

# Speech Reflections in Late Modern English Pauper Petitions

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In the absence of direct records of speech, language historians, when reconstructing orality in Late Modern English, have a range of text types at their disposal that contain speech-like elements, such as personal correspondence, trial proceedings or drama and fiction (cf. Culpeper & Kytö 2010: 7–18). A written source that similarly reflects contemporary spoken language during the Late Modern English period is pauper petitions, i.e. letters written by the labouring poor to apply for out-relief (financial or other support) to their home parish. As many of the writers had not received much schooling, let alone grammatical training, the data source can reflect the varying levels of education and elements of speech of the writers from different regions in England.

The first part of the paper briefly introduces the SNSF-funded research project *The Language of the Labouring Poor in Late Modern England (2020–2024)* and the corpus of pauper petitions we are currently compiling. We will present sociohistorical background information like education and mobility which is relevant for understanding speech reflections in these petitions. In the second part, we will present case studies from different geographical areas, including Dorset and Northern counties. In our analysis of the speech reflections in the pauper petitions we draw on comparative resources such as dialect poems by William Barnes (1801–1886), his *Dissertation on the Dorset Dialect of the English Language* published in 1844 (Burton 2013, 2017a/b; Burton & Ruthven 2013), as well as *Dialects, Poems, Songs, and Ballads by Various Writers, in the Westmoreland and Cumberland Dialect* (1839). While sociolinguistically variable features such as h-dropping and h-insertion are common in all regions, different writers reveal different sets of regionally more restricted features. Augustine Morgan from Dorset, for instance, must have pronounced “week” with a short vowel (spelt “wick”), lowered the KIT vowel (“lettel” for “little”) and elided final /t, d/ (“han” for “hand”, “nex” for “next”). Since all paupers represented in our corpus had moved away and wrote back to their home parishes, the petitions also allow us to identify the likely origin of the paupers, and track mobility patterns as well dialect contact in the past. The data gathered from pauper petitions thus significantly increases our knowledge of spoken and regional features in Late Modern England and pushes the boundaries of dialect studies back in time.

## References

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