

Mixed, Scare, or a Secret Third Thing? The Hybrid Quotation Continuum in German-Language Newspapers

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This study investigates mixed quotation (MQ) and scare quotation (ScQ) in contemporary German-language newspapers, with a particular focus on how to distinguish between them for the purposes of corpus annotation within a broader project on the history of reported discourse. The analysis draws on a corpus of 800 articles from four Austrian newspapers published on 31 January and 1 February 2025. Its aim is to develop a taxonomy of ambiguous cases lying between MQ and ScQ. The results confirm that MQ and ScQ are best conceived as poles of a continuum. At one end are clear cases of MQ, where words are attributed to a definite speaker; at the other are clear cases of ScQ, where quotation marks signal unusual wording, irony, or authorial stance without attribution. Between these extremes lie ambiguous cases, where attribution is uncertain or context-dependent, and gradual shifts from quoting an identifiable speaker to referencing discourse more generally.

For annotation purposes, I propose a pragmatic solution: all instances that can be attributed to a speaker, even indefinite or hearsay, should be annotated as MQ; the last steps on the continuum belong to ScQ; truly ambiguous cases should be excluded. Future research, with larger and more balanced corpora, should refine this taxonomy and explore production and reception, including how journalists and readers perceive or exploit the MQ–ScQ continuum.

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1. Introduction

This article stems from a broader sociolinguistic historical investigation of the evolutions in the forms and functions of reported discourse in German-language newspapers from the 18th century to the present. The initial phase, covering 1740 to 1850, is nearing completion (Assenzi 2023a, 2026, forthcoming; Assenzi & Windisch 2026). As we progress to analyzing the 19th through 21st centuries, the need arises to categorize forms of reported discourse that did not exist before the 1850s. One such recent addition to journalistic language is mixed quotations, the focus of this paper.

The project investigates reported discourse as a building block of journalistic language. As Haapanen (2020: 378) puts it: “Searching for quote-worthy statements orients news production from the very beginning and, similarly, quotes-to-be are the starting points for the actual writing around which the journalist-narrator’s own running text is then drafted”. Therefore, reported discourse appears to be an ideal object for the investigation of how the language of newspapers changed as a result of transformations in both journalistic practices and the media landscape. In this project, I broadly define reported discourse as any representation of linguistically encoded content produced in a communicative situation A and later relayed in a subsequent communicative situation B (Assenzi 2023a, 2026). Specifically, I focus on the reproduction of speech acts that actually occurred, thus excluding hypothetical or negated speech acts. This broad definition enables me to observe the evolution of more traditional forms of reported speech, such as direct and indirect speech, as well as prepositional

and parenthetical references to an information source, e.g., *according to x*, *as x said*, and reportive evidentials, such as adverbs like *angeblich*, ‘reportedly’, or the German verb *sollen*.¹ This definition, of course, includes mixed quotes.

The project relies on quantitative methods and involves creating and annotating a newspapers corpus. In some cases, this can be challenging. Some forms of reported discourses are straightforward and easy to identify; for example, a direct quotation introduced by a reporting clause with a speech act verb is unmistakably a case of direct speech. Similarly, if a sentence contains the word *allegedly*, it will have to be categorized as a case of reportive evidentiality. However, other cases are more complex, especially when we encounter a few words (that is, not an entire clause) or a single word enclosed in quotation marks. Quotation marks, as is well known, signal a quotation, but determining which type, whether pure, scare, or mixed, requires context. However, can the context always help distinguish a mixed quote from a scare quote?

This contribution explores the use of quotation marks in contemporary German-language newspapers, with a focus on unclear cases that at first glance could be either scare or mixed quotes. Some of these cases are clarified by the broader context as either one or the other quotation type, while others remain ambiguous and could legitimately be interpreted as both. The paper outlines a taxonomy of ambiguous cases and shows that they exist on a continuum, smoothly transitioning from mixed quotes to scare quotes. This supports the idea of a hybrid quotation continuum, as suggested by De Brabanter (2005, 2010).

Chapter 2 gives an overview of mixed and scare quotes and the definitions of the two terms adopted here. Chapter 3 opens with a brief note on the emergence of mixed quotations in German-language newspapers and the related appearance of ambiguous mixed–scare cases. This Chapter then presents an analysis of mixed, scare, and ambiguous quotations based on a corpus of 800 articles from four Austrian newspapers from 31 January and 1 February 2025. Chapter 4 discusses the hybrid quotation continuum in German-language newspapers, while Chapter 5 presents some concluding remarks and addresses the challenges this continuum poses for corpus annotation.

2. Mixed and scare quotation

Quotation is “easy to understand but hard to explain” (Ludwig & Ray 2017: 100). It can take various forms, including direct, pure, emphatic, mixed, and scare quotations (see Brendl et al. 2011 for an overview). Quotation covers phenomena ranging from mentioning a word at a metalinguistic level, reporting an utterance, indicating that the words should not be understood literally, emphasizing a concept, and more. It is quite impractical, then, that in many languages these different forms of quotation are mostly signaled by the same punctuation mark: the quotation mark. Usually, this is not problematic because context provides enough clues to interpret the correct meaning that quotation marks contribute to the sentence. However, there are situations where even this seemingly simple task becomes difficult. It’s precisely these cases that constitute the focus of this paper. Given my interest in reported discourse in German-

¹ On reportive evidentiality, see Boye (2018: 265), Vanderbiesen (2016: 45–46). On reportive evidentials in German, see Mortelmans (2001), Mortelmans & Vanderbiesen (2011), Mortelmans & Stathi (2022), Vanderbiesen (2018), Assenzi (2023b). For an overview of the categories of reported discourse found in German-language newspapers before 1850, see Assenzi (2023a, 2026).

language newspapers, one challenge interests me the most: being able to draw a line between mixed and scare quotation.

Mixed quotation (henceforth: MQ) is often defined as a combination of direct and indirect speech (Cappelen & Lepore 1997: 431; Brendl et al. 2011: 3–4; Fuhrhop et al. 2025: 129).² Some accounts, especially semantic ones, are quite strict and only consider “quotation marks [...] used in the complement clauses of indirect discourse” as MQ (Ludwig & Ray 2017: 101, see also McCullagh 2017, 2025). However, this definition seems too narrow for the data we can observe in actual language use.

In contemporary German-language newspapers, MQ does appear inserted into canonical indirect speech with a sentence-initial reporting clause followed by an embedded reported clause, as in (1). However, from a diachronic perspective, canonical indirect speech with sentence-initial reporting clause has generally lost prominence in the German-language press (Assenzi, in preparation). Today, the reporting clause appears more frequently than not at the end of the sentence, after a verb-second reported clause in the present subjunctive, as in (2) (Assenzi, in preparation). We can only interpret these cases as canonical indirect speech if we accept that the postponed reporting clause is still the main clause and not something else, like a parenthetical clause indicating the source of the reported information.³ In the latter case, if we follow the narrow definition of MQ adopted by some, we should exclude that (2) contains a MQ. But then, what exactly are the words within quotation marks?

