# *Beautiful* and *ugly* in the English folk aesthetics

Anna Gladkova (Monash University)
Jesus Romero Trillo (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid)

angladkova@gmail.com
romerotrillo@gmail.com

# Universality (?) of aesthetic perception

humans are fundamentally similar in their understanding of 'beautiful' and 'ugly' (Cunningham et al., 1995; Dutton, 2009)

considerable cultural variation and influence in aesthetic appreciation (Bjerke and Polegato, 2001; Eco, 2005; Fenko, Otten and Schifferstein, 2010; Furnham and Alibhai, 1983; Guendouzi, 2004; Howes, 1991, 2007; Majid and Levinson, 2011; Sartwell, 2004; Strauss, 2005)
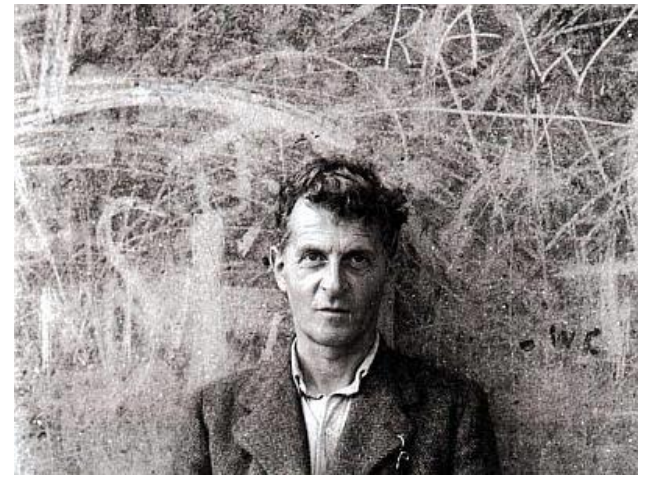
You might think Aesthetics is a science telling us what's beautiful – almost too ridiculous for words. […] It is hard to find boundaries.

I wish to make it clear that the important problems in aesthetics are not settled by psychological research. These problems are answered in a different way – more in the form 'What is in my mind when I say so and so?'

Wittgenstein (2007[1967])

How aesthetics is embedded at the level of language?

Can we talk about models of 'folk aesthetics' or 'ethnoesthetics' embedded in language?

Do models of 'folk aesthetics' embedded in language differ from language to language?

How do people conceptualise 'beautiful' and 'ugly' across languages?

Can we offer a cultural interpretation of such conceptualisations?

Is there a relationship between the conceptualisation of aesthetic terms and (im)politeness, gender, nature, different senses, economic, social and cultural factors?

# DATA

- English

- *beautiful* and *ugly*

- Cobuild Wordbanks Online [CWO] (8 varieties of English, 2001-2005, 550 mln. words, spoken and written)

# Methodology: the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)

- 65 semantic universals

- governing universal syntax

someone feels something (good/bad) (in part of the body)
someone feels like this
someone feels something good/bad towards someone else

- semantic explications as representations of meaning

- substitution test for explications

| | |
|---|---|
| I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING/THING, PEOPLE, BODY | substantives |
| KIND, PART | relational substantives |
| THIS, THE SAME, OTHER/ELSE | determiners |
| ONE, TWO, MUCH/MANY, SOME, ALL | quantifiers |
| **GOOD, BAD** | evaluators |
| BIG, SMALL | descriptors |
| **THINK**, KNOW, WANT, **FEEL, SEE, HEAR** | mental predicates |
| SAY, WORDS, TRUE | speech |
| DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH | actions, events, movement, contact |
| BE SOMEWHERE, THERE IS, HAVE, BE SOMEONE/SOMETHING | location, existence, possession, specification |
| LIVE, DIE | life and death |
| WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT | time |
| WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE | space |
| NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF | logical concepts |
| **VERY**, MORE | augmentor, intensifier |
| LIKE | similarity |

# BEAUTIFUL

**beautiful$_1$ ('visual perception')**
*My mother was beautiful and never washed dishes…*
*And it's a beautiful basket, too, she agreed graciously.*
*Finland is a beautiful country.*

**beautiful$_2$ ('aural perception')**
*I'm charmed to make your acquaintance, Lorenzo said in a beautiful deep voice.*
*Frank listened to Guapo's voice, enjoying the sound of the beautiful words he was saying.*
*The ice makes a beautiful sound.*

