

# **R E V I E W**

by **Assoc. Prof. Svetlana Georgieva Dimitrova-Gyuzeleva, Ph.D.**

of the thesis *Vocabulary Breadth and Depth: An Empirical Study of the Factors for Expansion of the Individual Active and Passive Lexicon in Spanish*

submitted by **Venche Plamenova Mladenova**

for obtaining the Ph.D. degree in area of higher education 2. *Humanities*,  
professional field 2.1. *Philology* (scientific specialty: *General and Comparative Linguistics: Applied Linguistics*)

## **1. Information about the PhD candidate**

Venche Mladenova acquired her bachelor's degree in Spanish Philology in 2003 at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", and three years later she graduated from the same university with an MA degree and the professional qualification of translator-editor. Since May 2004 she has been working as an assistant professor at the Department of Western Languages at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology of Sofia University, teaching Spanish as a foreign language to non-philology students of the university.

## **2. Information about the PhD Thesis and the Abstract**

Venche Mladenova's Ph.D. thesis is 179 pages in length, including an introduction, four main chapters, a conclusion and 8 appendices (with the instruments used to collect the empirical data and the results of the studies), as well as a rich bibliography with over 130 cited sources, out of which about 25 publications by Bulgarian scholars. The thesis also incorporates 12 tables and 34 figures illustrating key research results. The abstract fully and adequately reflects the content of the presented dissertation. Although there is no explicit declaration of the originality of the research study, there is no doubt that the PhD thesis is the work of the doctoral candidate herself.

In the present review I will try to briefly outline those aspects of Vence Mladenova's dissertation that I consider particularly successful and that shed light on her research skills, as well as to make some critical comments and recommendations arising from the complexity of the matter under study.

The dissertation presented by the doctoral candidate is devoted to a research topic that is surprisingly still understudied in our country<sup>1</sup>, despite being particularly relevant to the practice of modern foreign language teaching, namely the factors (linguistic and extralinguistic) for increasing the breadth and depth of the individual lexicon of students learning Spanish as a first or second foreign language (usually after English) with a low level of proficiency in the target language (A1). The research topic is at the intersection of several scientific fields: theoretical linguistics and cognitive psychology, language acquisition theory and language teaching methodology in the context of higher education. Within the framework of her research, the doctoral candidate sets herself two very specific and achievable global goals: the theoretical goal is related to an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of the lexicon and the semantic relations between lexical units, and the practical goal, based on an empirical study of the factors that contribute to the increase in vocabulary size, is to outline a “rational approach” to expanding the breadth and depth of the individual vocabulary of students who belong to Generation Z (the so-called “digital natives”) who are learning Spanish as a foreign language at A1 level (pp. 15-16).

The interdisciplinary nature of the matter under study leads to some anomalies in the organization of the information presented in the PhD thesis. For example, in the Introduction, the focus of attention is on the methodological aspects of language teaching and, in particular, the digitalization and gamification of modern education in general (especially during and after the COVID pandemic); the psychological characterization of modern students from a generational point of view is also made there; in other words, the philological focus related to the theoretical aim of the study is blurred. On the other hand, the theoretical section (Chapter 1) reviews only potential linguistic factors which can influence lexical volume (such as syntagmatic, paradigmatic and associative<sup>2</sup> relations between lexical items, as well as interference and positive transfer of lexical units from the mother tongue and/or from another dominant foreign language); extralinguistic factors, that contribute to the increase of individual vocabulary (such as motivation and attitudes, educational environment, digitization and gamification of the educational process) are discussed somewhat in passing within Chapter Two – *Organization of the Empirical Study* only after the research design has been presented.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting here that the English methodological literature has long emphasized the importance of acquiring vocabulary as part of functional communicative competence, and many educators advocate the application of the so-called “lexical approach” in foreign language teaching, based on research on live speech. (see Lewis, Michael. 2002. *The Lexical Approach: The State of ELT and a Way Forward*, Language Teaching Publications, Heinle ELT).

<sup>2</sup> Associative thinking and semantic associations are seen by the author as situated “at the boundary between linguistic and extralinguistic factors in the research” (p. 115).

In terms of content, it should be stressed that the presentation of the theoretical linguistic framework of the study (the analysis of the characteristics of the lexicon and the semantic relations between lexical units) and the related literature review in the first chapter of the dissertation are definitely among the main merits of the doctoral candidate's work. Also praiseworthy is her attempt at comprehensiveness in presenting and critically evaluating the foreign and Bulgarian lexicological research studies related to the clarification of the concepts of vocabulary breadth and depth, to the description of the syntagmatic, paradigmatic and associative relations between lexical units, and to the description of the universal linguistic awareness as the foundation of plurilingual competence and potential source of positive language transfer<sup>3</sup>. It is also commendable that despite her claims that the theoretical analysis of the lexis is based on the postulates of structuralism (p. 112), Venche Mladenova also takes into account the views of the representatives of functional linguistics/ functional sentence perspective theory (e.g. when considering syntagmatic relations from a semantic perspective and the semantic roles of the sentence constituents, pp. 36-38), as well as transformational-generative theories of language (when discussing the innate language acquisition device and the mental lexicon, pp. 69-71).

