1 Introduction

In this article, we want to argue that impoliteness can be conventionalized in linguistic form, in particular beyond the level of the lexicon. We will make our case with a study of the French structure instantiated by *espèce d'idiot!* 'you idiot!'. The present section will start with an evaluation of the discussion in the literature about conventionalized (im)politeness (Section 1.1). Next, we will present the specific structure under investigation (Section 1.2) and, finally, we will outline the precise aims of our article (Section 1.3).

1.1 Conventionalized (im)politeness

The traditional "first-wave" models of politeness, such as Lakoff (1973) and Brown and Levinson (1987), recognized that it may be "relative to norms in a given society, group or situation" but simultaneously insisted that politeness exists "in terms of the lexicogrammatical form and semantic interpretation of an utterance" (Leech, 2014: 88) too. Their research also focused primarily on how particular linguistic forms instantiate proposed maxims of politeness and (only) secondarily on how the choice between these forms could be influenced by factors like social distance and power, which were usually regarded as invariable. The field has undergone a considerable change, though, since the discursive and/or post-structuralist turn in "second-wave" politeness studies pioneered by scholars such as Eelen (2001) and Mills (2003). In this approach, the focus is on politeness as a context-dependent assessment by the speech participants (e.g. Locher 2006) and the literature is mainly concerned with how interlocutors understand politeness themselves and how they create and establish it through their discourse. Linguistic form obviously still plays a role in such research but it is its variable interpretation in interaction that is emphasized (e.g. Locher 2013). Importantly here, but perhaps unsurprisingly,

the history of impoliteness studies has witnessed the same two waves – with, for instance, Culpeper's (1996) model of impoliteness inspired by Brown and Levinson (1987) and Locher and Watt's (2008) focus on relational work in impoliteness.

The present article takes a "third-wave" perspective on (im)politeness. Following Culpeper (2011: 120-121), we acknowledge that (im)politeness is obviously not merely an issue of form. One can, for instance, clearly offend someone without using what might be considered "impolite expressions". Conversely, such forms can function in non-impolite ways too – when employed ironically or for the purpose of banter, for example (e.g. Lagorgette and Larrivée, 2004 on insults as solidarity markers). However, we also agree with Culpeper (2011: 120-121) that (im)politeness is not just a purely discursive issue either. For one, speakers are able to and do actually evaluate the (im)politeness of expressions out of context. Take Jain's (2022: 389) survey about the parenthetical English address structure of *you* followed by a noun phrase. She asked her informants to imagine that there is some undefined concept called *dwffxigta* and then to rate to what extent a person saying *you dwffxigta!* to them is conveying irritation with them, appreciation of them or neither. The first interpretation was strongly preferred by the informants, even in the absence of any situational information to suggest it. We take this result to point to a firm association of the structure – regardless of lexical content – with impoliteness, despite the fact that a genuine compliment such as *you beauty!* seems perfectly normal too.

A solution to this apparent contradiction is offered by Terkourafi's (2005a; 2005b) work on politeness and its application to impoliteness by Culpeper (2011). In their view, when forms regularly appear with speech acts and in circumstances where they serve (im)polite purposes, they create schemas or frames in which they are connected with the "function" of (im)politeness (see Terkourafi, 2005a: 248). An essential part of their argument is that the conventionalization of such schemas or frames tends to be a matter of degree, correlating with "the (statistical) frequency with which an expression is used in one's experience of a particular context"

(Terkourafi, 2005b: 213). This relative understanding of conventionalization allows for the fact that a linguistic form in such a schema or frame is not necessarily interpreted as (im)polite in every situation or by every speech participant. Still, what will typically take place when someone encounters the form can be described, in Terkourafi's (2005a: 251) Neo-Gricean terms, as follows: they will not (have to) figure out the speaker's intent from scratch, through particularized inferences, but (can/)will instead rely on their earlier experience and linguistic knowledge, captured in the schema or frame, "to derive the proposition that 'in offering [the form] ... the speaker is being [(im)]polite' as a generalised implicature of the speaker's utterance". In other words, (im)politeness will be the preferred or presumed reading of the form but, crucially, this interpretation can still be cancelled.

Adopting this framework, a recent study by Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper (2023) has looked into the English structure mentioned above. Their review of the literature (e.g. Potts and Roeper, 2006) makes clear that it can be considered a construction in Goldberg's (2006: 3) sense of a "conventionalized" pairing "of form and function" (see Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper, 2023: 26-27 for details) and that it serves to express addressee evaluation. This meaning becomes evident when one introduces a non-evaluative noun phrase into the construction: an address like *you reader!* is decidedly odd. As Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper (2023: 28) rightly point out, though, the observation that the construction conveys addressee evaluation is not the same as the claim made by various scholars (about English and comparable structures in other languages) that it constitutes a linguistic form of impoliteness (e.g. Ooms and Van Keymeulen, 2005: 63-64; Culpeper, 2011: 134-135; Finkbeiner, Meibauer and Wiese, 2016: 4), since addressee evaluation can be positive or negative. Their claim does receive support from Jain's (2022) results for *you dwffxigta!* but the question remains in what way a construction that accepts *you beauty!* could count as an impolite form. Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper (2023) argue that the answer can be found in usage. They therefore examine a random

sample of 200 corpus hits of the construction and determine, for each instance, whether it is impolite in its co-text, i.e. whether it is meant and/or taken to have negative psychological ramifications for the addressee(s) (see Culpeper, 2011: 11-12). Their analysis reveals that the construction is impolite in 75% of the cases (with an extra 12% of hits that feature ostensibly insultive terms but are not intended or seen as offensive; Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper, 2023: 33-34). It is this bias in usage, in their view, that establishes the schema or frame that the participants in Jain's (2022) survey act upon and that justifies regarding the construction as conventionalized, to a great extent, for impoliteness.

Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper (2023: 38) conclude their study with the observation that the field has "only just started scratching the surface of inherently impolite constructions in language" (but see e.g. Giomi and Van Oers, 2022). The present article wishes to answer this implicit call for more research, with an investigation into a present-day French structure that we believe is conventionalized for impoliteness.

1.2 *Espèce de* + NP!

The structure in question is illustrated in (1), with an example from our corpus of online written language (see Section 2.1 for more information).[1] It consists of the noun *espèce* 'kind, sort, species, type' and the preposition *de* 'of' followed by a noun phrase, which is typically limited to a single noun, like *chien* 'dog' (see Section 3.1.1 for more details on the noun phrase types). The structure will henceforth be referred to as *espèce de* + NP!.

(1)   *"C'est une chaussure de taille 10", a plaisanté George Bush, après avoir esquivé, deux*

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[1] Corpus examples are given exactly as they occur in the data. They may therefore contain non-standard spelling and such – as well as, given the topic of this article, language that some possibly find offensive.

fois de suite, l'envoi de la paire de chaussures d'un journaliste irakien lui criant tout

*d'abord: "C'est le baiser de l'adieu, **espèce de chien**", puis: "Vous êtes responsable*

de la mort de milliers d'Irakiens". (frTenTen20: 23416103)

"'That's a size 10 shoe", George Bush joked, after twice having dodged a pair of shoes

thrown at him by an Iraqi journalist, who first shouted: "This is the kiss goodbye, you

dog", and then: "You're responsible for the deaths of thousands of Iraqis".

To our knowledge, the structure has not yet received much close attention in the literature. This

lack of interest is quite remarkable given the amount of research into so-called "type nouns" in

French, such as *genre* 'genus' and *sorte* 'sort' as well as *espèce* (e.g. Rouget, 1997; Doyen and

Davidse, 2009; Dufaye, 2014). Admittedly, the structure does get mentioned regularly in work

on impoliteness, where it is typically described as a "marqueur d'injure" (Gaatone, 1983: 162),

i.e. an insultive marker (see also Derive and Derive, 2004: 22; Gardes Tamine, 2011: 360).

Yet, this characterization does not tend to be elaborated upon and minimal consideration is

given to the structure itself.

In our view, *espèce de* + NP! constitutes a construction in the sense of Goldberg (2006:

3), pairing a unique suite of formal properties and restrictions with a distinct function. On the

formal side, it differs from most other uses of *espèce (de)* (cf. Chauveau-Thoumelin, 2020) in

its parenthetical nature and its lack of an article – compare (1) to (2a) below, which features a

syntactically embedded noun phrase with *espèce de* that begins in *une* 'a' – as well as in its

specific intonational contour. As far as we are aware, the intonation of *espèce de* + NP! has not

yet been studied in any detail but we would say that it typically involves separation from what

surrounds the construction and marked pitch changes within the construction. Bruno (2014)

furthermore points to a tendency for stress to shift to the penultimate syllable in *espèce de* +

NP! (e.g. *espèce de CONnard!* 'you asshole!'). These last two properties make the construction

different from a parenthetical case like (2a), which would normally be pronounced with even pitch and without a stress shift.

