

Vocatives with No Other Utterances in English Conversation: Their Semantic and Functional Profile

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1. Introduction

Much sociolinguistic and pragmatic work has been done on terms of address (or ‘forms of address’) since Brown and Gilman (1960). Terms of address are “device[s] used to refer to the addressee(s) of an utterance” (Leech 1999: 107). As English lacks a distinction of address pronouns between T/V, such as *tous/vous* in French, terms of address in English are mostly concentrated in nouns and noun phrases. Dickey (1997: 255) argues that “nominal forms are the only type of address available for study in languages like English,” but in reality, there are some adjectives: e.g. *dear*, *gorgeous*, and *silly* (cf. Leech 1999: 107, Formentelli 2014: 55).

These nouns and noun phrases are used vocatively. Zwicky (1974), Levinson (1983), and Betsch and Berger (2009), among other linguists, define the vocative; Leech (1999: 107) succinctly defines a vocative as “a particular kind of address term.” Zwicky (1974: 787) lists two functions of vocatives, namely calls and addresses. The difference is that “calls are designed to catch the addressee’s attentions, addresses to maintain or emphasize the contact between speaker and addressee (787).” (1) is an example of “call” while (2) is an example of “address”:

(1) Chandler! He’s here!

(2) Thanks, Joey, that’s a good idea.

(both from *Friends*)

Biber et al. (1999: 1112) list three different pragmatic functions of vocatives (cf. Leech 1999):

(3a) getting someone’s attention

(3b) identifying someone as an addressee

(3c) maintaining and reinforcing social relationships

It seems reasonable to say that Zwicky’s “call” function is further divided into (3a) and (3b). Leech (1999: 109) indicates that “these are not the only communicative functions of vocatives” and that “a vocative may have a more directly emotive function”, such as when a parent addresses a child *Ben!* in a loud voice to complain so he would turn down the music.

(3c) is also not enough to cover all the “address” functions. I have previously (2012: 66) pointed out that addresses are to present a status of the social relationship between speaker and addressee, such as their social distance, a new relationship which the speaker wishes to exhibit to the addressee, and a possibly

forgotten relationship of which the speaker would like to remind the addressee.

These address functions of vocatives have been examined extensively. However, there is yet another type of vocative that has not been analyzed much if not at all (cf. Bonsignori et al. 2011).

This paper aims to investigate this specific type of vocative in English. All examples are taken from American TV dramas; as Kitayama (2013) and Formentelli (2014), among others, argue, verbal interactions being portrayed in telecinematic dialogue imitate the actual interpersonal conversations, though mimesis of reality embraces “the illusion of spontaneity and a certain degree of artificiality” (Formentelli 2014: 54; cf. Rossi 2011: 45).

2. The data

For the purpose of this research, eight recent American TV dramas are analyzed. In the dramas, a wide range of verbal interactions in formal and informal contexts with a sociolinguistic variety of speakers are presented. Note not all the data in the entire dramas are collected. The dramas are listed as below:

Table 1. American TV dramas used for the research

Abbreviation	Title	Years of Production	Creator(s)
F	Friends	1994-2004	David Crane, Marta Kauffman
C	The Closer	2005-2012	James Duff
GW	The Good Wife	2009-2016	Michelle King, Robert King
S	Suits	2011-2019	Aaron Korsh
H	Homeland	2011-2020	Alex Gansa, Howard Gordon
MS	Madam Secretary	2014-2019	Barbara Hall
DS	Designated Survivor	2016-2019	David Guggenheim
R	The Resident	2018-	Amy Holden Jones, Hayley Schore, Roshan Sethi

3. The vocatives that are used without any other utterances

3.1 Previous research

Another type of vocative that has not been analyzed much is the one used alone without greetings or other leave-taking utterances that usually co-occur. Bonsignori et al. (2011: 25) indicate that “terms of direct address or vocatives (e.g. *Sir*, *darling*), often co-occurring with greetings or leave-takings proper, but which can also appear alone and can modify the degree of politeness of the speech act.” Unfortunately, there is no detailed analysis on this type of vocative which appears alone. Their only remark is that “the linguistic realization of the closing is entrusted to a vocative, accompanied by the act of bowing” (Bonsignori et al. 2011: 31).

Since there is hardly any research on the vocative in this usage, I will present the data one by one and analyze them closely.

