

Proper names as discursive parameters of identity

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The paper will discuss the formation of identities, national and local, from a particular standpoint, that of formation and use of a unique class of nouns, namely, proper names relating to geographical entities. While nouns in general are important parameters of particular types of discourse (cf. Biber & Conrad 2001), proper names are special in being unique identifiers of recognizable pieces of reality, and often form semantic centres in sentences and in discourse (cf. Piotrowski 1994).

The paper will treat proper names in their multicultural aspects, across two, and more, languages, as relating to geographical entities in the so-called New Territories in Poland (in particular Lower Silesia): the regions that after World War II were annexed (“returned”) to Poland, while before they had been part of Germany. Firstly I will discuss the status of multilingual proper names, next I will go on to the description of the processes of giving the geographical entities Polish names. On the background of available evidence I will argue that the renaming was in fact an act of creating a mythical past, a new tradition, a new discourse, for the New Territories, in opposition to the previous discourse. The new discourse was organised around exclusion of the German (and other) past, and, while stressing the continuity of Polish rule, it in fact brought about discontinuity of historical traditions. The new discourse was meant to help form a new identity – deeply nationalistic - of the people that moved to the New Territories, and one may say that this was often successful (cf. the summary of the studies in Thum 2003/2006). The question of the actors in the renaming process leads to the question of the relations of power.

What is, however, interesting is the emergence of a new identity in the new generations of Poles in the New Territories, which seem to reject partly the “Polish” discourse and, seeking their local identity, go back to the “German” discourse, which can be seen in the use of older names, the older discourse. In turn, this can be related, as some sociologists do, to differentiation between global versus local identities (Szkudlarek & Melosik 1998).

Bibliography

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