



THE ELDERLY IN PROVERBS: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ESTONIAN AND SLOVENE PROVERBS

1 INTRODUCTION

The dictionary of the Slovene language (*Slovar slovenskega knjižnega jezika*) defines *starost* 'old age' as the period of human life from maturity to death and accompanies the definition with some examples: *fear of old age; everyone thought he would not live to see old age; preparing for old age; peaceful, tiresome old age; advanced, expressive; grey old age; diseases of old age; fear of old age*.¹ The phraseological part of the entry gives the examples: *old age is not a joy, old age is not pleasant for humans; old age does not come alone, it is often accompanied by problems*. In the collection of modern proverbs *Starost ne pride sama, Starost ni radost* [Old age does not come alone; Old age is not a joy]. A similar attitude can be found in Estonian language and folklore material: The (*Fraseoloogiasõnaraamat*, Õim 2017) defines *vanadus* ('old age') as the later stage of human life, often associated with decline and dependence, yet also with experience and wisdom. The dictionary and the database of Estonian proverbs *Eesti vanasõnad* (Krikmann 1997-) include numerous expressions that reveal the cultural ambivalence toward ageing: *vanadus ei tule üksi* ('old age does not come alone'), *vanadus ei ole rõõm* ('old age is not a joy'), *vanadus tuleb vaikselt* ('old age comes quietly'), *vanadus on raske koorem* ('old age is a heavy burden'). Such sayings convey the inevitability of decline and the vulnerability of the body and mind, but at the same time they preserve the moral expectation of endurance and humility. These examples already show that ageing is still undesirable, perhaps even the most "do-not-want-to-see-it" natural phenomenon in Western society. On this point there is important to emphasize that it is not the same to be old in different societies and cultures (Bizjan 2005: 85): Western society in general, even in the longer term, at

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least since antiquity, has been characterized by three age-related longings: eternal youth, longevity, and wisdom. The latter were not perceived as inevitable consequences of old age, but intellectual abilities associated with wisdom – unlike other mental and physical characteristics of the human body as it ages, do not show any decline (Wahl 2023: 33–58; Bratož 2023: 24; Remec 2023:8–9). Never-the-less, the negative perception of age is evident already from the phraseological nest in the Dictionary from Pleteršnik (1894/1895), which also contains the proverb *Starost je žalost* ‘Old age is a sadness’.

Ageing is associated with stereotypical characteristics, such as a worn out, wrinkled appearance, physical inability, and mental slowness. The age at which a person is considered old changes over time: 200 years ago, when life expectancy among Slovenes and Estonians was approximately 50 years, old age started at 40 or even earlier; nowadays, a person is considered elderly at 65 years old (Lohr 1990), while the expected life span is 70–75 years.

On the other hand, successful coping strategies for the elderly play an increasingly important role in Europe’s ageing society. Cultural gerontology has emerged as a separate field of study in the last few decades as one of the most lively and insightful areas of academic analysis. Drawing on work across the humanities and social sciences, it has changed the ways in which we study the later years, challenging old stereotypes and introducing new theories and methodologies (Twigg/Martin 2015). However, when developing coping strategies, it is important to consider attitudes and cultural stereotypes in broader terms, including those existing in the folklore of specific cultural and linguistic spaces. Language is one of the main sources for accessing societal worldviews and social stereotypes on different topics, including age.

Paremiological phenomena are related not only to language as such, but also to contacts between languages and cultures. The way in which phraseology is transmitted often reflects the power dynamic between the cultures in question. The origin of a short folk form is also determined by its use: it may have come from a foreign linguistic environment (for example, from Latin or German), but speakers have incorporated it into their linguistic and cultural code, adding features of their own language and cultural environment, and transforming it over time according to their habitat and mentality. This is where folklore, with all its spatial and linguistic determinants, plays a role. Comparative research reveals different lexical elements of paremiological units and, with them, different stereotypes linked to the words. Proverbs, which are used in everyday speech, represent a folklore genre revolving around stereotypes and often reflecting radical views and attitudes. An important way to study proverbs is to observe the use of proverbs by the elderly and compare it with other age groups in a community. Previous studies have focused on proverbs about old age and ageing: for example, Juwen Zhang (2021) has argued that the study of proverbs in general, and proverbs about old age and ageing in particular, helps us understand the essence of a particular culture. Wolfgang Mieder (2000) dedicated a longer article, “Alter schützt vor Torheit und Weisheit nicht. Sprichwörter über das Alter(n) aus Literatur und Medien”, to proverbs that thematise ageing; Issa Peters (1986) focused on

Egyptian and Lebanese proverbs in the article “The Attitude Toward the Elderly as Reflected in Egyptian and Lebanese Proverbs”.

