

## Aesthetic Adjectives

Louise McNally, Isidora Stojanovic

► **To cite this version:**

Louise McNally, Isidora Stojanovic. Aesthetic Adjectives. The Semantics of Aesthetic Judgment, ed. James Young, pp.17-37, 2017. <ijn\_01078847>

**HAL Id: ijn\_01078847**

**[https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn\\_01078847](https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn_01078847)**

Submitted on 30 Oct 2014

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Aesthetic Adjectives

Louise McNally, Universitat Pompeu Fabra  
Isidora Stojanovic, Institut Jean Nicod (CNRS & ENS)

paper draft for the volume *Semantics of Aesthetic Judgement*, ed. James Young  
October 2014

## 1. Introduction

Among semanticists and philosophers of language, there has been a recent outburst of interest in predicates such as *delicious* and *tasty*, called *predicates of personal taste* (henceforth PPTs, cf. Lasersohn 2005; see also Stojanovic 2007, Stephenson 2007, Pearson 2013). Somewhat surprisingly, the interest has not yet spread to predicates such as *beautiful*, nor to other predicates used in expressing one's appreciation of aesthetic value. Lasersohn himself explicitly distances his proposal from aesthetic predicates in order to avoid touching upon any issues in aesthetics (Lasersohn 2005: 645). Most other authors either tend to consider aesthetic predicates as merely a subclass of PPTs, or else they simply leave them aside. The question of what makes an adjective an *aesthetic* adjective has thus hardly been addressed at all, and it is precisely this question that this paper proposes to tackle.

We will investigate various linguistic criteria that may be used in delineating the class of aesthetic adjectives, should there be such a class indeed. We shall see that if the existing proposals about PPTs have not been successfully extended to aesthetic predicates such as *beautiful*, it is not only because semanticists fear getting entangled with aesthetics. There are actually good motivations for keeping PPTs and aesthetic predicates apart: the semantics of the former, but not the latter, entails an experiencer (or so we shall argue in section 2.4; see also Bylinina 2014). However, the situation is not as clear-cut as that. There are many adjectives whose semantics arguably also entails an experiencer, yet which are readily used in expressing aesthetic judgments. Adjectives that are derived from verbs that entail an experiencer, such as *provocative*, *astonishing* or *moving*, are a case in point, since as adjectives they arguably maintain the experiencer argument from the verb they are derived from. Nevertheless, when we describe, say, a sculpture as *provocative*, or a theater performance as *astonishing*, we clearly make aesthetic judgments. The difficult question, then, is to articulate the relationship between an aesthetic predicate (of which *beautiful* and *ugly* are paradigms) and other predicates that just happen to be *used* in making an aesthetic judgment. Tightly related to this point is the more general question of the relationship between an evaluative predicate and a predicate that occurs in an evaluative judgment. One of our aims is to make some progress in addressing these questions.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses general criteria that linguists have proposed for semantically classifying all kinds of adjectives, and we highlight the criteria we view as relevant for distinguishing the class of aesthetic predicates. Section 3 summarizes the relevant criteria and applies the diagnostics discussed in section 2 to one standard example for an aesthetic predicate, namely *beautiful*. Finally, section 4 concludes with some general remarks on aesthetic adjectives and aesthetic judgments, and provides some food for future thoughts.

## 2. Linguistic criteria for semantically classifying adjectives

Since the work of Bartsch & Vennemann 1972 and McConnell-Ginet 1973, there has been a steady increase in research on the lexical semantics of adjectives from logically—and philosophically—oriented semanticists. This literature has not addressed the nature or status of aesthetic adjectives *per se*, but by reviewing some of the most important semantic characteristics of adjectives, we will arrive at a set of properties that are shared by the adjectives that we hypothesize to be properly aesthetic.

### 2.1. A first note on gradability and thresholds

Perhaps the most basic characteristic that classifies adjectives involves whether they are gradable or not. Nongradable adjectives (e.g. *nuclear*) cannot be used to order two individuals according to the degree to which they manifest the property in question. For example, assertions such as that in (1) are odd:

- (1) ??The Ascó power plant is more nuclear than one in Sant Adrià.

Gradable adjectives (e.g. *large*), in contrast, describe properties that can be held in greater or lesser degree:

- (2) The Ascó power plant is larger than the one in Sant Adrià.

We mention gradability here in order to clarify one potential point of confusion. In order for a gradable adjective to truthfully apply to some individual, it is typically not enough that the property in question be held to just any degree; rather, it must be held to a degree that passes a *threshold* or meets a *standard*. For example, if something is long, it has a certain, usually substantial length. The choice of threshold for an adjective often (if not always; see Kennedy & McNally 2005) depends on a contextually-determined comparison class (see e.g. Unger 1975, Klein 1980, Kennedy 2007, Solt 2011, Bylinina 2014). Two standard linguistic diagnostics that allow us to identify when an adjective in English is evaluated with respect to a comparison class are its compatibility with the degree modifier *very* and with the *for*-phrases that contribute information related to the comparison class. When the standard for the adjective is determined not by a comparison class but rather by other criteria, as in the case of *open*,<sup>1</sup> these expressions are not acceptable, as shown in (3).

