

Conventionalized impoliteness in English and Polish: The case of ‘you idiot!’

Abstract: This study argues against the dominant view in the current research that linguistic forms cannot be conventionalized for (im)politeness. As a case study, we examine a construction in English and Polish typically characterized as expressing addressee evaluation, i.e. ‘you idiot/beauty!’. However, recent work has shown that this construction is heavily biased toward genuine insults in usage and has therefore claimed that it exhibits a high level of conventionalization for impoliteness, possibly due to the pragmatic explicitness and directness of adding the second person pronoun to an address. We put this claim to the test, through a questionnaire that asks first language speakers to rate the well-formedness and (im)politeness of addresses featuring different types of nouns with ‘you’ or without it. Our results confirm the construction’s overall conventionalization for impoliteness. Addresses with evaluatively neutral nouns such as ‘reader’, for example, are found not only to be less well-formed when combining with the second person pronoun but also to be forced into an evaluative and, more specifically, impolite interpretation with ‘you’. Yet, our results contain little evidence for the hypothesis in the previous work that the second person pronoun would increase the impoliteness of negatively evaluative addresses like ‘(you) idiot!’ or for the idea in the earlier work that the Polish construction would be more conventionalized for impoliteness.

Keywords: conventionalization, English, insult, impoliteness, Polish, questionnaire

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1 Introduction

Impoliteness may be characterized as (linguistic) behavior that is assessed negatively – in specific situations and against a range of different ideals (cf. Section 2.1) – and has (often intentional) offensive effects or, put differently, causes emotional ramifications such as anger and hurt for some person/people (Culpeper 2011: 23). Contrary to the prevailing view in the literature, this chapter seeks to show that impoliteness understood in this manner *can* be conventionalized. To make our case, we will look at the English pattern instantiated by *you idiot!* and its equivalent in Polish, which are typically intended and/or perceived as genuine direct insults and can thus be said to have an offensive or negative emotional effect on the addressee(s). In this introduction, we will first review the debate about conventionalized (im)politeness, then introduce the particular pattern under examination and conclude with the aims of our study.

1.1 Conventionalized (im)politeness

Classic theories of politeness (e.g. Lakoff 1974; Brown and Levinson 1987) acknowledged that politeness may be “relative to norms in a given society, group, or situation” but they maintained at the same time that it also exists “in terms of the lexicogrammatical form and semantic interpretation of an utterance” (Leech 2014: 88). In fact, their focus was very much on how specific linguistic forms relate to various maxims or principles of politeness and on how the choice of such forms can be affected by extra-linguistic factors – typically treated as invariable – like social distance and power. The field has, however, witnessed a significant shift since the

discursive and post-structuralist turn in politeness studies (e.g. Eelen 2001; Mills 2003). The dominant view nowadays is that “no utterance is inherently polite” (Locher 2006: 251) and politeness is thus seen as a purely situational judgment by the interlocutors. Accordingly, the focus at present is mostly on how speech participants themselves construe politeness and construct it through discourse.

It will probably come as little surprise that the debate about “formal inherency” just presented (in an admittedly simplified manner) is present in the literature on impoliteness too (e.g. Culpeper 1996; Locher and Watts 2008). Culpeper (2011: 120–121) offers a useful evaluation of the two positions. On the one hand, it would obviously be wrong to assume that impoliteness is just a matter of form. Speakers can easily cause offence without resorting to ostensibly impolite expressions. The way in which such forms are perceived may also vary between cultures, situations and/or individuals and they are often used ironically or as banter as well (e.g. Lagorgette and Larrivé 2004 on insults as markers of solidarity). On the other hand, impoliteness is not simply a matter of discourse either. People can and do assess the (level of) impoliteness of expressions out of context. As Van Olmen and Grass (2023) show, for instance, French speakers judge the pseudo nouns¹ *plauche* and *galpon* to be offensive, even with no situational information, when they occur in *espèce de ...!* (lit. ‘species of ...!’). This fact suggests that there is something intrinsically impolite about the expression.

A way to reconcile the conflicting positions can be found in Terkourafi’s (2005a, 2005b) work. She argues that linguistic forms may indeed be associated with politeness: if they repeatedly combine with “particular types of context ... as the *unchallenged* realisations of particular acts”, they can establish frames together “that create the perception of politeness” (Terkourafi 2005a: 248). Crucially, however, these frames have a variable degree of conventionalization in Terkourafi’s (2005b: 213) view, correlating with “the (statistical) frequency with which an expression is used in one’s experience of a particular context”. As experiences may diverge, the linguistic forms in such frames need not be polite for all speakers and/or in all situations. Moreover, what happens – in Neo-Gricean terms – when faced with a specific expression is that, “rather than engaging in full-blown [particularized] inferencing about the speaker’s intention, the addressee draws on that previous experience (represented holistically as a frame) to derive the proposition that ‘in offering an expression *x* the speaker is being polite’ as a generalised implicature of the speaker’s utterance” (Terkourafi 2005a: 251). Politeness would thus be this form’s assumed or preferred interpretation. Yet, this reading would still be cancellable.

Culpeper (2011: 113–154) shows that this framework can be applied to impoliteness too and adopts it to identify a range of relevant formulae in British English. One of them involves *you* plus a noun phrase functioning as an insulting address (e.g. *you idiot!*), which is the topic of the next section.

1.2 YOU+NP in English and Polish

Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper (2023) point out – with reference to, among others, Potts and Roeper (2006) and Corver (2008) – that this formula counts as a construction in English as well as in Polish and Dutch.² That is, what we call YOU+NP is a “conventionalized” pairing “of form and function” (Goldberg 2006: 3), combining unique grammatical properties with a

¹ We use this term to refer to words that look like real nouns in a language but do not actually exist. The way that such words are interpreted within structures, like *plauche* and *galpon* in *espèce de ...!*, can reveal important characteristics of those structures. For instance, if pseudo nouns receive a particular interpretation in some structure, that interpretation can only really be assumed to come from the structure itself.