3.2 With a vocative of given names

3.2.1 Opening a conversation

People use a vocative alone without greetings to start a conversation. Since these examples have been scarcely analyzed, I will present as many examples as possible. Let us take a look at the first example:

(4) Peter: [*finishing the phone call*] Sorry about that. It's amazing how my life has gone from no calls to a call sheet of 85 a day.

Diane: Yes, it's quite a change - from prison back to the State's Attorney's office... How you doing?

Peter: I love it. I really love it. [*inviting Cary into his room*] You don't mind if Cary sits in on this, do you?

Diane: No, not at all...Hi, Cary.

Cary: Diane.

(GW)

In this scene, Peter, the State of Illinois's district attorney, is having a conference with Diane, a law firm's senior partner. Peter invites young Cary, who works at the state's attorney's office but used to work at Diane's firm before that, so he knows her firm well. Diane greets Cary nicely, and Cary, in return, says "Diane" only, without any greetings.

(5) Alicia: It wasn't a lie.

Eli: Okay. Okay. But was the strategy yours?

Alicia: Ye...No. It wasn't.

Eli: Whose was it?

Ruth: [*coming into Eli's office*] Eli, you're not... [*turns to Alicia*] Oh, Mrs. Florrick, hello.

Alicia: Ruth.

Ruth: Thank you for your time today.

(GW)

Alicia, Peter's wife and lawyer, is talking with Eli in his office. Eli is Peter's longtime campaign strategist and Alicia recognizes Eli's loyalty to Peter. Ruth is a new Democratic elections consultant, and Alicia doesn't trust Ruth, not to mention Eli.

(6) Eli: Don't tell me you made a deal.

Ruth: [*approaching to Eli and Alicia*] Alicia, hello.

Alicia: Ruth.

Eli: You made a deal.

(GW)

They are at the court for the grand jury hearing, and Eli wants to know what the hearing involving Peter is especially about. Ruth was called to testify and now she is back, and Eli and Alicia are anxious to know what Ruth said in the hearing.

- (7) Susan: [*coming home and notices Ross*] Oh, hello, Ross.
Ross: Susan.
Susan: [*to Carol*] So...so did you hear?
Ross: Yes, we did. Everything's A-okay.
Susan: Oh, that's so...! [*hugs Carol, they giggle, Ross steps away*] (F)

Ross, the ex-husband of Carol, is visiting her at her and Susan's apartment, and Susan, the lesbian wife of Carol, comes home. Carol is pregnant with Ross's baby. Carol went to see her doctor and heard the sex of the baby.

- (8) [*Chandler and Eddie's apartment. Joey stops by and knocks on the door.*]
Eddie: Hey, Joey. What's going on, man?
Joey: Eddie.
Chandler: Morning.
Joey: Morning. (F)

Joey used to share this apartment with Chandler, but he moved out to live alone. When he decided to move back to their apartment, Chandler had already found his new roommate Eddie. Now Joey cannot come back to their apartment and came by to pick up his mail.

- (9) [*Doctors are scrubbing their hands before surgery at the hospital.*]
Dr. Nolan: First the robber, now the cop.
Dr. Austin: They're all the same on the inside.
Dr. Nolan: Yeah. [*scrubbing*]
[*Dr. Cain enters. Scrubbing stops.*] [*Scrubbing resumes.*]
Dr. Cain: [*turns on the faucet*] Dr. Austin.
Dr. Austin: Dr. Cain.
[*Scrubbing continues.*]
Dr. Austin: We'll be repairing the aortic dissection first. (R)

Dr. Cain is a neurosurgeon who has just joined the hospital as a "star physician." His arrogance makes everyone tense. Dr. Austin is another first-class surgeon who is proud of his outstanding talent.

- (10) [*Carrie enters the room.*]
President: [*Over the monitor*] Is that you, Ms. Mathison?

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Carrie: It is, sir.

President: Glad you could join us. It's nice to finally meet you.

Carrie: Thank you, sir.

David: [*Sitting next to the President*] Hello, Carrie.

Carrie: David.

(H)

Carrie has been working for the national security of the US and is in Afghanistan now. David is the White House Chief of Staff and Carrie once investigated David.

Seven examples are shown, and in every conversation, a vocative without greetings is used. In (4), Cary was fired by Diane and even though he does not hold a grudge per se, Cary may not trust Diane fully and is probably a little tense.

(5) and (6) are the same person's utterances. Responding to Ruth's greeting, Alicia gives a short utterance, "Ruth" only. Alicia values Eli's fidelity to her husband and she disagrees with his decision to hire Ruth for his campaign. Although Ruth wants to have a good relationship with Alicia as she is her candidate's wife, Alicia does not want to become friendly with Ruth.