- (3) a. a very long cigar box / ??a very open cigar box  
b. long for a cigar box / ??open for a cigar box

The fact that different speakers may appeal to different comparison classes can lead to disagreement about whether an adjectival description applies in a given case. For example, two speakers from different countries might disagree about what constitutes a tall person or a salty dish because their respective experiences of people's heights or the saltiness of food might be different. The fact that such disagreement can exist has led some researchers (e.g. Rett 2007) to characterize all gradable adjectives whose threshold depends on a comparison class as *evaluative*. We will not use the term 'evaluative' in this way (see below), and for the rest of this section we will abstract away from any perceived subjectivity or judge-dependence in interpretation that is specifically attributable to the

<sup>1</sup>Note that *open* is gradable: we can order entities according to their degree of aperture.

- (i) The box on the left is more (or wider) open than the box on the right.

identification of a comparison class and the choosing of a threshold for applying an adjective. We do so because we take the determination of thresholds based on comparison classes to be grounded in similarity judgments (see McNally 2011), which we assume are not aesthetic in nature and thus orthogonal to our main concern in this paper. While it has been observed that most aesthetic predicates are gradable, it remains an open question whether all of them are.

## 2.2. Dimensionality

We now turn to the properties that will concern the definition of aesthetic adjectives. We start with the distinction between *unidimensional* and *multidimensional* adjectives (see Sassoon 2013 for recent discussion). A unidimensional adjective is one for which exactly one criterion is used to order individuals according to the property it describes. For example, *tall* orders individuals according to height (and nothing else); *slow* does so according to speed. The unidimensional adjectives include *long, tall, short, old, young, heavy, light, new, and old*. The vast majority of morphologically simple unidimensional properties are measurable (see section 2.3 on measurability), and, with only a few exceptions to which we return below, they correspond to Bierwisch's (1989) class of *dimensional* (as opposed to evaluative) adjectives.<sup>2</sup>

The multidimensional adjectives, in contrast, are those for which more than one criterion is used to order the individuals that have the property. They include *sick, healthy, lazy, industrious, beautiful, pretty, ugly, shy, timid, jolly, stupid, smart, clever, shrewd, brave, and cowardly*. For example, when deciding whether someone is sick or healthy, we might consider the state of her cardiovascular system, nervous system, immune system, etc. The beauty of a place (and thus whether it is beautiful) might depend on the (ir)regularity of the terrain, the sort of vegetation found there, the color of the sky, etc. Deciding whether an adjective describing a multidimensional property holds of some individual involves not only determining a threshold of applicability but also determining the relative weight of each of the dimensions that contribute to the property in question. Here, again, there will be room for disagreement between speakers, and decisions may change from one context to another.

This latter fact points to an important difference between unidimensional and multidimensional adjectives, and in particular to two different kinds of disagreement we can observe with adjectives.

---

<sup>2</sup>One might think of possible exceptions such as temperature adjectives (*hot, warm, cold*), adjectives describing specific tastes, such as *sweet, or bitter*, or adjectives such as *light, dark, bright, dim, loud or quiet*. These are unidimensional insofar as they describe properties that can be measured strictly in terms of one criterion: temperature, concentration of a given flavor source (e.g. sugar), amount of light, decibels.

However, the properties described by these adjectives are typically attributed based on human perception. In scientific articles, for example, substances are not likely to be referred to as 'sweet' but rather as having some particular sugar content; the use of temperature adjectives in instructions is often accompanied by a numerical temperature value for orientation. Whether or not something is described as hot, sweet or bright thus seems to depend crucially on an experiencer, and while in most cases a perceived experience of temperature, flavor, or light will correlate with measurable properties, it is possible to imagine that the perception and the measurable property could become disconnected.

The qualification "morphologically simple" is added because morphologically derived adjectives such as *readable, worthless, wooden, hopeful, or lucky* often have interpretations that could be considered unidimensional as defined here, but are not dimensional in Bierwisch's sense: for example something is readable if it can be read, and someone is lucky if she has some luck. However, such adjectives often come to be associated with multidimensional interpretations – for instance, *readable* as having engaging characters, an interesting plot, clear prose, etc. As noted later in the text, we suspect that any candidates for aesthetic uses of these adjectives will be of the latter sort (and will accordingly pass the tests for multidimensionality). However, we do not claim here that all unidimensional adjectives are, as a rule, morphologically simple, or that all multidimensional adjectives have to be morphologically complex; rather, there seems to be a tendency for morphologically complex adjectives to be multidimensional whereas we cannot make any such generalization for morphologically simple ones.

While speakers may disagree about the threshold for unidimensional adjectives, as noted in the previous subsection, their judgments about orderings between individuals with respect to the property should never vary (assuming of course that they have the necessary information to detect the property reliably). For example, two speakers might disagree as to whether Ayumi or Mihajlo are tall, but they should never disagree (when properly informed about Ayumi's and Mihajlo's height) as to whether Ayumi is taller than Mihajlo. As we have already noted, this kind of disagreement will not be our concern here. With multidimensional adjectives, on the other hand, things can be different. Two speakers may disagree about whether Ayumi is healthier than Mihajlo because they may disagree about whether one component of health or another (e.g. the state of the cardiovascular system vs. the immune system) should carry more weight (see Kennedy 2013 for recent discussion on this point).

