

# A cross-linguistic comparison of functions and usage of word marks

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Word marks like the hyphen or the apostrophe can share the same functions in different languages. To give an example: as a graphematic reading aid, the apostrophe can mark morpheme boundaries, as in the genitive case in English ‘dog’s’ or in the diminutive ‘baby’tje’ in Dutch. But besides that, both the theoretical functions and the actual usage of the word marks can differ strongly in different languages. Which different or common principles underlie the usage of word marks in German, English, Dutch and French? Both the hyphen and the apostrophe will be discussed. By defining comparative cross-lingual parameters, the functions and usage of these word marks will be systematically and empirically compared. This presentation does not address the evolution of writing systems but takes a synchronic cross-linguistic approach to shared properties and differing functions of word marks, empirically underpinned by a corpus study.

The hyphen is generally regarded as a reading aid. It marks morphological boundaries and thus facilitates segmentation, while preserving a word as a graphematic unit (Bredel 2008; Nerius 2007; Bernabei 2003; Gallmann 1985). Comparing the function of the hyphen in the four languages, hyphenation can be mandatory (e.g. *auto-ongeval*, nl. “car accident”) or optional (e.g. *Schnee-Engel*, de. “snow angel”) and can either serve as a graphical separation (e.g. *drip-proof*) or as a graphical link between units (e.g. *dis-moi*, fr. “tell me”). French offers a special case: a hyphenated graphematic word can consist of several syntactic words.

The apostrophe can be used, among other functions, to separate the stem from a suffix (e.g. *baby’tje*, nl. “baby”, diminutive), to replace a suffix (e.g. *Max’ Hund*, de. “Max’s dog”, genitive), or to graphically indicate a phonetic abbreviation (*l’arbre*, fr. “the tree”). Depending on the language, the apostrophe can be mandatory or optional in these cases and mark different types of boundaries. It can mark morphological or syntactical boundaries, or it can be placed where there is no boundary at all (*pin’s*, fr. “lapel pin”). The corpus study will determine which function and which type of boundary marking is most common in which language.

Based on grammars and linguistic descriptions of the word marks in the respective languages, cross-lingual parameters are developed which allow the systematic comparison of the word marks’ usage in the four languages. The empirical corpus analysis thus identifies the main functions of the hyphen and the apostrophe both cross-linguistically and language-dependent.

**References:** Bernabei, D. (2003). *Der Bindestrich. Vorschlag zur Systematisierung*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang. Bredel, U. (2008). *Die Interpunktion des Deutschen. Ein kompositionelles System zu Online-Steuerung des Lesens*. Tübingen: Niemeyer. Gallmann, P. (1985). *Graphische Elemente der geschriebenen Sprache. Grundlagen für eine Reform der Orthographie*. Tübingen: Niemeyer. Nerius, D. (2007). *Deutsche Orthographie*. Hildesheim: Olms.

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