

**Aesthetic Evaluation in the Russian Worldview:
Exploring Beauty and Ugliness through Facial Similes**

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Abstract

This study explores how beauty and ugliness are conceptualized in Russian similes that describe facial features. By analyzing these, it aims to reveal culturally embedded aesthetic ideals through figurative language. Drawing on principles from cognitive linguistics, which understand similes as reflections of conceptual thought and cultural perception rather than decorative language, this research uses data from the Russian National Corpus (RNC) to examine how facial features are subject to aesthetic judgment through comparison. The main focuses of the analysis is on identifying the most frequent targets of beauty-related evaluation (e.g., eyes, nose, cheeks, lips, face, hair, and "beautiful as..." gendered constructions), the symbolic source domains used in these comparisons, the evaluative nature of the similes (positive or negative), and the presence of gendered patterns.

The core findings go to show that eyes are the most emotionally and aesthetically loaded domain, meaning the similes are praising their beauty using celestial and natural imagery while also expressing intense emotions such as fear, anger, surprise, and more. Hair is primarily evaluated in terms of texture and color, where brightness, lightness, and smoothness signify beauty, and messiness suggests ugliness. As for face, facial similes often times use humor and ridicule, and that reflects the cultural sensitivities around the symmetry. The nose stands out as a heavily stigmatized feature. It is consistently mocked through very coarse, earthy comparisons, which may suggest rigid norms around the facial acceptability. In contrast, cheeks are almost exclusively associated with positive, food-related imagery that conveys vitality and femininity, while lips show a more balanced duality, with beauty and grotesqueness hinging on color and size.

These patterns demonstrate how metaphorical and embodied thinking works with cultural aesthetics, and by that, grounds abstract beauty ideals in more tangible and recognizable imagery that is tied to nature, objects, other humans, and emotional expression. The study attempts to contribute to the more under explored intersection of figurative language, cultural values, and aesthetic evaluations, while also offering a linguistic lens through which societal norms around physical appearance and/or gender can be examined. It can also serve as a foundation for any future cross-cultural studies that investigate how language reflects and reinstates beauty standards in different societies and time periods.

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Introduction

Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder—but who is the beholder, and what shapes their gaze? Beauty is a long-debated topic where there seems to be no right or wrong answer. Every so-called beholder has their own ideas of what is beautiful and what is not; hence, different beauty ideals and goals are present in each culture. We can distinguish these ideals through visuals like advertisements, movies, cartoons, and drawings or through the language used when talking about people's appearances.

In linguistics, there is a term called figurative language, which refers to language that describes conventional things in an unconventional way. For example, instead of saying, "I am very hungry," one could say, "I am so hungry, I could eat a horse." The second version does not actually mean eating a horse but rather exaggerates the speaker's hunger to elicit stronger understanding from the listener. Figurative language includes several subtypes: similes, idioms, proverbs, metaphors, sarcasm, hyperboles, and others.

In cognitive linguistics, figurative expressions like similes are understood not just as decorative language but as reflections of how people think and conceptualize abstract ideas—such as beauty, emotion, or morality—through more concrete, physical experiences. This approach makes it possible to see how similes are linked not only to language but also to perception and cultural values.

This type of language is often used to comment on people's appearances, either idealizing certain features or mocking them. Among these different types, the most explicit and direct form

is the simile. A simile, or in simple terms, a comparative structure, is a way of comparing one thing to another. In this case, the thing being described (also called the target domain) and the thing it is compared to (the source domain) are two different domains that share a particular quality. A specific trait of the source is projected onto the target. In terms of beauty, similes can reveal deeper conceptual understandings and mental beauty assessments that may relate to the aesthetic ideals of a particular time period, the culture associated with that language, or both.

Similes that are natural to one language reveal culturally embedded beauty ideals specific to that culture. As the saying goes, language is a mirror of culture. For example, the Russian simile “нос как картошка” (literally, “nose like a potato”) mocks the roundedness and large size of the nose by comparing it to a potato. This simile clearly shows that big, round noses are considered unattractive in the Russian cultural context. Another example is “щеки как яблоки” (“cheeks like apples”), where cheeks are compared to apples in terms of roundness, firmness, and likely a healthy red tint. This reveals that in Russian culture, cheeks are associated with beauty ideals and are seen as attractive when they appear round and rosy.

However, these culturally embedded ideals of beauty vary from language to language and culture to culture. Initially, this study aimed to explore these ideals in a comparative framework, looking at historically colonized and colonizing cultures, specifically, the Russian Empire and the Kazakh Khanate. Over time, these dynamics evolved into nearly seventy years of Soviet rule, during which Russian became the dominant language imposed by the state. It would have been interesting to explore whether beauty standards shifted over that period, at least as reflected in language. However, due to time constraints and limitations in the scope of this project, Kazakh data collection and comparative analysis had to be postponed.

Although there are numerous studies on Russian aesthetic values or figurative language more broadly, relatively little has been written about similes as a standalone phenomenon and especially in terms of their qualitative use to express beauty and ugliness.

