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The Definite Articles of Vocatives

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Abstract This paper discusses the internal structure of vocative phrases in Romanian by focusing on the status of definite articles. The main observation: the option for a vocative noun with or without a definite article is not free but depends on the speaker's assessment of his/her relations with the interlocutor: (in)formality, social or physical distance, authority, disapprobation and so on. The proposal is that, in certain vocative phrases, the definite article becomes a spell-out for an interpersonal feature encoding (in)formality, and this property arises from an upward reanalysis of the article which merges in Voc instead of D.

Keywords Vocatives. Definite articles. Romanian. Interpersonal relations. Addressee.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Background. – 3 Vocative Case Endings. – 4 Definite Articles. – 5 Formal Approach. – 6 Conclusions.

1 Introduction

Many formal studies have acknowledged the impact of the discourse on the syntactic derivation of sentences.[1] In particular, it has been shown that particles expressing speaker's intentions, injunctions, ostensivity or modality qualify as syntactic items that indicate the mapping of conversational pragmatic features to syntax (Cardinaletti 2007; 2011; Coniglio 2007; Haegeman 2014; Hill 2007; 2014 a.o.).

1 I have always considered Anna a model of professionalism and integrity, and I am so grateful for her friendship. Her important research work will continue to inspire new generations of linguists.

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Vocatives also belong to this set, and have been used for diagnostic tests in conjunction with the above particles to establish the type of pragmatic features converted to formal features and the location of such features on the clausal spine (Haegeman, Hill 2013; Miyagawa 2012 a.o.). However, when it comes to vocatives, questions were raised not only regarding their location on the clausal spine, but also their internal structure: how does a noun become a direct address?

Several studies considered this question, and the general consensus is that the noun projects a functional extra-layer, and the address effect arises from the mapping of an addressee-like feature in this functional field (Espinal 2013; Hill 2010; Stavrou 2014). However, although the addressee feature proved to be a necessary condition for deriving vocatives cross-linguistically, it was not sufficient to account for variations in the morpho-syntax of vocative phrases that could be related to the social standing of the interlocutors. In this respect, some studies also argued for the mapping of features relevant to the social ground, in addition to the addressee (Hill 2014; Kumari, Wiltschko 2023 a.o.).

This paper contributes information that confirms the syntactic encoding of the social standing of the interlocutors, in addition to the addressee feature. Empirical evidence comes from the possibility of having definite articles with vocative nouns in Romanian, as in (1a, b): in the address in (1a) the bare vocative noun refers to the speaker's mother, whereas in (1b), with the addition of the definite article, the vocative is identificational and refers to the mother of the baby, not of the speaker.

(1) a. Mamă, plec imediat.
mother leave.1SG immediately
'Mother, I'm leaving right away.'

b. Mam**a**, ia bebeluşul.
mother.the take.IMP.2SG baby.the
'Mother, pick up your baby.'

Briefly, this paper shows that the option for definite articles with vocative nouns depends on the established interpersonal relation between speaker and addressee, or the family ranking. The distribution of definite articles in such contexts is syntactically constrained, showing restrictions on coordination, phrase complexity and the type of movement. The syntactic behavior indicates the upward re-analysis of the definite article and its use as the spell-out of the interpersonal feature, after being stripped of the 3rd person feature (i.e., the definite article becomes a pragmatic particle).

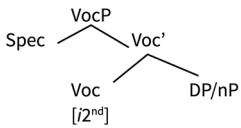
The discussion developed along these lines establishes two derivational patterns that transcend the semantic classification of

vocatives (e.g., as identificational, expressive, bonding etc.): one pattern in which the definite article is used as a D element, and one in which the definite article is reanalyzed as a dedicated vocative morpheme. Each pattern pairs systematically with interpretive effects that indicate the type of social relations rather than the semantic type of vocative phrases.

2 Background

Previous formal studies on the structure of vocatives agree that the vocative reading arises from the projection of an extra-layer at the left periphery of DP > nP. That is where an interpretable formal feature is introduced to map the collocutor. For convenience, this feature is labeled as 2nd person, since it conveys the engagement of the addressee; the domain in which the feature is introduced has the label VocP in Hill (2013), Espinal (2013), Stavrou (2014), among others, as shown in (2). Different labels and representations have also been proposed (a third DP layer in Bernstein 2023; Ground-addr layer in Kumari, Wiltschko 2022), but the basic idea remains.