- (1) Herbert Gassner (50), weist darauf hin, dass man durch die Vereinigung „bei den Top fünf in Österreich mitspielen kann.“ (*Die Presse*, 1 February 2025, p. 48)
‘Herbert Gassner (50) points out that, thanks to the merger, they will be able to “compete among the top five in Austria”.’
- (2) Parteien wie FPÖ oder AfD seien (SBJ) nicht „per se Gegenstand dieses Buches“, befindet Ex-Kanzlerberater Fleischmann. (*Die Presse*, 1 February 2025, p. 6)
‘Parties such as the FPÖ or AfD are (SBJ) not “per se the subject of this book”, observes former chancellor’s adviser Fleischmann.’

Moreover, MQ can also occur in narrative reports (2), where the reported content is not expressed as a clause but as a nominal or prepositional phrase functioning as the object of a speech-act predicate. It can likewise appear with other forms of indirect reporting, for instance with *wie*-clauses, where the reporting clause is syntactically embedded in the reported clause (3), or with *so*-parentheticals (4) (Pittner & Frey 2023).

- (2) Bartosch berichtete am Freitag von einer „sehr konstruktiven Sitzung, die von gegenseitiger Wertschätzung getragen war“. (*Die Presse*, 1 February 2025, p. 21)
‘On Friday, Bartosch spoke of a “very constructive meeting, marked by mutual appreciation”.’

² I do not go into the intricacies of semantic vs. pragmatic systematizations of quotation, as this is neither my area of expertise nor the aim of this contribution. For discussion, see, e.g., Predelli (2003), Cappelen & Lepore (2005), Reimer (2005), Gutzmann & Stei (2011a), Recanati (2008), and Johnson & Lepore (2011). I personally find pragmatic accounts of quotation, such as those of De Brabanter (2010, 2017, 2023) and Gutzmann & Stei (2011a, 2011b), better suited to explain the behavior of quotation marks in actual language use.

³ The tradition of syntactic research in German holds that verb-second clauses cannot be genuine object clauses (Reis 1997). On this view, interpreting (2) as canonical indirect speech would not be possible. However, the structure of sentences such as (2) is not clear-cut, as verb-second reported clauses seem to display properties of both embedded and non-embedded clauses (Freywald 2013). I’d like to thank Werner Frey for valuable discussions and suggestions on this topic.

- (3) Oder, wie es die Veranstalter in ihrer Einladung formulierten: Es gebe (SBJ) noch „eine zweite Chance für die Zweite Republik“. (*Die Presse*, 1 February 2025, p. 5)
‘Or, as the organizers put it in their invitation: There is (SBJ) still “a second chance for the Second Republic”.’
- (4) Es sei (SBJ) „spät, aber noch zeitgerecht“, so der Grüne. (*Die Presse*, 1 February 2025, p. 5)
‘It is (SBJ) “late, but still timely”, so (stated) the Green Party member.’

Lastly, MQ appears very frequently in combination with the so-called *berichtete Rede* (6, underlined in the example). *Berichtete Rede* consists of a syntactically independent clause in the present subjunctive, which in German has the function of marking indirect speech (Fabricius-Hansen & Sæbø 2004). In journalistic usage, *berichtete Rede* always appears within longer passages of reported discourse, and the quoted speaker must be made explicit in the immediately preceding context, as in (5) (Pitz & Solfjeld 2019: 155).

- (5) Damit das gelingt, hat Kommissionspräsidentin Ursula von der Leyen einen Plan vorgelegt. „Uns fehlt es nicht an Kapital“, sagte sie in dieser Woche. [...] Es fehle (SBJ) an einem „effizienten Kapitalmarkt“. (*Die Presse*, 1 February 2025, p. 3)
‘To make this happen, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has presented a plan. “We don’t lack capital,” she said this week. [...] What is (SBJ) lacking is an “efficient capital market”.’

MQ appears even in more “extreme cases”, that is, in the absence of an explicit reported-speech context. The examples above involved non-canonical forms of indirect speech, yet MQ still clearly appeared in the context of reported discourse, as shown by *so*- and *wie*-reporting clauses or by the use of the present subjunctive in (5). But this is not always necessary. In contexts where it is obvious that the words of others are being rendered, for instance in interviews or book reviews, the material in quotation marks is automatically interpreted as a direct quotation from the interviewee (6) or from the book under discussion (7), even without any formal indication of speech reporting. In such cases, the broader context is “reporting clause enough”, so to speak (see De Brabanter 2010: 116 on example 16).

- (6) Daheim auf der Couch hingegen hat [Bernhard Fetz] sich sehr stark für osteuropäische Literatur begeistert. [...] Imre Kertész’ *Roman eines Schicksallosen* hat er, lange bevor dieser den Nobelpreis bekam, gelesen „und war davon ganz weg“. (*der Standard*, 1 February 2025, p. 48)
‘At home on the couch, however, [Bernhard Fetz] developed a strong enthusiasm for Eastern European literature. [...] He read *Fatelessness* by Imre Kertész long before the author received the Nobel Prize “and was completely blown away by it”.’
- (7) Gemeinsam wird eine alte Bauernhausruine restauriert, unter den immer gleichen Hits von Johnny Hallyday, die bis heute „wie Messerklingen“ die alte Wunde wieder aufreißen, „als hätten die Wörter einen doppelten Sinn, einen versteckten, immer gleichen, den nur ich hören kann“ (*der Standard*, 1 February 2025, p. 44)
‘Together, they restore an old farmhouse ruin, accompanied by the ever-present hits of Johnny Hallyday, which to this day, “like knife blades”, cut open the old wound, “as if the words carried a double meaning, a hidden, ever-the-same one, that only I can hear”.’

Therefore, to reflect the actual uses of mixed quotes observed in the corpus, it seems necessary to adopt a broad definition of MQ. In MQ, quotation marks delimit a snippet of direct speech that appears in combination with another non-direct reporting strategy, or in a context that makes it clear that the words of a definite speaker are being reported, even without formal signals of reported discourse. Moreover, MQ attributes words to an identifiable speaker, who is either mentioned explicitly in the immediate co-text or recoverable from the broader discourse context. MQ thus falls into the realm of reported discourse as described above.

What does not fall into the realm of reported discourse, and therefore should be excluded from annotation in my project, is scare quotation (henceforth: ScQ). While ScQ is not the focus of this study's annotation, its functions are discussed here to clarify the distinction between ScQ and MQ and introduce ambiguous cases.