(2) a. *Rousseau en est **une espèce de précurseur inclassable**.* (frTenTen20: 2877571)

'Rousseau is some sort of unclassifiable precursor of it.'

b. *C'étaient le hurlement du dingo, **espèce de chien-loup**, rôdant autour de nos bergeries.* (frTenTen20: 23775557)

'It was the howl of the dingo, a kind of dog-wolf, prowling around our sheepfolds.'

Espèce de + NP! may be argued to inherit/share some of these properties from/with some general address construction, of which (3a) would be an example. It is not a mere instantiation of this construction, though: while the non-evaluative noun *professeur* 'professor/teacher' is perfectly acceptable in (3a), its occurrence in (3b) is odd according to Jones (1996: 223), who writes that only "epithet noun[s]" – best understood as evaluative noun phrases – can combine with *espèce de* here.

(3) a. *Ah, tu as un beau métier, **professeur**!* (frTenTen20: 4050839)

'Ah, you have a nice job, professor!'

b. ? *Espèce de professeur!*

? 'You professor!'

c. *Une chose l'avait surpris dès son arrivée: la présence impromptue et régulière d'**une espèce de professeur** de sports qui les sommait, à chaque fois, de faire de l'exercice.* (frTenTen20: 28068238)

'One thing had surprised him from the moment of his arrival: the spontaneous

and regular presence of some sort of sports teacher who ordered then, each time, to exercise.'

This apparent restriction is a feature that also sets *espèce de* + NP! apart from other uses of the type noun, as (3c) shows.

On the functional side, it should be clear from the above discussion that *espèce de* + NP! serves as an address. Moreover, the nature of this address is evidently not neutral. Most sources characterize it as insultive and/or as (negatively) evaluative. In fact, *espèce de* + NP! has been said to be able to force such an interpretation onto a non-evaluative noun phrase. Guérin (2012: 1086) (see Ernotte and Rosier, 2004: 35 too), for instance, writes that "it is enough for … a term [like *linguiste* 'linguist'] to be employed in a syntactic structure typical of insults for it to become qualifying: in *espèce de linguiste!* 'you linguist!', the noun *linguiste* no longer serves to only index a job but also to qualify (to depreciate) the person targeted" (our translation). This intuition deserves to be checked properly, however. And so does the presumed relationship between *espèce de* + NP! and impoliteness. It is hard to see how *espèce de veinard!* 'you lucky devil! in (4), for one, can in any way be thought of as an insult or as expressing negative addressee evaluation.

(4) *Je t'emmène à moto! – C'est pas vrai! T'en a une! Pourquoi tu ne me l'a pas dit!* **Es-pèce de veinard**! *C'est quoi le modèle! – … Une Honda CBR 125 R – Waouh! Trop sexy!* (frTenTen20: 10300832)
'I'll take you on a motorbike! – That can't be true! You have one! Why didn't you tell me! You lucky devil! What is the model! – ... A Honda CBR 125 R – Wow! Too sexy!'

What we do hope to have shown in this section is that *espèce de* + NP! combines a number of

distinctive formal properties with a special type of address function but also that this construction still merits further study.

1.3 Present study

Our main aim in this article is to explore whether *espèce de* + NP! can be regarded as a construction conventionalized for impoliteness (and thus whether impoliteness can be conventionalized in linguistic form). This question can be answered in different ways, though. In view of the work by Terkourafi (2005a; 2005b) and Culpeper (2011) (see Section 1.1), one may, for instance, investigate whether the construction is associated with impoliteness frequently enough in usage to assume the existence of a relevant schema or frame. We will adopt this approach in our corpus-based study of *espèce de* + NP! in Sections 2.1 and 3.1. Considering the claims by Jones (1996) and Guérin (2012) among others (see Section 1.2), one may also examine to what extent the construction is compatible with various types of noun phrases and what impact it has on their interpretation. This avenue will be explored in our questionnaire-based study of *espèce de* + NP! in Sections 2.2 and 3.2.

These two approaches will be shown to complement each other. They will also enable us to answer questions that do not appear to have been asked before, such as 'is there a difference in (im)politeness between *espèce d'idiot!* and just *idiot!*?'. However, neither approach will allow us to explain *why* the construction at issue may be conventionalized for impoliteness. We will nevertheless discuss some of the suggestions made in the literature (e.g. Ernotte and Rosier, 2004; Mihatsch, 2010) in our conclusions in Section 4.

2 Methodology

This section will first discuss our corpus-based approach to *espèce de* + NP! (Section 2.1) and in particular the data used and our analytical framework. We will then turn to our questionnaire-based approach (Section 2.2) and cover its design and instructions, the data collection and our statistical analysis.

2.1   Corpus-based approach

2.1.1 Data

Our study employs the 2020 French component of the multilingual TenTen corpus family, abbreviated as frTenTen20.[2] The TenTen corpora are part of the online language resource platform SketchEngine[3] and consist of data crawled from the internet by "technology specialized in collecting only linguistically valuable web content".[4] The component used here was built in 2020 and contains more than fifteen billion words from webpages with .be, .ca, .fr and other extensions. It also covers genres ranging from encyclopedias and news to discussions and fiction, which relate to topics spanning from arts and science to education and entertainment. Our rationale for choosing frTenTen20 is four-fold. First, the fact that we can select the eight billion words of material from .fr webpages allows us to restrict the data as much as possible to the variety of French with which we are most familiar. Second, because of its large size, this subcorpus can still be expected to return a sufficient number of relevant hits for further analysis. Third, although frTenTen20's automatic categorization of the data into genres and topics is not very reliable or consistent and limiting ourselves to particular predetermined text types is therefore not a good idea, the corpus includes material – such as the dialogues in fiction and

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[2] The number after this abbreviation in our examples refers to the specific corpus documents in which they occur.
[3] See https://www.sketchengine.eu/ (accessed 22/03/2024).
[4] See https://www.sketchengine.eu/documentation/tenten-corpora/ (accessed 22/03/2024).

discussions – in which *espèce de* + NP! is (more) likely to occur (i.e. rather than in encyclope-dias and news). Fourth, frTenTen20 is annotated with parts of speech tags, making it fairly easy to search for and extract cases of *espèce de* followed by a noun optionally modified by an adjective. We should note, though, that there are downsides to relying on a TenTen corpus too (see Jakubícek et al. 2013). For instance, with internet data, it is often not possible to identify who produced the text or to check whether it is written in their first language. It is sometimes also difficult to know the time of production of a text. Such issues need to and will be borne in mind when analyzing the data.

The search query used to retrieve instances of *espèce de* + NP! from frTenTen20 on SketchEngine is given in (5).

(5)   [word="[\,\!\.\?\;\:\"\'\-]"] [lemma="espèce|espece"] [lemma="de"] ([tag="N.*"] | [tag="A.*"] [tag="N.*"] | [tag="N.*"] [tag="A.*"]) [word="[\,\!\.\?\;\:\"\'\-]"]

It essentially looks for all cases of the lemma *espèce* with the lemma *de* immediately next to it that are followed by a just a noun, a noun with a preposed adjective or a noun with a postposed adjective. Some extra comments are necessary, however. First, frTenTen20's poor lemmatiza-tion procedure requires the spelling *espece* to be included as an alternative form to find every attestation of the actual lemma *espèce*. Second, the noun phrase in our construction can be more complex than a noun with one optional adjective (e.g. *espèce de petit rat puant!* 'you stinky little rat!') but queries allowing for more complexity would run the risk of returning too many false positives and of making the quantity of data to be processed unmanageable. It may still be reassuring to know that, apparently, noun phrases after *espèce de* tend to be short: just a quarter of the hits for (5) involve more than a solitary noun. Third, the punctuation marks at the start and end of our search query, though motivated by the parenthetical nature of *espèce*

de + NP!, may mean that we miss certain instances of the construction. Yet, without them, the results would have more irrelevant than relevant hits.

There are 2,793 hits in the .fr component of frTenTen20 for the query in (5), which we downloaded with the maximum amount of context allowed by SketchEngine, i.e. 100 characters to the left and right of a hit,[5] and which we put in a random order in Excel. This dataset was used to collect two distinct samples:

- a 200-hit one to examine, in view of Terkourafi's (2005a; 2005b) and Culpeper's (2011) work, whether *espèce de* + NP! tends to be impolite in actual usage (see Section 2.1.2 for our analytical framework);

- a 50-hit one to see, given Guérin's (2012) comments about *espèce de linguiste!*, how the construction behaves when its noun phrase is not itself negatively evaluative.

