OPINION

on the Dissertation of Elena Nikolova Runevska

on the subject of

'Aspects of Teaching the Bulgarian Language to Bessarabian Bulgarians from the Territory of

Present-day Ukraine'

Submitted for the award of the higher education and academic degree of 'Doctor' in Science Area

2. *Humanities*, Professional Field 2.1. *Philology (Bulgarian Language - Applied Linguistics)*

by Prof. Petya Nacheva Osenova, Ph.D,

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1. **Competition data**

I have been appointed as a member of the Academic Board of Examiners for the defence of the Dissertation of Elena Nikolova Runevska by Order № РД-38-373 of 09.07.2024 of the Rector of Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'. I find no evidence of procedural violations. The Candidate has fulfilled the minimum national requirements for Science Area 2. *Humanities*, Professional Field 2.1. *Philology (Bulgarian Language - Applied Linguistics)*, the requirements of the 'Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act', the 'Rules on the Implementation of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act', the 'Rules on the Conditions and Procedure for the Acquisition of Academic Degrees and Filling of Academic Posts' at Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'.

2. **Details of the applicant**

Elena Runevska graduated with a Master's in Bulgarian Philology from Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski' in 2000. Prior to this the Candidate graduated from the Institute of Library Science with a BA degree in Library Science and Bibliography. She was a doctoral student undertaking an independent doctoral study in the 'Department of Bulgarian as a Foreign Language' of the Faculty of Slavic Philology at Sofia University 'St. Kliment Ohridski'. She was 'struck off with the right to defend' her Dissertation and her work was successfully discussed in that primary unit. She has considerable experience in the fields of teaching Bulgarian language, literature, and journalism.

3. **Characteristics of the Dissertation and its scientific contribution**

3.1. Relevance of the scholarly issue explored

The topic of the integration of that Bulgarian diaspora outside the country's borders is extremely important and urgent in social, linguistic and cultural terms. In this sense, the Candidate's research into the peculiarities of, and difficulties in, the instruction of Bessarabian Bulgarians is interdisciplinary and makes an essential contribution.

3.2. Knowledge of how the issue is being considered in scientific literature

Elena Runevska has demonstrated a good knowledge of available literature on the topic of her Dissertation. She used circa 100 sources and bibliographic references in Bulgarian, English, Russian and Ukrainian.

3.3. Significance of the Contribution to Science of the Dissertation

The Dissertation amounts to 230 pages. It consists of an introduction, three chapters, a summary, conclusion, bibliography and five appendices.

The key contributions of the Dissertation are, in my opinion, the following: identification of specific problems in the learning of Bulgarian language and literature by Bessarabian Bulgarians that arise from a complex linguistic environment comprising bilingualism and inactivity in Bulgarian language use; description of the systemic errors in the delivering learning of the Bulgarian language at all linguistic levels which emphasises production of the language; [recommending,] within the chosen communicative approach to learning, the creation of an appropriate learning environment which includes various exercise blocks covering grammar and vocabulary, and the creation of an Anthology of Bulgarian literature and curricula; the conducting of a survey within the target group of Bessarabian Bulgarians, according to which they define themselves as Bulgarians with Bulgarian as their mother tongue.

I have a recommendation for the Candidate regarding the presentation of scientific contributions. Although the contributions themselves are described correctly, they need to be well differentiated and highlighted. Usual best practice is to number them or separate them by other appropriate means. The explanatory segment before the contributions would better relate to the individual parts of the Dissertation. Technically, I suggest that the summaries after each chapter, as a structure, should be part of the chapters themselves rather than being at their level.

The introduction correctly presents the motivation for the chosen topic, the object and subject matter of the research, and the aim and related tasks. The research methodology is complex. It includes a survey method, a comparative analysis and observational technique.