² As the present chapter deals with English and Polish, Dutch will not be discussed further. Let it suffice to mention here that it behaves in more or less the same manner as the other two languages (see Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper 2023: 31–33).

distinct meaning (see Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper 2023: 26–27). At first glance, for instance, (1a) and (1b) may look similar to the appositive patterns in (1c) and (1d) in that they are made up of a pronoun and a noun phrase. There are differences, however. The appositives in (1c) and (1d) are integrated into the clausal syntax, as subjects, in both Polish and English while (1a) and (1b) stand on their own. Moreover, YOU+NP can be singular or plural in the two languages, as (1a) and (1b) make clear, but the appositives can only be plural, as shown by (1c) versus (1e) and (1d) versus (1f). In Polish, YOU+NP also requires the noun phrase to be in vocative rather than nominative case, as the comparison of (1g) to (1a) reveals – but note that, as in (1b) to (1d), the two cases are syncretic for plural nouns.³

- (1) a. *Ty* *idioto!*
2SG.NOM/VOC idiot.VOC.M.SG
'You idiot!'
- b. *Wy* *idioci!*
2PL.NOM/VOC idiot.NOM/VOC.M.PL
'You idiots!'
- c. *My* *studenci* *jesteśmy* *inteligentni.*
1PL.NOM student.NOM/VOC.M.PL be.1PL.PRS intelligent.NOM.PL
'We students are intelligent.'
- d. *Wy* *studenci* *jesteście* *inteligentni.*
2PL.NOM/VOC student.NOM/VOC.M.PL be.2PL.PRS intelligent.NOM.PL
'You students are intelligent.'
- e. **Ja* *student* *jestem* *inteligentny.*
1SG.NOM student.NOM.M.SG be.1SG.PRS intelligent.NOM.M.SG
'I student am intelligent.'
- f. **Ty* *student* *jesteś* *inteligentny.*
2SG.NOM/VOC student.NOM.M.SG be.2SG.PRS intelligent.NOM.M.SG
'You student are intelligent.'
- g. **Ty* *idiota!*
2SG.NOM/VOC idiot.NOM.M.SG
'You idiot!' (intended meaning)

YOU+NP's semantics can be described as conveying addressee evaluation. This meaning manifests itself clearly in (2). Non-evaluative noun phrases like *rowerzysto* 'cyclist' in (2a) do not seem very compatible with the construction – unless the noun is modified by evaluative adjectives such as *głupi* 'stupid' and *dzielny* 'brave' in (2b).

- (2) a. ? *Ty rowerzysto!*
? 'You cyclist!'
- b. *Ty głupi/dzielny rowerzysto!*
'You stupid/brave cyclist!'

Example (2b) also shows that addressee evaluation need not actually be negative in YOU+NP. This fact raises the question why Culpeper (2011) and numerous others (e.g. Teleman, Andersson and Hellberg 1999: 797; Ooms and Van Keymeulen 2005: 63–64; Finkbeiner, Meibauer

³ We will provide glosses for Polish just in (1), since it is the only place where such grammatical information is relevant. For our other examples, translations should suffice. The abbreviations used in (1) are: 1 first person, 2 second person, M masculine, NOM nominative, PL plural, PRS present, SG singular and VOC vocative. Note also that (1e) and (1f) would be more acceptable if *student* was separated intonationally – or by commas in writing – from the rest of the clause but that the noun would then be parenthetical rather than part of an appositive structure.

and Wiese 2016: 4) nevertheless regard the construction as an impoliteness formula.

In line with the above understanding of conventionalization, Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper (2023: 28) argue that the answer lies in the use of YOU+NP: “If we can establish that, in actual usage, the construction (most) frequently serves impolite purposes, it is not unreasonable to assume that language users generalise over such instances and there exists a schema [or frame] – alongside a more abstract evaluative one – where the form YOU+NP is associated with the ‘function’ of impoliteness.” To this end, they examine 200 random corpus attestations of the construction for each language. A quick look at the nouns appearing in their data is already highly suggestive (see Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper 2023: 32–33). The five most common ones, presented in (3),⁴ are clearly all negatively evaluative.⁵

- (3) a. *idiot* (16), *bastard* (11), *bitch* (5), *fucker* (5), *moron* (5)
 b. *idiot(k)a* ‘idiot’ (13), *swinia* ‘swine’ (8), *chuj* ‘fucker’ (7), *dran* ‘bastard’ (7), *dupek* ‘asshole’ (4)

The study goes further, though, and analyzes the co-text of every hit to determine whether it is truly impolite or, in words reminiscent of Culpeper (2011: 11–12), whether there is sufficient evidence that it is intended and/or taken to have negative emotional ramifications for the addressee. An in-depth discussion of this co-textual evidence is beyond the scope of the present chapter but the underlined parts in (4) should give the reader a good idea of the types of indications considered (see also Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper 2023: 29–30).⁶

- (4) a. meta-linguistic comments
usmiechnol sie do mnie szyderczo gdy widzial ze policja mnie powstrzymuje, krzyknolem “ty pedale!” a on do mnie “ty heteryku!” :/ od kiedy heteryk to cos zlego? :| ale skoro on mnie tka obraza to uwaza ze to cos zlego (plTenTen19-390136)
 ‘he smirked at me when he saw that the police were stopping me, I shouted “you faggot!” and he said to me “**you heterosexual!**” :/ since when is being straight something wrong? :| but since he is insulting me in this way, he must think it’s wrong’
 b. impoliteness responses (e.g. challenging; Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann 2003: 1563)
*I’m surprised at your arrogant post hasn’t gotten you flamed yet; you certainly deserve to be, **you dolt**. – I don’t see how I would be considered a dolt and the post was not arrogant.* (enTenTen18-35133812)
 c. narrative insights into the interlocutors’ intent and/or mental state
*Bassam explained that the Border Police soldiers were driving by the school in Anata, taunting the children by saying, “Come out, **you heroes**.” ... They routinely use the loudspeakers to yell profanity at homes while on patrol.* (enTenTen18-13452138)

⁴ When different Polish forms are given with the same translation, like *idiot(k)a* ‘idiot’ in (3) and *sqsiedzie/sqsiadko* ‘neighbor’ in (5), they are simply the masculine and feminine variants of the noun.

⁵ One reviewer wishes to know how many of the 200 cases per language contain negatively evaluative nouns. Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper (2023: 31), however, do not look at nouns in isolation but consider whole noun phrases (*girl* on its own may not be overtly evaluative but, when combined with *dumb*, for instance, it does convey negative evaluation). Moreover, they explicitly refrain from giving frequencies for evaluative versus non-evaluative noun phrases because of difficulties in distinguishing them. It is therefore only possible to provide the rough estimate that, in both languages, circa 80% of the noun phrases are negatively evaluative.

⁶ The corpus examples in this chapter all come from Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper (2023), who relied on the multilingual TenTen corpus family (Jakubíček et al. 2013) for their investigation.

- d. co-occurring acts (e.g. threats)
Zostawcie tą biedną dziewczynę w spokoju! Albo pokażę wam, co to jest prawdziwy BÓL wy chorzy degeneraci! (plTenTen19-1264337)
 ‘Leave that poor girl alone! Or I’ll show you what real PAIN is, you sick degenerates!’

