



ISSN: 3005-5091

**AL-NOOR JOURNAL**  
**FOR HUMANITIES**

Available online at : <http://www.jnfh.alnoor.edu.iq>

**JNFH**  
Al-Noor Journal  
for Humanities

## Revisiting Vocatives in English

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### Abstract

This study aims at revisiting the forms and functions of vocatives in English. Vocatives can be classified into different forms that perform two main functions in English viz, calling the addressee and maintaining the relationship, the former labeled as the identification function while the latter as the expressive function. The various forms of vocatives vary in fulfilling both functions. In addition, the expressive function of vocatives is governed by some factors such as the addresser, the addressee and the context or the situation in which the vocatives can be used.

**Keywords:** identification function, expressive function, context or situation.

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## مراجعة لصيغ المنادى في اللغة الانكليزية

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**الخلاصة:** تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى مراجعة أشكال صيغ المنادى في اللغة الإنكليزية. صيغ المنادى ووظائفها. ويمكن أن تقسم على أشكال عديدة، وهذه الصيغ المختلفة تؤدي وظيفتين أساسيتين، وهما، استدعاء المنادى، وإدامة العلاقة بينهما. تسمى الوظيفة الأولى بالتعريفية، بينما تسمى الثانية بالتعبيرية. أما الأشكال المختلفة للمخاطب فتختلف في تحقيقها للوظيفتين الأساسيتين. فضلاً عن ذلك الوظيفة التعبيرية للمنادى، تحكمها بعض الخصائص، منها ، من الشخص المخاطب، والشخص المخاطب، فضلاً عن السياق أو الموقف الذي حصل فيه استخدام صيغ المنادى.

**الكلمات الافتتاحية:** الوظيفة التعريفية؛ الوظيفة التعبيرية؛ السياق أو الموقف.

### 1. Introduction

Vocatives have been defined as the way of getting the addressees attention, in order to maintain or establish a relationship between this addressee and some proposition (Lambrecht, 1996: 267). For Newmark (1988:41), vocatives can be viewed as “the case used for addressing your reader in some inflected language”. In addition, vocatives are optional elements, usually a noun phrase denoting one or more individuals to whom it is addressed (Quirk, et al, 1985:773). Until very recently, vocatives were neglected in linguistic research because they were considered part of the pragmatic component of grammar.

The typical vocative is not adverbial but nominal like proper nouns. English does not make use of the vocative case inflectionally but expresses the notion by using an optional noun phrase with a distinctive intonation. Also, there are forms used in

direct address. They are parts of neither of the complete subject nor of the complete predicate.

Zwicky (1974:787) distinguishes two functions of vocatives which he labels *calls* and *addresses*, the former is used to attract the addressee's attention and the latter to maintain the relationship between the addresser and the addressee.

## **2. Statement of the Problem**

Vocatives, as Levinson (1983:71) points out, seem to have been somewhat neglected in the description of English. Moreover, the dispersed observation that have been made about the form and distribution of vocatives reveal some disagreements. A range of examples identified as vocatives reveal certain lack of consistency. For instance, disagreement can be found as to whether the NPs in some imperatives are vocatives or subjects and the defining semantic feature of vocatives can only refer to the addressee(s). Bale (1975:5) suggests that vocatives can also include third person referent. Others claims about vocatives seem to be on consideration of too limited range of examples. Downing (1969) suggests that the NPs of a vocative can't be accompanied by the definite article, in the same vein Thorne (1966) claims that some vocatives like *you* and *somebody* can occur only with imperatives. In addition, Downing (1969) and Sadock (1970,1974) maintain that the vocative *somebody* is impossible with declaratives. According to such inconsistencies, it is important to take a more comprehensive look at the range of vocatives in use.

## **3. Aim of the Study**

This research aims at providing a brief analysis of the forms and functions of vocatives in English.

## **4. Scope of the Study**

In fact, an in-depth analysis that covers all aspects of vocatives needs several books. This research will be limited in scope, and mainly seeks to answer the following three questions:

- 1) What are the forms of vocatives?
- 2) What is the function of each form of vocatives?
- 3) Can these forms be used interchangeably?

