Dr Nils Langer
University of Bristol

Historical Sociolinguistics in Nineteenth-century German School Inspection Reports

Monday 19 January 2009
King’s College London, Waterloo Campus
Franklin-Wilkins Building, Waterloo Bridge Wing
5.30pm - Room 3/7

Language history from below (cf. Elspaß 2007 for overview) is a scholarly programme to redress the prominent focus on standard and formal language in traditional linguistic historiography. Standardisation of, say, German grammar, was more or less complete by the nineteenth century (but cf. Davies & Langer 2006 for areas of controversy) but not everything that was written in German was done so in the standard language. Language history from below aims to provide a bigger and more complete picture of the range of variation and varieties that actually constitute German. For this reason, studies in this area often concentrate on the nineteenth century since in this period, evidence of variation is most strikingly submerged by formal and printed standard-language texts. The most fruitful ways to pursue this research is to uncover corpora of informal and non-printed texts (cf. Fairman 2007, McLelland 2007) in order to analyse contemporary language use. However, a contribution to our understanding of the historical sociolinguistics of the time can also be made by investigating metalinguistic sources, e.g. the use of non-standard language in contemporary literary works (e.g. the use of Low German by workers and patricians in Thomas Mann’s Die Buddenbrooks), or the use of dialect poetry in school grammars (e.g. in American German school grammars; cf. Langer 2008). An as yet unused source for this enterprise are school inspection reports (Visitationserichte), which, though they are not from below, shine a very direct light on the situation “down below”. In Schleswig-Holstein, school inspections of every school took place over a 2-day period every three years and a detailed report was compiled by the regional church superintendent not only on the state of education, but also the quality of the church service, the provisions for the parish poor, and the general moral behaviour of the local community. In this paper, I will present evidence from such school inspection reports covering the period from 1830-1910 which discuss explicitly the sociolinguistic conditions of the area, in particular with regard to general language competence (Ausdrucksfähigkeit), multilingualism (Frisian, Danish, German), and problems with regard to monolingual dialect speakers. These reports – often very detailed and personal – thus provide a valuable contribution to our understanding of the sociolinguistic challenges in rural and working-class communities in Northern Germany.

The seminar is organised by King’s College London: Centre for Language Discourse & Communication