



CSLS GUEST LECTURE

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Historical Sociolinguistic Approaches to the Language of the Labouring Poor in Late Modern England

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Social stratification has been determined to be a highly relevant explanatory factor for language variation and change, albeit varying according to the language, society and people under investigation. In (English) historical sociolinguistics, the investigation of the social class factor is dependent on the availability of written data across the social spectrum. As literacy was socially stratified prior to the introduction of elementary compulsory schooling in 1870, it was difficult to find written sources from the lower social strata before the nineteenth century. However, new data from the English lower orders, so-called pauper petition letters (c. 1795–1834), have recently become available and allow us now to shed new light on Late Modern English language history and to test the applicability of synchronically informed sociolinguistic theories to written historical data.

In this talk, you will be introduced to the recently launched research project [“The Language of the Labouring Poor in Late Modern England”](#) which comprises the creation of a corpus of c. 2,000 pauper petitions. Based on the experiences of the research team with the material to date, and couched in socio-historical, educational and migration histories, I will discuss a number of issues that highlight the merits and challenges of the data such as the kinds of linguistic studies that are possible with the data, the (un)reliability of meta-linguistic social data retrieved from the pauper petitions, and the relationship between the pauper petitions and dialect representations in contemporary literature, depositions, as well as grammars and manuals. All in all, the talk provides an overview of what kinds of research questions can be answered with the help of the pauper petitions corpus.

Prof. Dr. Anita Auer is a professor at the University of Lausanne (English Department) and a (socio)historical linguist with a special interest in diachronic and synchronic aspects of language variation and change. Her current research focuses on (a) alternative histories of the English language, (b) the historical development of English subjunctive constructions; and (c) language maintenance and shift amongst Swiss heritage speakers past and present in North America.

