

Guest lecture

Prof. Anita Auer

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“Voices from the Lower Social Spectrum:
The Language of the Labouring Poor
in Late Modern England”



Wednesday, 6 May 2026, 3.30pm

Hörsaal 5, Geiwi-Turm

Abstract

This presentation focuses on the processes of linguistic standardization in Late Modern English (1700-1900) through a 'language history from below' perspective, drawing on a recently created corpus of pauper letters written between 1795 and 1834. These petitions for poor relief offer a rare window onto non-elite writing practices during the Late Modern English period.

After outlining the socio-historical context and the heterogeneous literacy practices of the lower social strata, I present methodological challenges related to authenticity, orthographic variability, and the reconstruction of linguistic repertoires. Thereafter, case studies demonstrate how pauper letters allow for analyses of different linguistic levels in different regions in Late Modern England. The findings reveal both inter- and intra-writer variation that is shaped by degrees of schooling and exposure (or lack thereof) to normative linguistic models. By foregrounding non-elite writers, this type of research advances our understanding of language standardization as a socially stratified and uneven process, and it shows how ego-documents produced outside elite domains can shed new light on broader patterns of language variation and change in Late Modern England.