

## The Use of Quotation Marks in German as a Register Phenomenon

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*Quotation as a linguistic phenomenon has been granted its own graphic sign in writing: the quotation marks “...”. Yet research has repeatedly shown that this punctuation unit is not a necessary condition for quotation as a pragmatic phenomenon. Still, the correlation between quotations and their explicit marking remains undeniable, and it provides the point of departure for the present study. Based on three corpora (graduation exams, newspaper articles, WhatsApp messages), I demonstrate that quotation marks disclose important aspects of quotation practices. Writers employ them in the corpora with specific nuances. Despite such variation, all uses refer back to a common functional basis. The data reveal quotation marks as flexible resources whose functions shift across communicative settings. They are not mere graphic delimiters but register-sensitive indicators, adapting to situational and genre-specific contexts. Describing this variability through the concept of register allows for a systematic account of how quotation marks operate within different communicative environments.*

**Keywords:** quotation marks, graphematics, register studies, corpus linguistics

### 1. Introduction

Quotation is one of the few linguistic phenomena that – at least in written German – possesses a graphic sign explicitly and terminologically dedicated to it: the quotation marks <“>. At the same time, the relationship between the linguistic phenomenon quotation on the one hand and the written sign on the other is not as close as this designation might suggest. It has repeatedly been demonstrated that quotation can occur without quotation marks, whether through other, often non-segmental devices (like *italics*), or even entirely without marking (cf. De Brabanter 2023 among others). Conversely, quotation marks themselves prove to be highly variable in use. Even in German, where the official orthography rules of the Council for German Orthography (*Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung*) provide an external normative framework, the guidelines specifying when quotation marks must be used are strikingly open. In the currently valid regulations, the sole paragraph addressing this sign states only in highly general terms: “Quotation marks indicate a separation from the surrounding text”<sup>1</sup> (§79, Official Orthography Rules issued by the Council for German Orthography 2024<sup>2</sup>). Three constellations are explicitly named therein: direct speech/“classical citation” of other texts, mentioned expressions, and expressions used with reservation. A comparable indeterminacy in formulation could already be observed in earlier versions of the official orthography Rules (cf. Fuhrhop et al. 2025).

One consequence of this rather open formulation is that variation can be observed in authentic usage data. This pertains in particular to the last aspect named in the Official Rules, namely “expressions used with reservation” (*vorbehaltlich verwendete Ausdrücke*). An example is provided in Figure 1, drawn from two graduation exams. For this text type, it is to be expected that writers orient themselves toward the official orthography rules and aim to produce a text that is as “correct,” that is, as norm-conforming, as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations taken from German-language publications have been translated by the author.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <https://grammis.ids-mannheim.de/rechtschreibung/6211> (Accessed 2025-09-13.)

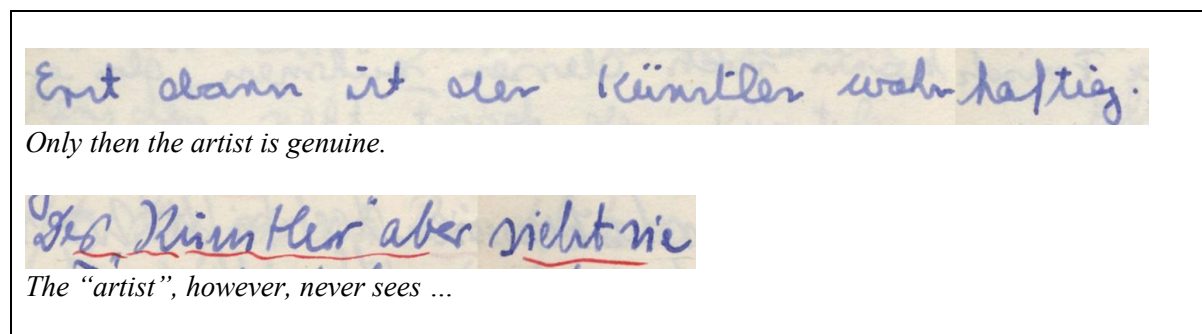


Figure 1: Excerpts from two graduation exams written in 1968<sup>3</sup>

The excerpts are taken from two school essays in which the authors were asked to take a position on statements made by the writer Max Frisch concerning the nature of poets. Both texts were written in 1968 at a school in Lower Saxony, Germany. While the first author consistently refers to *artists* without further marking, the second one introduces irony by placing the same lexeme in quotation marks.

What we observe in Fig. 1 can be called interindividual variation as the two writers use different segmental means. However, this variation simultaneously implies its own limitations since writing, as a communicative act, is bound to the condition of being understood. This is especially relevant in the context of graduation exams like in Figure 1, which can be classified as high-stakes assessments: The writers want to be understood as the readers evaluate their competence based on what they have written. Accordingly, there are limits to variation that are shaped by the communicative conditions under which writing takes place. It is a central assumption of sociolinguistics that the “kaleidoscope of writing styles” (Busch 2021a: 298) is essentially influenced by the situation in which writing occurs. In principle, the introductory example already demonstrates this: graduation exams are likely to be produced with the aim of sounding as academically appropriate as possible; rather than irony, explicit and unambiguous forms are expected.

The underlying hypothesis – that observable variation in writing arises predominantly in dependence on the social situation in which it takes place – forms the starting point of the present study. What is here provisionally referred to as the “social situation” can, following Wiese (2021), be more precisely described as a *communicative situation* (comm-sit). She defines this as “the setting of [...] social activity, [...] distinguished by [...] different situational characteristics” (Wiese 2021: 6). Comm-sits in this sense “support the co-occurrence of linguistic resources” (Wiese 2021: 29). In order to linguistically describe the complex interplay (the “support”) between language use on the one hand and communicative context on the other this study focuses on the specific linguistic phenomenon of quotation, more precisely on the use of quotation marks as punctuation units.

Theoretically and methodologically, this study aligns with the research on sociolinguistics of writing (cf. Busch 2021b; Lillis 2013; Sebba 2007, among others). Within these studies, punctuation in general and quotation marks in particular can be regarded as a “underresearched feature” (Sanchez-Stockhammer 2016: 163), such that the present work contributes to closing a research gap (see, however, Fuhrhop et al. 2025, 2023; Fetzer 2024).

<sup>3</sup> The illustrative example is taken from the GraphVar corpus (cf. Romstadt et al. 2024).

Meibauer (2007: 32) outlines the methodological approach for such work by suggesting that grapholinguistic studies must, first, clarify *when* specific punctuation units are used, second, *what they stand for*, and third, *with what intention* they are deployed. A similar line can be seen in Biber & Conrad (2009: 6), who state programmatically that “the linguistic component of a register analysis requires identification of the *pervasive linguistic features* in the variety” (my emphasis). The first step, then – the identification of those features, or more specifically, the question of when particular signs appear, i.e., the empirical survey of their actual use – is the subject of this study. The aim here, then, is to identify potentially register-specific patterns and to determine their respective relationship to the overall functionality of quotation marks (in interaction with the phenomenon of quotation itself). The focus lies on how particular communicative conditions (or different comm-sits) influence written language use, and what functional conclusions can be drawn from this for both grapholinguistics and the linguistic description of quotation. The study thus takes up the demand made by Dreesen (2019: 27), who argues that in order to capture quotation marks, it is necessary “first to establish their occurrence [...] graphematically, to describe it comprehensively, and to investigate possible functions, intentions, effects, etc.”

Accordingly, the following questions are addressed: What associations exist between the communicative characteristics of comm-sits and the use of quotation marks? How are these associations motivated? And, finally, what conclusions can be drawn from them regarding the linguistic phenomenon of quotation?

Specifically, the study proceeds as follows: first, the research object “writing” is situated within the tradition of sociolinguistics (Chapter 2). The linguistic foundations concerning the use of quotation marks are addressed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 condenses these perspectives and presents a corpus-based analysis of quotation mark use across three distinct communicative situations. The findings show that quotation marks are used to varying degrees and, above all, in different functional forms across these contexts. From this, empirically grounded prototypes can be identified, whose occurrence in specific communicative constellations can be interpreted functionally (Chapter 5). These observations are summarized in Chapter 6 and discussed in two directions: they inform both a linguistically grounded description of quotation mark usage in writing, and a broader understanding of quotation as a linguistic phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Register theories and written language

It is a fundamental question in linguistics how performative language use relates to the communicative context it appears in. Within the field of variational linguistics, the concept of *register* has been established for the systematic description of this interplay. It is commonly defined as “a variety associated with a particular situation of use” (Biber & Conrad 2009: 6). The central assumption underlying this definition is that specific linguistic forms co-occur as clusters, thereby generating a characteristic profile since their individual elements show a “greater-than-random tendency to co-occur” (Halliday 1988: 162). Such clustering is functionally motivated: Through a shared function, language use can be linked back to the context in which it occurs. Linguistic clusters in the sense of patterned linguistic forms must be described empirically. A distinction is typically made between *register features* and *register markers*.

