

Retraction Notice

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History

Expression of Concern:

☐ yes, date: yyyy-mm-dd**X** no

Correction:

☐ yes, date: yyyy-mm-dd**X** no**Comment:**

The authors want to retract the paper for data error.

This article has been retracted to straighten the academic record. In making this decision the Editorial Board follows [COPE's Retraction Guidelines](#). Aim is to promote the circulation of scientific research by offering an ideal research publication platform with due consideration of internationally accepted standards on publication ethics. The Editorial Board would like to extend its sincere apologies for any inconvenience this retraction may have caused.

The full retraction notice in PDF is preceding the original paper, which is marked "RETRACTED".

A Comparative Analysis of the Inherent Linguistic Impoliteness in the “YOU + NP” Structure between English and Chinese

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative analysis of the “YOU + NP” structure (e.g. you idiot), a recognized impoliteness formula, in both English and Chinese. Contrary to the prevailing perspective in contemporary (im)politeness research, which emphasizes context as the primary determinant of politeness or impoliteness, this study claims that impoliteness can be intrinsically linked to linguistic forms. While our findings in this research indicate that the “YOU + NP” structure is conventionally associated with impoliteness across both languages, it is not entirely conventionalized. The high level of conventionalization of the form may result from the inherent evaluative nature by addressee of the structure, combined with the pragmatic explicitness of using a second-person pronoun, contributing to its impolite connotations. Notably, the structure’s association with impoliteness is more pronounced in Chinese, possibly due to linguistic and cultural nuances. By comparing English and Chinese, this research underscores the significance of linguistic form in shaping (im)politeness perceptions and offers insights into cross-linguistic variations in impoliteness conventions.

Keywords

“YOU + NP” Structure, Impoliteness, Corpus Pragmatics, Linguistic Forms

1. Introduction

The exploration of politeness in linguistic studies dating from the early days of the classics (Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983; Brown & Levin, 1987) established the foundational principles for analyzing politeness in discourse. The discipline has witnessed significant transformations over the decades, such as Culpeper (1996).

The prevailing perspective now suggests that (im)politeness is not intrinsically encoded within linguistic form or structure, but rather is subject to contextual interpretation. This transformation has been fueled by research such as that of Eelen (2001), along with the rise of the discursive approach (Locher, 2006) and the post-structuralist perspective (Mills, 2003). Yet, academic discourse is characterized by diverse opinions. Scholars like Culpeper (2011), have expressed skepticism regarding this dominant perspective. Impoliteness, for instance, can be implicit rather than overtly expressed. Van Olmen et al. (2023) posited that linguistic structures also endow considerable influence, an aspect that has often been neglected in scholarly debates. This research endeavors to spotlight specific linguistic structures that are traditionally associated with impoliteness, underscoring their ubiquity across diverse languages.

Our investigation primarily orbits around the linguistic structure “YOU + NP”, exemplified by expressions like “you bastard.” “YOU” represents the second-person pronoun, referring to the person being addressed. “NP” stands for a noun phrase, which includes a noun and any associated modifiers. And in Chinese, there may also contain a particle “ge” (个), meaning “this”, to indicate a particularity or specificity in the context. Several reasons underpin this choice. Firstly, expressions akin to “you bastard” epitomize a distinct category of impoliteness formula, termed insults, as categorized by Culpeper (2011). As highlighted by Culpeper, such insults are typified by derogatory content and often use pronouns such as “you” as a direct reference. Secondly, the “YOU + NP” format isn’t confined to English. Its analogs, bearing similar impoliteness undertones, are discernible in other languages, including Chinese, where the “YOU + NP” structure is predominantly utilized as vocatives, representing the speaker’s evaluative stance (Guo & Zhang, 2023). Thirdly, the “YOU + NP” structure lends itself to facile corpus-based searches. However, determining the level of politeness conveyed by a linguistic element requires subjective evaluation, leading us to conduct manual analysis of specific samples from a corpus. Notably, the “YOU + NP” format isn’t invariably impolite; expressions like “you star” are complimentary.

The following questions steer this research:

- 1) Does the “YOU + NP” Structure conventionally signify impoliteness?
- 2) Are there discernible variations in the “YOU + NP” structure across the languages examined, especially concerning conventionalization?
- 3) What underpins the association of the “YOU + NP” structure with impoliteness across diverse linguistic landscapes?