The aim of this paper is to analyse attitudes toward the elderly and ageing in Estonian and Slovene proverbs, based on material collected from the 19th century to the present day. The article aims to determine which stereotypes and metaphors about old people and ageing are used, and how norms and ideas related to the elderly are represented in proverbs. An attempt is also made to categorise Estonian and Slovene proverbs about old people and ageing according to their specific content or subtopic.

2 METHODOLOGY

The proverbs for this analysis were chosen from two databases: the Slovene e-database and the Estonian published scientific collection of proverbs:

The Collection of Slovene paremiological units, *Pregovori 1.1*, consists of 37,390 Slovene proverbs, mostly from the 19th and 20th centuries (Babič et al. 2023). The proverbs were collected through fieldwork, personal notes and manuscripts, printed collections (including referential ones), journals and newspapers, and literature.

The older Estonian material used in this paper comes from the fundamental publication on Estonian proverbs – the five-volume academic anthology *Eesti vanasõnad I–V* (‘Estonian Proverbs’, Vols. 1–5, containing 15,140 proverb types, published as part of the series *Monumenta Estoniae Antiquae*, issued from 1980–1988, and also accessible through the online database “Eesti vanasõnad”, <https://folklore.ee/eesti-utlused/vanasõnad/est/>, Krikmann 1997-). The volumes are based on the proverb corpus of the Estonian Folklore Archives (approx. 160,000 units) and consist of material collected from the second half of the 19th century up to the 1960s, using various methods – some were recorded by folklorists during fieldwork using oral questionnaires, others were sent in by correspondents, and some were solicited through newspapers.

The material in both languages was selected using the keywords *vana* (Estonian) / *star* (Slovene) ‘old’ or ‘aged’, which may function as an attributive adjective (e.g. animal metaphors: *vana koer* / *star pes* ‘old dog’, *vana hobune* / *staro kljuse* ‘old horse, old billy’, *vana sikk* / *star kozel* ‘old goat’, i.e. an old person), but also as a noun: *vana* / *starec*, *starka* ‘elderly person’ and *vanadus* / *starost* ‘old age’; *hall* / *siv* ‘grey’, as the most explicit expressions referring to old age.

The collected material was then divided into seven thematic categories, and analysed in a comparative light.

3 ANALYSIS OF OLD AGE IN ESTONIAN AND SLOVENE PROVERBS

Proverbs about ageing and the elderly can be categorised according to their contents and according to attitudes towards them.

The first known semantic categorisation of proverbs about the elderly was carried out by Michael Sailer (1810; Mieder 2000: 99–101). He postulated five categories: the arrival of old age, the gifts of old age, infirmities, the blessings of old age, and the art of ageing. In our attempt to categorise proverbs about ageing according to their content or theme, we used the systematisation from the popular edition of Estonian proverbs, *Vanasõnaraamat* (A Book of Proverbs; Hussar/Krikmann/Sarv 1984, 149–57), which is based on the anthology *Eesti vanasõnad* (Estonian Proverbs). Under the category ‘Biological Human’ there is the subcategory ‘Ages and Genders. Love. Family and Home. Relatives’, with a further subcategory ‘Youth and Old Age’ comprising eight topics. The categorisation in the present article is adapted to the material of the two languages (and two cultures). The thematic categories based on the content include the following eight general ones:

- (1) human lifespan and its duration, its different stages, nodal points, irreversibility, etc.;
- (2) defining features of youth and old age: youth as a period of sowing seeds, of knowledge acquisition and of learning things in youth to draw from in old age;
- (3) the opposition between the young and the elderly, divided into two subgroups:
 - (3a) a young person is strong, healthy, resilient, agile, fiery, beautiful, while an old person is feeble and sickly, and old age is cheerless;
 - (3b) the opposition between the young and the old: a young person is foolish and unskilled, while an old person is experienced and wise;
- (4) an old person is resilient, astute, strong;
- (5) an old person becomes demented, childlike;
- (6) old people deserve respect and must not be ridiculed;
- (7) comparison of the human age with that of an animal.

(1) Human lifespan and its duration, its different stages, nodal points, irretrievability, etc.