Understanding how similes function in the Russian language to be able to express beauty and ugliness can allow us to uncover more than just linguistic patterns: it also offers insight into cultural perceptions, emotional attitudes, and even implicit social hierarchies tied to physical appearance. The human face, being the most visible and emotionally expressive part of the body, serves as a particularly rich site for such metaphorical evaluations. Language can not only reflect but also helps construct what is considered “normal” or “attractive” or “undesirable.” After tracing which facial features are praised or ridiculed, and which images are used to do so, we gain access to the underlying value systems that shape cultural expectations around gender, health, age, and morality. Moreover, facial similes can also often combine aesthetic judgment with emotional or moral evaluation. By doing that labeling certain appearances not just as unattractive but as foolish, aggressive, or disorderly. Through this way, figurative language functions as a subtle but powerful mechanism of social control, shaping how individuals view themselves and others. Thus, exploring similes reveals not just how people talk, but how they think, feel, and judge within a specific cultural context.

This study aims to contribute to the underexplored intersection of figurative language and cultural aesthetics by analyzing how beauty and ugliness are conceptualized in similes that describe facial features in Russian. Through this lens, the project seeks to understand what is considered beautiful or unattractive and what symbolic images are used to express these evaluations.

Hence, the focus is on answering the following research questions:

- (1) What are the most frequent targets of aesthetic subjectification?
- (2) What are the typical sources of beauty judgements?
- (3) What is the nature of these comparisons? Positive or negative?
- (4) Are there gendered differences in the source domains?

This study is corpus-based and draws on the main principles of cognitive linguistics to identify, then categorize, and interpret similes from the Russian National Corpus (RNC).

Literature Review

Cognitive linguistics treats figurative language not as a stylistic device but rather as central to the human thinking process. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), people understand abstract ideas by mapping them to more concrete ideas and experiences. Put simply, we describe abstract qualities like beauty through concrete, physical, and sensory experiences. For example, metaphors like “LIFE IS A JOURNEY” or “ANGER IS FIRE” illustrate that we conceive intangible concepts in terms of physical experiences (Kövecses, 2020). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call this a Conceptual Metaphor Theory (from now on, CMT).

In the context of beauty, figurative language helps people articulate subjective aesthetic experiences through concrete, often sensorially grounded, imagery. For instance, Kolocheva’s (Okuneva) (2008) cross-linguistic cognitive studies of beauty show that this sensorial mapping is evident in both English and Russian. It is often conceptualized via domains like light and warmth (“Beauty, like a lantern's light, will shine outward from within him,” “Beauty blinds; the blind is easy robbed” [Proverb], or “Свет вашей красоты озарил все вокруг” [Е. Шварц, Гольф Король]), a fragile flower (“Beauty is but a blossom,” [Proverb], or “Холить свою красоту было некогда,” [В. Токарева, Один из нас]), and an eternal movement of water in English

(“Beauty is like the surf that never ceases,” [Struthers Burt]) versus liquid in Russian (“Я впервые понял, как много простой красоты разлито в мире,” [А. И. Куприн, Колесо времени]) (Okuneva, 2008, pp. 61-62). All of these draw on sensorial or physical experiences.

To apply CMT to metaphors or other forms of figurative language, we must first understand two key concepts: target domain and source domain. As it was mentioned previously, Lakoff and Johnson state that people understand abstract ideas through concrete sources, which gives us two variables to work with: the source domain and the target domain. The source domain here would be the concrete experience, or a particular quality of this experience that we map onto the abstract idea (the target domain).

This approach does not only apply to metaphors; it can be used to describe other figurative language tools like similes, but first, let's see what a simile is.

A simile is an explicit, figurative comparison between two essentially unlike entities or concepts (Israel et al., 2004). It is often times confused with metaphors or comparisons, but these three are entirely different concepts. As stated before, similes are explicit, figurative comparisons that highlight similarities between two unlike entities, and often using explicit comparative constructions like “like/as” in English, for example. However, they differ from literal comparisons, which assess shared properties between entities considered comparable within similar cognitive domains. So, think of understanding concrete experience through another concrete source. For example, “She's as sweet as sugar candy.” In this case, sugar candy is construed as a paragon of sweetness, meaning this is a simile. In contrast, a literal comparison like “Max is as tall as Mortimer” does not imply that Mortimer is particularly tall; it merely means that his height serves as a reference point for Max's height (Israel et al., 2004, pp. 127). Metaphors, contrastingly, are primarily a figure of thought that can create similarities by

projecting structure from one domain to another. They do not require explicit marking like similes and possess greater grammatical flexibility. Consider an example of "The windshield wipers made a great clatter like two idiots clapping in church." This is a simile; now if we reformulate it to be more like a metaphor: "The clattering windshield wipers were idiots clapping in church" (Israel et al., 2004, pp. 129).

This way similes, just as any other figurative language, can be analyzed through the conceptual metaphor approach. By the same token, similes about beauty tend to pick salient attributes (shape, color, texture) as their source domains. One study notes that similes typically map attributive properties, such as shape, size, and color, instead of relational or functional source aspects (Israel et al., 2004, pp. 131). In practice, stock similes for appearance often run "as *X* as a *Y*" (e.g., "white as snow," "bright as the sun"), highlighting a single sensory attribute.