The analysis reveals that English YOU+NP exhibits a strong predisposition in usage to impoliteness and its Polish counterpart an even stronger one, with 75% of the former’s hits and 92% of the latter’s resembling those in (4) (these numbers do not even include the respective 12% and 4% of attestations that contain negatively evaluative noun phrases but are employed in a non-impolite way, to “talk dirty” in sexually charged interactions or as banter; Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper 2023: 33–36).

These findings justify calling YOU+NP an impoliteness construction in Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper’s (2023) view. The frequency data does not explain, however, *why* this addressee evaluation construction, which *may* be positive too after all (e.g. *you extraordinary beauty!*), is so biased toward impoliteness in English and even more so in Polish. Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper (2023: 37) believe that the presence of the second person pronoun plays a crucial role here. While, strictly speaking, it may be somewhat redundant in an address (already marked by an intonation break, for instance), it does serve to openly ascribe the noun phrase’s meaning to the addressee. Making the target clear in this way can be said to make the address pragmatically more explicit and thus direct (see Culpeper and Haugh 2014: 170). Such directness is often eschewed on account of politeness (cf. Brown and Levinson’s 1987: 131 strategies to “impersonalise S[peaker] and H[earer] and “avoid the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘you’”). If one wishes to insult someone, by contrast, “explicitly associat[ing]” them “with a negative aspect” (Culpeper 2005: 41), like ‘you’ does in YOU+NP, is very effective. Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper (2023: 37) go as far as hypothesizing that the construction “does the job of hurting the addressee’s feelings better than an offensive address that does not contain a second person pronoun” but concede that “this conjecture obviously needs to be tested”. They also discuss possible reasons why the impact of ‘you’ may be especially pronounced in Polish. For one, as it is a pro-drop language, the nominative-vocative pronouns *ty* ‘you’ and *wy* ‘you all’ do not appear very often and their overt expression immediately evokes strong interpersonal emphasis, which lends itself to impoliteness. Moreover, Polish makes a distinction between informal *ty/wy* and formal *Pan* and variants (see Piskorska 2023). The fact that YOU+NP features the former pronouns means that it may be comparatively acceptable for addressing people close to the speaker but, when directed at others, the construction may come with an extra layer of irreverence or even condescension.

1.3 Present study

As mentioned in the preceding section, Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper’s (2023) hypothesis about the difference between ‘idiot!’ and ‘you idiot!’ deserves to be checked. The same is true for some of the predictions that they make based on their results (see Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper 2023: 37). They expect, for instance, that, YOU+NP will tend to be perceived as impolite even with evaluatively neutral nouns (e.g. ‘reader’) and pseudo nouns (e.g. ‘sprim’) out of context. In other words, the frequency-determined frame associated with the construction will force not just an evaluative interpretation on such nouns but a negatively evaluative one in particular (cf. Jain 2022: 389). They also suggest, given that YOU+NP seems almost exclusively impolite in Polish, that these tendencies may be stronger in this language than in English and, implicitly, that the effects could even arise with positively evaluative nouns (e.g. ‘angel’).

Putting these claims to the test is what the present chapter seeks to do after this

introduction. More specifically, we will examine, through a questionnaire, how compatible YOU+NP in English and Polish is with different types of nouns and what impact adding YOU to such nouns has on their interpretation. The methodology for this study will be discussed in Section 2. Section 3 will present our results. In Section 4, finally, we will give our conclusions.

2 Methodology

The present section will first describe the design of the questionnaire. We will move on to the instructions given to the participants next and then to the way in which the data was collected. The section ends with the details of the statistical analysis.

2.1 Design

The questionnaire consists of thirty scenarios.⁷ Since we are explicitly interested in judgments on YOU+NP out of context, since they can reveal much about the construction (see Section 1.1), each provides the same minimal situational information of “imagine that someone addresses you in this way”. The scenarios do vary, of course, in what the second person is actually called. They feature – both with and without ‘you’ – the negatively evaluative nouns in (5a), the positively evaluative ones in (5b), the evaluatively neutral ones in (5c), the pseudo nouns in (5d) and the inanimate nouns in (5e). This nominal diversity will allow us to see, for example, whether YOU+NP goes as well with positive *and* negative evaluation in Polish as in English, whether the construction forces an impolite reading onto non-evaluative and pseudo nouns or whether it can even create addresses out of nouns that do not normally characterize people (see Section 1.3). The choice of the specific nouns results from extensive deliberation, based in part on the findings of Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper (2023), about terms that have comparable de- and connotations in the two languages.

- (5) a. (ty) *debilu!* – (ty) *degeneracie/degeneratko!*
 (you) *moron!* – (you) *degenerate!*
 b. (ty) *aniele!* – (ty) *słodziaku*
 (you) *angel!* – (you) *sweetie!*
 c. (ty) *czytelniku/czytelniczko* – (ty) *sąsiedzie/sąsiadko*
 (you) *reader!* – (you) *neighbour!*
 d. (ty) *sprimie* – (ty) *wabie*
 (you) *sprim!* – (you) *wabe!*
 e. (ty) *botelku* – (ty) *garnku*
 (you) *bottle!* – (you) *pot!*

The list in (5) accounts for twenty scenarios. The other ten contain filler pairs – like *Wasza/Moja Wysokość!* ‘Your/My Highness!’, *(mój) panie/(moja) pani!* ‘(my) Sir/Madame!’ and *mój/drogi głupku!* ‘my/dear fool!’ – to obscure the focus of the questionnaire to some degree. In addition, all of these scenarios appear in an order that makes any direct comparison of the members of a pair more difficult. For example, the first half of the survey includes one negatively evaluative noun with ‘you’ (*ty degeneracie/degeneratko!* ‘you degenerate!’ in scenario 11) and one without it (*debilu!* ‘moron!’ in scenario 2) and the second half their counterparts (*degeneracie/degeneratko!* ‘degenerate!’ in scenario 24; *ty debilu!* ‘you moron!’ in scenario 19).

⁷ The English and Polish surveys in their entirety can be accessed at <https://forms.gle/PXmAFDSGxmBgBMkK7> and <https://forms.gle/rC9sBrjtSy8gcxnB7> respectively (both last accessed on 09/10/2024).

For each scenario, our survey has two questions, as the mock example in (6) shows. The first one asks, like in (6a), for an assessment, on a seven-point scale, of the well-formedness of the address. It will enable us to test how compatible YOU+NP is with different types of nouns in English and Polish and thus check intuitions like that in (2a), i.e. that non-evaluative nouns are somewhat strange in the construction (see Section 1.2).

(6) Imagine that someone addresses you in this way: “You idiot!”