In (7), Ross merely replies to Susan, "Susan". Susan is the one who "took away" his wife from him and Ross doesn't want to be nice to her.

In (8), Joey regretted his moving out from their old apartment and hoped to move back but there was already a new roommate Eddie. Naturally, he feels Eddie is a nuisance and doesn't want to be friends with Eddie.

In (9), there is a tension when Dr. Cain enters the room. He recently joined the hospital and thinks he is the best and never cares about other staff members. He showed his recognition to Dr. Austin, though. Dr. Austin, who is also a proud surgeon, also said simply "Dr. Cain" in recognition of his presence. They both wouldn't be friendly with each other.

In (10), David was once investigated by Carrie, and it has been a long time since they saw each other before. There was a slight awkwardness between the two.

These examples all have a situation in common: that the speaker feels awkwardness and negative feelings toward the addressee. The speaker does not want to open up themselves to the addressee but doesn't want to be impolite enough to ignore the person there. By saying the addressee's name, the speaker shows recognition of the presence of the addressee.

3.2.2 Closing a conversation

How about at the end of the conversation? Let's look at the examples:

(11) Ross: Okay, you know, I should probably, I should probably just go.

Carol: Oh, thanks for the books.

Ross: No problem. Okay... [*kisses Carol, then punches Susan's shoulder*] Susan. [*Ross leaves.*]

Susan: [*raises a hand at Ross*]

(F)

In this conversation, Ross is talking to Carol when leaving the apartment. Ross has been trying to speak with Carol only and ignore Susan, and says “Susan” without any other utterances before he leaves.

(12) Damian: One-way ticket and 12 hours to leave the country? Your government’s pretty ungrateful.

Hannah: Yeah, in England, you’d get a-a ceremony, right?

Damian: In England, I’d be knighted.

Hannah: Well, we don’t think much of burglars here, I guess.

Damian: Yeah, well, I don’t think much of not finishing a job.

Hannah: I’ll keep you posted. Don’t worry.

Damian: Wells. [*extending his hand to her for a handshake.*]

Hannah: No, I’m gonna walk you out. [*Chuck notices their inner feelings.*]

Damian: I’m touched.

Hannah: Don’t be. They wanted me to make sure you got in the cab.

Damian: [*to Chuck, going out*] Charles.

Chuck: Cheerio, mate.

(DS)

Hannah Wells, an FBI agent, investigates a case with Damian, an MI6 agent and they are secretly drawn to each other. Chuck, an FBI analyst, has always assisted Hannah in her investigations and has become her loyal ally. Damian, as a newcomer, feels uneasy a little in front of Chuck.

(13) Harvey: The point is, Sean, you had a secret little plan, and I’ve taken away your element of surprise.

Sean: Have you? You may know I’m coming, but do you know where or when? See, while you’re battering down the hatches at B-4, I might be at D-12 or H-3, and before you know it, I have sunk your battleship.

Harvey: That’s a cute game. I was more of a rock’em sock’em robots guy.

Sean: So you think you can knock my block off, Harvey?

Harvey: I know I can, because I had Eric Woodall fired. So stay the hell away from my clients, or I’ll pave the same career path for you.

Sean: Okay, your hands weren’t full with Eric. They will be full with me. [*patted Harvey’s arm*]

Harv. [*Sean leaves.*]

(S)

Harvey is a corporate attorney, and Sean is a prosecutor. Sean targets Harvey’s law firm and they are up against each other. Harvey is confident of beating Sean, but Sean wears a relaxed smile and even calls Harvey “Harv” and patted his arm.

In these examples, a vocative only in parting leaves a somewhat distant impression to the addressee. The relationship between the speaker and the addressee is businesslike and “forced” one to some extent. It might sound even official as if the speaker is obliged to show their acknowledgment of the addressee’s presence, though the examples are not in the formal setting. The vocative in the last example is

hypocorism, which may come from the speaker's hierarchical mind in which he looks down on the addressee.

This vocative use in parting discloses the distance that the speaker feels towards the addressee, which is presumably why it is scarcely performed in reality. It is utterly unnecessary and even risky to expose the distance you sense between you and the addressee, or that you actually don't care about the addressee. There is no such vocative use in Japanese, and in the Japanese-dubbed versions of the dramas, the vocatives in question are mostly changed into "Jaa." ('See you then./Bye for now.')