For the first sample, we started from hit 1 and selected the first 200 cases that act as an address (see Section 1.2), excluding obvious false positives such as (2b), (6a) and (6b). We did include instances like (6c), where the construction may not be directed at a specific person but *is* explicitly commented on and/or does serve as an example of the linguistic behavior of addressing someone. Cases such as (6c) are of interest, since they can tell us something about how *espèce de* + NP! is intended and/or perceived (note *véhicule d'injures* 'vehicle for insults' here). Our target of 200 was reached at hit 263.

(6) a.   *Cet ouvrage … n'est pas qu'une "**espèce de monographie**" succinte.* (frTen-
          Ten20: 16217799)

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[5] We want to stress, however, that, for our analysis (see Section 2.1.2), we usually went back to the corpus to look at more context.

'This work … is nothing but a succinct "sort of monograph."'

b. *Galvaud. s. m.* **Espèce de vagabond***, travaillant sans suite, tantôt d'un côté, tantôt de l'autre, à toute sorte d'ouvrages, et souvent aussi ne faisant rien.* (frTenTen20: 23233954)

'*Galvaud,* s[ingular]. m[asculine]. Type of vagrant, working without a follow-up, sometimes on one side, sometimes on the other, on all sorts of jobs, and often also doing nothing.'

c. *APPRENTIS: Ignares tellement honteux de leur analphabétisme … qu'ils ne parlent pas en public (des fois que cela s'entendrait!). Dans certains cas, véhicule d'injures: "va donc,* **espèce d'éternel apprenti***!".* (frTenTen20: 9910904)

'APPRENTICES: Ignorant people so ashamed of their illiteracy … that they do not speak in public (in case it could be heard!). In certain cases, vehicle for insults: "go away, you eternal apprentice!".'

For the second sample, we began from hit 2,793 – working our way toward hit 1 – and selected the first 50 cases that function as an address and contain no negatively evaluative noun phrase. We thus passed over such instances as *espèce de sauvage!* 'you savage!' and *espèce de méchant matou!* 'you wicked tomcat!', but we counted such instances as *espèce de génie!* 'you genius!' and *espèce d'adulte!* 'you adult!' – the former featuring a positively evaluative noun phrase and the latter an evaluatively neutral one (see Section 2.1.2 for more details). Our target of 50 was reached at hit 528 (there is thus no overlap between the two samples, as the target of the first one – starting from hit 1 – was achieved at hit 263). The fact that 2,265 hits had to be checked to obtain the second sample already suggests that the phenomenon discussed by Guérin (2012) is rare. It remains to be seen, however, whether the construction indeed forces an impolite interpretation onto nouns such as *génie* and *adulte*.

2.1.2 Analysis

In line with Van Olmen, Andersson and Culpeper (2023: 30), we analyze as impolite those cases of *espèce de* + NP! for which "there are reasonable indications that" it "is meant and/or taken to have negative emotional consequences" for the addressee(s) (see also Culpeper, 2011: 11-12; Hu and Van Olmen, forthc.). It is, in other words, not enough that the construction features a negatively evaluative noun for it to count as impolite. Take *idiot* in (7): the (under-lined) co-text makes clear that it is not intended or understood as offensive.

(7)   *Le jeune homme ... <u>lui fit les yeux doux</u>. "C'est toi qui me fais chanter.* **Espèce d'idiot***!"*
      Murmura-t-elle <u>sensuellement</u>. "Hum... Très intéressant!" <u>Sourit-il</u> en refermant ses
      bras sur sa taille. (frTenTen20: 23637439)
      'The young man ... looked kindly at her. "It is you who is blackmailing me. You idiot!"
      She murmured sensually. "Hmm… Very interesting" He smiled, closing his arms
      around her waist.'

The reasonable indications of impoliteness that can occur in the co-text are diverse. One type of indication is the explicit description of *espèce de* + NP! as an insult, as in (6c) with *véhicule d'injures*. Another type involves the overt assessment of the construction as impolite, as in (8) with *de l'attaque personnelle* 'a personal attack'.

(8)   *Est-ce qu'on dit "je suis fier d'être bête" ou "j'assume mon inculture"? Il ne tient qu'a*
      vous de changer, **espèce de tâche***! Et oui, <u>c'est de l'attaque personnelle</u>. Parce que*
      vous croyez probablement nourrir le débat en me traitant d'imbécile? (frTenTen20:

17144652)

'Do we say "I'm proud to be stupid" or "I embrace my lack of culture"? It is up to you to change, you useless person! And yes, that is a personal attack. Because you probably think that you are fueling the debate by calling me an imbecile?'

The way in which an addressee reacts is often indicative too (see the classification of potential responses to impoliteness in Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann, 2003: 1563). In (9a), for example, they openly challenge the speaker's indictment, signaling that they take offense at being called a brute. In (9b), the addressee's reply may be regarded as an attempt to reciprocate Célimène's impoliteness.

(9)   a.   *Aïe! Tu pourrais faire gaffe!* **Espèce de grande brute***! – Moi? Une brute? Tu peux parler! Je suis sûr que tu as cassé au moins trois côtes à Kaoru.* (frTen-Ten20: 17818353)

          'Ouch! You could be careful! You big brute! – Me? A brute? You should talk. I am sure that you broke at least three of Kaoru's ribs.'

    b.   *Célimène: Fermez-la,* **espèce de monstre***, je ne vous... Dom Salluste (rouge de colère) Ferme donc* la fosse à merde *qui te sers de bouche,* conne*!* (frTenTen20: 13900181)

          'Célimène: Shut it, you monster, I don't… Dom Salluste (red with anger): Shut the shit pit that serves as your mouth, bitch!'

Another type of indication that we frequently come across in our data is narrative clues about the psychological state of the speaker (e.g. irritated, disdainful) and/or the addressee (e.g. outraged, sad). *Furieux* 'furious' and *au bord des larmes* 'on the verge of tears' in (10) are cases

in point.

(10) a. *"Et pourquoi pas des capotes anglaises, pendant que vous y êtes, **espèce de comique!**" <u>Furieux</u>, je le crie bien haut.* (frTenTen20: 9488356)

'"And how about some English condoms, while you are at it, you comic!" Furious, I shout it loudly."

b. *"Tu va recommencer à me lécher les pieds pétasse, mais cette fois fais en sorte de te controller, **espèce de nympho**!" <u>Au bord des larmes</u>, les yeux baissés Laure souleva délicatement le pied droit de sa maitresse.* (frTenTen20: 23514603)

'"You are going to start licking my feet again bitch, but this time make sure that you control yourself, you nympho!" On the verge of tears, with downcast eyes Laure delicately lifted her mistress's right foot.'

A last type of indication that *espèce de* + NP! is impolite is its co-occurrence with (other) face-threatening speech acts. In (11a), for instance, the threat preceding *espèce de montagnard!* 'you mountain dweller!' can be taken to suggest that the address is intended as offensive. For (11b), it is worth noting the insult *bande de moules* 'bunch of imbeciles' (lit. 'bunch of mussels') and the imprecation *je vous emmerde* 'you can all go to hell' (lit. 'I shit on you') before *espèces d'humains!* 'you humans!'.

(11) a. *Tu tiens ta femme <u>ou c'est 4 lames qui partent dans la nuit</u>, **espèce de montagnard**, j'ai un mental de FARC moi.* (frTenTen20: 3090648)

'You hold your wife or it will be four blades that leave during the night, you mountain dweller, I have got a FARC mentality.'

b. *Et comment, qu'je parle, <u>bande de moules</u>! – Quel langage! – Ça fait des siècles*

*que j'ai pas parlé, alors <u>je vous emmerde</u>, **espèces d'humains**! – Continue à nous*

insultés comme ça et tu vas avoir mal, tas de ferrailles! (frTenTen20: 2567358)

'And how, let me speak, bunch of imbeciles! – What language! – I have not spo-

ken in centuries, so you can all go to hell, you humans! – Keep insulting us like

that and you are going to get hurt, piece of junk!'

To determine in this manner whether the 250 sampled cases of our construction are impolite or

not, we – the two authors of the present article – met on a regular basis, compared our inter-

pretations and, where required, made changes. The data thus went through several rounds of

reanalysis and, crucially, hits about which no agreement could be reached were simply classi-

fied as non-impolite (see Section 3.1). It is important to emphasize here that the co-text con-

sidered can relate to speaker *and/or* addressee and that we treated indications of one of the

participants' perspectives as sufficient for an analysis as impolite (e.g. an instance of *espèce de*

+ NP! that the co-text suggests was not meant but was still taken to have negative emotional

consequences for the addressee was classified as impolite). This approach is in line with the

idea that impoliteness is not (simply) – as more traditional views would have it (e.g. Tracy and

Tracy, 1988: 227) – a matter of speaker intention but (also) one of addressee perceptions, irre-

spective of the speaker's aims (e.g. Culpeper 2011, 48-56; see also Ruytenbeek, Decock and

Depraetere, 2023: 83).

