This paper explores to what extent Communities of Practice, popular in contemporary sociolinguistics (e.g. Eckert 2000), provides a means to understand historical variation; some contemporary sociolinguists question whether it is possible to use CoPs for historical sociolinguistics due to the discrepancies between modern and historical data and methodologies (Meyerhoff 2002). As a contribution to the exploration of this problem, I present findings from a study of the linguistic practice of Queen Elizabeth I, who has been identified as a linguistic leader of many sixteenth-century morphosyntactic changes (Evans 2013; Nevalainen et al. 2011). Concentrating on Elizabeth’s pre-accession idiolect, I offer a theoretical account of possible CoPs, based on historical accounts of Elizabeth’s early life. I then consider how these hypothetical CoPs can be supported using historical linguistic evidence. I discuss results from comparative analyses of Elizabeth and individuals associated with the posited CoPs, extracted from inter-linked idiolectal corpora. I consider how the social relationships proposed in historical scholarship can be said to map onto, or be realised through, the linguistic evidence, and assess how language functions as part of Elizabeth’s social identity during this period, potentially resulting in linguistic leadership.

References:


Keywords: idiolect, historical sociolinguistics, Community of Practice.