Northern English Pauper Letters:
Exploring Social and Regional Variation in Late Modern England

This presentation is part of the workshop "Interactions with the Standard in Early and Late Modern Regional Varieties of English" (organised by Christine Elsweiler and Sarah van Eyndhoven).

Abstract
The North of England, perceived as culturally and linguistically different from the South since the Middle Ages, has received much attention from English (historical) linguists since the early 2000s (see for instance Wales 2006; Hickey ed. 2015; Beal & Hancil eds. 2017). The proposed presentation aims to contribute to these regionally focused studies by shedding new light on the interplay between social and regional variation in the North of England during the Late Modern English period. As the period is marked by standardization processes of written and spoken English, notably codification and prescriptivism (cf. Milroy & Milroy 1991), grammatical works and pronunciation dictionaries have determined norms based on the language of well-educated gentlemen from the South of England, which necessarily led to the stigmatization of other linguistic variants. While the upper layers of society were often aware of the linguistic norms and therefore could have adhered to them, texts produced by the lower layers of society, that did not receive a high level of literacy training, are more likely to contain non-standard and stigmatized linguistic features. We can gain access to the language of the labouring poor through so-called pauper letters that were written in the context of the Old Poor Law.

Based on samples of pauper letters written in the North of England during the period c. 1795-1834, the study systematically investigates linguistic variation from two perspectives, notably (a) with a special focus on features that have been associated with the North (as indicated in contemporary grammars, dictionaries and manuals, as well as discussed in relevant literature, see e.g. Gardner et al. 2023), and (b) with selected case studies of individual writers in which the relationship between linguistic norms and non-standard features is investigated (see e.g. Auer et al. in press). The study will reveal that pauper letters are a useful resource for investigating regional (and social) variation in the Late Modern English period, but that it is difficult to determine whether the use of linguistic norms and/or the lack of non-standard/dialectal features is due to higher literacy levels and an awareness of the linguistic norms or to the fact that certain linguistic features were not used in the region.

References:

Auer, Anita, Anne-Christine Gardner & Mark Iten. In Press. Patterns of Linguistic Variation in Late Modern English Pauper Petitions from Berkshire and Dorset. In Markus Schiegg & Judith Huber (eds.). *Intra-Writer Variation in Historical Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Lang.

Beal, Joan C. & Sylvie Hancil (eds.) 2017. *Perspectives on Northern Englishes*. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter Mouton.

Gardner, Anne-Christine, Anita Auer & Mark Iten. 2023. Language and Mobility of Late Modern English Paupers. In Michael C. Frank & Daniel Schreier (eds.), *Migrations and*

Contacts (Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature, Vol. 41), pp. 45-70. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.

Hickey, Raymond (ed.) 2015. *Researching Northern English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Milroy, James & Lesley Milroy. 1991. *Authority in Language: Investigating Language Prescription and Standardisation.* 2nd ed.. London & New York: Routledge.

Wales, Katie. 2006. *Northern English. A Cultural and Social History*. Cambridge University Press.