

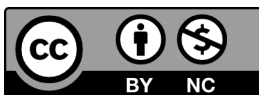
The Cognitive Role of Beauty: How Subjective Agency Transcends Cultural Frameworks

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Abstract: This paper challenges the traditional paradigm that cultural frameworks restrain aesthetic production and reinterprets Auguste Rodin's claim to the individual's proactively subjective agency of beauty in the material world. Besides, as cognitive capacity serves as the mediator between individuals and the material world, which empowers individuals' subjective agency to play its central cognitive roles, namely, explore, incorporate, and refine the aesthetic elements from the outside world, thereby generating aesthetic language. Furthermore, although the limiting role of cultural frameworks, such as formulating aesthetic norms, individuals can liberate themselves in building beauty. Meanwhile, the frontier of culture can extend according to the generative role of subjective agency. Hence, through analysis of aesthetic linguistic production, this paper employs a cognitive linguistic framework—drawing on construal, categorization, and conceptual blending—initially to elucidate how subjective agency in yielding aesthetic expressions, then to delineate how cultural frameworks constrain aesthetic Cognition, and ultimately to demonstrate how these three mechanisms become methodological toolkits for transcending those very constraints. Consequently, this paper's central thesis is that subjective agency is the crucial catalyst to foster the expansion and dynamic evolution of cultural aesthetics itself, thereby bypassing and expanding cultural boundaries. Then, this paper has proved that beauty is not a pre-existing entity to be explored, but a dynamic product co-constructed by the individuals whose subjective agency is able to see, challenge, and innovate.

Keywords: Aesthetic Exploration; Prototype Theories; Idealized Cognitive Model; Cultural Cognitive Linguistics



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1 Introduction

Auguste Rodin once alleged that beauty is ubiquitous but only needs a pair of eyes to find it, which underscores the rule of individual subjective agency in passively finding beauty in the outside world. However, this statement neglected a phenomenon that the function of humankind lies in its subjective agency, which allows it to create manifold aesthetic language and concepts that do not exist in the world. For a long time, according to Chen's (2008) discussion, numerous

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scholars have debated the relationship between individuals and the aesthetic concepts, namely the dichotomy between empiricism and rationalism. Hence, the proponents of empiricism have explored the objective features of beauty, while the proponents of rationalism have highlighted the decision features of human faculties and attributes to the beauty. Consequently, they have all neglected the interplay between humankind and the material world. In this light, this paper decides to examine the function of human subjective agency in the aesthetic concepts.

Moreover, Cognition serves as the essential bridge to material outside and the individual's inner world, which offers the methodology to research their deep relationship. Meanwhile, as the functional cognitive operations have been proposed by cognitive linguists, such as the construal operations (Langacker, 1999), the idealized cognitive model (ICMs) (Lakoff, 1987), and blending theory (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002), all have offered a powerful framework for this investigation. From construal operations, the various beauties stem from individuals' perspective selections. The dynamic role of ICMs provides a path to survey the formation and extension of aesthetic paradigms. Ultimately, conceptual blending theory paves the way for the generation of emerging aesthetic language.

In this circumstance, adopting the cognitive linguistic framework, this paper selects the aesthetic language as the object to demonstrate the function of subjective agency in seeking, organizing, and refining the aesthetic concepts; moreover, in producing beautiful types according to Part Three. Additionally, cultural factors play a vital role in the cognitive process. Therefore, in this analysis, the inhibiting factors of cultural frameworks for this aesthetic innovation cannot be overlooked, based on the discussion of Wen (2024, 2025) in Part Four. However, as subjects of human beings, numerous studies have proved that individuals are able to generate novel aesthetic language beyond the limitations of cultural frameworks. This mutual collaborative pathway enables individuals to reconceptualize subjective agency—from an abstract philosophical notion into an operationalizable model rooted in cognitive linguistics. Ultimately, the paper positions subjective agency as the significant catalyst in the dynamic evolution of cultural aesthetics.

Meanwhile, in this practice, the findings of this study have transcended the philosophical debate and provided a cognitive-based and operational explanatory model for aesthetic production. Meanwhile, the application of cognitive linguistic mechanisms has also gained enrichment, echoing many cognitive linguists' assertions of the universal utilization of cognitive operations.

2 The Role of Subjective Agency in the Construction of Diverse Beauty

The construction of beauty has long been debated between objectivist traditions (e.g., Kant's universal aesthetics) and subjectivist approaches (e.g., Bourdieu's cultural arbitrariness). This paper navigates beyond this dichotomy by proposing a cognitive agency framework, where subjective agency operates not as a passive receiver but as an active co-constructor of beauty through three core mechanisms: multimodal construal, prototype reconstruction, and conceptual blending. This aligns with Rodin's claim while extending it through Langacker's (1999) dynamic cognition construal, Rosch and Lakoff's prototype theory, and Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) blending theory.