  We also adopted a procedure of intensive discussion for the selection of the 50 cases of

espèce de + NP! not featuring a negatively evaluative noun phrase. The question that we had

to ask ourselves here for every instance is whether the noun phrase on its own conventionally

conveys (some kind of) disapproval of a human referent. For the large majority of hits, it was

relatively easy to answer either positively (e.g. *âne* 'donkey', *bâtard* 'bastard', *traître* 'traitor')

or negatively (e.g. *civilisé* 'civilized person', *demoiselle* 'young lady', *mathématicien*

'mathematician'). However, as pointed out in Section 1.1, conventionalization is a matter of degree. For numerous cases, we therefore also ended up consulting reference dictionaries such as *Larousse* and *Le Robert* and the internet to check whether or not particular nouns have common negative associations. As a result, *thon* 'tuna', for instance, was ultimately rejected, because it seems to have some currency as a term of abuse for women (see the Google results for *thon + injure + français*), but *pleurote* 'oyster mushroom' was kept. In the same vein, *hongrois* 'Hungarian' was retained but *juif* 'Jew' was not, since *Le Robert* (s.v. *juif*) mentions its *emploi diffamatoire* 'defamatory use'. Conventionalization can vary between speakers too, of course, and we acknowledge that our own subjective judgments may have had some impact on the collection of our 50 hits. So we will list all noun phrases in this sample for the sake of transparency (see Section 3.1.2).

2.2 Questionnaire-based approach

2.2.1 Design and instructions

Our questionnaire comprises 30 scenarios.[6] They all share the same, nearly negligible amount of situational information of "imagine that someone addresses you in this way".[7] This instruction is deliberately minimal, since we want judgments on *espèce de* + NP! out of context, which Section 1.1 has shown can tell us much about the nature of the construction. The scenarios do differ in the presence or absence of *espèce de* and in the actual nouns used in the address. The latter come in four types: (i) the negatively evaluative nouns in (12a); (ii) the positively evaluative ones in (12b); (iii) the evaluatively neutral ones in (12c); and (iv) the pseudo nouns in

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[6] See https://forms.gle/EYFkt9ZLnCTxcAzE9 (accessed 26/03/2024) for the survey in its entirety and Van Olmen and Andersson (forthc.) for a similar questionnaire-based study of 'you' + NP! in English and Polish.

[7] For simplicity's sake, the in-text quotes of the questionnaire will be given in English. See (13) for an example of a scenario in French.

(12d). For the last two types, informal feedback from the participants in a pilot study suggested that some extra information would be beneficial, and we therefore added the respective instructions "imagine that you are a professor/waiter/waitress" and "imagine that the word *plauche/galpon* exists in French". In view of the masculine and feminine nouns in (12a) and (12c), we should also note the following instruction for our participants: "If the scenario contains multiple forms of an expression, we encourage you to consider the form that you think applies to you for your answers."

(12)   a.   *(espèce d')idiot/idiote! – (espèce d')enfoiré/enfoirée!*

'(you) idiot!' – '(you) motherfucker!'

b.   *(espèce de) génie! – (espèce d')ange!*

'(you) genius!' – '(you) angel!'

c.   *(espèce de) professeur/professeure! – (espèce de) serveur/serveuse!*

'(you) professor!' – '(you) waiter/waitress!')

d.   *(espèce de) plauche! – (espèce de) galpon!*

'(you) plauche!' – '(you) galpon!'

The addresses in (12) make up sixteen scenarios. The remaining ones all feature decoys – such as (*mon/ma) chéri/chérie!* '(my) darling!', *Ma/Votre Majesté!* 'My/Your Highness!' and *Monsieur/Madame!* 'Sir/Madame!' – to make the purpose of the questionnaire less obvious to the participants. For the same reason, special care was taken to keep the members of every pair as far away from each other as possible. Take the pseudo nouns: *plauche!* is scenario 4 and *espèce de plauche!* scenario 26 while *espèce de galpon!* is scenario 9 and *galpon!* scenario 30.

Each scenario contains the same two questions, illustrated in (13). The first one requests a judgment about the address's well-formedness, as in (13a). In the preliminary instructions, it

is introduced as follows: "You will be asked to assess how well-formed or well-formulated X is as a way to address someone in French. One can rephrase the question in this way: to what extent do you think addressing someone as X is natural or unnatural? In your answer, you will be required to select a score on a 7-point scale, in which 1 stands for 'very unnatural/very ill-formulated/very ill-formed', 7 for 'very natural/very well-formulated/very well-formed' and 4 for 'neither unnatural/ill-formulated/ill-formed nor natural/well-formulated/well-formed'."

(13) *Imaginez que quelqu'un s'adresse à vous comme ceci: "Espèce de génie!"*

    a. *Dans quelle mesure "espèce de génie!" vous semble-t-il naturel / bien formulé / bien formé dans ce cas? (Rappelez-vous que 4 signifie "ni non naturel / mal formulé / mal formé ni naturel / bien formulé / bien formé".)*

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
très non naturel /									*très naturel /*
très mal formulé /		O	O	O	O	O	O	O	*très bien formulé /*
très mal formé									*très bien formé*

    b. *Dans quelle mesure l'individu qui dit "espèce de génie!" vous semble-t-il méchant / blessant / etc. ou gentil / bienveillant / etc. dans ce cas? (Rappelez-vous que 4 signifie "ni méchant / blessant / etc. ni gentil / bienveillant / etc.".)*

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
très méchant /									*très gentil /*
		O	O	O	O	O	O	O	
très blessant /									*très bienveillant /*

très hostile /	*très aimable /*
très incivil /	*très courtois /*
très impoli	*très poli*

The second question requests a judgment about the address's (im)politeness, as in (13b). The preliminary instructions present it as follows: "You will be asked to evaluate whether the person saying X seems kind/complimentary/good-natured/civil or unkind/hurtful/bad-natured/uncivil to you. One can rephrase the question in this way: to what extent do you think the person saying X is polite or impolite? In your answer, you will be required to select a score between 1, which stands for 'very unkind/very hurtful/very bad-natured/very uncivil/very impolite', and 7, which stands for 'very kind/very complimentary/very good-natured/very civil/very polite'. A score of 4 stands for 'neither unkind/hurtful/bad-natured/uncivil/impolite nor kind/complimentary/good-natured/civil/polite'."

Two comments are in order. First, the mention of a range of alternative terms here, based on Oliver (2023: 134) among others, aims to accommodate for the fact, established by discursive and post-structuralist scholars, that the labels of "polite" and "impolite" are not necessarily understood in a uniform way (see also Ruytenbeek, Decock and Depraetere, 2023: 78-80 for a comparable variety of ways in which speakers of French describe face threats). Second, it is obviously impossible to know exactly how every single participant actually assessed (im)politeness. The set-up of our survey nevertheless seeks to find some kind of balance between the perspectives of speaker and addressee (see Section 2.1.2): the question itself essentially asks the participants to rate the (im)politeness of the speaker using a particular expression but, as they have also been instructed to imagine themselves as the addressee, their own feelings as

the target of that expression come into play too.[8]

Further preliminary instructions include the content warning that "the study involves language that some may find offensive" and the comment that it "contains optional questions of a demographic nature". The primary reason for collecting that data was to enable us to remove the answers of anyone wanting to pull out of the survey after completing it. Finally, the participants are also instructed to consider: (i) "There are no right or wrong answers. This questionnaire is not a test of your knowledge of any "rules" of the French language or of French culture.[9] We are interested in your own linguistic intuitions and usage; not in what other people, institutions, style guides or grammars might think."; (ii) "It is crucial that you answer the questions as instinctively as possible. Once you have assigned a score, please refrain from changing it afterward."; (iii) "There is no deadline for this questionnaire or a prescribed time to complete it in."; and (iv) "You are encouraged to use the full scale from 1 to 7. For instance, if you think that a particular expression is not very natural but not impossible either, you may want to consider assigning a score of 2 or 3. Similarly, if you think that some expression is more kind than unkind but not especially kind, you may want to consider assigning a score of 5 or 6."

