

ENGLISH VOCATIVES: A LOOK AT THEIR FUNCTION AND FORM

EIRLYS E. DAVIES

University Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah, Fez, Morocco

In descriptions of English, the vocative seems to have been somewhat neglected, as Levinson (1983: 71) points out. Moreover, the scattered observations that have been made about the form and distribution of vocatives in English reveal some disagreements. There has even been some lack of consistency as to the range of examples identified as vocatives. One finds, for instance, disagreement as to whether the NPs in some imperatives are vocatives or subjects,¹ although the distinction between the two has been clearly drawn (see Davies 1981, Quirk et al 1972, Schmerling 1975). And while the defining semantic feature of the vocative would seem to be the fact that it can refer only to addressee(s), we find Bale (1975: 5) suggesting that it can also include third person referents. However, the only example she cites to prove this point is (1), and the acceptability of this seems due to the fact that *you and the boys* here can be an appositive NP and not a vocative at all, as is suggested by the impossibility of (2), where the vocative interpretation is imposed.

- (1) You'll be able to help me, you and the boys?
- (2) *Help me, you and the boys.

Other claims about vocatives also seem based on consideration of too limited a range of examples. Downing (1969), for example, maintains that a vocative NP can never be accompanied by the definite article, but (3) seems quite acceptable, and similar examples are cited by others without special comment (see e.g. Stockwell et al 1973: 645).

¹ For instance, Bolinger (1977: 154) and Huddleston (1971: 58) assume that the final NPs in examples like *Don't tell him about that anybody* are to be identified as vocatives, while others such as Quirk et al (1972: 403) and myself would classify such NPs as vocatives.

(3) The boy without a tie, would you stay behind please.

Thorne (1966) claims that the vocatives *you* and *somebody* can occur only with imperatives, and Downing (1969) and Sadock (1970, 1974) also maintain that *somebody* is impossible with declaratives, yet examples like the following seem normal:

(4) What's the matter, you?

(5) I'm waiting for an explanation, somebody.

In view of such inconsistencies, it seems important to take a more comprehensive look at the range of vocatives in use. Some broader generalisations are made by Quirk et al (1972), who identify five categories of vocative, though their description is wisely couched in such terms as "usually" and "occasionally". Their categories are proper nouns with or without titles, *you* and indefinite pronouns, nominal clauses (e.g. *whoever said that*), what they call standard appellatives, and examples of the other kinds accompanied by modifiers. However, the apparent orderliness of this classification is perhaps helped by their use of the vague term "appellatives", which they describe as "usually nouns without pre- or postmodification" (1972: 373), and under which they subsume the diverse categories of family relationships (e.g. *mother*), endearments (*darling*), titles of respect (*sir*) and markers of profession or status (*Mr President*). A moment's consideration yields other examples of such nouns which do not fit tidily under any of these headings:

(6) Come on, idiot/monkey/man/friends/Londoners.

They also fail to mention the possibility of using adjectives as vocatives, as in (7), and the use of the construction *you* + *singular noun*, which is ungrammatical except when used as a vocative, as in (8).

(7) Watch out, stupid/gorgeous/silly!

(8) Shut up, you idiot/you grumbler/you swine.

Their simple enumeration of examples also obscures the fact, which becomes obvious on closer consideration, that within the various categories it is very difficult to make absolute generalisations. Thus we find that, as will be illustrated later, some names of professions and titles can be used but not others, and some adjectives but not others, while some nouns seem possible in the plural but not the singular and others seem to be very different in their effect according to whether they are singular or plural. Zwicky (1974) gives copious examples to illustrate what he calls the "extraordinary idiomaticity" of vocatives, and concludes that they are so idiosyncratic that "it seems that the list of vocative NPs in English is largely learned item by item" (1974: 788).

Starting from the formal properties of vocatives, then, it seems difficult to find valid generalisations which will shed light on the range of vocatives

actually possible. The alternative I would like to adopt here is to begin by looking at the functions of vocatives, and then to reassess some aspects of the range of vocatives in the light of these functions.