In ScQ, quotation marks signal that some kind of “pragmatic enrichment is involved in the interpretation of the quoted expression” (Brendl et al. 2011: 8). By using quotation marks, the writer draws the reader's attention to an expression, to highlight certain features of it or of its use (Predelli 2003: 4).⁴ The functions of quotation marks in ScQ are diverse, ranging from “a non-verbal commentary on unexpected, unconventional use of an expression to an implicit signal of authorial attitude” (Nádraská 2022: 101). They can convey attitudes such as criticism, sarcasm, irony, distance, or disapproval, as well as novelty, tentativeness, or the suggestion that the reader may find the expression unfamiliar or inappropriate in context (Nádraská 2022: 103).

For example, in (8), the quotation marks draw attention to the neologism and wordplay *Bro-bleme* (‘bro-blems’). The word appears in an article about a reality show where one participant's constant use of the word *bro* has become a serious *problem* for his girlfriend. In (10), quotation marks around *seiner* (‘his’) indicate that Muki Huskovic is not the literary owner of the arena, but rather that he has played there so often that it feels like home.

(8) Können sie ihre „Bro-bleme“ beseitigen? (*heute.at*, 1 February 2025, p. 5)
‘Will they be able to solve their “bro-blems”?’

(9) [...] Muki Huskovic, der in „seiner“ Generali-Arena Hartberg-Premiere feiern durfte [...] (*Kronen Zeitung*, 1 February 2025, p. 62)
‘Muki Huskovic, who celebrated his Hartberg debut in “his” Generali Arena...’

So, following the definitions above, the distinction between MQ and ScQ seems straightforward and can be summarized with Nádraská's (2022) concept of *voice*. Quotation marks always signal a voice. In MQ, which Nádraská terms *partial quotation*, the words in quotation marks are either attributable or explicitly attributed to an external voice, the quoted source (Nádraská 2022: 104). ScQ, by contrast, conveys the journalist's internal voice, who thinks the readers might need a signal that they should pay special attention, whether because a technical term, a neologism, an unexpected word, or a register-incongruent expression is

⁴ Experimental studies confirm that quotation marks do indeed draw readers' attention to the quoted expression and guide its interpretation. Eye-tracking experiments (Raue et al. 2025) show that quotation marks introduce processing effects in later, post-lexical stages of reading, suggesting they trigger a pragmatic processing of the words in quotes. Similarly, reading time studies (Schlechtweg 2022; Schlechtweg & Härtl 2023) demonstrate that quotation marks, while initially creating a processing burden, ultimately facilitate the recognition and integration of non-literal interpretations, such as irony.

being used, or because the expression is meant to be taken with skepticism (Nádraská 2022: 105).⁵

So far, so good. But in practice, the boundary that separates ScQ from MQ is less clear-cut than this simplified account suggests. There are, in fact, ambiguous cases that lend themselves to more than one interpretation, as we will see in the following Chapter.

3. Ambiguous quotations in German-language newspapers

To ensure a broad empirical foundation for the present analysis, a corpus of 800 articles was compiled, with 200 articles drawn from each of four Austrian newspapers. Two of them are quality papers (*Die Presse* and *Der Standard*), the other two *Boulevardzeitungen* (*heute.at* and *Kronen Zeitung*), which are comparable to tabloids in their focus on soft news, sensationalism and entertainment. The texts were retrieved from the APA Online-Manager database⁶ and cover two publication dates, 31 January and 1 February 2025. The corpus includes articles from different sections (national and international politics, sport, interviews, book reviews, lifestyle, entertainment, local features, etc.) to examine whether the use of MQ, ScQ, and ambiguous cases is shaped by article topic and section, as well as by each newspaper's house style. All texts were annotated manually by the author in CATMA⁷ by searching for quotation marks and establishing case by case whether the words in quotation marks should be classified as MQ, ScQ, or ambiguous cases. Cases of direct speech, pure quotation, as well as instances where quotation marks denote proper nouns were excluded.

Before looking more closely at ambiguous cases, I will first give a short overview of the history of quotation marks in German-language newspapers and the emergence of MQ, which in turn gave rise to the appearance of borderline MQ–ScQ cases.

3.1 The emergence of mixed quotation in German-language newspapers

While working on the project's first phase, I didn't come across any MQs in the large corpus of three German-language newspapers used to study reported discourse between 1740 and 1840 (Assenzi 2023, 2026, forthcoming). However, MQs are very common in today's German-language newspapers (Pitz & Solfjeld 2019: 154). While canonical direct speech was always present in newspapers, MQs are a relatively recent development, with their first (extremely rare) appearances in the second half of the 19th century. Although there's still no research on the history of MQ in German, some preliminary analysis within the project mentioned above suggests that MQs likely have become frequent only during the 20th century, probably after the 1950s.

Until around the 1850s, then, things were simpler. Quotation marks were used in three clearly defined ways: (i) for proper nouns, such as the name of the German newspaper *Magdeburger Zeitung* in (10); (ii) for ScQ, as in (11); and (iii) for canonical direct speech with

⁵ Many discussions distinguish between MQ and ScQ based on similar criteria. For example, in the German tradition following Klockow (1978, 1980), quotation marks in MQ are usually called *conventional* ('konventionell'), while in ScQ they are described as *modalizing* ('modalisierend') (see Fuhrhop et al. 2025: 109). MQ corresponds to both Type A and Type B in Lehr (2006), whereas ScQ aligns with Type C.

⁶ <https://aomlibrary.apa.at/> (accessed 2025-05-25).

⁷ <https://catma.de/> (accessed 2025-05-25) – Gius et al. 2025.

a reporting clause, as in (12). Until the 1850s, there was practically no room for confusion between these three functions.

- (10) Auch die sehr gemäßigte „Magdeburger Zeitung“ ist dem Standrechte der Bureaucratie gefallen. (*Innsbrucker Zeitung*, 27 June 1850, p. 609)
‘Even the very moderate “Magdeburger Zeitung” has fallen victim to the bureaucracy’s state of emergency.’
- (11) Ein schöner Beleg für die sogenannte „preußische Ehre“. (*Die Bayerische Presse*, 24 October 1850, p. 4)
‘A fine example of the so-called “Prussian honor”.’
- (12) Präsident Graf Schwerin ergreift das Wort zu folgender Ansprache: „Die Arbeiten der Kammer für diese Sitzungsperiode sind beendet [...]“. (*Wiener Zeitung*, 28 February 1850, p. 629)
‘President Count Schwerin takes the floor to deliver the following address: “The work of the Chamber for this session is now complete [...]”.’

