

Naming Grandparents

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Introduction

When working in a European milieu one becomes aware of the problems that arise from assuming that normal terms used in English – the most common shared language for researchers – are also available and have exactly the same meanings in other languages. Amusement, frustration and gradual comprehension develop as one discovers that words and terminologies may be culturally specific. In the EU Grandparenting Network⁴ the key term of grandparenting was not one that could be translated directly into all the other languages spoken in the group. Although everyone could cooperate on the basis of a shared understanding of the English usage, nonetheless the absence of terms like grandparents or grandparenting in many languages, led to a discussion about the terminology used for grandparents, including emotional and value associations that are not necessarily shared by other cultures. A central question is whether there are regional, rural/urban, generational and social class variations in forms of address for a grandparent; if there are polite and familiar forms of address, and variations within traditional and non-traditional families. The common occurrence of complex, reconstituted families in many European countries - where step-grandparents may co-exist with the original grandparent - also led to a question about how step-grandparents are addressed; have kinship terms developed for such kinds of relationships? And finally we wanted to see if there are any common or discernible trends in the way grandparental terms are currently being used. The project gave good grounds for studying the above questions.

It is worth noting that it is the parental and grandparent generations who usually decide how a child should address their grandparent appropriately. After reaching a certain age the child and grandparent may renegotiate the particular term used.

Social anthropologists have long been intrigued by the very different ways societies name and classify kin, and while these intricate debates are not of direct interest here, it will be helpful to understand prevalent systems of addressing grandparents (Per

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⁴ EU Network – Grandparenthood and Intergenerational Relationships in Aging European Populations

Hage, 1999). Normally gender⁵, generation and descent lines provide the basic keys for labeling kin. For grandparents there are 4 basic possibilities that are found in the world societies⁶ –

- A. A simple system where all grandparents are addressed by the same term – regardless of the descent link with the grandchild. Thus both gender and type of descent are ignored (patrilineal, matrilineal, cognatic), and only the generational kinship term is available i.e. grandparent. This system was not found amongst our respondents.
- B. A system where gender and generation are recognized – though the specific descent line is ignored⁷ – thus father’s father and mother’s father are addressed using the same term - grandfather. The mother’s mother and the father’s mother are also addressed by the same term - grandmother. As is discussed below, this is the most widely found form of naming grandparents in Europe.
- C. The third is where both generation, gender and kinship descent lines are recognized – thus there are four possible terms- MM, FM, FF, MF. This is found amongst most of the Scandinavian countries.
- D. A fourth system is one which stresses descent and generation but ignores gender, e.g. where grandparents on the father’s side are called by one term, and grandparents on the mother’s side are called another. Such kinds of naming system are apparently rare and were not found amongst our mainly European respondents.

There has been considerable debate in Europe amongst anthropologists as to the significance of kinship (Goddard et al., 1994; Goody, 1999). The development of individualism, capitalism, and the decline in salience of peasant land and property ownership, led to the assumption that kinship would be less important in advanced European societies and this would be reflected in the frequency of interaction and the social significance of kin, including grandparents. High rates of occupational and residential mobility, the increasing participation of women in paid employment and higher divorce rates were seen as processes that would inevitably reduce the saliency of kinship. Sociologists (Giddens, 1990) have argued that there is considerable evidence to indicate that though the content and expectations relating to marriage and kinship have altered, they nonetheless remain critical in the identity and life course of the individual even though they are more reflexive and negotiable. Individualism, relating to ideas of choice and personal life courses, means that in modern societies people can choose the degree to which they relate to their kin, including grandparents. While greater longevity, especially in Europe over the past four decades, suggests a greater probability of grandparents being alive, individualism implies that people can exercise choices in the degree to which they relate to them. These choices depend on the development of close emotional relations and are more critical in the development of the relationship between grandchild and grandparent than is the control of assets and property or the stress on connections through descent (Edgar and Glezer, 1994). Since the usage of kinship terminologies is a cultural construct, specific and more general social changes are likely to be reflected in both attitudes and terms for grandparents.

Method

⁵ Gender is the more generic word though often we are discussing actual sex

⁶ A version of this is developed in Per Hage (1999)

⁷ This also is the result of a cognatic system of descent

The Network researchers completed a small questionnaire in line with the questions outlined in the introduction. This provided stimulating empirical data on continuing differences between countries. The questionnaire was completed by 49 people from 18 countries including; Australia, Bulgaria, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland (Finnish speaking and Swedish speaking parts), France, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Israel (Jewish only), Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Sweden. The majority of questionnaires were completed by the researchers and team leaders of the EU project on Grandparenthood, with some further questionnaires completed by friends or colleagues of team members.

