

As you all know, serving on the Anéla/VIOT Thesis Award Committee is a rotating pleasure. This year's committee consisted of Rian Aarts from Tilburg University, Ninke Stukker of Groningen University and my name is Emmeline Besamusca from Utrecht University. As in previous years, Guusje Jol of the Radboud University in Nijmegen provided great support in facilitating the committee's work, writing prompt and excellent notes, bringing season's sweets to our meetings (such as 'pepernoten' in different varieties), and establishing online communication channels when exceptional weather circumstances prevented us from meeting in person.

It was an inspiration for us to serve on this committee and to consider and discuss a selection of excellent theses written last year. Yet, at the same time, it also proved a rather challenging task. Obviously, each of the eight theses presented for our consideration deserves merit for having convinced the expert supervisors involved. In the respective endorsement letters, the quality of the submitted work was eloquently argued, and clearly it was not our task to question the evaluations of any of the colleagues involved. Furthermore, the theses submitted reflect the heterogeneity of the field of applied linguistics, whereas we cannot possibly be considered experts in all areas.

In short, the theses presented us with a rich basket of excellent, yet very different fruits. In order to compare these apples, pears, and peaches, so to say, we first identified a number of relevant aspects to evaluate - including academic and social relevance of the study, scope and presentation of the theoretical framework, formulation of research questions, transparency and consistency of method, reflection on results in relation to the literature, as well as originality of the approach, and readable quality of the text. On a minor score, we also considered the variation in masters' curricula across our institutions and the position and size of the thesis therein, and the amount of work reflected in the thesis in relation to number of ECTS obtained.

In a first round, each thesis submitted was read and considered by two of us. In this first phase of the process, we explicitly avoided a thesis to be read by a committee member who may have had a relation or involvement with this particular work or student.

After this first round of reading and discussing, four of the submitted theses were nominated. These four research projects were presented here today. For those of you who attended

alternative sessions, and did not have a chance to study all of today's abstracts, let me introduce each of the four nominated theses here briefly, in alphabetical order.

The first thesis was written by Peta Baxter. The social relevance of the theme of her research, Foreign Language Anxiety, needs no argument, and obviously it has been subject of study before. Yet, in her critical discussion of the research into FLA thus far, Peta clarifies how – to date – the phenomenon has mostly been studied in classroom settings, and has been based on self-evaluations of speakers of a foreign language. Peta proposed two alternative means to detect Foreign Language Anxiety. On the one hand, she focusses on physiological effects to detect FLA. To that end, she familiarized herself with the use of an electrocardiograph to measure the heart rate of the speaker. In addition, she designed two perception experiments to observe and evaluate non-verbal behavior of the non-native speaker. In these well-considered, new experimental setups to study FLA, the research gains a clear scientific relevance. In the discussion, the complexity of data generated in different experiments is well presented and brought together. All in all, a well written, relevant, and original thesis. We are looking forward to the article in the International Journal of Bilingualism, as announced in the endorsement letter by the supervisor of this thesis, Martijn Goudbeek of Tilburg University.

The second thesis, written by Lotte van Burgsteden, is entitled "Reading bodies". In her study on "vocally displaying possible understandings of embodied conduct in adjacent positions", Lotte analyzes communication processes between surgical team members during operation procedures. In the setting of the operating theater, participants often use visual signs to communicate the actions performed and how they are to be assessed. Departing from a solid theoretical framework, Lotte analyzed specific communication fragments between team members during hip replacement surgeries. Her ability of presenting and applying complex theoretical concepts is exemplary. The detailed discussion of her findings presents valuable theoretical insights into the interactional process in question and enhances the understanding of how intersubjectivity between surgical team members in the consequential setting of complex surgical practices is realized. From the endorsement letter of her supervisor, Mike Huiskes of Groningen University, we understand that the findings of Lotte's study have meanwhile found their way to the training program of surgeons at the University Medical Center of Groningen.

The third thesis presents the creative research project by Miriam van Griethuysen on considering storytelling and brand personification as instruments in marketing strategies. To develop her hypothesis that narrative instruments could influence empathy and generosity towards a brand, Miriam set out on a broad and multidisciplinary discovery tour of concepts such as storytelling, narrative, personification, empathy, and generosity. To identify the possible effects of the different variables in a marketing context, she designed an experiment to test the reception of the brand 'Tilburg University' under three different conditions, presenting a personalized storytelling text, a narrative text, and an informative text. This experiment was very carefully designed and executed, and the results prove promising. In the discussion, Miriam considered the outcomes of her study with the necessary care – not overlooking the fact that in retrospect, her choice of brand to test was perhaps not the most suitable to experiment with personalized storytelling. Yet, no hero should be entirely beyond reproach. And the story of her research voyage was compellingly told and convinced not only her supervisor, Ruud Koolen of Tilburg University, but us as well.

The fourth thesis, written by Margreet Pieper, documents a study into the possible effects of pronunciation teaching on the ability of Dutch secondary school pupils to produce and perceive English phonemes. To develop her hypothesis, Margreet convincingly build onto relevant insights from the domains of phonetics, pronunciation teaching and experimental linguistics. She designed an experiment to test the effect of pronunciation lessons on the production and perception of native Dutch speaking school pupils in the case of a selected number of English phonemes – which I'd better not try to pronounce here, as Margreet concluded that without having enjoyed explicit pronunciation lessons, my pronunciation is likely to be wanting. This conclusion resulted from a carefully planned and solidly executed experiment, testing pronunciation and perception of a group of pupils after have received pronunciation lessons and a control group who did not have such lessons. The beautifully designed teaching material for the pronunciation lessons deserve special mention, as they are but one testimony of the great care Margreet invested in her research design. A relevant study, both academically and socially, as was also argued by her supervisors, Aoju Chen and Rick de Graaf from Utrecht University.

In Sum: four – quite different – research reports, which convinced us on all scores as identified at the start, and are therefore fully deserving of a nomination for the Anéla/VIOT Thesis Award.

However, as it is with awards, in the end only one of the nominees can be the ultimate winner. Fortunately, it did not take long or strenuous discussions, as we unanimously considered one of these theses most outstanding, and that is the thesis by Peta Baxter.

Foreign Language Anxiety is clearly a relevant phenomenon to study in a social context that is increasingly expecting and requiring active competences in foreign languages, a development in which speakers with FLA may find themselves at a disadvantage. Peta's research, however, is not only socially relevant, her approach also added meaningful theoretical insights into FLA. Peta stepped out of the classroom setting of the previous research into a much wider, more general context of second language speakers. Furthermore, in considering physiological and non-verbal indicators of FLA during language production, she also moved the research into FLA beyond the rather limited scope of retrospective self-reporting of language learners. In short: a very relevant study, which has identified a promising key to open the door to further research. And, last but not least, this thesis is an outstanding example of academic writing that is at the same time accessible and enjoyable to read for a wider audience. One does not need to be an academic expert in the field to be completely convinced by this thesis.

Dr. Rian Aarts

Drs. Emmeline Besamusca

Dr. Ninke Stukker