The ensuing sections of this manuscript delve into our research methodology and outcomes. Section 3 describes our data collation and analytical techniques, spotlighting the “YOU + NP” structure’s link with impoliteness. Section 4 unveils our analytical outcomes for each language scrutinized. In Section 5, the article reflects on our discoveries and their broader ramifications. Given this paper’s emphasis on insults, some illustrative examples might be perceived as distasteful by certain readers.

2. Literature Review

One of the ongoing debates in the field of (im)politeness revolves around whether it is inherent in language. Before delving into this discussion, it's essential to establish what is meant by (im)politeness being "inherent in language". In this context, inherent meaning refers to formal semantic meaning, which is primarily encoded, literal, or explicit. It is more concerned with truth conditions than with felicity conditions, tends to be conventional rather than non-conventional, and is less contextual and more non-relative (Grice, 1989).

Some scholars argue that (im)politeness is not inherently embedded in linguistic forms. For example, Locher (2006) suggests that perceptions of (im)politeness rely heavily on interactants' assessments of social norms of appropriateness acquired through previous speech events. This perspective, shared by others such as Mills (2003), leans towards cultural and individual relativism, opposing universalizing generalizations. This approach, often associated with post-structuralist or post-modern paradigms, tends to merge with the discursive approach over time (Van der Bom & Mills, 2015). However, as Culpeper (2011: pp. 120-121) highlights, mainstream (im)politeness theorists do not argue that (im)politeness is solely determined by linguistic expressions' inherent properties.

Contrary to the strict view, Clark (1996) argues that conventions, including those stemming from words and structures, facilitate participants in coordinating their thoughts and actions, implying that (im)politeness meanings may also be conventionally established to some extent. Moreover, the ability of individuals to assess varying degrees of (im)politeness of specific words and expressions out of context (e.g., Jain, 2022) suggests that (im)politeness must possess some degree of inherentness.

Politeness formulas are somewhat conventionalized. Terkourafi (2005b: p. 213) proposes that politeness is achieved through generalized implicature when an expression consistently co-occurs with certain contexts based on the addressee's prior experiences. Culpeper (2011) builds upon this notion with impoliteness formulas, where evidence of impoliteness is often challenged by counter-impoliteness and elicits meta-pragmatic comments or displays of negative emotions.

Insults, which frequently take the form of the "YOU + NP" structure, are among the most common impoliteness formulas. Jucker and Taavitsainen (2000) outline three core features of genuine insults in British English: a predication about the target, shared by many impoliteness definitions (Culpeper, 2011). These features delineate what constitutes insult and overlap with the notion of impoliteness.

Above all, the previous research underscore the nuanced nature of (im)politeness and emphasize the need for a multifaceted approach that considers both inherent linguistic forms and their contextual factors influencing on the impoliteness formula. Rare studies have applied quantitative methodology in empirical studies to explore the intricate dynamics of (im)politeness within language. This article attempts to bridge this gap by conducting a corpus comparative analysis

between the Chinese and English “YOU + NP” structure to deepen our understanding towards the impoliteness in language.

3. Methodology

3.1. The Corpus

This study utilizes the CCL (Center for Chinese Linguistics) Corpus for Chinese data and Sketch Engine for English data. The CCL Corpus is a renowned linguistic resource dedicated to the study of the Chinese language. This corpus is a comprehensive collection of Chinese texts, encompassing a wide range of genres, from classical literature to modern news articles. And for English data, this study used the multilingual ten-ten corpus families from Sketch Engine. It contains large bodies of texts, with billions of words (see **Table 1**), that “can be regarded as comparable corpora” as the same “technology specialized in collecting only linguistically valuable web content” is employed to construct a corpus for every language considered in our study. In the initial stages of the research, the author embarked on a meticulous search for all second-person linguistic forms that could fit within the specified construction. To clarify, the author was specifically interested in forms that could be immediately succeeded by a noun or a sequence of an adjective followed by a noun. However, certain forms, like “your,” were excluded from this search criterion. A few clarifications regarding this approach are warranted. Furthermore, by allowing the inclusion of a singular adjective as an optional component in the search, the author was able to identify instances such as “你(个)笨蛋” (translated as “you idiot”) and its variant “你(个)小笨蛋” (translated as “you little idiot”). While the inclusion of multiple adjectives was theoretically possible, for the sake of maintaining a manageable dataset, the author opted against searching for extended forms like “you stupid little idiot”. Drawing from Culpeper (2011) research, it was inferred that this approach of allowing a single optional adjective would likely encompass around 80% of the pertinent instances of the “YOU + NP” structure.

