

Kibbitzer 12

Vocatives in MICASE Jennifer McCormick & Sarah Richardson (August 2006)

Using the MICASE database, we analyzed the most common vocatives to find their form, position, and function and how this compared to previous work based on non-academic speech events. Of the 168 total vocative occurrences found, the most frequent were ‘guys’ with a total of 42 occurrences and ‘you guys’ with 35 occurrences. Figure 1 shows the vocative category breakdown; notice how rare some categories are such as endearments and titles like “professor”.

Vocative/Phrase	Total Vocatives	Form	Final	Initial	Medial	Stand Alone
Guys	42	Group terms	20	5	16	1
you guys	35	2 nd Person Pronoun	8	17	8	2
e.g Sarah	18	1 st Name in Full	6	6	3	3
Sir	12	Honorific	7	4	1	0
Dude	11	Familiarizer	4	2	5	0
Anybody	8	Indefinite Pronoun	1	1	0	6
e.g.Jen (Jenny)	8	Familiarized 1 st Names	0	5	0	3
Baby	8	Endearment	6	2	0	0
Professors	6	Title	3	3	0	0
Anyone	5	Indefinite Pronoun	1	1	0	3
Totals	168		67	46	37	18

Figure 1

Vocative forms

The categories are based on the Longman Grammar (1108-9) and examples from MICASE:

A. Group terms: terms used to address groups

MICASE: “team, team two, heads or tails?”

B. Second- Person pronoun: the use of second person pronouns when addressing one or more subjects

MICASE: “Alright, what else, *you guys*?”

C. First names: first name of the addressee

MICASE: “*Sarah*, how many did you recapture?”

D. Familiarizers: casual terms of familiarity that can mark closeness between speakers, and also can be used to address strangers

MICASE: “Come on *dude*, let’s get it together.”

E. Indefinite pronouns: terms used to address an unspecified subject

MICASE: “forceps, *anybody*?”

F. Honorifics: terms used to designate respect but also can be used in a sarcastic manner

MICASE: have you been helped, *sir*?

G. Endearments: terms used to express closeness or intimacy between the speakers

MICASE: “Hey *baby*, wanna (XX)”

H. Familiarized First Names: Shortened first names

MICASE: “*Jenny*, did you have any questions?”

I. Title and Surname

MICASE: “Thank you, *Professor Fine*.”

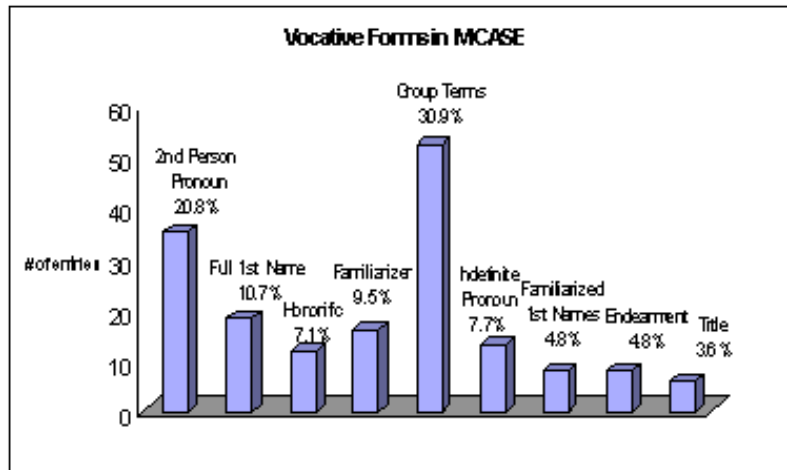


Figure 2

While the most common vocative form in Longman is the ‘first name’ category with 65%, & ‘familiarizers’ at 15%, we see something very different in the MICASE data (Figure 2). In addition, we created a ‘Group term’ category, in order to combine ‘group familiarizers’ with other pluralized vocatives. ‘Group Terms’ (30.9%) and 2nd Person Pronouns (20.8%) yielded the highest frequency of occurrence. We attribute the high occurrence of group terms to the fact that discourse in an academic setting requires that speakers get the group’s attention. It is also interesting to note that the two most common vocatives in MICASE, ‘guys’ and ‘you guys’ are each respectively part of the Group Term and 2nd Person Pronoun categories.

Vocative Position

Another important characteristic of vocatives is the position in which they occur in an utterance. The Longman Grammar divides vocatives into the following positions:

Final: where the vocative follows the clausal-unit to which it is most closely attached

- i. MICASE- “That’s a heavy load, girl.”

Initial: where the vocative precedes the clausal-unit to which it is most closely attached.

- i. MICASE- “Ladies and gentlemen, let me ask you something.”