Sassoon (2013) provides other diagnostics for distinguishing (gradable) unidimensional adjectives from multidimensional ones. For example, the latter can be modified by expressions such as *in some/every way/respect* or *except for (aspect)*;<sup>3</sup> the former do not accept such modification, as evidenced by the contrast between (4a,b) and (5a,b), on the one hand, and (4c) and (5c), on the other (indeed, it is impossible to imagine how (5a) could even be continued).

- (4) a. ??She is tall/heavy in some/every way.  
 b. ??The dish is sweet in some/every way.  
 c. She is beautiful/sick/interesting in some/every way.
- (5) a. ??She is tall/heavy except for... ???  
 b. ??The dish is sweet except for some aspect of it.  
 c. She is interesting except for her taste in music.

Note that many adjectives that describe unidimensional properties on some construals might describe multidimensional properties on others. A case in point is *heavy*, which is unidimensional when describing literal weight (see (4a), (5a)), but multidimensional when used metaphorically, as in (6):

- (6) The music was heavy in some ways, for instance in its excessive use of the tuba and a lumpy rhythm.

We hypothesize that aesthetic adjectives are multidimensional, hence, we shall not discuss unidimensional adjectives further here.

### 2.3. Measurability

The second characteristic we focus on in characterizing aesthetic predicates is measurability. As noted in the previous subsection, unidimensional properties appear to be almost uniformly measurable. Some multidimensional properties are also arguably measurable. Among these we include general size adjectives such as *big*, *large*, or *small*. Perhaps more controversially, we also include adjectives such as *intelligent*, *unintelligent*, *simple*, and *complex*, as well as color terms

---

<sup>3</sup> Unidimensional adjectives do allow *except for* phrases when they identify a part of the object being described, which seems to only be possible when the object itself has discernible subparts, as in the following example.

- (i) The dish was sweet except for the sauce.

However, this does not refute the claim that the adjectival property is unidimensional.

(*white, blue*, etc.). Intelligence is routinely mapped to various kinds of numerical scales; for example, IQ tests are meant to measure intelligence and if one accepts the validity of such tests, then intelligence is, to some degree at least, measurable. However, even if one resists doing so, intelligence can be measured non-numerically, for example, by checking which sorts of problems an individual is capable of solving or how quickly they can be solved. Similar criteria might be used to identify whether something or someone is simple or complex. This has been done for computer programs, for example. Color is a function of hue, brightness and saturation, all of which can be measured (as shown in the fact that they can be given digital definitions), even if color crucially depends on the intervention of our visual system.

We group the properties we do not consider measurable in this way into two general categories, which we will discuss in more detail in the following subsection. On the one hand, there are properties that entail an experiencer, such as *tasty*: in order for something to be judged as tasty, someone must have tasted it. These include the predicates that are commonly assumed to be predicates of personal taste (PPTs), mentioned in the introduction. On the other, there are those that imply a positive or negative evaluation on the part of the speaker. The most basic of these are adjectives such as *bad, fair, good, and excellent*. What the necessity of an experiencer and evaluativity have in common is that they both introduce subjectivity, insofar as they involve the necessary mediation of some sentient individual. Though these characteristics may go together, we consider the differences in the source of their respective subjective components as logically distinct, and we will treat them separately in the following two subsections.

Measurability, as we understand it, allows in principle for the objective use of an adjective. However, as mentioned above, when the adjective in question is multidimensional, speakers may (and probably often do) disagree about how to weigh the different dimensions of the properties. As a result, measurable multidimensional adjectives can manifest some of the linguistic behavior of adjectives requiring an experiencer. For example, they are both licensed in the comparative as complements to the verb *find*, in contrast to unidimensional, measurable properties such as *tall* (see Kennedy 2013 and below for discussion of this diagnostic):

- (7) a. I find Applicant A more intelligent than Applicant B.
- b. I find the cake tastier than the cookies.
- c. ??I find my sister taller than my brother.

We hypothesize that all aesthetic adjectives are nonmeasurable (or nonmeasurably used).<sup>4</sup> Let us therefore now turn to the two components that we identified as the sources for subjectivity and thus to result in nonmeasurability, namely the presence of an experiencer (section 2.4) and evaluativity (section 2.5).

## 2.4. The role of an experiencer

The third component to adjective meaning that we consider relevant for discerning the class of aesthetic adjectives involves the presence (or absence) of an experiencer, that is, a sentient individual who perceives the property in question. Some adjectives describe properties whose

---

<sup>4</sup>It has been pointed out to us that this hypothesis might be counterexemplified by the fact that people sometimes use numerical values in the ascription of properties like beauty – consider, for example, the movie *10*, whose title makes reference to a very beautiful woman, or the use of numerical scores for presentation quality in figure skating. However, it is essential to distinguish measurability based to some sort of external criterion from the use of numerical values to express an ordinal ranked preference, which is what we would argue is involved in both of the cases mentioned in this footnote.

applicability may depend on the way in which, or degree to which, they are experienced by some individual (or have a propensity to produce a particular experience in an arbitrary individual). Examples include adjectives such as *delicious*, *fun*, *salty*, or *loud*, as well as many adjectives derived from verbs denoting situations with experiencers, such as *shocking*, *disgusting*, *enjoyable*, or *boring* (see Bylinina 2014 for a recent overview).

