THE THEME:

Studies on ‘feeling’, ‘affect’, ‘sentiment’, and ‘emotion’ are on the rise across the humanities and social sciences as scientific evidence has revealed the fundamental connections between emotion, rational thinking, and good judgment (e.g. Damasio 1994, Goleman 1995). In line with these insights, emotional phenomena invite fresh and challenging perspectives on fundamental research questions such as the dichotomies between the body versus mind, individual evaluation, and judgment versus social norms and morality, or the biological versus cultural bases of meaning (Wilce 2009). Moreover, investigations into human emotionality ask for interdisciplinary contact between disciplines from the humanities and cognitive sciences. This also opens new routes for research in English literature, medieval studies, and linguistics.

After the linguistic and then the “historical” turn, scholars of English literature have begun recently to explore “The Affective Turn.” With its perceived potential to create critical links between emotion, bodies, matter, and technology, the notion of “affect” has taken on a key role in the current research landscape. The critical power of the term lies in its ability to permit researchers to look at agency and impact: the effects of affect. In other words, affect is a way of thinking about embodied consciousness and aesthetic performances that invites theorizing relationships, movement, interdependence, and above all, what art does to spectators and readers. In cultural and literary studies, affect has been a means of theorizing the social effects and mediations of language and art.

The Foucauldian notion that emotions and sentiments have a history has inspired a growing body of scholarly works that conceive “emotions as habits that can be produced through cultural scripts” (McNamer 2010). The medieval period, particularly the later medieval rise of affective piety, has been fertile ground for a study of social and cultural changes in emotional behaviour. In this context, emotion, spirituality, gender, and the body intersect in a complex manner: emotions are intrinsically linked with the mystical, and affective spirituality is equated with feminine piety. Caroline Walker Bynum, Rachel Fulton and, most recently, Sarah McNamer have addressed these issues, but much still needs to be done in order to reconstruct how emotion and affect influenced the construction of the individual and informed his/her social interactions in the medieval period.

Although traditional terms such as ‘connotation’, ‘expressive meaning’ or ‘expressive function of language’, ‘affective stance’, ‘language attitude’, or ‘(im)politeness’ point to the evaluative dimensions of linguistic structures, language use, and meta-linguistic judgments, the complex connections between language and emotion have not yet been systematically explored in English linguistics. This is surprising as human beings are not able to engage with one another, let alone communicate or learn a language, without showing a fundamental, if not innate, sense of empathy (Malloch and Trevarthen 2009). Thus, human language and emotionality seem to be fundamentally intertwined. For research in English linguistics this offers interesting perspectives on the role of emotions and affect in interaction, the verbal expression of feelings, or emotional components of meaning. Moreover, it permits to investigate the linguistic construction of evaluations in different types of discourse as well as the cultural and historical relativity of emotional language and emotion concepts.

THE KEYNOTE SPEAKERS:

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• Emotionality in discourse (media, political discourse, advertising, etc.)
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