(2)



For the configuration in (2), some studies propose only head-to-head movement by the noun to Voc (Espinal 2013 a.o.) to derive constructions as in (3).[2] Alternatively, other studies (Hill 2014 a.o.) show that DP-to-Spec,VocP movement is also possible, in constructions as in (4), with the same interpretive effect.

(3) Waiter! versus *The waiter!

(4) [The students from France], please fill out the form.

The obligatory deletion of the definite article with vocatives as in (3) is considered evidence for N-to-Voc, whereby the definite article *the* in D would be an intervener (Bernstein 2008 a.o.). However, if the

2 For Espinal (2013), phrasal movement as supposed in (4) derives 'fake vocatives' as opposed to 'true vocatives' which arise from head-to-head movement. For Hill (2014), all vocatives are equal, as forms of address, the derivational variation depending on phrasal complexity.

entire DP moves to Spec, VocP, as in (4), the article can stay in place within the moved DP.

Accordingly, the prediction is that languages in which the definite article is not a prenominal free morpheme, and hence, not an intervener, should display it with vocatives. A number of Balkan languages (including Romanian) would fall under this prediction, since their definite articles are post-nominal bound morphemes. Along these lines, the vocative form in (1b) is unexceptional.

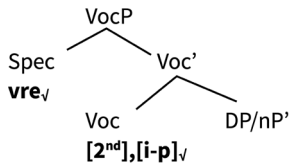
However, by the same rationale, Romanian vocatives should systematically display definite articles when N-to-Voc takes place, since vocatives are inherently specific (Hill 2007) and definite articles are not interveners. From this perspective, (1a) should be the anomaly, not (1b), contrary to the fact. Furthermore, a cursory look at the use of vocatives in Romanian shows that the use of the definite article seems aleatory with these forms (Croitor, Hill 2013), which creates annoyance for second language learners.

Why is the definite article not systematic with Romanian vocatives? The answer provided in this paper is that the definite article should be included in the class of particles that encode, within the VocP, the interpersonal relation between speaker and addressee; hence, it is used according to the speaker's intention to resort to informality. More precisely, previous studies argued for a formal feature that encodes the interpersonal relation between speaker and addressee, in addition to the [2nd p] on the Voc head in (2). Such feature is labelled [i-p] in Hill (2013) or Ground-speaker in Kumari, Wiltschko (2022). Evidence came especially from particles that establish the degree of familiarity, such as Gr. *vre*, Bulg. *be* or Rom. *bre* in (5), and which were shown in constituency tests to belong to the VocP, not to the clausal spine (Hill 2014). The relevant nouns are interpreted as vocatives with or without the particle of address; however, the type of familiarity would be missed.

(5)	a.	Vre	jaja,	ti	kanis	eki?	Greek
		PRT	grandma	what	do	there	
		'Grandma, what are you doing there?'					
	b.	Stefane**be**,		dai	mi	go.	Bulgarian
		Steven.VOC.PRT		give.2SG.IMP	to.me	it	
		'Steven, give it to me.'					
	c.	**Bre**	mamaie,	un'te	duci?		Romanian
		PRT	grandma.VOC	where-REFL.2SG	go.2SG		
		'Grandma, where are you going?'					

The context of use and the morpho-syntax of such particles cross-linguistically led to the revision of (3) as shown in (6).

(6)



Considering (6), the task is to demonstrate that the definite article may also check (and value) [i-p], on a par or in conjunction with the dedicated vocative particles such as *vre*.

It would not be for the first time that the presence of a definite article with vocatives is related to the type of social relations between the interlocutors, since it has been already signaled not only for Romanian, but also for French (Coene et al 2019) and for Bedouin Jordanian (Jaradat et al. 2022). The task of this paper is to show that the relation between the definite article and the social context has a syntactic impact. That is, one may suppose that the option in (1), between a bare vocative noun and a vocative with definite article, concerns only a lexical option (i.e., inflected or non-inflected noun) and that the ensuing interpretation arises from the principle of compositionality. This paper will show, however, that syntax is involved, and that the option for definite articles with vocative nouns has an impact on the derivational pattern.

