

Dissecting vocatives: how a noun becomes an address

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This talk is an overview of formal studies of vocatives, aiming to draw a unifying picture of the underlying structure that allows for the interpretation of a noun as a direct address. In a nutshell, despite technical divergences and terminology, most analyses recognize that vocatives arise from the extension of the DP with a layer that maps the addressee semantics to syntax (Moro 2003; Hill 2007; Espinal 2013; Stavrou 2014; Wiltchko 2021 a.o.), for which I will use the VocP label. Following Hill (2014), I consider that the triggering factor for the projection of the VocP layer is a [2nd person] feature that trumps the inherent [3rd person] feature of D (also Bernstein 2023). The evidence for the checking of [2nd person] indicates cross- and intra-linguistic variation insofar as it involves either head-to-head or DP-to-Spec movement to VocP.

Although the presence of [2nd person] meets a general consensus, the proposal of a concurrent feature that maps the social relation between speaker and addressee is less discussed in the literature. I will make the case for such a feature, which I label [i-p] (for inter-personal) by using mostly Romanian data (see also Common Ground in Kumari&Wiltchko 2023). Briefly, Romanian vocatives convey nuanced readings of the social and personal relation between the discourse participants not only through intonation or the lexical choice of nouns, but also through morphosyntactic options, which involve dedicated vocative particles (1a,d), the manipulation of vocative case endings (1c,d) or the recycling of the definite article (1b,d).

- (1) a. Măi băiat, fii cuminte.
VOC-P boy be.IMP.2SG wise
'You boy, smarten up.'
- b. Băiatu', vino te rog.
boy.the come.IMP.2SG you pray.1SG
'Young man (waiter), please come.'
- c. Băiete, vino te rog.
boy.VOC come.IMP.2SG you pray.1SG
'Hey boy, come here please.'
- d. Măi băiatule, ce faci?
VOC-P boy.the.VOC what do.2SG
'You (troublesome) boy, what are you doing?'

Data as in (1) support the proposal of the [i-p] feature, which may be underspecified and remain syntactically unvalued, or it may be specified and trigger the merging of elements that fix its reading through morphosyntax. Reverse vocatives illustrate another way of exploiting [i-p], this time to signal the kin ranking of the discourse participants.

Basically, the internal structure of vocative phrases must account for two factors: (i) the direct address reading of the noun; and (ii) the factor that allows a vocative phrase to merge with the clause. The combination of [2nd person] and [i-p] are responsible for the direct address reading (including the social implications it may have), whereas the hierarchy inside VocP, with [2nd person] at the phase edge, makes the VocP visible to the [addressee] feature, which is mapped on the clausal spine (Speas&Tenny 2003) and probes for compatible nominals.