Proper names with and without definite articles

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Proper names are a class of expressions that have a unique and rigid reference, that are singular with regard to number, and that are inherently definite. Given these semantic/ pragmatic properties it is astonishing that languages behave differently with regard to the syntagmatic combination of proper names and definite articles. This variation holds for proper names in general, but also within a language for different classes of proper names such as person names, nick names, place names, object names, and so on. For instance, person names do generally not allow a definite article in English as one would expect; in Colloquial German, person names are frequently used with definite articles, though, which is not good in Standard German; and in Modern Greek person names are obligatorily used with definite articles. These facts have been observed in previous research (see for instance Anderson 2004, 2007; Van Langendonck 2007), but no systematic study of the cross-linguistic variation of these constructions has been done so far.

The first goal of this contribution is to present first results of a typological study that examines the constructions of proper names and definite articles of a broad sample of languages that have definite articles. Languages may combine proper names with definite articles obligatorily, or never, or optionally with certain pragmatic effects. In addition, there will be variation of this behavior in each language of the sample with respect to the different classes of proper names.

The second goal of the contribution is to seek explanations within the functional-typological approach to language for the patterns found in the sample languages. Various hypotheses will be discussed. One of them deals with the probability, to which proper names in a language may be confused with identical or similar appellative expressions (common nouns).

References: • Anderson, J. M. 2004. On the grammatical status of names. *Language* 80. 435–474. • Anderson, J. M. 2007. *The grammar of names.* Oxford: OUP. • Van Langendonck, W. 2007. *Theory and typology of proper names.* Berlin & New York: De Gruyter.