The syntax of vocatives in Egyptian Arabic

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Vocative nominals (VNs) like [Hey John] and [You idiot] occur outside the argument structure domain of sentences, exhibit special morphosyntactic properties, are phonologically marked by a pause, and pragmatically signal calls and addresses (Zwicky 1974, Levinson 1983). In this paper, I bring data from Egyptian Arabic (EA) to bear on two questions: What is the internal structure of VNs? How do we explain their morphosyntactic behavior?

VNs in EA are typically introduced by the particle yaa, whose distribution is as follows: (i) yaa is obligatory with bare nouns and (nominalized) adjectives (1a,b). (ii) yaa is prohibited with second person pronouns and DPs headed by the definite article ʔil- (2a,b). (iii) yaa is optional with proper nouns (3a), titles (3b), nouns with possessive clitics (3c), construct-state possessives (3d), bitaatib-possessives (3e), and relative clauses introduced by the complementizer ʔillii (3f).

1. a. *(yaa) walad b. *(yaa) yabii
   ‘You boy’ ‘You stupid’
2. a. (*yaa) ʔinta b. (*yaa) ʔil-wilaad
   ‘You’ ‘The boys’
3. a. (yaa) Ahmad b. (yaa) ʔustaaz c. (yaa) bint-ii d. (yaa) ʔabuu Ahmad
   ‘Ahmad’ ‘Mister’ ‘My daughter’ ‘Father of Ahmad’
   e. (yaa) bitaaʕ ʔil-baTaaTaa f. (yaa)-ʔillii raakin ṭuddaam ʔil-beet
   VOC POSS the-sweet-potatos VOC-COMP parking.3SGM in-front-of the-house
   ‘sweet-potato seller’ ‘The one parking in front of the house’

To account for these facts, I assume that VNs are Vocative Phrases (VocPs), which merge high in a Rizzi-1997 articulated left periphery (Moro 2003, Espinal 2013, Hill 2007, 2013, Stavrou 2013). VocP is headed by Voc, which selects an NP or DP as complement. Voc has an interpretable [2PERSON] feature and an uninterpretable [uD] feature to be licensed under Spec-head agreement with a vocative particle or a category with a [D] feature.

4. [VocP Spec Voc[2PERSON][uD] [DP/NP …]]

When Voc’s complement is an NP, as in (1), the only way to license Voc’s features is by merging the particle yaa in SpecVocP, since bare NPs cannot license [D]. When the complement to Voc is a DP headed by a second person pronoun (2a) or the definite article ʔil- (2b), the DP obligatorily moves to SpecVocP, checking [D] on Voc, and blocking the insertion of yaa. Finally, when Voc’s complement is a DP with a null D, as in (3), then we have two options: Either yaa is merged in SpecVocP or DP moves to SpecVocP, resulting in the optionality of yaa.

Strong evidence in support of a syntactic analysis of VNs that involves feature-licensing inside VocP comes from the morphosyntactic properties of complex VNs in EA, i.e., VNs where a vocative noun is modified by an adjective or a relative clause and which phonologically and syntactically behave as one unified VocP and not as separate VocPs. In such contexts, VocPs exhibit a special kind of agreement that I refer to as vocative concord (VC), where (the head of) each modifier of the vocative N is overtly marked by an instance of the particle yaa, as in (5).

5. *ya[a walad yaa yabii yaa]-ʔillii raakin ṭuddaam ʔil-beet
   VOC boy VOC stupid VOC-COMP parking.3SGM in-front-of the-house
   ‘You stupid boy parking in front of the house’

I show that VC is a reflex of the agreement resulting from feature-licensing inside VocP. I will also show that languages not exhibiting VC effects (e.g., Romanian, Italian) rely instead on displacement operations or overt case-marking for feature-licensing inside VocPs.