Various diagnostics have been proposed to distinguish adjectives entailing an experiencer from those that do not. When the adjective is deverbal, a clear indicator is the possibility of adding a *to* or *for* prepositional phrase (see (8b), (9b)) that identifies the experiencer in the event described by the verb root (see (8a), (9a)).

- (8) a. The situation shocked/disgusted/bored/offended us.  
 b. The situation was shocking/disgusting/boring/offensive to us.
- (9) a. We enjoyed the experience.  
 b. The experience was enjoyable for us.

However, this diagnostic is more difficult to apply with adjectives that are not derived from verbs. Often, such prepositional phrases do not sound very felicitous with these, as illustrated in (10).<sup>5</sup>

- (10) a. ??The cake was delicious to/for me.  
 b. ??The food was salty to/for me.  
 c. ??The music was loud to/for me.

For such cases, linguists have appealed to intuitions about whether sensory experience is a condition on certain uses and interpretations of the adjectives. For example, Pearson (2013:15) observes that if a speaker has never tasted shortbread, but has only been told about its taste, s/he “might say, *Apparently, shortbread is tasty*, but not, *Shortbread is tasty*.”<sup>6</sup>

A second diagnostic that has been used to identify adjectives with experiencers is the evaluative use of the *find* construction (Sæbø 2009, Kennedy 2013, Umbach 2013, Bylinina 2014). Such adjectives are routinely licensed in the comparative form in the complement to this construction.

- (11) a. I find the current situation more shocking/disgusting/boring/offensive than the previous one.  
 b. I find the food more delicious/saltier today than yesterday.  
 c. I find the music louder here than at the other disco.

Predicates that clearly lack an experiencer, are odd under *find*:

---

<sup>5</sup>Note that it is crucial to apply this diagnostic with the verb *be*, as opposed to e.g. *seem*, *look* or *sound*, which introduce experiencer arguments on their own, independently of the adjective, as shown by the fact that they admit measurable, unidimensional adjectives with a *to*-phrase, while the verb *be* does not:

- (i) a. That guy seems tall to me.  
 b. ??That guy is tall to me.

It is also crucial to avoid interpreting examples such as (10b) in the text with an implicit *too* expressing that the degree exceeds an acceptable degree, as this *too* licenses a *for*-phrase independently of what the adjective allows:

- (ii) a. The food is too salty for me.  
 b. He is too tall for me.

<sup>6</sup>An additional potential problem might be that (even with deverbal adjectives) a *for/to*-phrase might correspond to a benefactive rather than an experiencer argument. We will abstract away from this here.

- (12) a. ??I find this chair wooden.  
b. ??I find that lamp green.

However, this diagnostic must be applied with care, as we showed in (7) above that all multidimensional adjectives can also routinely appear in this construction in the comparative form, independently of whether or not they describe properties that must be experienced in order to be ascribed. The same holds for the positive (i.e. noncomparative) form of unidimensional, measurable adjectives like *tall* in certain contexts:

- (13) I find him tall.

(13) implies that the attribution of tallness is made on the basis of the speaker's prior experience with different individuals' heights. Thus it seems that the *find* construction introduces an entailment related to experience, but this entailment is not specifically diagnostic of properties whose very attribution is necessarily grounded in experience.

It has also been claimed that such predicates are among those that license so-called faultless disagreement (Kölbel 2003, Lasersohn 2005, 2009, Stojanovic 2007, Stephenson 2007, Anand 2009, Pearson 2013 a.o.):

- (14) Speaker: This book is interesting.  
Hearer: No it isn't.

We will not get into a discussion of whether the disagreement here is genuinely faultless or not. Rather, we want to observe that this diagnostic, like the previous one, is insufficiently fine-grained to identify specifically the presence of an experiencer. There can be more than one reason for disagreement about the fact of the matter: We have already seen that there can be disagreements about the weights to assign to the different components of a multidimensional property, and we will see in the next section that there can be disagreements about whether an evaluative property should hold, even if the evaluative judgments are not based on personal experience. We would therefore like to identify other sorts of diagnostics that can distinguish adjectives whose properties entail experiencers, despite failing to accept a *to-* or *for-*phrase, from those that do not.

We propose as one such diagnostic the contrast in inferences that one draws from embedding different adjectives under predicates such as *look* or *sound*,<sup>7</sup> as in the following:

- (15) a. The cake looks delicious to me.  
b. The article sounds interesting to me.  
c. The food sounds insipid to me.
- (16) a. The cake looks small to me.  
b. The article sounds intelligent to me.  
c. The colors look very balanced to me.
- (17) a. ??Miró's work looks beautiful to me.  
b. ??His behavior looks good to me.  
c. The painting looks beautiful to me.  
d. The cake looks good to me.

<sup>7</sup>These two verbs differ only in what they imply about the source of the information (i.e. which particular sense is involved) supporting the property attribution (or the perceptual experience thereof in that particular sense). We therefore use them at random in this discussion.