3 Vocative Case Endings

The use of definite articles often involves vocative forms with case inflection. Hence, this section presents the morpho-syntactic properties and the context of use for nouns with vocative case inflection.

All languages have vocatives, but only some may also have vocative case inflection or marking through dedicated morphemes. Cross-linguistically, when such marking is not compulsory, the option for having or not having it depends on the speaker's intention to qualify the interpersonal relation, as shown in (7) for Fuyang Wu (a Chinese language) with the name *Amin* and for Romanian in (8) with the name *Dan*.

(7)	a.	/aʔ.miŋ/	Zero marker	= social distal: cold, unfriendly
	b.	/aʔ.miɛŋ/	Rhyme-change marker	= neutral, friendly
	c.	/aʔ.miŋ.ue/	Suffix marker	= physical distance, informal

(from Tanaka 2020)

(8)	a.	Dan,	vino	azi.	= neutral
		Dan	come.IMP.2SG	today	
		'Dan, come today.'			
	b.	Dan**e**,	vino	azi.	= informal
		Dan.VOC	come.IMP.2SG	today	
		'Dan, come today.'			

In (7), the dedicated vocative markers are coupled with certain interpretations of the social standing of the collocutors. The vocative case ending in (8) has a similar effect: the unmarked form *Dan* in (8a) is sufficient to check the 2nd person of Voc, but gives no information w.r.t the interpersonal relation – only the intonation and the context may fill out that gap. Conversely, the marked form *Dane* in (8b) forces informality, irrespective of intonation (see also Bucci 2018).

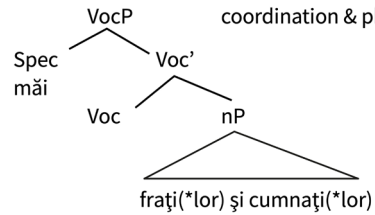
Acknowledging that vocative case endings produce a change in the interpretation of the interpersonal relation does not necessarily mean that syntax is involved: this could be just a matter of selection of (un)inflected forms from the lexicon. In this respect, syntactic tests are in order, as in (9) to (12).

A coordination test as in (9) shows restrictions that indicate syntactic processing (see also Croitor, Giurgea 2024).

(9)	a.	măi	fraţi	şi	(*măi)	cumnaţi, …
		PRT	brothers	and	PRT	brothers-in-law
	b.	*? măi	fraţilor	şi	cumnaţilor	
		PRT	brothers.the.voc	and	brothers-in-law.the voc	
	c.	fraţilor, …/		cumnaţilor,…		
		brothers.the.voc		brothers-in-law.the.voc		

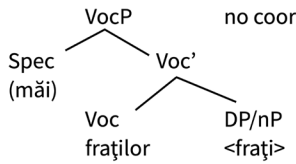
In (9a), the vocative particle *măi* is in Spec, VocP (tested in Hill 2014). The coordination cannot be between two VocPs, because the repetition of the particle is disallowed. So, it has to be a coordination of two nouns under a coordination phrasal structure, and as such, it cannot move to the head Voc. Crucially, the coordinated nouns have to be bare stems as long as the addressees are brothers of the speaker. Inflecting these nouns for vocative case, as in (9b) does not work. If they are inflected for case, they are recursive not conjoined, as in (9c). Hence, this is syntax: lack of inflection signals, generally, less informality unless *măi* is present, the nouns may be coordinated and the phrasal construct checks the features of Voc through long distance agree as in (10).

(10)



Presence of inflection signals social proximity, the vocatives can be inflected and head-to-head movement applies as in (11).

(11)



Another test for the syntactic impact of the pairing between vocative case inflection and the interpersonal reading comes from adjectival modification. As shown in (12), adjectives force a phrasal analysis of the vocative, on the pattern in (10), but with movement.

