

Moderna binamns konstruktion och funktion

Summary

The construction and function of modern nicknames

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This article discusses the structure and function of modern Swedish nicknames. The specific questions raised are what constitutes a nickname and what function such a name can have. There is also a discussion about how nicknames are to be distinguished from first names and from stage, or professional, names, as well as a terminological discussion. Theoretical starting points are drawn from several disciplines, underlining the interdisciplinary nature of the subject. Fundamental to an understanding of nicknames are the contextual situation and the communication theory model. These perspectives are then combined with explanations of identity construction and the linguistic resources available for that purpose.

The data consist of 311 nicknames collected by means of a postal survey and interviews. Four aspects of the construction of these names are explored: the sources of the names, their formation, their content, and perceived reasons for the names being given.

The most common group of name givers when it comes to nicknames is childhood family (34 per cent), followed by childhood friends (31 per cent). The difference between these groups is quite small, but a comparison of men and women makes it clear that it is much more common for women to be given a nickname in the first-mentioned setting and men in the latter. From a gender perspective, the results also show that it is as common for women as it is for men to have nicknames, and that the giving of such names has a playful element to it with regard to gender as well, in that the same nicknames can be given to both women and men, and a person may be given a nickname perceived as belonging to the other sex.

Nicknames are part of youth language, as they are clearly age-related. The vast majority of them are created from early childhood up to high-school age, after which the creation of nicknames declines.

In the data it has been possible to distinguish three functions that nicknames may have: an affective function, where the focus is on the utterance; a relationship function, where name givers and name bearers are central; and finally a positioning function, excluding an audience that does not have access to the reciprocal use of nicknames.

Finally, the study raises a number of new issues. It is based on perceived, rather than actual, use of nicknames. The latter aspect also deserves attention, as does a more in-depth study of identity issues.