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<sup>4</sup> For the discussion of whether quotation must necessarily be considered a linguistic phenomenon, see De Brabanter (2023).

While the former appear particularly frequently in texts of a given register but are not exclusive to it, the latter occur solely within one specific register such as specific technical terms (cf. Biber & Conrad 2009: 53–54).

This already makes clear that the linguistic description of registers is, by definition, comparative in nature. A linguistic element can only be validated as a register marker if multiple registers are analyzed and the feature in question is found exclusively in one of them.<sup>5</sup> This is even more true for register features, which ultimately depend on whether certain linguistic forms appear more or less frequently – i.e., characteristically – within one register compared to another. In this sense, comparison is the foundational mode of linguistic register analysis.

Methodologically, Biber & Conrad (2009) outline three key steps in a register analysis: (1) the description of a register’s situational characteristics, (2) the description of its linguistic characteristics, and (3) the interpretation of the functional links between linguistic and situational features – an aspect emphasized above as particularly salient. Thus, the starting point is a precise description of language use on one hand, and of the communicative context on the other.

One may legitimately ask why this study aims to analyze the use of a specific *written* sign within a framework of register research.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, most of the studies cited this far focus on spoken language. Register research in the domain of written language is a relatively recent development. Busch (2021b) offers a particularly concise definition:

*Writing registers are understood as bundles of selections from the inventory of graphic-segmental forms, which, within a population, acquire distinction through metapragmatic awareness and are indexically linked to socio-situational contexts.*

(Busch 2021b: 101)

This definition takes seriously the notion that written language use – like language use as a whole – must ultimately be described as social practice (cf. Sebba 2007). This link – the potential for choosing between different options as a foundational mode of variation – renders writing system use indexically meaningful (cf. Meletis 2020: 339).

Within this framework, the use of various elements of the writing system – including punctuation units – must be interpreted. These have thus far rarely been examined in the context of register research. Notable exceptions include the already cited works by Sanchez-Stockhammer (2016) Simonsen (2021), and Busch (2021b).

Sanchez-Stockhammer (2016) conducts an exploratory comparison of punctuation use in comics versus academic texts. She concludes that “particular punctuation marks tend to correlate with particular registers, and that some punctuation marks are employed following register-specific conventions” (Sanchez-Stockhammer 2016: 151). She demonstrates this, for example, with question and exclamation marks, which appear exclusively in the comics she analyzed. Ellipses and apostrophes are also classified as register features of comics. In contrast,

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<sup>5</sup> However, Biber & Conrad (2009: 54) assume that *register markers* may indeed appear in other registers as well – though always with a metaphorical link back to the source register.

<sup>6</sup> Quotation marks generally lack a conventionalized spoken equivalent, which is characteristic of punctuation units in general (cf. Meletis & Romstadt forthcoming). This, too, can be empirically demonstrated. Klewitz & Couper-Kuhlen (1999: 473), for instance, noted: “[I]t would be an overstatement to claim that prosodic marking is used systematically as a sign of reported speech in talk the way quotation marks are in texts [...], quotations in speech may not receive any kind of special prosodic formatting at all” (see also Schlechtweg & Härtl 2020; Apel et al. 2020). The so-called “air quotes,” i.e., co-speech quotation-mark gestures, are not discussed here (cf. Graf 2016).

semicolons, round brackets, and single quotation marks are found to be characteristic (i.e., frequent) in academic texts (cf. Sanchez-Stockhammer 2016: 157). Her perspective remains at the global level as she seeks to describe individual punctuation units as register markers or register features (i.e., without undertaking a functional differentiation of particular usage types).

That is different in the study of Simonsen (2021), that focuses more specifically on exclamation marks, analyzing student emails addressed to a university employee and noting a particularly high frequency of this punctuation unit. It is thus associated with “a more informal register, with situations of reduced social control and lower attention on the part of the writers” (Simonsen 2021: 348). The exclamation mark thereby functions both as a contextualizing and a context-establishing feature.

Busch (2021b) analyzes a wide range of written language phenomena from the perspective of register research – also including quotation marks. He compares texts written by secondary school students from Hamburg, Germany, with *WhatsApp* messages produced by the same individuals. At a global level, he finds that quotation marks occur considerably more frequently in the school texts than in the *WhatsApp* messages. Moreover, in the latter they appear to be functionally more variable, extending to constructions beyond classical quotations. These findings are revisited in the following sections (Chapter 4).

### 3. Quotation as a grapholinguistic phenomenon

#### 3.1 Marks of quotation vs. quotation marks

Quotation, as a linguistic phenomenon, is not inherently bound to any particular modality. Within writing, however, there exists a specific symbol that explicitly refers to it: the quotation marks. Nevertheless, a one-to-one mapping between written representation and quotation as a linguistic act falls short. First, this is due to the fact that quotation can also occur without explicit marking. De Brabanter (2023) convincingly demonstrates that the so-called *Necessity Claim* – that quotation always requires formal marking – cannot be upheld (cf. also Saka 1998). Second, even when quotation is marked, it is not necessarily done using quotation marks (cf. Johnson 2011). Accordingly, De Brabanter (2023: 285) proposes a distinction between “quotation marks,” which refer specifically to the punctuation unit, and “marks of quotation,” which may include “a variety of typographic devices”. This is exemplified in the following passage:

- (1) Regina Kehns Bilder zu Saša Stanišićs *Wolf* zeigen meisterhaft, welch Gewinn ein produktives Spannungsverhältnis zwischen Text und Bild auch für jugendliche Leser:innen ist.<sup>7</sup>  
*‘Regina Kehn’s illustrations for Saša Stanišić’s Wolf masterfully demonstrate the benefits that a productive tension between text and image can offer, even for young readers.’*

The italicized units in (1) (that make reference to a book title) could just as well be enclosed in quotation marks; here, italics fulfill the same functional role. In this vein, Bredel (2008: 128) aptly refers to quotation marks as “typographic border crossers.”

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. <https://www.friedrich-verlag.de/friedrich-plus/sekundarstufe/deutsch/literatur/lesetipp-emotion-im-wolfspelz-15465> (Accessed 2025-09-10.)

Given the fluidity of the relationship between quotation and quotation marks, one might ask whether a grapholinguistic investigation of their usage is even worthwhile. The rationale is straightforward: there is no inherent necessity to mark quotation in writing, and even when it is marked, quotation marks are not obligatory. Nonetheless, they are employed to a significant extent. This study thus follows the distinction between “quotation marks” on the one hand and “marks of quotation” on the other. It focuses specifically on quotation marks as punctuation units. It is therefore based on the following central thesis: we can gain insights into quotation by examining the conditions under which quotation marks <“”> – as the prototypical graphical indicator of this phenomenon – are used, and equally when they are not. Conversely, the communicative conditions under which quotation occurs offer new perspectives on the use of punctuation units. It follows that any mutually informative investigation must focus primarily on the authentic usage of these signs. The aim is not to explore when punctuation could be used – a hypothetical space of possibilities – but rather to determine when and under what conditions language users actually employ them.

Two preliminary notes are in order: Terminologically, I follow Stei (2007: 216) in referring to the “quotation mark complex” as the quotation marks together with the enclosed expression. The theoretical foundation for this study’s account of quotation mark usage is provided by Klockow (1980), whose corpus-based analysis pertains to German. The categories of quotation he identifies are largely compatible with established models in the Anglophone research tradition (cf. Brendel et al. 2010). For a detailed discussion of this correspondence, see Fuhrhop et al. (2023). The reliance on Klockow’s model is justified both by its proven applicability in corpus-based studies (cf. Fuhrhop et al. 2023, 2025) and by its theoretical coherence (cf. Stei 2007: 231–234).

### 3.2 Usage-based studies on quotation marks

For German, the punctuation theory by Bredel (2008) is particularly pertinent. With specific regard to quotation marks, she argues that they can be interpreted through the lens of speech act theory. They may be understood with respect to *locution*, *reference*, or *proposition* (cf. Bredel 2004). In a certain sense, this mirrors the three types of quotation mark usage cited in the introduction, which are also specified in the official orthography rules of German (see Chapter 1).

