the basis for composing the thesis, albeit indirectly. The structure of the work is conceptual, not thematic. The five chapters consistently reveal the general theoretical logic chosen by Alexander Georgiev: 1. The role of language in the construction of reality; 2. The role of language in the construction of social identities; 3. Media effects and the public sphere; 4. Research methodology and 5. Reflection of language reform policies in the Bulgarian media. It is somewhat unexpected that a relatively small chapter on the methodology of the study is the fourth in a row, but this is because it is about the methods used to process the collected data, and not so much about the general methodological framework of the entire study.

Specifically, regarding the methodology used in processing the empirical data, I will note that quantitative content analysis and discourse analysis are completely legitimate tools, applied according to existing rules. The same can be said about corpus linguistic research and the application of Latent Dirichlet allocation. The author describes his method of work

in sufficient detail, and this allows anyone else to use it on the same material and verify the conclusions drawn.

The empirical data on which the study is built are mainly of two types: a) documents that make recommendations for the use in the public space of certain means of expression related to specific social groups, and b) online text media publications from 9 sources. I will just note that this is inaccurately marked as the “object of study.” And since it is also about linguistics and semiotics, we have the serious difficulty of translating the distinction between object and subject into Latin languages.

The author conscientiously shows the limitations in the possibilities of using empirical material relevant to his topic. The nine media were chosen, he explains, not only because of their significant presence on the Bulgarian media scene, but also “because of their free content and the possibility of searching in it.” It is the latter that is the reason why sources such as “Dnevnik”, “Kapital” or “Trud” were not included in the study. These limitations, of course, are significant from the point of view of the main semantics of the study, which also raises the legitimate question of whether the results would not be different (and to what extent) if these sources had been included in the analysis. In any case, however, Alexander Georgiev very correctly collected his data from a total of 37,732 media texts, including 34,713,812 tokens (translated as words, but ambiguously also meaning symbols or indicators). In temporal terms, this is limited to 14 years (2011-2024), which also indicates an extremely large volume of information used and analysed. The processing and analysis of this empirical data is entirely within the framework of established research procedures and in this sense, I find it completely correct. The author uses the Dirichlet latent allocation method in the analysis of the texts and in the appendix has shown in rubrics, thematized in accordance with the general theme of the study, the 10 most representative of the analysed texts (which allows the reader to be convinced of the correct handling of the empirical material and its reliability).

It is difficult for me to assess the extent to which there are new facts in the study, but I am rather inclined to assume from the general impression of reading that on the basis of more or less known facts there is a new type of generalization and a new, deeper understanding of the effect of language reform policies on the language practice of the Bulgarian media is constructed. In other words, the main contribution of the work is that it offers a new interpretation of a current and partially already analysed research object.

It is always difficult for authors of dissertations to formulate their own research contributions. Alexander Georgiev formulated them in the synopsis as follows:

1. Language reform policies are examined in the context of social constructivism, performative speech acts and affective theory, as well as media effects and the theory of the public sphere. The role of language in the formation of social identities is also discussed.

2. The phenomenon of “non-binary” language, new to the Bulgarian language, and the media’s attempt to adapt it to denote individuals with non-binary gender identity in comparison with other languages are analysed.
3. Based on a specially developed corpus of media texts and technology for extracting data from it, current statistical data on the impact of various language policies in media discourse are presented. Older data and observations available in the scientific literature are clarified and supplemented.

The first point is a statement of what has been done and does not essentially define a contribution to our knowledge. The second point can indeed be accepted as a description of a real contribution, although it could be better formulated – it is systematically proven that the new phenomenon for the Bulgarian language “non-binary language” puts the established linguistic norms in public speaking to the test. The third point is also an undoubted contribution to knowledge, the main thing here being the updating of previous research and its conclusions, as well as the introduction of new information on an already known research problem.

I assess the available contributions in this dissertation as completely sufficient for an independent scientific study.

In general, I will add that, in general, the proposed dissertation meets the academic requirements. The thesis has a clearly formulated research objective and a corresponding hypothesis that is subject to proof. The main methods of the study are explained in detail – quantitative content analysis, critical discourse analysis and LDA analysis (which should not be confused with linear discriminant analysis). The chosen structure of the presentation follows the logic of the stated research tasks. And the citations are according to the established academic standards. The bibliography is also presented according to the requirements.

In terms of language and style, the text meets the academic criteria. I noticed a negligible amount of spelling errors that can be easily corrected with a systematic proofreading.

The text of the presented abstract (44 pages) correctly presents the content of the dissertation.

I will also note that the five publications presented accompanying the defence are in academic journals, have undoubted qualities of scientific texts and treat elements of the general topic of the dissertation.

Critical notes

One can always ask for more, but on the other hand, no research is possible if it is not limited to clear frameworks. I have already formulated a critical question regarding the 9 media used and the obvious difficulty of using three influential media due to restrictions on access to them or due to the use of algorithms to protect their content.

Here I would like to point out a few more general methodological critical notes.

First of all, it seems to me that in the presentation of the methodology it is important and useful to place a little more emphasis on the paradigm of social constructivism as an approach that simultaneously avoids traditional positivism and its postmodern criticism. The reader is often left with the impression that the work is based much more on the analysis of discourse as the sole support for understanding social reality, and not so much on the consequences of practical actions based on existing discursive practices.

Secondly, I think it would be good to pay a little more attention to defining some basic concepts such as identity and language policy. Here, perhaps, reference is needed, for example, to Anna Krasteva on the topic of communities and identities, as well as to a few more sources on language policies, such as Umberto Eco on political correctness.

Finally, although I noted the difficulty in presenting the contributions (and they do indeed exist, although they need reformulation), I believe that their presentation is generally needed in a slightly more systematic way. Mostly as a possible development, expansion, and complement to what has already been done by the scientific supervisor Andreana Eftimova in her monograph “The Double Language in the Media: the Language of Political Correctness v/s the Language of Hate” (2016).

In the perspective of a possible expansion of the study, I would point out that due to the increasing weight of social media on the mass consciousness (understandings, prejudices, motivations), it would be very interesting to supplement the analysis with a study of language practices in this increasingly dependent on impenetrable algorithms reality.

Conclusion

The presented dissertation is a very interesting and topical theme. The study undoubtedly enriches our knowledge in the field of language reform policies and its impact on influential Bulgarian media. The basic academic standards of the study itself and its textual presentation have been met. All this gives me reason to conclude that the dissertation presented by Alexander Georgiev complies with the requirements for awarding the educational and scientific degree “doctor” (Ph.D.) in the specialty 3.5. Public Communications and Information Sciences.

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