Now that the theoretical framework is established, let's turn to existing literature focusing on how figurative language (especially similes) reflects the beauty models in culture. Figurative language, including similes, is very culture-specific. Deignan (2003), in her study, analyzed different metaphorical expressions, including similes, across corpora of different languages to determine the extent of their culture specificity. She analyzed similes, such as "eats like a horse" or "work like a horse" in English and their possible counterparts in other languages like Russian, Korean, German, etc. The study found that while most English figurative "horse" expressions were not shared across other languages, "horse" similes showed some overlap with the Russian language. Essentially, Deignan (2003) concludes that differences in similes across cultures that draw on animal attributes differ due to various folk beliefs about those animals and culture-specific inferences.

In terms of figurative language of beauty, Gladkova (2021) also confirms this. Her study of the cultural semantics of the Russian folk aesthetics shows that words like красивый (*krasivyy*, “beautiful”) and прекрасный (*prekrasnyj*, “fine” or “very beautiful”) reflect culturally specific ideals through a Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) analysis. According to Gladkova (2021), more often than not, these terms have deep connotations with moral and emotional code (harmony, goodness, or even purity) as well as the visual appeal. For example, saying that someone is красивая (*krasivaya*, beautiful fem.) in Russian thus can evoke a broader moral and social approval, which can be noticed in religious or historical texts. For instance, the Virgin Mary is described not only as physically beautiful but also as embodying humility and holiness. Her beauty lies in virtue as much as it lies in her appearance. Similar but survey-based studies also suggest that Russians associate “beauty” with qualities that delight both the senses and the mind (Chzhan, 2011). Wierzbicka (1992) also describes how the Russian culture generally is more prone to putting emphasis on the morality.

Kartalova (2023) reaches similar conclusions in her study of Bulgarian similes: Similes are a key way to understand the contemporary environment and cultural idioms, revealing individuals' associative thinking processes. The figurative similes analyzed by Kartalova reveal culturally embedded models of beauty that reflect both traditional and evolving Bulgarian worldviews. Most notably, the feminine singular form of the tertium comparationis (*krasiva kato...*—beautiful like...) suggests that the cultural conceptualization of beauty in Bulgarian is strongly gendered and is closely associated with femininity, purity, and delicateness. She says it reflects a worldview in which beauty is not only an aesthetic quality but a moral and emotional ideal that is historically projected onto women. Moreover, the choice of comparata (the source domain) ranges from idealized figures such as “an angel” or “Aphrodite” to more ironic or

illogical images like “a goblin” or “Quasimodo.” This demonstrates a deep cultural model in which beauty is evaluated not only through idealization but also through humor and social commentary. The rich associative thinking behind these comparisons goes to show how the cultural imagination affects the construction of beauty. Another interesting point that Kartalova makes is that these similes are also dynamic, which means they evolve alongside society. Her data shows how newer comparata like “photomodel” or “Alain Delon” replace older ones, revealing how Bulgarian speakers continually reshape their cultural models to reflect contemporary ideals. These findings again underscore that in Russian cultural discourse, aesthetic praise frequently overlaps with ethical and social ideals.

Beyond semantic analysis, other empirical linguistic studies of phraseology can further confirm that Russian figurative language makes a rich use of similes and metaphors to describe beauty. Muszyńska-Wolny (2020) employs phraseological analysis that highlights the prevalence of stable similes comparing women to regal or divine figures. For instance, she catalogs idioms such as *красивая, прекрасная, статная как королева* (beautiful, stately as a queen (fem.)) and *нарядная, красивая как принцесса* (finely dressed, lovely as a princess (fem.)) (Muszyńska-Wolny, 2020, pp. 188). These constructions clearly reflect a culture-specific prototype in which ideal femininity is projected on queens or goddesses, as can be seen in expressions like *красивая как богиня* (beautiful as a goddess (fem.)) (Muszyńska-Wolny, 2020, pp. 199). This further reinforces the idea that similes of this kind link physical attractiveness with elevated status, perfection, and idealized womanhood. Muszyńska-Wolny also notes that while many comparisons associate women with beauty, grace, and attractiveness, which are often tied to youth, elevated social status, or idealized roles like actresses, ballerinas, or goddesses, other similes can also reflect negative associations. Poor appearance, roughness, or being poorly

dressed seem to frequently get linked to low status or professions such as cooks, market women, or washerwomen, as well as figures like witches, e.g., *как бомжиха* (like a homeless woman (fem.)), which is used to mock or criticize the appearance of women. Additionally, some similes reference physical traits like delicate hands or reinforce harmful stereotypes, such as the association of blond hair with foolishness.

Figurative language in Russian can also frequently target specific features of appearance. In classical texts, facial features are often described through natural imagery. A medieval religious account, for example, describes the Virgin Mary's lips as *уста цветущие, исполненные сладких речей*, which is literally translated as “lips in bloom, full of sweet words,” a simile that likens lips to flowers and implies freshness and allure (*УСПЕНИЕ ПРЕСВЯТОЙ ВЛАДЫЧИЦЫ НАШЕЙ БОГОРОДИЦЫ И ПРИСНОДЕВЫ МАРИИ | СВЯТО-ИОАННО-ПРЕДТЕЧЕНСКИЙ СОБОР*, n.d.). Even today, similar expressions like *губы как цветы* (lips like flowers) are used colloquially, as will also be seen later in the results section. These examples go to show how culturally resonant imagery continues to shape the way that physical beauty can be linguistically constructed and perceived.