Post the identification process, the author meticulously handpicked the first 200 instances that aligned with the research’s target criteria, which were then compiled for a more in-depth analysis, as illustrated in **Table 1**. This manual selection process necessitated the elimination of clear non-target hits, exemplified by phrases like “你时间” (your time). Additionally, any identified strings that played a syntactic role within a clause were also excluded from the dataset. For instance, the phrase “给你(个)厉害瞧瞧” (give you some surprises), despite its structure, was deemed irrelevant for this study as it predominantly functioned as the subject of its respective sentence.

Table 1. Corpra frequencies for “YOU + NP” structure in Chinese and English.

	Corpus Size	Number of query hits	200 target cases reached a hit
Chinese	581,794,456	1088	470
English	21,926,740,748	55,990	284

3.2. Data Analysis

In the comprehensive analysis undertaken, each data point retrieved was carefully categorized based on several distinct linguistic features. These features include:

- 1) The presence or absence of an adjective within the noun phrase (NP);
- 2) The specific noun and, if applicable, the adjective present within the NP;
- 3) The distinction between metalinguistic usage and the standard application of the “YOU + NP” structure;
- 4) The function of the phrase in its context, either as impolite or otherwise, will be elaborated upon in subsequent sections.

Drawing inspiration from the previous research (Culpeper, 2011), the author put much effort in examining the co-text surrounding each data point. Instances were labeled as impolite when there were tangible indications suggesting that the “YOU + NP” structure was intended to or perceived to, evoke negative emotional responses. The evidence for such labeling was multifaceted. For instance, the study identified explicit instances where the structure was evaluated as impolite, especially in metalinguistic contexts, as illustrated in example (1). Conversely, example (2) represents a non-metalinguistic context.

e.g. (1) 别人要去吃屎你也去吃？你个畜生！

(2) 赵镢头一眼，又说，“咱倒不是心疼到了嘴边儿的粮食又要归大队，你个十一岁的小娃，你懂什么？”

The reactions of the addressees, whether verbalized or depicted non-verbally, often provided invaluable insights. Contrary to politeness, which often remains under the radar, impoliteness is typically met with some form of resistance or counter-response, as highlighted by Culpeper and Tantucci (2021). For instance, in example (3a), the defensive retort from the second speaker indicates their perceived offense from the initial statement. In example (3b), the narrator vividly portrays the addressee’s non-verbal reaction as one of intense anger.

e.g. (3a) A: I’m surprised at your arrogant post hasn’t gotten you flamed yet; you certainly deserve to be, you dolt.

B: I don’t see how I would be considered a dolt and the post was not arrogant.

(3b) “非常感谢，你这个愚蠢的婊子！”大声地尖叫。疯七爷被这无缘无故的话激怒了。

Another indicative feature of impoliteness was the actions that occurred concurrently with the “YOU + NP” structure. Example (4) showcases an aggressive dismissal, which is further elaborated upon in Section 2.3. The co-text was particularly crucial for nouns (and adjectives) that weren’t immediately recognizable as insults.

e.g. (4) 莺儿就怒斥他，说：“你个爷们，就知道盯着我们这点小钱财！”

It is only evident from the presentation of Yinger’s behavior as “怒斥” (rebuke angrily) that “你个爷们” (you man) is sarcastic here.

A standout observation from the study was a unique manifestation of impoliteness in the Chinese language, where the NP is specifically a personal name.

When contextualized, this structure can convey sentiments of insult or sarcasm, as demonstrated in example (5).

e.g. (5) 妻子感到非常委屈, 说: “好你个鹿道有, 怎么一点亲情也没有呢!”

From the wife's sense of grievance and her accusation of the husband's lack of affection, one can discern an underlying tone of irony in this expression.