Zwicky distinguishes two functions of vocatives, which he labels calls and addresses, the former being used to attract the addressee's attention and the latter "to maintain or emphasise the contact between speaker and addressee" (1974: 787). However, this division does not seem entirely satisfactory to me. He notes that some vocatives (e.g. *cabby*) can be used as calls but not as addresses, and claims *you* to be one of these, though I feel that in my dialect at any rate *you* can be used by a speaker who already has the addressee's attention, as in (9):

(9) Now get back to the house, you, and see what's going on there.

On the other hand, he postulates the generalisation that all address forms are also usable as calls. I wonder, then, in which category he would place the vocative *somebody*, as in an example like (5); it seems hardly plausible to use this vocative as a call, to attract attention.

I would like to draw a slightly different distinction between two major functions. The first can be called the identifying function, associated with those vocatives used to indicate just who is being addressed. The identification will typically be achieved thanks to the semantic content of the vocative, though contextual factors, such as gesture, gaze, or circumstances (perhaps the fact that there is only one potential addressee within hearing) may also be important. Such vocatives may have the illocutionary force of a summons, like Zwicky's calls, or a piece of information, or, when occurring repeatedly within a single conversation, function simply as reminders, which add a personal tone to an utterance (for a detailed discussion of the kinds of illocutionary force typically associated with vocatives, see Davies 1983). The second function is that of what we could call expressive vocatives, those which indicate something of the speaker's view of or attitudes towards his addressee(s), which may include the degree of distance or solidarity between speaker and addressee, their relative status or roles, the speaker's view of the addressee's position or role in society, or something of his feelings (e.g. affection, disapproval, admiration) towards the addressee, or any combination of these; such vocatives may have the force of compliments, insults or even acts of obeisance. It is important to recognise that many vocatives fulfil both an identifying and an expressive function simultaneously.

Returning again to the range of formal possibilities for vocatives, it is interesting to consider the typical functioning of each type. In the first place, vocatives consisting of proper names, with or without titles, are, with their unique reference, of course ideal for fulfilling an identifying function, although the choice of first name, last name, or last name+title will also give the

vocative an expressive value, indicating something about the speaker's view of the addressee (see Ervin-Tripp 1972).² Where the speaker has no proper name at his disposal to use, however, he may resort to a definite NP containing sufficient modification to identify the addressee:

(10) The girl in red/the boy at the back/the one who said that/those with tickets, I'd like you to come down to the front.

Curiously, it seems that such definite NPs must, to be acceptable, almost always contain some pre- or postmodification which explicitly contrasts the designated addressee(s) with other hearers, thus making quite clear the identifying function of the vocative; for examples like (11) in contrast seem odd, though they might perhaps just be possible when used by a teacher outlining the role of boy or girl in a game being explained, where boy and girl are the only identifying features required.

(11) ?The boy/the girl, I'd like you to come down to the front.

You may also serve as an identifying vocative, though it may also be expressive of a somewhat disrespectful attitude to the addressee on the part of the speaker; and the need to distinguish the intended addressee from other hearers is reflected in the frequent use of *you* with postmodification, as in (12).³

(12) You over there/you with the glasses/you wearing the red coat, have you registered at the office yet?

We may return here to the indefinite vocative *someone/somebody*. While, as I noted earlier, this does not really seem to function as a call to attract the addressee's attention, it can be said to fulfil an identifying function, although this might seem an odd claim in view of its obviously indefinite specifications. In fact, the information given by such a vocative is not the identity of a specific individual who is being addressed, but rather an indication that the speaker is indifferent as to which of his hearers assumes the role of addressee — though he is certainly expecting one of them to do so. The distribution of such vocatives is accordingly limited to situations where the speaker might have some motivation for indicating that he wants one, but any one, of his hearers to act as addressee; and in fact the only such situation seems to be one where the speaker expects his utterance to provoke some kind of action response in its addressee, but wishes to indicate that only one of the

² The rules for choosing between these forms are of course language- and culture-specific, and the choice may not be equally expressive in all languages and cultures.

