

Reflections on Wisdom*

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The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.

- Socrates

To know that you know, and to know that you don't know - that is real wisdom.

- Confucius

1. The Issue

Charles Dickens describes Mr. Thomas Gradgrind, the stereotypical school teacher of the Industrial Revolution, as an efficient disseminator of information, while the students are painted as mere containers waiting to be filled: *Indeed, as he eagerly sparkled at them from the cellarage before mentioned, he seemed a kind of cannon loaded to the muzzle with facts, and prepared to blow them clean out of the regions of childhood at one discharge.* The 21st century teacher can no longer be a Mr. Thomas Gradgrind stuffing information into the minds of students who wait passively before him like *little pitchers ... to be filled so full of facts.* The Digital Revolution has brought information to our fingertips, and the

* For Professor Osamu Takai who has proved to me, on more than one occasion, that you cannot be a good teacher if you do not love what you do. Thank you for sharing your wisdom with me.

younger and nimbler fingertips of the students can often grasp it faster than those of the teachers. The role of the teacher as a source of information is rapidly becoming obsolete. What is, then, the role of the teacher in the Digital Age?

Some voices suggest that we need to focus on fostering wisdom rather than imparting knowledge. The proposal seems reasonable enough until we stop to think about the meaning of the word *wisdom*. What does *wisdom* stand for? Can we all agree on a definition of ‘wisdom’? Is ‘wisdom’ universal? (To avoid confusion I will use italics to refer to the word, *wisdom*, and quotes to refer to the concept expressed by the word, ‘wisdom.’)

If I were writing these lines in Japanese, I would probably use the word *chie* (知恵). Would I be making the same suggestion? Are ‘wisdom’ and ‘chie’ the same thing? The two quotes from Socrates and Confucius use the word *wisdom* and seem to say quite similar things. But are they equally close in the original? As a non-Japanese educator, working in Japan, should I strive to foster ‘wisdom’ or ‘chie’? Or maybe neither?

This article will take a closer look at the way the words *wisdom* and *chie* are used by naïve speakers of English and Japanese in an attempt to discover the folk psychology definition of the concepts behind the words. Following Wierzbicka (2003, 2006), I believe that everyday words are loaded with cultural values and reveal the fundamental attitudes of the speakers. Such attitudes are made more powerful by the fact that they are not always recognized as such.

The analysis is based on data drawn from the British National Corpus (BNC), the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) for English and the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics

NINJAL-LWP for BCCWJ (NINJAL) corpus for Japanese. The BNC has 100 million words, roughly the same as NINJAL which boasts 104,805,763 words. COCA has 450 million words.

2. Frequency

The first thing to look at is frequency; how often are the words used? The BNC and the NINJAL corpora are roughly of equal size and *wisdom* appears 1520 times in the BNC while *chie* has 2637 tokens in NINJAL. These figures seem to suggest that the Japanese word has higher frequency than its English counterpart. A closer look, one that takes into account the morphologically related words, reveals a different picture. The noun *wisdom* is derived from the adjectival root *wis-*, found in the adjective *wise*, and the suffix—*dom*. The word *chie* covers both nominal like *chie wo kudasai* ‘give me wisdom’ and adjectival uses like *chie no aru hito* ‘wise man’. If we count all the derived words based on the root *wis-*, the number more than doubles, as shown below.

<i>wisdom</i>	1520
<i>wise</i>	2118
<i>wisely</i>	364
<i>total</i>	4002

Frequency, combined with morphological productivity, indicates the vigor of the lexical item suggesting that the concept behind the root *wis-* is more important to English speakers than the one associated with the word *chie* is for speakers of Japanese. It could be argued that Japanese uses several words to cover the semantic space occupied in English by the

root *wis-*. Along with *chie*, we find *eichi* (英知), *saiki* (才氣) and *kenmei* (懸命) sharing the semantic space. But that would just serve to further prove the point. The semantic space is fragmented in Japanese, split among several concepts, each with a different flavor, while in English there is a unique, syntactically versatile element. Throughout this article, I will continue to deal only with *chie* as the most relevant and frequent translation for the English word *wisdom*.

3. Collocations and meaning

When we focus too intently on the meaning of a word, our intuitions can get out of hand and we end up quite confused. It is often more rewarding to look at the context, the collocates of a word in order to grasp its meaning more accurately. The following section will investigate the main collocates of the ‘wisdom’ vocabulary in English and Japanese. This will hopefully shed some light on their meaning and, through this, on the speakers’ understanding of the concepts behind the words.

3.1. English ‘wisdom’

What do we do with ‘wisdom’? If we are English speakers, we question it. If we look at the verbs that take the word *wisdom* as complement, *question* is at the top of the list, followed by *see* and *doubt*. It would seem as if English speakers did not put their trust in ‘wisdom’ very much. The reason for this situation becomes clear when we look at the properties of ‘wisdom’ as revealed by the choice of adjectives modifying the noun. The highest on the list of adjectival collocates is *conventional*. Other adjectives used with the word *wisdom* are *received*, *traditional*, *accepted*, *accumulated*, *common*, and *prevailing*. This is what the

speakers have to question, the 'wisdom' of the past, the wisdom accumulated by others.