3.3. Theoretical Framework

Terkourafi (2001) introduces a paradigm grounded in a frame-based methodology when addressing the concept of politeness. This paradigm emphasizes the necessity of dissecting specific linguistic manifestations in tandem with their respective contexts, which collaboratively establish frames. Terkourafi posits that the consistent intersection of distinct contextual types with specific linguistic articulations, which stand uncontested as representations of certain actions, engenders the perception of politeness (Terkourafi, 2005a). The systematic and uncontested nature of these “politeness formulae” elucidates the phenomenon wherein acts of politeness frequently remain under the radar, escaping overt recognition.

Expanding on this, it can be inferred that potential candidates for these politeness formulae undergo a process of conventionalization, albeit to varying extents, tailored to specific contexts of deployment. It's pivotal to underscore that this doesn't insinuate that such linguistic items possess an unwavering polite connotation or that their politeness is universally applicable across all contexts. These semi-conventionalized interpretations occupy an intermediary space, nestled between semantics and pragmatics, oscillating between being fully ingrained and entirely fluid (Levinson, 2000). They don't equate to what Terkourafi (2005b) designates as the “sentence meaning”, which is inherently encoded and irrevocable. Conversely, they aren't merely “utterance-token meanings”, which are contextually derived through nuanced conversational deductions. Instead, they epitomize what can be termed as “utterance-type meaning”, which, while being the default or favored interpretation, remains susceptible to alteration.

Transitioning to a related discourse, Terkourafi's seminal contributions laid the foundational groundwork for Culpeper's (2011) exploration into impoliteness formulae. Contrasting with politeness, the hallmark of impoliteness is its propensity to be contested, often eliciting counter-impoliteness. This is further accentuated by the elicitation of meta-pragmatic observations (e.g., declarations of perceived rudeness) and manifest emotional responses ranging from humiliation and pain to anger. Typically, such formulae can be meticulously examined employing empirical methodologies, with corpus linguistics being a prime example. Culpeper's (2011) endeavor involved collating potential exemplars of English impoliteness formulae from discourses where impoliteness was the focal point, supplemented by event report forms filled out by a cohort of 100 British undergraduate students. Table 2 is a selection of the impoliteness formulae that emerged from this investigation.

Table 2. Conventionalized impoliteness formulae in British English (drawn from Culpeper, 2011).

Impoliteness formulae type	Example
insult (personalized negative vocatives)	you fucking moron
insult (personalized negative assertions)	you are such a bitch
insult (personalized negative references)	your little arse
insult (personalized third-person negative references in the hearing of the target)	the daft bimbo
pointed criticisms/complaints	that is total crap
Condescensions	that's being babyish
Silencers	shut the fuck up
Threats	I'm going to bust your fucking head off if you touch my car
curses and ill-wishes	fuck you

4. Results & Discussion

4.1. Chinese

To provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of our dataset, we present tables detailing specific nouns and adjectives found within the “YOU + NP” construction. For clarity and brevity, only recurrent terms and the initial ten distinct ones arranged alphabetically, are showcased. These selections were deemed insightful even in the absence of contextual information. Alongside each noun or adjective, we will also indicate its frequency and the number of occurrences where it is associated with an impolite context within the corpus (Table 3).

Additional tables encapsulate summarized data, highlighting the distribution of cases that either include or exclude an adjective, those that are characterized as impolite, and the breakdown between singular and plural instances (see Table 4).

Table 4 presents an overview of all recurrent nouns and adjectives and the first ten unique ones found in our random sample of 200 instances of “YOU + NP”. As indicated in summary Table 6, most hits are singular (96%). Table 6 also points out that Chinese “YOU + NP” appears with an adjective in roughly half of the cases (41%).

Given the many nouns like 流氓 “gangsters” and 杂种/混蛋 “bastard” and the many adjectives like 骚 “slutty” and 死 “dead”, it should come as no surprise that “YOU + NP” is primarily used for impolite purposes in Chinese (92%). Consider (6) for some more co-textualized examples and in particular the evaluative noun in (6a), the evaluative adjective in (6b), the combination of the two in (6c) and the non-evaluative NP in (6d). The speaker's accusations of selfishness and hypocrite in the latter example signal that “modern-day Christians” are meant as an insult. “YOU + NP” can be said to facilitate this intention, encouraging through coercion an evaluative reading of the NP that is likely to be negative because of the primacy of impolite uses. Cases like (6d) account for only a small number of the hits, though.