**beautiful$_3$ ('human action')**
*Barcelona play beautiful football.*
*It is, without doubt, one of the most beautiful games.*
*All my life I fought for peace, I believed it was the most beautiful idea in the world […]*

**beautiful$_4$ ('subjective experience')**
*Oh yes garlic in things is wonderful. It's beautiful flavour.*
*For a start the mangoes were huge and smelled beautiful.*
*A couple of schoolboys said the hamburgers tasted beautiful.*
*This […] fabric […] is stretchy, soft and feels beautiful to wear.*
*After a good night's sleep, waking up in the morning should be the most beautiful experience of each day of your life.*
*'That was a beautiful meal,' she said.*
*Did you enjoy your time down in Torquay? Yes we had a beautiful time.*

*+ collocations/set expressions beautiful life, beautiful people*

*(after Gladkova & Romero Trillo 2014)*

[A] *something/someone is* **beautiful**$_1$ *(This woman is beautiful. This vase is beautiful.)*

(a) this thing [this someone] is like this:

(b)　　　at many times, when someone sees this thing

(c)　　　this someone can't not feel something very good because of this

(d)　　　at the same time, this someone can't not think something very good about it


[B] **beautiful**$_2$ *singing/voice/tune*

(a) this thing is like this:

(b)　　　at many times, when someone hears this thing

(c)　　　this someone can't not feel something very good because of this

(d)　　　like people can't not feel something very good at some times

　　　when they see some things

(e)　　　at the same time, this someone can't not think something very good about it

[C] *someone does **beautiful₃** something (Barcelona play beautiful football, he had a beautiful idea)*

(a) it can be like this:

(b)        someone does something at some time

(c)        when someone else thinks about it, this someone can't not feel something very good because of this,

(d)        like people can't not feel something very good at some times when they see some things

(e)        at the same time, this someone can't not think something very good about it

[D] *something is **beautiful₄** (It's beautiful flavour. This tastes beautiful. It was a beautiful experience.)*

(a) someone can think like this at some time:

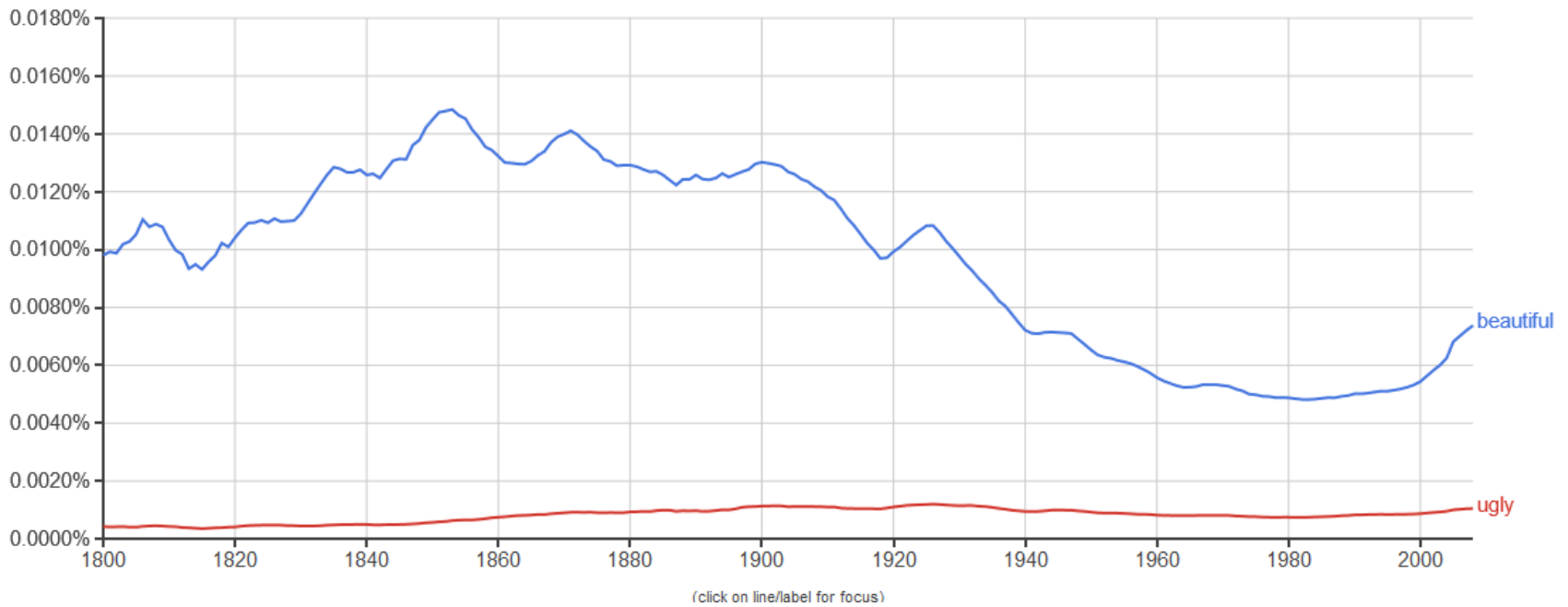(b)        "something is happening to me now, I can't not know it