While the existing literature on Russian similes does not involve microanalysis of facial features one by one to determine the general beauty and ugliness perceptions and ideals of human faces in the Russian worldview, this study will try to fill in this gap in the appropriate scope and address the possible interpretations of the found results.

Methodology

This is a corpus-based study where the data collection process advises the Russian National Corpus (from here on, the RNC). The RNC is a large and one of the most widely used corpora of Russian in general, containing more than 1 billion lexemes in total. It has at least 8

genres of text, such as main (389 M), media (850 M), social networks (161 M), spoken (14 M), dialect (665 K), poetry (14 M), and more. For this research, the “main” corpus was selected since it is the most balanced and diverse representation of standard written Russian.

In this particular research, the corpus-based method was chosen because it gives access to the most authentic and contextualized use of similes for further analysis. Drawing from cognitive linguistics, similes in this study are treated not as stylistic devices but as meaningful conceptual mappings that can reflect the cultural perceptions of beauty and ugliness.

The search query is the most common simile construction in the Russian language: [body_part_name] + как + [N], where *как* (like/as) introduces the comparison and (N) is a noun in the nominative case.

The body parts analyzed are hair, eyes, cheeks, nose, lips, and face. Since the scope of the research is not big, the focus is just these 6 body parts. No time restrictions were applied to the corpus search so that the data can allow for the inclusion of similes from different historical periods. This aimed to capture any possible diachronic variation and observe whether aesthetic values or metaphorical tendencies evolved over time.

The search results then were manually filtered to exclude all of the irrelevant comparisons or those that lacked aesthetic or emotional meaning. All the remaining instances were evaluated in context and categorized into four main evaluative groups: beauty (positive), ugliness (negative), neutral/neither, and emotional.

These categories were chosen to be able to capture the evaluative stance and the emotional tone since it is important to recognize that not all similes refer strictly to appearance. Each simile was then analyzed for its source domain (e.g., sapphire, mop, sun, etc.) and grouped

into broader semantic fields such as precious stones, natural elements, food, man-made objects, textures, etc.

Next, each comparison was coded for the shared domain between the source and the target, which included color, shape, texture, size, and emotion.

All of the data was annotated using Google Sheets, where each instance was tagged for their evaluative type, shared domain, and source category. Consequently, frequencies and proportions were calculated to identify patterns and dominant trends for further analysis.

Additionally, in order to explore gendered aesthetic evaluations, two more queries were run: [красивый] + как + [N] and [красивая] + как + [N], where both are [beautiful] + like/as + [N], but due to gendered division in the Russian language, the first one denotes masculine beauty, and the second is feminine beauty.

These allowed a targeted look at gender-specific similes, and although the number of instances was small, the results were analyzed in terms of their source domains to gain insight into symbolic representations of masculine and feminine beauty.

Due to time constraints and the scope of manual analysis, this study focused exclusively on similes using the explicit как construction. Metaphors and implicit comparisons were excluded as well. In cases of ambiguity, the surrounding context was used to determine the evaluative or emotional direction of the simile.

Since the classification of the data involves interpretative judgement, the dataset was analyzed using consistent criteria. While inter-rater validation was not possible for this small-scale project, detailed annotation and contextual reading were used to ensure internal reliability.

The annotated data can be opened and checked via the following link: [Capstone Data](#)

Results

Body Part	Total Instances	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Emotional	Common Source Domains
Eyes	115	65	7	17	26	Nature (stars, sky), stones, abstract (day/night), coals
Hair	48	23	4	20	1	Texture (mop, wires), color (gold, night), shape (helmet)
Face	20	6	2	12	-	Shape (moon, pancake), humor (butt), color (flour, sky)
Nose	18	-	-	18	-	Shape (potato, awl), color (cherry, plum)
Cheeks	11	10	-	1	-	Food (apple, ham), texture (pillow, cream)
Lips	8	4	-	4	-	Color (cherry, ham), shape (sausages), injury (wound)

Table 1. RNC search results by body part and their classifications.

The most popular search was the eyes, with 115 instances found. The color of the eyes is usually praised by being compared to natural elements, such as precious stones, fruits, berries, vegetables, the sky, stars, water, and abstract themes like day and night. Many of these comparisons emphasize the blue or deep color of the eyes, e.g., eyes like the sea or the night. There are also neutral comparisons that do not necessarily indicate whether the eyes are beautiful or ugly; they simply describe them as they are. For example, “eyes like coals” compares the blackness of the eyes but not necessarily their attractiveness. Only three similes referring to ugliness in terms of color were found: eyes like resin, the sea on a stormy day, and coals. Notably, similes involving coals have different evaluative directions—they can denote beauty, ugliness, or emotion.

