

## The inverse vocative in the area of Palermo: a case of microvariation

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This paper discusses the syntax of Inverse Vocatives (henceforth, ‘IVs’) used in the area of Palermo, contrasting them with those reported in the literature for other Southern Italian Varieties (‘SIVs’, including dialects and regional Italian). We suggest that in Palermo IVs and ‘regular’ vocatives (‘RVs’) are both VocPs, but in IVs the noun is in the DP complement of VocP, similarly to what has been proposed for “fake” vocatives by Espinal (2013).

IVs are a typologically rare phenomenon in which a speaker uses an apparent vocative form referred to her/himself. It is found in SIVs, Rumanian, Turkish, Hungarian and some other languages (Rohlf 1925, Renzi 1968, Mazzoleni 1995, a.o.):

- (1) A mother to her son: “Mangia {a/la/Ø} mamma (tua!)” (lit. “Eat {to/the/Ø} (your) mommy!”)  
(Reg. It. of Palermo)

The example (1) (attested with article, with the element *a*, or with a bare noun) should be intended as “Eat, my child!”. There is thus an inversion, where a term referring to the speaker (‘mom’) is used to address the hearer. IVs show some limitations that are absent in RVs: they have an affective value and are only used in intimate contexts. Moreover, IVs cannot be truncated, and they only convey the function of address but not that of call.

In Romance, IVs show diatopic variation. The analyses put forward in the previous literature can be resumed into four approaches:

A) IVs are PPs headed by the dative preposition *a* (which might be null) and have a benefactive value (Sgroi 2012, Iovino & Rossi 2014);

B) IVs include a null element, such as *bello* or *ascolta*, so that “mangia (a) mamma” should be intended as “mangia bello/figlio/ascolta a mamma” (Iovino & Rossi 2016, Abbate 2010);

C) IVs and RVs are both VocPs, but since only IVs trigger *raddoppiamento fonosintattico* (‘RF’), they have a smaller structure than RVs: the absence of RF in RVs is interpreted as involving an additional functional phrase on top of the phrase hosting the IV (Corr 2022);

D) in Rumanian, IVs are merged in VocP2 together with RVs (the IV in Spec and the RV as head; the RV then moves to a higher VocP1), because of their rigid order ‘RV-IV’ (Akkuş & Hill 2017).

In this paper we investigate whether IVs in Palermo differ from those of other SIVs, and whether they can receive one of the structures above. For this aim, we are collecting data about the dialects and regional Italian varieties of Palermo and Terrasini, through a questionnaire in which the informants are asked both acceptability judgements and open questions.

The preliminary results (6 informants) show that in this area IVs have some peculiarities that differ from other varieties attested in the literature: (i) no informant accepts RF (2); (ii) IVs and RVs can occur in any order, unlike Abbate’s and Iovino & Rossi’s data, and they can be non-adjacent (although the co-occurrence of an IV with an RV is considered marginal in general) (3); (iii) the addressee can be plural (4).

- (2) Mangia a {mamma/\*mmamma}! “Eat, my child!”  
(3) ?Mangia mamma Elio!/ Elio mangia mamma! “Eat, Elio my son!”  
(4) Mangiate a mamma! “Eat, my children!”

The refusal of RF, which is obligatory when *a* is a preposition, excludes that the IV is a PP or part of a bigger structure with *bello/figlio/ascolta* (hypotheses A and B above): the *a* is better compared to the vocative particle *a* optionally used in RVs of various dialects (e.g. Romanesco, Loporcario & Faraoni 2021). Crucially, in many other varieties (including Romanesco), the *a* of IVs triggers RF. In addition, when asked explicitly our informants rejected paraphrases with “eat for your mommy” and with introductory elements like *bello* or *ascolta a*. Instead, they affirmed that IVs codify an affective value referred to the addressee, even if the noun does not *per se* refer to her/him, and thus they are perceived as a special type of RV. The impossibility of RF is also incompatible with hypothesis C,

which, in addition, does not fully explain why IVs cannot be truncated. Finally, hypothesis D is not a good candidate either, because the order IV-RV is possible and an IV can co-occur with an RV in different positions (3): thus they cannot be part of the same VocP.

The point of departure of our analysis is truncation: as shown in D'Alessandro & Oostendorp (2016), nouns can be truncated in RVs because they are heads moved to Voc. Conversely, truncation is out in “fake” vocatives (i.e., vocatives associated, among others, with a predicational or referential meaning, cf. Espinal 2013), because here the noun remains in the DP complement of VocP. We propose that IVs have a similar structure as “fake” vocatives: in both, the noun is in the complement of VocP (NP if there is an article; DP otherwise) and does not move to Voc; Voc has a [+DX] feature that identifies the (null) addressee, as in Espinal (2013), and it enters a c-command relation with the noun ‘mamma’ (5). Note that truncation is out even in the varieties that have RF in IVs. Therefore, we tentatively suggest that in these varieties *a* is a preposition, and that usually the Voc head selects a PP instead of a DP (6). In the varieties in which the IV has a purely benefactive (and not vocative/addressing) reading, instead, the IV has the same structure as other types of benefactives (i.e., a PP adjunct).

- (5) a. [<sub>VocP</sub> (a) Voc<sub>[+DX]</sub> [<sub>DP</sub> la [<sub>NP</sub> mamma]]]  
 b. [<sub>VocP</sub> (a) Voc<sub>[+DX]</sub> [<sub>DP</sub> mamma tua [<sub>NP</sub> ~~mamma~~]]]  
 (6) [<sub>VocP</sub> Voc<sub>[+DX]</sub> [<sub>PP</sub> a [<sub>DP</sub> mmamma tua [<sub>NP</sub> ~~mamma~~]]]]

The structure in (5)-(6) explains why IVs cannot be truncated, and also why RF is out: the structural distance between *a* and the vocative does not allow RF. Note that the IV is hosted in a different VocP than an RV, thus IVs and RVs can co-occur in different positions in the clause. Finally, its similarity to “fake” vocatives might explain why the call function is out. This latter property might also be due to the fact that IVs are always used in contexts in which the connection between the two participants has already been established, with a physical proximity which makes the call function unnecessary. Note that conceptually it makes sense that IVs are similar to “fake” vocatives, because IVs might also imply a predicational or identificational value (although with a ‘lexical flip’), as “fake” vocatives do (Espinal 2013).

In conclusion, in Palermo IVs the noun sits in the DP complement of a VocP, while in RVs it moves to the Voc head (of a different VocP). In future research we will investigate whether this analysis can be extended to other Sicilian varieties.

## References

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