2.1 The Discovery of Beauty: Construal as Multifaceted Perception

Significantly, construal operations serve as the starting point to cognitive production, which provides original resources to the following-up mechanisms. Additionally, the construal operation embodies subjective agency.

Meanwhile, beauty can be explored through construal operations. From Langacker (1999), construal enables people to conceive and portray the same situation (the same kind of beauty) in alternate ways through perspectives, specificity, and different mental scanning. To interpret the beauty, the perspective plays a significant role, which includes a presumed vantage point and a variety of other factors pertaining to the viewing circumstances. Therefore, drawing on various perspectives, people assign differential salience to the identical beauty, thereby shaping their understanding and articulation of the concrete beauty. For instance, for the beauty of the spring rain, a farmer may hold that “the spring rain is as precious as oil,” highlighting its function for crops. However, a poem may express that “a curtain of silver threads dissolves into perfume,” stressing its appreciating function. In this circumstance, people can understand the beautiful landscapes from diverse perspectives, thereby gaining a multifaceted sense of beauty. Inversely, this concept promotes individuals to find beauty everywhere.

2.2 The Organization of Beauty: Categorization as Prototype Reconstruction

Based on the outcomes from construal, the function of categorization is to manage them. In this light, categorization enables the cognitive organization of perceived aesthetic diversity. Then, it empowers individuals to build a personalized beauty category through their outcomes. According to prototype theory (Rosch, 1978; Lakoff, 1987), categories are not defined by fixed boundaries but by prototypical members, the Idealized Cognitive Model (ICM), and the graded structures. In this circumstance, individuals could forge the ICM of the beauty, for instance, their own definition of beauty. Then, based on the ICM of beauty, they can identify the prototypical member for the beauty category. In addition, as they cognize the novel sort of beauty, any attributes in this one that correspond to their prototype can become members of the category. Besides, as the ICM is dynamic, each individual’s prototype may be changed. For example, regarding the beautiful scene, one’s prototype may be verdant grassland, while others may be the quiet mountain. However, their concept of beauty is dynamic and changeable, which allows them to perceive more beautiful scenes everywhere to expand their category of beauty. Hence, the reconstructed aesthetic prototype serves as a springboard for creative generation, propelling the conceptual integration process.

2.3 The Creation of Beauty: Conceptual Integration as Aesthetic Innovation

After attaining the cognitive resources from construal and categorization, the formation of new types of beauty often arises from the blending of distinct mental spaces, a process described by conceptual integration theory (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). Therefore, individuals selectively combine elements from existing domains of beauty with other domains to produce novel concepts about beauty. Hence, according to these two input spaces, individuals can produce the emergent structure in the blending space. In this light, people can produce manifold new beautiful expressions from this operation. To illustrate, by combining the category of aesthetic concept (Input Space One) with contemporary pandemic-related situation and sentiment (Input Space Two), they generate a new and beautiful expression of “健康红码处，落日楼头，断鸿声里 (Quarantined by a red code, I stand lonely at sunset in balcony, with listening to the lament of a bird),” due to the identical meaning of desolation in generic space. In this generative process, the Input Space one is the aesthetic concepts from the Song Dynasty, which includes “落日” symbolizing the passing of lives, “断鸿声里” symbolizing loneliness, and the unique *Ci* rhythmic. Additionally, the Input Space Two is the contemporary sentiments from the COVID-19 pandemic: the red code stands for the limitation of daily action. Therefore, this emergent structure repurposes the ancient aesthetic concepts and illustrates how conceptual integration yields new,

aesthetic language, thereby expanding the beauty in the objective world.

3 Cultural Constraints on the Cognitive Making of Beauty

An individual's cognitive processes are fundamentally shaped by cultural frameworks, as demonstrated by Lakoff's (1987) theory of idealized cognitive models (ICMs) and Langacker's (1999) cultural-embedded cognition framework. Building on these foundations, cultural cognitive linguistics—particularly Wen's (2024, 2025) systematic theorization in the Chinese academic context—reveals three key mechanisms through which cultural frameworks shape collective aesthetic Cognition: the cultural patterning of preference perspective tendency in construal operations, the normative reconstruction of aesthetic prototypes via ICMs, and the regulatory impediment of culturally dissonant conceptual integration.