The first content category highlights human lifespan and its duration, its different stages, nodal points, irretrievability, etc. Here we encounter the so-called general truths that could be categorised as truisms. The Estonian material includes claims that are obvious or self-evident, such as: *Iga toob vanust* ‘years bring age’; *Aeg viib haua või surma poole* ‘time will take you towards the grave or death’; *Vanast ei saa enam noort, aga noorest küll vana* ‘An old thing will never be young again, but a young one will get old’. The Slovene material presents, in the function of truisms, statements with the formula X is Y: *Starost je modrost / žalost / slabost* ‘Old age is wisdom / sadness / weaknesses, and X is not Y: *Starost ni radost / ni lepa / ni rada sama* ‘Old age is not a joy / is not beautiful / does not want to be alone’. In both languages, these statements function as given facts, mostly emphasising inevitability, a major life truth, usually accompanying discussions about the negative sides of old age. Into this group of proverbs, we can also include those that thematise three major pivotal events in human life: birth, marriage, and death, as well as the duration and process of life. The Estonian proverb in this category defines specific life achievements that

should be met by a certain age, otherwise they will never be met: *Inemine om kolm kõrd rummal: edimalt latsepõlveh, tõist kõrd paari minneh, kolmas kõrd vanah eäh* ‘A person is a fool three times: first in childhood, the second time when marrying, the third time in old age’ (EV 2157:4). On the other hand, the Slovene proverb *Glava ne postane siva ob rojstvu* ‘The head does not become grey at birth’ reveals the opposite: wisdom comes with age and experience, just like grey hair.

(2) Defining features of youth and old age (youth as a period of sowing seeds, gathering and learning things in youth to be able to draw from in old age)

It is characteristic of humankind to demand to know the exact age at which a person becomes old, and when old age truly begins. This boundary has varied across different periods, depending on a range of sociocultural factors—foremost among them, the economy. As the saying goes: *Pri revnih ljudeh se kokoši, pri bogatih hčere ne postarajo* ‘Among poor people, hens do not grow old; among rich people, daughters do not’. One of the markers of old age was definitely a physical sign: *Baba se postara, kedar zgubi zobe* ‘A woman grows old when she loses her teeth’ which changed significantly with the advent of the contemporary health system in Europe. This change in attitude is also reflected in a nowadays widely spread form: *50 is the new 40, 60 is the new 50, 70 is the new 60*, etc. Here we can observe a humorous attempt at normalisation of the perception of age. and aging: age boundaries are shifting, life lasts longer, and is perceived as more meaningful. As this kind of precise dating often leads to a dead end (reaching old age has been dated to coincide with reaching retirement age, although even this boundary has been pushed further ahead), folklore offers various methods to estimate when a person has reached a certain age. These are used mostly as humorous remarks or signs. The juxtaposition of young and old seems to be very productive, which shows that society reflects extensively on these contrasts. At the same time, these examples explicitly show what the social expectations were, often emphasising diligence and work in youth. Youth is definitely seen as a period of sowing seeds, gathering, and learning in order to draw from that in old age. Two important tendencies are revealed in the use of proverbs: on the one hand, proverbs are seen as cautionary instructions in life; on the other, they are useful for summing up certain situations in hindsight and for confirmation. This is at odds with the contemporary idea of lifelong learning, which is verbalised in the same way in both analysed languages: *Mida Juku ei õpi, seda Juhan ei tea* ‘What Juku does not learn, Juhan does not know’ [*Juhan* used to be a very popular men’s name; its childhood diminutive is *Juku*.] (EV 2490); *Kar se Janezek nauči, Janez zna* ‘What little John learns, John knows’. This proverb, with its variations, is known in all European languages and is also very productive in creating antiproverbs, for example, in German *Was Hänchen nicht lernt, lernt Hans nimmermehr* is modified into *Was Hänchen nicht lernt, macht Hans arbeitslos* (Mieder 2000: 102–106), or in Slovene *Kar se Janezek nauči, navadno Janez tudi počne; Kar se Janezek nauči, ni nujno, da bo jutri še imelo vrednost*, in Estonian *Mida Juku ei*