Results

A general term for “grandparenting”?

We found that not all languages have a single word for grandparents but may instead need to say “grandmothers and grandfathers” e.g. “yiayiades kai papoudes” in Greek⁸. Furthermore many of the languages represented in our study have no word for “grandparenting”⁹.

Difference in terms according to lineage

As suggested in the introduction type B and C forms of naming grandparents were found amongst our respondents. Amongst Swedes, Swedish speaking Finns, Norwegians, and Danes Type C existed, which differentiates grandparents according to descent line; thus the paternal grandmother (same words in all of these languages) is called “farmor” (father’s mother) and the maternal grandmother is called “mormor” (mother’s mother)¹⁰. However amongst Finnish speaking Finns Type B naming occurs (no descent line differentiation) when using the polite form for grandmother or grandfather, but the different terms appear in the usual form of address. In Swedish and Norwegian the same words are used for polite forms and the usual form of address. Type B classification was used in England, France, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany, the Netherlands, Israel (Jewish) and Estonia - e.g. “yiayia” for both grandmothers and “pappou” for both grandfathers (Greek). The German and Israeli (Jewish) respondents added that people sometimes clarify which grandmother they are talking about by adding the first or last name e.g. Oma Schmidt. In English, and also in Dutch, their place of residence or surname may be added when referring to them in absentia.

In Poland in everyday speech no distinction is made according to descent; though such terms do exist they are rarely used. The Polish word for “grandparents” comes

⁸ According to the mode presented, this may suggest that gender differences are more stressed in most cultures and thus putting men and women under the same term is not common practice

⁹ The following languages represented in the Network reported not having a single word for grandparents nor for “grandparenting”; Greek, Israel (Jewish), Spanish, Italian, Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish. Some languages, such as Dutch and French have a general term for grandparents, but no term to convey “grandparenting”.

¹⁰ Interestingly, the Chinese terms for grandparents (FaFa, FaMo, MoFa and MoMo) are strikingly similar to the Scandinavian terms. Traditional Chinese society practices patrilineal descent (Ikels, 1998).

from the word for grandfather, perhaps reflecting the importance traditionally placed on the male line in Polish culture. In Spanish all kinship terms are the plural of the male form e.g. grandparents are “abuelos” (grandfathers). In Ewe (a language spoken in Ghana), a similar set of practices with the Poles exists so that though there are grandparental terms distinguishing lineage, in practice only two terms are used “mama” (grandmother) and “tagbo” (grandfather).

Nicknames and diminutives

All respondents from the Mediterranean countries in our study (Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal) indicated that diminutive forms (suffixes added to the kin term) are regularly used when addressing grandparents. This is also the case in Bulgaria, Lithuanian and the Slavic languages e.g, Russian, Ukrainian. In general diminutives are used with names to indicate intimacy and emotional closeness. e.g. in Spanish “abuelo” (grandfather) becomes “abuelito” as a term of endearment. Diminutives seem to be used especially by young grandchildren but also by older and adult grandchildren when they feel especially close to a grandparent.¹¹

Diminutives do not exist in normal practice in other European languages e.g. in English¹². In the Netherlands diminutives of grandparental terms do exist but, in contrast to the countries mentioned above, are not used when addressing one’s own grandparent. Using the diminutive “opaatje” (little grandfather) is either insulting or used to emphasise some kind of weakness, rather than a term of endearment. Similarly, in German the use of the diminutives “Opalein” and “Omalein” would be insulting.

In small rural communities, e.g. in France, the widespread tendency of nicknaming people in terms of their personal characteristics, may take precedence over the kinship terms, including grandparental terms.

Step-grandparents – are there any special terms?

Specific terms for step-grandparents are rare. The presence or absence of the original grandparent may affect both the relationship and terminology available, as does the relationship with the parent of the child. This is an area where individual choices occur in terms of the relationship. Thus closeness may be signaled by children using the same term for their actual grandfather and step-grandparent. However it is the nature of the relationship between the child’s parent and the step-father or mother which is critical. Several countries reported the use of first names by both the parent and grandchild towards a step-parent/ step-grandparent. e.g. UK, Greece, Sweden and Swedish speaking Finns... When the relationship is more formal or distant the grandchild might address the step-grandparent as Mr or Mrs X.