The sentences in (15) all imply that the speaker would be inclined or disinclined (depending on the adjective) to experience the subject in question in virtue of the property attributed to it; that is, he would be inclined to eat the cake because it is delicious and to read the article because it would interest him; and he would be disinclined to eat the food in order to avoid its insipidness. These very clear sorts of inferences do not arise with the adjectives in (16) and (17). The observation that the cake is small, the article is intelligent, or the colors are very balanced may have various implications, but they do not strongly imply (even in the case of *intelligent*) an inclination or disinclination on the part of the speaker to experience the subject in virtue of the ascribed properties. The cases in (17), with adjectives that we hypothesize to be evaluative without entailing an experiencer, are interestingly different. The first observation is that (17a,b) are odd. This strongly suggests that we do not, as a rule, attribute beauty or goodness based on perceptual experience. What makes (17c,d) acceptable with the same adjectives is that they strongly imply that the speaker is reporting a perception of the subject on a very specific occasion. This might be in comparison to an expectation of the experience that would be evoked or a previous experience of the subject – for example, one is likely to utter (17c) if the painting has been a work in progress and has finally begun to meet the criteria one uses to ascribe beauty. It may also be in anticipation of a future experience that will support the evaluation, as in (17d), which one is likely to use if one sees the cake and imagines that their evaluation, after tasting it, will be positive.

Though tentative, this last diagnostic seems promising as a way of teasing apart predicates that entail a proper experiencer from those whose subjective element may be due to differences of opinion over where the threshold for ascribing a property lies or what the relative weights of the different criteria for ascribing it should be, and it also lends initial support to our claim that evaluativity should be teased apart from the crucial entailment of an experiencer. We hypothesize that the entailment of an experiencer is neither necessary nor sufficient for an adjective to be considered properly aesthetic.

## 2.5. Evaluativity

Finally, as mentioned in section 2.3, we consider as evaluative those adjectives that carry with their use an entailment of a positive or negative attitude or evaluation on the part of the speaker.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most basic examples of evaluative adjectives understood in this sense are *good* and *bad* (along with *mediocre*, *great*, *excellent*, *terrible*, *magnificent*, *awesome*, *super*). We might also include *beautiful*, *pretty*, *gorgeous*, *handsome*, and *ugly*.

We submit that the evaluative attitude towards a given object conveyed by the ascription of these adjectives does not result directly from the subject's experience of the object at stake. We have already seen in (15)-(17) one way of distinguishing strictly evaluative predicates from predicates entailing an experiencer. Interestingly, complementation under *find* might also serve to distinguish them. A search of the British National Corpus<sup>9</sup> revealed only 9 uses (out of 2353 total tokens of 361 different adjectives) with *good/better/best*, 4 with *beautiful*, and 1 with *pretty* in the complement to evaluative *find*; there are none with *bad*, *mediocre*, *great*, *excellent*, *awesome*, *super*, *gorgeous*, *handsome*, and *ugly*. In contrast, the adjectives that occur most frequently with *find* (over 20 times) are *difficult*, *hard/harder*, *easy/easier*, *useful*, *helpful*, *impossible*, *necessary*, *interesting*,

<sup>8</sup>Although we speak of "entailment", we shall take no stance regarding the nature of the entailment at stake, and, in particular, whether it should be seen a semantic entailment or, rather, as a pragmatic matter.

<sup>9</sup>The search was carried out in November 2013 on a local installation of the British National Corpus, exploited with the Corpus Query Processor (<http://cwb.sourceforge.net/>), using the following search string: "find" [pos="AT0|DT0|DPS"]? [pos="AJ."]{0,2}[pos="NN.|NP0|PN."] ("very|much|really|slightly|a bit|the")\* [pos="AJ."]. The results were then manually cleaned. This string does not collect all examples of the *find* construction, but it served to extract a representative sample of them.

*attractive*, and *strange*, none of which are explicitly expressive of positive or negative attitude or evaluation. The general failure to find evaluative adjectives under *find* strongly suggests that their evaluative component is not based directly on personal experience.

Another sign that *find* anti-selects for strictly evaluative predicates is evident in the oddness of assertions like (18), in comparison to the more natural embedding under *consider* in (19).

- (18) a. ?I find Miró's mosaic on the Rambles mediocre.  
b. I find lying bad/worse than stealing.
- (19) a. I consider Miró's mosaic on the Rambles mediocre.  
b. I consider lying bad/worse than stealing.

Though (18b) is not unacceptable, it strongly implies that the speaker has made his or her evaluation about lying on the basis of specific experiences of doing it. This is not the case with (19b). Similarly, (18a) suggests that the evaluation of Miró's mosaic is based on a comparison with other works of art that the speaker has experienced, unlike (19a). The fact that (18a) sounds rather odd indicates that our judgments concerning goodness or badness are not based directly (or entirely) on perceptual experience but rather come about in some other way.

Of course, there is no reason to think that all evaluative judgments we make are aesthetic. Another question, perhaps more difficult to answer, is whether all aesthetic judgments are evaluative. Consider once again a case in which, say, a sculpture is judged as being provocative. Assuming that we do want to consider such a judgment as an aesthetic judgment, this would provide a case in which the aesthetic judgment on its own does not imply any value judgment: There can be contexts in which judging a structure to be provocative entails a positive evaluation on the speaker's part, there can be contexts in which it entails a negative evaluation, and arguably, there can also be contexts in which it entails neither a positive nor a negative evaluation.