Eyes clearly receive mostly positive comparisons, with few negative ones (17 out of 115) and a notable number of neutral ones. Some similes are also emotionally charged. For example, eyes like coals may represent ugliness, where the smallness and blackness of the eyes are mocked; in neutral terms, it simply indicates eye color without aesthetic judgment; and in

emotional contexts, it can suggest fear or anger. One vivid example is:

“Жмусь я к нему крепко, крепко, мне жутко становится; глядь, а по сторонам саней кто-то тоже скачет, глаза, как угольки горят, воют, лошадь храпит...”

Literally translated as: “I press myself against him tightly, tightly, I feel terrified; look, and on the sides of the sleigh someone is also jumping, eyes like coals are burning, howling, the horse is snorting...” (Google Translate, 2025). Here, “eyes like coals are burning” expresses fear and intensity, a poetic image repeated at least six more times in the data.

It is interesting to note that similes comparing eyes in terms of shape, such as eyes like the moon or like slits, tend to be negative, as they often mock smallness. Only one exception was found: eyes like a bulb (onion); however, it does not refer to the eyes of a person but of an animal.

Overall, it seems eyes are the most emotionally expressive part of the face, considering that approximately one-fourth of the similes involving eyes express fear and anger through different source domains. In terms of beauty, the color of the eyes are praised the most, and the shape is mocked in 100% of the cases (excluding animals). This concentration of emotional language affirms the cultural centrality of the eyes in expressing both inner states and outward aesthetic value.

As for hair, it appeared 48 times, making it the second most frequent search. It is mostly compared in terms of color and texture, though one emotionally charged comparison and four instances involving shape were also found. Comparisons based on color were predominantly positive (16 out of 18), whereas those based on texture were mostly negative (17 out of 26), likening hair to wires, bristles, mops, textiles, etc. Shape-based comparisons were also largely negative (3 out of 4), including hair like a helmet, haystack, and scraps of wool. Hair compared

in terms of color is mostly described as golden blonde, often likened to gold, halos, rye, sun, and various forms of light.

The word face overall tends to be mocked slightly more than praised, with 12 out of 20 examples carrying negative connotations. These similes are mostly based on shape, such as a face like a moon, mattress, misshaped egg, pancake, plate, and so on. One particularly humorous example is “a face like a butt,” which potentially may share the domain of shape, though it was categorized as humorous rather than purely aesthetic.

Positive similes involving the face often center on color, such as a face like Rozan or like a sky brightened with lightning but no moon. However, mocking uses of color also appear, such as face like flour, referring to a very pale, lifeless complexion. One especially intriguing and ambiguous example was “a face like a network of narrow dead ends and alleys somewhere on the outskirts of a big city.” The surrounding context provided no clear evaluative direction, so it was classified as neutral.

The next case is nose, which yielded particularly insightful results. All 18 similes involving the nose are negative, mostly mocking its size and shape. Common comparisons include buttons, turnips/bulbs, potatoes, and wheels, which criticize the nose for being large and round. Other similes mock sharpness, comparing the nose to an awl or a pika (a sharp Russian traditional musical instrument). One unusual case was a nose like a seawall/breakwater, which was difficult to interpret on its own, but the negative context around it led to its classification as ugly. The nose is also mocked in terms of color; for example, a nose like a cherry, plum, or beetroot, all of which suggest an unnaturally red nose.

Cheeks appeared 11 times, and 10 of these were on the positive side. They are mostly compared to red or pink items like apples, peaches, blood, ham, pomegranate, etc., which imply

a healthy, attractive blush considered conventionally beautiful. There are also texture-based comparisons, such as pillows (with an affectionate diminutive affix: подушечки) and sour cream, both referring to soft, clean cheeks. The only negative example found was cheeks like sausages, which, apart from being unflattering, appears in a context that conveys discomfort:

“Губы как рана. Щеки как колбаса. Серьги — слезы.”

Translated as: “Lips like a wound. Cheeks like sausages. Earrings — tears.” The strong association of cheeks with food and softness also reflects embodied perceptions of health and youthfulness, where physical vitality is intertwined with tactile and visual cues.

Lips were found in only 8 instances, making them the least frequent body part in this study. Interestingly, this category is evenly split: four positive and four negative similes. All comparisons share the quality of color, typically referencing red or pink tones. Examples include flowers, cherries, rose petals, ham, sausages, and a wound. However, similes emphasizing size—such as sausages, ham, and a wound—are clearly mocking. For example, “На плакате изображалась уродливая, развратная девица — губы, как пара багровых сарделек, чудовищный бюст выпирает из корсажа, голые кривые ноги паскудно приплясывают. [Ирина Васюченко. Хромые на склоне // «Ковчег», 2014].” Translated as: “The poster depicted an ugly, depraved girl—lips like a pair of crimson sausages, a monstrous bust protruding from her bodice, bare, crooked legs dancing vilely,” mocking the shape and/or the size of the lips. In the case of lips, it seems color itself is not necessarily the defining factor of beauty or ugliness in lip-related similes; however, the shape and/or the size of the lips can only be a target of mockery.

The search for the masculine form of “beautiful as” yielded 12 examples. Male beauty is often compared to girls, gods, actors, bunnies, and mythological figures like Cupid. Some

comparisons are more abstract or symbolic, such as a palace, silver, or, more unusually, a gynecologist.