³ Some such NPs sound odd used non-vocatively as the subject of a following verb, though acceptable as objects; cf.:

- (a) ?You with the glasses/?you wearing the red coat have won the game.
 (b) I'd like to speak to you with the glasses/you wearing the red coat.

hearers need bother to make this response. Thus examples like (13) and (14) would not be used merely to give information; (13) would serve to suggest that someone should respond by answering the phone, and (14) that someone should provide the report.

(13) The phone's ringing, someone.

(14) I'd like a report on this, somebody.

The oddity of other examples, such as (15), arises simply from the fact that here one cannot imagine any reason why the speaker should be indicating that he does not care who assumes the role of addressee:

(15) ?You're wonderful, someone.

It is presumably the unacceptability of examples like this one, which is clearly explainable in pragmatic terms, which has led Downing (1969), Sadock (1970, 1974) and Thorne (1966) to postulate inaccurate and quite unnecessary syntactic constraints on the distribution of this vocative.

Another category of vocative which typically fulfils a primarily identifying function is that of bare plural nouns, as in the following examples:

(16) Come on, Yorkshiremen/Moroccans/workers!

(17) Shoppers! Have you heard about our new credit facilities?

(18) Foreign visitors! Try our genuine traditional English teas.

(19) Animal-lovers! Help us to protect donkeys in their old age!

The effect of vocatives like these is to identify the addressees as members of some group category, people with some common distinguishing feature which is partly the reason why they are being addressed in the first place. The reason why they are addressed as a group rather than individually may be because in the particular circumstances they are operating as a group (e.g. as a football or quiz team, or members of some association, as perhaps in 16)); in this case the speaker will choose a group label even if he knows the individual names of all the members of the group. In other cases, like (17), (18) and (19), it would clearly be impossible to adopt a more individualised form of address, since the message is addressed to a sector of the general public. Sometimes a vocative containing the definite article can similarly function as a group label, where the article is felt to be part of the name of the group:

(20) Play up, the Reds!

It is interesting to note that singular versions of vocatives like those in (16)–(19) are not likely to be used. This seems to be because when addressing a single individual it is considered appropriate to recognise him as a unique individual rather than merely a member of some larger category. Thus to use vocatives like those in (21) and (22) might seem insulting in that it suggests

that the individual is of significance only insofar as he belongs to a larger group.

(21) ?Come on, Moroccan/worker!

(22) ?Visitor/shopper! Step inside and see our display!

In fact, it would seem that singular common nouns without the kind of modification illustrated in (10) are rarely used as identificatory vocatives in contemporary English,⁴ except in one rather special written context — that of the opening of a letter, as in the following:

(23) Dear Householder/Voter/Parent/Colleague,
You are invited to attend...

In this particular context, many nouns can be used vocatively which would not seem acceptable as vocatives in any other context:

(24) ?Householder/Voter/Parent/Colleague, you are invited...

Their acceptability here seems dependent on the recognition of the letter as a circular, sent to numerous individuals who satisfy the description provided by the noun — so that it is still clear that, although the particular letter is addressed to a single individual, that individual is of necessity being appealed to impersonally, merely in his capacity as a member of the larger group. These letter vocatives can be considered a rather special case, and contrast with other vocatives in other respects also (note, for instance, that the vocative *sir* is of far more general application in the context *Dear Sir* than elsewhere — a person would write *Dear Sir* to people he would never address in speech as *sir*).

Vocatives like those in (23), then, seem closer in effect to those in (16)–(20) than to other singular vocatives. To see this, we can look at the kinds of unmodified singular noun which do seem generally acceptable as vocatives, in contrast to unacceptable examples like (21), (22) and (24).

(25) Come on, rascal/miser/idler/idiot/nuisance.

(26) Watch your step, nigger/wog/Communist/Nazi.

The point about examples like these is that in each case the vocative is fulfilling, not an identifying, but an expressive function, indicating something of the speaker's feelings towards the addressee. Indeed, in all the examples above, one understands the tone of the vocative to be somewhat derogatory, teasing or sarcastic, whether this can be traced to the semantic content of the noun itself, as in (25), or depends on possibly culture-specific connotations, as in (26). In other cases the noun used instead has pleasant connotations,

⁴ Though it is worth noting that they are used in this way in poetry; e.g. *Look! stranger, on this island now* (W. H. Auden, *On This Island*).

and the vocative could be taken as a compliment:

(27) How are things, angel/beauty/charmer?