Of course, it must be noted that quotation marks worked quite differently in the past. For example, quotation marks could appear in what may look like MQ but turns out to be indirect speech, as the use of the reportive subjunctive clearly indicates – see (13).

- (13) Der anonyme Verfasser äußert in der Vorrede die Ansicht, „daß es hohe Zeit sei (SBJ), die Erörterung der streitlichen bundesrechtlichen Fragen endlich wieder einmal auf das Gebiet wissenschaftlicher Prüfung zu versetzen [...]“. (*Die Bayerische Presse*, 30 August 1850, p. 2)
‘In the preface, the anonymous author expresses the view “that it is (SBJ) high time to finally return the discussion of controversial federal legal issues to the realm of scientific examination [...]”.’

In other cases, quotation marks were absent, yet the lack of deictic shift to the origo of the current writer clearly identifies the passage as direct speech. For example, in (14), *heute* (‘today’) can only refer to the time when the original quoted report was written (on or before 26 July), not to the time the news article itself was published (8 August). It is well known that direct speech, and quotation in general, does not, and never did, necessarily require quotation marks (De Brabanter 2023: 286; Raue et al. 2025). Even these cases are therefore actually unambiguous.

- (14) Aus Erfurt vom 26. Juli berichtet die Thüringer Zeitung: als heute ein Zimmergesell den General v. Voß [...] auf der Straße mündlich um Gerechtigkeit hat wegen einer ihm zugefügten Beleidigung, wies ihn der General zurück. (*Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 8 August 1848, p. 2)
‘The Thüringer Zeitung reports from Erfurt on July 26: When a carpenter approached General von Voß [...] on the street today to demand justice for an insult inflicted upon him, the general dismissed him.’

In a more recent development, MQ emerged. One of the very rare examples from before the 1950s is given in (15). The sentence starts with a reporting clause containing the speech act verb *sagen* (‘say’), and continues with a V2 reported clause, in which words in quotation marks appear. These must be interpreted as the exact words of Dr. Pacak, the quoted speaker, as also indicated by the lack of deictic shift of the adverb *hier* (‘here’).

- (15) Von den Ruthenen sagte [Dr. Pacak], er sei (SBJ) „fest überzeugt [...], daß die Ruthenen wie ein Mann hier sein werden, damit sie der Stimme ihres Herzens und der der großen slavischen Familie Oesterreichs folgen.“ (*Reichspost*, 8 March 1909, p. 3)
'Regarding the Ruthenians, [Dr. Pacak] said he was (SBJ) "firmly convinced [...]" that the Ruthenians will stand here as one so that they may follow the voice of their hearts and that of Austria's great Slavic family'.

With the rising frequency of MQ, ambiguous MQ-ScQ cases also began to surface. The following section presents an exploratory look at such cases in contemporary German-language newspapers and sketches a first taxonomy, with the aim of exploring how we might tell the two phenomena apart.

3.2 Not actually ambiguous cases: MQ that gives rise to pragmatic enrichment

The literature discusses some cases that combine features of both MQ and ScQ. For instance, Brendl et al. (2011: 8) argue that scare quotes “can refer to an original utterance” while at the same time being pragmatically enriched to signal that the current speaker distances themselves from the quoted words (2011: 5). Gutzmann & Stei (2011b: 2651) seem to agree with this view when they state that a MQ “may be used to distance oneself from the quoted words or to emphasize their standard meaning, yielding an overlap between mixed quotation and scare quotes.” The example Brendl et al. (2011) use to explain this phenomenon is reproduced in (16):

- (16) Lena, the philistine, said in disgust that “this piece of shit” is difficult to understand (Brendl et al. 2011: 5)

Let us assume, for the moment, that their interpretation is correct and that the speaker in (16) indeed wishes to quote Lena's words and, at the same time, to distance themselves from them. But pragmatic distancing is not unique to such hybrid cases: it applies to any form of direct speech, including canonical direct speech. As Nádraská (2022: 116) notes for hard news, “direct quotation enables the [internal voice] to abdicate responsibility and shift it to the [external voice], which is especially important when the expressed stance is incompatible with the expected neutral stance of the [internal voice].” Similarly, Bell (1991: 208) observes that direct quotes allow the journalist to distance themselves from the reported words by attributing full responsibility to the quoted speaker. Should we then consider many straightforward cases of canonical direct speech as overlapping with ScQ as well?

Moreover, without further contextual cues it is impossible to know whether pragmatic enrichment is correct or even necessary. Returning to example (16): it may well be that the current speaker agrees with Lena's words and chooses to quote them precisely because they find the wording particularly apt.

Cases in which MQ gives rise to pragmatic enrichment (and possible distancing effects) are, of course, present in journalistic practice and have already been observed in the German (Lehr 2006: 188–190) and English press (Nádraská 2022: 116–119). However, it is never the quotation marks alone that trigger such enrichment; context is always decisive. For example, in (17), the left-leaning newspaper *der Standard* encloses Elon Musk's words at an AfD convention – specifically, his statement about Germany's need to move on from its “past guilt” – in quotation marks. As we know that the *Standard* cannot agree with Musk, the AfD, or this formulation in particular, we may interpret the quotation marks as signaling distance. Yet if the

same sentence appeared in a right-leaning populist paper, the MQ could easily be read as a sign of agreement: “This is what a trusted voice says, therefore it must be true”. A news agency, a supposedly neutral agent, might use quotation marks simply to attribute the words to Musk, without inviting further interpretation.

- (17) Am Wochenende sagte [Elon Musk] beim AfD-Wahlkampfauftakt zur Bundestagswahl, die Deutschen hätten (SBJ) „zu viel Fokus auf vergangener Schuld“. (*der Standard*, 31 January 2025, p. 26)
‘Over the weekend, [Elon Musk] said at the AfD’s campaign kickoff for the federal election that Germans have (SBJ) “too much of a focus on past guilt”.’

In cases similar to (16) and (17), I would argue that MQ prevails. The primary function of quotation marks here is to attribute words to another speaker. From this perspective, these cases are not ambiguous: they are MQ, following the definition I outlined above. For the purposes of my project, then, such instances count as MQ with an added pragmatic positioning effect, which is an additional but separate dimension typical of any form of reported discourse.

3.3 Cases disambiguated by context as MQ

In the cases discussed above, where MQ is pragmatically enriched, we could, drawing on Nádraská’s concept of voice, say that both the journalist and the reported speaker are talking at the same time, the two voices run side by side. In the cases I consider ambiguous, however, the answer to the question “who is talking?” would be: “it’s complicated”. It may be one voice, the other, or both simultaneously. In some instances, the broader context of the article helps us to disambiguate, and these cases are treated here. In other cases, even further reading the article fails to provide clarity. These are the truly ambiguous cases that will be discussed in §3.4.