Meanwhile, the feminine form of “beautiful as” produced only 8 instances, less than half as many as the masculine forms. Women's beauty is likened to models, candy wrappers, queens, angels, other women, and even nations like an Italian girl. Some similes use affectionate or humorous comparisons, such as a goat with a diminutive (козочка) or a goldified church, which suggests sacredness or splendor.

Overall, a noticeable trend emerges: similes involving size, shape, and texture are more likely to express negative meanings, while color-based similes are overwhelmingly positive. Similes that target irregular shapes or large sizes often lean toward mockery, especially when related to hair, nose, and lips. On the other hand, with 92 out of 114 instances (approximately 80%) praising color, it appears that color serves as a culturally safe and stable domain for aesthetic idealization. This asymmetry suggests a culturally specific preference for visual harmony and delicacy over exaggeration and irregularity in facial aesthetics. These patterns invite further cross-linguistic comparison to assess whether similar metaphorical structures and aesthetic preferences appear in other cultural contexts, such as Kazakh or Uzbek.

In terms of the source domain, the following trends can be observed:

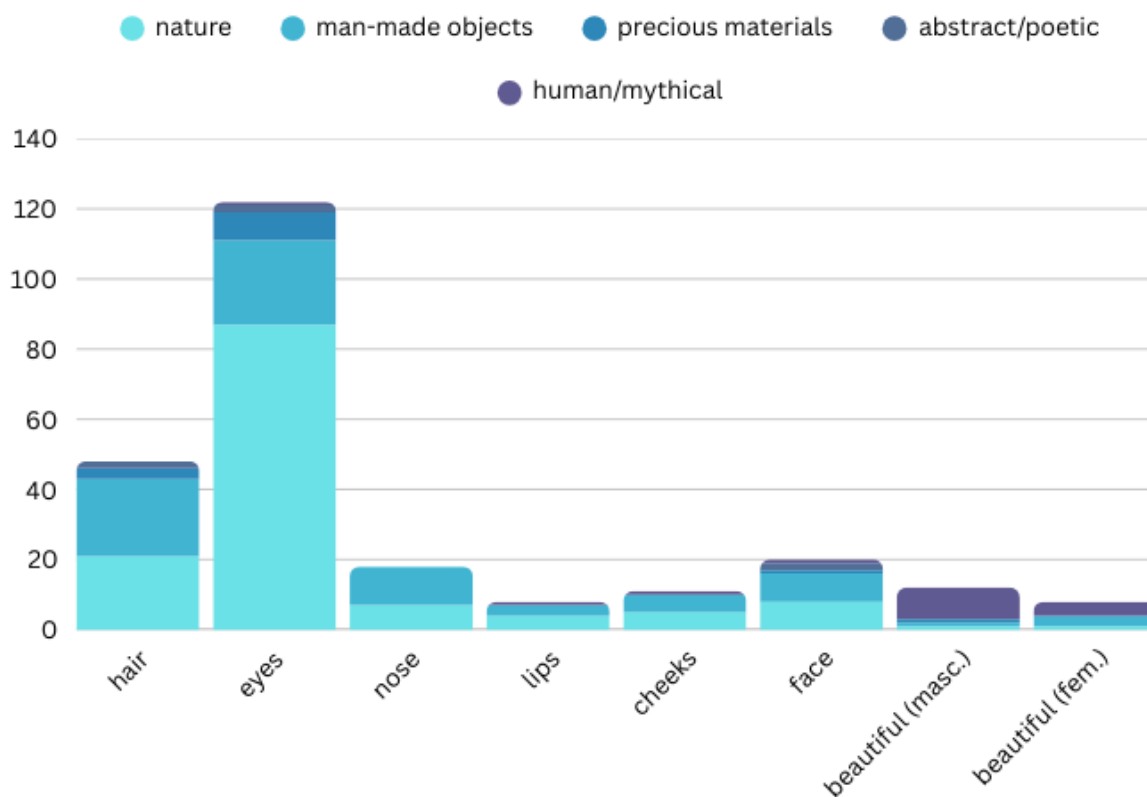


Table 2. The count of different semantic groups as source domains across 8 queries.

In the table above, the thing that stands out the most is the fact that the most commonly used source domains are nature-related, such as fruits and vegetables, plants, non-precious elements, animals, sky and celestial bodies, waters, and insects. The second dominating source group is man-made objects that include textiles and fabrics, containers and utensils, weapons and sharp objects, tools, household objects, lights like torches and headlights, processed foods, buildings, and miscs.

An interesting observation that can be made here is also that the similes with an adjective “beautiful” in both genders are more prone to have other people as the source domain.

Additionally, there is one particularly interesting case that illustrates a clear evolution in the evaluative domain of a simile over time: “eyes like plates.” In an example from the early 20th century:

«Не понимаю. Худощавая, глаза, как тарелки», — возмущались фрау. Мужья запускали глаза на портрет с осторожностью, через плечики жен, и находили, что «авантюристка-то чертовски соблазнительна». [А. Хованская. Авантюристка (1928)].