Stand alone: where the vocative is not attached to any unit.

- i. MICASE- “Good good good. Next one? Jenny?”

Medial: where the vocative occurs in the middle of a clausal-unit or a non-clausal unit.

- i. MICASE- “How are we doing, folks, with the scales.”

A large majority (70%) of vocatives in non-academic speech occur in the utterance-final position and a much smaller portion of vocatives (10% each) is found in the initial, medial stand alone positions. In MICASE, vocatives in utterance-final position were also the most common, even though they were much less frequent (39.6%) than the Longman figure of 70%. In MICASE, the initial, medial, and stand alone positions varied somewhat (27.4%, 22%, & 11%, respectively) and in some cases, the percentages are significantly higher than those in the Longman data. As with vocative form, the reason for this difference may be related to academic discourse, in particular to the wider use of speaker nominations.

Vocative Functions

The functions of vocatives is a topic that is highly debated amongst linguists. Vocatives are said to “express attitude, politeness, formality, status, intimacy, or a role relationship, and most of them mark the speaker characterizing him or her to the addressee” (Zwicky, 1974). In her Ph.D. Thesis, Elizabeth Axelson (2003) references previous research that has identifies vocatives as “markers of power and solidarity (Hook, 1984), in-group status (Wood & Kroger, 1991, Brown & Levinson, 1978), or pseudo-intimacy (McCarthy & O’Keeffe, 2001), equality (Troemel-Ploetz, 1994) or condescension (Wood & Kroger, 1991); as conversation initiators and topic change contextualization cues (Ostermann, 2000); and as redressive action for face-threatening acts (Ostermann, 2000, Brown & Levinson, 1978).”

Even so, the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (1999)* states that there are three main functions:

Summoning Attention

MICASE- “So, whoever got heads, won.”

Addressee Identification

MICASE- “Hi, Miss Gaston.”

Establishing and maintaining social relationships

MICASE- “Dude, that is mine, it’s one of mine.”

A More Specific Look: Two Labs in MICASE

In order to have a preliminary look at vocative function we chose two transcripts (and audio recordings) of lab sessions for further analysis.

Interaction A

In this speech event there was a Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) who played a passive role in group conversation. However, when she did speak, her use of vocatives was primarily to summon attention, to identify speakers, and to establish order. She mainly referred to the students as a whole, calling them ‘guys,’ ‘you guys,’ and ‘team two’ rather than using a combination of Full and Familiarized 1st Names. The students,

on the other hand, appeared to exercise the majority of control in the lab. We feel this was assisted by the use of utterance-initial vocatives. This might also, explain the overall high frequency of vocative use in the event, there being 1 per minute. Because there wasn't one dominate facilitator in the speech event, the students may have been unknowingly using vocatives at a higher frequency in order to give directives and to maintain control and productivity. Some examples of this are:

1. Bill, you wanna heat some water for me?... (Lab 200, p.6)
2. Jenna, will you please write this up? (Lab 200, p. 27)
3. Hey Brian, did you (xx)...the reference point then looking up the thing in the C-R-C? and I'll look (xx)... (Lab 200, p.37)

Interaction B

In contrast to Conversation A, here there was an established facilitator who maintained control of the group throughout the speech event, not only in explaining the lab, but in keeping it on task by minimizing confusion, and by delegating tasks rather than giving control to the students. Because participant roles were already established, there were a significantly fewer number of vocatives (1 per 5.5 minutes). The majority of the vocatives were utterance-final, and we feel that they were used to maintain social relationships as opposed to maintaining control in the conversation. Some examples are:

<1> Thank you for sharing Brad that was really tasty.

<2> Yeah, thank you Brad

<3> Thank you

<4> Thank you Brad

<5>Thank you Brad. (Lab175, p.3)

This example shows the repeated use of the Familiarized 1st Name, Brad. The first use of Brad not only addresses, but also identifies him. Then three other participants also found it necessary to use his name, thus suggesting that the vocatives in this example are primarily designed to maintain social relationship or pseudo-intimacy within the group.

Conclusion

Vocative forms can be identified although it is a time-consuming process in an untagged corpus such as MICASE. As others have found, characterizing their pragmatic functions is very difficult, as is trying to relate function to vocative position. However, we did find a strong correlation between the position of vocatives and their function. It seems that the 'summoning attention' vocatives will tend to be utterance initial, while the addressee identifiers (those often found in the classroom) will be final. It is also possible that the relatively high occurrence of medial vocatives in academic discourse is connected with the negotiation of interlocutor relationships, often as a kind of advance signal that tougher talk is coming up (Swales 2004), or that they are redressive of face-threatening acts of some kind.