

Cultural significance of *patria* in the Spanish language

In Chapter 4 of *Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words* by Anna Wierzbicka, we studied the significance of four different words for “homeland” in German, Polish and Russian. Because I have some experience in Spanish, I chose to research the word *patria*, which could be compared to these words we read about. According to wordreference.com, *patria* means:

1. Tierra natal o adoptiva ordenada como nación o país, a la que se pertenece por vínculos afectivos, históricos o jurídicos.
'Birthplace or adopted land like a nation or country, which carries emotional, historical or legal ties.'
2. Lugar, ciudad o país en que se ha nacido.
'Place, city or country in which you were born.'

The first definition shows that *patria* does not have to signify a birthplace. The use of the word “adopted” demonstrates that someone may take a place where they are not originally from and make it their own. However, a birthplace may also qualify as someone’s *patria*, as shown in the second definition. This explanation also makes it clear that *patria* does not necessarily indicate a country.

I found another thought-provoking understanding of *patria* from the Spanish website “Concepto de:”

La patria, es el lugar en el que por una razón histórica, cultural, afectiva, política, religiosa, ideológica o de cualquier motivo le genera un afecto y un vínculo al individuo. En algunos casos hasta podría suceder que la patria de una persona sea un lugar en el que jamás ha estado físicamente (el sionismo es un movimiento internacional que propone a la tierra de Israel como patria para todos los judíos del mundo, lo que hace que muchos la sienten propia aún sin haber estado jamás allí).

‘The *patria*, is the place for which a historical, cultural, emotional, political, religious, or ideological reason generates an affection and a link to the individual. In some cases, it may be that someone’s *patria* is a place in which they have never physically been before (Zionism is an international movement that proposes that the land of Israel is the *patria* for all Jews in the world, making many people feel this without ever having been there).’

This definition presses the point that *patria* is about a connection outside of a place where someone was born or even anywhere they have been. I have never thought that the American version of “homeland” could be appropriate for a place one has never visited, so this definition of *patria* shows how literal translations do not always allow for equivalent meanings between different languages.

As I am not a fluent Spanish speaker and do not know the cultural connotations of words, I thought to ask a native Spanish speaker for their interpretation of the word *patria*. I have been Skyping with a student in Mexico every week for my Spanish class, so I used that opportunity to gain a better insight into this word. Fernanda told me that to her, a *patria* is somewhere that a person was born or has spent many years of their life. She said that one should love their *patria* and want good things for it. She told me that *patria* is more like a feeling than a geographical location. I then asked her the meaning of the term *tierra natal*, which translates directly to “native land.” In contrast to *patria*, Fernanda said that *tierra natal* only represents a country where a person was born, but it has no personal meaning. It was interesting to get a native speaker’s impressions of these words because I have heard *tierra natal* used as a term for “homeland.” However, the definitions that I have learned in Spanish class have been textbook or dictionary definitions, and therefore do not carry as much cultural meaning as a native speaker’s account of the word.

Patria is very similar to the German word *Vaterland* in the simplest sense. “[Patria,] which also stands for country, land, and nation, is a very powerful male word meaning father, fatherland, or land of the fathers” (Cruz-Janzen). Both *patria* and *Vaterland* have the same direct translation to “fatherland”

and also do not always convey a birthplace. On the other hand, the two words have different moral imperatives implied to their respective native lands. *Vaterland* entails a strong sense of duty to one's country, as expressed in part (k) of its summary: "if this country wants me to do something, I have to do it" (Wierzbicka). To contextualize the concept, Wierzbicka explains that "one's *Vaterland* is like a wonderful father who can demand things from one and whom one must willingly obey." I do not get the same sense of obligation in the word *patria*. The central concept is a personal link to a place, not being duty-bound to serve your country. However, I do see a sense of loyalty and willingness to serve the homeland, as shown in many Latin American countries' national anthems. For example, the Costa Rican anthem says,

Noble patria, tu hermosa bandera
¡Salve oh tierra gentil, salve oh madre de amor!
Cuando alguno pretenda tu gloria manchar,
Verás a tu pueblo, valiente y viril
La tosca herramienta en arma trocar.

Noble homeland, your beautiful flag
Hail gentle country, hail loving mother!
If anyone should attempt to besmirch your glory,
You will see your people, valiant and virile,
Exchange their rustic tools for weapons.

Cuba's anthem makes a stronger statement that shows its eagerness to fight for the country:

Al combate, corred, bayameses,
Que la Patria os contempla orgullosa;
No temáis una muerte gloriosa,
Que morir por la Patria es vivir.

Hasten to battle, men of Bayamo,
For the homeland looks proudly to you.
You do not fear a glorious death,
Because to die for the country is to live.

Nowhere have I read that people *must* sacrifice things for their *patria*. These national anthems contain some of the countries' most powerful ideals but even Cuba's anthem does not speak to all Cubans, telling them something that they are compelled to do. The difference in expectations of one's duty to their homeland is one of the main distinctions that separates *Vaterland* and *patria*.

To summarize the meaning of *patria*, I will attempt to create a definition using universal concepts, as Wierzbicka has done for each of her words.

patria

- (a) a place
- (b) I am like a part of this place
- (c) this place is like a part of me
- (d) I feel something very good when I think about this place
- (e) I think something like this when I think about this place:
- (f) I want good things for this place
- (g) I want to do good things for this place
- (h) I couldn't feel like this about any other place
- (i) this place is like a person
- (j) many other people feel the same way about this place
- (k) these people are like the children of this place
- (l) these people are like a part of this place

Component (a) shows that *patria* is not necessarily a country or a birthplace. It is simply a place. Parts (b) and (c) express the oneness that the individual has with their *patria*. Positive feelings towards this place are reflected in parts (d), (f), and (h) while a willingness to help this place is described in component (g). The concept of the land as a father figure is brought up in component (i). Parts (j), (k), and (l) demonstrate how this concept is true for a group of people.

Learning about a word's significance beyond its literal meaning and translation gives us an insight into the word's culture. Many words hold powerful ideals that are not attainable through a dictionary or online translator. I learned the cultural context of the word *patria* and how it is unique compared to any other version of "homeland" that we have studied, although they may all literally translate to the same word. Through gaining cultural experience and examining the connotations of specific words, we may achieve a better understanding of the similarities and differences between the societies of the world.

Works Cited

- Alvarez, Fernanda. "Cultural Significance of "patria"" Online interview. 22 Oct. 2014.
- "Concepto De Patria." *Concepto.de*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- "Costa Rica." *Nationalanthems.info*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- Cruz-Janzen, Marta I. (2007) "Madre Patria (Mother Country): Latino Identity and Rejections of Blackness," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 6.
- "Cuba." *Nationalanthems.info*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- "Definición De Patria." *Definición ABC -- Tu Diccionario Hecho Fácil*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- "The Motherland, Fatherland, Homeland. Who Decides?" *Straight Dope Message Board*. N.p., Dec. 2013. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- "Patria." *WordReference.com -- Online Language Dictionaries*. N.p., n.d. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. "Lexicon as a Key to History, Nation, and Society: "Homeland" and "Fatherland" in German, Polish, and Russian." *Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. N. pag. Print.