The quasi-experimental study conducted by the doctoral candidate in the period 2021 - 2024 with beginner-level students of Spanish from the BA degree programme in “Tourism” at Sofia University in order to identify the mechanisms of individual vocabulary expansion is also of contributory nature. Both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools were used for the purposes of the action research study: language tests (to check the learners' mastery of semantic relations – paradigmatic /synonymy/ and syntagmatic /free word combinations, collocations/), field study and observation (to establish the influence of teacher-supported syntagmatic and associative relations on the acquisition of foreign language vocabulary in digital and non-digital environments), a questionnaire survey and a semi-structured interview (focusing on students' motivation and attitudes towards digital game-based vocabulary acquisition). The empirical study was conducted in two parts, tentatively called Pilot Study A (2024<sup>4</sup>) and Pilot Study B (March-June 2021). The data obtained from the two parts of the

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<sup>3</sup> It would have been good to mention here the series of research studies by prof. Todor Shopov and prof. Maya Pencheva who also encourage the conscious reflection on the available linguistic repertoire and accumulated linguistic experience (the so-called metacognitive [inter]linguistic analysis) in order to expand linguistic knowledge (e.g. by recognizing similar linguistic forms across languages) and to support the understanding of even languages we have little or no knowledge of – see Shopov, T. and Pencheva, M. 2003. *Understanding Babel. An Essay in Intercomprehension Analysis*. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press. The role of the universal linguistic consciousness as a catalyst for plurilingualism is also discussed in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) and the CEFR Companion Volume (2020).

<sup>4</sup> The second study (tentatively called A) was essentially a case study, conducted over a 20-minute span during a class with eight students at A1.1 level in Spanish as a second foreign language, using the gamification e-

quasi-experiment have been rigorously processed and analysed, and the research results largely confirm the working hypotheses formulated regarding the influence of linguistic and extra-linguistic factors on individual vocabulary growth (pp. 112-113). I find particularly interesting the doctoral candidate's conclusion that despite the fact that the students surveyed considered online resources and gamification “a powerful tool for increasing their engagement with learning [...], a significant percentage of them disapproved of using digitized learning resources to learn new vocabulary” (p. 85): it is my view that although members of Generation Z “live immersed in the digital world” (p. 12), they are predisposed to entertain themselves when online and using digital devices as they do in life outside the classroom, which leads to reduced levels of concentration and a more superficial attitude to the learning material on their part (cp. Baron 2021<sup>5</sup>). I would also like to comment on another research finding of the doctoral candidate, which seems to me a bit misinterpreted. Venche Mladenova argues that “it is evident from the empirical research data that as far as paradigmatic relations are concerned, synonymy has a weaker effect on the acquisition of new vocabulary than traditionally thought and expected” (p. 112, emphasis mine). In my opinion, the use of synonyms when introducing and explaining new vocabulary is indeed an effective strategy for enriching vocabulary and making it easier to remember new vocabulary items by relating them to something familiar, but at A1 level such a teaching strategy cannot have the expected effect due to learners' limited vocabulary (at this level almost all words are new and such a practice will lead to cognitive overload and inhibition of cognitive processes).

In conclusion, I would like to point out that Venche Mladenova's PhD thesis is a complete, interdisciplinary, independently prepared and generally well-structured scientific work, underpinned by an impressive empirical research study, treating an interesting and topical linguistic problem of great importance in the context of modern language teaching. The critical remarks made by me in the review above in no way detract from the significance and contributions of the dissertation, which speak for the doctoral candidate's research skills.

### **3. Publications and participation in scientific forums and research projects**

Venche Mladenova has provided information (including manuscripts) for 3 of her not-coauthored publications on the topic of her dissertation, which are the result of her participation in national and international scientific conferences held in the period 2024 - 2025, and all three papers have been published in the proceedings of the respective forums. In

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platform [www.kahoot.com](http://www.kahoot.com) for the purpose of the vocabulary activity in that particular lesson, followed by a semi-structured interview with the participants.

<sup>5</sup> Baron, Naomi S. 2021. *How We Read Now: Strategic Choices for Print, Screen, and Audio*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

the same period (2024 - 2025), she has also been actively involved in the activities of the SUMMIT research project related to enhancing the effectiveness of foreign language teaching and boosting student motivation through gamification as an innovative tool in the educational process. I believe that on this indicator of academic growth Venche Mladenova's application meets the minimum national requirements of the *Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act* and the Regulations for its Implementation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Therefore, on the basis of everything stated above, I confidently recommend to the members of the scientific jury that **Venche Mladenova's** dissertation be positively assessed and that she be conferred the Ph.D. degree in professional field 2.1. *Philology* (scientific specialty: *General and Comparative Linguistics: Applied Linguistics*).

22 July 2025

Assoc. Prof. Svetlana Dimitrova-Gyuzeleva, Ph.D.