(c)        I can't not feel something very good because of this,

(d)        like people can't not feel something very good at some times

          when they see some things

(e)        at the same time, I can't not think something very good about it"

"The world gets uglier and uglier, as Alice would have said. And yet how often do any of us stop to consider how living in an ugly world affects our attitudes and actions. […] the things that we perceive as ugly say virtually everything we need to know about where our culture has gone wrong. Even if we don't like to think about them, the ugly things in our world do affect us. They influence how we see ourselves and our neighbours, how [sic] behave towards each other, and towards the wider environment. How we take care of ourselves and our families and communities". (Anonymous 2007: 42)

"It started as a bit of an office game. Everywhere we looked we saw the 'creep' of an ugly culture and the devastating impact it can have on us" (Anonymous 2007: 42).
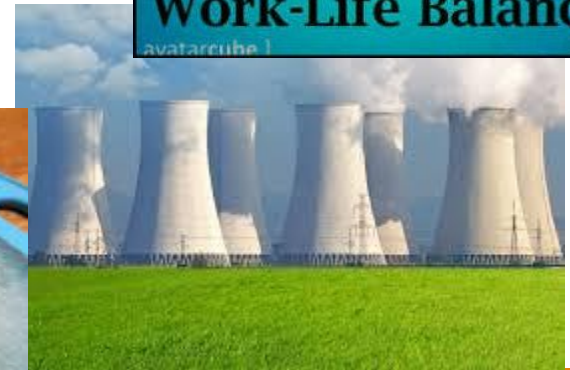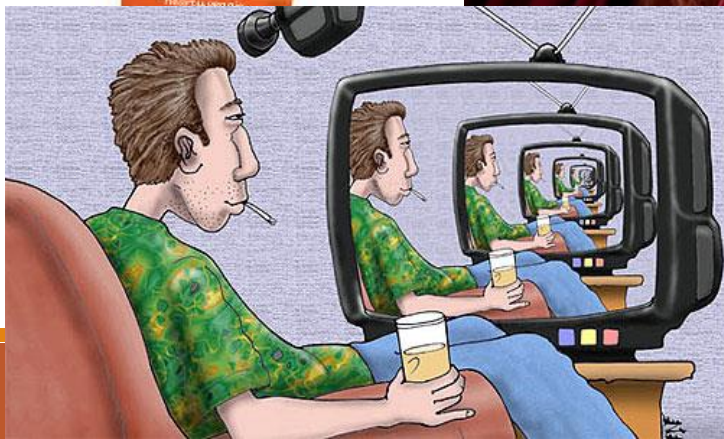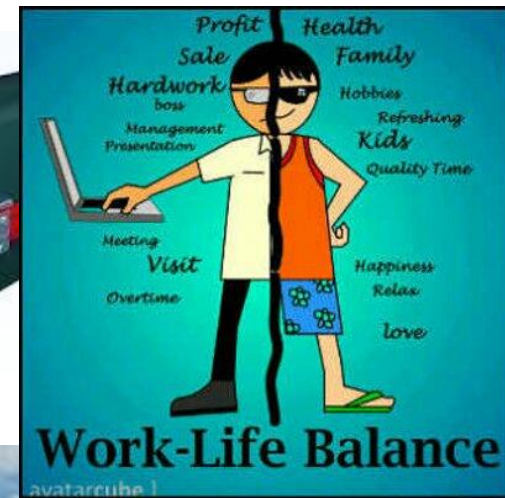
"Over the past two hundred years or so, critics reflecting on the cultural situation of their day have regularly lamented the mounting prevalence of the disgusting. Today's contemporaries have every reason to make a similar finding" (Menninghaus 2003: 12).