- a. How natural/well-formed is *you idiot!* in this case? (Remember that 4 stands for “neither unnatural/ill-formed nor natural/well-formed”.)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
very unnatural/very ill-formed	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	very natural/very well-formed

- b. How unkind/hurtful/etc. or kind/complimentary/etc. is the individual saying *you idiot!* in this case? (Remember that 4 stands for “neither unkind/hurtful/etc. nor kind/complimentary/etc.”)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
very unkind/very hurtful/very bad-natured/very uncivil/very impolite	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	very kind/very complimentary/very good-natured/very civil/very polite

The second question, like in (6b), asks for a judgment, on a seven-point scale, about the (im)politeness of the address. It will allow us to test, for instance, whether negatively evaluative nouns are considered (even) more impolite when they occur in YOU+NP or whether evaluatively neutral nouns are seen as (more) impolite in the construction (see Sections 1.2 and 1.3). What is important to note here, though, is the insight from the discursive and post-structuralist research that the interpretation of terms like “polite” and “impolite” is not stable at all. For that reason, our survey does not just use these labels in the questions (and the instructions; see Section 2.2). Following Oliver (2023: 134) and others, the questionnaire also captures (im)politeness: (i) with ‘kind/unkind’ as an assessment of behavior for signaling a close/distant relationship (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987 and Culpeper 1996 on positive (im)politeness); (ii) with ‘complimentary/hurtful’ as an appraisal of the costs and benefits of conduct to others (cf. Culpeper and Tantucci 2021 on the principle of (im)politeness reciprocity); (iii) with ‘good-natured/bad-natured’ as an evaluation of a person’s innate character (cf. Kádár 2017 on (im)politeness and morality); and, lastly, (iv) with ‘civil/uncivil’ as an appraisal of the adherence to some conventional code of conduct (cf. Sifianou 2019 on the connection between (im)politeness and (in)civility).

2.2. Instructions

The participant information page of the survey warns people that it contains language that some may find offensive. The page also alerts potential participants of the fact that there are a number of optional demographic questions about age, gender, education, employment and languages. This information is gathered for two reasons. On the one hand, it enables us to remove individuals who compromise the comparability of the English and Polish participant groups (see Section 2.3). On the other hand, it allows us to delete the data of anyone who wishes to withdraw

from the study within four weeks of taking part (no such request was received, however).

The instructions themselves firstly inform participants that they will be presented with a range of short scenarios and illustrate them with one featuring *szczęściarzu!* ‘lucky duck!’ as the address in the format of (6). Participants are also told that, “if a scenario includes multiple gendered forms (e.g. ‘waiter/waitress!’), [they] are encouraged to consider only the form that [they] think applies to [them] for [their] answers”. Then, we introduce, through our illustration, the questions and the ways to respond to them. The first one is said to ask participants “to assess how well-formed ‘lucky duck!’ is linguistically as a way of addressing someone in [their] language”. For the sake of clarity, we also rephrase the question: “How natural do you think it is in your language to call someone ‘lucky duck!’ when you talk to them?”. The answer is described as requiring the selection of “a score on a 7-point scale, where 1 stands for ‘very unnatural/very ill-formed’, 7 for ‘very natural/very well-formed’ and 4 for ‘neither unnatural/ill-formed nor natural/well-formed’”. The second question is said to ask participants “to assess to what extent the person saying ‘lucky duck!’ to [them] is being kind/complimentary/good-natured/civil or unkind/hurtful/bad-natured/uncivil”. It too gets rephrased, as “how polite do you think the speaker of ‘lucky duck!’ is?”. The answer is characterized as expecting participants “to pick a score from 1, which means ‘very unkind/very hurtful/...’, to 7, which means ‘very kind/very complimentary/...’”, with 4 standing “for ‘neither unkind/hurtful/... nor kind/complimentary/...’”.

The final guidelines are of a more general nature. Participants are told that there are no correct or incorrect answers: “This questionnaire is not a test of your knowledge of any rules of [your] language or ... culture. We are interested in your own linguistic intuitions and judgments, not in what other people, institutions, style guides or grammars might think.” They are also instructed to respond as instinctively as possible and to avoid changing any scores given. We furthermore stress that there is no time limit to the survey and encourage participants to use the whole seven-point scale: “For instance, if you believe that a particular expression is not especially well-formed but not impossible either, you may want to consider assigning a score of 2 or 3. Similarly, if you believe that a certain expression is more kind than unkind but not especially kind, you may want to consider assigning a score of 5 or 6.”

2.3 Data collection

The data for English was collected in two ways.⁸ The first author invited his own undergraduate students at Lancaster University – the 2022 first- and second-year cohorts in May 2023 and the 2023 first-year cohort in October 2023 – to complete the questionnaire. He also asked linguist-colleagues at other British universities in June 2023 to circulate a call among their undergraduates. All students were told that the survey was looking for judgments on the well-formedness and degree of (im)politeness of a range of English expressions by first language speakers. We also stressed that they were entirely free to take part or not, that the questionnaire was anonymous and that non-participation would not affect their studies or grades in any way. The survey received a total of fifty-seven responses. Five were removed, however: two because the participant did not identify as a first language speaker of English, three because the participant reported that they were not a student. This last decision was mainly taken to make sure that the English and Polish groups were as similar as possible. The fifty-two remaining participants were all born between 2000 and 2005, 71.15% of them identified as female and 88.46% said that they were studying linguistics and/or a modern language.

⁸ For which ethical approval was obtained by the first author from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University in April 2023. Thanks are due to João Almeida (University of Glasgow), Federica Formato (University of Brighton), Robbie Love (Aston University), Carmen Ríos García (University of Liverpool) and Ellen Smith-Dennis (University of Warwick) for their help in disseminating the English survey.

To get the data for Polish,⁹ the second author asked colleagues at universities in Poland in March 2023 to distribute an invitation to take part in the survey among their undergraduates. The message said that we were interested in judgments by first language speakers on the well-formedness and degree of (im)politeness of a range of Polish expressions. We also again emphasized that participation was voluntary, anonymous and unconnected to the student's studies. The questionnaire received one hundred and twenty-six responses, of which twenty-eight were excluded: two participants did not identify as first language speakers of Polish, three were born in the 1970s and 1980s and twenty-three stated that they were not students. The other ninety-eight had an overall profile comparable to that of our English participants. They were all born between 1995 and 2004, 73.47% of them identified as female and 94.90% reported that they were studying linguistics and/or a modern language.

For the sake of clarity, Table 1 summarizes and compares the information of our Polish and English participants.

Table 1: Comparison of questionnaire participants

Language	# Respondents	# Excluded	Year of birth	% Female-identifying	% Language degree
English	57	5	2000-2005	71.15	88.46
Polish	126	28	1995-2004	73.47	94.90

2.4 Analysis

We will provide the following descriptive statistics for our questionnaire results: means (μ) and standard deviations (σ). The former capture the average score for well-formedness or level of (im)politeness of a specific type of noun with or without the second person pronoun. The latter measure the variation between the scores given by all participants for this type of noun with or without 'you': if the standard deviation is low, those scores tend to be close to the mean; if it is high, they are more dispersed (see Rasinger 2013: 134–136).