Table 3. Nouns and adjectives in Chinese “YOU + NP”.

word “translation” (#impoliteness/#attestations)	
Nouns	recurrent 先人/祖宗/奶奶“ancestors” (4/4), 畜生“animals” (2/2), 杂种/混蛋“bastard” (2/2), 军官“brass” (1/2), 兔崽子“brat” (3/3), 大哥“brother” (1/2), 狗/狗东西“dog” (5/5), 流氓“gangsters” (2/2), 鬼“ghost” (3/6), 丫头片子“girls” (3/5), 男人“man” (2/2), personal name (10/12), 娘们/婊子“slut/bitch” (3/3), 女人“woman” (1/2)
	unique 鸟“bird” (1/1), 城里“civil” (1/1), 乡下“countryside” (1/1), 驴“donkey” (1/1), 妖精“goblin” (0/1), 头“head” (1/1), 爷们“menfolk” (1/1), 猴“monkey”, 野人“savage” (1/1), 儿子“son” (1/1), 虫“worm” (1/1)
adjectives	recurrent 大“big” (2/2), 机灵“clever” (0/2), 死“dead” (2/3), 操/日“fucking” (5/5), 小“little” (3/4), 老“old” (1/2), 可怜“poor”(1/2), 骚“slutty” (2/2), 蠢“stupid” (2/2), 倒霉 “unlucky” (0/2)
	unique 有罪“guilty” (1/1), 乐天“happy” (0/1), 幸运“lucky” (0/1), 黄毛“naive” (1/1), 调皮“naughty” (0/1), 糊涂“numb” (1/1), 聪明“smart” (0/1), 臭“stinky” (1/1), 软弱的“weak-minded” (1/1)

Table 4. Summary of Chinese “YOU + NP”.

Feature	Numbers
Number	191 SG/200 tokens (96%) vs 9 PL /200 tokens (4%)
Adjectives	81 with adjectives/200 tokens (41%)
Impoliteness	184 impolite cases/200 tokens (92%)

e.g. (6a) 老人我会立刻张开嘴，立即发动攻击。你个疯子，你以为你是谁。

(6b) “放开我，流氓，放开我，你个没良心的狼。”她边说边打耿林。

(6c) 拉驴子的突然吼了一声，“快走，你个蠢驴！”

(6d) 你们当代基督徒啊，你们用面包屑和主人来喂养我们，却不让我们和你们一起在盘子里给他们洗礼……这是一种这是取笑基督教团体的好办法，给他们可怜的基督徒弟兄们提供的是爱的大餐的外表，而不是爱的大餐的现实。

Note also in **Figure 1** that singular and plural cases are similar in their proportions of impoliteness (92.1% and 88.9% respectively) but that there is a significant difference between NPs without an adjective (76.5%) and NPs with an adjective (60.7%; $\chi^2 = 5.64$, $p < 0.05$).

A closer look at the data suggests that most nouns in the impolite cases may be in (6c), but need not in (6a)—be modified to convey an evaluation of the addressee. By contrast, many of the nouns in the non-impolite instances require an adjective to express a non-negative evaluation (e.g. 你个机灵鬼“you smart ass”, 你个美丽的妖精“you beautiful goblin”). Without the adjective, an impolite interpretation of such cases would seem more likely. There are two relatively common settings in the corpus where ostensible insults do not appear to be meant or taken as an offense. The first one is the well-known phenomenon of banter between interlocutors who are close to each other. The speaker and their