## **5. Forms of Vocatives**

According to Quirk *et. al.* (1985:773) and Biber *et. al.* (1999:1108-9), vocatives can be classified into eight forms, they are as follows:

- 1) Names: First names, full names, with or without title, or a nick name or pet name.
- 2) Standard appellatives, usually without modifications, include three forms, namely:
  - a. Terms of family relationships (sometimes with initial capitals). *Father, Mother* etc. or more familiar forms like *mom* (ma), *dad* (da), *granny*, etc.
  - b. Titles of respect (sometimes with initial capitals). Such as, *Madam, Sir, My Lord, Your Majesty*.
  - c. Markers of status (sometimes with initial capitals). For example, *Mr. President, Prime Minister, Father* (for Priest), *Professor*, and *Doctor*.
- 3) Terms of occupations: Like *waiter, driver, barmaid*, and *nurse*.
- 4) Epithets (nouns or adjective phrases) expressing an evaluation. This can be viewed into two terms: favorable terms (sometimes preceded by My) like *darling*, or *my dear* and unfavorable terms (sometimes preceded by you) as in *bastard, coward, liar*.
- 5) General Nouns that are used in more specialized senses as in *brother, buddy, girl, guys*.

- 6) The personal pronoun *you* and the indefinite pronouns.
- 7) Nominal clauses: for instance, *whoever said that, come out here.*
- 8) Items in the following sentences may be explained by the addition of modifiers or appositive of various kinds: as in *My dear Mr. Johnson, old man, young man, old boy, etc.*

For Gamley and Pätzold (1992:289), vocative forms can be divided into five distinct classes: unbound pronouns, names, kinships terms, titles and descriptors. They (ibid.:291) add that the general principles which lie behind the use of forms of address are that “vocatives indicate the nature of relationships between people of primary importance whether the terms are used reciprocally or non- reciprocally”. The former indicates some kind of equality and are common within a status group like, *children, students, and fellow workers*. The latter, on the other hand, indicates an imbalance in power or prestige; an example of this is teacher-student relationship.

## 6. Functions of Vocatives

According to Zwicky (1974: 787), there are two important functions of vocatives, the first function is calling the addressee or attract the addressee’s attention and the second one is to maintain the social distance between the two parties. However, this classification seems unsatisfactory because some vocatives (e.g. *cabby*) can be used to call the attention and not as a form of address, and there is a claim that the pronoun *you* can be used by a speaker who already has the addressee’s attention as in the example below.

*Now get back to the house, you, and see what’s going there.*

On the other hand, he assumes that all the forms of address can be used as calls.

A slightly different distinction between the two major functions will be drawn. The first function will be called the identifying function that is associated with those vocatives to indicate who is being addressed. This identification will be achieved thanks to the semantic content of the vocative by contextual factors, like gaze, gesture, or circumstances (there may be only one potential addressee within hearing) is also important. Such vocatives may have the illocutionary force of summons, as Zwicky's termed, or a piece of information, or, when occurring repeatedly within a single conversation, function simply as remainder to add personal tone to the utterance.

As for the expressive function, it is associated with vocatives which can show the speaker's attitude towards his addressee. A speaker can express his intimacy, relative distance, closeness, or something of his feeling (affection, admiration, approval) by using such vocatives with the addressee. Such vocatives have the force of compliment, insult or even acts of obeisance. It is important to recognize that many of these vocatives fulfil both identifying and expressive function simultaneously (ibid).

According to (Davies: 1986) vocatives have a range of formal possibilities, so it is interesting to consider the typical functioning for each type. In the first place, vocatives that consist of proper names, or proper names with titles can fulfill the identifying function, although the use of the first name, last name, last name with title will give an expressive value that shows the speaker's relation towards his addressee:

*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.*

However, such definite NPs, to be acceptable, must include some pre- or post-modification which exactly identify the

designated addressee(s) from other hearers. By this way, the identifying function will be achieved. The example below seems to be odd because it can be possible when it is used by a teacher clarifying the role of boy or girl in a game being explained, where *boy* and *girl* are the only identifying features required.

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

In fact, the use of singular common nouns without the kind of modification illustrated in the previous examples is rarely used as identificatory vocatives in contemporary English except in one rather special written context - that of the opening of a letter as in the example below:

*Dear Householder/ 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:

? *Householder/ Parent/ Colleague, you are invited ...*

The acceptability of such vocatives depends on the recognition of the letter as a circular, sent to different individuals who fit the description provided by the noun - so that it is still clear that although the particular 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 (ibid).

