

# Using Proverbs to Explore Intergenerational Relations Across Cultures

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According to the standard dictionary definition, a “proverb” is “a short saying in common use that strikingly expresses some obvious truth or familiar experience” (Guralnik and Solomon 1980:1144). The condensed nature of proverbs allows them to be interpreted again and again, across time and in different situations. They are interesting because they not only tap into universal themes in the human condition, such as the physiological rhythms of the human life cycle, but they also vary in ways that appear to reflect specific cultural differences. In the home and in other community settings alike, proverbs are used to pass on rich cultural traditions, to transmit folklore, and to communicate expected codes of behavior.

The focus of the “What is Age?” poster that was displayed at the Indigenous Knowledges Conference is how proverbs can be used to enhance our understanding about intergenerational relations in various cultural frameworks. This poster originally was developed to supplement a Penn State University Cooperation Extension Web-based curriculum entitled *Proverbs to Promote Understanding Across Generations and Cultures*. The target population for this outreach initiative was Extension educators and other professionals interested in working with children, youth, and adults to facilitate awareness of age- and culture-related stereotypes and to stimulate critical thinking about the intergenerational and cross-cultural relationships in people’s lives. The curriculum package includes five activity modules (each drawing upon proverbs from different parts of the world), a series of overheads (22 pages), a marketing card, and the “What is Age” poster (Kaplan, Ingram, and Mincemoyer 2001).

The idea for the proverbs curriculum came from a 1999 study of proverbs about the aging process and patterns of intergenerational relations. This study, which is described below, consisted of a survey conducted with students and faculty at Hawaii Pacific University. Respondents, all of whom were bilingual, were asked to list sayings that reflect cultural values and beliefs related to:

- the aging process,
- views about elderly people, and
- patterns of communication between people of different generations.

In addition to writing out the sayings and phrases they could recall in their native languages, respondents were asked to provide English translations and write comments about the cultural, philosophical, and historical significance of the proverbs they shared. Research team members (consisting of the author and three undergraduate research assistants) also searched for proverbs in languages other than English in books, articles, and websites. (For a more detailed report about the study presented below, see Kaplan 2002).

## Survey Results

**Characteristics of survey sample:** Surveys were returned by 117 respondents, each of whom was fluent in a language other than English. In the surveys that were completed and content analyzed, twenty-six different languages were represented. Since the number of responses in each language was too small to enable meaningful statistical analyses to be conducted, the languages were recategorized into four main language groups: Asian (N=80, 67.8%), Pacific Island (N=13, 11%), Western European (N=20, 16.9%), and Eastern European (N=5, 4.2%).

Languages that were categorized as **Asian** include: Cantonese (3), Tegalo and Ilicano (Philippines, 7), Indonesian (3), Japanese (27), Korean (5), Mandarin (30), Thai (2), Vietnamese (2), Indian (1), and Malay (1). **Pacific Island** languages included: Hawaiian (4), Tongan (4), and Chamuro (indigenous language of Guam, 3). **Western European** languages included: German (3), Italian (1), French (1), Swedish (6), Spanish (3), Portuguese (4), Finnish (1), and Icelandic (1). **Eastern European** languages included: Hungarian (1), Romanian (1), Slovak (1), Croatian (1), and Serbian (1).<sup>1</sup>

The asymmetrical nature of this data set, in terms of the high proportion of respondents speaking Asian and Pacific Island languages, is in part an artifact of the location in which the survey was distributed (an international university in Hawaii).

The age of the respondents ranged from 17 to 73, with 84.1% fitting into the age range of 17 to 30. In terms of gender, 42 (35.9%) of the respondents were male, and 70 (59.8%) were female; gender information was not provided by five respondents (4.2%).

**Views about the elderly and the aging process:** In investigating how older adults and the aging process were characterized in the proverbs and phrases found in different languages, the following basic themes were identified:

- There appear to be more positive than negative characterizations.
- For many of the languages that were considered, there is a juxtaposition of sayings that reflect strikingly positive views toward the elderly and sayings that reflect strikingly negative views.
- Characterizations of the elderly and the aging process are rich and varied and draw upon a wide range of metaphors, including those tied to the natural environment, animals, and food.