(12) a. Prieten bun, ne cunoaştem de-o viaţă… = more formal
friend good REFL.1PL know.1PL of-a life
'My good friend, we've known each other for a life time…'
b. *Prietene bun,….
friend.VOC good
c. Prietene, ne cunoaştem…. = informal
friend.VOC REFL.1PL know.1PL

In (12a), the vocative *prieten bun* 'friend good' moves as a phrase to Spec, VocP. The same cannot take place in (12b), where the vocative case ending is added to the noun: phrasal movement prevents the contact between the noun and the Voc head (where case is spelled out), hence the ungrammaticality of (12b). On the other hand, omission of the adjective in (12c) goes hand in hand with head-to-head movement, and the spell-out of the vocative case is allowed. When it comes to the interpretation, (12a) has a degree of formality and is appropriate as an address in letters or written messages, whereas (12c) entails informality and physical proximity.

To conclude this section, the option for a noun inflected for vocative case has an impact not only on the interpretation of the interpersonal

relations but also on the syntactic behavior of the relevant form by restricting the type of movement. The addition of a definite article to the inflected forms is thus expected to also conform to the syntactic conditions that restrict the internal organization of vocative phrases.

4 Definite Articles

According to previous studies, in languages with prenominal articles, such as English or Italian, vocative nouns cannot be preceded by definite articles for two reasons (Bernstein 2008): (i) as a free morpheme in D, the article blocks N-to-D, which is obligatory for the derivation to converge; and (ii) the article comes with an intrinsic 3rd person feature that clashes with the 2nd person feature required for a vocative reading, so it has to be deleted.[3] According to condition (i), Romanian vocatives should always exhibit definite articles, since they cause no interference with N-to-D. Nevertheless, condition (ii) rules out the definite article on a systematic basis and independently of N-to-D/Voc. Crucially, Romanian vocatives challenge both predictions since they may or may not display definite articles even when N-to-Voc takes place (vs DP to Spec, VocP). Consider (13) where all four forms of the noun qualify as vocatives, irrespective of whether the noun displays a bare form (13a), a vocative case ending (13b), a definite article (13c) or a combination of all the above (13d). Notably, each form infers different degrees of familiarity and social expectations.

(13)	a.	măi	băiat	unmarked noun
		PRT	boy	
	b.	băiet**e**		noun + vocative case
		boy.voc		
	c.	băiat**u**’		noun + def. article
		boy.the		
	d.	băiat**ule**		noun + def. article + vocative case
		boy.the.voc		

Table 1 sums up the general relations between vocative forms and interpretation.

3 Ledgeway (2012) points out that definite articles in Romance languages descend from demonstratives and preserve the 3rd person feature. See similar remarks for English *the* in Bernstein 2008.

Table 1 Romanian vocative forms

Form	Interpretation
Bare noun	formal, neutral, unfamiliar
Noun stem + vocative case	informal, familiarity
Noun stem + definite article	distance (social, spatial), familiar calls
Noun stem + definite article + vocative case	very familiar, disapprobation

Not every vocative noun can occur with all the forms in Table 1, although some do. This is a fluid situation that depends a lot on diachronic changes and regional variations. Also, there are tendencies for some forms to be used rather for calls than for addresses, or for certain types of vocatives, but there is no systematic pattern in this respect. In other words, there is a weak correlation between the nominal form and the vocative type it conveys. For example, in (14), the same vocative form is compatible with a call function (14a), a familiar address (14b) or a bonding effect (14c). In a call, the vocative identifies the referent that becomes the speaker's addressee. For attention drawing calls, the identification is not necessary, the addressee is only reactivated. Bonding vocatives cover all other types of address for persuasion, evaluation, disapprobation and so on, and may surface in any position in the clause.[4]

(14) a. Fetele, treceţi la dreapta. = identification call
girls.the go.IMP.2PL to right
'Girls, go on the right.'

b. Fetelor, treceţi la dreapta. = attention drawing call
girls.the.VOC go.IMP.2PL to right
'Girls, go on the right.'

c. Bine, hai, la treabă, fetele/ fetelor. = bonding
good PRT to work girls.the/ girls.the.VOC
'Ok, to work now, girls.'

On the other hand, the same type of vocative, e.g. an identification call, could be expressed by three noun forms, as in (15).

(15) a. [Domnişoară], reveniţi, nu puteţi trece. = neutral, polite
miss return.IMP.2PL not can.2PL pass
'Miss, turn back, you cannot pass.'