Here again, while the vocative may flatter, it does so in a teasing, rather familiar way; one could not imagine any of these expressive vocatives being used by an inferior to address a superior. In other cases, the vocative is not particularly laudatory or derogatory, but the tone of bantering or gentle sarcasm is still present:

(28) What's new, dreamer/stranger/miracle-maker?

Colloquial terms seem particularly at home in such vocatives, as illustrated in (29), and we can find contrasting pairs like those in (30), where a noun carrying overtones of censure or disparagement seems acceptable as a vocative, while another, more neutral in connotations, does not.

(29) Mind your own business, scrounger/meddler/snob.

(30) Stop exaggerating, boozier/?drinker/guzzler/?eater.

The singular nouns that can function as vocatives seem in fact to be of the kind that Bolinger (1980: 77) calls "overtly biased nouns" or "epithets", which resemble adjectives in the way they are used, in that they indicate some property of their referent, and can be used with an intensifying adjective, such as *utter*, *complete* or *awful*.

(31) He's an utter rascal/Communist/charmer/dreamer/snob.

Moreover, when used as vocatives, their familiar, bantering tone is reminiscent of nicknames; indeed, many of the examples that spring most readily to mind are of nouns conventionally used as nicknames:

(32) What are you up to, bighead/chatterbox/moneybags?

It would seem appropriate to say that these singular common nouns when used vocatively, as in (25)–(30), are functioning like nicknames — although many of them do not seem to be generally available as nicknames if they are not functioning vocatively:

(33) ?Idiot/?Angel/?Scrounger/?Boozier's looking for you.

The fact of being used vocatively seems to bestow on such singular nouns something approaching the status of proper nouns; indeed, in a particular idiolect, an item originally used as a vocative may later evolve into a fully-fledged nickname behaving like a proper noun in other contexts as well.⁵

⁵ For instance, I have noted the item *Babe* used by a couple first as a vocative of endearment, then later as a true proper name to refer to each other in the third person.

The special interpretation of these singular noun vocatives is also revealed if we compare pairs of vocatives contrasting in number; for, as Zwicky (1974) notes, there are cases where singular and plural vocatives are not parallel in use.

(34) Come along, men/boys/girls/ladies/gentlemen/children.

(35) Come along, man/boy/girl/lady/?gentleman/child.

While the plural vocatives in (34) can, like those in (16)–(19), be used to the appropriate addressees when seen as a group, a speaker who used one of these plurals would not necessarily be able to use the corresponding singular when he turned to address a particular member of the group. The vocatives *boy*, *girl* and *child* suggest a certain assumption of authority on the part of the speaker, with perhaps a note of condescension, irritation or even hostility which need certainly not be present with the corresponding plurals; thus *boys* could be used by a friendly adult, whereas *boy* as vocative suggests a schoolteacher addressing a pupil, or some other adult asserting authority over a child. Similarly, *man* and *lady* have a slangy, jocular tone not necessarily associated with their plurals, and *gentleman* does not seem to be available at all, perhaps because if it were used in the singular it would like the others have a familiar tone quite out of keeping with the dignity associated with its meaning; instead, the polite singular equivalents of *ladies* and *gentlemen* seem to be *madam* and *sir*.

We could mention, too, some other cases where singular nouns used as vocatives need not have the interpretation one would expect from their literal meaning, but seem, as it were, to be used metaphorically. There is, for instance, the vocative *son* which is used, not necessarily to address the speaker's son, but as an expression of friendly affection from adult to boy; while *baby* is used as a term of endearment between adults (as are other metaphorical vocatives, such as *honey*, *treasure*, *pet*), and *brother* and *sister* are used as expressions of solidarity between members of religious or other communities. All these nouns, when used vocatively, acquire their own particular meanings, again reminiscent of nicknames.