The category *disambiguated by context* involves words enclosed in quotation marks that appear in headings and sub-headings and that look at first glance like ScQ. However, upon closer examination, they are revealed as MQ by the context, understood here as the text following the heading. Consider the following examples:

- (18) ÖVP-Kompromiss! Kickl bekommt eine „Bankenabgabe light“ (*heute.at*, 1 February 2025)
‘ÖVP compromise! Kickl gets a “bank levy light”.’
- (19) „Abgehärtet“ als Profi (*der Standard*, 1 February 2025, p. 22)
““Hardened” as a professional.’

In both cases, if we only read the headings, we might assume a ScQ reading: *Bankenabgabe light* (‘bank levy light’) in (18) could be a figurative label for the measure in question, as could *abgehärtet* (‘hardened’) in (19). But the two diverge once context is considered. In (18), no element in the article suggests that the phrase was ever uttered by another speaker. It is entirely the journalist’s coinage, the interpretation as ScQ is therefore correct. In the case of (19), however, the same word reappears in a clear MQ context a few lines later:

- (20) Die Zeit als Profi habe (SBJ) ihn „abgehärtet“, sagt Hamann. (*der Standard*, 1 February 2025, p. 22)
‘His time as a professional “hardened” him, says Hamann.’

The heading in (19) is thus retroactively reinterpreted as a condensed form of MQ and is only ambiguous if read in isolation.

Headings can also contain unambiguous MQ when they explicitly mention a quoted speaker. In (21), the *VP* (short for *Volkspartei*) is named as the source, and we tend to think that the word *Wichtigmacherei* (‘grandstanding’) in quotation marks was uttered by one of its representatives. The following context confirms this reading:

- (21) Babler-Angebot für VP „Wichtigmacherei“
Dass Babler in der ZiB 2 nun platzierte, die SPÖ stünde nach wie vor für Verhandlungen bereit, sieht man in der Lichtenfelsgasse „bloß als Wichtigmacherei“. (*heute.at*, 1 February 2025)
‘To the *Volkspartei*, Babler’s offer is “grandstanding”
The fact that Babler stated in the ZiB 2 that the SPÖ was still ready to negotiate is seen in the Lichtenfelsgasse “merely as grandstanding.”’

A further question arises in cases of MQs disambiguated by context that do not meet the usual verbatim requirement associated with MQ (Maier 2014: 4), as in (22). Here, quotation marks point to words originally uttered by someone else, yet the context makes clear that the journalist has reshaped the quote. Are quotation marks here signaling, in effect, that these are someone else’s words, though not exactly?

- (22) Ski-Star nach Abfahrts-Crash mit „komplexer Verletzung“
„Sicher eine komplexe und schwere Knieverletzung, die ich da erlitten habe in Bormio und nicht einfach damit umzugehen“, sagt Gino Caviezel [...] (*heute.at*, 31 January 2025)
‘Ski star suffers “complex injury” after downhill crash
“It was definitely a complex and serious knee injury that I suffered in Bormio, and not an easy one to deal with,” said Gino Caviezel.’

Such examples are rare. Moreover, the supposed verbatim requirement in journalistic direct speech is something of a myth. Even if readers and journalists share the implicit assumption that direct speech should represent the original utterance faithfully, direct quotes are in practice very frequently modified (Haapanen & Perrin 2017: 439). Furthermore, as Maier (2014) points out, the degree of verbatim expectation is flexible and depends on genre conventions. In this sense, example (22) may still be “verbatim enough” for journalistic practice and could still count as MQ disambiguated by context.

3.4 Ambiguous cases: who’s talking?

Cases I consider ambiguous are similar to example 21 in Fuhrhop et al. (2025: 124), here reproduced as (23). Brendl et al. (2021) treat such cases as ScQ that refer to a reported utterance. Fuhrhop et al. (2025: 125), by contrast, interpret them as MQ with a distancing effect, supposedly reinforced by the use of the present subjunctive. I do not share this reading of the subjunctive: research has shown that in reported discourse the subjunctive is not, in itself, an indicator of distancing. The reportive subjunctive does not alter the facticity of the reported information but rather functions as a pure marker of indirect speech reporting (ten Cate 1996: 207; Fabricius-Hansen & Sæbø 2004: 224; Fabricius-Hansen et al. 2019: 154). Still, I agree that this case is ambiguous, though not because of pragmatic enrichment, as discussed above. The real issue is not whether the quotation marks that enclose *Wahrheit* signal distancing, but rather to whom the word can be attributed.

- (23) Mit ihrer Hilfe könne (SBJ) die „Wahrheit“ über das Zustandekommen des Gesprächs und anschließende Entscheidungen des Senders ans Licht kommen (*Berliner Morgenpost*, 20 November 2020, p. 8; reproduced in Fuhrhop et al. 2025: 124)
‘With their help, the “truth” about how the conversation came about and the subsequent decisions made by the broadcaster can (SBJ) come to light.’

Let us look at the broader context of (23). The sentence appears in the *berichtete* Rede, a form of reported discourse that is only licensed if the immediate context clearly identifies whose words are being reported. And indeed, in the preceding context of (23), the speaker is identified as Prince William. The sentence is thus part of a longer stretch of reported discourse with a clearly identifiable speaker. As we have seen, such contexts tend to trigger a MQ reading.

However, when a single word appears in quotation marks, disentangling the journalist’s voice from that of the reported person becomes particularly difficult. This difficulty arises from the very nature of reported discourse, and non-direct forms of speech reporting in particular, the environment in which most MQ are embedded.

Bakhtin’s notion of polyphony has frequently been applied to reported discourse, highlighting that more than one voice is channeled in speech reporting. Building on Ducrot, Marnette (2005: 21) distinguishes between the *locutor* (the original speaker who produced the utterance), the *speaking subject* (the current speaker reporting the words), and the *enunciator* (the point of view reproduced in reporting). Distinguishing between these positions is especially problematic in indirect speech, which is always polyphonic. As noted in many studies of reported discourse, canonical indirect speech is a case of the long-standing concept of *oratio obliqua* (Coulmas 1986: 3–6). It “assimilate[s] the material presented by the original speaker to the reporting speaker’s perspective” (Evans 2013: 68), who paraphrases the original utterance in their own words (Marnette 2005: 23; Waugh 1995: 156). Thus, in indirect speech two perspectives always coexist: Evans (2013) aptly calls it biperspectival. In theory, the reporting speaker and the locutor are clearly distinct; in practice, however, “there may be some hesitation as to whose words (and point of view) are being reproduced, those of the quoted or those of the quoting speaker” (Marnette 2005: 24).