# UGLY

○ **ugly$_1$ ('visual perception')**

*The artist rarely painted men, claiming that men are ugly, women are beautiful.*

*Lu wasn't good in school and his face was ugly.*

*Truth lighting up those hideous corners of an ugly room, with the rotting wood and the broken plaster and the ratty furniture*

○ **ugly$_2$ ('aural perception')**

*Gallagher laughed. At least, the ugly sounds that poured out of him might have been called that.*

*Nikko's words were all right, but his tone was ugly.*

○ **ugly$_3$ ('human actions')**

*Violence is ugly.*

*A force was sweeping Europe, ugly and dangerous.*

*… had an ugly meeting with the dean about budgets…*

*I'd been lucky not to get too much of his ugly attention.*

*… ugly side of my personality*

*It had been weeks, but the ugly scene in the study was still etched in her mind.*

*I hate you, but am ashamed to own up to such ugly emotion.*

*It was an ugly document to put one's name to*

*Ugly as sin.*

*It has reconnected him with the "band of brothers" the Vietnam veterans who shared the ugly experience of serving in an unpopular war.*

*Listen up, geeks Internet message boards have become rife with consumer chatter about their good, bad and ugly experiences with the new technologies.*

[E] *something/someone is **ugly$_1$***
(a) this thing [this someone] is like this:
(b)　　　at many times, when someone sees this thing
(c)　　　this someone can't not feel something very **bad** because of this
(d)　　　at the same time, this someone can't not think something very **bad** about it

[F] ***ugly$_2$** singing/voice/tune*
(a) this thing is like this:
(b)　　　at many times, when someone hears this thing
(c)　　　this someone can't not feel something very **bad** because of this
(d)　　　like people can't not feel something very **bad** at some times when they see some things
(e)　　　at the same time, this someone can't not think something very **bad** about it

[G] (*someone does) something **ugly$_3$*** (Violence is ugly, an ugly meeting, an ugly force)
(a) it can be like this sometimes:
(b)　　　someone does something at some time
(c)　　　when someone else thinks about it, this someone can't not feel something very **bad** because of this,
(d)　　　like people can't not feel something very **bad** at some times when they see some things
(e)　　　at the same time, this someone can't not think something very **bad** about it
(f)　　　**people know: it is bad if someone does something like this**

# BEAUTIFUL – UGLY
# WORD PROFILE COMPARISON: NOUN COLLOCATES

*Beautiful*-only patterns in the corpus refer to nature and landscapes (e.g., *countryside, scenery, garden, beach, lake, surroundings, landscape, setting, valley*) and also to specific females (*princess* and *wife*).

*Ugly*-specific noun collocates mainly contain reference to human actions (e.g., *brawl, blot, scar, melee, mug, confrontation, spat, flare-up, bust-up*).

➢The preference  for human actions with a social emotive component, as represented in the meaning *ugly$_3$*, is missing in *beautiful*.

➢*Beautiful*-specific collocates emphasize a particular status of nature in the perception of beauty.

# BEAUTIFUL – UGLY
# WORD PROFILE COMPARISON: MODIFIERS

*Beautiful*-specific modifiers: *stunningly, breathtakingly, hauntingly, strikingly, achingly, startlingly, ruggedly, starkly, extraordinarily, spectacularly, heartbreakingly* (emotive and affective adverbs which emphasize the affective and emotive nature of *beautiful*)

*Ugly*-specific modifiers: *downright, hideously, plain, uniformly, real, damned, first, fairly, increasingly, even, little* (less emotive in nature and are more transparent in terms of a degree of a feeling)

➢From a linguistic point of view in English, positive and negative emotions have different nature and the experience of negative emotions is described differently from the positive one. Positive emotions tend to be emphasized and cherished, while negative emotions show a tendency for a degree modification, rather than for a detailed clarification of their nature.

# OTHER UGLY-SPECIFIC COLLOCATES

the verbs *turn* and *get*.

specify a more dynamic and transient nature of *ugly* as compared with *beautiful*. This fact might suggest that *beautiful* is perceived as a more salient, static and intrinsic property than *ugly*.