At this point, we might look more carefully at vocatives composed of *you* with an appositive NP. Here too there is a contrast between singular and plural. The construction *you*+plural NP, which occurs outside vocatives too, is freely usable as a vocative identifying a group, with perhaps a somewhat familiar tone evidently deriving from the presence of *you*:

(36) Listen to me, you boys/you men/you Scotsmen/you newcomers.

However, the singular construction, available only as a vocative, must satisfy another condition; once again, the singular NP must function as an epithet, expressing something of an emotive evaluation of the addressee.

Thus we find examples like (8), while those like (37) are more difficult to interpret.

(37) Listen to me, ?you boy/?you man/?you Scotsman/?you newcomer.

In fact, this construction is sufficient to impose a pejorative or complimentary tone; so that *you boy*, if used at all, would probably be understood to express the speaker's disgust at the addressee's behaving childishly, while *you man* might serve to express admiration of the addressee's manly qualities, and *you Scotsman* could perhaps be used to accuse the addressee of meanness. Even proper names seem possible in this construction, provided they can be reinterpreted as epithets; thus *you Judas* might express the speaker's view of the addressee as a traitor, while *you Thomas* would accuse him of being a doubter.

Thus, singular nouns which do not seem acceptable when used alone as vocatives can be used vocatively when incorporated into a *you* construction, which serves to make quite clear that the NP is being used as an expressive vocative. For instance, this seems true of most NPs containing adjectives. Crystal and Davy (1969: 162) observe that, except in religious language, vocatives are "always unmodified, other than in certain idioms"; in view of the existence of examples like (10) and (12), this seems too sweeping a statement, but perhaps the intended point was that vocatives generally lack pre-modifying adjectives. It seems to be true that the only cases where NPs of the form Adj N seem plausible as vocatives are ones where the sequence is something of a fixed collocation, a more or less stereotyped idiomatic phrase where the adjective and noun seem almost to function as a single semantic unit.⁶ This can be seen by comparing the following:

(38) Come along with me, young man/old boy/little girl/bright spark/big head/wise guy.

(39) Come along with me, ?beautiful girl/?fat boy/?aged man/?clever child.

However, other adjective-noun combinations do seem possible in the *you* construction:

(40) Keep quiet, ?despicable liar/?cruel thing/?disgusting pig.

(41) Keep quiet, you despicable liar/you cruel thing/you disgusting pig.

Another category of singular vocative is that consisting of a title or name of a profession. Most of the titles that may also occur with a proper name are possible alone as vocatives:

(42) Come this way, Doctor/Nurse/Sister/Matron/Professor/Vicar/Father/Colonel/Major/General/Constable/Sergeant/Inspector.

⁶ Again, poetry predictably provides many exceptions, such as *Dearest and nearest brother* (Stephen Spender, *Elegy for Margaret VI*).

There are, however, interesting exceptions; for example, *doctor*, though commonly used as a vocative for a member of the medical profession, is not used alone to address the holder of a Ph.D. This may perhaps be because, to be usable as a vocative, a title has to sum up what seems to be the addressee's salient role in society; and while a medical practitioner is perhaps seen as first and foremost a doctor, even when off duty, in the case of a Ph.D. holder the title does not indicate his profession or role in society at all. As for names of professions as vocatives, here the possibilities are very limited. It is interesting that many of those possible seem to designate heads of institutions of various kinds:

(43) Good afternoon, Headmaster/Principal/Prime Minister/Vicar/ Ambassador/Vice Chancellor.

(44) Good afternoon, ?Lecturer/?M. P./?Verger/?Secretary/?Dentist.

A factor which may come into play here is the notion of uniqueness; those who use such vocatives are likely to apply each to only one particular individual of their acquaintance. Moreover, the use of such vocatives is appropriate only where the addressee is being viewed solely in a professional capacity. Thus *Headmaster* might be used by staff, pupils or parents, but not by outsiders, unless in a discussion of school business; nor would a congress of headmasters seem likely to address one another by this vocative!