õpi, seda Juhan ei tea / in the Internet era: Mida Juku ei copy, seda Juhan ei paste'i (What Juku does not copy, Juhan does not paste). All the proverbs with the formula *What X, then Y*, including this one, are often used in negative form: *What not X, then not Y*: *Česar se Janezek ne nauči, Janez pač ne zna* 'What little John does not learn, John does not know'. The same idea is followed by proverbs that emphasise youth as a period of laying a good foundation for old age, and are verbalised in various ways: *Mida külvad kevadel, seda lõikad sügisel (mida õpid noores eas, seisab eluaeg sul peas)* 'What you sow in spring, you shall reap in autumn (what you learn at a young age, you will remember for life)' (EV 5148); *Kuida sa noorelt kasvad, nenda sa vanalt jääd* 'How you grow up in youth, you will remain in old age' (EV 7479); *Mis noorelt haritud, sest vanadus ei võõrdu* 'What is cultivated in youth will not be let go in old age' (EV 7486: 6); *See viis, mis noorelt õpib, see vanalt peab* 'The tune learned in youth will be kept [in mind] in old age' (EV 7543); *Kaj boš v mladost sejaj, boš v starosti žel* 'What you sow in youth, you shall reap in old age'; *Kakršna je mladost, taka bo starost* 'Like the youth, like the old age'; *Če v mladosti se učiš, se za starost skrbiš* 'If you learn in youth, you take care of old age'; *Če se hočeš v starosti greti, moraš v mladosti za toplo peč skrbeti* 'If you want to stay warm in old age, you need to take care of the oven in youth'. These proverbs function as instructions and might even be used as compliments for the young. On the other hand, there are many warnings about the opposite, negative outcome, which is linked to wrong decisions, lack of action, or even sloth in youth: *Kes noorelt valetab, see vanalt varastab* 'He who lies in youth will steal in old age' (EV 7473); *Parem noores eas õppida kui vanas kahetseda* 'Better to learn in youth than regret in old age' (EV 7541); *Če se za mlade dni ne skrbi, se v starosti trpi* 'If youth is not taken care of, old age suffers'; *Fant postopa, mož bo kradel, starec beračil* 'The boy wanders, the man will steal, the old man will beg'; *Kdor se ne trudi v mladosti, gorje mu v starosti* 'Those who do not work hard in their youth will suffer in their old age'.

This group of proverbs explicitly addresses the young population, calling for work motivation and diligence, and consequently benefiting society (taking care of society, which will in turn take care of the individual in old age, as well as earning money for the days when one will not be able to work as much; see also Huzjan 2024, Peters, 1984).

(3) The opposition between the young and the elderly

(3a) A young person is strong, healthy, resilient, agile, fiery, beautiful, etc., while an old person is feeble and sickly, and old age is cheerless

This category mainly emphasises that a young person is strong, healthy, resilient, agile, fiery, beautiful, etc., while an old person is feeble and sickly, and old age is cheerless. In this category, youth is clearly idealised with characteristics of good health and bodily functions: *Noorel nugise silmad, vanal varese silmad* 'A young person has the eyes of a marten, an old one has the eyes of a crow' (EV 7502); *Inimene läheb vanemaks, tõbi läheb nooremaks* 'A man gets older, the disease gets younger' (EV

2112); *Mladost ima lep obraz, starost lepo dušo* ‘Youth has a beautiful face, old age has a beautiful soul’; *Pri starcih gre pamet doli, gre gori pri mladcih* ‘The brain goes down in the elderly, it goes up in youngsters’. Old age is also conceptually linked with a reduced warmth of the body, as expressed in the Slovene proverb: *Mladina na led, starost k peči gret* ‘Young people should go on the ice, old age should warm by the oven’. As the oven is a warm place and warmth is conceptually linked with love, the Estonian proverb associates the metaphor of the oven and the heart: *Vannu ase aho pääl, laste paik paja all* ‘An old person’s bed is up on the oven, a child’s place is at the hearth’ (EV 13522), i.e., one should love a child and take at least minimal care of the elderly. Decrease in physical strength is expressed as a lack of agility in Estonian proverbs: *Eks noo ise hüppab ikka üle, vana pugegu alt läbi* ‘A young one can jump over, an old one better crawl through underneath’ (EV 7468); *Vana tatt om lühvka pallo võrksamb ku pistü* ‘An old mushroom is much more agile sideways than standing up’ (EV 13494). One of the signs of decreased physical strength is the walking stick, an object stereotypically used by elderly people to aid walking, but not tolerated for younger people: *Kepp om noorele häbis ja vanale abis* ‘A stick is a shame for a young one and an aid for an old one’ (EV 3592). The Slovene material, on the other hand, emphasises the function of wine: *Starega človeka drži palica, še veliko bolj pa vino* ‘A stick holds the old man up, but wine holds him even more’. If the stick means physical support, wine represents psychological support. Old age is clearly linked to physical impairment with all of its practical implications, which also causes lower working capacity and greater dependence on society and its care. Such impairment of physical abilities seems to be the main emphasis in proverbs when comparing with youth. Youth is depicted in both languages as a strong period, a time of great energy, while old age implies being weak and declining.