Two special terms for step-grandparents emerged from this study, both among Swedish speaking Finns. The official term for step-grandparents is “styvmormor/styvmorfar” but recently two new terms have emerged among young

¹¹ In Ukrainian and Russian there are even two levels of diminutive attached to grandparents

¹² Shortened forms of the full kin term may indicate familiarity and intimacy e.g. gran V granny; however this is not an obvious rule by which the speaker knows how generally to intimate emotional closeness

people (around 20 years of age). The first term is “plastmormor” / “plastmorfar”. The “plast” prefix literally means “plastic” and it alludes to a reconstituted family where people who are not biologically related are “molded” or “stuck” together to form a new family. The second new term is “låtsasmormor” / “låtsasmorfar” meaning “pretend-grandmother/father”. These terms are used only to describe a step-grandparent and not when addressing them. This may be a way in which the Swedish speaking Finns reproduce and do not lose the descent line connection with the parent’s parents.

In French no new word for a step-grandparent has been created and a lengthy explanation is required e.g. “my grandfather’s second wife”¹³.

In the Netherlands step-grandparents are sometimes given a nickname based on a typical characteristic, as a way of distinguishing them from the biological grandparents, e.g. a step-grandfather who smokes the pipe might be called “opa met de pijp”. There are also cases of step-grandparents being called “aunt” or “uncle” in Dutch.

Changes in use of grandparental terms

In some countries politeness behaviour used to distinguish individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds; in Norway those from a higher socio-economic class tended to use the polite form of “you” (second person plural) to address their grandparents though this is now rare. The Dutch, Finnish, Germans, Greeks, Italians, Portuguese and Spanish reported that children now use the singular form of “you” with grandparents, where they used the plural/polite form in the past. A historic change occurred in language and politeness behaviour after 1968 with the student radical movement in Paris instigating a general move towards using less formal modes of interaction and address.

This is also reflected in the way that both children and grandchildren may increasingly be using first names for parents and grandparents e.g. amongst Norwegians, Finnish speaking Finns, Dutch, English, Australian and German children. This seems to be linked to changing aspects of respect; some respondents commented that in the past grandparents were respected and grandchildren were sometimes even afraid of them, where as now they are more approachable, with less authority.

Geographical & regional, social class and age differences

Numerous regional differences in grandparental terms were found within Finland, Germany, Spain, Greece, Bulgaria and the Netherlands – mainly due to dialects. In Norway rural and urban areas had distinct naming practices. The terms “beste mor” (“best mother”) and “beste far” (“best father”) are rural terms and the terms mormor, morfar, farmor, farfar are the polite/official terms and are used mainly in urban areas. Additionally in some rural areas in Norway parents are called “mamma” and “pappa” (the usual form of address for parents) and grandparents are called “mor” and “far”

¹³ French has difficulties in such linguistic neologisms.

(the polite forms of mother and father), implying a very close relationship and similarity in role of parents and grandparents in some rural areas.

In England regional variations exist with nicknames such as “nan” or “nanna” (for grandmother) being more common in the North of England, and possibly a more frequent usage among the lower classes, with “nanny” being more common amongst higher classes¹⁴. In English addressing one’s own grandparent with the formal terms “grandmother” and “grandfather” indicates respect and a certain emotional distance, whereas informal terms and nicknames such as “granny” or “gramps” indicate familiarity and emotional closeness. Some other respondents (from Germany, France, Finland, Greece and Bulgaria) also thought it more common for the higher classes to use the polite/official terms with their grandparents, and also that informal terms are used more in rural areas. In countries with a wide range of ethnic groups and immigrants e.g. Israel, Australia and the UK, there are large variations in kinship terminology with very differing attitudes to grandparents co-existing.

Respondents indicated that young children use informal terms to address their grandparents - often inventing nicknames or shortening terms into baby-language - and as they get older they use more official/polite terms, or even switch to using first names in some cases.

