"Names in Society. A linguistic and prosopographic approach"

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Abstract

Names or more exactly *proper names* are playing several functions in society: they are highly efficient linguistic means to identify a person, namely the "bearer of the name". In this function proper names like *Wulff, Merkel, Spatzinger* compete with descriptive terms such as *the president, the German chancellor, the scribe of Strasbourg* etc. The particular form of a proper name can also signal the family, the geographical background or the social position of the bearer of the name. Prosopographic research, i. e. the systematic investigation of a group of people, depends on the identification of individuals by means of their names. This identification is often difficult to establish since independent criteria are hard to establish. Names are also one of the main research objects of linguistic and philosophic investigation into the nature of reference, i.e. the relation between a linguistic expression and its meaning. In this talk we firstly present new insights of the referential behavior of names in discourse. We secondly provide evidence that this behavior depends on the function of names in society, and thirdly we analyze how the textual properties of names in historical context also inform us about their function in their contemporary society.