For the comparison of two scores (e.g. the (im)politeness of positively evaluative nouns with or without the second person pronoun), we will use two-tailed paired t-tests. They assess whether the mean scores differ significantly from each other or not, also taking into consideration their standard deviations. Our t-tests are two-tailed because we do not always have clear expectations about the direction of the difference between scores (see Baayen 2008: 81). They are paired because we always compare data from the same group of participants (see Rasinger 2013: 200). When contrasting one score to multiple others (e.g. in the post-hoc analysis after an analysis of variance; see below), our standard level of significance will undergo Bonferroni correction, dividing it up by the number of comparisons conducted. This adjustment minimizes the likelihood of overvaluing any particular test result with a p-value below 0.05, since it may simply arise by chance amidst numerous tests (see Baayen 2008: 114).

For well-formedness in particular, we will also need to contrast several scores at the same time (e.g. different kinds of nouns with or without the second person pronoun) and we can use an analysis of variance – ANOVA, for short – to do so (see Rasinger 2013: 209). Our ANOVAs are of the type with repeated measures since we always compare data from the same group of participants (see Baayen 2008: 264). They are also of the two-way variety since we wish to test two separate variables (i.e. noun type and presence/absence of 'you'; see Rasinger 2013: 210–

⁹ In accordance with Swedish law at the time of data collection, given that the study does not directly deal with or process potentially sensitive personal data in Sweden, alongside the intended storage of data at Lancaster University, the survey was deemed exempt from ethics clearance by the second author's affiliations of Umeå University and Uppsala University. Thanks are due to Agata Rozumko (University of Białystok), Adam Głaz (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin), Adam Wojtaszek (University of Silesia), Sylwia Karolak (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań), Dariusz Szczukowski (University of Gdańsk) and Łukasz Książyk (University of Warsaw) for their help in disseminating the Polish questionnaire.

3 Results

3.1 Overview

Table 2 gives, for both English and Polish, the means and the standard deviations for the well-formedness and the degree of (im)politeness of the five different types of nouns (see Section 2.1) *with* the second person ([+you]) and *without* it ([−you]). In the rest of this section, we will first examine the findings for well-formedness and then those for (im)politeness.

Table 2: All questionnaire results

Noun type	[±you]	Well-formedness				(Im)politeness			
		English		Polish		English		Polish	
		μ	σ	μ	σ	μ	σ	μ	σ
negatively evaluative	[−you]	5.06	1.77	4.65	2.03	1.90	0.97	1.73	0.89
	[+you]	5.47	1.61	5.15	1.93	1.92	0.96	1.69	1.16
positively evaluative	[−you]	5.27	1.53	5.22	1.72	5.58	1.24	5.96	1.11
	[+you]	4.92	1.76	4.68	1.97	5.94	1.21	6.00	1.19
evaluatively neutral	[−you]	3.85	1.73	5.71	1.51	4.33	0.83	5.18	1.18
	[+you]	2.05	1.32	2.74	1.89	3.62	0.93	3.61	1.29
pseudo	[−you]	1.85	1.16	1.65	1.11	3.45	0.88	3.08	1.15
	[+you]	2.47	1.62	1.81	1.26	3.17	0.97	2.96	1.19
inanimate	[−you]	2.03	1.26	1.81	1.19	3.48	0.80	3.07	0.99
	[+you]	2.95	1.58	1.94	1.22	2.97	0.84	2.90	1.03

3.2 Well-formedness

Let us begin with the results for English, for which Figure 1 presents the mean scores in a more accessible way (note, again, that 1 stands for ‘very ill-formed’, 7 for ‘very well-formed’ and 4 for ‘neither ill-formed nor well-formed’).

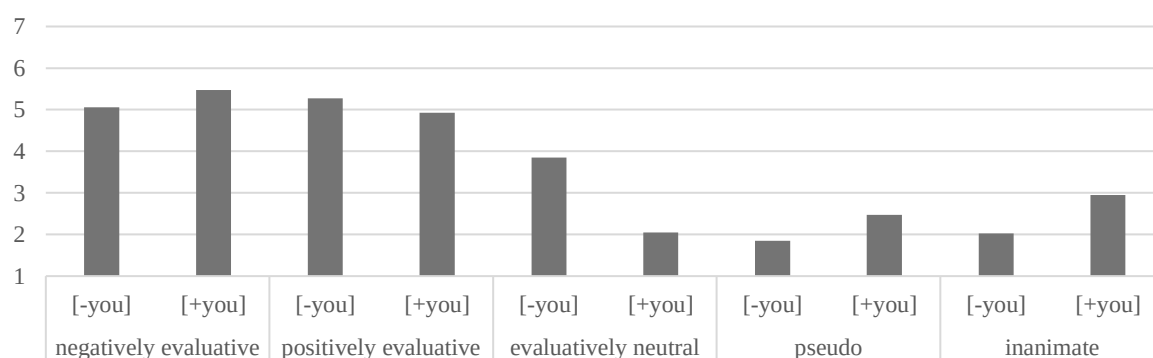


Figure 1: Well-formedness in English

An initial observation concerns the pseudo and inanimate nouns. With scores ranging between 1.85 ($\sigma = 1.16$) and 2.95 ($\sigma = 1.58$), they are clearly judged to be ill-formed by virtually every participant, whether *you* is present or not. They differ in this regard from the other nouns and will therefore be treated separately here. It is, of course, hardly surprising that any address with words like *sprim* and *bottle* is regarded as unnatural: referring to someone with a fake term or as a thing is just strange. Interestingly, however, when such nouns occur in YOU+NP in English,

¹⁰ The statistical analysis was performed in SPSS 29 (IBM Corp 2022).

their well-formedness as addressees does improve in a statistically significant way ($p < 0.001$ for the two t-tests). The pseudo ones go from 1.85 ($\sigma = 1.16$) to 2.47 ($\sigma = 1.62$) and the inanimate ones from 2.03 ($\sigma = 1.26$) to 2.95 ($\sigma = 1.58$). While they continue to be seen as ill-formed, the construction can be argued to make an address interpretation at least somewhat more plausible. This phenomenon may simply be due to the presence of the second person pronoun, explicitly assigning the word's meaning to the other person. It could also be attributed to the semantics of YOU+NP, though, with the construction implying that a pseudo noun such as *sprim* must have some evaluative sense and that an inanimate noun like *bottle* is intended as a kind of assessment of the addressee.

