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# Articles before anthroponyms

## Examining their occurrence and function in transcribed voice messages from messenger groups

This study is about the use of the definite article before personal names. Personal names always refer unequivocally to a specific, concrete object whereas articles are determinatives which agree in case, number and gender. They create clarity, which is, however, redundant with personal names as these are monoreferential. In written language, it is unusual to use the definite article while in spoken German it is more common. Previous studies (Bellmann 1990; Werth 2014; Ackermann 2018;) touched on the topic but there has been no usage-based survey so far.

This paper analyses articles before personal names, a deviation from standard use where personal names are used without an article. The study covers data from voice messages posted in the messenger service Telegram, exploring different ways in which the article is used before personal names as well as potential meanings and conditions. The focus is on spoken language so as to shed light on the prevalence and application of this phenomenon. The theoretical foundations, data collection method and results are presented, whereby this study is part of a more comprehensive research project (Sahlbach 2022). The aim is to gain a better understanding of the meaning of these constructions.

Articles appear before the noun in noun phrases (and, if present, also before pre-modifiers); according to Vater (1984), they can assume referring, pointing, questioning and quantifying functions. Bisle-Müller (1991) takes the description of their function one step further, demonstrating that the article assumes a coordinating role in interaction. It is not customary to use the article before all types of proper nouns and it is only used in combination with personal names in spoken language. There are regional variations in its use: in southern Germany the article is used consistently while in the north, its use depends on the context (Bellmann 1990). Werth (2014) distinguishes between contexts according to their function, one of which is as a reference. The effect of using it depends on the context, however, and cannot be derived from the construction alone. A consideration of the semantic and pragmatic implications allows conclusions to be drawn about the meanings and functions of the constructions.

The presence of the definite article before personal names was investigated based on its usage. There were several challenges in connection with gathering spoken data. As this is a phenomenon which does not appear in written language, voice recordings had to be found which represent oral language in relation to both the medium and conception. Voice messages fulfil this requirement and were therefore taken for the study. They are shared in public Telegram groups and can be both accessed and extracted. In this way over 11,000 voice messages were collected from 14 different groups comprising 370 hours of recordings.

With that quantity of data, automated transcription was paramount to facilitate the analysis. As regular transcription programs are either expensive or have a high error rate, an alternative was identified. With the help of a program written especially for this study,

voice messages could be transcribed free of charge using Google's Speech Recognition API. Programmed using Python, *MemoTrans* divided up the selected audio files into smaller segments and shared them with the Google interface. The transcribed contents were then collected in a text file and the individual voice messages were indicated. The file name was saved as meta information so that later the transcribed texts could be matched up with their audio file. In the meantime, the interface has been closed down by Google so that it is no longer possible to transcribe audio files using this method. The application was, however, very good at transcribing spoken text. The transcripts were then analysed using corpus-linguistic methods.

In the data just under 1,000 instances were found of the article being used before personal names. As the aim of this study was to describe the various constructions, the results were systematically divided up into different groups. In 7% of the instances, the indefinite article was used before personal names but in the vast majority of cases the definite article was used. The category of personal names was subdivided into the type of name (given name or last name) and full name. In over 50% of the instances the given name was used, with the full name and family name each appearing in over 20% of the cases. When taking a closer look at the results, it became clear that the names could be subdivided further. The people addressed had different relationships with the Telegram group. Sometimes members of the group were addressed, in other cases public figures (politicians, for example) and in a few instances, it turned out that people were naming themselves. To investigate the influence that individuals' positions in relation to each other had on the use of the article, these characteristics were also recorded and analysed.

The results clearly revealed that the closer the people addressed are to the group, the more often given names are used. Family names and full names tend to be used above all when referring to people who are not members of the group or who are public figures.

It became clear that the use of the article before anthroponyms in transcribed voice messages from Telegram groups is a complex phenomenon that can fulfil different semantic functions. The use of this construction depends on various factors, including the position of the speaker in relation to the group and the relationship between interlocutors. Further research is required to examine the semantic functions of this construction more closely.

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