When conducting a content analysis (chi-square analysis) to compare survey responses of a combined Asian and Pacific Island languages group to those of a combined European languages group, no significant differences were found. Furthermore, the themes noted above appear to cut across many of the languages that were considered.

As a group, survey respondents provided more than twice as many sayings that convey positive views about elderly people than sayings that convey negative views: 83 of the 117 sayings provided about the elderly (70.9%) were positive, and 37 (31.6%) were negative. Survey responses that indicated positive conceptions about elderly people tended to emphasize the themes of “deserved enjoyment” (N=36), “wisdom/experience” (N=26), “respect” (N=11), “elevated status” (N=6), and “empowerment” (N=4). Sayings conveying negative conceptions about the elderly tended to emphasize themes of “increased dependency” (N=8), “closed mindedness” (N=8), “diminished prestige” (N=7), “social awkwardness” (N=4), and

“inevitable death” (N=4).

Similarly, in terms of the 83 proverbs that respondents provided to characterize the “aging process,” most emphasized positive aspects such as the “improvement of skills” (N=41) and the “natural process” of aging (N=23). Sayings that provide more pessimistic appraisals of the aging process tended to emphasize “deterioration and decline” (N=16) and the “unflattering nature of physical change” (N=3). Some examples of proverbs fitting into these response categories are presented below.

Many of the proverbs reflect views about elderly people that are strikingly positive and hopeful. One theme is the characterization of old age as a time of enjoyment:

- **Italian** [survey]: “*La pensione e la seconda giovinezza.*” [“Retirement is like a second childhood.”]
- **Japanese** [survey]: “*Dai ni no jinsei.*” [“The second life.”] (Respondent’s comments: “They [can now] have fun for themselves.”)

The following sayings convey the notion that along with old age comes a greater level of wisdom and life experience:

- **Romanian** [survey]: “*Batrineuea aduce multa iscusinua.*” [“The older you get the more knowledgeable you are.”]
- **Spanish** [survey]: “*Mas sabe el diablo por viejo que por diablo.*” [“The devil knows more because he’s old than because he’s the devil.”] (Respondent’s comments: “It makes you remember that old people have a lot of knowledge.”)
- **Chinese** [survey]: “*Wo chi guo de yian bi ni chi guo de fuan hai duo.*” [“I have eaten more salt than you have eaten rice.”] (Respondent’s comments: “It’s like saying, ‘I am old enough to have more knowledge and experience than you.’”)

Sayings and phrases also were found that reflect the negative experiences often associated with aging and old age, although these sayings were not as prevalent as those reflecting positive views. The following sayings reflect images of loneliness, vulnerability, and struggle:

- **Swedish**: “*Unga lever sina liv i flock, vuxna i par, och gamla ensam.*” [“Youth goes in a flock, manhood in pairs, and old age alone”] (Mieder 1986:558).
- **Hawaiian** [survey]: “*Elemakule kama ‘ole moe I ke ala.*” [“An oldster who has never reared children sleeps by the roadside.”]
- **Hebrew**: “*Youth is a garland of roses; age is a crown of thorns.*” (Christy 1888:20).

The following sayings expound on the “deterioration and decline” theme:

- **German** [survey]: “*Wer rastet der rostet.*” [“The person who rests will rust.”]
- **French**: “*Un homme est aussi vieux que ses arteres.*” [“A man is as old as his arteries.”] (Davidoff 1946:8).
- **Chinese (Mandarin)** [Survey]: “*Sheng lau bing si.*” [“Born, old, sick, die.”]