Translated: *"I don't understand. She's skinny, **her eyes are like plates,**" the women were indignant. The husbands looked at the portrait cautiously, over their wives' shoulders, and found that "the adventuress is damn seductive."*

In this particular context, the simile “eyes like plates” seems to imply unattractiveness. Given that the subject is described as skinny, we may infer that her cheeks and face are also extra small, which visually would enlarge her eyes in proportion. At the time (1928), beauty ideals favored fuller and healthier complexions, so disproportionately large eyes may have been seen as unappealing or even unsettling to some extent. Thus, the simile appears to mark deviation from aesthetic norms rather than highlight beauty.

Now, fast forward to the 21st century:

“Заглянул, увидел перепуганную Серафиму. Глаза как тарелки. Утром бабе Лизе стало плохо.” [Слава Сэ. Ева (2010)]

Translated: *“Looked in, saw a frightened Serafima. **Eyes like plates.** In the morning, Granny Liza felt ill.”*

In this more modern usage, the simile “eyes like plates” no longer seems to carry an aesthetic judgment. Instead, it functions as an emotional expression, capturing the character’s emotional state, in this case, fear and/or shock. The shared domain here is no longer strictly the physical size but rather the perceptual exaggeration of wide eyes under emotional stress.

This diachronic shift demonstrates how similes can lose their original visual-evaluative function and become expressions of emotion or psychological state, which in turn suggests that cultural and semantic meanings of figurative language can change significantly over time.

Discussion

In this section, we will discuss the interpretation of the results above.

It can be observed that eyes and cheeks are the most aestheticized features among the six chosen for this study. In contrast, the nose is the only feature that is criticized in 100% of the cases, leading us to speculate that the nose cannot be perceived as beautiful. Instead, it can only be average or acceptable. If it is not average, it is considered ugly and mocked; if it is average, it is simply ignored. There are also features that are split more evenly—lips, face, and hair—which are not the immediate targets of beautification but rather secondary ones.

Regarding source domains, an interesting but previously discussed finding is that natural domains are predominantly associated with positive similes. Examples include “lips like rose petals,” “hair like rye,” and “eyes like the sea.” Many of these domains symbolize purity, smoothness, health, color, warmth, lightness, and value. In contrast, man-made objects are more often associated with ugliness, triviality, roughness, coarseness, decay, and generally unpleasant imagery. This illustrates how concepts of beauty and ugliness are metaphorically constructed using primarily opposing domains. These mappings may reinforce an implicit bias toward

associating beauty with naturalness and moral purity, while associating artificiality with decay or deception.

Metaphorical imagery also reveals gendered tendencies. Feminine beauty is frequently framed in terms of flowers, fruits, and gentle colors. For instance, a woman might be described with “eyes like cherries” or a wreath of “carnations” in her gaze. These similes emphasize delicacy and softness—qualities that align with traditional ideals of female beauty. By contrast, masculine “beauty” similes (though rarer) tend to draw on starker or more prestigious images. In one novelistic description, a man’s eyes are “like emeralds,” which is a jewel metaphor that conveys strength and preciousness. Another male example uses “eyes like cherries” as well, suggesting that some metaphors (cherries, lakes) are shared. However, women more frequently receive natural, nurturing metaphors (flowers, fruits, soft colors), while men’s appearances may be likened to jewels or dynamic phenomena. This pattern echoes Muszyńska-Wolny and others’ observations that Slavic languages often reserve floral and fruit imagery for feminine beauty. Gendered patterns also appear in context: a kindly wife is praised as “очень хорошенькая: eyes like cherries,” whereas a male figure’s beauty is noted in conjunction with vigor (emerald eyes, martial mustache). These contrasts suggest that Russian similes, like many cross-cultural beauty metaphors, encode subtle gender norms in their choice of source domains.

Another noteworthy point is that some Russian similes exhibit semantic shifts over time. Notably, the phrase “глаза как тарелки” (‘eyes like plates’) in our data consistently indicates fear or astonishment. This figurative meaning persists in modern usage as a cliché for wide-eyed shock. These changes reflect broader shifts in aesthetic sensibility. As Kövecses discusses, the dominance of metaphorical mappings can wax or wane culturally. What was once an expression

of mockery may shift semantically to express emotional reactions. This example alone suggests that Russian ugliness similes have undergone natural semantic evolution.

Some emotional expressions were also found in the data, most of which center on the eyes. This observation supports the idea that in Russian culture, eyes are not only aestheticized but also viewed as mirrors of the soul. As the Russian saying goes, “Глаза — зеркало души,” translated as “Eyes (are) a mirror to (one’s) soul” (translated by me). It is also notable that the most frequently expressed emotions through these similes include fear (coals), aggression (fire), excitement (flash), surprise (plates), happiness (sparks), curiosity (windows—affectionately), and emotional coldness or absence (glass, stone), with at least two examples for each.

One more overarching observation is that color is the only shared domain mostly associated with positive similes, while shape and size are mocked in nearly 80% of cases. This may suggest that human appearance is often criticized based on shape and size—not only in specific features but in overall form.

Notably, there is a tendency to compare masculine beauty to feminine beauty, as seen in examples like “He is beautiful like a girl,” which appears four times in the dataset. In contrast, there are no instances of feminine beauty being compared to masculine. This suggests that in the Russian worldview, the standard or definition of beauty is inherently feminine.