### 3. Summary of the diagnostics and application to *beautiful*

In this section, we apply the diagnostics for the different properties proposed in the previous sections to a standard example of an aesthetic predicate, namely *beautiful*. In section 2.1 we discussed **gradability** and observed that most aesthetic predicates are gradable, although it remains an open question whether all of them are. The following tests show that *beautiful* patterns with other gradable adjectives in being able to form comparatives (20a), being compatible with *very* (20b), and in allowing a *for*-phrase (20c).

- (20) a. This vase is more beautiful than that vase.  
b. This vase is very beautiful.  
c. This place is beautiful for a three-star hotel. (adapted from tripadvisor.com.au)

As noted in section 2.2, aesthetic adjectives are typically **multidimensional**. As a diagnostics for multidimensionality, we discussed the compatibility with expressions like *in some/every respect/way* and *except for*. (21) shows that *beautiful* passes both of these tests.

- (21) a. This vase is beautiful in every respect.  
b. This vase is beautiful except for the color.

The question arises why aesthetic adjectives are, in general, multidimensional. We believe that this

is so because aesthetic judgments are typically based on the application of a multiplicity of criteria at the same time. What is more, as we noted in section 2.2, different speakers may assign different weights to the different criteria, which may lead them to disagree over the application of a given predicate.

In section 2.3, we hypothesized that aesthetic adjectives are **nonmeasurable** (or nonmeasurably used) and we posited that nonmeasurability can be due to two different kinds of subjectivity: either because the predicate in question brings with it an experiencer (which is the case for predicates of personal taste, such as *tasty, delicious, fun, shocking, boring, disgusting, enjoyable*), or because the predicate in question has an evaluative component (*bad, fair, good, excellent*).

While several diagnostics have been proposed for determining whether or not a predicate has an experiencer argument, we focus on two different diagnostics here (since some of the others turn out to be less useful, as illustrated in section 2.4). These are the compatibility with a *for/to*-phrase identifying the experiencer and the inference of (dis)inclination to experience the object in question when the predicate is embedded under *look* or *sound*. (23) and (24) (repeated from (17)) suggest that *beautiful* behaves like a predicate without an experiencer argument, since it does not pass these tests.<sup>10</sup>

(23) ??The vase is beautiful to me.

(24) a. ??Miró's work looks beautiful to me.  
b. The painting looks beautiful to me.

As we already noted in section 2.4, (24b) is more acceptable than (24a), but it also strongly suggests that the reported judgment is based on some contrastive experience of the painting; it may contrast with the way in which one's interlocutors perceive the painting, or with the way in which the speaker perceived it on some previous occasion.

Finally, in section 2.5 we saw that strictly evaluative adjectives do not readily embed under *find*, which makes them different from predicates of personal tastes (and from other predicates that come with an experiencer, such as *difficult*). We observed that in our corpus study of co-occurrences of adjectives with *find* there were only four tokens with *beautiful*, suggesting that it behaves like an evaluative adjective.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. Aesthetic adjectives and aesthetic judgments

In section 2, we discussed a number of linguistic criteria that may be used to classify adjectives, and in section 3, we applied these criteria to *beautiful*, which is the paradigm of an aesthetic adjective. Our discussion naturally leads to asking whether these linguistic criteria make it possible to delineate the class of aesthetic adjectives (should there be such a class indeed) and to examining the relationship between applications of aesthetic adjectives and aesthetic judgments. These are the issues that we tackle in this last section. However, the two issues presuppose that we should already have a firm grasp on which adjectives we want to count among aesthetic adjectives and on which

---

<sup>10</sup>Despite the existence of various songs with the title "Beautiful to Me," a Google search yields very few examples of *to*-phrases with *beautiful* in ordinary text.

<sup>11</sup>Of course, the fact that we do find occurrences of *beautiful* with *find*, albeit very few, raises the question whether *beautiful* remains an evaluative adjective on those uses. As suggested earlier in relation to (24b), we believe that embedding *beautiful* under *find* introduces an experiential component, thus rendering the adjective's interpretation not strictly evaluative.

judgments we want to count among aesthetic judgments. While we typically take *beautiful* and *ugly* to be aesthetic adjectives *par excellence*, it remains unclear whether there is a single, unified class of aesthetic adjectives. As noted earlier, it is plausible to think that one can express an aesthetic judgment using, so to speak, ordinary adjectives. It may help here to take a look at the adjectives that aestheticians themselves take to be relevant.

Famously, Frank Sibley proposed something like a list of what he called “aesthetic concepts” (Sibley 1959: 421), among which we find the following: *unified, balanced, integrated, lifeless, serene, somber, dynamic, powerful, vivid, delicate, moving, trite, sentimental, tragic, graceful, delicate, dainty, handsome, comely, elegant, garish, dumpy*, and *beautiful*. However, it takes little to see that not all of these (probably not even half of them) are exclusively aesthetic. For example, to say of a faded flower that it is lifeless is not necessarily to make an aesthetic judgment about it. It may be an ordinary statement, which boils down to expressing the sheer fact that the flower is deprived of life. Similar observations may be made regarding *balanced, dynamic, powerful*, etc. Of course, this is not to deny that one *may* make an aesthetic judgment using these adjectives. Thus, to describe a painting as lifeless, balanced, or powerful, will often constitute an aesthetic judgment (and, usually, a negative one in the case of *lifeless* and a positive one in the case of *balanced* and *powerful*).

