To the HSE Dissertation Council
in Philology and Linguistics

Personal written reference
of the Dissertation Committee Member

Colin Phillips, PhD

On the dissertation of Natalia Slioussar
On the topic: «Experimental study of several core concepts of theoretical morphology», for the purpose of obtaining
Philosophy Doctor in Philology and Linguistics HSE

This dissertation presents an outstanding set of studies that highlight the contributions of the Russian language to broader debates about how words are spoken and understood. Some of the studies are ones that I already know and like, and often mention to my students. Others are ones that I am learning about for the first time and will refer to in the future.

The scientific quality of the research is unquestionably high. The research topic is highly relevant, as it engages with contemporary international debates in psycholinguistics and linguistics. The findings are certainly original and well justified. Statistical analyses and experimental designs are well suited to the question at hand.

Therefore, I have no reservations about recommending that Dr Slioussar be awarded the sought degree. I have fewer points of reference to compare work at this level with, but I certainly regard this as research of a distinguished quality.

I find a number of things particularly impressive about the collection:

Most importantly, they combine careful linguistic analysis of Russian with detailed psycholinguistic experimentation, showing that a language like Russian makes it possible to address questions in psycholinguistic theory that cannot be addressed in morphologically simpler languages like English or German.

The studies are also notable for their methodological diversity. It is powerful to combine reaction time and reading-time measures with production studies and functional neuroimaging approaches.

In addition, the creation of a database of Russian words (with 1.7 million word forms) will be a highly valuable tool that will help to move forward the field of psycholinguistics in Russia.

I appreciate the care with which the studies are carried out and analyzed, and how key findings are replicated. One challenge for bringing attention to important findings in languages that have been less examined in psycholinguistics, including Russian, is that readers may be inclined to overlook individual studies that they regard as hard to replicate. The thoroughness of the current studies will help them to be taken more seriously.
The studies are thought-provoking, and so they raise many questions for me. But the themes that I would be most interested in knowing more about are:

(1) In the studies on number and gender attraction, Slioussar advocates a retrieval-based account, but I would like to know more about the choice of retrieval cues that can capture the syncretism effects and the head-gender effects.

(2) In the study on information structure and word order, what mechanisms are needed to capture the finding that context-mismatch effects develop faster on phrases that appear in canonical positions than on phrases that appear in non-canonical positions?

(3) In the functional neuroimaging studies, the dissociation of different morphological properties is clever. What processes can we then attribute to the functional connectivity patterns between LIFG and temporal areas?

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