3.3 With a vocative of title and surname: Opening a conversation

Here is an example of a vocative of title and surname:

(14) Jackson: Deputy Chief Johnson.

Brenda: I assume you're here to tell me that you've arrested Mr. Moktari's son. Where'd you take him? Egypt? Saudi Arabia?

Jackson: I'm not at liberty to say. (C)

Jackson is an FBI agent and he pays a visit to the Los Angeles Police Department for an investigation into an Iranian woman's case. Brenda, LAPD Deputy Chief, fights over jurisdiction. A vocative of title and surname conveys his intentions to be official and businesslike, but it also implies that they are not on such terms that they would greet each other.

3.4 With a vocative of honorific address: Closing a conversation

There are cases in which honorific address is used alone as a vocative:

(15) Elizabeth: You have confidence in this intelligence?

Ephraim: Entirely. I'll also point out that the date of the transfer is less than 48 hours after our SEAL team's capture of Reza Mousavi in Lebanon.

Russel: Yeah, well, Iran didn't waste any time hatching a counterattack.

Ephraim: Or it's a striking coincidence.

Elizabeth: Thanks, Ephraim.

Ephraim: Ma'am. [*Ephraim leaves.*] (MS)

Ephraim, Director of National Intelligence, reports some classified information to Elizabeth, the Secretary of State, and leaves.

(16) Blake: Ma'am, I'm really sorry.

Elizabeth: It's all right, Blake. I mean, you couldn't have anticipated the warrant or its scope.

Russel: Yeah, or that some ally of Hanson's in the FBI is obviously leaking to the press.

Mike: The timing's right out of Hanson's playbook. Releasing dirt just before the Correspondents' Dinner, he's chumming the waters.

Elizabeth: Thank you, Blake.

Mike: Yeah, thanks, Blake.

Blake: Ma'am. [*stands up and leaves.*] (MS)

Blake, Elizabeth's Executive Assistant, explains what happened and leaves.

In these three examples, vocatives of honorifics are used. Unlike vocatives of names, they don't notably sound cold; it would be safely explained as the vocative is not a name, distance is simply interpreted as official or hierarchical, and consequently, polite. In Japanese-dubbed versions, though, they are translated as "*Shitsurei (-shimasu)*" ('Excuse me./Bye. '), which is, in return, rather difficult to translate into English; hence only the vocative is evidently used.

How about these two?

(17) Jackson: There may be no need to interrogate Faraz at all. In fact, I think knowing her son's in foreign custody might provide Mrs. Moktari with enough incentive to cooperate with us. We're not working against you. We're just providing you with the necessary leverage to find out exactly what the mother knows.

Brenda: Besides, an observant Islamic woman is much more likely to talk to me than she is to you.

Jackson: I look forward to seeing you in action, ma'am... [*to the other men in the room*] Gentlemen. [*Jackson leaves.*] (C)

This is the last part of the conversation shown in (14). Jackson's "Gentlemen" sounds official and courteous, but rather cold at the same time, partly because of the nature of the situation but also with the rather abrupt vocative-only utterance in parting. He is polite, but that is precisely the reason why he is impolite, because it sounds feigned.

(18) [*Men are playing cards.*]

Harvey: I check.

Man: Raise. 5000.

Harvey: I'm all-in.

[*Cell phone dings; from Jessica: "I need you."*]

Harvey: You can pay me later. I got to go. [*standing up*] Gentlemen. (S)

When Harvey and other men are playing cards, he receives a text message from his superior and leaves. He is not particularly rude but does not seem particularly polite, either. His cocky attitude somewhat relates to the way this kind of respect vocative (e.g. *sir*) is used by a customer to a waiter, not the other way around. This type of use of honorific vocative is so routinely used that it is sometimes associated

with “false polite” attitude.

3.5 With a vocative of occupational terms: Closing a conversation

Lastly, there are cases in which occupational terms are used alone as a vocative:

(19) Judge: Court finds a reasonable suit here. Trial starts tomorrow.

Santana: Thank you, your honor. [*Santana leaves.*]

Harvey: [*to Judge*] You’re getting a good kick out of this, aren’t you?

Judge: I am. But I’m taking this on its merits. And you better bring your “A” game tomorrow, ’cause he’s got a legitimate claim.

Harvey: He wants a trial? I’ll give him a goddamn trial. [*lifting one hand*] Your Honor. [*Harvey flung the door open and left.*] (S)

In this conversation, three people are debating in a courtroom if Santana, the taxi driver’s case, should go on trial. Harvey intended to make this trial go away, but the judge found it legitimate and approved it. Harvey was upset, which is apparent from his offhand behavior, but he was courteous enough to say, “Your Honor”.