A fundamental point of reference for Bredel’s analysis is a study by Klockow (1980). Within the Anglophone research tradition, his theory has received comparatively little attention, most likely because it was published in German. In order to elucidate his usage-based approach (and subsequently to highlight its relation to speech act theory), I will present it here in greater detail. Central to Klockow’s account is the concept of “remedium,” which he adapts from an earlier study by Lausberg (1963).<sup>8</sup> In this sense, quotation marks are an indicator of remedia – that is, a “signal of the presence of an additional level of meaning, a kind of prompt to avoid interpreting the marked expression in a naïve manner” (Klockow 1980: 22). Quotation marks thus function primarily as interpretive aids: they serve as a visually salient signal

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<sup>8</sup> Lausberg (1963) himself derives the concept of the remedium from ancient rhetoric (cf. Lausberg 1963: 42–43).

*that the speaker does not fully identify with the marked expression and is not willing to accept the consequences that would ordinarily follow from its use under the given situational conditions.*

(Klockow 1978: 15)

He condenses the use of the punctuation unit into ten so-called *formulation principles*.<sup>9</sup> Cross-cutting the remaining nine is the *principle of signaled deviation*: “It is expected that any deviation from the [...] [other] principles will be signaled and justified” (Klockow 1980: 279). This principle thus forms the conceptual foundation that legitimizes the entire investigation of quotation marks, while simultaneously acknowledging that the signaling process may also be realized through other practices, such as italicization. When a linguistic expression violates one of Klockow’s principles, signaling is necessary.

In addition, Klockow assigns a “privileged position” (Klockow 1980: 279) to two other principles: the *principle of sincerity* and the *principle of addressee-orientation*. The former states that one may expect writers to identify with what they write; the latter refers to the expectation that formulations will be tailored to the reader’s cognitive capacities and expectations. Beyond these three primary principles, Klockow defines seven additional ones, which occupy a subordinate position in his model but are still relevant – particularly in the context of the *principle of signaled deviation* – for identifying usage patterns (at least within the newspaper texts he analyzes). These are: the *principle of grammaticality*, the *principle of lexical conservatism*, the *principle of clarity*, the *principle of precision*, the *principle of homogeneity*, the *principle of stylistic adequacy*, and the *principle of linguistic ownership* (Klockow 1980: 275–279). They are, on the basis of their designations, more or less self-explanatory.

Based on these ten principles, Klockow (1980) derives various functional types of quotation mark usage, illustrated in Figure 2.

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<sup>9</sup> Klockow himself notes that some of these “principles” are formulated rather vaguely, “which means there remains considerable room for interpretation in their application” (Klockow 1980: 275). This, he continues, is “not a flaw but corresponds to the fact that individual writers draw the boundary between normative and deviant usage at different points and exhibit varying levels of tolerance toward deviations” (ibid.).

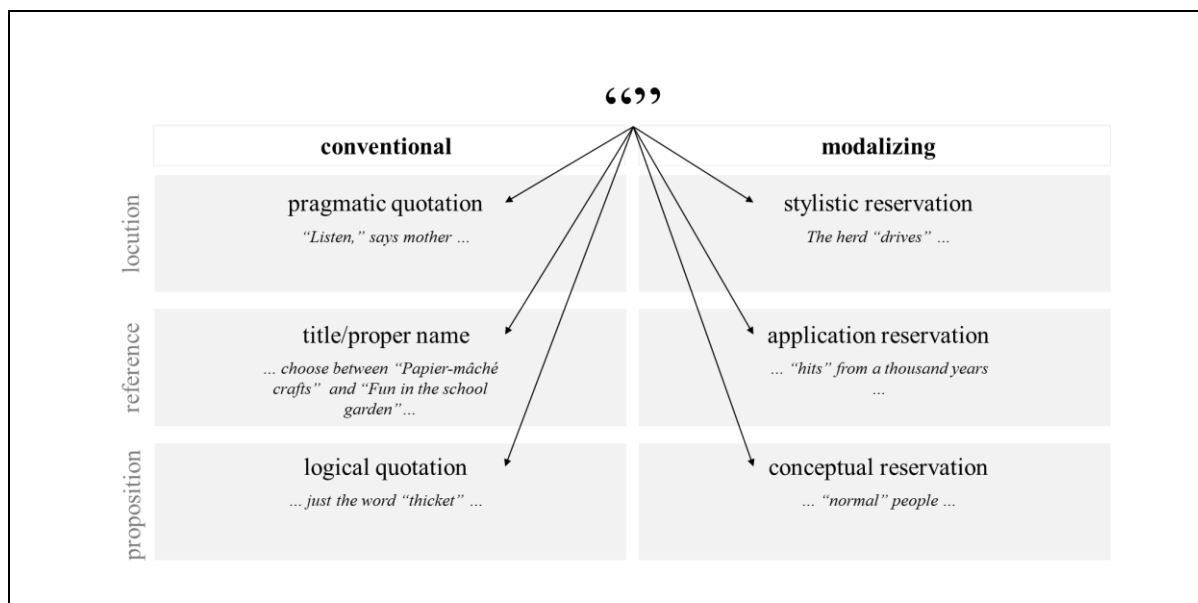


Figure 2: Systematization of quotation mark usage in Klockow (1980), adapted from Bredel (2008: 136)<sup>10</sup>

Klockow begins with what he terms the conventional use – namely, cases where the marked expression would still be clearly understood as a quotation even without the marks. Their absence would thus constitute an error. In such cases, the marked expressions are being mentioned rather than used. This applies to three general scenarios:

- (2) a. „Hör zu“, sagt Mutter und sieht mich an. (Stanišić 2025: 10)<sup>11</sup>  
*“Listen,” says Mother, looking at me.*
- b. Keine Brennnesseln, kein dorniges Dickicht – ich meine, allein schon das Wort „Dickicht“ (Stanišić 2025: 11)  
*No nettles, no thorny thicket – I mean, just the word “thicket.”*
- c. Im Sommer letztes Jahr musste man sich gleich am ersten Tag zwischen „Basteln mit Pappmaschee“ und „Gaudi im Schulgarten“ entscheiden [...]. (Stanišić 2025: 12)  
*Last summer, on the very first day, we had to choose between “Papier-mâché crafts” and “Fun in the school garden.”*

In (2a), the quotation is a literal reproduction of a linguistic unit attributed to someone other than the author. In extreme cases, omission of quotation marks in such instances could be interpreted as a violation of copyright. Klockow calls such cases pragmatic quotations. They contravene the *principle of linguistic ownership*. Normally, the author of written language is

<sup>10</sup> Bredel (2008), drawing on Klockow, interprets this system also from the reader’s perspective: “Upon encountering quotation marks, readers first attempt to locate a locutionary alienation. Only when this interpretation fails is referential alienation considered. If that too fails, the reader attempts to locate the writer’s skepticism in the propositional structure” (Bredel 2008: 136).

<sup>11</sup> The examples from Stanišić (2025) are taken from the narrative *Wolf* by Saša Stanišić.

also its originator. In this case, however, that assumption is called into question – and the deviation from this fundamental principle is graphically marked. A comparable structure is found in (2b), which Klockow categorizes as a logical quotation – a metalinguistic quotation in which the writer refers to the linguistic unit qua linguistic unit. A related type appears in (2c), which involves the quotation of proper names (in this case, the names of school clubs) or titles.

These conventional uses of quotation marks are among the oldest historically. Parkes (1993) identifies early attestations as far back as the 9<sup>th</sup> century, although the marks at that time took the form of marginal diples (>).