The connotations of uniqueness seem more pronounced with some other professional vocatives, notably *Teacher*, *Cook* and *Nanny*. The use of *Teacher* as a vocative seems restricted to very particular contexts; typically it seems to be used by very young children to, not just any teacher at their school, but only the particular teacher in charge of their class — the one with whom they are especially familiar. If used at all by adults, this seems to be with the same connotations, the adults adopting the child's view. Similarly, *Cook* and *Nanny* are most likely to be used to address permanent household members, fulfilling unique roles; both carry connotations of familiarity and even affection.

As for other professional terms used vocatively, these seem to be very few and restricted to well-defined contexts. Vocatives such as *Waiter*, *Driver* or *Operator* are possible where the addressee is being approached wholly in terms of his professional duties; for instance, they could be used to accompany instructions relating to the addressees' respective jobs, but not in general small talk, even while on the job. Moreover, many speakers would seem reluctant to use such vocatives at all nowadays, the reason being similar to that offered for the oddity of examples like (21) and (22); it seems somewhat impolite and condescending to identify an individual purely in terms of his profession, unless this happens to be a particularly prestigious or respected one. However, the use of such vocatives seems more acceptable in

the more impersonal medium of written notes, examples like (45) being commonplace:

(45) Milkman — please leave one pint extra.

Use of the occupational vocative here seems less offensive simply because it is obviously through necessity; if the writer does not know the milkman's name, he has no alternative but to use the occupational label to ensure the note is not picked up by someone else.

It seems possible, then, to classify occupational vocatives into three groups: firstly, those referring to relatively unprestigious jobs, which, since they identify the addressee solely in terms of such an occupation, are acceptable only in certain contexts and may be judged impolite; secondly, those referring to prestigious positions, which are polite and respectful in effect, since they express the speaker's view of the addressee as fulfilling a unique and important role; and thirdly, those, like *Teacher*, used with connotations of special familiarity and uniqueness, even if they do not denote particularly prestigious occupations. With the last two of these categories we can also group vocatives using kinship terms, such as *Mother*, *Father*, *Grandmother*, *Uncle*, *Aunt*, etc. These too sum up the fundamental role of the addressee in the eyes of the speaker, and again there is the idea of uniqueness (with *Uncle/Aunt* + Proper Name being used by an individual where those vocatives do not have unique reference for him). The variant forms often used (*Mummy*, *Granny*, *Grandma*, *Auntie*) again recall the nickname-like quality we have noted in other singular noun vocatives. Another example is the vocative *God*, which similarly contrasts with the common noun in its connotations of familiarity and uniqueness.

It is interesting to note that a number of the titles and occupational labels usable as vocatives can in fact function like proper names in other contexts. Not all speakers would use all the following, but I have heard all of them used:

(46) Doctor/Nurse/Cook/Teacher/Vicar will be here soon.

When functioning as proper names, these terms seem to possess to a still greater degree the special connotations already noted as a feature of their use as vocatives — which accounts for the fact that their occurrence as proper names is even more restricted in terms of users and contexts of use. *Doctor*, for instance, might be used as a proper name by a patient to identify the particular doctor assigned to look after him, or perhaps by a nurse when talking to such a patient; but is unlikely to be used of just any doctor who happens to be around. Similarly, *Vicar* seems likely to be used as a proper name only by a loyal parishioner referring to a familiar figure. These connotations are reflected in the oddity of examples like (48) and (50), in contrast to (47)

and (49):

- (47) Doctor says I should take more exercise.
 (48) ?Doctor came, but he was new, and didn't know my history.
 (49) Vicar gave one of his wonderful sermons.
 (50) ?I've never met Vicar before.

Other terms become still more specialised. *Sir*, for example, can as a vocative be used to express respect for many kinds of superior; but as a proper name it would be used only by a schoolchild, to refer to his particular class teacher:

- (51) Sir forgot to give us any homework today.

Madam, on the other hand, seems as a proper name to be used only by shop assistants, hairdressers, waiters, and other "servants of the public". The same connotations appear again here; it suggests the speaker's particular concern for the woman referred to, as if she is somehow special or unique, and also contributes to a more intimate tone. In fact, to achieve these effects, a speaker often chooses to use *Madam* as a proper name even when he is actually addressing the woman referred to, so that a vocative might have been more natural:

- (52) Would Madam care for some more coffee?