Our claim, then, is that many adjectives that are not by their very nature “aesthetic” may be *used* in order to make an aesthetic judgment. Now two questions follow. First, what distinguishes genuine aesthetic adjectives (such as *beautiful* and *ugly*, paradigmatically) from other adjectives such as *lifeless, balanced* or *moving*? Second, when the adjective at stake is not an exclusively aesthetic adjective, how do we decide whether a statement made with that adjective expresses an aesthetic judgment or not?

Let us take up these questions in reverse order. In aesthetics, it is customary to characterize an aesthetic judgment as one that deploys the application of an aesthetic *concept*. This, in turn, raises the question when a given adjective that is not exclusively aesthetic, such as *lifeless* or *dynamic*, expresses an aesthetic concept. Sibley himself seems to acknowledge that in many cases, the question cannot be settled: “It may often be questionable whether a term is yet being used aesthetically or not. Many of the terms I have mentioned may be used in ways which are not straightforwardly literal but of which we should hesitate to say that they demanded much yet by way of aesthetic sensitivity” (Sibley 1959: 447).

To get a better sense for the underlying problem, let us turn to some examples and, for the sake of simplicity, let us limit our attention to discourse about works of art (which some might consider as the heart of aesthetic discourse). It is easy to see that not every statement about a work of art is an aesthetic judgment, as the following illustrates:

(25) Picasso’s *Guernica* was inspired by the bombing that took place in the Basque Country in April 1937.

On the other end of the spectrum, to say that Picasso’s *Guernica* is one of the most beautiful paintings of 20<sup>th</sup> century is to attribute a (very) positive aesthetic value to *Guernica* and, quite uncontroversially, to express an aesthetic judgment about that painting of Picasso’s (as well as, derivatively, about other paintings of 20<sup>th</sup> century).

The more interesting questions about aesthetic discourse arise with cases in which we do seem to apply an aesthetic concept, and yet, we do not necessarily assign any aesthetic *value* to a work of art, the way we do when we judge it to be one of the most beautiful paintings. Consider the following:

(26) a. Picasso’s *Guernica* is dynamic.

- b. Picasso's *Guernica* is somber.
- c. Picasso's *Guernica* is moving.

The adjectives in (26a-c) are all taken from Sibley's list. What happens in these examples is that we get a judgment that involves an aesthetic concept, yet one that is not expressed by means of some exclusively aesthetic adjective such as *beautiful* or *ugly*. As mentioned earlier, adjectives like *dynamic* and *somber* have ordinary, i.e. non-aesthetic uses, as illustrated in (27).

- (27) a. The environment is dynamic, changing with the years and the seasons.
- b. It was a small and somber room with minimal instruments, and no technology. (From [www.travelpod.com](http://www.travelpod.com))

Nevertheless, in contrast with both (25) and (27a, b), the judgments in (26a-c) are not mere factual statements; they are genuine aesthetic judgments. What is more, we would like to suggest that (26a-c) are not necessarily evaluative: they need not imply any attribution of aesthetic *value*. Thus (26a) *may* entail a positive evaluation of the *Guernica* in an appropriate context, but it may also fail to entail any evaluation at all. Even in the absence of any value attribution, the judgment expressed in (26a) would still contain an aesthetic concept, viz. that of being a dynamic painting. The latter, we suggest, is an aesthetic concept, yet not an *evaluative* one. Now consider (26b). The concept expressed by *somber* in a majority of cases tends to come with a negative connotation. However, the judgment in (26b) may well convey a positive evaluation in an appropriate context, just as it may convey a negative one. We submit that the statement at stake may also be evaluatively neutral, that is, it may fail to assign to the object any aesthetic value at all, and still be a full-fledged aesthetic judgment.

We can now return to the first of the two questions: What is it that distinguishes genuine aesthetic predicates, such as *beautiful* and *ugly*, from garden-variety predicates such as *dynamic* or *somber*, that may, but need not, be used in order to make an aesthetic judgment? Our hypothesis is that the former, but not the latter, have it built into their lexical meaning that their role is to assign a certain aesthetic value to the object or individual to which they are attributed. We saw with the examples in (26a-c) that a speaker *may* make an evaluative aesthetic judgment in virtue of attributing a certain aesthetic concept to an object. We also proposed, more controversially, that in these examples, a speaker may make an evaluatively neutral aesthetic judgment, merely in virtue of deploying a given aesthetic concept and attributing it to the object at stake. Now, what makes aesthetic judgments expressed using a genuine aesthetic predicate special is, we think, that the evaluative judgment implied by the aesthetic judgment is so implied in virtue of the meaning itself of the aesthetic predicate that has been used. That is to say, it is the very meaning of the expression 'beautiful' that will, unlike the meanings of 'dynamic' or 'somber,' turn the judgment at stake into an *evaluative* aesthetic judgment.