A second major use developed out of these conventional forms: the so-called modalizing use. Its key feature is that the omission of quotation marks does not result in a formally incorrect or ungrammatical sentence, but rather in a semantically altered one. The effect of modalizing quotation marks can be illustrated as follows:

- (3) a. Die Herde „fährt“ durch den Wald, wie es in der Jägersprache heißt.  
(Klockow 1980: 140)<sup>12</sup>  
*The herd “drives” through the forest, as hunters say.*
- b. Aus einem kleinen Radio scheppern „Hits“ aus tausend Jahren vor unserer Geburt. (Stanišić 2025: 68)  
*From a tiny radio blare “hits” from a thousand years before we were born.*
- c. Auch sogenannte „Normale“ – wenn es die gibt – können von ihnen gelegentlich profitieren. (Klockow 1980: 190)  
*Even so-called “normal” people – if they exist – can occasionally benefit from them.*

In (3a), the verb *drive* does not stylistically fit with the surrounding narrative. It violates the *principle of stylistic adequacy*. This already points toward the arguments linked to the concept of “register” in the preceding chapters. What is at issue here is the appropriateness of linguistic expressions in specific communicative situations. If this fundamental principle is violated, signaling thus becomes obligatory. This constitutes a central argument for considering quotation marks as potential register markers (see above). The text makes this explicit by referencing its source: such phrasing is appropriate only in the specialized jargon of hunters. In colloquial German, one would expect *gehen* (“go”) or *ziehen* (“pass”). Klockow refers to such uses as stylistic reservation. He considers this category applicable whenever replacing a marked expression with a stylistically neutral one would simultaneously render quotation marks unnecessary. What counts as “neutral” depends on context: for instance, *move* might be stylistically unmarked in a journal on hunting and thus not warrant quotation marks. In precisely this communicative situation, it might instead be far more appropriate to mark *fahren* (“drive”) with quotation marks.

Examples (3b) and (3c), by contrast, concern content rather than style. They often involve deviations of the *principles of precision* and *clarity*. In (3b), the quotation marks reflect a reservation about whether the term *Hits* (“hits”) is applicable to the referenced content. This

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<sup>12</sup> The examples cited from Klockow (1980) are drawn from a corpus of newspaper articles from the 1960s and 1970s.

is what Klockow terms an application reservation. The writer does not dispute the word’s general meaning but questions whether it aptly describes this particular instance.<sup>13</sup> In (3c), the situation differs: here, the entire term *normal* is questioned as a descriptor for people. This doubt is reinforced explicitly in the text by the phrase “if they exist.” Klockow labels such instances conceptual reservations, which often concern ideologically charged terminology. Unlike application reservations, they constitute a closed class and could theoretically be catalogued<sup>14</sup> – since their problematic nature persists irrespective of context:

*There is, as the detached use is meant to demonstrate, no mode of usage that does not involve a simultaneous distancing from the term. Consequently, the term [...] becomes detached from its use and transforms into an object with a general reservation.*

(Dreesen 2019: 28)

Some uses of quotation marks lie in some way *between* the poles of conventional and modalizing uses. These are often referred to in linguistic literature as “hybrid quotations.” Their hallmark is that they “involve strings of words whose internal structure is part and parcel of the host structure” (De Brabanter 2023: 291). While this definition aligns structurally with modalizing quotation, these expressions frequently involve attribution to an external speaker – thus functionally approaching conventional quotation. Their ambiguous status within Klockow’s model will be further addressed in Chapter 4.

Stylistic reservation and pragmatic quotations – this has become evident in the preceding accounts – pertain to the *locutionary dimension* of other speakers – either as a concrete utterance or a distinctive speech style. Title quotations and application reservations pertain to *reference*. Conceptual reservations and logical quotations concern the *propositional structure* of an utterance: “Here too, it is not a specific alternate proposition that is invoked (as happens with focus on form), but rather the adequacy of an expression is fundamentally questioned” (Bredel 2008: 135).

In principle, this overall function should also be applicable to digitally mediated communication, which was not yet conceivable at the time of the publication of Klockow’s study. How such new forms of communication challenge the categories described here is further addressed in §4.3. At a global level, it will be shown that the heuristic is likewise applicable to these data.

#### 4. The use of quotation marks in corpora

On the basis of the preceding discussion, the research questions for the following section are as follows:

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<sup>13</sup> What has been termed in Anglophone research “emphatic quotations” may likewise be described as a form of application reservation, in which quotation marks primarily serve the purpose of emphasis (e.g. *Here you can buy “fresh” vegetables.*). They relate to application insofar as the quoted word is treated as if it were insufficient on its own – thus constituting, in effect, an inverted form of application reservation. Since such instances occur only rarely, if at all, in the three corpora examined here, this observation remains a marginal note.

<sup>14</sup> This “catalogability” is rather an abstract criterion, since conceptual reservation is, of course, always also a reflection of sociolinguistic processes. Terms that are considered fundamentally problematic in this sense today may, under certain circumstances, have been perceived as entirely unmarked only a few years or decades ago. Consequently, the composition of such a hypothetical list of conceptual reservations is, by definition, variable.

- How do different properties of the embedding communicative situations affect the use of quotation marks? The findings of Sanchez-Stockhammer (2016) indicate that differences are to be expected; the present study seeks to expand on these by adding further perspectives. In other studies, on the use of quotation marks, the relation to register and text type has at most been addressed in the outlook (cf. Fuhrhop et al. 2023, 2025); here, it is to be placed prominently at the center of the comparison.
- How, conversely, do different forms of quotation mark usage impact the embedding communicative situations? Are there, as Busch (2021b) suggests, indications of various more or less prototypical usage patterns across different register constellations?
- Do differences emerge in the quantity and/or quality of the various functions of quotation marks, as systematically identified by Klockow (1980) and Bredel (2008) and also empirically investigated corpus-linguistically in Fuhrhop et al. (2023, 2025) and Busch (2021b)? The cited studies are either based on a single corpus (cf. Fuhrhop et al. 2023, 2025), address comparisons of quotation marks only as a subsidiary aspect of a broader analysis (cf. Busch 2021b; Sanchez-Stockhammer 2016), or rely on a limited dataset.
- And finally, from a more overarching perspective: What does the use of quotation marks reveal about the phenomenon of quotation – and vice versa?

Existing studies are extended in addressing these questions in two respects: first, quantitatively, as a larger dataset underlies the analysis and three distinct registers are compared; second, qualitatively, as the observed differences in usage are interpreted with a focused application of the register concept.

The procedure of the study is relatively straightforward in each case: I searched for all occurrences of quotation marks <“>. <sup>15</sup> The occurrences obtained in this way were analyzed in a second step. The assignment of instances to the functional classes followed the procedure described by Klockow (1980). Conventional use is thus characterized primarily by the fact that omission of the quotation marks would constitute an orthographic error but would not result in a change of meaning. In the case of modalizing quotation marks, the opposite holds. The differentiation of subcategories was likewise carried out in line with Klockow (1980) and the tests described there (see above). Ambiguous cases were assessed by multiple annotators; if their classification remained uncertain, they were assigned to the category “unclear.” In addition, the data described here was reclassified after an interval of four months. The level of agreement, measured as intrarater agreement, was satisfactory for all three corpora ( $\kappa > 0.8$ ; cf. Landis/Koch 1977).

The guiding assumption of this study is twofold: first, that the sociocommunicative context is reflected in actual language use; and second, that this relationship becomes manifest through specific, potentially indexical clusters of co-occurring linguistic forms – in this case, the use of quotation marks.

#### *4.1 Newspaper articles*

Newspaper articles are considered particularly well suited for corpus investigations, first, because of their high availability, and second, because their broad – often nationwide – distribu-

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<sup>15</sup> Since the form of quotation marks has been graphically “neutralized” in most digital corpora, searches were conducted exclusively for <“>. Only in MoCoDa2 (§4.3) additional allographs were queried (<„“, <“>, <«»>, etc.).

tion approximates what may be described as “standard language” (cf. Eisenberg 2007). Communicatively, this involves a one-to-many interaction in which a single writer produces a text for a large, anticipated readership.

In Fuhrhop et al. (2025), we examined the use of quotation marks in precisely these texts, focusing in particular on their modalizing function. For this purpose, we analyzed a subset of the *German Reference Corpus* (DEREKO).<sup>16</sup> We examined the 2020 issues of a total of 18 national daily newspapers. Our analysis was based on a sample of 5,172 quotation mark complexes. Structurally, these consisted in most cases of noun phrases or nouns (74.8%). Functionally, approximately every second instance involved the quotation of a proper name (cf. Fuhrhop et al. 2025: 120). Modalizing quotation marks together accounted for only 6.5% – and this in a corpus specifically constructed to contain as much modalizing usage as possible: Because our focus was precisely on this type of usage, we restricted the length of the quotation mark complexes to a maximum of three graphematic words. The data from the study by Fuhrhop et al. (2025) is therefore not generalizable; rather, it provides indications of quotation-mark usage within a particular, a priori defined structure.