For example, in (24), what exactly are the quotation marks doing? Do they signal that Prince William literally used the word ‘truth’, or are they the journalist’s own formulation, with the quotation marks indicating skepticism about whether any truth can be gained from the process? Both readings are plausible. Which is precisely the trademark of what I call ambiguous cases. As Nádrská (2022: 108) also notes, such cases arise when “the context does not provide sufficient cues to determine whether the words in [quotation marks] belong to the [internal voice] or to an [external voice]” (see also her discussion of example 10, p. 113).

Ambiguity is triggered in contexts where quotation marks are applied to only one or a few words within a segment of reported discourse, particularly when the quoted item is an occasionalism, neologism, or other unusual formulation that could equally be interpreted as ScQ. In such cases, it remains unclear whether the journalist is reproducing a peculiar wording used by the quoted speaker or whether they themselves introduced the unusual expression and used quotation marks to highlight it. Consider the English expression in (24): did Anke Stern actually use the words ‘picture perfect’, or did the journalist choose to compress her statement into this unusual (in German) expression and mark it with quotation marks? Similarly, does the striking choice of the verb *ausgehungert* (the ‘starving’ of independent media) in (25) come from the quoted speaker, or is it the journalist’s own rewording?

- (24) Anke Stern berichtet: „Inzwischen haben sich fast alle Allgemeinflächen in den Hotels in Insta-Spots verwandelt.“ [...] Entsprechend müsse (SBJ) eben alles „picture perfect“ sein und es genügend Bereiche geben, die dazu geeignet seien (SBJ) abgebildet zu werden. ((*Die Presse*, 1 February 2025, p. 59))
‘Anke Stern reports: “By now, almost all common areas in hotels have turned into Instagram spots.” [...] Accordingly, everything has (SBJ) to be “picture perfect,” with enough spaces that are (SBJ) suitable for being photographed.’
- (25) Die LiF-Gründerin hält den Medienbereich für ein zentrales Feld bei der „schleichenden Abschaffung der Demokratie“. Wenn unabhängige Medien „ausgehungert“ und ideologisch genehme gestärkt würden (SBJ), sei (SBJ) die für die Demokratie unerlässliche Kontrolle bedroht. (*der Standard*, 1 February 2025, p. 15)
‘The LiF founder considers the media sector a central arena in the “gradual dismantling of democracy.” If independent media are (SBJ) “starved” while ideologically aligned outlets are strengthened, the control essential to democracy is (SBJ) under threat.’

But ambiguity also arises in the opposite type of case: when lexemes or collocations that are frequent in a certain discourse appear enclosed in quotation marks in a reported speech segment. In such instances, the journalist may be using quotation marks to draw attention to the expression and highlight its status as a typical formulation in that specific discourse. At the same time, precisely because such collocations are so conventional, it is equally possible that the quoted speaker did in fact use those very words. Consider (26):

- (26) Doch dann schaltete sich die FDP-Fraktion ein und versuchte doch noch einmal, zwischen Union, SPD und Grünen zu vermitteln. Ihr Vorschlag: Der Gesetzesentwurf solle (SBJ) in den Innenausschuss zurücküberwiesen werden, um dort eine Lösung aus der „Mitte der Gesellschaft“ zu suchen. (*der Standard*, 1 February 2025, p. 9)
‘But then the FDP parliamentary group intervened and made another attempt to mediate between the Union, SPD, and Greens. Their proposal: the draft bill should (SBJ) be referred back to the Interior Committee in order to seek a solution from the “center of society” there.’

Here, the expression *Mitte der Gesellschaft* (‘center of society’) occurs in a *berichtete Rede* rendering the words of an FDP representative. The phrase is widely used across political discourse and was especially frequent in the 2025 German election campaigns. Interpreted as ScQ, the quotation marks would indicate “what is commonly called the ‘center of society’ in political discourse”. But the same expression could equally be read as MQ if it reproduces the speaker’s actual wording, which is plausible in this context, and probably the preferred interpretation of most readers.

In the specific case of (26), the original utterance can be reconstructed: the speaker actually used the phrase *demokratische Mitte* (‘democratic centre’).⁸ Thus, the expression *Mitte der Gesellschaft* is not a direct reproduction of the speaker’s words but rather a journalistic reformulation, making this an instance of ScQ rather than MQ. In most cases, however, the original utterance is unavailable, and even if it were, few readers would seek it out. As a result, similar cases nearly always remain ambiguous.

⁸ Deutscher Bundestag, *Stenografischer Bericht*, 211. Sitzung, Berlin, 31 January 2025, p. 27218. <https://dsrserver.bundestag.de/btp/20/20211.pdf> (accessed 2025-08-05).

Matters become even more complex in cases where quotation marks appear within reported speech without a clearly identifiable speaker, blurring the line between reporting the words of a specific individual and referring more generally to discourse.

3.5 Slipping down the MQ-ScQ cline

The following example looks similar to (26). The word *Brandmauer* (‘firewall’) in quotation marks was a common expression in German political discourse during the 2025 elections, referring to the need for democratic parties to build a “firewall” to contain radical antidemocratic political forces. As in (26), it remains unclear whether the quotation marks here signal the journalist’s own choice of wording or whether they reproduce the words of the critics mentioned at the beginning of the sentence.

- (27) Kritiker hatten gewarnt, die „Brandmauer“ anderer Parteien zur AfD falle (SBJ), wenn ein Gesetz verabschiedet werde (SBJ), für das AfD-Stimmen maßgeblich gewesen wären. (*heute.at*, 31 January 2025)
‘Critics had warned that the “firewall” of other parties against the AfD would collapse (SBJ) if a law were passed (SBJ) for which AfD votes are decisive.’

But who are these critics whose concerns are being reported? We usually assume that direct and indirect speech are quotative strategies, used to attribute utterances to an overt, definite source, a tendency empirically confirmed for German-language newspapers by Vanderbiesen (2016). But what should we do with cases where the words are attributed only to a vague group such as *critics*?

Examples (26)–(30) illustrate a cline of progressively less identifiable speakers: from the unnamed FDP representative in (26), to the unspecified critics in (27), to the impersonal subject pronoun *man* in (28), a passive construction with no source in (29), and finally explicit reference to discourse in (30).

- (28) Die Bewohner der Stadt Bangkok gelten als besonders freundlich. Es handle (SBJ) sich schließlich um die Hauptstadt vom „Land des Lächelns“, wie man über Thailand sagt. (*heute.at*, 1 February 2025)
‘The residents of Bangkok are considered to be particularly friendly. After all, this is (SBJ) the capital of the “Land of Smiles,” as people say about Thailand.’
- (29) Die vielfach zitierte „demokratische Mitte“ Deutschlands ist nach diesem Tag gespalten (*Die Presse*, 1 February 2025, p. 10)
‘Germany’s much-cited “democratic center” is divided after this day.’
- (30) Während in Deutschland im offiziellen politischen Diskurs von der „in Teilen rechtsextremen AfD“ die Rede ist, sind es in Österreich „die Freiheitlichen“ (*der Standard*, 1 February 2025, p. 38)
‘While in Germany the official political discourse refers to the “partly right-wing extremist AfD,” in Austria it is “the Freedom Party”.’

