

Quotation Unbound – Bridging the Divide Across Quotation Types

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Quotation is a linguistic device that speakers employ to reflect on language, to attribute utterances to speakers or writers, and to highlight particular expressions within discourse. The functions of quotation therefore range from metalinguistic reference and speaker attribution to indicating non-stereotypical uses of language. At the same time, quotation has posed a challenge for traditional semantic and pragmatic accounts, for instance by disrupting assumptions about compositionality and by blurring the boundary between truth-conditional content and metalinguistic reference across quotation types.

Several different types of quotation are commonly distinguished in the literature: direct (1a) and indirect quotation or speech reports (1b) (e.g., Clark & Gerrig 1990), mixed quotation (1c) (e.g., Recanati 2001; Potts 2007), and scare quotation (1d) (e.g., Predelli 2003; McCullagh 2017).

- (1) a. Tom said, “Today’s a beautiful day.”
b. Tom said that today was a beautiful day.
c. Tom said that today was a “beautiful day”.
d. Tom says today’s a “beautiful” day.

For the analysis of examples like (1a-c), it is first necessary to differentiate between two contexts of utterance: that of the current speaker and that of the source of the quoted material. In the case of direct quotation, these two contexts are clearly separated, often marked by quotation marks. Thus, in cases like (1a), the quoted material can be unambiguously attributed to Tom, the source of the quoted utterance. On the other hand, in indirect quotation, the quoted material is adapted to fit the current speaker’s context of utterance, often through embedding under a speech verb and shifting linguistic features such as deictic expressions (1b). Cases of mixed quotation are located between these two poles and allow for partial verbatim integration of the quoted material into a new utterance (1c) (Potts 2007; Maier 2015). In contrast, scare quotation (1d) signals the speaker’s distancing from, scepticism toward, or marked use of a particular expression within the current utterance’s context.

In addition, speakers frequently use instances of metalanguage to talk about certain aspects of language, as in instances of pure quotation (e.g., Davidson 1979; Washington 1992) in (2a).

- (2) a. “Table” has two syllables.
b. A table is a piece of furniture.

While the word *table* in (2b) refers to the object itself, (2a) refers to a linguistic property of the quoted form *table* (see also Härtl & Schlechtweg 2023).

However, these traditional categorizations have been challenged from different angles in recent accounts. One open question is to what extent quotation (and mixed quotation in particular) can be explained by semantic or pragmatic approaches. In this line, it has been

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proposed that instances of quotation are bound to a covert semantic operator (Kirk-Giannini 2024; Härtl 2025). Other approaches highlight pragmatic mechanisms of quoting and unquoting (e.g., De Brabanter 2023). Furthermore, research on specific instantiations of quotation, such as scare quotes and air quotes, has expanded semantic and pragmatic analyses and incorporated gestural and phonological aspects. In this context, the investigation of potential ambiguities and linguistic cues to resolve them gained relevance in quotation research, for example, in the domain of irony. Another perspective on quotation research is focused on different narrative styles. In recent work, free indirect discourse (FID) as a linguistic feature primarily associated with literary discourse has become a testing ground to unify different quotation types or refine the boundaries between them in approaches driven by semantics and pragmatics (Schlenker 2004; Maier 2014, 2015). Because FID combines elements of direct and indirect discourse while introducing complex interactions with perspective, deixis, evaluation, and empathy, it allows us to probe which properties of quotation are structurally essential and which are derivative or contextually induced. Developments in digital communication have also reshaped quotation practices, giving rise to new forms of reference and interaction, illustrated, for instance, through emojis and other multimodal resources in chats and social media. Recent developments in quotation research have thus also focused on how different types of media enable and constrain the realization and interpretation of quoted utterances.

While at first glance phenomena such as pure quotation, direct and indirect speech, mixed quotation, and FID appear to form a heterogeneous set, recent research has increasingly called for theoretical approaches that bridge the divide between these types and capture their common core mechanisms. For this reason, unifying accounts for the different types of quotation have been proposed (cf. Härtl 2025).

The tension between unification and differentiation underscores a central need of current quotation research: a much stronger empirical basis. Despite a long theoretical tradition, many claims regarding quotation types remain insufficiently tested, and empirical evidence is often scarce. Corpus studies, cross-linguistic surveys, prosodic investigations, and experimental work are increasingly necessary to ground theoretical proposals and to evaluate their cross-linguistic robustness (e.g., Härtl & Schlechtweg 2023; Raue 2026).

The present volume, *Quotation Unbound*, responds to these developments by bringing together empirical and theoretical contributions that examine quotation both as a sentence-level phenomenon and as a discourse-structuring device. The chapters in this volume approach the issues from different angles: through corpus-based investigations and cross-linguistic comparison, formal semantic and pragmatic analysis, multimodal research, and experimental methodology, the contributions address questions such as:

- What empirical evidence supports a unified analysis of quotation types?
- Which diagnostics — negation, cancellation, at-issueness, or prosody — separate types of quotation, and which reveal deeper connections between them?
- What theoretical frameworks can accommodate the observed range of quotational behaviours?
- How do speakers interpret quotations and quasi-quotational phenomena such as FID in narrative contexts, and what cross-linguistic variation do we find?

By integrating perspectives from both theoretical and empirically-driven research traditions, this volume aims to deepen our understanding of quotation as a linguistic and cognitive

phenomenon. *Quotation Unbound* gathers approaches that attempt to unify quotation types with those that identify principled contrasts between them, thereby offering a platform for redefining and empirically grounding the theoretical landscape of quotation studies.