- (1) *Since our beliefs strongly influence our actions, getting them right is socially very important, and therefore the freedom to **question received wisdom**, especially in fields that affect the behaviour of large numbers of people is, indeed, in the liberal view, a hugely important means, if not a vital precondition, of ensuring that 'the interests of weaker individuals and groups' are not harmed by 'the irresponsible attitudes and actions of the more powerful'. (BNC)*

What other values are comparable to 'wisdom'? Collocations of the form *wisdom and xxx* suggest that 'knowledge', 'experience' and 'understanding' are in the same class as 'wisdom', so are, though to a lesser degree, 'goodness' and 'courage'. In the US things are a little different: 'knowledge' and 'experience' are still at the top of the list, but they are accompanied by 'power', 'compassion', 'insight' and 'strength'. The association with 'power' and 'strength' could be due to the fact that in the US 'wisdom' is frequently 'practical wisdom'. These apparently small differences between British and American speakers underscore the cultural nature of 'wisdom'. Even speakers of the same language show different tendencies in their use of the word and it is safe to assume that the linguistic habits reflect conceptual habits.

- (2) *Scholars gathered **wisdom and knowledge** from the four corners of the world. (BNC)*
- (3) *For ten minutes, the president and the pastors prayed for peace, an economic recovery, protection for U.S. soldiers, and for Obama to be*

*guided by a **wisdom and power** beyond himself.* (COCA)

Who is wise? If we examine the nouns that can be modified by the adjective *wise*, we notice a split between nouns with human referents and inanimate nouns. The top ten collocates for *wise* in the BNC are: *men, man, woman, precaution, decision, counsel, words, move, use, advice* while in COCA we have: *man, men, use, guy, decision, thing, choice, woman, move, guys*. Apparently, English speakers tend to consider men far wiser than women, especially in the US. The frequency of *wise men* is about five times higher than that of the collocation *wise woman*. But noun collocates reveal another feature of the concept 'wisdom'. 'wisdom' is a relational concept, it requires a possessor, or experiencer, and it is not unlimited. It needs an object. The grammar of the word reflects this fact: the adjective *wise* can modify either the possessor, *men* or, more rarely, *women*, or it can modify the object. The list of noun collocates suggests that 'wisdom' is a practical quality (*wise use*) playing an essential in decision making and choice.

- (4) *That part of it is trying to make **wise use** of taxpayer funds.*
(COCA)
- (5) *Taking 'conservation' to mean the **wise use** of resources, this section explores current strategies for the conservation of polar resources.*
(BNC)
- (6) *Is a personal pension a **wise decision**?* (BNC)
- (7) *It seems that most of the students who ignored their remedial placement made a **wise decision**.* (COCA)

This conclusion is supported by the behavior of the adverb *wisely*. What

do we do wisely? According to BNC and COCA, English speakers *use*, *choose*, and *spend* wisely. The Americans have more practical wisdom and they tend to *invest wisely*, while the British, more sensitive to appearances, frequently just *nod wisely*.

- (8) *Like any other 18-to-20-year-old, she didn't **choose wisely** at that point in her life.* (COCA)
- (9) *Let's be more efficient and make the tax payers' money be **used wisely**.* (BNC)
- (10) *I own this joint and, since I've **invested wisely**, I'm set for life.* (COCA)
- (11) *He listened, summed me up and **nodded wisely**.* (BNC)

3.2. Japanese 'chie'

The use of the Japanese word *chie*, suggests that the concept it denotes is very different from English *wisdom*. Like *wisdom*, *chie* is most frequently used as the object of transitive verbs, 1213 examples out of 2637, but the verbs are quite different from those used by English speakers. The top three uses of the noun CHIE are with the verbs *kasu* (貸す) 'lend', *kudasaru* (くださる) 'give, honorific' (180) and *shiboru* (絞る) 'squeeze' (114). The value represented by the word *chie* seems to be a resource that can be borrowed, shared (*dashiau* (出し合う) 'pool resources' is the 5th most frequent collocate of *chie*), given and received.

- (12) *dekiru-dake* *hayaku* *chie-o* *kashite* *kudasai*.
 as soon as possible fast wisdom lend please
 出来るだけ早くお知恵をお貸し下さい。
 'Lend me wisdom as soon as you can.'

- (13) *chie-o o-kari shitai-desu.*
 wisdom borrow do
 知恵をお借りしたいです。
 ‘I would like to borrow some wisdom.’

Whereas the English collocations suggest the speakers’ cautious attitude towards conventional wisdom and the need for individual judgment, you have to *make your own wise choices*, the Japanese language reveals trust in the collectively accumulated resource. As a matter of fact, when *chie* is too active, when it is put to work by the individual, it tends to become slightly disreputable, as suggested by examples (14-15).

- (14) *warui chie-o hatarakaseru*
 bad wisdom work-causative
 悪い知恵を働かせる
 ‘Be up to no good./ Have wicked thoughts.’
- (15) *warui houmen-ni chie-ga hataraku*
 bad direction wisdom work
 悪い方面に知恵がはたらく。
 ‘Be cunning when it comes to bad things.’