2.2.2 Data collection

After ethics approval had been obtained,[10] we asked colleagues working in departments of linguistics, modern languages and/or literature at universities in France in May 2023 whether they

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[8] For more general questions about speaker intentionality and unintentional impoliteness, insults are, in our view, quite interesting anyway. If Ruytenbeek, Decock and Depraetere (2023: 83) are right in arguing that insults – and, by extension, constructions specialized for insults – "explicitly encode an intention to offend", it is difficult to see how someone using them, even if a joking way, can be unaware at least of how they may come across.

[9] One of the reviewers rightly points out that this instruction assumes that the participants are speakers of French and from France. We acknowledge that we do not know for sure that they all meet this description. Yet, given the way that the invitation to take part in the questionnaire was formulated and disseminated (see Section 2.2.2), we are confident that our participants are indeed first language speakers of French and are at least familiar with French culture.

[10] The survey was submitted to the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University in March 2023 and we were given permission to proceed with it in April 2023.

would be willing to disseminate a call to take part in our questionnaire, among their students and networks. The invitation specified that the survey was seeking judgments on the well-formedness and degree of (im)politeness of a variety of French expressions by first language speakers. It also emphasized that participation was voluntary and anonymous and, as students were included in the target audience, that non-participation would have no impact at all on their studies or grades. Three colleagues agreed to our request and forwarded the email invitation, which already contained a link to the online questionnaire (see footnote 6), to their contacts.[11] By the end of May 2023, the survey had received 67 responses, all by people who identified as first language speakers of French. Although we have no reason to expect sociolinguistic differences to affect our results, the following list presents, for the sake of completeness, a demographic breakdown of the participants in terms of age, gender and education:

- 2 reported being born in the 1940s, 1 in the 1950s, 4 in the 1960s, 4 in the 1970s, 7 in the 1980s, 23 in the 1990s, 21 in the 2000s and 5 provided no information;
- 49 identified as female, 15 as male, 2 as non-binary and 1 provided no information;
- 8 reported a baccalaureate as their highest level of education, 17 a bachelor's degree, 25 a master's degree, 16 a doctoral degree and 1 provided no information.

2.2.3 Analysis

For our questionnaire results, we will give the descriptive statistics of means and standard deviations. A mean represents the average of the scores given by all the participants for the degree of (im)politeness or the well-formedness of a particular type of noun with *espèce de* or without

it. A standard deviation captures the variation between all participants' scores for this type of noun with(out) *espèce de*: if it is low, they are generally close to the mean; if it is high, they are more spread out (see Rasinger, 2013: 134-136).

When contrasting two scores (e.g. the (im)politeness of evaluatively neutral nouns with or without *espèce de*), we will employ two-tailed paired t-tests. They point out whether or not the means differ significantly from one another, bearing their standard deviations in mind too. The type of t-test is (i) two-tailed, since we will not necessarily have specific hypotheses about the direction of the difference between all scores (see Baayen, 2008: 81), and (ii) paired, since we will be considering scores from the same set of participants (see Rasinger, 2013: 200). When comparing a single score to various others (e.g. the well-formedness of *espèce de* with negatively evaluative nouns vs with other types of nouns), we will Bonferroni-correct the standard level of significance of 0.05 or, in other words, divide it by the number of t-tests performed. This correction makes it less likely that the result of any specific test with a p-value under 0.05 is valued too highly, as it could simply have emerged by accident among multiple t-tests (see Baayen, 2008: 114).[12]

3   Results

In this section, we will present the findings of our corpus study first (Section 3.1), those for the 200-hit sample as well as those for the 50-hit sample. Then, we will describe the results of our questionnaire (Section 3.2), those for well-formedness as well as for (im)politeness.

3.1   Corpus-based approach

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[12] To conduct the statistical analyses, we used SPSS 29 (IBM Corp 2022).

3.1.1 200-hit sample – does *espèce de* + NP! tend to be impolite in actual usage?

Before we turn to the question in the section heading, consider the instance of *espèce de* + NP! in (14), to get an idea of our data and in particular of the noun phrases that are typically attested in the construction.

(14) *Je me plantes face à lui, furieuse: "C'est pas une raison pour te rincer l'oeil!* **Espèce de pervers***!" Il a l'air un peu surpris de me voir lui crier dessus, et il recule un peu.*
(frTenTen20: 18583087)
'I stand in front of him, furious: "That's no reason to feast your eyes on me! You pervert!" He looks a little surprised to see me yelling at him, and he backs away a little.'

Example (14) is representative of our sample in that its noun phrase: (i) is singular, like 96.5% of cases; (ii) consists of a single noun, i.e. no modifier is present, like 81% of cases; and (iii) has itself a negatively evaluative meaning, like 84% of cases.

A few comments are in order. In relation to feature (i), it may be interesting to know too that, of the seven plural hits, four spell 'species' as singular *espèce* and three as plural *espèces*, as in (15a) and (15b) respectively.

(15) a. *Et cette aigrette baissa un regard de mépris sur la feuille et lui dit: "Ah, ah ah! Vous n'avez rien du tout, vous,* **espèce de luthériens formalistes***!"* (frTenTen20: 22405251)
'And this plume of feathers looked down at the leaf with contempt and said: "Ah, ah ah! You do not have anything at all, you, you formalist Lutherans!"'
      b. *Ce qui a rendu fou de rage l'acteur et producteur de 58 ans. "Nous créons des*

*milliers d'emplois, **espèces d'enfoirés**."* (frTenTen20: 24295323)

'Which infuriated the 58-year-old actor and producer. "We're creating thousands of jobs, you bastards."'

Feature (ii) can be said to be in line with earlier findings indicating that insults tend to be short (e.g. Culpeper 2011: 239). It is also worth noting the recurring adjectives in the instances that do have a modifier – in the list below, which accounts for just under half of the 38 cases (the figure between brackets is the number of times that the adjective's masculine and/or feminine forms appear in our data):

petit/petite 'little' (6), *sale* 'dirty' (4), *gros* 'fat' (3), *vieux/vieille* 'old' (3), *grand/grande* 'big' (2)

As *sale* 'dirty' in (16a) – as well as *grande* 'big' in *espèce de grande brute!* 'you big brute!' in (9a) – shows, these modifiers often contribute to or intensify the intrinsically negatively evaluative character of the noun phrase. The adjective may, however, also be what actually makes a noun phrase negatively evaluative, like *indigne* 'unworthy' with *fils* 'son' in (16b), or express no obvious evaluation, like *éternel* 'eternal' in *espèce d'éternel apprenti!* 'you eternal apprentice!' in (6c).

(16)   a.   *L'homme regarda les dégâts causés par le bébé, incrédule, avant que la fureur ne le prit. – C'est pas vrai! **Espèce de sale morveux**! Tu ne peux pas faire attention!, se mit-il à hurler.* (frTenTen20: 14696795)

'The man looked at the damage caused by the baby, in disbelief, before fury took hold of him. – This can't be true! You dirty snot! Can't you be careful!, he started

screaming.'

b. *Et comment me remercies-tu? Tu souilles mon nom et mon rang dans la boue où te jettes,* **espèce de fils indigne***, raclure née d'une alliance à la fin tragique.*

(frTenTen20: 1551584)

'And how do you thank me? You defile my name and my rank in the mud into which you throw yourself, you unworthy son, scum born from an alliance with a tragic end.'

As for feature (iii), finally, it is not always easy to determine for every single instance whether the noun phrase is negatively evaluative of its own accord (see also Section 2.1.2). But we are confident that it is the case for at least 168 of the hits in our data. Indirect support for this claim comes from the overview below of all recurring nouns in *espèce de* + NP!. The list makes up 41% of the sample and exclusively contains nouns that, in our view, already convey negative evaluation by themselves:

idiot/idiote 'idiot' (10), *crétin* 'cretin' (6), *brute* 'brute' (5), *enfoiré/enfoirée* 'bastard' (5), *connard/connasse* 'asshole/cunt' (4), *pervers* 'pervert' (4), *salope* 'slut' (4), *cochon* 'pig' (3), *fou/folle* 'crazy man/woman' (3), *menteur* 'liar' (3), *ordure* 'garbage' (3), *abruti* 'moron' (2), *chien/chienne* 'dog/bitch' (2), *con/conne* 'jerk/bitch' (2), *dégénéré* 'degenerate' (2), *fainéant* 'lazy person' (2), *fumier* 'shit' (2), *garce* 'bitch' (2), *lâche* 'coward' (2), *malade* 'sick person' (2), *monstre* 'monster' (2), *obsédé* 'maniac' (2), *salaud* 'bastard' (2), *salopard* 'bastard' (2), *sorcière* 'witch' (2), *taré* 'crazy person' (2), *troufion* 'asshole' [dated] (2)

For the remaining 32 cases, we refrain from any further classification (e.g. into positively evaluative and evaluatively neutral) on account of its unfeasibility (see also Van Olmen, Andersson

and Culpeper 2023, 31). A noun phrase like *pétasite* 'butterbur' may straightforwardly be categorized as evaluatively neutral but it is unclear how other noun phrases should be analyzed. The following questions can serve as examples: (how) does the reclamation of *geek* 'geek' in certain communities affect its classification, does *ours* 'bear' have any conventional evaluative meanings and do the noun and the adjective in *barbare érudit* 'erudite barbarian' cancel each other out?