This special issue contains seven contributions that mostly originated from the DGfS workshop *Quotation Unbound* held at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz in 2025.² The issue opens with three corpus-based studies on quotation in German.

Lucia Assenzi examines how mixed quotation (MQ) and scare quotation (ScQ) are used in contemporary German-language newspapers and argues that they form a continuum rather than two discrete categories. Based on a manually annotated corpus from Austrian outlets, the study shows how attribution, context, and journalistic stance shape the interpretation of quotation marks in practice. Particular attention is given to ambiguous cases, where quotation marks can simultaneously suggest both speaker-reference and evaluative distance. To address this analytically, the author proposes a pragmatic annotation strategy: classify all speaker-attributable cases as MQ, treat discourse-oriented uses as ScQ, and exclude genuinely ambiguous instances.

The paper by **Natascha Raue** investigates quotational constructions as instances of indeterminacy, showing that they allow for a spectrum of readings ranging from literal to various non-literal interpretations such as irony, scepticism, or evaluative distancing. Combining theory with corpus evidence from German news, it demonstrates that writers employ a wide array of linguistic and graphemic means – especially lexical markers like *sogenannt* (‘so-called’) and *angeblich* (‘allegedly’), quotation marks, parentheses, and evaluative adjectives – to highlight intended meanings. A follow-up forced-choice study reveals that both lexical modification and quotation marks shift reader interpretations toward non-literal readings, with combined marking strengthening this effect. Overall, the paper argues for a continuum-based view of readings in quotational constructions and positions them as a test case for indeterminacy.

Jonas Romstadt investigates how quotation marks function as register-sensitive graphic resources in written German. The innovative corpus-based investigation of quotation mark usage focuses on the following three registers: newspaper articles, graduation exams, and WhatsApp messages. Romstadt conceptualizes quotation as a grapholinguistic phenomenon, while quotation marks are argued to not only delimit quoted speech but also signal sociolinguistic positioning, thereby serving as indicators of register variation in written German. By systematically uncovering register-specific patterns across three datasets, the study advances our understanding of graphic variation and provides a foundation for a usage-based approach to graphic devices.

Sebastian Walter and Stefan Hinterwimmer extend the discussion to multimodal elements in quotation in the form of emoji. The authors argue that perspective shift in indirect discourse is far more flexible than commonly assumed, even in languages traditionally classified as non-shifting. They show that face emojis as multimodal elements can receive shifted interpretations when embedded in indirect discourse. Building on Clark & Gerrig’s (1990) notion of quotation as demonstration, the authors propose that these cases involve mixed quotation, where specific aspects of the reported speech event are iconically reproduced. In doing so, the authors offer a unified, non-monstrous analysis that broadens our understanding of perspective-taking across both linguistic and multimodal domains.

² We would like to thank the organizational team of the DGfS 2025, all presenters and interested researchers in contributing to our workshop, and especially for the lively discussions.

The contribution by **Peter Hofmann** continues the discussion of perspective shift and the relationship between direct and indirect discourse. The author investigates whether Free Indirect Discourse (FID) can be analyzed as a covert instance of mixed quotation. Using an acceptability-rating experiment with German materials, the study tests whether FID preserves verbatim linguistic form in a way comparable to direct quotation. Participants consistently preferred exact lexical repetitions across conditions, and no differences emerged between FID and direct quotation. These findings offer preliminary empirical support for the assumption that FID may encode a quotation-like structure despite lacking overt quotation markers. By shifting the debate from theoretical argumentation to experimental evidence, the pilot study provides a novel empirical perspective on one of the central questions in contemporary research on FID. More broadly, it highlights how psycholinguistic methods can contribute to long-standing discussions about quotation, perspective, and discourse representation.

The volume concludes with two articles that further extend the thematic scope of the issue through multimodal and cross-linguistic perspectives. **Nathalie Staratscheck** examines air quotes (AQs) as a multimodal phenomenon that extends far beyond their written representation. The author explores how air quotes are positioned within the classification of types of quotation, especially with regard to scare quotes (SQs), and proposes a typology of distancing classes based on evidence from audio-visual data. The core function of AQs is hypothesized to signal *distancing* between an expression and its intended conceptual mapping, while prosodic, gestural, and facial cues can optionally add expressive or evaluative content. The study adopts a multimodal approach to address the distinction between AQs and SQs, and considers theoretical frameworks suitable for an empirical analysis of AQs that takes gestural, facial, and non-verbal features into account.

Peter Herbeck and Eva-Maria Remberger examine the quotative use of the Romance action verb *fer/fare* (“do/make”) in Catalan and Italian, demonstrating that it functions as a specialized marker of direct discourse distinct from the canonical verbs of saying *dir/dire*. Through corpus-based comparison, the authors show that *fer/fare* displays reduced TAM inflection, a strong association with coordination and interactional contexts, and a marked tendency to introduce mimetic, expressive, or sound-based quotations. Drawing on theories of mimesis and demonstrative quotation, the study argues that *fer/fare* selects a covert manner-demonstrative layer (LIKE+THIS), capturing its performative and iconic properties. The findings situate *fer/fare* at an early stage of pragmaticalization, retaining verbal status while developing discourse-oriented functions. Overall, the study provides new insights into the syntax and discourse functions of quotatives in Romance languages and contributes to broader typological discussions on mimesis and grammaticalization.

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