Differing attitudes associated with the terms for grandparents

Grandparental terms may sometimes be used when addressing people other than one’s own grandparents, such as non-related elderly members of the community. The wider use of these terms reflects very different attitudes to older people depending on the context in which they are used and the culture. In Germany, Denmark, England, Finland, Israel and Sweden the terms for grandparents are sometimes used when referring to elderly persons in a derogatory way - to imply physical or intellectual slowness, incapability (e.g. for slow or bad drivers), being old-fashioned etc. In the UK the term ‘grandparent’ might occasionally be used respectfully for a person who is an old friend of the family, but this is rare. The terms for grandparents may be linked with negative attitudes to traditionalism and rural life. In Poland, young urban people sometimes use the term ‘grandmother’ negatively when referring to older women from rural areas. As terms for grandparents are associated with being old, some younger grandparents prefer to be called by their first name or a nickname – presumably because of negative attitudes associated with ageing.

The Italian respondents all reported that the term “nonno” (grandfather) is used to imply injury or inability to do something. The use of the terms for grandparents with people other than one’s own grandparents is derogatory – *except* where a diminutive is used, in which case it is a pleasant way of addressing an older person whom you feel close to. In Greece, in most cases it would be insulting to use the diminutive of a grandparental term when addressing an elderly member of the community, but in some situations it can be respectful and foster a warm atmosphere. e.g. a group of young adults sitting in a coffee shop may address an unknown old man next to them as “pappou” (grandfather) while chatting with him about his life.

¹⁴ A curious homonym is between grandmothers called nanny and professional baby and child carers for the upper class, also called ‘nanny’

In the Volta region of Ghana the patrilineage is considered most important¹⁵. Traditional male Chiefs or Kings are referred to as “tagbui” meaning grandparent (the word comes from the word for grandfather), regardless of their age. This is because grandparents (and one might assume particularly grandfathers) are considered to be very wise people, as are Chiefs or Kings, and older members of the tribe are deeply respected by the younger members.

Further comments about grandparents in specific cultures

In Greece it is traditional, and still the norm, for grandchildren to be named after their grandparents (Danforth, 1982) and there are unwritten rules as to which grandparent gets “priority”. The first-born child is named after the paternal grandfather if it is a boy. If it is a girl, it will still be named after the paternal grandfather where a female form of his name exists. If not, she will be named after her paternal grandmother. If the firstborn is a girl, and the next child a boy, he will still be named after the paternal grandfather. Thus the paternal line of descent is emphasized and given importance and it is of particular honour and importance for a child to be named after a deceased paternal grandfather. In the case where a maternal grandfather has died, the naming of the child after this grandfather may take priority. However there are regional variations in traditional patterns of naming.

In Bulgarian the words for grandmother (baba) and grandfather (diado) have multiple meanings being synonyms for “old woman” and “old man”. The terms are occasionally and often informally used when referring to persons of high authority. “Diado” is used when referring to God (diado gospod), a Reverend/Priest (diado pop) and Santa Claus (diado mraz). In addition to meaning grandmother and old woman, the term “baba” also means “midwife” and it is also used when referring to the season of winter (baba zima) and the month of March (baba Marta). The use of the words for grandparents to refer to persons of high authority in particular implies that grandparents are held in high regard in Bulgarian culture.

Interpreting the Findings

One clear development evident in the findings from this small study is that there has been an overall decline in the status of older people; grandparents are no longer automatically given respect and authority by virtue of kinship and age. The decline in use of plural/polite forms when addressing grandparents and the greater use of personal names suggests a move away from traditional patterns of respect and kinship to a more personal and negotiated relationship between generations. The increasingly negative connotations of grandparental terms being used with non kin suggests a decline in the status of older people.

One curious finding has been the stress on kinship and descent in the Scandinavian countries; the suggestion that kinship terms are emerging amongst some Finns for step-grandparents – an increasingly common phenomenon - indicates the normalcy of the situation and the desire to indicate a degree of kinship, which the use of a personal name does not indicate.

¹⁵ The importance placed on paternal and maternal descent varies throughout Ghana

Language usage and the plasticity of languages vary – i.e. the ways and degrees of creating neologisms; however it should be assumed that social changes will be partly reflected in conventions concerning how grandparents are addressed and thought about. Although normally it is children and grandchildren who address and name grandparents, grandparents may become active in this process themselves. Certainly it would appear that it was grandparents, initially in the USA, who through their own organisations, developed the concept of ‘grandparenting’ a neologism of fairly recent origin. High divorce rates combined with high rates of geographical mobility, may account for their felt need to emphasize their rights and those of the grandchild, as opposed to the rights of the parent. The stress on individual and human rights based on common descent marks an interesting change where kinship and descent are no longer automatic and ‘biological’ but also individualised and negotiated relationships.

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