For this reason, a random sample of 500 quotation mark complexes from the same corpus was annotated for the present analysis. The resulting distribution is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Quotation Marks in the Newspaper Corpus (DEREKO, 2020)

	absolute	relative	confidence interval <sup>17</sup> , $p=0.95$
title/proper name	99	19.8%	16.3–23.3%
logical quotation	17	3.4%	1.8–5.0%
pragmatic quotation	299	59.8%	55.5–64.1%
mixed quotation	65	13.0%	10.1–15.9%
application reservation	7	1.4%	0.4–2.4%
conceptual reservation	2	0.4%	0.0–1.0%
stylistic reservation	5	1.0%	0.1–1.9%
unclear	6	1.2%	0.2–2.2%

Three observations can be made from Table 1. First, it is striking that modalizing quotation marks account for only about 2% of the corpus. They are therefore evidently a marked exception in newspaper language. At the same time, this low proportion demonstrates that the aim of Fuhrhop et al. (2025) – to achieve a higher proportion of modalizing uses by restricting the size of the quotation-mark complex – was successful (their share there was 6.5%). What predominates is the application reservation, which can be observed in cases such as (4):

- (4) Dort hatte die Familie zwischen den Jahren eine sechswöchige „private Familienzeit“ genommen [...]. (B20/JAN.00714<sup>18</sup>)  
*There, the family had taken a six-week “private family time” over the holidays [...].*

<sup>16</sup> <https://cosmas2.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2-web/>. Accessed 2025-09-13.)

<sup>17</sup> The obtained values can be related to the corpus as a whole. By virtue of the central limit theorem, the distribution of quotation mark functions can be approximated by a normal distribution. When making statements about the overall corpus, a confidence interval is calculated in each case ( $p = 0.95$ ) (cf. Meindl 2011: 139).

<sup>18</sup> Corpus examples from DEREKO are cited here using the convention employed in that resource, which specifies the newspaper, year, month of publication, and issue number the example is taken from. Here: Newspaper: B (= *Berliner Zeitung*), Year: 20 (= 2020), Month: JAN (= January), Issue: 714.

Here, it is questionable whether the family time truly deserves the attribute *private*.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, in newspaper language, conventional use of quotation marks clearly predominates over such modalizing uses. The prototype – this is the second relevant insight evident in Table 1 – is the pragmatic quotation, as illustrated in example (5).

- (5) „Bonnie?“, fragte ich [...]. (T20/FEB.00252)  
*“Bonnie?” I asked [...].*

Proper names also occur in substantial numbers, while logical quotations are the exception.<sup>20</sup>

Thirdly, the category labeled “mixed quotation” in Table 1 is noteworthy. It does not appear in the methodology by Klockow outlined above and is instead borrowed from the Anglophone research tradition on quotation. It pertains to cases that elude Klockow’s heuristic because they oscillate between conventional and modalizing use. Examples are shown in (6).

- (6) a. In seiner Darstellung waren alle sexuellen Beziehungen, die er hatte, „einvernehmlich“. (B20/JAN.00408)  
*In his account, all the sexual relationships he had were “consensual.”*
- b. Dass seine Mode nicht „for everyone“ sei, wie Telfar gerne sagt [...] (B20/JAN.00788)  
*That his fashion is not “for everyone,” as Telfar likes to say [...].*
- c. 100 Jahre Groß-Berlin sind „ein guter Zeitpunkt“ für eine Debatte. Das findet Jens-Holger Kirchner (Grüne). (B20/JAN.00117)  
*One hundred years of Greater Berlin are “a good moment” for a debate. That is the view of Jens-Holger Kirchner (Greens).*

In all instances, the focus is on reproducing a foreign voice within the author’s own text. The source of the quoted utterance is also explicitly identified in (6a–c), albeit sometimes only in the following sentence: in (6a) an unspecified *he*, in (6b) *Telfar*, in (6c) *Jens-Holger Kirchner*. Here, they behave like classical pragmatic quotations in Klockow’s sense. At the same time, however, the quoted units are actively used: if the quotation marks were omitted, it would no longer be clear which elements are quoted and which are part of the syntactic structure projected by the author. In (6b), this is further reinforced by the subjunctive verb form (*sei*). If the quotation marks were omitted, no “error” would result, and the cited units would no longer be readily identifiable. This precisely corresponds to what Cumming (2005: 77) describes as “indirect speech reports in which some portion is set off in quotes to indicate literalness of rendering.” The 13.4% of mixed quotations in the corpus can thus be described, on the one hand, as pragmatic quotations, yet they behave more “modalizingly” than other conventional forms

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<sup>19</sup> This could also be read as a mixed quotation; however, the context provides no indication thereof. In Fuhrhop et al. (2023: 422), we observed that in such nominal groups with adjectival attributes, it is often the case that both the adjective *and* the head noun appear within the quotation mark complex, rather than only the attributive element.

<sup>20</sup> However, titles/proper names also appear to be more prone to *italics*. It is therefore possible that they occur even more frequently than pragmatic quotations – while at the same time making more frequent use of alternative typographic marking practices. I am grateful to Niklas Reinken for this observation.

of quotation for the aforementioned reasons. That instances such as (6a–c) are not misinterpreted as modalizing is ensured by the linguistic co-text. Its relevance becomes immediately apparent when interpreting the examples from the reader’s perspective: punctuation units can generally be understood as reading aids (cf. Bredel 2008; Meletis & Romstadt forthcoming; specifically for quotation marks: Schlechtweg & Härtl 2023). What determines their occurrence is precisely the instruction to the reader they provide. Herein lies the crucial difference. If the co-text provides any information indicating that the quoted material is attributed to another source, examples like (6a–c) can be read as mixed quotations. If no such information is given, the author is at least indifferent, and a reader’s interpretation of the passage as modalizing would be considered acceptable.

#### 4.2 *Graduation exams*

The quotation-mark complexes described in §4.1 are drawn from newspapers. Newspaper language, however, emerges – at least potentially – under editorial supervision, automated spell-checking (and in the future possibly increasingly including AI-generated text). What we are actually observing, then, when examining written newspaper language, is something akin to the “combined” usage of author, editor, and possibly an automated spelling program.

The authentic writing practices of competent writers may therefore be more reliably observed in texts produced without editorial intervention. Graduation exams are particularly suitable in this regard, as they are created (under historically comparable conditions) by writers aiming to produce readable, comprehensible, and orthographically correct texts. Both newspaper texts and exams share an orientation toward standard language. They differ, however, in the structure of the anticipated readership. While newspaper texts are written for the broadest possible audience, exams are typically read by only two evaluators. At the same time, graduation exams are oriented toward educational language: students aim to demonstrate what they have learned and their readiness for further education or university study.

To capture the written practices of these writers, who are at the end of their institutionally guided literacy acquisition, data is drawn from the GraphVar corpus, which contains over 2,000 graduation exams from a secondary school in Lower Saxony, Germany (cf. Romstadt et al. 2024). The corpus includes exams in German, History, and Biology.

In Fuhrhop et al. (2023), the 2013 cohort (137 exams) was analyzed with respect to the quotation marks they contained. On average, 19.6 quotation marks occurred per exam; structurally, these were mostly noun phrases or nouns as in the newspaper texts (80.2%, cf. Fuhrhop et al. 2023: 416). Notable differences emerged between subjects. German exams contained significantly more logical quotations (29.5% versus only 8.0% in Biology and History), while conceptual reservations appeared almost exclusively in History exams (47.1% versus 2.0% in Biology and 6.8% in German). Stylistic reservations were mainly observed in Biology exams. These differences are readily explained in terms of content: German exams involved the interpretation of literary texts, requiring analysis of (poetic) language; History exams addressed topics such as National Socialism, involving instances of racist language; the stylistic reservations in Biology exams largely reflect the high frequency of domain-specific and foreign-language terminology (cf. Fuhrhop et al. 2023: 430).

To place these observations on a broader empirical footing, the most recent cohort in the GraphVar corpus available for analysis (2018) is annotated here. Since the full cohort is described, the calculation of a confidence interval is unnecessary.

Table 2: Quotation marks in graduation exams (GraphVar, cohort 2018, cf. Romstadt 2026)

	Biology		History		German	
title/proper name	7	3.6%	81	24.5%	273	18.8%
logical quotation	16	8.1%	6	1.8%	89	6.1%
pragmatic quotation	4	2.0%	151	45.6%	1.011	69.6%
application reservation	58	29.4%	37	11.2%	34	2.3%
conceptual reservation	3	1.5%	46	13.9%	10	0.7%
stylistic reservation	106	53.8%	10	3.0%	34	2.3%
unclear	3	1.5%	0	0.0%	1	0.1%

Overall, the German exams behave nearly similarly to the newspaper texts described in §4.1, with the exception of the greater relevance of logical quotations. The reason for this – the analysis of the linguistic characteristics of literary texts in these exams – has already been noted. In History exams, titles and proper names occur particularly frequently, an observation that has also been addressed.