As for *you*, this form of vocatives may also serve the identifying function. In addition, it also expresses a somewhat disrespectful attitude by the speaker towards his addressee. Distinguishing the intended addressee from a certain group of hearers must be reflected through the use of the vocative *you* with post modification, as shown in the example below:

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

In addition, there are other examples of such nouns which do not fit the above headings such as:

*Come on, idiot/monkey/ man/ friends/Londoners.*

Also, the use of certain adjectives as vocatives, as the first example below, and the use of the construction (you + singular noun) which is grammatically incorrect except when they are used as a vocative as in the second example below:

*Watch out, stupid / gorgeous/silly!*

*Shut up, you idiot/ you grumbler/ you swan. (ibid)*

As for the indefinite vocative *somebody/someone*, it does not fit to function as a calling device to attract the addressee's attention. It can be said that it fulfills the identifying function to some extent because when this vocative is used, the identity of a specific individual can't be determined, in other words, by using such vocative we can't identify who is being addressed. The speaker in this case wants one of his hearers to perform the action. In fact, the only situation that fits this function is that when the speaker expects his utterance to provoke some kind of action response in his addressee, but wish to indicate that the only one of his hearers need bother to make his response. In the following examples the vocative *someone/somebody* are not used to give information. They suggest that someone should respond to the phone, and someone should provide the report.

*The phone is ringing, someone.*

*I'd like a report on this, somebody.*

In the same vein, the following example seems to be odd because the addressee should be identified clearly.

*? You are wonderful, someone*

(Zwicky: 1987)



Another type of vocative which mainly fulfils the identifying function is that of bare plural nouns, as in the following examples:

*Come on, workers!*

*Foreign visitors! Try our genuine traditional teas.*

By using such type of vocatives, the speaker wants to identify the addressees as members of a specific group, people with common distinguishing trait which is partly the reason for addressing them in the first place. The reason for addressing them as a group rather than individually is that under certain circumstances they work as a group of football or quiz team, or a member of a certain association. In such cases, it would be impossible to use a more individualized form of address, since the speaker wants to convey a message to a sector of the general public. Sometimes a vocative containing the definite article can be adopted as a group label, where the article would be felt as part of the group name.

*Play up, the Reds!*

It is interesting to note that singular versions of vocatives like "*Come on, workers*" are not to be used because when addressing a single individual it is considered appropriate to recognize him as a unique individual rather than merely a member of some larger category. Thus, to use vocatives, people in the following way would be insulting because it suggests that the individual is of significance only in so far as he belongs to a larger group.

? *Come on, worker!*

Unmodified singular nouns seem to be acceptable as vocatives, in examples such as:

*Come on. Miser/idiot/ nuisance.*

*Watch your step, Communist/Nazi/ nigger*

It is important to note that in the above examples, the vocative fulfils the expressive function not the identifying function, showing something of the speaker's feeling towards his addressee. In addition, it is the semantic content of the noun or culture specific connotation that plays a vital role in conveying the speaker's view towards his addressee (ibid).

Another category of singular vocatives is the one 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:

*Come this way, Doctor/ Nurse/Sister/Professor/Vicar/Father/Colonel*

There are, however, interesting exceptions. For example, the vocative *doctor* while it is used alone as vocative to address a member of medical profession, is not used alone to address the P.H.D. holder. This is because to use a title as vocative, it should sum up the salient role in society: as a medical practitioner is perhaps seen first and foremost a doctor, even when off duty, in the case of Ph.D. holder the title doesn't indicate his profession or his role in the society at all.

When using names of profession as vocatives, the possibility is very limited. It is interesting that many of those seem to designate heads of institutions of different types:

*Good afternoon, Headmaster/Prime Minister/Vicar/Vice Chancellor.*

*Good afternoon?, Lecturer/? Secretary/? Dentist*

The notion of uniqueness plays an important role here; those who use such vocatives are likely to apply each to only one particular individual of their acquaintance. In addition, these vocatives can be appropriately used when the addressee is solely seen in a professional capacity. Thus, a vocative such as *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 head-masters seem likely to address one another by this vocative!

Some other professional vocatives have the connotation of uniqueness such as *teacher*, *cook* and *nanny*. *Teacher* is used vocatively in very particular contexts such as by young children to their teacher who is in charge of their class and not any teacher in their school. The one with whom they are familiar. If used at all by adults, this seems to be with the same connotations, the adult adopting the child's view. In the same vein, *cook* and *nanny* are used to address permanent household members, carrying connotations of familiarity and even affection (Davies:1987).

