

An Investigation into the Vocative *Bro*: Connections Between Speaker, Purpose & Position

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Vocatives have been shown to be rich with sociolinguistic meaning, because their use as reference terms is indicative of the identities of and dynamic between speakers (Zwicky, 1974). This study builds off previous research into the many male-gendered vocatives common in English (e.g. Kiesling, 2004; Rendle-Short, 2009), by investigating who uses the vocative *bro* today and how they do so. Specifically, this study expands upon the work of Urichuk & Loureiro-Rodríguez (2019), which highlighted the current prevalence of *bro* amongst younger Manitobans. Examining data from text messages, Twitter, and an online English corpus (COCA), this research seeks to understand how *bro* is employed by speakers of different gender and ethnic identities, and to explore the connections between utterance position, vocative purpose and speaker identity.

Research into male-gendered English vocatives (e.g. Kiesling, 2004; Rendle-Short, 2009) observes that women use them more than assumed, but often for different purposes than men. In particular, only men frequently use these vocatives to show a very specific not-too-intimate kind of solidarity. Contrastingly, for example, Rendle-Short (2009) and Kiesling (2004) both saw women use *mate* and *dude* respectively often for commiseration, in an expressive way that nonetheless creates connection with the addressee. The vocative *bro* seems like fertile ground for similar correlations with speaker identity, especially considering its history. Originating as an African-American reference term¹, *bro* received a lot of attention in the 2000s as a popularly-condemned solidarity marker for privileged frat boys². Recently, results from a self-report survey on male vocatives in Manitoba (Urichuk & Loureiro-Rodríguez, 2019) suggest that *bro* is more commonly used by young males, regardless of their ethnicity.

In order to further explore uses of *bro*, this study examines 328 *bro* tokens gathered from three methods of data collection: a corpus of speech from American TV/radio from 1990-2017 (COCA) (n=72), a collection of tweets from 2019 (n=152), and responses to an ongoing survey in which participants submit text messages including *bro* (n=104). This provides us with a breadth of naturally-occurring data from speakers of various ages, genders, and ethnicities, as well as covering different modes of communication.

Preliminary analysis shows several distinctive patterns of use. In the COCA data, we find a more ‘traditional’ use of *bro*: participants are mostly middle-aged African-American males employing *bro* for addressee identification and discussion facilitation at the end of the utterance (e.g. “What do you make of all this, bro?”). The Twitter corpus features younger speakers (avg age=22), and a large portion of the data constitutes an extension of the previous: young male speakers across ethnicities using *bro* at the end of their utterance frequently to ‘toughen up’ their tweet, perhaps drawing upon the stereotypical association of AAVE with toughness and masculinity (e.g. “Never gone. Never forgotten. I love you bro.”). A second pattern can be observed in the Twitter data, with young women of various ethnicities using *bro* at the beginning of their utterance for intensity (e.g. “BRO THE CAPTION”). The consistent use of *bro* by these young women strengthens previous observations that women use male-gendered vocatives more than their masculine-associations might suggest. As well, females’ frequent use of utterance-initial position and the general correlation of position with vocative purpose and speaker are new observations that contrast with previous work considering vocative position (e.g. Martínez, 2018; Rendle-Short, 2010).

Overall, while men seem to employ *bro* often for solidarity that isn’t ‘too’ close, that use does not seem necessary for women and their more innovative use instead resembles a discourse marker. Further insights from survey data will also be presented to expand upon these observations.

¹ Malady, Matthew J. X. (2014, August 13). *The End of Bro*. Retrieved from <https://slate.com>

² Demby, Gene. (2013, June 21). *Yeah! We Mapped Out The 4 Basic Aspects Of Being A 'Bro'*. Retrieved from <https://npr.org>

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