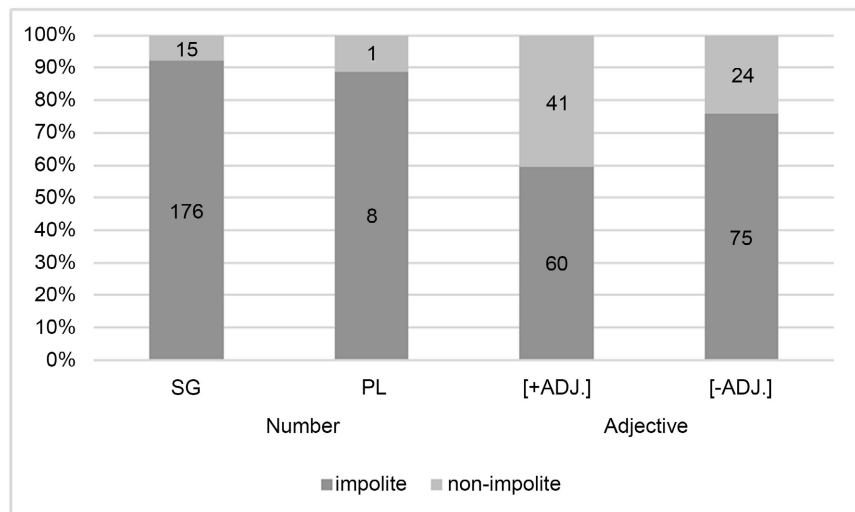


Figure 1. Proportions of impoliteness in Chinese “YOU + NP”.

cat in (7) can serve as an example. The second one involves “dirty talk” (erotic talk) and is linked to nouns like 荡妇 “little voyeur” and adjectives like 调皮的 “naughty” and 有欲望的 “horny”. Our sample contains three cases like (7) and two cases the other, making up an additional 5%.

e.g. (7) 我走了进去，它在我两腿之间冲向沙发，“你个懒惰小猫，”我笑着对它说。

From the research findings, it is evident that the impoliteness ratio of this construction in Chinese is quite high, the reasons for which warrant further investigation. This might be associated with several characteristics. Firstly, such constructions often stand alone as sentences in Chinese, necessitating accompanying punctuation. Secondly, these constructions are not utilized to delineate differences between members referred to by personal pronouns and other members. Instead, they especially serve as vocatives to address someone, encompassing the speaker’s evaluation of the person referred to by the pronoun. As a result, evaluative lexicon, such as “two-faced” or “reckless”, often precedes the NP. Hu and Gao (2019) posited that such structures represent a topic. Omitting these might render the phrase incongruent with the nuances of the Chinese language.

The bias towards impoliteness is also evident from what can happen to evaluatively positive or neutral NPs in “YOU + NP”. “Personal name”, for instance, would traditionally be a neutral assessment, but the speaker in (8) is clearly being sarcastic and expressing a negative evaluation of the interlocutor. The NP can be said to be coerced into an insult here.

e.g. (8) “你个谭政，真是个书生。要整你，还要问为什么？”

4.2. English

Table 5 enumerates all the frequently occurring nouns and adjectives found in the English structure “YOU + NP”, along with the initial ten distinct ones. Complementary summary data is presented in **Table 6**. When comparing the linguistic patterns between English and Chinese, it’s evident that the English “YOU + NP”

Table 5. Nouns and adjectives in English “YOU + NP”.

word “translation” (#impoliteness/#attestations)	
Nouns	recurrent idiot (16/16), bastard (8/11), bitch (5/5), fucker (2/5), moron (5/5), hypocrite (4/4), monster (4/4), asshole (3/3), child (1/3), motherfucker (3/3), sinner (3/3), thing (2/3), villain (3/3), wretch (3/3), boy (1/2), bugger (1/2), cow (2/2), girl (1/2), hussy (1/2), lot (1/2), man (1/2), people (1/2), perv (0/2), pervert (2/2), scoundrel (2/2), serpent (2/2), SOB (2/2), swine (2/2)
	unique Anchin (0/1), ass (1/1), baby (0/1), backslider (1/1), bat (1/1), being (0/1), beldam (1/1), Belge (1/1), bighead (1/1), bigmouth (1/1)
adjectives	recurrent stupid (12/12), old (7/9), poor (1/5), filthy (3/3), little (2/3), lucky (0/3), mucky (0/3), big (1/2), fucking (2/2), horny (0/2), naughty (0/2), sick (2/2), silly (0/2), sweet (0/2)
	unique absolute (1/1), adolescent (1/1), anti-semantic (1/1), appalling (1/1), artful (0/1), blithering (1/1), bold (1/1), complacent (0/1), crazy (1/1), delusional (1/1)

Table 6. Summary of English “YOU + NP”.