There appeared to be a pattern of substantial “within language” variance in terms of how elderly people are categorized; very positive and very negative statements about aging and the aged were found within each of several of the target languages. The pairs of proverbs

presented below in Italian, Spanish, Lebanese, Swedish, and Korean reflect this juxtaposition:

- **Italian:**  
(pos.) “*Onorate il senno antio.*” [“Age commands respect.”] (Jones 1963:445).  
(neg.) [survey] “*L’invecchiamento e come ferro alla pioggia-arnugginisce.*” [“The aging process is like a piece of iron in the rain. It gets rusty.”]
- **Spanish:**  
(pos.) “*Dichos de los viejitos son evangelios chiquitos.*” [“The sayings of our elders should be taken as gospel.”] (Burciaga 1997:ix).  
(neg.) [survey] “*Eres un carroza.*” [“You are such a carriage.”] (Respondent’s comments: “‘Carriage’ in this saying refers to the old vehicles used in the past.”)
- **Arabic (Lebanese):**  
(pos.) “*He who has not any old man [in his household], let him buy one.*” [“An old man in a family is a fount of wisdom and right counsel.”] (Freyha 1974:117).  
(neg.) “*A man of sixty is only good for slaughtering.*” [“Slaughtering” is translated literally as “for the knife.”] (Also in Freyha 1974:9).
- **Swedish** [surveys]:  
(pos.) “*Gammal ar vis.*” [“Old is wise.”] (Respondent’s comments: “You gain wisdom with the years.”)  
(neg.) “*Den gra maffian.*” [“The grey mafia.”] (Respondent’s comments: “There is a perception that many old people only care about getting their pension and saving money on rebates.”)
- **Korean** [surveys]:  
(pos.) “*Yaeshun sal yi dueltae insaeng yi shijhak duerp ni da.*” [“Life begins when you are sixty.”] (Respondent’s comments: “We have a special way to count years. The same year comes back after every 60 years.”)  
(neg.) “*Nhulghumyun jook au yah hahnda.*” [“If I get old, I have to die!”]

Consistent with this theme of duality, there appears to be a broad range of conceptions in the literature that examines how age and aging are portrayed in other languages as well. In the English language, for example, there are popular sayings in praise of the virtues of senior adults, such as “The older the wiser,” as well as those which degrade the elderly, such as “Out to pasture.” (By presenting a metaphor of racehorses that no longer race, this last saying associates retirement with idleness.)

In the United States, such a juxtaposition of perspectives is supported by studies into the nature and range of the stereotypes held about older adults. These indicate that there are mixed perceptions or, as described by Hummert et al. (1994), “multiple stereotypes.” In his study of the history of terms used in the English language to represent old people, aging, and the effects of aging, Covey (1988:292) states: “Terms applied to old age range the full gamut of positive to negative connotations. The negative and positive terminology that has coexisted throughout history represents a duality of perception of the old.” Covey further contends that the words used to characterize the elderly change over time as a function of socioeconomic changes, changing ideology, and changes in the power and status held by elderly people.

A cursory review of Japanese words and phrases associated with old age similarly indicates multi-dimensional perceptions of aging. In Japanese, the word “kanreki,” which refers

to reaching one's sixtieth year of age,<sup>2</sup> has positive connotations. Ishii (1991:11), in referring to the longevity revolution in Japan, states:

*In Japan a 60th birthday, "kanreki," is especially celebrated because once it was rare to achieve that age.... Not only do people live well past kanreki, they remain active and fulfilled into their 70's and beyond.*

In contrast to images of senior adults as active and happy, there are certain phrases that paint a different picture of the experience of being a senior adult in Japan. Seo (1991:12) writes:

*Life after retirement for a sarariman ("salaryman" or white collar worker) is relatively unfortunate. Having dedicated heart and soul to work, after retirement they are at a loss for purpose. Some of these men are called nureochiba, "wet dead leaves," since they stick to their wives when they go out.*

From *kanreki* to *nureochiba*, such diverse characterizations of elderly people illustrate that there is no singular, unidimensional view about how well the elderly are faring in modern Japan.

**Patterns of intergenerational communication:** Of the 79 responses that were obtained that allude to patterns of intergenerational communication, the most common theme was a reference to difficulties of communication (N=30). Other response categories were "youth respect elders" (N=20), "seniors contribute" (N=11), "hierarchical (unequal) power relationships" (N=11), and "youth lack respect" (N=5). Two responses fit into an "other" category.

When comparing responses from the combined Asian and Pacific Island languages group of respondents to those provided by the combined European language group, again, no major distinctions were found.