Finally, it is worth noting that when a person’s overall beauty, not just individual features, is compared to something else, it is most often compared to other people. This trend holds regardless of gender, as shown in Table 2. This may indicate that beauty ideals are imagined through particular images of people or through typical features of other groups. In essence, beauty is subjective and relative. What one person finds attractive may not appeal to another. For

example, “She is as beautiful as an Italian girl” reveals that the speaker has a particular appreciation for features associated with Italian women.

Limitations of this study

As mentioned in the introduction, this study was originally meant to be a cross-cultural comparative analysis of beauty ideals and ugliness through similes. However, we were faced with some difficulties and obstacles, namely the difference in size of the corpora and the morphosyntactic differences.

The Kazakh language is by nature agglutinative, meaning it modifies the semantic meaning of the word by attaching affixes to the root, whereas the Russian language has an inflectional (fusional) nature. This complicates the search for similes, since in Russian we have a stable, commonly used comparative structure of “target domain + как + source domain,” where “как” is equivalent to the English “like/as.” However, in Kazakh, the most common comparative structure would be “target domain-ACC + source domain-COMP.” The main problem here is the search strategy for the Kazakh data, as the agglutinative nature of the language means that the forms vary more widely, making consistent and reliable retrieval difficult. Some similes may also appear in poetic or idiomatic forms that cannot be captured with standard search patterns.

The second big limitation is the size of the Kazakh corpora. As was mentioned before, the Russian National Corpus, particularly the main category, contains more than 380 million lexemes; whereas the Almaty corpus, a.k.a. NCKL (The National Corpus of Kazakh Language), has just above 20 million. Even if the data collection process for the Kazakh language went smoothly, this would still have created a major limitation to the findings, as the amount of data is significantly smaller, which reduces the representativeness and makes it harder to identify recurring patterns.

Some of the other limitations of this study are the small sample size (only 6 body parts and 2 searches of “beautiful as...”), which can limit the scope of the analysis. With a broader range of search terms or metaphorical domains (e.g., voice, skin, behavior, “ugly as...”), a more comprehensive picture of beauty and ugliness in both languages could have been provided.

Lastly, it is important to mention that time constraints during the search, as well as factors such as gender, age, and genre of the texts collected, were not taken into account, which may have affected the results of the study.

Directions for Future Research

Taking into account the limitations mentioned above and the overall time constraint for this project, a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural implications of beauty and ugliness could have been achieved. Moreover, to build upon this research, a cross-cultural comparative study can be done with either (a) the development of a more refined and effective search strategy for agglutinative languages or (b) a cross-cultural study involving other inflectional languages such as Spanish, French, or German.

For future research, it would also be more useful if the discourse analytical methods were improved and applied to such studies, perhaps incorporating more qualitative or ethnographic approaches to better capture cultural nuance. Additionally, expanding the range of body parts, source domains, and evaluative adjectives could lead to richer semantic and cultural insights. Including metadata such as genre, speaker gender, and age in corpus searches could further enhance the interpretive depth of the findings. Finally, longitudinal studies or historical corpora could shed light on how beauty ideals evolve over time within each culture.

Conclusion

This study attempts to reveal how figurative language, particularly similes, play a powerful role in encoding cultural perceptions of beauty and ugliness in relation to specific facial features. Among all body parts analyzed, eyes stood out as the most emotionally and aesthetically loaded domain. They showed themselves to be rich in both positive and negative associations, where similes involving eyes not only praised their color with celestial and natural imagery but also clearly conveyed various intense emotional states, e.g., fear and anger. This dual function affirms the idea that the eyes are central to both aesthetic judgment and emotional expression.

In contrast, hair was actually more often than not evaluated through texture and color. Here beauty was linked to brightness and smoothness, while ugliness was associated with roughness and messiness. This in turn suggests cultural ideals that are tied to grooming, purity, and order. Similes about the face revealed a tendency towards humor and ridicule, especially when talking about the shape. This enforces the idea of cultural sensitivities around symmetry and proportionality. The nose emerged as a uniquely and highly stigmatized feature, with all 18 examples being negative. All the examples were mocking its size, shape, and color, often using earthy or coarse imagery, which suggests a strong cultural belief around what constitutes a "normal" and acceptable nose.

On the contrary, it seems cheeks were overwhelmingly praised, with food-related imagery symbolizing a healthy, youthful, and warm associations, an embodiment of vitality and femininity. Meanwhile, lips showed a perfectly balanced dichotomy between beauty and grotesqueness, where both the color and size served as key markers of desirability or excess.

Together, these patterns illustrate how metaphorical and embodied thinking intersects with social ideals of physical appearance. Beauty is not just an abstract aesthetic value, but it is often grounded in more or less tangible, culturally recognizable objects (for example, food, nature, color, and shape). Data showed that they carry emotional and moral weight in the Russian cultural context as well. This analysis not only attempts to shed light on linguistic creativity but also reflects deeper cultural values regarding the human body, gender norms, and emotional expression. It tries to offer a meaningful starting point for further future exploration into how language both reflects and reinforces societal standards of beauty and ugliness across different cultures.

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