Among the modalizing quotation marks, the conceptual and application reservations are especially noteworthy. The conceptual reservation often pertains to terms that are historically and socially problematic, as illustrated in (7).

- (7) Außerdem wurden die Polen grausam behandelt und als Sklaven der „arische Rasse“ vorgesehen [...]. (2018\_GE\_LK2\_03\_M\_05P<sup>21</sup>)  
*Moreover, the Poles were treated cruelly and intended to serve as slaves of the “Aryan race” [...].*

Even when the argument makes it clear that the author does not intend to use the term personally, the restraint is further marked by quotation marks. Some of these instances oscillate between the modalizing conceptual reservation and what was described above as “mixed quotation” (assuming the problematic terms are pragmatically quoted). The classification in Table 2 was made from the reader’s perspective. As soon as an external source is identified, thus explicitly marking the instance as a pragmatic quotation, it is assigned to the corresponding category. If this is not the case, a conceptual reservation is assumed.

Application reservations are also notably frequent in the History exams, often occurring in cases such as (8).

- (8) Bei der Aufarbeitung der Schuld wurden Fehler gemacht, wenn ein „ehemaliger“ Nationalsozialist eine Charta, die für Frieden steht, als Verbindung / Versöhnung mit seinen alten Opfern unterschreibt. (2018\_GE\_LK2\_12\_M\_05P)  
*Mistakes were made in addressing guilt when a “former” National Socialist signed a charter representing peace as a connection/reconciliation with his former victims.*

In (8), it is questioned whether the person was truly a former National Socialist or perhaps still an active one. In this way, the author distances themselves from the statement: a “former”

<sup>21</sup> Examples from the GraphVar corpus are cited here with their respective identifiers. These include information on year of production, subject, course, author, gender, and grade. Here: Year: 2018, Subject: GE (= History), Course: LK2 (= Course 2), Student: 03 (= Student No. 3), Gender: M (= male), Grade: 05 P. (= 5 points = satisfactory).

*National Socialist* is construed as someone other than a *former National Socialist*. This concerns the content level of the essay, and it can be assumed that it reflects the communicative situation in which it is written, since graduation exams are produced not for a broad audience but solely for an evaluating teacher (anticipated to be competent both professionally and in the relevant academic register).

Finally, a look at the Biology exams, which overall behave markedly different from both the German and History exams on the one hand and the newspaper texts on the other. In these essays, conventional quotation marks account for only about 14%. This is initially due to the fact that graduation exams in that subject make much less use of external sources or others' statements. This is also evident in the overall much lower frequency of quotation marks in biology exams. Conversely, stylistic and application reservations occur significantly more frequently. The former, as already described, is primarily due to the high frequency of subject-specific and foreign-language terminology in these texts. In addition, the phenomenon described in Fuhrhop et al. (2023: 426) as the “struggle for educational language” can be observed. Two examples are shown in (9).

- (9) a. Der Organismus ist so darauf konzipiert, in geringer Zeit viel ATP herzustellen, dass durch die ATP-Synthase, als auch durch die semipermeable Membran Protonen hindurch diffundieren können, indem sie „huckepack“ mit einem anderen Ion auf die andere Seite übertragen werden.  
(2018\_BIO\_LK2\_08\_W\_07P)  
*The organism is designed to produce a large amount of ATP in a short time, so that protons can diffuse through both the ATP synthase and the semipermeable membrane, being “piggybacked” across by another ion.*
- b. Man kann also sagen, dass das Aktionspotential durch das Axon „springt“.  
(2018\_BIO\_LK2\_19\_M\_08P)  
*One can therefore say that the action potential “jumps” along the axon.*

In (9a), the issue concerns a stylistic reservation: the word *huckepack* (“piggybacked”) is described as colloquial in German.<sup>22</sup> Graduation exams, however, are not produced with colloquial language in mind. In the absence of a stylistically neutral term in this context, the author in (9a) nonetheless uses *huckepack* – her awareness of the stylistic inappropriateness is signaled by the quotation marks. In a somewhat analogous way, the example in (9b) involves an application reservation. An *action potential* is a (charge-based) process that becomes apparent only at the submicroscopic level. It cannot “jump” in the usual sense; the verb *springen* requires a controllable agent, which is absent here. The quotation marks thus indicate something akin to “inadequate agency.”

Both processes described are, on the one hand, directly attributable to the communicative situation in which the exams are produced. The focus is on writers producing a text in which they seek to demonstrate particular competence, as outcomes in this examination context are closely tied to significant decisions affecting their personal future. Students are expected to produce a text that is both academically and register-appropriately formulated. The notion of appropriateness addressed here, as described above, is directly linked to register characteristics.

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<sup>22</sup> For example, the *Digital Dictionary of the German Language*: <https://www.dwds.de/wb/huckepack> (Accessed 2025-09-03.)

Accordingly, the differences in the functional distribution of quotation marks observed in Tables 1 and 2 can be derived from the characteristics of the embedding comm-sit.

### 4.3 *WhatsApp* messages

Unlike the texts described so far, *WhatsApp* messages belong to digitally mediated communication (DMC). They differ markedly from all previously discussed texts in terms of the communicative situation in which they are produced. In the German research tradition, the distinction between *text-oriented* and *interaction-oriented writing* has been established (cf. Storrer 2018). While the former aims to produce a coherent text that can be understood independently of the immediate situation, the primary communicative goal of the latter is the successful conduct of the ongoing interaction.

Precisely because the resulting texts are not primarily intended for situation-independent reception, features such as orthography are far more flexible than in text-oriented writing. It should be noted that this distinction between communicative orientations is to be understood as a continuum – writers behave in a more text-oriented or more interaction-oriented manner.

The use of punctuation in interaction-oriented writing has often been described as differing from its use in text-oriented writing (cf. e.g., Androutsopoulos 2018; Busch 2021b). Accordingly, differences in the use of quotation marks can also be expected. Specifically, Busch (2021b: 346) characterizes quotation marks in his study as “marginal” in *WhatsApp* messages – he finds only 47 instances, of which 10 (21.3%) are assigned to conventional use.

To place these initial observations on a broader empirical footing, the *Mobile Communication Database 2* (MoCoDa2, cf. Beißwenger et al. 2019) is searched for quotation marks.<sup>23</sup> As of September 2025, it currently contains almost 40,000 *WhatsApp* messages with a total of 320,124 tokens. Excluded here are all cases in which quotation marks are automatically inserted by the messaging application *WhatsApp* itself to indicate the names of chats. The corpus contains 262 such messages that contain at least one quotation mark (0.7%). This overall frequency is considerably lower than in the corpora described above. In some cases, the classification of individual instances required a broader view of the entire interaction, since only in this way could it be determined, for example, whether a quotation mark complex constituted a pragmatic quotation. This is hardly surprising, however, given that we are dealing here with interaction-oriented writing (see above). The overall distribution is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Quotation marks in *WhatsApp*-messages (MoCoDa2)

	absolute	relative
title/proper name	19	7.3%
logical quotation	49	18.7%
pragmatic quotation	96	36.6%
mixed quotation	4	1.5%
application reservation	63	24.0%
conceptual reservation	1	0.4%
stylistic reservation	23	8.8%
unclear	7	2.7%

<sup>23</sup> <https://db.mocoda2.de/c/home>. I wish to thank Melanie Giesbrecht for her assistance in generating the data for this corpus.

Unlike Busch's data (2021b), conventional use of quotation marks also predominates in MoCoDa – analogous to the newspaper texts and the graduation exams described above. A reason for this is not immediately apparent. It is possible that the smaller sample of writers examined in Busch (2021) allowed individual preferences to exert a greater influence on the data. This effect is expected to be less pronounced in MoCoDa due to the corpus size. It is likewise conceivable that in MoCoDa, in particular pragmatic quotations occur more frequently overall due to the topics addressed in the messages, compared to the interactions described by Busch (2021).

If mixed quotations are counted as pragmatic quotations (as in Klockow's methodology), 38.1% of all quotation-mark complexes fall into this category. This includes cases such as (10), in which entire messages are quoted; here, the closing quotation mark is missing, but the boundary can still be clearly determined by a line break.

