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Towards the written language in Early Modern Bern (Switzerland)

In Early Modern Times, some criminals were brought to the Tower of Bern (*Käfigturm*). Protocols of the criminal processes were collected in tower books (*Turmbücher*) and are today accessible in the State Archive of Bern. Even though these protocols are available to the public, systematic research from a historical, linguistic or jurisprudential perspective is still missing. Reasons for the absence of research could be due to the size of the corpus (approx. 250'000 pages) and certainly also in the type of handwriting used in the documents (*Kurrentschrift*), which is not legible for modern readers. In addition to this gap, there is little research on early forms of the written language (pre-standard) or on language history in early modern Switzerland. This project aims to fill some of these gaps.

One of the main goals of this project is to detect, analyze and describe language variation and change in the early modern state of Bern, Switzerland. What are the features of Early Modern Bernese Swiss German, and what can we learn about the history of Bernese German by studying it? In addition, the project intends to take a first look at the written language: Was it an office language and if yes, did it resemble to any other office language used in the German-speaking area at that time? How frequent are dialect traces in the written languages and what functions do they serve? By means of recent methods applied in Digital Humanities, an initial sample of approx. 15'000 pages of the tower books has been digitized using ScanTents and is now ready for analyses. These analyses were performed using automatic recognition and transcription of the manuscripts with the help of *Transkribus*.

Initial analyses seem to suggest that an office language was in use; however, we are unsure as to what kind of office language it is because of a lack of research. Furthermore, it is already clear that there is a certain degree of influence from the dialects in writing in these documents; however, frequency and function of the dialect is, again due to the lack of research, unclear until the present day. This conference contribution aims to face some of these challenges.