(3b) The opposition between the young and the old: a young person is foolish and unskilled, while an old person is experienced and wise

In contrast to the previous category, here a young person is seen as foolish and unskilled, while an old person is experienced and wise. The following proverbs belong to this category: *Ega vana koer valet haugu* ‘An old dog does not bark lies’ (EV 13319); *Noor inimene on vanast seitse korda taga* ‘A young man is seven times behind compared to an old man’ (EV 7511); *Noore inimese oid on jalgupidi seljas* ‘A young man’s reasoning is standing with feet on his back’ (EV 7493); *Saad vanemaks, lähed targemaks* ‘The older you get, the wiser you become’ (EV 13357); *Vanad nõule, noored jõule* ‘Old people with reason, young people with strength’ (EV 13381); *Mladost je norost, čez vodo skače kjer je most; starost pa je modrost* ‘Youth is craziness, it jumps over the water where the bridge is, old age is wisdom’; *Kar mladi ne vedo, jim stari povedo* ‘What young people do not know, the elderly tell them’.

Also, the Estonian proverb *Vaev vanaks saada, hea vanana elada* ‘It is a struggle to grow old but life is good in old age’ (EV 13190), refers to the fact that an old person has no obligation to work or keep a job. The proverb, however, is intriguing because archival material reveals that Estonian folklore collectors have added contextual descriptions

to it, and many refute the proverb. For example: “It is a struggle to grow old but life is good in old age.” This is nonsense – old age is miserable.’ (1967, Vastseliina); ‘It is a struggle to grow old but it is good to be old. Old people, especially those in poor health, have wondered whether it was said as mockery or whether, in those farms where the son took over the farmstead, the parents indeed had an easy life.’ (1982, Tartu); ‘When you get old, people say that it is a struggle to grow old but life is good in old age. No, it is not, damn it.’ (1981, Vastseliina); ‘Old people say that it is a struggle to grow old but life is good in old age. But this is not the case, no. An old person is sick one day and healthy the next.’ (1982, Otepää). These explanations provide the Estonian proverb material with a context that is often missing in proverb collections and are therefore of great importance. The explanations show that proverbs are used in context and that mere assumptions about their wording are often misleading.

(4) An old person is resilient, astute, strong

Resilience and astuteness are also emphasised in proverbs that reveal the mind of the elderly, their wisdom and experience: *vana kont on sitkem* ‘an old bone is sturdier’; (an old person is clever, experienced, knows how to deflect threats, enjoy good things, etc.): *Vana karu — kaval aru* ‘Old bear—clever mind’ (EV 13413); *Vana rebane juba lõksu ei lähe* ‘An old fox does not fall into the trap’ (EV 13482); *Ärä vanna santi likatama õppe* ‘Do not teach an old cripple how to limp’ (EV 13537); *Ää vana hobusele õpeta kaerasöömist* ‘Do not teach an old horse how to eat oats’ (EV 13538); *Vanad hobused söövad ka veel kaeru* ‘Old horses also still eat oats’ (EV 13378); *Vanad sikud lakuvad ka heal meelel soola* ‘Old goats also like to lick salt’ (EV 13386); *Star kozel ima trd rog* ‘An old goat has a hard horn’; *Starega konja težko naučiš voziti, Starega konja ne naučiš jahati*² ‘It is hard to/You cannot teach an old horse to ride; *Zastonj je starega vola učiti orati* ‘It’s useless to teach an old ox to plow’; *Starega drevesa ne upogneš* ‘You cannot bend the old tree’; *Starega vrabca ne uloviš s plevami* ‘You cannot catch an old sparrow with chaff’ In Estonian, the proverb ‘Old horses still eat oats’, *Vanad hobused söövad/tahavad ka veel kaeru*, is still commonly used in contemporary media. The proverb is used in its most general sense – namely, that “old age should not mean giving up what is good in life, and an elderly person can also enjoy life and live it to the fullest.” This aligns with today’s trend of vital ageing. Vitality is primarily seen as the *joie de vivre* of older people, which is a prerequisite for higher life expectancy.

(5) Old people becoming demented, childlike

Some proverbs compare old age with childhood. This is especially evident in Estonian material: *Vana inime ja hull laps on ühetaolise aruga* ‘An old person and a mad child have similar reasoning’ (EV 13400); *Kmet mora biti dvakrat pastir: kot otrok in na stara leta* ‘A farmer should be a shepherd twice: as a child and in old age.’ This is also

2 The proverb appears in various forms in the collection Slovenian Proverbs 1.1, mixing the lexemes: *voziti*, *jahati* [to ride], *konj* [horse], and *vol* [ox].

seen in proverbs in which the elderly are seen as silly, forgetful, and unable to take care of oneself: *Inimene on kaks korda laps* ‘A human is twice a child’ (EV 2121). The Slovene material on the topic could be expanded with contemporary examples from pop and rock music which have become widely known such as *Bolj star bolj nor* ‘The older the crazier’, which has been taken from the refrain of a song by the popular singer Zoran Predin.³