- (10) "Hallo alle zusammen,  
Vom 10.05 bis 11.05. Ist die Familie Eichfeld im Urlaub.  
[...]  
Falls ihr noch Fragen habt sprecht mich an oder schreibt mir.  
Ich hoffe ich habe nichts vergessen ♥ 😊  
Liebe Grüße Larissa 😊

Dachte, die hättet ihr auch bekommen 😊 (Chrissy, #thpWy, #6<sup>24</sup>)  
*"Hello everyone  
From May 10th to May 11th, the Eichfeld family will be on vacation.  
[...]  
If you have any questions, feel free to contact me or write to me.  
I hope I haven't forgotten anything ♥ 😊  
Best regards, Larissa 😊*

*Thought you had received this one too 😊*

Moreover, *WhatsApp* messages also contain instances that extend the prototype of the pragmatic quotation and broaden the underlying concept, which could be termed "fictional pragmatic quotations," as illustrated in (11).

- (11) a. Kennst du da nicht eher sowas von mir wie "ich höre dir zu und sag mir wie ich dir helfen kann, ich tue alles!" ? (Emma, #n3716, #27)  
*Wouldn't it be more like me to say, "I'm listening to you, tell me how I can help you, I'll do anything!" ?*
- b. Jaa no stress 😊 das war bei uns genauso... jeder war so 'wtf?!' (Finn, xU16A, #27)  
*Yeah, no stress, 😊 it was the same with us... everyone was like 'wtf?!'*

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<sup>24</sup> Examples from MoCoDa2 are cited here with their respective corpus identifiers. These provide information about the writer, the chat, and the message. Here: Author: Chrissy, Chat: Identifier #thpWy, Message: #6 (= the sixth message in the chat).

Here, the apparent aim is to render approximate reactions as utterances of others or of oneself unambiguous in the sense of pragmatic quotations. This is particularly evident in (11b), where the reaction <'wtf?!'>, enclosed in single quotation marks, exhibits this fictional quotation character. In a sense, these instances push to the extreme what examples like (12) already illustrate.

- (12) Joa. Richard sagte vorhin so "Alles Gute zum Valentinstag und ich nur so ähmmm okay? " (Claire, #uRoR0, #25)  
*Yeah. Richard was like, "Happy Valentine's Day, and I was just like, ummm, okay? "*

In (12), the focus is not on a literal reproduction of Richard's or the author's reaction, but on an approximate reconstruction of the interaction. This interactional character is particularly emphasized through the use of quotation marks. Notably, the closing quotation mark is placed only at the end of the second fictional quotation and is absent at the end of the first. The fundamental possibility of this, in the end, lies in the fact that quotations are nonserious actions:

*And they depict their referents, though only selectively. It follows, then, that quotations too are nonserious actions and selective depictions. It also follows that speakers aren't necessarily committed to trying to reproduce a source utterance verbatim.*

(Clark & Gerring 1990: 802)

Functionally related to such "fictional" pragmatic quotations are "fictional," or more precisely, spontaneously created ad hoc proper names, as observed in (13).

- (13) In der heutigen Folge "unnötiges wissen mit Lorenz": warum bekommen Spechte keine Gehirnerschütterung? (Lorenz, #NVWOq, #9)  
*In today's episode of "Useless Knowledge with Lorenz": why don't woodpeckers get concussions?*

Even apart from such instances, proper names account for almost a quarter of all examples in the *WhatsApp* corpus, like <"Lego Ninjago Zeitwillinge"> (Esther, #Erl73, #41).

By contrast, modalizing uses of quotation marks appear in only about one third of all instances in the *WhatsApp* corpus. Compared to the other text types described, this is still a relatively high proportion (and aligns with Busch's assessment of *WhatsApp* messages). Application reservations are particularly frequent, with examples shown in (14).

- (14) a. Meine "beste freundin" ist in der 12. Mit einem jungen aus unser stufe zusammen gekommen bak sie ist meine Freundinund ich gönne es ihr vom herzen tamam aber seit dem sie mit ihm zusammen ist hat sie all ihre Freunde im Stich gelassen (Fatma, ,DGi83, #451)  
*My "best friend" is in 12th grade. She started dating a guy from our year, because she's my friend and I really wish her the best, totally, but ever since she got together with him, she's completely abandoned all her friends.*
- b. Ja sicher 🙄 ich wollte „eigentlich“ nicht viel trinken 😊 (Rico, #ONU61, #6)  
*Yes, of course. 🙄 I "actually" didn't want to drink much. 😊*
- c. Oder ist das nicht "adventlich" genug? 🌲 (jana, #jQdYZ, #225)  
*Or is that not "Christmassy" enough? 🌲*

In (14a), the sender of the message, Fatma, problematizes whether the person in question is in fact her “best friend” or whether this designation is a misattribution. This constitutes a prototypical case of application reservation in Klockow’s sense. (14b) illustrates an analogous case involving a quotation-marked adverb. Here, the application reservation is further reinforced by the message-final emoji 🤔, which also illustrates that, from the reader’s perspective, different graphical resources may interact. In (14c), the application reservation is addressed metalinguistically – the author questions whether the attribute *adventlich* (“Christmassy”) is appropriate in the given context.

Only a single instance could cautiously be classified as a conceptual reservation, namely the example *Trinkspiel-Tisch* (“drinking game table”), which is treated within the message itself as incorrect and even non-existent. This clearly differs from the terms that were marked with conceptual reservations in the History exams. One could ask whether this might also be considered a stylistic reservation, since it involves only an expressive neologism or an “ad hoc proper name.” In any case, it constitutes modalizing use, and it was the only instance that concerned the general (and precisely not situation-dependent) use of a specific linguistic structure.

Other, relatively frequent, stylistic reservations accounted for about 9% of all examples. This category also includes the use of nicknames, as in (15).

- (15) Die Fotos von Valentino zeigen ja, dass es ihm richtig prima geht!!! "Der Professor" 😊  
(Sylvia, #52raJ, #30)  
*The photos of Valentino really show that he’s doing great!!! "The Professor" 😊*

The nickname (*der Professor*, “the professor”) is enclosed in quotation marks in (15). It is directly tied to the ongoing interaction, thereby clearly exemplifying what was noted above regarding interaction-oriented writing. In the *WhatsApp* data, the central concern is not the production of a generally comprehensible, situation-independent text; rather, the primary communicative imperative is the successful conduct of the interaction in progress.

Fundamentally, these instances thus illustrate what Busch (2021b) has described as “signals of polyphonic structures”:

*Quotation marks, as signals of polyphonic structures, always also index a social positioning toward the voices they stage. [...] By positioning themselves not only in relation to embedded external voices but also vis-à-vis their interlocutors, writers adapt the polyphony of quotation.*

(Busch 2021b: 353)

At the same time, the present data make it clear that this social positioning, which was particularly evident in the fictional quotations, operates against the backdrop of a clearly delineated functional prototype – which, in the *WhatsApp* messages, is also constituted by pragmatic quotations. In other words, the comm-sits in which the *WhatsApp* messages are embedded lead to certain functional potentials of quotation marks being utilized more extensively than others. In some cases, a functional extension from prototypical structures was even discernible. This, in turn, can be secondarily imbued with social significance within the interaction, upon which the overall success of the messages is oriented.

## 5. Homogeneity and variability in the use of quotation marks in German

Taken together, the observations indicate that quotation marks are highly flexible signs. With the exception of the Biology exams, conventional use of these marks predominated across all the communicative situations outlined, reflecting a high degree of homogeneity. At the same time, functional variation was also observed, which could be traced back to the communicative context.