Taken together, these examples show a fluid transition in the use of quotation marks: from clear MQ, to dubious MQ where words are attributed to indefinite speakers, and finally to explicit reference to discourse itself. Combined with the cases of ambiguity discussed above, those last cases seem to point to the existence of a MQ-ScQ continuum.

4. The hybrid quotation continuum in German-language newspapers

4.1 The continuum

The examples discussed above make it untenable to treat MQ and ScQ as fully distinct categories. Instead, they are best understood as two poles of a spectrum, with numerous intermediate cases. Between clear instances of MQ and ScQ we find cases where only the context of the article allows us to decide, others where even the context does not help and ambiguity remains, and still others where we see a gradual blurring of the boundary between words attributed to a definite speaker and words attributed to discourse.

This does not concern MQ and ScQ alone, but quotation more generally. Following Gutzmann & Stei (2011b: 2652), quotation marks perform a single function everywhere they appear: to “indicate that further pragmatic inferences are necessary to grasp the interpretation intended by the writer”. Distinguishing between different types of quotation is therefore a matter of conversational implicature (Gutzmann & Stei 2011a: 2162; see also Meibauer 2015). As a result, one and the same quotation may receive different interpretations depending on its broader context (Gutzmann & Stei 2011a: 164; 2011b: 2651).

The idea of a continuum is hardly new, as different accounts have suggested that MQ and ScQ are not to be treated as separate phenomena (e.g., Geurts & Maier 2005, Saka 2005, Gutzmann & Stei 2011a, 2011b). I therefore align with De Brabanter (2005, 2010, 2017, 2023), who has consistently argued for a *Hybrid Quotation Continuum*, since “no principled boundary can be drawn” between MQ and ScQ (De Brabanter 2005). This is precisely what my data shows. A tentative visualization of the continuum is given in Figure 1:

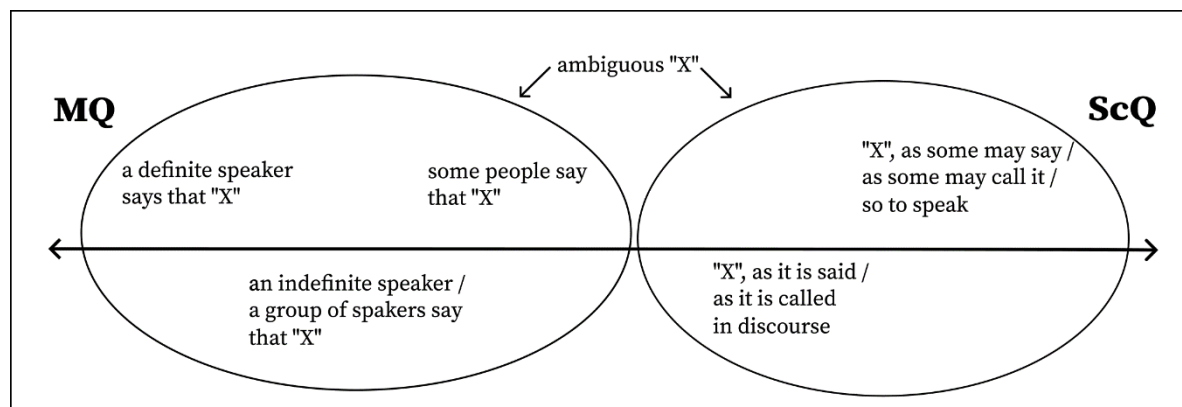


Figure 1: The hybrid quotation continuum

As shown in Figure 1, the continuum ranges from cases where a definite speaker A is quoted as having said “X”, through references to utterances of indefinite speakers, and finally to references to discourse itself. From here, the step to ScQ is small. Somewhere in between lie the ambiguous cases I discussed above: cases that can be interpreted either as MQ or ScQ.

Returning to the initial question of where to draw the line for annotation purposes, I suggest the following: as long as the words in quotation marks can be attributed to someone, whether a definite speaker, an indefinite group, or even to hearsay, they count as reported discourse and thus as MQ in my analysis. The last two steps on the continuum fall under ScQ.

Ambiguous cases “float above” the continuum, and it would probably be reasonable to leave them aside in the annotation.

4.2 The distribution of MQ, ScQ and ambiguous cases across newspapers

Although all cases of mixed, scare and ambiguous quotations were annotated, the focus of this paper is not on quantitative analysis but on developing a taxonomy of MQ and describing the cases found in the corpus as a way of working towards the annotation guidelines for the main project. Even so, the results of corpus annotation point to some tendencies that are worth mentioning here.

For starters, the total number of annotated cases varies considerably across the four newspapers, as shown in Table 1. This can be explained by differences in article length: the two tabloids (*Kronen Zeitung* and *heute.at*) generally publish much shorter texts than the quality papers. For this reason, their subcorpora are smaller. *Kronen Zeitung* in particular has a very small subcorpus. Moreover, this newspaper does not provide its full content to the APA platform I used to retrieve the articles: political coverage is underrepresented, while soft news (especially sports) is disproportionately frequent.

Table 1: Distribution of quotation types in the corpus - absolute numbers

| | MQ | Disambiguated | non-verbatim | discourse | ScQ | Ambiguous | total |
|-----------------------|-----|---------------|--------------|-----------|-----|-----------|-------|
| <i>der Standard</i> | 151 | 13 | 1 | 6 | 62 | 43 | 276 |
| <i>die Presse</i> | 113 | 3 | 0 | 12 | 67 | 8 | 203 |
| <i>Heute.at</i> | 85 | 10 | 4 | 2 | 44 | 9 | 154 |
| <i>Kronen Zeitung</i> | 20 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 55 | 7 | 88 |

If we look at the proportional distribution of quotation types in Figure 2, we see that these are not evenly spread across the newspapers. ScQ dominates only in the *Kronen Zeitung*, while MQ is the most frequent category in the other three papers. This distribution can plausibly be explained by the imbalanced composition of the corpus. While annotating, I had the impression that MQ occurs most often in hard news, especially political reporting, where reported discourse is abundant. ScQ, on the other hand, seems to be more typical of soft-news genres such as sports, lifestyle, or celebrity coverage, where commentary and evaluative stance might play a greater role than the reporting of speech. The dominance of ScQ in the *Kronen Zeitung* is therefore likely due to the overrepresentation of soft news in the subcorpus. These are, however, impressions rather than firm results, since text types and article topics were not systematically annotated.