*turn* and *get co*-occur with all meanings of *ugly*, but that they are more common with the third use:

*ugly* with *turn* – 186 occurrences
- *ugly$_1$* – 3 hits, *ugly$_3$* – 183 hits

*ugly* with *get* – 208 occurrences
- *ugly$_1$* – 3 hits, *ugly$_3$* – 205 hits

*turn* has the highest MI score of 5.27 among the verb collocates with ugly and *get* also receives a reasonably high MI score of 2.9. This aspect of meaning of *ugly* has been reflected in the explication of *ugly$_3$* through the presence of the prime SOMETIMES.

*ugly* and *beautiful* tend to collocate with other terms that are either negative or positive per se

*beautiful* common collocates: *blonde, intelligent, elegant, sunny, young, talented, serene, walled, unique, blond, bright, sexy*

*ugly* common collocates: *squat, fat, malicious, brute, mean, unattractive, skinny, stupid, horrible, bald, concrete, dirty*

"In order to get clear about aesthetic words you have to describe ways of living" (Wittgenstein 2007[1967]: 11).

# 100 NOUNS MOST FREQUENTLY MODIFIED BY 'BEAUTIFUL' AND 'UGLY'

The nouns were grouped into eight categories:

people (people, parts of body, human features)

nature (natural phenomena and objects)

time

artifacts (human-created objects and buildings,  places created by people)