As a measure of this functional variation, entropy  $H$  (in bits) can be calculated. Originally defined in information theory (cf. Shannon 1948), entropy can also be used to assess linguistic variation. To do so, the relative frequency of each variant (conceived as its probability of occurrence) is multiplied by its information value, operationalized as the negative base-2 logarithm of its frequency – the rarer a variant, the higher its information value.<sup>25</sup>

The total entropy for a phenomenon of variation is obtained by summing the individual entropies of all variants. Broadly simplified, a high entropy value indicates a high degree of variation: the more evenly and widely the variation is distributed across the individual variants, the higher the entropy.<sup>26</sup>

Table 4: Functional distribution of quotation-mark types across different corpora and entropy  $H$  as a measure of variation

	newspaper articles	graduation exams (German)	graduation exams (History)	graduation exams (Bi- ology)	<i>WhatsApp</i> messages
title/proper name	19.8%	18.8%	24.5%	3.6%	7.3%
logical quotation	3.4%	6.1%	1.8%	8.1%	18.7%
pragmatic quotation	72.8%	69.6%	45.6%	2.0%	38.1%
application reservation	1.4%	2.3%	11.2%	29.4%	24.0%
conceptual reservation	0.4%	0.7%	13.9%	1.5%	0.4%
stylistic reservation	1.0%	2.3%	3.0%	53.8%	8.8%
unclear	1.2%	0.1%	0.0%	1.5%	2.7%
<b>entropy <math>H</math></b>	1.15 bits	1.36 bits	1.89 bits	1.67 bits	2.23 bits

It emerges that in newspaper texts, quotation marks are used most consistently in alignment with a prototypical function. This prototype is the pragmatic quotation, including the constructions described above as “mixed quotations” – used precisely when the source of the external voice is explicitly identified for the reader. Modalizing quotation marks account for only 2.8% cumulatively. By contrast, graduation exams exhibit an increased degree of variation, though not uniformly. German exams – concerning quotation marks – resemble newspaper texts most closely. In Biology exams, while the overall variation is only slightly higher, the balance of forces is reversed: here, as the only subcorpus, modalizing quotation marks predominate, corresponding to what was described above as the “struggle for educational language.” This again

<sup>25</sup> An example: Let us assume that a linguistic variable can occur in exactly two different forms. Variant 1 accounts for 70% of all instances, Variant 2 for 30%. We can calculate the entropy for each variant. For Variant 1, this yields:  $H = 0.7 \times (-\log_2(0.7)) = 0.36$  bits. For Variant 2, applying the analogous formula, the entropy is  $H = 0.52$  bits. The overall entropy is the sum of the individual entropies – in the present case,  $H = 0.88$  bits.

<sup>26</sup> In the present case, entropy can thus assume a value between  $H = 0$  bits (only a single functional variant occurs) and  $H = 2.58$  bits (six variants occur evenly, each in 16.7% of all cases).

demonstrates that the differing communicative situations in which newspapers on the one hand and exams on the other are embedded make different modes of quotation more frequent. The primary difference appears to be the varying anticipated audience. The degree of variation is even higher in *WhatsApp* messages. They are homogeneous in the sense that conventional use – unlike in Busch’s (2021b) corpus – remains the prototypical function. What is particularly notable in addition to the generally higher variation, is that this prototype is variabilized in the service of successful interaction, and constructions described as fictional quotations occur with increased frequency. Compared to the standardized writing of newspaper texts, it is especially striking that application reservations in *WhatsApp* messages occur 6.5 times more frequently than all modalizing quotation marks in newspapers combined. The communicative situation in which newspaper articles are produced thus makes prototypical, conventional quotation marks more likely. Here again, the focus is on the interplay between communicative environment and linguistic usage. Referring back to the definitions of register presented at the outset, quotation marks can therefore be considered as register markers in German. With regard to the status of variation Table 4 demonstrates that entropy values are not only useful as indicators of that phenomenon, but that the processes they capture may also function as an index of register differentiation. In certain communicative situations, a higher degree of variation is to be expected than in others. One might even argue that variation in usage can itself constitute a more or less salient register feature. At the same time – this is the foundation of the whole analysis – the individual subtypes can be traced back to a shared basic function of quotation marks, which ultimately relates to authors’ attempts to distance themselves from their own text.

## 6. Conclusion and outlook

The analyses presented are subject to certain limitations with regard to their interpretation. For instance, they have been conducted exclusively for the German writing system (more precisely, the German punctuation system). Moreover, the corpus samples used were comparatively small, so that verification on a broader empirical basis remains pending. Bearing these limits of interpretability in mind, the following overall conclusions can be drawn: The patterns observed therefore indicate that, depending on the communicative situation, functional particularities in the use of quotation marks emerge across registers. The identified “clusters,” understood as co-occurring patterns of quotation mark usage, can be interpreted functionally. Ultimately, these can be traced back to which functional potentials of these marks appear most relevant to writers in a given social constellation. The clusters evident in Table 4 can thus be interpreted functionally. Quotation marks ultimately operate beyond orthographic convention as sociopragmatic devices of stance and alignment.

This is, first and foremost, a statement committed to a usage-based grapholinguistic perspective, placing authentic written usage at its center. Distinct from this is the question of whether the observed patterns relate to a distancing pragmatic effect or form parts of the semantic contribution of quotation marks. Addressing this question would require a more detailed, including qualitative, analysis of the data described here; one that also takes into account truth-conditional effects, which were not the focus of the present study. Against the backdrop of the workflow outlined above in register research, this would constitute the next logical step, building on such usage patterns. For the present study, this was not the primary focus, primarily because the shared core function of the assumed subtypes of quotation mark use pertains specifically to the reading process. Quotation marks thus signal to readers that the writers do not

fully identify with the written content. The reasons for this visually salient distancing are diverse, relating to authorship, form, content, and style. They are therefore distinct from the semantic or pragmatic derivation of something like “quotational meaning” and oriented as procedural aids for reading.

This insight also raises further follow-up questions and is thus more of a starting point than an endpoint for further grapholinguistic research on quotation. Meletis & Romstadt (forthcoming) for example show that quotation marks occur in 20 out of 25 analyzed writing systems. Do functional similarities also emerge across these systems? Beyond this, there is a language-internal question of extending the analysis to other registers, which can be contrasted with the present findings. This aspect also touches on a more fundamental question in sociolinguistics. The form of interpreting linguistic variation employed here, using the register concept outlined at the outset and ultimately relying on a close alignment of form and function, has been critiqued on a more general level (cf. e.g., Agha 2007). A particularly prominent critique concerns the static nature of the register model proposed by Biber & Conrad (2009), which is said to marginalize the dynamics of social interaction between communicative participants in favor of a focus on the language product. Other approaches to registers (cf. also the definition of “written registers” presented in Chapter 2) place greater emphasis on these very social practices. Asif Agha, for example, defines a register as

*a linguistic repertoire that is associated, culture internally, with particular social practices and with persons who engage in such practices. The use of a register conveys to a member of the culture that some typifiable social practice is linked indexically to the current occasion of language use.*

(Agha 1999: 216)

The final point regarding the indexicality of register is especially crucial: Here, the perspective of the language users is foregrounded, since the link between language use and context can become metapragmatically salient. In Agha’s model (2007: 169), a register analysis thus includes, in addition to the identification of a linguistic repertoire (which roughly corresponds to the procedures described above), an analysis of social practices and a description of social distribution. For instance, we have observed statistically that quotation marks in the function of conceptual reservation occurs with higher frequency in graduation exams in the subject of History and thus qualifies as a register feature. This interpretation initially concerns only the language product and can subsequently be functionally analyzed – a necessarily retrospective procedure. An alternative approach, following Agha (2007), would be now to investigate whether language users themselves *perceive* an indexical potential in the linguistic usage thus described – and if so, what kind (see the discussed “social positioning” in §4.3). What unites both outlined frameworks of register analysis is their starting point in concrete language use. That was the aim of this study – to describe the status quo, upon which further analyses can be conducted. The issue of indexicality within such clusters is a secondary concern and may be subject of future studies. The potential value of such a perspective is illustrated by the examples in (16), in which writers of newspaper texts (16a), graduation exams (16b), and *WhatsApp* messages (16c) engage metalinguistically with quotation marks, their functions, and the necessity of their use.

- (16) a. Warum führt er das Wort Konzernlobby in Anführungszeichen, als ob es sie nicht gäbe? (E20.JUN.01339)  
*Why does he put the word Konzernlobby in quotation marks, as if it did not exist?*

- b. Durch das in Anführungszeichen setzen des Wortes „gleichschalten“ bezüglich der Ländergleichschaltung, sorgt Erich Kästner an die Stelle für Ironie. (2018\_DE\_GK1\_04\_W\_08P)  
*By placing the word “regiment” in quotation marks in reference to the coordination of the federal states, Erich Kästner introduces a note of irony.*
- c. Sorry „,“ vergessen 😊😊 (Ina, #X95rV, #34)<sup>27</sup>  
*Sorry, I forgot „,“ 😊😊*

Against this background, the empirical results of the present study should be understood not as a conclusion, but rather as a starting point for further research, which is likely to benefit from an even closer integration of grapholinguistics on the one hand and the pragmatics of quotation on the other.

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<sup>27</sup> Example (16c), unlike (16a) and (16b), does not show a direct reflection of the function of quotation marks; however, the author here demonstrates something like “implicit awareness” of their potential, as a single punctuation unit is placed within quotation marks.

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