Example (14) is representative of our sample in one more way, which directly relates to the present section's main aim, i.e. its impolite character. It is one of the 81.5% of such cases in our data. We have already presented several examples in (1), (6c), (8) to (11) and (15), with various types of noun phrases. Table 1 provides the overall results for the [+impolite] versus [–impolite] instances, as well as those of the [±negatively evaluative] noun phrases separately.

Table 1: Impoliteness in the 200-hit sample

[±impolite]	[+negatively evaluative]		[–negatively evaluative]		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
[+impolite]	140	83.33%	23	71.88%	163	81.50%
[–impolite]	28	16.67%	9	28.12%	37	18.50%

The non-negatively evaluative ones have a slightly lower proportion of impolite cases (71.88% versus 83.33%) but the difference is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2.34$, $p > 0.05$). We will briefly come back to them in Section 3.1.2, however.

Let us now turn to the non-impolite instances of *espèce de* + NP! in the data. An important initial observation concerns the nature of the noun phrases: three quarters of them (i.e. 28 out of 37) still clearly express negative evaluation themselves, as in (17). In context, though, they do not seem to fulfill an impolite function. Instead, they are used: (i) as banter between close contacts, where exchanging apparent insults can be said to create or signal camaraderie, as in

(17a) (see Lagorgette and Larrivée, 2004); (ii) to mark affection (in a teasing manner), like in (17b); or (iii) as "dirty talk" in sexual encounters where the participants consent to and take pleasure in the usage of such terms, as in (17c). Crucially, in none of these cases can the construction be interpreted as intending to or being perceived as having negative emotional ramifications for the addressee.

(17) a. *"Rien ne t'empêche de chanter Heroin, c'est vrai. Mais c'est un peu triste, sans accompagnement, non?" Je la vois relever la tête, son regard cherchant le mien pour mieux me fusiller. – "Sors ton harmonica, **espèce d'idiot**. Tu crois que j'ai pas remarqué ton manège?" Elle me toise, glaciale, ou du moins essayant... J'éclate de rire, et elle me rejoint quelques secondes plus tard.* (frTenTen20: 20087628)

'"Nothing is stopping you from singing Heroin, that is true. But it is a little sad, without accompaniment, no?" I see her raise her head, her gaze seeking to better glare at me. "Take out your harmonica, you idiot. Do you think I haven't noticed your behavior?" She stares at me, frozen, or at least trying to… I burst out laughing and she joins me a few seconds later."

b. *C'est pour mes sac-sac-sac, c'est pour mes Sacavins. Tous prêts à s'mettre la youte du soir au matin. Une bande de sales gamins, alors fais pas l'malin. Espèce de sac-sac-sac, **espèce de Sacavin**!* (frTenTen20: 17855018)

'This is for my wine-wine-wine, this is for my winos. All ready to get hammered from evening to morning. A bunch of dirty kids, so do not be smart. You wine-wine-wine, you wino!"

c. *Vous … ordonnez sèchement: "Lèche! je veux que tu les lèches avec ta langue. **Espèce de petite chienne**. Vite!" Je m'exécute parfaitement conscient à cet*

instant d'être ravalé au rang d'animal. Au lieu d'en éprouver du dégoût, une im-

mense satisfaction m'envahit. (frTenTen20: 338627)

'You ... order sharply: "Lick! I want you to lick them with your tongue. You little

bitch! Now!" I do so perfectly aware at this moment of being reduced to the level

of an animal. Instead of feeling disgust, an immense satisfaction comes over me.'

The non-impolite instances also include one, in (18a), that can be described as an attribution of

luck. The remaining ones do not have sufficient(ly clear) co-text to enable us to classify them

with any certainty. In (18b), for example, there are no obvious indications of impoliteness but

we do not have enough information about the interlocutors' relationship to consider *espèce de*

goinfre! 'you glutton!' as banter either.

(18) a.   *Et puis parce que c'est vraiment une fête on te prépare de petites surprises trop*

mimi comme les bijoux de Foxy M.A. ... avec lesquels tu pourras peut-être repar-

*tir, **espèce de veinard***. (frTenTen20: 25047070)

'And then because it is really a party we will prepare cute little surprises for you

like Foxy M.A.'s jewelry … which you might be able leave with, you lucky de-

vil!'

b.   *Sanjiiiiii! ENCORE DE LA VIANDE!! – Arrête un peu de t'empiffrer autant, **es-***

***pèce de goinfre**! Laisses-en à Elana-chan! – Tiens c'est vrai! Où est-elle?* (frTen-

Ten20: 28628671)

'Sanjiiiiii! MORE MEAT!! – Stop stuffing yourself so much, you glutton! Leave

some for Elana-chan! – Hey, that's true! Where is she?'

For the sake of completeness, Table 2 gives a quantitative breakdown of the 37 non-impolite

instances into the usage types described above.

Table 2: Non-impoliteness in the 200-hit sample

Usage type	#	%
Banter	16	43.24
Affection	4	10.81
Dirty talk	7	18.92
Attribution of luck	1	2.70
Unclear	9	24.32

Of note here is that, not including the unclear cases, banter and dirty talk make up the majority of the non-impolite hits in our sample.

To conclude, the fact that more than four fifths of cases of *espèce de* + NP! are like those in (1), (6c), (8) to (11) and (15) supports an analysis of the construction as conventionalized for impoliteness, as "a correlate of the (statistical) frequency with which" it "is used in one's experience of" impolite "contexts(s)" (Terkourafi, 2005b: 213). Moreover, with Leech (1983: 142-145), we would argue that the uses in (17) back this analysis up as they are actually contingent on the possibility for offense (see Zimmermann, 2003 on "antipoliteness" too). In (17b), for instance, it is the supposed humiliation associated with *espèce de petite chienne!* 'you little bitch!' that the participants enjoy. These uses could also be said to be secondary in Neo-Gricean terms, requiring further particularized inferences to cancel out the primary/conventional reading. The default reading of *espèce d'idiot*, for instance, is one as a proper insult but, in (17a), it is overridden by the specifics of the situation, which trigger its interpretation as banter.

3.1.2 50-hit sample – does *espèce de* + NP! tend to force an impolite reading onto non-negatively evaluative noun phrases?

If *espèce de* + NP! is indeed an impoliteness construction, we would expect, following Jones (1996) and Guérin (2012), that it tends to combine with negatively evaluative noun phrases but also that it forces an impolite interpretation onto noun phrases not expressing negative evaluation. The first expectation is borne out by the amount of data that we had to go through for our 50-hit sample (see Section 2.1.1). For the second one, consider the following overview of the recurring and unique noun phrases in the present sample, as well as the examples in (19):

- recurring noun phrases: *veinard/veinarde* 'lucky devil' (5), *génie* 'genius' (3), *hongrois* 'Hungarian' (2)

- unique noun phrases: *adulte* 'adult', *amphibie* 'amphibian', *animalcule* 'microscopically small animal' *auteur* 'author', *caténaire* 'catenary', *centrist* 'centrist', *châtain* 'chesnut-haired man', *civilisé* 'civilized person', *coelomate triblastique* 'triblastic coelomate', *collard* '(Gilbert) Collard, cabbage', *comique* 'comic', *crampon* 'crampon', *crotale* 'rattlesnake', *cucurbitacée* 'gourd', *demi-tabouret* 'half stool', *demoiselle* 'young lady', *fils unique* 'only son', *français* 'French person', *frontifpice* 'frontispiece', *grand ventilateur* 'big fan', *guerrière* 'female warrior', *humain* 'human', *industriel* 'industrialist', *ingredient* 'ingredient', *jeunot* 'young man', *journaliste démocratique* 'democratic journalist', *libertin* 'libertine', *libre-penseuse* 'free thinker', *logarithme* 'logarithm', *marin* 'sailor', *mathématicien moderne* 'modern mathematician', *montagnard* 'mountain dweller', *montre* 'watch', *pleurote* 'oyster mushroom', *poete* 'poet', *PTT* 'Postal, Telegraphs and Telephones (worker)',[13] *saint* 'saint', *superwoman-desblogues* 'super woman of blogs', *surfeur* 'surfer', *vélar* 'hedge.mustard'

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[13] One of the editors pointed out to us that *PTT* may also be a jocular abbreviation of *petit travail tranquille* 'little quiet work', used to make fun of people who work at the post office.