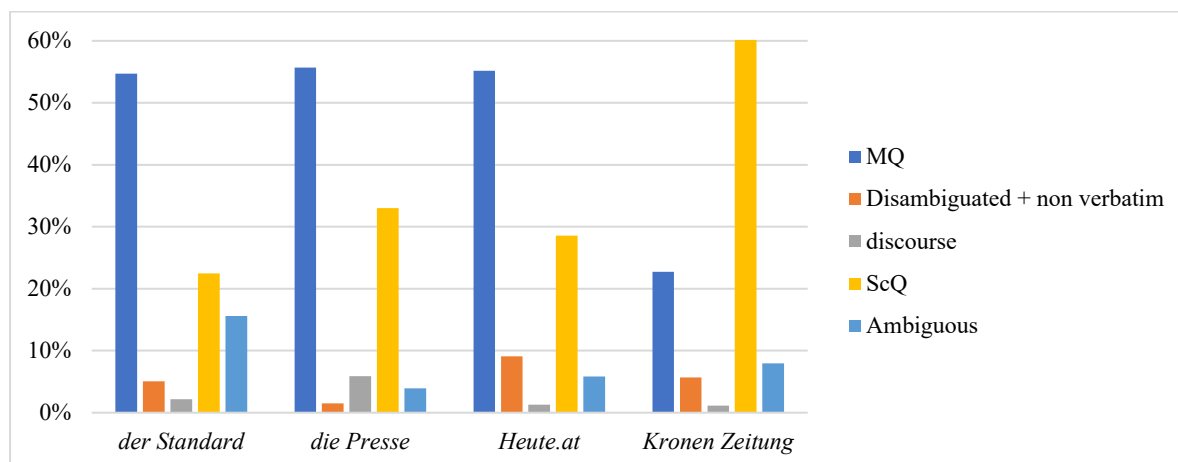


Figure 2: Distribution of different quotation types in the corpus - percentages

Furthermore, in the *Presse*, both *disambiguated by context* cases (which appear only in headings and subheadings) and ambiguous cases are relatively rare. This may suggest that the *Presse* follows more stringent internal guidelines for quotation practices and thus avoids ambiguity. By contrast, the *Standard* shows a surprisingly high proportion of ambiguous cases. This might indicate that its journalists occasionally play with ambiguity, or that they are less aware of it, or less disturbed by it.

These observations underscore that, while the corpus used in this study is well-suited for qualitative analysis, it is far from ideal for quantitative analysis. A more systematic quantitative study may be pursued in the future on a more balanced corpus, which should be constructed based on the number of words rather than the number of articles, as different newspapers and newspaper types exhibit substantial variation in average article length. Moreover, the results of the present analysis seem to point to the fact that the use of ScQ, MQ, and ambiguous cases may depend on text type (e.g., hard vs. soft news, as well as specific topics) and on the guidelines of individual newspapers, or even on the preferences of individual journalists. For these reasons, future quantitative studies of MQ must rely on a balanced corpus, ensuring equilibrium in total length, text type, and topic distribution. Additionally, insights from newsroom practices and interviews with journalists could illuminate the role, or lack thereof, of editorial guidelines and personal preferences in the handling of quotes and quotation marks in ScQ and MQ.

5. Concluding remarks

This study set out to clarify how mixed quotation (MQ) and scare quotation (ScQ) function in contemporary German-language newspapers, and to determine where to draw the line between them for the purposes of annotation within a larger project on the history of reported discourse in the German-language press. The corpus analysis was based on 200 articles each from four Austrian daily newspapers, two quality papers (*Der Standard*, *Die Presse*) and two tabloids (*Kronen Zeitung*, *heute.at*), from 31 January and 1 February 2025.

The analysis confirmed that MQ and ScQ are best understood as poles of a continuum. At one end are clear cases of MQ, where words are attributed to a definite speaker; at the other end are clear cases of ScQ, where quotation marks highlight unusual wording, irony, or authorial stance without attributing the words to anyone in particular. Between these poles lie

cases that show a gradual shift from quoting an identifiable speaker to referencing discourse more generally, as well as ambiguous cases in which attribution is uncertain and quotation marks could point either to another speaker or to the journalist's stance, or both. Time and again, the analysis underlined the importance of the broader supersentential and even extralinguistic context as crucial for disambiguating the functions of quotation marks.

The continuum is a useful concept, but it poses challenges for the annotation of reported discourse, where one must decide where to draw the line between MQ and ScQ. For the aims of my project, I therefore propose a pragmatic solution: as long as words in quotation marks can be attributed to someone, even if only to an indefinite group of speakers or to hearsay, they should be annotated as MQ, that is, as part of reported discourse. The final steps on the continuum, where quotation marks no longer indicate attribution to a speaker but instead mark discourse or the writer's stance, are best treated as ScQ. Truly ambiguous cases, which remain unresolved even when the broader context is taken into account, should be excluded from annotation. While this decision is tailored to the needs of my project, it may also (hopefully) prove useful for the broader theoretical discussion of the slippery MQ-ScQ cline.

Future research, ideally based on larger and more balanced corpora, could refine the taxonomy discussed above and quantify the distribution of MQ, ScQ, and intermediate cases across newspaper types and journalistic genres. It would also be valuable to look beyond textual analysis and investigate actual production dynamics. As ten Cate (1996: 204) notes, in the press “the necessity arises [...] to make clear what [the journalist] ascribes to another person and what is [their] own contribution.” This is crucial for transparency in journalism, but as the present analysis shows, it is not always achieved. Do journalists consciously exploit the continuum, or are they unaware of the ambiguity? Should applied linguistics advocate for clearer conventions? Could alternative punctuation practices, such as those adopted by the Italian online newspaper *Il Post* (systematically using curved quotation marks “...” for ScQ and double angled quotes «...» for direct and mixed quotes) offer a solution?

Moreover, experimental studies that test how readers process ambiguous cases could be particularly illuminating. For instance, comparing non-ambiguous and ambiguous quotations using methods such as reading time studies (e.g., Schlechtweg 2022; Schlechtweg & Härtl 2023), eye-tracking (e.g., Raue et al. 2025), or questionnaire-based studies on the perceived function of quotation marks (e.g., van Krieken 2020) could further deepen our understanding of how readers interpret ambiguous instances.

These questions underscore that there is still ample work to be done on MQ and ScQ in (German-language) journalism, not only from the perspective of textual usage but also in relation to writers' production practices and readers' interpretive strategies.

Abbreviations

| | |
|-----|-----------------|
| MQ | mixed quotation |
| ScQ | scare quotation |
| SBJ | subjunctive |

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