Feature	Numbers
Number	147 SG/200 tokens (73%) vs 53 PL/200 tokens (27%)
Adjectives	105 with adjectives/200 tokens (52.5%)
Impoliteness	150 impolite cases/200 tokens (75%)

structure has a marginally higher tendency (52.5%) to be modified by an adjective than its Chinese counterpart (41%). Another notable distinction is the prevalence of plural forms in the English “YOU + NP” structure, which stands at 27%, a stark contrast to the mere 4% observed in Chinese. The underlying reasons for this discrepancy warrant further investigation.

The frequent appearance of nouns such as “idiot” and “bastard” and adjectives like “stupid” and “filthy” in the English data underscores the primary usage of the “YOU + NP” structure for conveying impoliteness. While 75% of the English instances exhibit impoliteness, this is somewhat lower than the 92% observed in Chinese, though the difference isn’t drastic. For illustrative instances showcasing evaluative nouns, evaluative adjectives, their combined usage, and non-evaluative NPs that are contextually coerced into an evaluative interpretation within the “YOU + NP” structure, readers are directed to examples (9a) through (9d).

e.g. (9a) Who do you think you are? You are a cheater. A jerk. You cheater. How dare you treat me like this?

(9b) His mother had got wind of the trouble and was hastening to interfere. “Come down, you treacherous boy,” shouted Sergeant Branderby again, “or I have that here which will make you.”

(9c) Tommy: “Anybody got a spare guitar?” (before “Free Range”) e Audience member with mic: “Come on! Fucking play, you stupid shit! This is a fucking gimmick!”

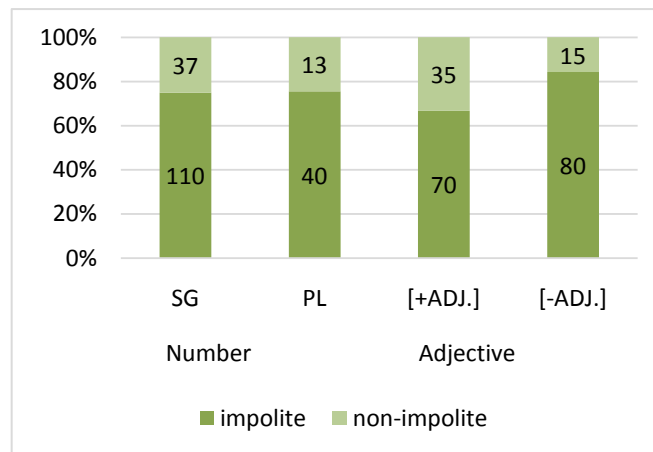


Figure 2. Proportions of impoliteness in English “YOU + NP”.

(9d) Wladek stood where he was, firmly planted, methodically making snowballs to catch Rublev from the flank, laughing until the tears came to his eyes, showering him with abuse “Take that, you theoretician, you moralist, to hell with you” and never once hitting him.

As depicted in **Figure 2**, similar to the patterns observed in Chinese, the English data reveals no significant disparity in the impoliteness ratio between singular (74.8%) and plural forms (75.4%). However, a distinction emerges when comparing NPs without an adjective (84.2%) to those with an adjective (66.7%; $\chi^2 = 8.19, p < 0.05$).

The rationale for the diminished impoliteness ratio in NPs with adjectives seems to mirror the trends in Chinese. Specifically, nouns in non-impolite instances frequently require modification to ensure a neutral or positive connotation, as exemplified by phrases like “*you gorgeous girl*” or to modify the sentiment, as seen in “*you romantic bastard*.” Interestingly, the aforementioned “*you romantic bastard*” is an oxymoronic NP and is part of a subset comprising twenty-four instances (12%). These instances, while containing superficial insults, are not necessarily intended or perceived as impolite within their respective contexts.

The remaining non-impolite examples from the corpus (13%) encompass a handful of instances that convey sentiments of sympathy or fortune, such as “*you poor man*” and “*you lucky dog*”. This pattern in English bears resemblance to the Chinese data. However, it’s worth noting that overtly positive evaluations of the addressee appear to be less common in English, whereas straightforward identifications like “*you majesty*” seem to occur more frequently.