**Difficulties associated with intergenerational relations:** A popular phrase in American society that emphasizes tension or misunderstanding between the generations is "generation gap." Several sayings and phrases were found in other languages that convey a similar sentiment about the challenges of intergenerational communication:

- **Chinese (Cantonese)** [survey]: "*Dui niao tan qin.*" ["(Intergenerational communication is like) playing music to a cow."]
- **Chinese (Mandarin)** [survey]: "*Ji tong ya jiang.*" ["(A young person talking to an older adult is like) a chicken talking to a duck."] (Respondent's comments: "Chickens and ducks are both birds, but of different species." When old and young talk to each other, they express different opinions.)
- **Indonesia:** "... *Bogain pihany dibelah dua.*" ["(Intergenerational communication is like) an areca nut divided into two."] (Respondent's comments: "There is a big gap in views and communication among the young and the old due to lack of respect and understanding of each other.")

**Positive aspects of intergenerational communication:** In contrast to the negative imagery noted above, the research group also found several prevalent statements in other languages that

convey profound concepts of intergenerational interdependence. For example, in China there is the well-known phrase:

- **Chinese** [survey]: “*Chang jiang hou lang tui qian lang, yi dai gen bi yi dai qiang.*” [“As in the Yangtse River the waves behind drive on those ahead, so each young generation should excel the last one.”] (Heng and Zhang 1988:444). There is a lot to this saying. In one sense, it is used to describe the relations between the young and the old; young people are represented by the waves in the back, pushing forward with a lot of energy and adding to the momentum of the river.
- Also in **Chinese**: “*Qian ren zai shu, hour en cheng liang.*” [“One generation plants the trees under whose shade future generations rest.”] (Heng and Zhang 1988:469).

Several sayings and commonly used phrases were found that allude to youth respect for elders:

- **India** [survey]: “*Doddawara Helikegalige sada kretagnatawagiro.*” [“Always be grateful for the advice you receive from elders.”] (Respondent’s comments: “Elders are frequently approached for advice.”)
- **Tongan** [survey]: “*Te leleva’, te ai e Polumei.*” [“When the young want to hang out with the old.”] (Respondent’s comments: “The child wants a lot of attention.... It’s an honor to be able to spend time with the elders.”)
- **Chinese (Mandarin)** [survey]: “*Jin lao ai you.*” [“Respect the elders and love the young.”] (Respondent’s comments: “[The saying] shows how in Asian cultures we value our elders.”)
- **Hawaiian** [survey]: “*Na hulu kupuna.*” [“Our precious elders.”] (Respondent’s comments: “This is a common phrase in Hawaiian that is a declaration of respect for the elderly. It reflects a tradition of respecting the power and prestige of elders.”)<sup>3</sup>

**Emphasis on family:** Many sayings emphasize family ties and responsibilities:

- **Hawaiian** [survey]: “*Ola na ‘iwi.*” [“The bones live.”] (Respondent’s comments: “Said of a respected oldster who is well cared for by his family.”)
- **Hawaiian**: “*He Keika mea kupuna.*” [“(It shows that) the child has a grandparent.”] This saying is used in admiration of a child whose grandparents show affection by making beautiful things for his use or composing songs and chants in his honor (Pukui 1983).
- **Chuuk**:<sup>4</sup> “*Aramas chok money, dramas chok angang, aramas chok mongo.*” [“When one has many relatives, he is like a chief. He can accomplish anything. He has money, work goes well, and food is provided.”]
- **Korean**: Similarly, there is the well-known saying: “*Namuae Gajiga Maneulsuruk, Duh Maneun Baramyi Bubnida.*” [“The more branches a tree has, the more winds it attracts.”] (Yong-Chol 1991:192).
- **Ilocano (Philippines)** [survey]: “*Taripatuen daguiti ubbing. Isu dan to ti nangtaripato kenca no lumakay ca.*” [“Take care of the young and they will take care of you in your old age.”]

