

# The “Functions” of *Air Quotes* in Spoken English

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Air Quotes are not a new phenomenon and many speakers use them daily. Nevertheless, research concerning the function(s) of air quotes remains sparse to this point. One of the early attempts at categorizing the functions of air quotes is Graf (2016) who analyses the usage of air quotes in the YouTube format “Shore, Stein, Papier” and finds that they fall into four distinct categories. Unfortunately, his findings cannot be generalised as they are based on gestural quotatives of a single person. Furthermore, there is research by Lampert (2013), which deals with different uses of air quotes, but it has been shown that her categorisation is rather broad.

Our study is an important contribution within this field of research as it extends existing categorisation schemes. While studies are mostly based on small datasets or do not capture all functions that air quotes perform, we investigate air quotes used in a variety of different sources that differ with regard to the content that is presented, the gender of the speakers and in terms of whether the content is scripted or not. The only restriction imposed on data selection was that speakers had to speak American English. The decision to use a wide range of different data allows us to get an overview of different uses and to investigate whether existing classifications can be applied of whether they have to be extended.

The analysis is mainly based on YouTube content but also excerpts of movies. We investigate a total of 27 occurrences of air quotes. To categorise the data, we draw on the classification system by Cirillo (2019).

The results show that air quotes are used to express vagueness, irony or distance from what is said. Air quotes are further used to cite, similar to the use of quotation marks in written language. This shows that in many respects they fulfil the function of *scare quotes* in written English. However, even though most of the uses of air quotes are covered by the classification scheme, they sometimes fulfil more than one function at a time. Preliminary results also indicate that it is a fluid phenomenon, and usage can differ depending on the context and speaker.

**References:** • Graf, Marius (2016). “Air Quotes im YouTube-Format ‘Shore, Stein, Papier’ – Gesprächsanalytische Betrachtung einer redebegleitenden Geste”. In Arens, Katja & Sarah Torres Cajo (eds.), *Sprache und soziale Ordnung. Studentische Beiträge zu sozialen Praktiken in der Interaktion*, 101-126. Münster: MV Wissenschaft. • Lampert, Martina (2013). “Say, be like, quote (unquote), and the air-quotes: interactive quotatives and their multimodal implications: The ‘new’ quotatives remind us of the vocal, verbal, and gestural dimensions of speech”. *English Today* 29(4). 45-56.