Finally, it is interesting that while some speakers find examples like (53) odd, and would not use these titles as proper names, they may however judge examples like (54) to be perfectly natural.

- (53) ?Professor/?Superintendent/?Sergeant is in the office.
 (54) Prof/Super/Sarge is looking for you.

The abbreviated forms, with their suggestions of greater familiarity and possibly affection, seem to take on the status of nicknames and thus can acceptably function like proper names.

It is noticeable that all the titles and occupational terms which are usable like proper names can also function as vocatives, although not all those which can be used as vocatives seem possible as proper names. We might then consider the status of vocative NPs to be something intermediate between common and proper noun. As we have seen, common nouns, when functioning vocatively, may acquire certain associations of familiarity and uniqueness which bring them closer to proper names, and this process may be extended until the common noun actually functions as a nickname or proper name when not a vocative.

We might also look at the possibilities for using adjectives vocatively. Here, as Zwicky (1974: 791) points out, there are curious contrasts; some

adjectives sound perfectly natural as vocatives, others do not:

- (55) Hello, stupid/?foolish/gorgeous/beautiful/?attractive!

Both derogatory and complimentary adjectives can be used, and those which are not obviously either of these tend, like the epithet nouns we looked at earlier (example (28)), to have a teasing, bantering, possibly sarcastic tone:

- (56) Come on, now, mysterious/mischievous/impatient/curious!

Indeed, a cheeky tone is often associated with even apparently complimentary adjectives, such as *beautiful*.

As (55) suggests, there is certainly some idiosyncrasy here, with some adjectives more acceptable as vocatives than others of similar meaning. However, the pattern is not entirely arbitrary; some general tendencies can be identified. There are interesting contrasts like the following:

- (57) What's the matter,

}	grumpy?/irritable
	crafty?/cunning
	lanky?/tall
	skinny?/thin
	mingy?/mean
speedy?/fast	

?

The acceptable examples here again sound like nicknames, and one might at first suppose that the greater acceptability of the first members of these pairs should be traced to their more colloquial, slangy tone. However, there is more to it than this; it is striking that the acceptable examples all end in /i/, and we find other contrasting pairs, as in (58), where the more acceptable adjective does not seem noticeably more colloquial:

- (58) What's up,

}	tiny/?small/?little
	silly/?foolish
	lazy/?idle
	trendy/?fashionable

Etymology seems less important than phonology here, for while in some cases the *-y* is identifiable as an adjectival suffix, in others (e.g. *silly*, *lazy*) this is not the case. Possibly, however, the acceptability of all these adjectives as vocatives is influenced by their phonological similarity to forms like *sweetie*, *shorty*, which are formed from an adjective and the suffix which Onions (1966: 1017) describes as forming "pet names and familiar diminutives". Certainly many adjectives which sound quite impossible as vocatives become perfectly

acceptable with the addition of this suffix:

- (59) How are things, $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{fatty/?fat} \\ \text{blondie/?blonde} \\ \text{cutie/?cute} \\ \text{thickie/?thick} \\ \text{smartie/?smart} \end{array} \right\} ?$

When used vocatively, forms like these may be felt to be nouns, functioning as nicknames; however, like some of the nouns we looked at earlier, they do not have the status of true proper names, for speakers who use them freely as vocatives may not be able to use them non-vocatively.⁷

The adjectives which can be used as vocatives, then, function very much like the epithet nouns we have already considered. When used as a vocative, an adjective has the quality of a nickname, and it is interesting that the phonological form of an adjective may play a part in determining whether or not it lends itself to this kind of interpretation. The effect of such vocatives is invariably very familiar, whether they are affectionate, gently teasing, or downright insulting.