4 For an ample discussion of semantic types of vocatives in Romanian see Croitor, Giurgea 2024.

b. [Domnişoara], reveniţi, nu puteţi trece. = formal, authority
miss.the return.IMP.2PL not can.2PL pass
'Miss, turn back, you cannot pass.'

c. [Domnişoaro], nu vezi, nu poţi să treci. = disapprobation
miss.the/VOC not see.2SG not can.2SG SBJV pass.2SG
'Miss, can't you see, you can't pass.'

The bare noun in (15a) signals a polite address; the definite article on the same stem in (15b) signals a call from a position of authority, diminishing the status of the addressee; whereas the fused definite article with the vocative case ending in (15c) indicates a condescending address to a female whom, by her aspect, the guard does not consider worth of respect, or worth to be called 'miss'. Hence, the verbs display the politeness 2nd plural in (15a, b), but the singular in (15c).

5 Formal Approach

The main question arising from these data concerns the compatibility of the definite article with the vocative, considering that the article has an intrinsic 3rd person feature whereas vocatives entail a 2nd person feature associated with the noun. Furthermore, articles are generally irrelevant to the interpretation of the proposition beyond contributing specificity, whereas in vocative phrases they determine the interpretation of the social relation in addition to the specific reading.

The approach to this issue relies on the observation that Voc may subsume the function of D when it comes to licensing the noun as a syntactic object. That is, VocP is the functional field that ensures argument-hood to the noun, by merging with a head of the clausal spine that assigns it a role (i.e. the pragmatic role of addressee) and a structural case (Hill 2014). The mechanics of VocP licensing by merging on the clausal spine fall beyond the foregoing discussion, but the point is that, when deriving the vocative phrase, it is possible to skip the projection of a DP layer, so a VocP > nP hierarchy is possible. This hierarchy has been argued for independently in Espinal (2013), Hill (2014), Stavrou (2014) among others for constructions with simple vocatives.

In a VocP > nP hierarchy, the definite article necessarily merges directly in Voc. The inference is that in such contexts the article does not come with its inherent 3rd person feature. In other words, the article is reanalyzed upwards in the nominal hierarchy as a marker for the [i-p] feature of Voc after being stripped of the person feature. Confirmation comes from data as in (16) and (17).

(16)	a.	(*Măi)	fete**le**,	treceţi	la dreapta.	DP-to-Spec,VocP
		PRT	girls.the	go.IMP.2PL	to right	
		'Girls, go on the right.'				
	b.	(Măi)	fete**lor**,	treceţi	la dreapta.	N-to-Voc
		PRT	girls.the.VOC	go.IMP.2PL	to right	
		'Girls, go on the right.'				
	c.	[Fetele din spate],		treceţi	la dreapta.	DP-to-Spec,VocP
		girls.the from back		go.IMP.2PL	to right	
		'The girls from the back (of the room), go on the right.'				
	d.	*[Fetelor din spate],		treceţi	la dreapta.	*N-to-Voc
		girls.the.VOC from back		go.IMP.2PL	to right	

In (16a), the vocative noun *fetele* 'girls' displays the definite article and cannot cooccur with the vocative particle *măi*. However (16b) shows that the particle is semantically compatible with this noun, only that the noun inflection must be different. In the hierarchy in (6), *măi* occupies the Spec, VocP position. Accordingly, the grammaticality contrast between (16a) and (16b) arises from a competition between *măi* and 'the girls' for the Spec, VocP position in (16a), in this particular case, whereas in (16b) 'girls' undergoes head-to-head movement and allows the particle in the Spec. So, for (16a), the article is in D and the movement must be phrasal, as DP to Spec, VocP. On the other hand, in (16b), the article merges directly in Voc, and n-to-Voc occurs. Consequently, (16c) aligns with (16a) insofar as phrasal movement applies in the absence of *măi*, whereas the form with the reanalyzed article in (16d) is incompatible with phrasal movement.

