

REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Petar Mollov

for the dissertation of Vence Mladenova

on "Vocabulary breadth and depth. An empirical study of the factors of individual active and passive vocabulary growth in Spanish"

1. Presentation of the dissertator

Venche Mladenova graduated from the Bachelor's Program in Spanish Philology at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philologies, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and a Master's degree in Translation-Editing at the Faculty of Slavonic Philologies at the same university. Her professional career began at the Miguel de Cervantes Spanish High School and she is currently an assistant professor at the Department of Western Languages at the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philologies at Sofia University.

2. Evaluation of the merits and contributions of the dissertation

How to acquire vocabulary more easily and successfully in learning a foreign language has preoccupied and preoccupies all specialists in the theory and practice of language teaching. Venche Mladenova's dissertation fits precisely into this research field. It has a theoretical-applied character, conditioned by her long-standing work as a lecturer of Spanish at the Department of Western Languages at Sofia University. She is a professor at the University of St. Kliment Ohridski.

The volume of the work is 178 pages and its content is organized in an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, contributions, six appendices and a bibliography.

The object of the study is the characteristics of vocabulary and semantic relations in its structure, and the specific subject is the factors that affect the breadth and depth of the vocabulary of language learners. To derive and analyze the factors, the author has conducted an empirical study based on which she draws her conclusions. The methods she used were questionnaires, interviewing and conducting tests with the students of the subject she teaches. The data obtained were subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis, as well as correlation analysis of the relationship between semantic relationships and student performance and between student performance and their attitudes towards the factors noted in the questionnaire.

The first chapter is the theoretical framework of the dissertation. In it, the dissertation's author specifies the content of the concepts she uses in her work and also sets out the methodology she uses in her analysis. She traces a number of theoretical propositions concerning the wide range of lexical concepts relevant to her topic. The types of lexico-semantic relations - syntagmatic, paradigmatic and associative; interference and positive transfer; the mental lexicon are discussed. The exposition is arranged in a concise, rather schematic form, characterized by clarity and precision.

The second chapter focuses on the empirical research conducted with students of Tourism at Sofia University. The objectives, methods, instruments and working hypotheses pertaining to each study are described very clearly and specifically. It is noteworthy the variety of components, some developed by the author and others created on the model of English tests. A positive aspect of the work is the combination of different perspectives - the traditional approach focused on semantic relations between linguistic units, modern methods (digitization and gamification) and the subjective judgment of the study participants.

Chapter Three analyses the data obtained, grouped into three strands - linguistic factors, associative thinking and extra-linguistic factors - and ends with

conclusions, where the author makes a link between the results obtained and the theoretical propositions of established linguists. The results are presented with the specific percentage data in tabular form. The dissertation concludes that some of the previously stated hypotheses are confirmed and others are not. Examples of the former are that learning words in word combinations is a more effective method of vocabulary acquisition, and the positive impact of contact between language systems and associative links on individual vocabulary size, while traditional learning through synonymous links is found to be less effective than learning based on antonymous links. Regarding modern digital learning tools and gamification, V. Mladenova illustrates that their growing role does not lead the students participating in the study to turn their backs on traditional methods.

The fourth chapter sets out the general conclusions, which, in addition to theoretical, have valuable practical value, as they can serve to orient teaching methods towards the most successful practices. It should be noted that their validity goes beyond the specific language - Spanish - and can be useful to practitioners, teachers and researchers in other languages as well. Finally, the author identifies perspectives for further research in the area of the dissertation.

Following the Conclusion, several appendices structure the research materials.

The bibliography is extensive, well selected and includes state-of-the-art titles.

The dissertation of Venche Mladenova is an original study with contributions to the theory and practice of teaching Spanish vocabulary at the beginning level of language acquisition. The main contributions can be summarized as follows:

- The work is the first study in our country of the factors for increasing the vocabulary of learners of Spanish;
- systematizes and investigates the relationship between semantic relations and the efficiency of vocabulary acquisition in Spanish based on objective data, but also on the subjective attitudes of learners;

- highlights and explores the role of associative thinking in the process of foreign language acquisition;
- considers language transfer as an effective tool for vocabulary expansion;
- highlights antonymy as a more effective method of vocabulary expansion than synonymy;
- demonstrates the high effectiveness of syntagmatic relations, regardless of their degree of stability, in vocabulary expansion;
- provides a theoretical basis for optimizing foreign language teaching in academic settings, and for testing the progress of Spanish language learners;
- traces the impact of virtual environments on foreign language learning.

The style of exposition throughout the work is concise, with a bias towards schematic presentation, which explains the many bullet points and sub-points that add clarity and lucidity.

The abstract faithfully reflects the content of the work.

3. Publications and other activities related to the dissertation topic

The dissertator has three publications related to the dissertation topic: the first presents the methodology of her research; the second is devoted to the virtual environment and its relationship to learning motivation; the third (in print) traces semantic relationships in theories of mental lexicon as a factor in vocabulary increase. In addition, she participated in a SUMMIT project on "Increasing the effectiveness of foreign language teaching and students' motivation through gamification as an innovative tool in the educational process", in the framework of which she presented a seminar paper (unpublished).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that the qualities of the theoretical and applied work of Venche Mladenova and her contributions warrant her to be awarded the degree of Doctor of Education and Science.

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