

Exploring Historical Urban Vernaculars in Early Modern Bern, Switzerland

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In early modern times, some criminals were brought to the Tower of Bern. Protocols of the criminal processes were collected in what are called tower books and are today accessible in the State Archive of Bern. Even if these protocols are today open to the public, systematic research from a historical, linguistic, or jurisprudential perspective is still missing. Reasons for the absence of research could lay in the size of the corpus and certainly also in the type of handwriting used in the documents (*Kurrentschrift*). In addition, there is also no systematic research on early written languages or on language history in the early modern state of Bern. My project aims to fill some of these gaps.

The main goals of the project are (a) to detect and describe the urban vernacular of early modern Bern and (b) to depict Bernese language history. In addition, the project intends to take a first look at the written language: Was there some kind of office language in use? How frequent are vernacular traces in the written languages and what are their function? Until today, approx. 15'000 pages of the tower books have been digitized, partially transcribed and are ready for some initial analyses.

In this talk, I want to focus on the vernacular traces found in the tower books. First examinations have already shown that utterances of both, suspects and witnesses, are mostly represented by indirect speech. Nevertheless, we also find traces of direct speech in the protocols, often characterized by using (urban) vernacular words. Based on three chosen criminal cases I will show which different functions these vernacular traces have fulfilled and how their use can be understood as a testimonial of social injustice created by early modern language use.