With this hypothesis in place, let us close by briefly addressing the more general question of the relationship between evaluative predicates (which include 'beautiful' and 'ugly,' but also moral predicates such as 'good' and 'evil') and predicates used in expressing evaluative judgments. Our proposal is that the former form a proper subclass of the latter. We submit that many ordinary predicates may, in an appropriate context, be put to use to give expression to a value judgment. It remains a question for future study to understand what kind of processes, pragmatic or other, enable us to convey a value judgment using linguistic expressions whose meaning does not convey anything evaluative. On the other hand, what is characteristic of genuine evaluative predicates is that they give expression to value judgments precisely in virtue of what they *mean*. If our proposal is correct, we should expect there to be ways of testing for evaluativity using linguistic criteria. In section 2.5, we looked at one such criterion. We suggested that *find*-constructions in English anti-

select for evaluativity. The thought was that genuinely evaluative predicates are not felicitous in *find*-constructions in their genuinely evaluative use. Although it is possible to say things like “Mihajlo finds Ayumi beautiful” or “I find their behavior wrong,” we believe that in such occurrences, the meaning of *beautiful* and *wrong* is coerced into one that is not purely evaluative but rather contains an experiential component. To be sure, we do not purport this test to be the only one that may be used to tell apart an evaluative predicate from the rest, or even to be the most important one.<sup>12</sup> How exactly it is that languages demarcate evaluative predicates from the rest is another open issue that we shall leave for future research.<sup>13</sup>

## References

- Anand, Pranav. (2009) “Kinds of taste” Ms., UCSC.
- Bartsch, Renate and Theo Vennemann. (1973) *Semantic Structures: A Study in the Relation between Syntax and Semantics*. Athaenum Verlag.
- Bierwisch, Manfred. (1989) “The semantics of gradation” In Manfred Bierwisch and Ewald Lang (eds.), *Dimensional Adjectives*. Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 71-261.
- Bylinina, Lisa. (2014) *The Grammar of Standards: Judge-Dependence, Purpose-Relativity, and Comparison Classes in Degree Constructions*. LOT Dissertation Series 347. Utrecht: LOT.
- Kennedy, Christopher. (2007) “Vagueness and grammar: The semantics of relative and absolute gradable adjectives” *Linguistics & Philosophy* 30:1-45.
- Kennedy, Christopher. (2013) “Two sources of subjectivity: Qualitative assessment and dimensional uncertainty” *Inquiry* 56:258-277.
- Kennedy, Christopher and Louise McNally. (2005) “Scale structure, degree modification and the semantics of gradable predicates” *Language* 81:345-381.
- Klein, Ewan. (1980) “A semantics for positive and comparative adjectives” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 4:1-45.
- Kölbel, Max. (2003) “Faultless disagreement” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104:55-73.
- Lasersohn, Peter. (2005) “Context dependence, disagreement, and predicates of personal taste” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 28:643-686.
- Lasersohn, Peter. (2009) “Relative truth, speaker commitment, and control of implicit arguments” *Synthese* 166:359-74.
- McConnell-Ginet, Sally. (1973) *Comparative Constructions in English: A Syntactic and Semantic Analysis*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester.
- McNally, Louise. (2011) “The relative role of property type and scale structure in explaining the behaviour of gradable adjectives” In Rick Nouwen et al. (eds.), *ViC 2009 (Papers from the ESSLLI 2009 Workshop on Vagueness in Communication)*. Lecture Notes in Artificial Intelligence 6517. Berlin: Springer, 151-168.
- Pearson, Hazel. (2013) “A judge-free semantics for predicates of personal taste” *Journal of Semantics* 30:103-154.
- Rett, Jessica. (2007) “Antonymity and evaluativity” In Tova Friedman and Masayuki Gibson (eds.), *Proceedings of SALT XVII*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 210-227.
- Sæbø, Kjell Johan. (2009) “Judgment ascriptions” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 32:327-352.
- Sassoon, Galit W. 2013. “A typology of multidimensional adjectives” *Journal of Semantics* 30:335-380.
- Sibley, Frank. (1959) “Aesthetic concepts” *Philosophical Review* 68:421-450.
- Solt, Stephanie. (2011) “Notes on comparison classes” In Rick Nouwen et al. (eds.), *ViC 2009 (Papers from the ESSLLI 2009 Workshop on Vagueness in Communication)*. LNAI 6517. Berlin: Springer, 189-206.
- Stephenson, Tamina. (2007) *Towards a Theory of Subjective Meaning*. Ph.D. dissertation, MIT
- Stojanovic, Isidora. (2007) “Talking about taste: Disagreement, implicit arguments, and relative truth” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30:691-706.
- Umbach, Carla. (2013) “Evaluative propositions and subjective judgments” Ms., Berlin: ZAS.
- Unger, Peter K. (1975) *Ignorance*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>12</sup>Another possible criterion is to test for evaluativity by seeing if there is inconsistency if the evaluative component is simultaneously denied. Indeed, it seems plausible that the use of an evaluative predicate and the simultaneous negation of the relevant attitude on the speaker’s part gives rise to a certain feeling of inconsistency, as in the following:

- (i) a. Picasso’s *Guernica* is beautiful, but I do not value it aesthetically.
- b. Cheating is wrong, but I do not disapprove of it.

<sup>13</sup> We are grateful to audiences at the 2013 ESA Meeting, the London Aesthetics Forum, the University of Leeds, and the 2014 ESPP Meeting for comments and suggestions, and especially to Berit Gehrke for input on a previous draft. This research was supported by an ICREA Foundation Academia award to Louise McNally and a Marie Curie grant FP7-PEOPLE-2011-IEF 302596 to Isidora Stojanovic.