(19) a. *"Non monsieur je ne baisserai pas de ton. ... Vous êtes qui pour m'en empêcher,*

*donnez moi votre nom. Vous avez les dents qui raient le parquet, **espèce de jeu-***

***not**." Je me dis alors qu'un syndicaliste hystérique s'en prend à un conseiller à*

l'accueil. (frTenTen20: 2169962)

"No sir I will not lower my voice. … Who are you to stop me, give me your

name. You are overly ambitious, you youngster." I then tell myself that a hysteri-

cal trade unionist is attacking a receptionist.'

'   b. *L'intéressé lui vertement répondu sur le même réseau social, l'égratignant sans*

*détour: "Ferme donc ta gueule, **espèce de collard**!"* (frTenTen20: 9979681)

'The person in question replied to him sharply on the same social network, lacera-

ting him bluntly: "Shut your trap, you cabbage!*"*

c. *"Alors qui es-tu exactement? Un terroriste, c'est ça? Tu voulais buter une ou*

*deux personnes et faire la une du journal?" – "Evidemment, **espèce de génie**, et*

c'est pour ça que j'ai lâché mon arme avant de m'enfuir en courant." L'homme

lui décocha un crochet du droit en plein visage. (frTenTen20: 1565675)

"So who are you exactly? A terrorist, right? Did you want to kill one or two peo-

ple and make the front page of the newspaper?" – "Of course, you genius, and

that's why I dropped my gun and ran away." The man delivered a right hook to

his face.

These hits differ in the type of noun featured in *espèce de* + NP!. *Jeunot* 'youngster' in (19a)

is one that refers to a human being without any distinct evaluative overtones. *Collard* 'cabbage'

in (19b) denotes a vegetable and has, to our knowledge, no established insultive use – in fact,

the speaker is making a pun here based on the surname of the addressee, politician Gilbert

Collard. *Génie* in (19c), finally, normally conveys a positive quality of the referent. However, it is evident from the co-text that all three are meant to offend here. The addressee's violent reaction in (19c), for example, signals the sarcastic intent behind *espèce de génie!*. As Table 3 shows, the majority of the non-negatively evaluative noun phrases listed above, i.e. 68%, are similarly impolite – a fact that we would attribute to their appearance after *espèce de* and the construction's association with impoliteness producing such a reading. We will examine this claim in more depth in our questionnaire-based approach (see Section 3.2.2).

Table 3: Impoliteness comparison of the samples

[±impolite]	50-hit sample		200-hit sample	
	#	%	#	%
[+impolite]	34	68.00	163	81.50
[–impolite]	16	32.00	37	18.50

Table 3 does reveal a difference between our 50-hit and 200-hit samples: there are significantly more non-impolite instances in the former than in the latter ($\chi^2 = 4.36$, $p < 0.05$). The explanation lies partly in the sheer number of cases of *espèce de veinard/veinarde!*, serving as attributions of luck (see 18a), that unavoidably ended up in the 50-hit sample. Another reason is that non-negatively evaluative noun phrases may just suit banter well when they occur in *espèce de* + NP!, as in (20).

(20) *"Idiot," lui lança-t-elle, sans brutalité. Elle lui proposa une cigarette qu'il accepta, lui alluma, puis se servit elle aussi. "Et toi, **espèce de libre-penseuse**!" rétorqua Raphaël, se prenant au jeu. "Ce n'est pas moi qui viens draguer les filles."* (frTenTen20: 26664825)

'"Idiot," she called out to him, without any brutality. She offered him a cigarette, which

he accepted, lit it for him, then helped herself to one too. "And you, you freethinker!" Raphael retorted, getting involved in the game. "It is not me who comes to pick up girls.""

The apparent incongruity between the construction and noun phrases like *libre-penseuse* 'free-thinker' may create an immediate impression of such cases as somewhat peculiar and therefore a likely interpretation of them as humorous (see also *se prenant au jeu* 'getting involved in the game' in the example). Recall also that the cases of *espèce de* + NP! with non-negatively evaluative noun phrases in our 200-hit sample have a (non-significantly) higher proportion of non-impolite uses than those with negatively evaluative ones (see Table 1). In fact, their rate of non-impoliteness, 28.12%, is very similar to the rate of 32% of our 50-hit sample ($\chi^2 = 0.71$, $p > 0.05$). It is important to add, however, that our 50-hit sample only contains instances with noun phrases that are in no way negatively evaluative (see Section 2.1.2) whereas the 200-hit sample do include ambiguous one such as *geek* and *barbare érudit* (see Section 3.1.1).

3.2 Questionnaire-based approach

3.2.1 Well-formedness

With our survey question about well-formedness, we aim to investigate how compatible *espèce de* + NP! is with various types of noun phrases. The results are given in Table 4, which includes the means (μ) and the standard deviations (σ) for the well-formedness of the four different types of nouns introduced in Section 2.2.1, on their own ([–espèce de]) *and* in the construction ([+espèce de]). Recall that 1 here signifies 'very unnatural/very ill-formulated/very ill-formed' here, 4 'neither unnatural/ill-formulated/ill-formed nor natural/well-formulated/well-formed' and 7

'very natural/very well-formulated/very well-formed'.

Table 4: Questionnaire results for well-formedness (from 1 'very ill-formed' to 7 'very well-formed')

Noun type	[±espèce de]	μ	σ
negatively evaluative	[–espèce de]	5.22	1.93
	[+espèce de]	5.75	1.82
positively evaluative	[–espèce de]	3.26	1.77
	[+espèce de]	2.75	1.63
evaluatively neutral	[–espèce de]	4.52	2.07
	[+espèce de]	2.07	1.35
pseudo	[–espèce de]	2.64	1.71
	[+espèce de]	3.60	2.04

Espèce de + NP! is only found to constitute a well-formed address with the negatively evaluative nouns ($\mu = 5.75$, $\sigma = 1.82$). Its score drops significantly, to the ill-formed side of the scale, with the pseudo nouns ($\mu = 3.60$, $\sigma = 2.04$) and even more with the positively evaluative ones ($\mu = 2.75$, $\sigma = 1.63$) and yet further with the evaluatively neutral ones ($\mu = 2.07$, $\sigma = 1.35$) ($p < 0.001$ for the t-tests comparing all noun types). This result may be taken as evidence that the construction is, essentially, incompatible with non-negatively evaluative noun phrases and with evaluatively neutral ones in particular. This conclusion seems warranted in view of our corpus findings: 84% of all noun phrases in our 200-hit sample have a negatively evaluative meaning themselves (see Section 3.1.1) and the 50-hit sample, with no such noun phrases, required a large amount of data to collect (see Section 3.1.2).

Some caution is in order, though. We should also consider these findings for *espèce de* + NP! in light of the results of the nouns on their own. The negatively evaluative ones are already well-formed addresses without *espèce de* ($\mu = 5.22$, $\sigma = 1.93$). Interestingly, their rating does increase significantly when appearing in the construction (to $\mu = 5.75$, $\sigma = 1.82$; $p < 0.001$) –

suggesting that, if one wishes to assess an addressee in an adverse way, *espèce de* + NP! is the ideal vehicle to do so. The evaluatively neutral nouns are rated as well-formed too on their own ($\mu = 4.52$, $\sigma = 2.07$). The fact that they exhibit the most substantial decrease when combining with *espèce de* (to $\mu = 2.07$, $\sigma = 1.35$; $p < 0.001$) confirms the construction's "dislike" of evaluatively neutral noun phrases and thus its evaluative nature. Turning to the pseudo nouns and the positively evaluative ones, we can see that, even by themselves, they are judged to be ill-formed addresses. For the former ($\mu = 2.64$, $\sigma = 1.71$), one explanation might be that referring to a person with a fake word like *plauche* is just strange. What is of note, however, is the pseudo nouns' significant rise in well-formedness when occurring in *espèce de* + NP! (to $\mu = 3.60$, $\sigma = 2.04$; $p < 0.001$). Although they do not reach the well-formed side of the scale, the construction can nevertheless be said to improve their possible interpretation as an address. Our interpretation of this finding is as follows: calling someone *plauche* on its own is literally meaningless while the construction imbues the word with at least some meaning, i.e. *espèce de plauche!* must be conveying something bad about an addressee. This effect is probably strengthened by the (accidental) fact that both *plauche* and *galpon* contain a high proportion of less sonorous sounds (/p/, /ʃ/ and /g/), which Valléry (2024) shows is a characteristic of genuine *and* invented swear words in French.[14] Finally, the (unexpected) result for the positively evaluative nouns on their own ($\mu = 3.26$, $\sigma = 1.77$) is less easy to account for. What is essential here, though, is that these nouns are still significantly more ill-formed when appearing in *espèce de* + NP! ($\mu = 2.75$, $\sigma = 1.63$; $p < 0.001$). It remains safe to say, in other words, that the construction is not really compatible with noun phrases expressing positive evaluation.