5. Conclusion

As highlighted earlier, the “YOU + NP” construction in Chinese and English predominantly leans towards impoliteness. The examination in Section 3, focusing on real-world applications of this construction within context, reveals that they are predominantly perceived or intended as insults. In a majority of in-

stances, “YOU + NP” incorporates nouns or adjectives with negative connotations. While, as discussed in the context of banter and crude conversations, such noun phrases (NPs) aren’t inherently impolite, we concur with Leech (1983) that their usage primarily hinges on their potential to offend, further underscoring the construction’s inclination towards impoliteness.

Two additional observations from Section 3 bolster this impoliteness formula. Firstly, when “YOU + NP” encompasses an ostensibly neutral NP, the surrounding context often reveals an underlying insult. In such scenarios, the construction seems to impose an impolite interpretation. Secondly, our data for Chinese and English indicate a significant correlation between non-impolite interpretations and the inclusion of adjectives. It appears that “YOU + NP” frequently necessitates further noun modifications to ensure they aren’t misconstrued as negative evaluations.

From the author’s perspective, the aforementioned findings warrant categorizing “YOU + NP” as an impoliteness formula. While the construction isn’t universally impolite, echoing Terkourafi’s (2005a) insights on politeness and her emphasis on “utterance-type meaning”, its recurrent association with negative NPs and offensive contexts establishes a frame. This frame predisposes the recipient to interpret the “YOU + NP” construction as an implicit impolite gesture, even if the specific NP doesn’t inherently convey negativity, without delving deeply into the speaker’s intent. Given the influence of repeated usage on cognitive representation, it’s plausible to suggest that the prevalent association of “YOU + NP” with impoliteness in Chinese and English practice mirrors its mental conceptualization.

Corpus data suggest that this form-function pairing exhibits a higher level of conventionalization in Chinese (92% of cases are impolite) than in English (75%) and therefore that Chinese “YOU + NP” probably merits some further attention. The degree to which it is conventionalized for impoliteness may be correlated with its significantly lower number of adjectives (and its lack of a difference in impoliteness between modified and non-modified instances; see Section 3.1). In the meanwhile, the adjectives of English “YOU + NP” structure frequently appear to serve to prevent a negatively evaluative interpretation. The Chinese construction, however, is so heavily biased towards impoliteness that adjectives rarely get to fulfill this function.

One may also wonder about the reason(s) for “YOU + NP”’s high level of conventionalization for impoliteness in Chinese. In my view, the status of the vocative case in the language likely plays a role. The vocative is losing ground in speech, being perceived as too elevated a form of appeal (particularly with personal names) for “normal” conversation. “YOU + NP”, which requires a vocative NP, would thus be unusual for most types of addresses and have specialized even further into impoliteness. In general, given the special position of Chinese, we expect the tendencies described at the beginning of this paragraph (e.g. “YOU + NP” with pseudo-words) to be even stronger in this language than in English. This hypothesis has to be left for future research, though.

The final question is the reasons for “YOU + NP” in conveying impoliteness. At a glance, the inclusion of the second-person pronoun in an address might seem redundant. For instance, the mere term “idiot”, even in the absence of “you”, would typically be inferred as directed towards the addressee. However, the second person pronoun in “YOU + NP” is posited to add a distinct layer of meaning. The distinction between “you idiot” and merely “idiot” lies in the explicit ascription of the noun’s connotation to the addressee in the former. As Culpeper and Haugh (2014) suggest, “you idiot” amplifies the pragmatic clarity of the address, unambiguously designating its second-person recipient. Cultural nuances might lead individuals to sidestep such forthrightness, especially if they anticipate that their words might be deemed objectionable by the listener. The explicit presence of “you” in “YOU + NP” makes it an apt construct to “directly link the recipient with a negative trait,” as articulated by Culpeper (2005). This research posits that “YOU + NP” might be more adept at causing affront than a derogatory address devoid of the second-person pronoun. This proposition, of course, warrants empirical validation, perhaps by gauging the perceived offensiveness of terms like “idiot” against “you idiot”.

To conclude, this article establishes an analysis of “YOU + NP” in English and Chinese, that there do exist constructions in language that impoliteness can be strongly conventionalized across languages. More research is required, however, to see how pervasive this phenomenon is.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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