CHAPTER ONE

A FORMAL TWIST FOR THE SAME OLD STORY

1. BRINGING VOCATIVES TO SYNTAX

When traditional-pedagogical grammars list the nominal paradigms of the various noun declensions, vocative forms are always given last—all other cases (Nominative, Accusative, etc.) being listed above them. Likewise, when students are asked to recite the memorized declensions, they always tend to either lower their voice when they reach the vocative, or even omit it completely as something trivial, redundant or uninteresting. And if one wants to look for information about vocatives offered in traditional grammars, one finds one page (e.g., for Greek, Tzartzanos 1946) or a brief presentation (e.g., for Romanian, Popescu 1995: 63–70), while information about other cases expands to over twenty pages each.

The cursory attention paid to vocatives in teaching grammar stems from an avoidance of this issue in the field of linguistics, where “the literature concerning the Vocative Case is unusually scarce, especially if compared with the literature concerning other cases.” (Moro 2003: 247). Why is that so? It seems that the avoidance is related to the unorthodox status of the vocative, which, unlike the other Cases, cannot be related to the argument structure of the verb or the noun. This idea is explicitly stated in the earliest linguistic studies, especially by Hjelmslev (1935/37) and other structuralists, for example Kuryłowicz:

Le vocatif reste à l’écart. Il a une fonction appellative distincte de la fonction purement représentative (symbolique) des autres cas. (Kuryłowicz 1949: 146–147).

[The vocative stands aside. It has a calling function that is different from the purely representative (symbolic) function of other cases.]

An interesting twist occurs in de Carvalho (1983), who claims that the vocative in Latin constitutes by itself a whole Case system, since it defines one of the two poles of the communicative act, namely the non-ego, the other pole being the ego. All the other Cases rest aside and stand in opposition to the vocative case (“le vocatif constitue à lui seul toute une dimension des cas latins . . .” Carvalho 1983: 63).
The peculiarity of vocatives continues to be a deterrent for syntacticians, since it is obvious that any successful attempt to account for these constructions must involve some unorthodox proposal. In consequence, the avoidance of the vocative issue continues, although it is being rephrased: all other Cases are syntactically and semantically related to the verb by being related to thematic positions, whereas vocatives are just ways of “calling” or addressing, which places the latter on the poor-relative front (cf. Zwicky 1974: 777).

A hasty and superficial Google search would easily prove that the communicative and sociological or pragmatic functions of the vocative were the only aspects of it that were judged as worth exploring and/or pinning down. The following list is just a sample and does not intend in any way to be exhaustive: vocatives “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 particular, vocatives are taken to be markers of power and solidarity (Brown & Gilman 1960), they mark in-group status or pseudo-intimacy, equality or condescension (Brown & Levinson 1987). They may also be conversation initiators and topic change contextualization cues, or they may signal redressive actions for face-threatening acts (Dickey 1997, Mao 1994, Maynard 2001). Is this rich expressivity of vocatives related in any way to syntactic structure?


It took many years and the turn of the 21st century for Levinson’s assessment that vocatives “are an interesting grammatical category, again unexplored” (Levinson 1983: 71) to start being falsified. The first syntactically oriented studies on vocatives started to appear about ten years ago (Osenova & Simov 2003; Moro 2003; D’Hulst et al. 2007; Hill 2007; Sonnenhauser & Noel Hanna Aziz 2013), and they signaled the shift of linguists’ interests to the grammatical properties of pragmatic markers in general.

Why did that turn take place? The change in attitude was not unrelated to the rapid developments in the theory of syntax, and, in particular, within the framework of generative grammar, where the syntax-pragmatic interface started to claim attention. We present the most recent such develop-

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1 Even the pragmatics of vocatives is understudied according to Kubo (2004).