Chapter One introduces the specialized terms used in the Dissertation; it discusses the acquisition of Bulgarian as a second language in the context of bi- and multi-lingualism. Both the

intermediate language hypothesis, and the definition of negative transfer from Russian and Ukrainian in Bulgarian language learning are crucial here. Thus, I would recommend that the following work, which addresses the problems of intermediate language, be included: Банова С., *Езиково усвояване: вариации в параметрите при морфосинтактични реализации в междинния български език,* ISBN:978-954-07-4377-6. (Banova S., *Language acquisition: parameter variations in morphosyntactic realizations in intermediate Bulgarian*, ISBN:978-954-07-4377-6). This Chapter also provides a diachronic description of the waves of emigration from the 18th century to 1878. Finally, and importantly, the Chapter discusses aspects of the cultural and linguistic integration of Bessarabian Bulgarians. I believe that the inclusion of the social and cultural context is a significant factor in understanding the Bessarabian diaspora's learning of the Bulgarian language.

Chapter Two presents the theoretical contribution of the work. It describes students' difficulties in mastering the Bulgarian language and proffers strategies for overcoming them. The problems are addressed at several linguistic levels: morphology (names, pronouns, verbs); lexicology (lexical combinability) and syntax. It is useful to divide the sub-parts of the Chapter into semantic equivalence. For example, nouns, verbs, and pronouns are not concurrent with the syntactical but are relevant to the sub-part dealing with morphology. The Candidate also discusses the reasons for difficulties in acquiring Bulgarian, giving special attention to phenomena specific to our language, such as the presence of the definite article and rich system of verb tenses. In examining the definite article within the category of definiteness/ indefiniteness, the comparison with Russian and Ukrainian is valuable, but a future study might also delve deeper into errors with the indefinite article (expressed in Bulgarian by a 'significant zero' [(null)] and by the form '*one*'). Once again, in presenting verb tenses in the three languages more emphasis could be placed on the analysis of errors in the learning of Bulgarian. Personally, I feel the third sub-part of this Chapter is very important. It suggests strategies to overcome the problems. These include the concept of task-based learning as well as vocabulary expansion techniques. It is interesting to know whether the errors mentioned, such as „Аз ме е страх" ('I me am afraid', *I is afraid) and „Аз ми се струва" ('I me seems like', *I to me it seems like) are really mistakes due to negative transfer from Russian and Ukrainian, or to the influence of the colloquial form of the Bulgarian language. These are examples of typical mistakes made by Bulgarians as well. Errors in the category 'aspect' [of the verb] are also interesting, given that in all Slavic languages this sub-section is present as a lexical-

grammatical category and should be off the list of problematic topics. I also think that the analyticity to the otherwise very well explained typology of errors could be enhanced for each type.

The third Chapter presents the application of the theoretical framework to a real-world learning scenario. It includes Bulgarian language lesson design, typology of tasks and curricula. Here again, I would recommend the Candidate unify the sub-chapters in terms of meaning. For example, the sub-part '*Working with Texts'* is not on the same level as that covering '*Preposition'*. In addition, the knowledge control and assessment parts are very important components.

The Thesis has a summary and conclusions, but not *a* conclusion. I contend it is necessary to respect the genre and thus separate, in the Thesis, a conclusion that includes the results, findings and guidelines for future work.

The appendices include examples of written work by students with typical language errors, a model syllabus, a template for an annual examination.

3.4. Publications on the Dissertation

There are 14 publications on the topic of the Dissertation. 7 of them are independent. The published works are in conference collections or journals and include those from abroad and indexed journals. All of them are related to the Thesis topic. Three of these publications are co-authored and are practical exercises with assignments or tests. I exclude them as only academic articles are to be counted under the procedure.

3.5. Dissertation abstract

The abstract amounts to 27 pages. It follows the structure of the Thesis and faithfully reflects its achievements. The contributions made to science adequately represent the positive results of the research.

4. Conclusion

As a result of analysis of the contributions made to science by this Dissertation, and their significance for linguistics and the teaching of the Bulgarian language in both the theoretical and applied, I confidently propose that Elena Nikolova Runevska be awarded the higher education and academic degree of 'Doctor' and in doing so declare my positive assessment.

26.08.2024   Opinion prepared by:

Sofia   (Prof. Petya Osenova, PhD)