Note, however, that the complementary distribution between *măi* and a DP in addresses (vs calls) is a general but not a strict rule, and exceptions may be found. That is, some speakers may allow for co-occurrence in some contexts (e.g., *măi flăcău' tatii* 'PRT young-man. the father.GEN'/'father's young man,…'). In these constructions, *măi* merges in Spec, VocP and agrees with the DP in situ (no DP to Spec, VocP movement). However, the intonation contour differs from the examples in (16), introducing an admonishing tone.

Another source of evidence for the direct merging of the definite article in Voc comes from the names of persons used as vocatives, as in (17b).

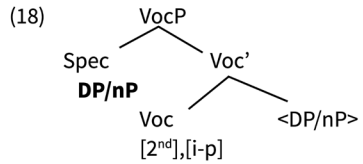
(17)	a.	Ionel(*ul)	a	venit	repede.		
		Ionel.the	has	come	fast		
		'Ionel came right away.'					
	b.	Ionel,	Ionelule,	ce	mai	faci	băiatule?
		Ionel	Ionel.the.VOC	what	more	do.2SG	boy.the.VOC
		'Ionel, Ionel, how are you, my boy?'					

Romanian names disallow articles in all environments except for vocatives, as shown in (17a) versus (17b). (17a) shows that when names qualify as DPs (vs VocPs), they disallow articles. The definite article on the name in (17b) indicates that the name meets with the article somewhere else, not in D, and the Voc head is the alternative. Even the philological studies suggest analyses to that effect for the vocatives of the Balkan languages. Schnelzer (2024) reports that some studies argue that these endings on vocative names did not even originate from the article, but from the reanalysis of some complaint particle (e.g. Bulg. *lele*). The point is that, intuitively, the properties associated with the definite articles on names were felt to be different from the properties expected from a regular definite article. The formal account proposed here makes sense of that suggestion since upward reanalysis to Voc (with the elimination of D) has the feature stripping effect.

This discussion leads to a refinement of the hierarchy in (6), as it distinguishes between two patterns that match structure and interpretation, and both rely on the status of the definite article as either D or Voc. When the article merges in D, the vocatives display phrasal movement or distance agree by which the DP checks the features of Voc, as in (18). Generally, the [i-p] feature in these configurations is underspecified, as in (4), although a familiarity reading may arise contextually (e.g., lexical selection as in *fetele* 'girls.the' vs *domnii* 'gentlemen.the' used in calls). On the other hand, when the definite article merges in Voc, where it combines with the vocative case ending, head-to-head movement or distance agree ensues, as in (19), and the reading is obligatorily informal irrespective of the lexical selection.

➢ Phrasal movement

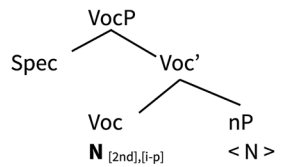
(18)



[i-p] is underspecified

➢ Head-to-head movement

(19)



[i-p] specified as informal

→ no DP field

Crucially, in the presence of definite articles on the vocative noun, the option for the derivational pattern in (18) or (19) depends on the value of the [i-p] feature: an underspecified [i-p] may select a DP (the article in D) with phrasal movement (irrespective of whether the noun is or is not modified); whereas an [i-p] specified for informality triggers a derivation without a DP field, where the article is in Voc and the noun cannot be modified. Notably, the readings predicted by these syntactic patterns may be trumped by lexical choices and contextual grounding, which allow for variation in the interpretation of the [i-p] feature. However, the syntactic patterns that underlie any vocative phrase remain constant, constraining the derivations as either in (18) or in (19).

6 Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to account for the use of definite articles with vocative nouns in Romanian, and to show that such use confirms the presence of a formal interpersonal feature in the bundle of formal features associated with Voc. The evidence for that came not only from variations in the noun inflection but also from syntactic restrictions on coordinating structures, modifiers and types of movement. I used the [i-p] label for that feature; other researchers may have their own proposals. The predictable question is whether the effects of [i-p] are limited to Romanian or may be generalized cross-linguistically. The analysis in (18)/(19) allows for a cross-linguistic extension of the [i-p] on Voc, with variation arising from the (under)specified value of this feature. This is the point where culture and language meet: some languages provide more explicit morpho-syntactic encoding of the type of interpersonal relations, and the underlying syntactic structure allows for typological changes in this respect.

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