As a resource, ‘chie’ is valuable and should be managed properly, used to the last drop.

- (16) *chie-o shibora-nakute-ikenai.*
 wisdom squeeze-must
 知恵を絞らなくていけない。
 ‘(I/we) must come up with some good ideas.’

- (17) *soko-de karera-wa chie-o shibori-ni shibotta*
 there they wisdom squeeze-to squeezed

そこで彼らは知恵を絞りに絞った。

‘At that point they racked their brains.’

Adjectival modifiers come to strengthen the conclusion that ‘chie’ is eminently good. NINJAL registers 81 examples where *chie* is modified by *ii* or *yoi* ‘good’ and only one with *warui* ‘bad’ as modifier. Other frequent modifiers are *fukai* ‘deep’, *subarashii* ‘wonderful’ and *tadashii* ‘correct’.

The use exemplified in (16) and (17) above reveals another feature of ‘chie’, its fluid quality. The verb *shiboru* ‘squeeze’, used in its literal sense, means extracting a liquid from an object.

- (18) *karuku mizuke-o shiboru.*
 gently liquid squeeze

軽く水けを絞る。

Gently squeeze the liquid out of it.

Incidentally, one of the most frequent compounds with *chie* is *chiebukuro* ‘a wisdom purse’, referring to the possessor of ‘chie’. Does ‘chie’, like other liquids, take the shape of its container, adapt to each specific situation? The answer seems to be ‘Yes’. Although Japanese grammar does not distinguish between count and mass nouns, if it did, *chie* would definitely be a countable noun. The second most frequent modifying pattern for *chie* recorded in NINJAL involves numeral modifiers, illustrated in (19) below.

- (19) *dai-yon-no chie-ga wakarimashita-ka*
 fourth wisdom understand-?

第四の知恵がわかりましたか？

‘Have you understood the fourth rule?’

This use is quite frequent online:

- (20) *sutoresu-o kuruku suru 32-no chie*
 stress light make 32-of wisdom

ストレスを軽くする 32 の知恵

‘32 tips to relieve your stress’

- (21) *jinsei-o kaeru kokonotsu-no chie*
 life change nine-of wisdom

人生を変える 九つの知恵

‘Nine tips that will change your life’

It is fairly obvious that *chie* functions as a result nominal. Rather than the mental quality responsible for good judgment, it seems to refer to the set of behaviors dictated by good judgment. It is better translated as ‘tips for.’ than as ‘wisdom.’ Tips are specific procedures suitable to specific situations. This characteristic of the word *chie* sets it apart from the English word *wisdom*, which is clearly a mass noun. There are no plural *wisdoms* varying from one situation to another. But the material consequences of using ‘wisdom’ are valued by English speakers too. The *words of wisdom* are also referred to as *pearls of wisdom* or *nuggets of wisdom*. However, there is a tongue-in-cheek quality to these classifiers and they can easily be turned from praise into sarcasm.

- (22) *Not only does the text tend to be repetitious but each item of gear if*

*prefaced by an otherwise blank page informing us of the Key Point to be gleaned in that section, **pearls of wisdom** such as: 'A file is useful for sharpening the edges of your... hooks. You can buy a fine metal file at any hardware store' or Superglue is not healthy. (BNC)*

(23) *The Plowden Report on Control of Public Expenditure contained, amongst other **nuggets of wisdom**, the following sentence which I should like to take as my starting-point: 'The social changes of the last fifteen years have altered the incidence of hardship, so that there now may well be excessive social services for some purposes and inadequate ones for others.'* (BNC)

In Japan, 'wisdom' is usually someone else's and the proprietor is a respected person as suggested by the frequency of the honorific prefix *o-* with the noun *chie*. 209 out of 228 examples involved the use of the prefix, followed by *aku-* 'evil' with 8 examples. This contrasts with the personal, agentive quality of English *wisdom* discussed above. English speakers are suspicious when it comes to accepting the conventional, collective wisdom but appear to set value on the ability to use wisdom individually in the process of decision-making.

4. Conclusions

As the brief discussion of the linguistic properties of the nouns *wisdom* and *chie* shows, there are reasons to think that English speakers and Japanese speakers work with very different concepts and that meaning risks to get seriously distorted in translation. As repeatedly pointed out in Wierzbicka (2003, 2006), now that English has become the global

language and the language of scientific dialogue, many of the assumptions underlying claims both in public life and in science are couched in terms that depend on the quirks of the English language and reflect the cultural values of its speakers. Words like *emotion*, *justice* or *fairness* are not names for universal concepts but English cultural words. The same could be said about wisdom. The English word reflects the individualistic, entrepreneurial, pioneering spirit valued in what Wierzbicka refers to Anglo-culture. The word *chie*, on the other hand, expresses the collaborative, self-effacing, flexible attitude so frequent in Japanese culture. Returning to the role of educators in the 21st century, I have difficulty choosing. Which should be my goal, 'wisdom' or 'chie'? I think I will have to look at some more languages before making up my mind.

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