This brief survey has illustrated something of the rich variety of forms available for vocatives in English. Zwicky (1974), in his discussion of them, emphasises the apparent idiosyncrasies of English vocatives; but while not denying an idiosyncratic element, I hope I have shown that it is possible to make some generalisations about the semantic effect of vocatives which can go some way to explaining the range of items which can acceptably function as such. On the one hand, we have vocatives which fulfil an identifying function; typical examples of these include proper names, definite NPs containing some modification sufficient to specify the identity of the intended addressee, and plural nouns used when the addressees can appropriately be identified as a group. Singular occupational nouns can also sometimes be used for the same purpose, with varying effects depending on the context of use. On the other hand, we have the primarily expressive vocatives, typical examples being singular nouns without modification, and adjectives, together with the *you*+singular noun construction, all used to describe some aspect of the addressee (such as occupation, role in society, relation to speaker, physical or personality characteristics). The striking fact we have noted about these expressive vocatives is that the items occurring in them tend to have different associations and different restrictions on their use from when they are used non-vocatively. In particular, we saw over and over again that the

⁷ The same is true of many other nicknames based on adjectives, such as compounds like *longlegs*, *cleverlogs*, *greedyguts*, *lazybones*, *slowcoach*; many speakers can use these as vocatives or as common nouns, but not as proper names.

vocative use introduced connotations of familiarity and/or uniqueness which gave such vocatives a strong similarity to nicknames (and indeed, we have seen that some of them could, under certain conditions, also function like proper names when not used vocatively).

More data remain to be accounted for, and there are many more questions to be asked. However, recognising these two different functions of vocatives has, I hope, helped to account for some restrictions on the distribution and interpretation of vocatives. Clearly, it is not merely accidental that so many items receive a different interpretation when used as vocatives from that they would normally receive elsewhere, that some convey so much more than their semantic content elsewhere might seem to predict, and that some are so highly restricted as to what kind of speaker might use them, to whom, and in what circumstances. And the otherwise puzzling contrast between singular and plural in some cases, and the fact that only the plural form seems possible in others, can be related to differences between the functions typically fulfilled by singular and plural noun vocatives.

REFERENCES

- Bale, S. 1975. *Some observations on the use of the vocative in British English*. Unpublished M. A. thesis, University of London.
- Bolinger, D. L. 1977. *Meaning and form*. London: Longman.
- Bolinger, D. L. 1980. *Language — the loaded weapon*. London: Longman.
- Crystal, D. and D. Davy. 1969. *Investigating English style*. London: Longman.
- Davies, E. E. 1981. *Aspects of the syntax of the imperative in contemporary British English*. Unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of Wales.
- Davies, E. E. 1983. "How to do things with vocatives". *Journal of the Faculty of Arts, University Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah* 7. 119–127.
- Downing, B. T. 1969. "Vocatives and third-person imperatives in English". *Papers in Linguistics* 1. 570–591.
- Ervin-Tripp, S. M. 1972. "Sociolinguistic rules of address". In Pride, J. B. and J. Holmes (eds). 1972. 225–240.
- Huddleston, R. D. 1971. *The sentence in written English: a syntactic study based on the analysis of scientific texts*. London and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Levinson, S. C. 1983. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Onions, C. T. (ed.). 1966. *The Oxford dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Pride, J. B. and J. Holmes (eds). 1972. *Sociolinguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. and J. Svartvik. 1972. *A grammar of contemporary English*. London: Longman.
- Sadock, J. M. 1970. "Whimperatives". In Sadock, J. M. and A. L. Vanek. (eds). 1970. 223–238.
- Sadock, J. M. 1974. *Toward a linguistic theory of speech acts*. New York: Academic Press.

- Sadock, J. M. and A. L. Vanek. (eds). 1970. *Studies presented to R. B. Lees by his students*.
Edmonton: Linguistic Research Inc.
- Schmerling, S. M. 1975. "Imperative subject deletion and some related matters". *Linguistic Inquiry* 6. 501-511.
- Stockwell, R. P., Schachter, P. and B. H. Partee. 1973. *The major syntactic structures of English*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Thorne, J. P. 1966. "English imperative sentences". *Journal of Linguistics* 2. 69-78.
- Zwicky, A. M. 1974. "Hey, what's your name!" *Papers from the tenth regional meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*. 787-801.