3.1 Cultural Constraints on the Unification of Construal Perspective

Culture serves as a pivotal member of individuals' cognitive processes according to Talmy (2000). Hence, culture will influence these three processes of beauty. Initially, culture may impact the selection of perspectives in the construal. In this circumstance, people would tend to appreciate a single type of beauty. For instance, Hofstede (2011) pointed out that the East and West possess multiple differences concerning individualism-collectivism. Aligning with distinction, in the process of decoding aesthetic occasions, individuals from Eastern and Western countries adopt different perspectives. The research has found, according to Wen (2025), in the background of Eastern culture, participants tend to utilize holistic attention. Inversely, in the background of Western culture, participants tend to leverage analytic attention. In this light, Chinese individuals prioritize holistic construal to highlight compositional harmony; for instance, “mountain and water painting” creates an outline of the whole landscape. In contrast, American ones employ analytic construal, emphasizing focal elements, for example, “the portrait painting” is exquisite, whose main role is obvious. Consequently, rooted in cultural frameworks, aesthetic perception becomes cognitively entrenched, limiting access to alternative construal pathways (Langacker, 1999) and ultimately homogenizing aesthetic diversity.

3.2 Cultural Constraints on the Prototypes Selection in Categorization

Moreover, when construal operations yield homogenized outputs (due to cultural patterning), they inevitably restrict the categorization. Meanwhile, the formation of ICM is culture-dependent, operating as a cognitive filter that prioritizes culturally salient features (Wen, 2025). For example, there is a difference in relative-relationship categorization in different cultures, as Lakoff (1987) notes. The ICM would diversify across countries and societies, not only in content but in their very structure—collectivist cultures tend to embed prototypes within relational networks (e.g., harmony between objects). In contrast, individualist cultures emphasize autonomous representation (e.g., transcend scenes). This dual shift: cultural construal and ICM variation dynamically reshape categorization. For instance, in the aesthetic subcategory, the natural beauty, Eastern and Western individuals may adopt various prototypes. A Chinese individual may express “大漠孤烟直 (in boundless desert lonely smokes rise straight),” based on the character of harmony in their ICMs, which delineates the whole and magnificent scene in the desert, thereby corresponding to their aesthetic appetites. Inversely, an American may utilize “the golden sunset glow bathes the wheat fields,” based on the character

of transcendental individualism in their ICMs, highlighting a representative moment of sublime conquest over nature. Hence, cultural frameworks may impede individuals from including more aesthetic members in the categorization, and the prototype may change slowly.

3.3 Cultural Constraints on Conceptual Combination in Blending Theory

Furthermore, several features in cultural frameworks may restrict people from producing creative expressions through construal integration. Although the default assumption in conceptual blending theory allows for unconstrained cross-space mappings, empirical evidence reveals that culturally entrenched ICMs (Lakoff, 1987) act as selective filters, inhibiting cognitively possible but culturally prohibited blends. As Wen (2025) explicitly stressed, “cultural frameworks function as cognitive thresholds that systematically exclude blends violating culturally sacred symbolic boundaries” (e.g., the diametrically exclusive between Water and Fire in Chinese Yin and Yang cosmology) For instance, in Chinese aesthetics, the “凤 (phoenix)” is composed by Fire, representing Yang energy, while 雪 (snow) is constituted by Water, labeling Yin essence. Despite both being archetypes of beauty, the characters can cooperate through blending theory and forge an aesthetic compound “凤雪 (phoenix-snow).” However, this process is culturally prohibited by the Yin and Yang Five Elements cosmology, which frames Fire (phoenix) and Water (snow) as destructive opposites. Consequently, these cross-cultural prohibitions exemplify how cultural frameworks exert mandatory constraints on conceptual integration, privileging ideological coherence over creating possibility (Wen, 2025), thereby limiting aesthetic production through cognitive filtering.

4 Agency Over Structure: Subjective Creativity Transcends Cultural Frameworks

To sum up, the analysis of Part Three has unveiled the cognitive cornerstone of subjective agency, which constitutes the cognitive tools of personal aesthetic generation. Besides, the founding of Part Four has demonstrated the opposite landscapes that cultural frameworks show their extreme structural restrictions, thereby setting up an untangleable boundary for the aesthetic production. In this context, a radical theoretical dilemma has emerged: on one hand, the force of agency allows individuals to embrace the multifaceted aesthetic concepts. On the other hand, cultural frameworks exert their structuring force to unify specific aesthetic patterns across different cultures. Hence, this part will explore the deep mechanism of subjective agency in creating novel aesthetic concepts through three cognitive mechanisms to present that subjective agency does not merely breed new sorts within the cultural frameworks. However, it can transform this framework from shackles of aesthetic production into springboards for innovative practice.

4.1 The Innovation of Perspective Selections in Construal

Individuals determine the perspective adoptions in construal processes through Langacker’s (1999) definition of construal. In his view, individuals can express the same occasions through alternative ways, thereby articulating different languages. In daily circumstances, individuals find it harder to speak an identical utterance to another one, illustrating how subjective agency empowers people to liberate themselves from cultural restrictions. For instance, the famous Chinese poetry of Song ci “枯藤老树昏鸦 (Withered vines, old trees, twilight crows)” serves as a case study in how a

conscious shift of focal perspective occurs, where it forces salience onto stark, independent entities in nature. Therefore, this phrase embraces prodigious value in cognitive linguistics, which lies in the composition of fragmented parts against the cultural preference: the holistic perspectives. Rather than receiving the refusal from Chinese individuals, this poem is regarded as a member of the aesthetic expression category for them, demonstrating that individuals can transcend the boundaries of culture and create more aesthetic expression. In this process, cultural boundary also attains an expanding, echoing Wen's (2024) conception of the dynamic feature of culture.