human action and mental categories

sound

characteristics

unclassified

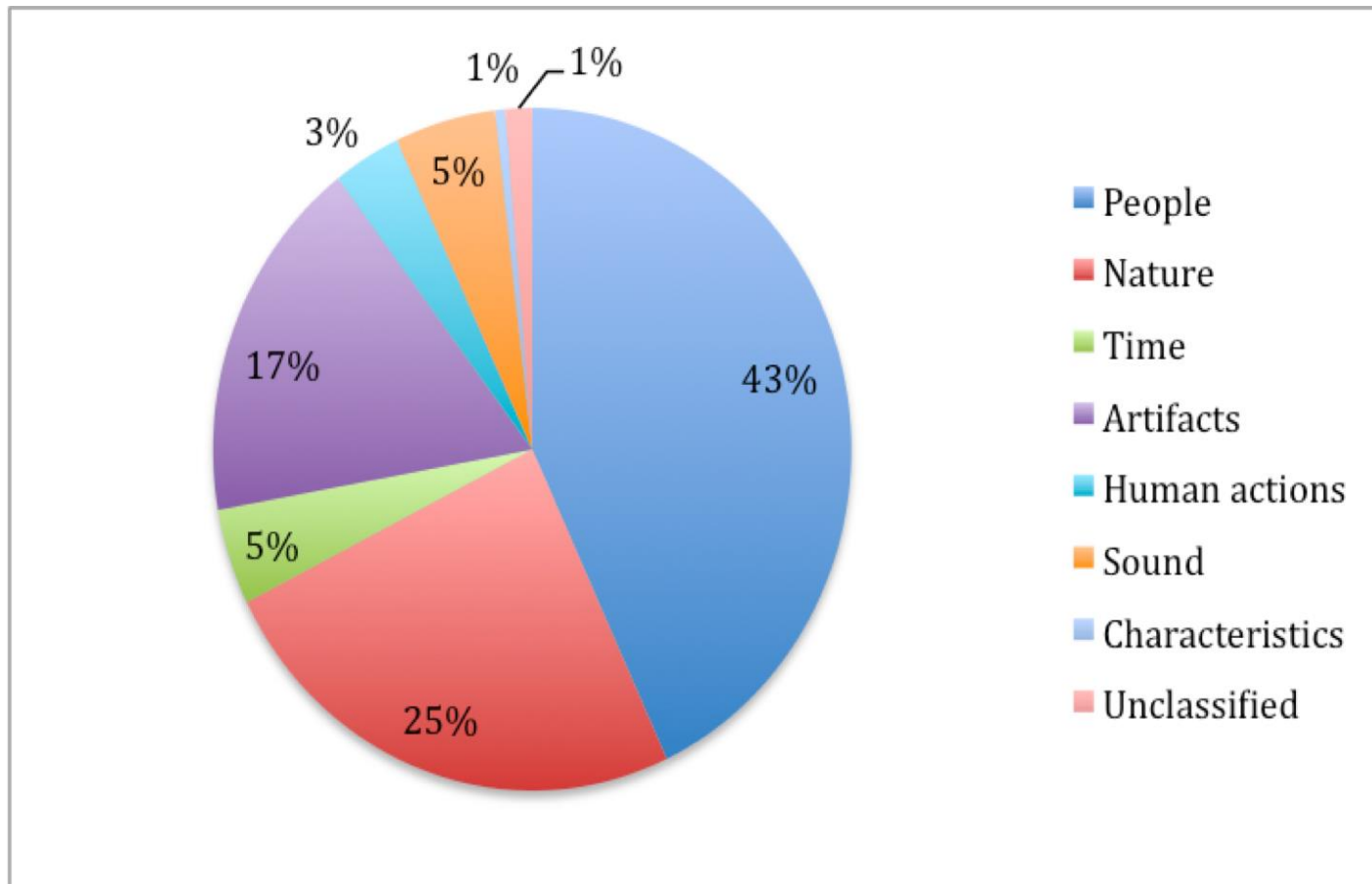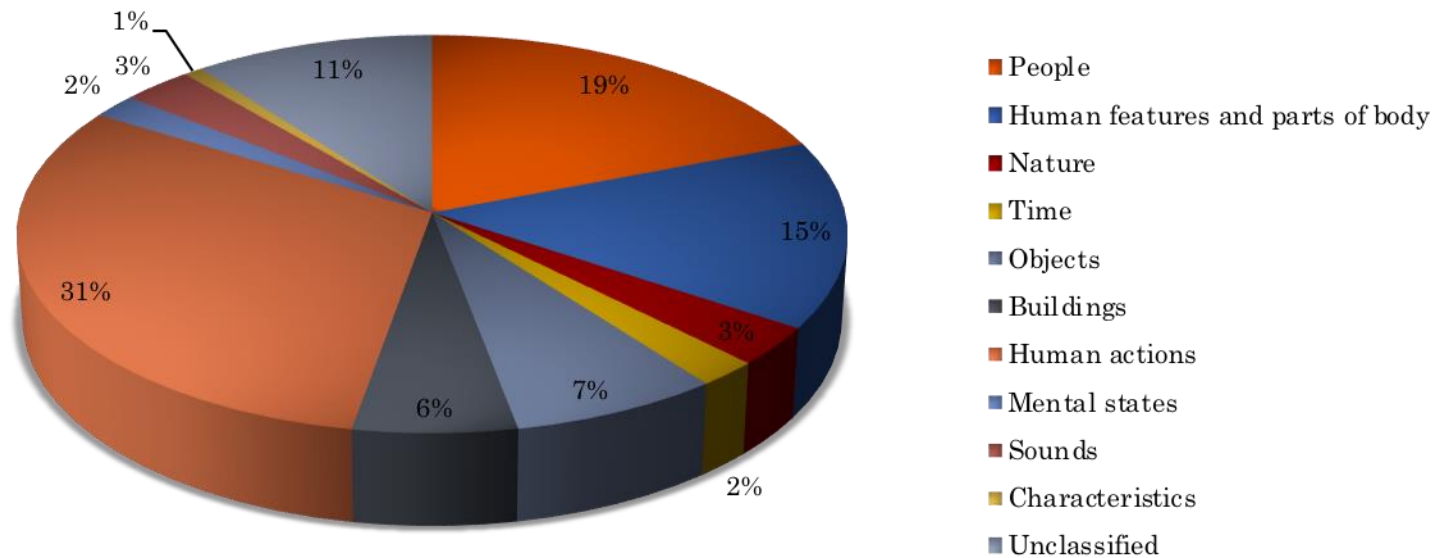# FIGURE 1. NOUN CATEGORIES MODIFYING *BEAUTIFUL*

# FIGURE 2: NOUN CATEGORIES MODIFYING *UGLY*



Pie chart legend:
- People
- Human features and parts of body
- Nature
- Time
- Objects
- Buildings
- Human actions
- Mental states
- Sounds
- Characteristics
- Unclassified