For the negatively and positively evaluative and evaluatively neutral nouns, our two-way ANOVA (see Section 2.4) allows us to compare the six relevant means at the same time and to test the impact and potential interplay of the factors along which the data varies, i.e. noun type and presence/absence of *you*. The results reveal that both the former ($F(2,206) = 122.03$, $p < 0.001$) and the latter ($F(1,103) = 28.49$, $p < 0.001$) have an independent effect and that their interaction is significant too ($F(2, 206) = 35.78$, $p < 0.001$). Subsequent t-tests contrasting the multiple pairs of means enable us to identify where the specific differences lie. As discussed in Section 2.4, these so-called post-hoc t-tests do need to meet a higher level of significance, through Bonferroni correction, since one mean score ends up being compared separately to several other scores.

The post-hoc t-tests show that the evaluatively neutral nouns are seen as less well-formed than the evaluative ones, whether the second person pronoun is there or not. Without *you*, the former appear to be neither ill-formed nor well-formed – i.e. a score of 3.85 ($\sigma = 1.73$) – while the latter are clearly quite natural – i.e. scores of 5.06 ($\sigma = 1.77$) and 5.27 ($\sigma = 1.53$) ($p < 0.001$ for all t-tests). With *you*, the negatively and positively evaluative nouns remain well-formed – i.e. respectively 5.47 ($\sigma = 1.61$) and 4.92 ($\sigma = 1.76$) – whereas the evaluatively neutral ones become ill-formed – i.e. 2.05 ($\sigma = 1.32$) ($p < 0.001$ for all t-tests). Especially the first difference between the noun types, when the second person pronoun is absent, was not expected. We acknowledge, however, that, out of context, calling someone *moron* or *sweetie* is more natural than addressing someone as *reader*. Such an evaluatively neutral noun may need more specific circumstances to truly work (e.g. a writer appealing to their audience) while our survey tried to keep the scenarios constant with minimal situational information. The second difference between the noun types, when *you* is present, confirms the intuition (and judgments in the literature) that YOU+NP, as an addressee evaluation construction, is not very compatible with evaluatively neutral noun phrases.

The post-hoc t-tests provide further support for this last statement in that the evaluatively neutral nouns are the only ones where we see a statistically significant drop in well-formedness, from 3.85 ($\sigma = 1.73$) to 2.05 ($\sigma = 1.32$), when the second person pronoun is added ($p < 0.001$). The positively evaluative nouns do not seem affected by the presence or absence of *you*, with scores of 4.92 ($\sigma = 1.76$) and 5.27 ($\sigma = 1.53$) respectively ($p > 0.05$). The negatively evaluative nouns, by contrast, appear to be seen as more well-formed addressees in YOU+NP than on their own, with respective scores of 5.47 ($\sigma = 1.61$) and 5.06 ($\sigma = 1.77$) – although, with a p-value of 0.008, the difference does not reach the required Bonferroni-corrected significance level here. It is still tempting, of course, to interpret this result as reflecting some kind of special connection between negative evaluation (and thus impoliteness) and YOU+NP.

For well-formedness in Polish, Figure 2 presents the means scores in Table 2 in a reader-friendly fashion. From the chart, it is immediately clear that, like in English, the pseudo nouns and the inanimate ones stand out: regardless of the presence or absence of *ty*, they are regarded as ill-formed. For that reason, they are discussed separately here too.

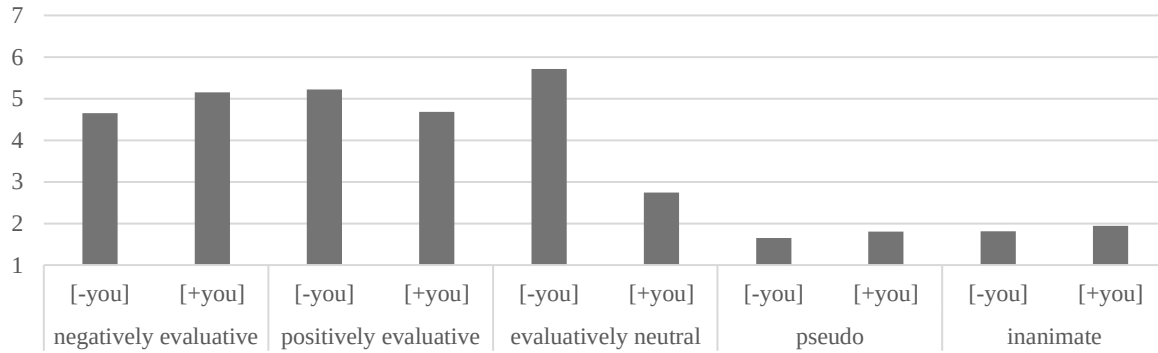


Figure 2: Well-formedness in Polish

To explain the low scores, we can again appeal to the inherent strangeness of addressing someone with a pseudo noun like *wabie* or a noun referring to an object such as *garnku* ‘pot’. The situation in Polish is not entirely the same, however. Unlike in English, there are no significant differences between addresses with or without *ty*. The pseudo nouns are rated as 1.65 ($\sigma = 1.11$) on their own and as 1.81 ($\sigma = 1.26$) in YOU+NP; the inanimate ones as 1.81 ($\sigma = 1.19$) and 1.94 ($\sigma = 1.22$) respectively ($p > 0.05$ for both t-tests). This result may tell us something about our two proposed accounts of the variation in English: it is probably not YOU+NP’s evaluative meaning that makes the pseudo and inanimate nouns in this language somewhat more well-formed addresses, since one would then expect their Polish equivalents to exhibit similar behavior. The more likely explanation is therefore YOU+NP’s function of explicitly attributing the noun to the addressee. A possible reason why it does not increase the well-formedness of the Polish pseudo and inanimate nouns is that they are already overtly assigned to the other person on their own, through vocative case.

For the other nouns, the ANOVA indicates that there are independent effects for the presence/absence of *ty* ($F(1,195) = 204.83$, $p < 0.001$) as well as the type of noun ($F(2,390) = 14.27$, $p < 0.001$), which also interact significantly ($F(2,390) = 185.68$, $p < 0.001$). The post-hoc Bonferroni-corrected t-tests make clear that the evaluatively neutral nouns are again unusual. Like in English, they are essentially judged to be ill-formed when occurring in YOU+NP – i.e. 2.74 ($\sigma = 1.89$) – and significantly less well-formed than all other addresses ($p < 0.001$ for all t-tests). This result shows that the construction is not particularly compatible with non-evaluative nouns in Polish either. Unlike in English, however, the evaluatively neutral nouns on their own score substantially higher for well-formedness – i.e. 5.71 ($\sigma = 1.51$) – than any other address. An explanation for this finding is that the vocative probably forces people to imagine circumstances in which something like *czytelniku/czytelniczko!* ‘reader!’ would work, even if no actual context is provided.

