

OPINION

on the dissertation titled “Breadth and Depth of Vocabulary Knowledge. An Empirical Study of the Factors for Increasing the Individual Active and Passive Spanish Lexicon”, submitted for the purposes of partially completing the requirements for awarding the educational and scientific degree Doctor in Higher Education Area 2. Humanities, Professional Field 2.1 Philology, Scientific Specialty General and Comparative Linguistics (Applied Linguistics), authored by **Venche Plamenova Mladenova**, prepared by Prof. Dr. Alexandra Bagasheva

1. Information about the PhD candidate

Venche Mladenova obtained a Bachelor’s degree in Spanish Philology from Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” in 2003, and three years later earned a Master’s degree with the qualification “translator-editor” from the same university. Since May 2004, she has been working as an assistant in the Department of Western Languages at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology at Sofia University. She teaches Spanish as a first or second foreign language to students from non-philological programs.

2. Information about the dissertation and the summary

The dissertation comprises 179 pages and includes an introduction, four main chapters, a conclusion, and eight appendices (containing the research instruments used in the empirical study and the results of the said empirical study), as well as an extensive bibliography with over 130 cited sources, approximately 25 of which are publications by Bulgarian scholars. The main text also includes 12 tables and 34 figures illustrating the results of the conducted study. The summary accurately and comprehensively reflects the content of the submitted dissertation. Despite the absence of a formal declaration of originality, it is absolutely clear that the dissertation is the author’s own work.

3. Evaluation of the dissertation

The topic of the dissertation is timely, interesting, and directly related to the candidate’s teaching practice. The subject matter chosen by Venche Mladenova is complex, multifaceted, and requires an interdisciplinary approach with a strong empirical component. The chosen problem has the potential for significant practical and theoretical contributions.

The research topic necessitates theoretical and methodological engagement with at least the following academic fields: theoretical linguistics and cognitive psychology, language acquisition theory, and foreign language teaching methodology in higher education. The specific research objective of the dissertation is to investigate the complex of linguistic and extralinguistic factors that contribute to expanding the breadth and depth of individual vocabulary knowledge in students learning Spanish as a foreign language at A1 level.

The candidate defines two main goals: a) a theoretical one – to present a thorough analysis of vocabulary features and semantic relations among lexical items, and b) a practical one – to outline a “rational approach” to vocabulary development for Generation Z students (“digital natives”) studying Spanish as a foreign language at the A1 level. To achieve this practical goal, the candidate conducted an empirical study of the contributing factors to vocabulary expansion.

The introduction focuses on methodological aspects of foreign language instruction, particularly digitalization and gamification in modern education, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It also provides a generational profile of current learners, clearly framing the motivation and direction of the study.

Chapter One presents a review of linguistic factors influencing vocabulary size (e.g., syntagmatic, paradigmatic, and associative relations, interference, and positive transfer from the native or another dominant foreign language).

Extralinguistic factors contributing to vocabulary development (e.g., motivation, attitudes, learning environment, digitalization, and gamification) are addressed in Chapter Two, following the research design.

The presentation of the theoretical linguistic framework (analyzing vocabulary features and semantic relations) and the associated literature review in Chapter One are among the dissertation's major strengths. The effort to present and synthesize both international and Bulgarian lexical studies, define the notions of vocabulary breadth and depth, and describe the various lexical relations is commendable. Also noteworthy is the emphasis on the concept of unified language consciousness as a basis for multilingualism and a potential source of positive transfer.

The theoretical analysis draws on structuralist principles (p. 112), incorporates views from functional linguistics (e.g., semantic interpretation of syntagmatic relations, pp. 36–38), and acknowledges transformational-generative grammar (e.g., the innate language acquisition mechanism and the mental lexicon, pp. 69–71).

The quasi-experimental study conducted by the candidate between 2021 and 2024 with beginner students from the “Tourism” program at Sofia University is a valuable contribution. It aims to determine mechanisms for expanding individual vocabulary. The study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods: a language test (examining learners' knowledge of paradigmatic/synonymy and syntagmatic/collocations), field study and observation (exploring the impact of teacher-supported syntagmatic and associative relations in digital and non-digital environments), questionnaire, and semi-structured interview (focusing on student attitudes toward learning vocabulary through digital gamified tools).

The empirical research was conducted in two parts – Pilot Study A (2024) and Pilot Study B (March–June 2021). The data from both phases of the quasi-experiment were carefully analyzed and confirmed the working hypotheses regarding the influence of linguistic and extralinguistic factors on vocabulary growth (pp. 112–113).

The candidate concludes that although students perceive online resources and gamification as tools for engagement, a significant portion are skeptical about using digital tools for vocabulary learning (p. 85). This suggests that, for many learners, digital tools are still primarily seen as entertainment rather than educational instruments.

It would have been highly informative if the candidate had assessed the effectiveness and appropriateness of the different vocabulary teaching strategies depending on the learners' proficiency level, since not all methods are equally suitable for beginner students.

The dissertation is complete, interdisciplinary, independently written, and well-structured. It balances experimental research and theoretical grounding and addresses a contemporary linguistic issue of high relevance for modern language education. The candidate's research skills are also evident in the genre and stylistic consistency of the text.

4. Publications and participation in academic forums and projects

Venche Mladenova has submitted evidence of three solo publications related to her dissertation topic, resulting from participation in national and international academic conferences held between 2024 and 2025. All three are published in the respective conference proceedings. In the same period, she actively contributed to the SUMMIT research project aimed at improving language instruction and student motivation through gamification as an innovative educational tool. This fulfills the legal requirements set by the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria.

5. Conclusion

Based on the above, I strongly recommend that the academic committee award Venche Plamenova Mladenova the educational and scientific degree Doctor in Professional Field 2.1 Philology, Scientific Specialty General and Comparative Linguistics (Applied Linguistics).

July 23, 2025

Prof. Dr. Alexandra Bagasheva