“Finger quotes”

You’ve seen them everywhere, and you’ve probably seen them every day. They’re finger quotes, and they’re out to punctuate the spoken word.

Plato didn’t trust in the written word—he wanted things to be spoken. Maybe he just didn’t know how to punctuate things because, let’s face it, when it comes to assembling words to make sense to other people orators have it easier than writers.

When we speak we have voice intonation to help us make our words clear. We convey emotion, sarcasm, confidence, and so much more through our voices. In person, we have body language—including facial expressions—to assist the interpretation of our words. It’s truly incredible to think about all the ways human beings have of clarifying meaning. Personally I think this speaks volumes about how important (clear) communication is to our species.

When we write, sometimes we need to imply the more physical entities of language (mentioned above) and we use **bold**, _underline_, _italics_, and “quotation marks” to help readers to understand. Constraints of the written word force us to be more resourceful at times, and to choose our words more carefully than if we were speaking. In writing we sometimes quote others, for sources of information, or even dialogue. Quotation marks make it clear in writing that these words are not our own.

Quotation marks can also be used to imply some elements of communication that seem best left to speaking. For example, an email from a family member said: If he was “really” sorry, he’d move out again. The
quotation marks around the word “really” are most likely meant to emphasize the word (something that is best done in oral communication). And in the previous sentence I placed quotation marks around a word because I was referring to it as a word and not using it in its typical sense. I admit that this may or may not be a common practice, but it is how I was taught... so I’m going with it for now.

Finger quotes, as they are affectionately called, are physical representations of quotation marks made by two fingers on a hand bending and unbending to create the sense of the punctuation marks used in writing: “ and ”. What is their use in speech, though? Don’t we already have enough ways to emphasize our words in real-time, face-to-face with another person?

It’s a puzzle to me, even though I know that I have used finger quotes too. I’ve seen people make finger quotes while they’re on the phone (which is pretty funny, considering that the other person can’t see the finger quotes, but can get a similar feeling about the words by listening to the speaker).

Finger quotes are normally used just for emphasis, but I wonder at times what it would be like if people used them to recount conversations, as we so frequently do. I haven’t seen anyone do this, though. Maybe it would just be too strange because there would have to be a lot of finger quoting going on just to give the general idea of a dialogue...