(6) Old people deserve respect; they should not be ridiculed

Numerous proverbs demand respect for the elderly, for example, *Austa halli ja ära valeta vanale* ‘Honour the grey-haired and do not lie to an old one’ (EV 488); *Pred sivo glavo vstani* ‘Stand up in front of a grey head’. In the Estonian material, one can also find prohibitions against ridiculing or laughing at either old people or children, who are more fragile and vulnerable than the rest: *Vanna ei tohi pügada: esi saat kavanoas, last ei tohi tiugada: esi olt ka latsolnu* ‘You must not mock an old man, for you will be old yourself one day; you must not tease a child, for you were young yourself once’ (EV 13515). However, the Slovene material does not provide such an example—the prohibition of mockery was not condensed into a proverbial form. Respect for older people may also be inferred from proverbial units which use grey hair as a metaphor for worrying: *Majhen otrok – majhna skrb, velik otrok sive lase dela* ‘Small child – small worry, big child makes grey hair’; *Veliko otrok sive lasi dela* ‘Many children make grey hair’. Worrying is further linked to experience, which results in wisdom: *Sivi lasi modra glava* ‘Grey hair, wise head’; *Upanje povzroča sive lase* ‘Hope causes grey hair’. Grey colour and grey hair are symbols of old age and wisdom, which should be respected, as we read in the proverbs: *Hall pea on vanaduse kroon* ‘Grey hair is the crown of old age’; *Halli pead austa, kulupead kumarda* ‘Honour the grey-haired, bow to the balding one’; *Halli mehe jalge ees võta müts maha* ‘Take your hat off at the feet of a grey-haired man’ (EV 806); *Vanemate kord on au saada* ‘It is time to honour the elders’ (EV 13514); *Kes vana halli austab, selle käsi keib hästi* ‘He who honours the old grey-haired will do well in life’ (EV 13333); *Austa halli ja ära valeta vanale* ‘Honour the grey-haired and do not lie to an old man’ (EV 488); *Kako lepo pristoji sivi glavi, da razsoja, in starim, da znajo svetovati* ‘How well it suits a grey head to judge, and the old to advise’; *Pred sivo glavo vstani* ‘Stand up in front of a grey head’; *Sivi glavi se odkrij* ‘Take your hat off in front of a grey head.’; *Z leti pamet, pa tudi siva glava* ‘Years bring wisdom, but also a grey head’. Respect for the elderly is explicitly linked to grey hair as a well-known symbol of wisdom in the Western world. Reaching old age is something every person should experience, and grey hair is a sign that life and time are following their natural course: *Lepota sivih las je prav obrnjen čas* ‘The beauty of grey hair is time turned the right way’.

3 <https://www.besedilo.si/zoran-predin/bolj-star-bolj-nor>

(7) Comparison of the human and animal ages

Virtually all the categories of proverbs analysed use animal metaphors related to age and ageing, especially those concerning mental capacity: puppy vs. old dog, foal vs. horse, for example, *Varsan ôpid, vanan pead* ‘You learn as a foal and keep it [in mind] in old age’ (EV 13858); *Mis kutsikun ôpit, vanan penin peat* ‘What you learn as a puppy, you will keep [in mind] as an old dog’ (EV 4707). The comparison of puppy/foal and old dog/horse is vivid, evoking the image of a hairy, soft, quiet, kind animal and an old dog/horse with its own traumas and weary look – this visual difference strengthens the message of the proverb. Such examples are not found in Slovene paremiological material, although older men are also (even today) referred to as: *staro kljuse / star pes / star kozel / star osel* ‘an old horse / dog / goat / donkey’. Bear (*karu / medved*), dog (*koer / pes*) and wolf (*rahvas / volk*) are associated with physical strength and learning abilities. Two proverbs are clearly international, with the same elements: *Vana karu ei ôpi tantsima* (EV 13412) vs. *Starega medveda ne naučiš več rajati* ‘An old bear will not learn to dance.’; *Vana koera enam ei ôpeta* (EV 13414) vs. *Starega psa ne naučiš novih trikov* ‘You cannot teach an old dog new tricks.’ Slovene material provides many variants with different animals but the same point: *Starega osla ni kaj učiti* ‘There is nothing to teach the old donkey’; *Starega konja težko naučiš voziti* ‘It is hard to teach an old horse to drive.’ Others retain the meaning, which, however, is conveyed in different way: *Kes vanast koerast enam linnukoera ôpetab* ‘There is no point in teaching an old dog to hunt birds.’ (EV 13339); *Karu ôpetatakse ikki noorelt murdma* ‘A bear is taught to kill at a young age.’ (EV 3306); *Ni treba starega volka klati učiti* ‘There is no need to teach an old wolf to slaughter’; *Tudi star volk odnese jagnje* ‘Even an old wolf takes the lamb’. In Slovene material, the bear is also used as a metaphor for a person at full strength in youth, but also for the animal or person who at some point weakens: *Ko se medved postara, postane igračka medvedkov* ‘When a bear gets old, it becomes a toy for young bears.’ If the bear, dog, and wolf metaphorically represent strength, the goat and donkey are usually used as degrading metaphors: *Sii vana inimese miil om nigu kitse piir* ‘The mind of an old person is like a goat’s fart.’ (EV 13373); *Star kozel ima trd rog* ‘An old goat has a hard horn.’; *Lisjak se postara, a se ne poboljša* ‘A fox gets older, but it does not get better.’ These animals are stereotypically stubborn, and the goat is even considered lacking in elegance, while the fox is stereotypically cunning. Slovene material also expresses strength with the metaphor of the bear: it is an animal that represents a person at its peak of their strength in youth, but also the animal or person which eventually weakens: *Ko se medved postara, postane igračka medvedkov* ‘When a bear gets old, it becomes a toy for young bears.’