3.2.2 (Im)politeness

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[14] Valléry (2024: 102) uses an "unsonority density" threshold of 0.33, i.e. "at least one out of three phonemes is an unsonorous consonant", to compare swear words with other words. Both *plauche* (0.5) and *galpon* (0.4) exceed this threshold.

With our survey question about (im)politeness, we mainly seek to examine whether *espèce de* + NP! forces an impolite interpretation onto non-negatively evaluative noun phrases. The results are presented in Table 5, which includes the means (μ) and the standard deviations (σ) for the (im)politeness of the four different types of nouns introduced in Section 2.2.1, on their own ([–espèce de]) *and* in the construction ([+espèce de]). Recall that 1 here signifies 'very unkind/very hurtful/very bad-natured/very uncivil/very impolite', 4 'neither unkind/hurtful/bad-natured/uncivil/impolite nor kind/complimentary/good-natured/civil/polite' and 7 'very kind/very complimentary/very good-natured/very civil/very polite'.

Table 5: Questionnaire results for (im)politeness (from 1 'very impolite' to 7 'very polite')

Noun type	[±espèce de]	μ	σ
negatively evaluative	[–espèce de]	1.93	1.08
	[+espèce de]	1.61	0.78
positively evaluative	[–espèce de]	5.55	1.22
	[+espèce de]	4.29	1.57
evaluatively neutral	[–espèce de]	4.11	1.71
	[+espèce de]	2.03	1.00
pseudo	[–espèce de]	3.18	1.00
	[+espèce de]	2.63	1.00

Our first observation concerns the pseudo nouns. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they are judged to be impolite, regardless of the presence or absence of *espèce de*: addressing someone with a would-be word that features a high proportion of less sonorous sounds is likely to be seen as somehow offensive. Interestingly, the pseudo nouns do become significantly *more* impolite when they occur in *espèce de* + NP! ($\mu = 2.63$, $\sigma = 1.00$ versus $\mu = 3.18$, $\sigma = 1.00$; $p < 0.001$). This result may be argued to support our explanation for the findings on their well-formedness in that the

construction clearly forces an (extra) impolite reading onto these nouns and thus makes them slightly better as addresses. Its property of imposing such an interpretation is evident in the evaluatively neutral nouns too. They are essentially deemed to be neither polite nor impolite on their own ($\mu = 4.11$, $\sigma = 1.71$), which makes sense since they express no evaluation. Yet, in *espèce de* + NP!, where they may not be especially well-formed, their score drops significantly and they are regarded as impolite ($\mu = 2.03$, $\sigma = 1.00$; $p < 0.001$). This finding confirms Guérin's (2012) claim about *espèce de linguiste!* (see Section 1.2). It is also in line with the results of our 50-hit corpus study, in which 68% of cases of the construction with non-negatively evaluative noun phrases still have an impolite function. The third type of noun to be discussed here is the positively evaluative ones. It is hardly remarkable by now that, by themselves, they are basically rated as polite ($\mu = 5.55$, $\sigma = 1.22$) and that their score significantly decreases in *espèce de* + NP! ($\mu = 4.29$, $\sigma = 1.57$; $p < 0.001$). Although this difference provides further support for the construction's coercive abilities in our view, one might have assumed that the positively evaluative nouns would witness a more substantial drop than to just 'neither polite nor impolite'. One plausible reason, discussed in Section 3.1.2, why they do not behave in this way is that they may tend to come across as humorous in the construction. It is perhaps interesting in this regard that two of the three cases of *espèce de génie!* in our 50-hit sample serve as banter. The one in (21), for instance, is unmistakably ironic but, in this specific context of a game where three friends are trying to confuse and outsmart one another, it cannot really be considered impolite (the joke in the example relies on the phonetic similarity between *infini* 'infinity' and *un Finn, hein* 'one Finn, eh').

(21)　*Combien font l'infini plus un? ai-je demandé à Finn. – L'infini, a répondu Finn en soupirant. – Faux. Ça fait deux. – Ah ouais? Comment ça? J'ai tendu l'index vers lui: – Infini. Puis je me suis désignée: – Plus un. Ça fait deux, **espèce de genie**. – Je regrette*

de t'avoir donné mon prénom. – Ha! Je t'ai eu! (frTenTen20: 21924909)

'How much is infinity plus one? I asked Finn. – Infinity, Finn replied with a sigh. –
False. That makes two. – Really? How so? I held out my index finger toward him: – In-
finity. Then I pointed at myself. – Plus one. That makes two, you genius! – I regret giv-
ing you my first name. – Ha! I got you!'

The negatively evaluative nouns, finally, are judged to be impolite, irrespective of *espèce de*'s
presence or absence. This finding is obviously not surprising. Comparing the two environments
is of interest, however. The negatively evaluative nouns become slightly but significantly more
impolite when they appear in *espèce de* + NP! ($\mu = 1.61$, $\sigma = 0.78$ versus $\mu = 1.93$, $\sigma = 1.08$; $p < 0.001$), which may be taken as an indication of the construction's impact on calling someone
espèce d'idiot! rather than simply *idiot!*.

4   Conclusions

We hope to have demonstrated in the present article that *espèce de* + NP! can be considered a
construction in its own right and, moreover, one that is strongly conventionalized for impolite-
ness in the sense of Terkourafi (2005a; 2005b) and Culpeper (2011). Not wanting to repeat in
this conclusion all the results supporting these claims, we trust that the following observations
will suffice here: (i) *espèce de* + NP! has been shown to primarily serve impolite purposes in
usage and even most of its other uses (e.g. banter) can be argued to depend on its association
with impoliteness; (ii) the construction has been found to be relatively incompatible with noun
phrases that do not convey negative evaluation themselves; and (iii) when such noun phrases
nevertheless appear in *espèce de* + NP!, the construction has been shown to force an impolite
interpretation onto them. Additionally, our results reveal what the impact of *espèce de* may be

when it combines with something like *idiot!*, i.e. the insult becomes (even) more impolite. Together, all these findings suggest in our view that there exist structures in language that encode impoliteness irrespective of lexical content.

Another issue that merits further investigation is the question of what motivates the status of *espèce de* + NP! as an impoliteness construction. One recurrent idea in the literature is that *espèce*'s literal meaning of 'species, type, kind' plays a crucial role. Ernotte and Rosier (2004: 39), for instance, use the construction as an illustration of how insults supposedly work "par inclusion syntaxique dans une classe" ('by the syntactic inclusion into a class') or, in other words, by assigning an individual to some general type. We can see the appeal of the proposal: saying that someone belongs to a particular *espèce* of people, with particular characteristics, is a form of typecasting and it seems quite obvious that a person may be offended by being typecast – or, in informal terms, being put in a box – that way. We also agree with Mihatsch (2010), however, that it is quite strange then that no other type noun in French or Romance as a whole can be employed in the same way as *espèce*. In fact, neither more recent typological work on insultive constructions (e.g. Giomi and Van Oers, 2022) nor more recent research into type nouns (e.g. Mihatsch et al., 2023, which covers the Germanic and Slavic languages as well) mentions anything like *espèce de* + NP! (the only case that comes close semantically is Italian *razza di scerno!* 'you fool!', where *razza* has the type-related meaning of 'race, breed'; Giomi, Van Olmen and Van Oers, 2025). Mihatsch (2010: 134) herself hypothesizes that the construction may have developed not out of any 'type' semantics of *espèce* but out of more specialized meanings that the noun had in Middle French, of 'manifestation, form of appearance' or 'individual case'.[15] An in-depth diachronic study of *espèce de* + NP! seems to be in order.

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[15] One of the reviewers' comments is worthy of note here: they point out that English *specimen*, in the meaning 'a typical example of a certain human quality of personality type', is often used in a derogatory manner. They also suggest a possible link between *espèce de* + NP! and evaluative 'of'-binominal constructions such as *that idiot of a professor* (e.g. Trousdale, 2012). Unfortunately, for reasons of space, we have to leave this interesting suggestion for future research.

Number of words (not including references)

11,869

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