

Guest lecture

Prof. Anita Auer

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“English Language History ‘from Below’: Exploring
Regional and Social Variation”



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4DG14 SR (GEIWI-Turm)

Abstract

This talk introduces students to historical sociolinguistics, a field that investigates how language varies and changes in relation to social factors across time. The presentation shows how English historical linguists combine linguistic analysis with social, economic, and textual history to understand language development from both “above” (elite, institutional, often printed, sources) and “below” (everyday writers, based on unedited manuscript sources).

The first part explores regional variation by examining written records from late Medieval and Early Modern English towns. By analysing spelling and verb-ending patterns in administrative documents and civic plays, the study reveals how urbanization and contact between dialects contributed to emerging supralocal written norms long before a standard form was fully established.

The second part focuses on social variation by analysing around letters written by members of the labouring poor between 1795 and 1834. These petitions provide rare insight into the language of lower-class writers, whose voices are often missing from historical corpora. Findings show how varying levels of schooling influenced spelling, grammar, and written expression, and how such documents allow us to complement the traditional elite-based language history.

Overall, the talk illustrates how historical sociolinguistics uses empirical data, corpus methods, and interdisciplinary approaches to uncover patterns of language variation and change across regions and social groups.