4 DISCUSSION

Proverbs as a particular type of traditional, condensed collective thoughts offer an insight into the social world-view of different phenomena. Although they cannot be analysed in isolation from culture and everyday life, we can still interpret the main ideas

embedded in these short folk forms. However, it is hard to claim to what extent paremiological units originally reproduced stereotypes, and to what extent they reflected a certain reality, or served as a moral note intended to prevent undesirable behaviour (such as refusal to assist elderly parents, marginalization of elderly or prevention of indifference towards them) (Bratož 2023: 23). The material in Estonian and Slovene dealt with in this paper is largely historical, i.e., stemming from 19th and 20th century collections, so the analysis provides a diachronic rather than a contemporary perspective. In both languages, old age is contrasted with youth: on the one hand, youth is presented as a time of physical strength, while old age is associated with physical decline; on the other hand, youth is a time of learning and also light-heartedness, while old age is depicted as a period of wisdom and knowledge gained from experience. However, proverbs also suggest the elderly are prone to losing their mental abilities, and one category of proverbs presents the elderly as returning to childhood. In our material, grey hair often appears to be perceived as a symbol of age and wisdom in our material. The stereotypical reference to grey hair also allows us to observe changing social attitudes towards ageing and to examine whether and how the perception of ageing has become established or changed over time. Today, grey hair is no longer a main marker of old age, as the modern beauty industry allows hair colour to be altered regardless of age, and grey hair can even be a fashion trend among young people.

A common characteristic in the material in both languages is also a comparison between humans and animals: prevalent in both languages is a comparison with the bear and then with the wolf and the dog, while the references to horse, donkey and goat differ in the two languages. In Estonian, the horse is referred to more often, while in Slovene it is donkey and goat. In summary, the material, although historical, reveals more similarities than differences in the view of old age. One may conclude that although proverbs in both languages view the aged as honourable, wise, or experienced, there are also those that project a negative attitude. Such proverbs portray the elderly as acting immaturely and inappropriately, or as being useless or burdensome. It seems that such a negative attitude is due to no specific reason other than old age itself. The expectations for younger people—when a person is young and strong, they should work hard and lay a good foundation for their old age—are much the same in Estonian and Slovene. In this way, proverbs that portray a negative view of the aged raise serious questions about the validity of the notion that the elderly are always held in high regard (Peters 1986: 85, Huzjan 2024). Negative views, when they occur, may reflect economic necessities of the culture: as long as the elderly are able to function well within the social system, they are viewed as honourable; but when their physical and mental abilities begin to wane, they become a social and economic burden. While a person is young, they should take care to ensure their own future economic stability (Huzjan 2024). Material from contemporary sources differs in several respects from the analysed material. For instance, references to old age are often used in a humorous way in internet memes, joke cards, or as witty remarks in conversation; they can easily spread through various types of globalized communication channels. For example, expressions such as the following are rather widespread: *Vana oled siis, kui "Happy Hour" tähendab*

sinu jaoks lõunauinakut ‘You know you’re getting old when Happy Hour is a nap.’
Vananemine on lihtsalt elamise sünonüüm. ‘Aging is simply a synonym for living,’ or
statements with the pattern *40-ta so nova 30* ‘the 40s are the new 30s’, etc..

