'You need a soft approach when you want a favour. An older chap answers the door: I promptly address him as "Father" or "Dad". If it's an old woman, then "Ma". If it's a middle-aged woman, I call her "Madam".1) If a youngish servant, then "My dear chap". You all deserve to be strung up. Such ignorance!'2)

In this passage from Menander's *Dyscolus* (492-8), the cook Sico professes himself to be an expert in the use of forms of address (vocatives). Some of the terms he suggests, however, are rarely or never found as addresses in extant Greek literature. Is Menander indicating that Sico spoke oddly? Probably not. Although there is a cook with peculiar linguistic habits in Straton's comedy *Φοινικίδης*, that cook cannot be taken as representing a general tendency of cooks in New Comedy. His obscure Homeric words are quoted not from his own lips but from those of someone else who is complaining about his language, clearly for comic effect. Sico in *Dyscolus*, on the other hand, is not caricatured for his use of language, and except in this passage, his Greek appears to be perfectly normal.

We must thus assume that Menander meant the cook's instruc-

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1) Literally, 'priestess'; for the extended usage compare *Dottere* in Italian
2) N. Miller, *Menander Plays and Fragments* (London 1987), 35
tions to be taken seriously, and this gives us new information about address habits in ancient Greece. Or does it? To what extent can we rely on Menander’s information about Greek vocative usage? Can he be taken as a faithful mirror of conversational Greek, or was he using a language different from that spoken on the streets of Athens in his day? To the extent that Menander’s language differs from that of Aristophanes, does that difference reflect actual changes in the language, or did one of these poets adhere to colloquial Attic more closely than did the other?

The problem of the relationship of comic language to conversational Attic has been increasingly discussed in recent years, although at an earlier period it was sometimes taken for granted that the language of comedy must be identical to that of colloquial spoken Greek. The question of comic language is of course a large and complex one, and at the present time it would be extremely difficult to examine all its aspects in a systematic way. The smaller and more quantifiable area of vocative usage, however, can provide some valuable evidence about the type of language used by Aristophanes and Menander.

The first question for a study of this type is exactly what standard to use for the evaluation of comic language, and this decision will have important consequences. We are not seeking ‘spoken Greek’, a nebulous concept taking no account of different registers and genres of speech, but rather conversational Attic. Discussions of this type often get sidetracked onto the question of the difference between spoken and written language, but in fact linguists studying this question now think that the spoken/written difference is not based on any real linguistic criteria. The distinction of genre is


4) For a general overview and extensive bibliography of linguistic work on this subject, see W L Chafe and D Tannen, *The Relation between Written and Spoken Language*, Annual Review of Anthropology 16 (1987), 383-407