

**Barbara Duden**

University of Hannover

Title:

"Pop-Genes" - the symbolic effects of the release of "genes" into ordinary speech

Abstract:

Within the last two decades the word 'gene' has migrated from science into ordinary conversations. Gene-talk has spread epidemically in political and professional arguments and ethical debates, but references to 'genes' have also entered personal deliberations. 'Genes' by now reshape not only political, social or medical concepts, but the very perceptions of the self. This intrusion of the term into common parlance, and particularly the drastic encroachment of 'genes' into personal deliberation - where 'genes' have come to impose themselves as the ultimate answer to primordial questions - 'where do I come from, who am I, what will happen to me in the future' -, led to the research project on 'genes' in ordinary prose that I undertook with Silja Samerski and want to report on here. I want to make it plausible that in the shadow of human genetics the first person singular or the personal pronoun, the "I" of the speaker, is subtly, profoundly and probably irreversibly affected, because 'genes' in ordinary speech have all that it takes to perform a blending of incompatible spheres of meaning. Outside of the boundaries of laboratory science and data processing the word has an extraordinary alchemistic power: simultaneously it refers to the most concrete, personal and intimate - the soma of the speaker - while at the same time referring to statistical probabilities and risk profiles. This alchemistic potency of the term makes it fit to exercise a crucial symbolic social function: references to 'my genes' and 'your genes' implant population statistics, probability reasoning and the demand for self-management in the corporeal make-up of the speaker or the person addressed as gene-carrier. 'The gene' in ordinary prose imparts bodily substance to the nature of personhood that lacks common sense and is dependent on professional tutelage.