5 CONCLUSION

Different aspects of old age and elderliness have historically been present in society, and this is also reflected in the abundance of proverbs relating to age. As seen from the categories mentioned above, proverbs concerning old people and ageing represent established cultural stereotypes or attitudes that are fraught with controversy and ambivalence. On the one hand, there are many negative stereotypes, highlighting the vulnerability and needs of elderly people and portraying them as a passive and non-autonomous group. This stereotype is deeply ingrained in some of the proverbs discussed here – for example, the young are depicted as capable of learning and adapting to change, while the elderly are not. On the other hand, some proverbs reflect a highly positive attitude towards the elderly, suggesting that old people deserve respect and are to be regarded as members of society. The other extreme is the approach of active ageing, which suggests that the solution lies in old people acting young. The analysed proverbs stem from two different languages (Estonian and Slovene), two different language families (Uralic and Indo-European), and two different regions of Europe (North and South), yet their embedded stereotypes and messages are similar—emphasising physical decline, wisdom, mental decline, grey hair, walking stick, and respect are just a few common key words that emerge from the analysis..

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Abstract

THE ELDERLY IN PROVERBS: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ESTONIAN AND SLOVENE PROVERBS

From a methodological and folkloristic perspective, the article explores attitudes toward older people and aging in Slovene and Estonian proverbs based on archival paremiological material collected from the second half of the 19th century to the present day.

Various aspects of old age and ageing are also reflected in the rich tradition of proverbs. As can be seen from the examined material, proverbs related to the elderly and to ageing reflect established cultural stereotypes or attitudes that are full of controversy and ambivalence. On the one hand, there are many negative stereotypes that emphasize the vulnerability and needs of the elderly and portray them as a passive group in need of help. This stereotype is extremely common in proverbs, where young people are portrayed as capable of learning and adapting to change, while the elderly are not. On the other hand, some proverbs reflect a highly positive attitude towards older people, suggesting that they deserve respect and are to be regarded as full members of society. The other extreme approach is active ageing, which suggests that the solution lies in older people acting young. The proverbs analysed stem from two different languages (Estonian and Slovene), two different language families (Uralic and Indo-European), and two different regions of Europe (northern and southern), but their embedded stereotypes and messages are similar – emphasizing physical decline, wisdom, mental decline, grey hair, walking canes as well as respect. If the understanding of universal signs and stereotypes of old age in proverbs often varies across cultures, it can also be argued that it is often actually rather similar, especially in countries that were historically connected to and influenced by the same “centre,” i.e., the historical area of German culture in the case of Estonian and Slovene..

Keywords: proverbs, ageing, Estonian, Slovene, ethnolinguistics, folkloristics

Povzetek
STARANJE V PREGOVORIH: PRIMERJALNA ANALIZA ESTONSKIH IN
SLOVENSКИH PREGOVOROV

Članek z metodološkega in folklorističnega vidika raziskuje odnos do starejših in staranja v slovenskih in estonskih pregovorih na podlagi arhivskega paremiološkega gradiva, zbranega v drugi polovici 19. stoletja pa vse do danes. Različni vidiki starosti in staranja se odražajo tudi v bogatem izročilu pregovorov. Kot je razvidno iz kategorij, pregovori, povezani s starejšimi ljudmi in staranjem, predstavljajo uveljavljene kulturne stereotype ali odnose, ki so polni kontroverznosti in ambivalentnosti. Po eni strani obstaja veliko negativnih stereotipov, ki poudarjajo ranljivost in potrebe starejših ljudi ter jih prikazujejo kot pasivno in odvisno skupino. Ta stereotip je globoko zakoreninjen v pregovorih, kjer so mladi prikazani kot sposobni učenja in prilagajanja spremembam, starejši pa ne. Po drugi strani nekateri pregovori odražajo zelo pozitivno stališče do starejših, saj nakazujejo, da si starejši zaslužijo spoštovanje in so polnopravni člani družbe, oz. kažejo na spodbujanje t. i. aktivnega staranja, tj. da starejši ljudje delujejo mladostno in aktivno. Analizirani pregovori so iz dveh različnih jezikov (estonski in slovenski), dveh različnih jezikovnih družin (uralski in indoevropski) in dveh različnih regij Evrope (severne in južne), vendar so si njihovi vgrajeni stereotipi in sporočila podobni – poudarjanje fizičnega upada, modrosti, duševnega upada, sivih las, hoje, palice in spoštovanja so le nekateri ključni izrazi, ki izhajajo iz analize. Če se razumevanje univerzalnih znakov in stereotipov starosti, obravnavanih v pregovorih, razlikuje glede na kulturo, lahko trdimo, da je razumevanje znakov starosti v Evropi precej podobno, zlasti v državah, ki so bile v preteklosti povezane z istim »centrom« in so bile pod njegovim vplivom, tj. nemško kulturno-zgodovinsko okolje.

Ključne besede: pregovori, staranje, estonščina, slovenščina, etnolingvistika, folkloristika