The post-hoc t-tests also reveal interesting differences *between* the evaluative nouns in Polish. With scores reliably above 4, they may all be seen as well-formed addresses, whether the second person pronoun is present or not, but the positively evaluative nouns display a significant decrease in well-formedness, from 5.22 ($\sigma = 1.72$) to 4.68 ($\sigma = 1.97$), when *ty* is inserted ($p < 0.001$) while the negatively evaluative ones exhibit a significant increase, from 4.65 ($\sigma = 2.03$) to 5.15 ($\sigma = 1.93$), when combining with *ty* ($p < 0.001$). Polish resembles English in the latter (though the difference does not meet the required level of significance there) but is distinct when it comes to the former. In other words, negatively evaluative nouns seem especially well-suited for YOU+NP in Polish but, relatively speaking, this appears to be less the case for positively evaluative ones in the language. This finding could be taken to reflect the construction’s extremely high degree of conventionalization for impoliteness in Polish. In this regard, it is probably also worth pointing out that addresses like *ty aniele* ‘you angel’ are deemed less well-formed than addresses like *ty debilu* ‘you moron’ – i.e. 4.68 ($\sigma = 1.97$) and 5.15 ($\sigma = 1.93$)

respectively – even if the p-value of 0.006 does not reach the necessary Bonferroni-corrected level.

3.3 (Im)politeness

Figure 3 charts the means for (im)politeness in English (recall that 1 stands for ‘very impolite’, 7 for ‘very polite’ and 4 for ‘neither impolite nor polite’).

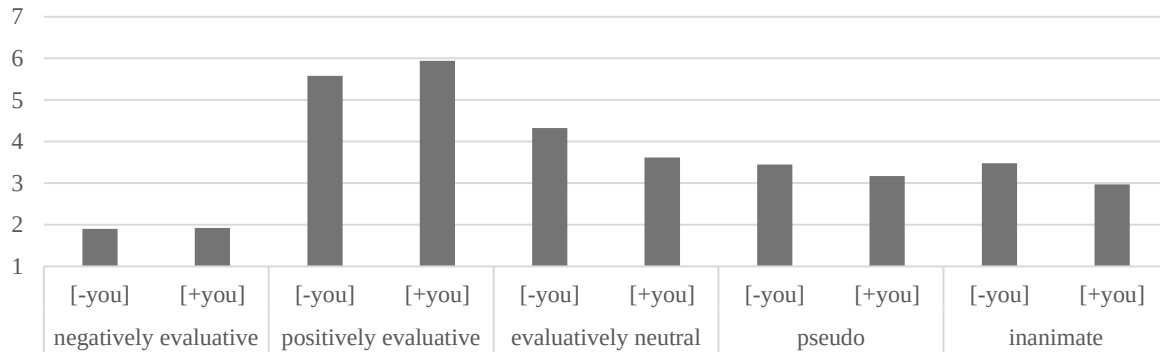


Figure 3: (Im)politeness in English

Let us again start with the pseudo and inanimate nouns. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they are judged to be impolite, irrespective of the presence or absence of *you*: addressing a person with a would-be word and especially as a thing is likely to be interpreted as offensive. Interestingly, though, these nouns *are* seen as even more impolite when they appear in YOU+NP. The pseudo ones go from 3.45 ($\sigma = 0.88$) to 3.17 ($\sigma = 0.97$) ($p < 0.01$ for the t-test); the inanimate ones from 3.48 ($\sigma = 0.80$) to 2.97 ($\sigma = 0.84$) ($p < 0.001$). These facts may be taken to reflect the construction’s usage-based conventionalization: the offensiveness of calling someone *wabe* or *pot* is strengthened by YOU+NP’s link with impoliteness.

This association comes to the fore with the evaluatively neutral nouns in particular. On their own, they score 4.33 ($\sigma = 0.83$) but, in YOU+NP, they drop significantly to 3.62 ($\sigma = 0.93$), on the impolite side of the spectrum ($p < 0.001$). The way in which we understand this observation is as follows: (i) although the construction is not very compatible with evaluatively neutral nouns (see Section 3.1), it forces an evaluative reading onto them to make them fit; and (ii) while, strictly speaking, this reading could be either positive or negative, people rely on their knowledge/experience of YOU+NP and thus tend to assign a negative one.

For the evaluative nouns, finally, it is hardly remarkable, of course, that the negative ones are deemed impolite and the positive ones polite. They exhibit some unexpected behavior too, however. For one, the hypothesis that the directness of *you* would increase the impoliteness of insults (see Section 1.2) is not borne out: the negatively evaluative nouns, such as *moron*, have similar scores with or without the second person pronoun – i.e. respectively 1.92 ($\sigma = 0.96$) and 1.90 ($\sigma = 0.97$) ($p > 0.05$). The positively evaluative nouns, such as *angel*, do see a change but it is an increase in politeness when they feature in YOU+NP, from 5.58 ($\sigma = 1.24$) to 5.94 ($\sigma = 1.21$) ($p < 0.001$). We have no immediate explanation for this result. At one point, Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper (2023: 37) implicitly suggest that the pragmatic explicitness of ‘you’ might be able to enhance the politeness of positively evaluative nouns too: “It is entirely imaginable that someone wishing to evaluate another person in a positive way may also want ... to overtly ascribe their assessment to their addressee.” It still remains unclear then why no equivalent effect is observable with negatively evaluative nouns. Perhaps, the fact that, comparatively, they are rated as more impolite in any case than the positively evaluative nouns are rated as polite simply means that any effect of the second person pronoun is bound to be

minimal. It is not entirely inconceivable that we might still see an effect of ‘you’ with negatively evaluative nouns that are less strong than *moron* and *degenerate* (e.g. *dumbo*).

To conclude the present section, consider the means for (im)politeness in Polish in Figure 4. We can discern a number of tendencies in this language that are similar to those in English. First, the pseudo and inanimate nouns are generally deemed impolite, whether *ty* is present or not. Second, the evaluatively neutral nouns are forced into an impolite interpretation when they occur in YOU+NP: they score 5.18 ($\sigma = 1.18$) on their own but 3.61 ($\sigma = 1.29$) when combining with the second person pronoun ($p < 0.001$). Third, the negatively and positively evaluative nouns are judged to be impolite and polite respectively. Fourth, no evidence exists for a directness effect of ‘you’ in the negatively evaluative nouns: they are rated as 1.73 ($\sigma = 0.89$) without *ty* and as 1.69 ($\sigma = 1.16$) with *ty* ($p > 0.05$).