Several sayings were found that convey a “like father, like son” theme:

- **Spanish** [survey]: “*De tal palo, tal astilla.*” [“From such a stick, such a splinter.”]
- **Japanese** [survey]: “*Kaeru no ko wa kaeru.*” [“Children of frogs are frogs.”]
- **Korean**: “*Pu chon cha chon.*” [“Father hands down, son hands down.”] (Grant 1982:19).<sup>5</sup>

Other sayings make similar reference to the importance of ancestors:

- **Hawaiian** [survey]: “*Nona i ke kumu.*” [“Look to the source.”] (Respondent’s comments: “Seek knowledge from the ancestors.”)
- **Korean**: “*An twe myon cho sang ui t’at.*” [“Blame the ancestors for failure”] (Grant 1982). This saying highlights a concept of family in which “ancestors” play an integral part.
- **Zulu**: “*Ubuntu.*” [“We are who we are today because of you who came before us.”] This sub-Saharan intergenerational concept was one of the driving themes of the Third Global Conference of the International Federation of Aging held in Durban, South Africa in October 1997 (Newman 1998).

***Distribution of power in intergenerational relationships:*** Hierarchical relations are particularly important in sayings that comment on intergenerational relationships:

- **Tongan** [Survey]: “*Lauvale.*” [“Uttering of fools.”] (Respondent’s comments: “When you are of a younger generation, you are often referred to as the ‘lauvale.’ You are from a generation that has not mastered language yet. You don’t give speeches, or become master/mistress of ceremonies.”)
- **Swedish** [survey]: “*Den or som enfloed. Den flyter nedstroms.*” [“It is like a river. It flows downstream.”] (Respondent’s comments: “The older people pass down knowledge rather than having a dialogue.”)
- **Chinese** [survey]: “*Bu ting lao ren yen, chi kui zai yan qian.*” [“If you don’t listen to older people’s suggestions, you will get into trouble.”] (Respondent’s comments: “Pay attention to elders.”)
- **Indian** (Tamil): “*An unsubmitive youth is useless.*” (Mieder 1986:558).
- **Spanish**: “*Dichos de los viejitos son evangelios chiquitos.*” [“The sayings of our elders should be taken as gospel.”] (Burciaga 1997:ix).

However, several sayings and phrases were found that reject the notion that intergenerational relationships should be hierarchical in nature:

- **Swedish** [survey]: “*Om Stenalderns barn hade lytt sina foraldrar hade vi fortfarande levat i Stenaldern.*” [“If the Stone Age children had obeyed their parents, we would still be living in the Stone Age.”] (Respondent’s comments: “Young people disobey/are rebellious.”)
- **Swedish** [survey]: “*I en familj ar kvinnan regeringen, mannen folket och bamen oppositionen.*” [“In a family, the mother is the government, the father is the people, and the kid is the opposition.”] (Respondent’s comments: “Kids disobey.”).
- **Icelandic** [survey]: “*Unglingaveiki.*” [“Teen Illness.”] (Respondent’s comments: “This word is used to describe a rebellious youth who does not respond to authority.”)

- **Japanese** [survey]: “*Oite wa ko ni shitagae.*” [“When you become old, you should obey your child.”] (Respondent’s comments: “When you become old, don’t be a hardheaded man. You should try to accept new ideas.”)

## Discussion

**Countering stereotypes:** Members of the research team originally assumed that for languages derived from traditional cultures, including cultures found in Asia and the Pacific Islands, proverbs and phrases would highlight views of aging that reflect reverence and perceived wisdom. A corollary assumption also was being tested: that for relatively new societies, such as the United States, the terminology used to describe aging would convey primarily negative stereotypical views. On both counts, we were wrong. Proverbs were found in Asian languages that reflected negative views as well as positive views toward the elderly. Furthermore, the results of this research and the literature that was consulted indicate that in the English language, terminology used to characterize the elderly neither emphasizes nor reflects unidimensionally negative stereotypes.

In a sense, the realization that there is great diversity within as well as between cultures in conceptions about age and aging is quite obvious. It would be absurd to expect there to be only one “type” of elderly people in any country. Accordingly, stereotypical notions of Western and Eastern concepts of aging are challenged in other places as well (e.g., Kleyman 2000; Giles et al. 2002).

