Self as a phenomenon

*New research explains the concept of self as a specific phenomenon or experience rather than as a language construct.*

There are many ways to understand the concept of self and identity. The EU-funded project PHENOSELF (Understanding the concept of self as a phenomenal concept) investigated the semantics of the concept of self – i.e. how the concept latches on to the individual it refers to. It helped explain the unique features of the self-concept, both under everyday circumstances and in pathological cases.

In linguistics, self is traditionally associated with the word ‘I’. More recently however, researchers have investigated self in terms of perception and action rather than words. In this vein, the project looked at self-concept not as depending on exploiting structural features of the context, but from a basic experience of self. The key hypothesis was that the concept of self is not an indexical concept (i.e. not related to ‘I’), but related more to a phenomenal concept. The latter includes more subjective phenomena such as in the words red, peppery, sad or silky, depicting phenomena we use to reflect on our experiences and how they make us feel.

PHENOSELF saw self as a kind of impression or experience of ‘me as myself’ that specifically triggers the application of the concept. In line with psychology and philosophy, it studied self-experience as ‘me-ness’ or ‘mine-ness’. This involved looking at relationships between self-experience and cognitive phenomenology to process conceptual thoughts, bodily awareness, bodily ownership and bodily movement.

The research resulted in underlining different concepts of the ‘subjective character’ related to these terms and what this represents. It proposed a phenomenal-concept model and explored various philosophical implications of the model, examining perspectives from epistemology to moral philosophy. Further research investigated the special value we ascribe to ourselves, and why subjects care in a special way about what happens to them.

Lastly, the project looked at the various notions of subjective character or a sense of self with respect to mental illnesses (e.g. alien thought syndrome, Cotard delusion) that skew the concept or sense of self. These insights add important insight into the debate on sense of self, whether in everyday situations or in clinical ones.