Pie chart values: 19%, 15%, 3%, 2%, 7%, 6%, 31%, 2%, 3%, 1%, 11%

# COMPARISON OF THE OVERALL USE OF 'BEAUTIFUL' AND 'UGLY' IN THE THREE CORPORA, BY CATEGORIES

**ENGLISH**

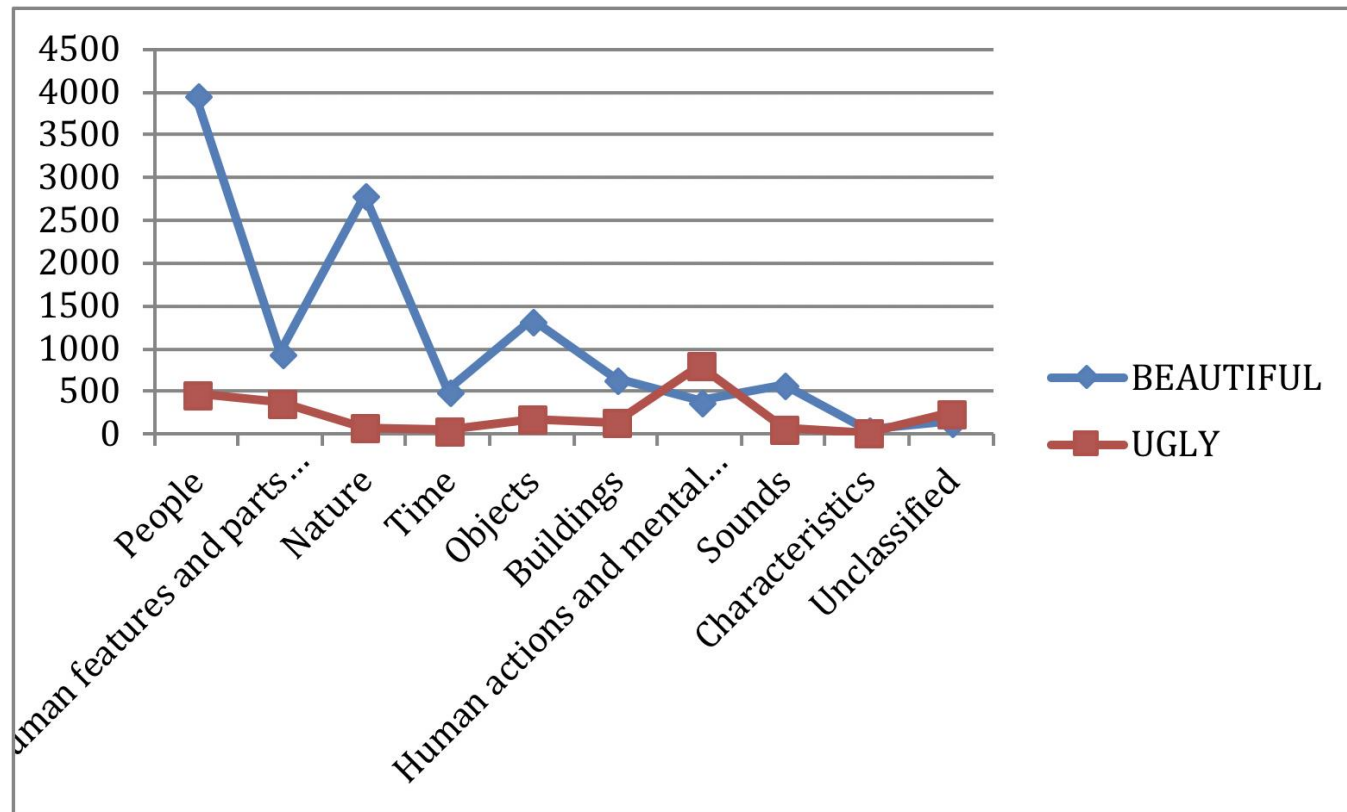|  | BEAUTIFUL | UGLY |
|---|---|---|
| People | 3964 | 470 |
| Human features and parts of body | 951 | 375 |
| Nature | 2799 | 78 |
| Time | 519 | 52 |
| Objects | 1335 | 182 |
| Buildings | 654 | 142 |
| Human actions and mental states | 393 | 811 |
| Sounds | 582 | 75 |
| Characteristics | 59 | 20 |
| Unclassified | 154 | 256 |
| **TOTAL** | **11410** | **2461** |

The chi-square test to see the difference in the use of 'beautiful' and 'ugly' in the first 100 nouns for each adjective were statistically significant

Chi-square= 3378.081

df = 19; p = 0.000000

V-Cramer=0.49

# Comparison Beautiful vs. Ugly

## Main conclusions

1. *Beautiful* and *ugly* are polysemous, three meanings are shared, one referring to 'personal subjective experience' is *beautiful*-specific.

*2. Beautiful* is applicable to the five senses – seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching, *ugly* is mainly used in reference to seeing and hearing.

3. 'People', 'nature' and 'artifacts' are most common collocate groups for *beautiful*; for *ugly* – they are 'human actions', 'people' and 'human features and parts of body'.

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