**Intergenerational communication:** Study results suggest that there is no singular orientation for understanding the benefits of intergenerational engagement. In the United States, for example, the sense of imperative for developing intergenerational initiatives is commonly tied to concerns about patterns of age segregation and negative stereotypes associated with aging. Popular colloquialisms such as “generation gap” and “ageism” denote such perceptions. Although some of the popular phrases and sayings found in non-English-speaking countries convey similar sentiments (in regard to the difficulties associated with intergenerational communication), others were found that convey quite different notions, where the emphasis is on intergenerational interdependence and harmony.

From a Western perspective, in the context of efforts to strengthen communities and social support systems, the use of metaphors such as the waves of the Yangtze River to convey norms of intergenerational relations marked by interdependency is quite illuminating. The powerful image invoked by such a metaphor stands in contrast to the images of generational conflict that occasionally creep into American public policy debate.

## Research Considerations

There are several limitations and challenges inherent in this particular study and in language analysis in general. First, this study lacked a mechanism for corroborating the respondents’ words/phrases/sayings and the meanings ascribed to them. One such procedure would involve hiring outside “informants,” native speakers of each language, to comment upon their perceptions of cultural salience in regard to each of the proverbs provided by the respondents. Such a reexamination would be useful for filtering out idiosyncratic responses that are not reflective of socially recognized proverbs.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of age diversity in the pool of respondents. This is likely an artifact of the university setting; most of the respondents were of college age. With more age diversity, it would be possible to explore interesting questions such as how people's attitudes toward the aging process vary as a function of their age. For this reason, in structuring follow-up studies, it may be prudent to establish data collection procedures involving a variety of community institutions.

This survey of proverbs and phrases is based on the assumptions that such common collocations can help to reveal core cultural values and that the medium of language can be utilized to explore and analyze these values. Despite the limitations of the survey data set (i.e., the small sample and unbalanced regional representation) and the preliminary nature of the undertaking, this study may still have value in terms of stimulating new discussion and deeper investigation into the diverse ways in which intergenerational relations are construed.

### **Last Word**

In the home and other community settings alike, proverbs are used to pass on rich cultural traditions for transmitting folklore and communicating expected codes of behavior across generations. Alternatively, proverbs also have played prominent roles in oral traditions of resistance to dominant cultural values (Soares 1997) and political ideals (Birnbaum 1987).

Proverbs also serve as effective educational tools in the classroom. For example, Cruz and Duff (1996) discuss how selectively chosen proverbs can be used to facilitate literacy skills development and help to bridge school- and home-based learning. Schnurer (1995) notes that proverbs can be included in secondary-school curricula to promote greater intercultural tolerance and understanding.

The proverbs and phrases presented in this paper can be used to enliven formal and non-formal educational programs focused on intergenerational issues. This was the intent of the "Proverbs to Promote Understanding Across Generations and Cultures" curriculum and the "What is Age?" poster displayed at the Indigenous Knowledges: Transforming the Academy conference. The proverbs presented in these outreach education vehicles contain "lessons" related to age and aging, cultural differences and similarities, family dynamics, societal stereotypes, and intergenerational relationships. It is feasible that they may be productively drawn upon to embellish themes presented throughout an entire course on gerontology or intergenerational programs and policy study.

Moreover, many of these proverbs and phrases can serve as fun "warm-up" or "getting-to-know-you" activities for participants in intergenerational groups; facilitators can simply read selected ones aloud, one-by-one, and elicit discussion centered on participants' interpretations. In these and other ways, the proverbs can be used to heighten our sensitivity to how other people view the world and to stimulate critical thinking of our own normative frameworks and value assumptions about the aging process and intergenerational relationships.

### **Endnotes**

1. Language grouping decisions are not meant to imply uniformity in terms of religion, language characteristics, social norms, or social perceptions about how age/aging is viewed and experienced.

2. *Kan* means “to go back to the beginning” and *reki* means “calendar.” *Kanreki* literally means to go back to one’s year of the twelve signs of the Chinese zodiac; 12 times 5 equals 60, which is the kanreki year.
3. Although *kupuna* is typically translated as “elder,” its literal translation, “standing at the headwaters,” denotes status and significance.

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