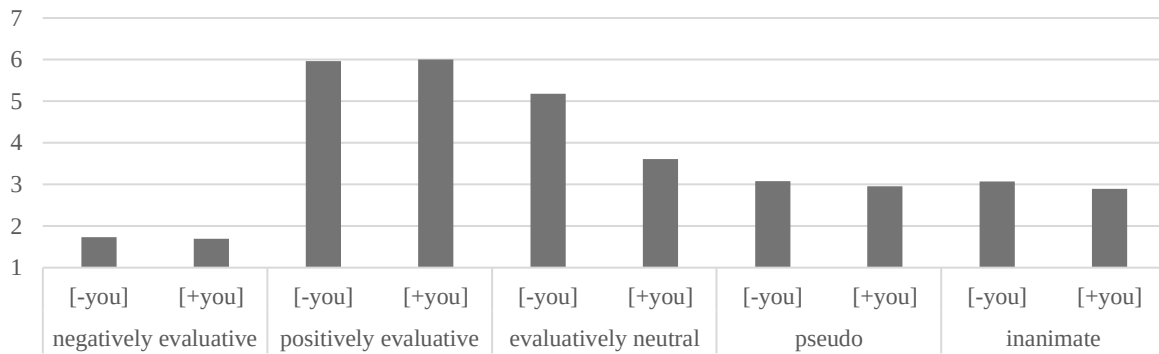


Figure 4: (Im)politeness in Polish

There are also two important differences with English. First, the level of politeness of the positively evaluative nouns does not vary with the second person pronoun’s presence or absence – i.e. respectively 6.00 ($\sigma = 1.19$) and 5.96 ($\sigma = 1.11$) ($p > 0.05$). In other words, we have no consistent evidence for a possible politeness-boosting effect of ‘you’ with nouns like ‘angel’ either, which may be due to the lack of politeness associated with *ty* (see Section 1.2). Moreover, one might have expected that Polish YOU+NP’s especially strong association with impoliteness could influence positively evaluative nouns too, perhaps evoking ironic or sarcastic interpretations when they combine with *ty* (cf. Van Olmen and Grass’s 2023 results for French *ange!* ‘angel!’ versus *espèce d’ange!* ‘you angel!’). But they appear to be resistant to any such hypothetical pressure. Second, unlike in English, the pseudo nouns do not become significantly more impolite in YOU+NP: they are rated as 3.08 ($\sigma = 1.15$) without *ty* and 2.96 ($\sigma = 1.19$) with *ty* ($p > 0.05$). For some reason, the construction only affects the inanimate nouns here, which go from 3.07 ($\sigma = 0.99$) on their own to 2.90 ($\sigma = 1.03$) in YOU+NP ($p < 0.01$).

4 Conclusions

YOU+NP has been described in the literature as a construction conveying addressee evaluation. Our results support this characterization for English as well as for Polish. In both languages, the construction is found to be well-formed as an address with positively and negatively evaluative nouns but ill-formed with evaluatively neutral ones. Our English data in particular may be taken to point to YOU+NP’s nature as an address in yet another way. The fact that the pseudo and inanimate nouns become somewhat more well-formed when combining with *you* suggests that the construction has at least some ability to create or improve an address interpretation of unlikely terms of address. This ability is probably due to YOU+NP’s function of overtly assigning the noun to the addressee, through the second person pronoun, rather than to its evaluative nature. Otherwise, the pseudo and inanimate nouns in Polish, which already achieves explicit

addressee attribution by way of the vocative in any case, would be expected to exhibit the same behavior as their English equivalents.

However, according to Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper (2023), YOU+NP is not *just* a construction expressing addressee evaluation. They argue, based on usage data from corpora, that it is strongly conventionalized specifically for impoliteness in English and even more so in Polish. Our results confirm the general claim about YOU+NP as an impoliteness construction in these languages in three ways. For one, when evaluatively neutral nouns combine with ‘you’, they are found to lose their (a)polite reading and to acquire an impolite one in both English and Polish. One would anticipate such nouns to be made compatible with the (evaluative) construction somehow but the fact that they tend to be interpreted as impolite can, in our view, only be accounted for by (speakers’ knowledge and experience of) YOU+NP’s usage-based conventionalization for impoliteness. We believe that it also explains the result that addresses with inanimate nouns in English and Polish (as well as with pseudo nouns in English) are seen as even more impolite when they contain ‘you’. A last finding relevant here is that, in both languages, the well-formedness as addresses of negatively evaluative nouns – unlike that of positively evaluative ones, for example – actually increases when they occur in the construction.

The more specific claim about Polish YOU+NP’s stronger association with impoliteness gets little support from our findings. One might have hypothesized, for instance, that even positively evaluative nouns would acquire a (sarcastic) impolite reading when combining with *ty* but they are, in fact, deemed as polite with the second person pronoun as without it. Moreover, given how rarely Polish YOU+NP features such nouns in corpus data, one might have expected to find evidence of a certain incompatibility between the construction and positively evaluative nouns. The fact that addresses with these types of nouns are seen as somewhat less well-formed with the second person pronoun than without it in Polish (but not in English) could be an indication. We should bear in mind, though, that any address with a positively evaluative noun is still very much well-formed in the language. In other words, while the partiality in usage suggests that there is a very strong schema or frame associating YOU+NP with negative evaluation and impoliteness in Polish, the language still also has a schema of the construction for “unbiased” addressee evaluation.

Finally, to explain YOU+NP’s conventionalization for impoliteness, Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper (2023) appeal to the notion of pragmatic explicitness. In their view, spelling out the target of an evaluation, through ‘you’, makes it more direct and such directness is well-suited for impoliteness but may be avoided for politeness. They even hypothesize that insults with the second person pronoun would therefore be more impolite than those without it. There are, however, no signs of such an effect in our findings: addresses with negatively evaluative nouns are as impolite with ‘you’ as without it in both English and Polish. Importantly, we do not believe that this result necessarily invalidates the general argument about the relationship between directness and impoliteness (see also Culpeper 2011: 183–193). It just means that ‘you idiot!’ is not more impolite than ‘idiot!’. The question what the actual difference between the two then is remains to be answered, of course.¹¹

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¹¹ To our knowledge, few other attempts have been made to offer an explanation. d’Avis and Meibauer (2013: 197) do rightly point out (for German and Swedish) that YOU+NP differs from a regular address like ‘(hey,) dad, ...’ in that it cannot really be used to get someone’s attention and serves instead “to confirm the addressee-status [in the social world] of the person spoken to”. This distinction does not seem to be especially relevant for ‘(you) idiot!’, however: it is difficult to see how such a negatively evaluative noun could function as a way to obtain the attention of a particular addressee in any situation.

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