(20) Carlton: I have 10,000 doses on our Atlanta storage facility.

Emily: Which may be enough to contain this. I can have HHS expedite the transfer to South Carroll Parish.

President: Okay. Carlton, thank you. I-I know this isn’t easy.

Carlton: Mr. President. [*Carlton leaves.*] (DS)

This conversation takes place in the Presidential Office. The President asks Carlton, the CEO of a pharmaceutical company, to offer their experimental cancer drug whose use for this disease is yet untested and not approved by the FDA. Carlton is reluctant, but he had to agree with the President. His “Mr. President” sounds as if he reminded himself that he wasn’t allowed to say no to the US President. After he left, Emily, White House Chief of Staff said, “He did not look happy.” Interestingly enough, in the Japanese-dubbed version, Carlton says “*Iie, daitooryoo.*” (‘No, (it’s fine), Mr. President.’)

(21) [*Over the computer monitor*]

Dalton: It doesn’t matter what you knew or didn’t know. Not now. What matters is that you stay safe. For whatever reason, these terrorists your administration is in bed with are turning on you. And if you’re not safe, neither is our nuclear agreement.

Khoosat: [*scoffs*] Your concern for my well-being is... touching.

Elizabeth: We have a team on the ground ready to take out Disah. We politely ask for your help. Or, even better, do the job yourself. That means root out all members of HS and send them

packing. Then get your own house in order.

Khoosat: Madam Secretary, you say it was my foreign minister you shared this information with?

Elizabeth: Yes.

Khoosat: I thank you for your candor. Mr. President, Madam Secretary. [*clicks off the screen*]

(MS)

This is a conversation between the US President Dalton, the Secretary of State Elizabeth McCord, and the Pakistan Prime Minister Khoosat on a teleconference. This use of the vocative sounds highly official and diplomatic.

The vocatives of occupational terms sound courteous as the speakers understand they engage in conversations because of their occupations and make it clear by addressing them. At the same time, the vocative alone leaves the impression of being professional and businesslike. It could also sound as obsequious and sarcastic, especially without any leave-taking expressions.

3.6 Other things to point out: Discussion

What makes people use the vocative without any other utterances to start or close a conversation?

Apparently, they do not use greetings proper or leave-taking proper (cf. Bonsignori et al. 2011); they do not even use “more or less formulaic expressions of phatic communion” (Bonsignori et al. 2011: 26) such as thanking, apologizing, and wishing good luck, etc. They do address their addressees by their names, honorific address, or occupational terms; that means that they show their recognition of their addressees, so they are at least not rude, but to put it the other way around, that is all they do. That greeting, farewell, and all other phatic communion expressions are “saved” reveals that these vocative-only utterances are highly functional and economical, which also explains why they are more used in telecinematic dialogue than in reality. It may also imply that the speaker wouldn’t bother to build a solid relationship with the addressee; deleting greeting, farewell, and other phatic communion expressions shows that the speaker would not seek to establish social contact with the addressee, which eventually leads to a certain lack of politeness.

This type of vocative functions to establish or maintain a minimum relationship as acquaintances. As paradoxically as it may seem, however, this illustrates the importance of addressing in the English language culture.

It should also be mentioned that this vocative-only use may be seen mainly in American English; this remains to be investigated further in the future.

4. Conclusions

Vocatives and terms of address play a significant role in communication in English. The address functions, in particular, are unique characteristics in the vocative usage in English. They portray interpersonal relationships, demonstrate social identities, and convey attitudes and emotions. This study

has examined the particular type of vocative in English utilizing the data from American TV dramas.

The analysis has revealed that the use of given-name vocatives only to open a conversation expresses speakers' awkwardness and embarrassment. When used to close a conversation, it conveys the distance the speaker feels toward the addressee. The use of title and surname to start a conversation signals businesslike and official attitudes. The use of honorific addresses to end a conversation basically shows the speaker's official, or hierarchical, polite stance, though it might also give an impression of feigned politeness. Lastly, the use of occupational terms only shows that the speaker pays their respects to the addressee's occupation, and it sounds businesslike and professional.

The analysis also shows that the use of vocative alone is extremely functional and economical, which explains its use in telecinematic conversation, and that it is essential to address in English, which is a unique and significant characteristic of English communication.

Notes

¹The relevant nouns and noun phrases of the transcribed text are underlined.

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