4.2 The Reconstruction of Prototypes in Categorization

Through the discussion from the former parts of 2.2 and 3.2, during the categorization, the ICMs serve as a significant participant in the formation of categorization. Lacroff (1987) holds that individuals build ICMs from their comprehension of the world. Amid this process, individuals would be influenced by cultural frameworks. In this circumstance, individuals reconstruct their category of beauty according to their subjective agency. The history of Chinese classical literature has demonstrated this concept through the representative genres in each dynasty of Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing. Commonly, the representative genres of the Tang and Song dynasties are the poem and *Ci*, which emphasize beautiful rhythm, concise language, and profound meaning. Consequently, although they have suffered the impact of culture, the individuals in these dynasties would build their ICMs of literature based on these features, collective cultural impacts. However, the Qing dynasty witnessed the emergence of scholars adopting the novel, the marginal members in the literature category, as a vehicle for literary expression. Proved by the time, this literary form became an emblematic signature of the period. As evidenced by *Dream of the Red Chamber*, it has become a perennial subject of scholarly inquiry. Hence, this transition from the poetic excellence of the Tang and Song dynasties to the narrative mastery of the Qing novel—all achieving monumental success and now enshrined as cherished members of the Chinese people's category of beautiful literature—is ultimately a testament to human subjective agency. In this light, the Chinese individuals' ICM of literature has been expanded and enriched, which leads to the shift of their prototypes, illustrating how subjective agency sheds the restraints of culture and reshapes individuals' aesthetic category.

4.3 The Innovation of New Expression for Culturally Incompatible Concepts Blending

Blending theory serves as the pivotal operation to navigate individuals to create new expressions, which has been discussed in 2.3. The emergent structure produced by this operation demonstrates the function of human subjective agency in enriching linguistic expression. Hence, aligning with this ability, individuals can also transcend the shackles of cultural frameworks, thereby offering more meaningful expressions to the world. The aesthetic compound of 空灵 (emptiness-spirit) exemplifies how this transformative force breaks the cultural limitations. In the Chinese historical context, the concept of “空 (emptiness)” signifies boundless potential, silent stillness, and the Daoist ideal of non-being. At the same time, “灵 (spirit)” denotes vibrant vitality, numinous essence, and the immanent life force (气) that animates all things. Culturally, the in-depth meaning of the two characters holds oppositional principles.

Nevertheless, blending theory empowers them to combine. The achievement of their conceptual integration of the emergent structure “空灵 (emptiness-spirit)” is not only culturally received. Furthermore, this compound is utilized in diverse aesthetic aspects, thereby becoming a symbolic Chinese-style word. This successful combination has demonstrated how agency can exploit cultural principles to yield revolutionary novel concepts.

5 Conclusion

This paper attempted to critically reconsider Rodin's claims of the passive discovery of beauty, which unveils a traditional deadlock of aesthetic concepts between empiricism and rationalism. Beyond this dichotomy, this study proposes a paradigm through another perspective: the beauty that is the dynamic and generative cognitive process, rather than the static and pre-existing object waiting for individuals to find.

By utilizing mechanisms of cognitive linguistics, this paper has examined how the core role of subjective agency serves as the crucial catalyst in propelling the dynamic evolution and inner expansion of the cultural-aesthetic system. Hence, the interplay through the generative force of the three methods: construal in multiple perspective choices, categorization for organizing fragmentary aesthetic sentiments, and blending theory for the creation. Consequently, as the strategic implementation of these mechanisms, individuals not only negotiate the cultural limitations. Moreover, it also positively fosters the inner expansion and dynamic enhancement of the cultural aesthetic system. In this light, cognitive linguistics provided a tangible and concrete mental pathway about how the power of agency influences the cultural-aesthetic system.

In further studies, their objectives should focus on empirical research (e.g., a neuroaesthetic experiment) to validate the aesthetic experience in the real context. Besides, in the cross-cultural area, the translation should also pay more attention to the analysis of aesthetic shift through different cultures according to cognitive linguistics. Due to the translator's subjective agency, they can produce more aesthetic language through the combination of diverse cultures.

Ultimately, the aesthetic generation never ceases, which is grounded in human fundamental cognitive structures. Thereby, holding the delicate force of subjective agency, individuals can create and re-create more aesthetic concepts in the world.

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