As for other professional terms used vocatively, they will 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 addressee's respective jobs, but not in general small talks, 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 "*Come on, Moroccan/worker!*"; 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 the following one being in a common place:

*Milkman-please leave one pint extra.*

The use of the occupational vocative here seems less offensive simply because it is obviously through necessity; if the waiter doesn't know the milkman's name, he has no alternative

but to use the occupational term to ensure the note is not picked up by someone else.

Therefore, it seems possible to divide occupational vocatives into three categories: first, those referring to relatively unprestigious jobs, which, because they only identify the addressee in terms of such an occupation, are acceptable in some contexts and might be considered impolite; second, those referring to prestigious positions, which are in fact polite and respectful because they convey the speaker's view of the addressee as playing a special and significant 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 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) (ibid).

The variant forms often used *mummy, granny, grandma, auntie* again recall the nickname like quality 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 used as vocatives can in fact function like proper names in other contexts. Not all speakers would use all the following, but all of them are heard and used:

*Doctor/ Nurse/ Cook/ Teacher/ Vicar will be here soon.*

When used as proper names, these terms appear to have even more of the special connotations noted as a feature of their

use as vocatives, which explains why their occurrence as proper names is even more limited in terms of users and contexts of use. Doctor, for example, may be used as a proper name by a patient to identify the specific doctor assigned to care for him, or by a nurse when speaking to such a patient; however, it is unlikely to be used of just any doctor who happens to be nearby.

Similarly, Vicar appears to be used as a proper name only by a devoted parishioner referring to a well-known figure. These connotations are reflected in the oddity of examples like (a) and (b), in contrast to (c):

(a)? *Doctor came, but he was new, and didn't know my history.*

(b)? *I never met Vicar before*

(c) *Doctor says I should take more exercise.*

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

*Sir forget to give us any homework today.* (ibid)

On the other hand, *Madam* appears to be a proper name reserved for waiters, hairdressers, shop workers, and such "servants of the public."

The same connotations recur here, suggesting the speaker has a special affection for the woman being discussed, as if she were special or unique. This also adds to the tone's intimacy.

Although a vocative could have been more natural, a speaker frequently chooses to employ *Madam* as a proper name even when he is actually addressing the woman referred to in order to create these effects:

*Would Madam care for some coffee?*

Finally, it is interesting that while some speakers find examples like (a) below odd, and would not use these titles as

proper names, they may however judge examples like (b) to be perfectly natural.

a) *?professor/? Sargent is in the office.*

b) *Prof/ Serge is looking for you.*

With their suggestions of greater familiarity and possibly affection, the abbreviated forms appear to take on the position of nicknames and can thus function as proper names.

It is noticeable that all titles and occupational terms that can be used as proper names can also be used as vocatives, though not all of those that can be used as vocatives appear to be possible as proper names. The status of vocative NPs may be considered intermediate between common and proper noun.

As we have seen, when used vocatively, common nouns may acquire associations of familiarity and uniqueness that bring them closer to proper names, and this process may be repeated until the common noun actually functions as a nickname or proper name when not used vocatively (ibid).

As for using adjectives vocatively, Zwicky (1974: 791) states that there are curious contrasts; some adjectives sound perfectly natural as vocatives, others do not:

*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 noun as the example which have a teasing, bantering, and possibly sarcastic tone:

*Come on, now, mysterious/ mischievous/ impatient/curious!*

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

As example (a) suggests, there are some adjectives which are 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:

*What's the matter, speedy?/fast*

*skinny?/thin*

*lanky//tall*

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 (ibid).

## **7. Conclusion**

The current study presents a brief analysis of the different forms of vocatives and the functions fulfilled by each form. The speaker aims, by using vocatives, to achieve two important functions. The first function is the identification function or calling the addressee's attention and the second function is the expressive or emotional function which shows the relationship between the addresser and the addressee(s). The various forms of vocatives vary in fulfilling the two functions. On one hand, we have vocatives which fulfil an identifying function such as proper names, definite NPs containing some modification sufficient to identify the intended addressee, plural nouns to identify addressees as a group. Depending on the context of use, singular occupational nouns can be used for the same purpose with varying effect. On the other hand, certain forms of vocatives fulfil the expressive or emotional function such as singular nouns without modification, and adjectives together with the *you* + singular noun construction, which is used to describe certain feature of the addressee. In addition, expressive vocatives have items occurring in them with different associations and restrictions on their use non-vocatively. Also, the expressive

function seems to be associated with different factors such as who is using the vocatives, to whom the form is addressed, and in what circumstances.

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