

RESEARCH NOTES

**Linguistic Means of Homeland Characterization in
M. A. Asturias's Mister President**

**Medios lingüísticos de caracterización de la patria en el señor
presidente de M. A. Asturias**

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Abstract

The present research is devoted to the concept ‘patria’ (homeland) analysis in the Nobel Prize-winning Guatemalan writer Miguel Angel Asturias’s novel *El señor presidente* (*Mister President*). The verbalizations of the studied concept in the novel are counted and their linguistic context is analysed. The totalitarian society described by the writer is not fully fictional. The dictatorship of Estrada Cabrera, though unnamed in the novel, is depicted. The linguistic realization of the studied concept is based on two groups of antithesis. The perception of homeland by real patriots, who are now considered the traitors of their homeland, and that of the people, who conform to the current conditions, but it is obvious that they are the ones who are ready to betray. The second antithesis is the fear of the president and calling the president the honoured citizen, the father and the defender of the homeland. The analysis of the linguistic means used to verbalize the concept ‘homeland’ in the studied novel shows that the said concept can be used by a totalitarian society as a tool of manipulation. Further analysis of the concept ‘homeland’ in other literary works by the authors writing in Spanish and belonging to different Hispanic countries will reveal the linguistic differences of the national variants of Spanish.

Keywords: homeland, Asturias, Mister President, concept, linguistic world image.

Resumen

La presente investigación está dedicada al análisis del concepto de patria en la novela *El señor presidente* del escritor guatemalteco Miguel Ángel Asturias, ganador del Premio Nobel. Se cuentan las verbalizaciones del concepto estudiado en la novela y se analiza su contexto lingüístico. La sociedad totalitaria descrita por el escritor no es completamente ficticia. Se describe la dictadura de Estrada Cabrera, aunque no se menciona en la novela. La realización lingüística del concepto estudiado se basa en dos grupos de antítesis. La percepción de la patria por parte de los verdaderos patriotas, que ahora son considerados los traidores de su patria, y la del pueblo, que se conforma a las condiciones actuales, pero es obvio que son ellos los que están dispuestos a traicionar. La segunda antítesis es el miedo al presidente y llamar al presidente el ciudadano de honor, el padre y el defensor de la patria. El análisis de los medios lingüísticos utilizados para verbalizar el concepto "patria" en la novela estudiada muestra que dicho concepto puede ser utilizado por una sociedad totalitaria como herramienta de manipulación. Un análisis más profundo del concepto "patria" en otras obras literarias de los autores que escriben en español y pertenecen a diferentes países hispanos revelará las diferencias lingüísticas de las variantes nacionales del español.

Palabras clave: patria, Asturias, señor presidente, concepto, imagen del mundo lingüístico.

Introduction

Recently, the importance of the “impact of a language on people’s interaction” has been in the focus of a great number of investigations (Dunyasheva et al., 2016). Differences between languages are much deeper than it can be imagined. But not only different languages have their peculiarities. We can find them within one language as well. Scholars worldwide indicate differences of the Spanish language national variants. Thus, for example, Yakubova et al. say that “every Spanish-speaking Caribbean country along with the Castilian Spanish has its own language variant that contains dialectal elements and that has experienced the influence of the indigenous substrate” (Yakubova et al., 2016). Besides, languages develop and change with the course of time. Registration and description of such changes is also important, because it can help scholars to track such changes, to compare the functioning of the language in different epochs and cultures, and to promote the development of linguistics in whole.

Fiction serves good material for the registration of such changes – it shows us a language in a fixed period of time and reflects the peculiarities of a certain culture. In this research we’ve chosen the Guatemalan writer Miguel Angel Asturias’s novel *El señor presidente* (*Mister President*) as the source of our study.

The idea of the book was prompted to the author by the life itself – in his childhood Asturias witnessed the dictatorship of Estrada Cabrera. And even after Cabrera’s fall he couldn’t publish his novel because a new tyrant came to power, Jorge Ubico (Ferrer Plaza, 2007). Being away from Guatemala, Asturias then joined the Parisian Bohemia (Morales, 1996).

It is not by chance we’ve chosen a book describing dictatorship to investigate the representation of the concept ‘homeland’. The fact is that the notion of homeland is very often cultivated in tyrannies. Like F. Dürrenmatt said in his *Romulus the Great*, “A state always calls itself fatherland when it is ready for murder” (Dürrenmatt, 1950). And very often the notion of ‘homeland’ can be found in the military context. Thus, E. O. Zalyaeva et al. mention about the presence of the concept ‘homeland’ in the text of Military Oath (Zalyaeva et al., 2016).

Methods

The present research was carried out according to the steps of a concept analysis in a literary work suggested by A. Kayumova et al. (Kayumova et al., 2019). Thus, the continuous sampling method was used to select all the references to the concept ‘patria’ (homeland) in Miguel Angel Asturias’s novel *Mister President* – all the cases, when the lexeme ‘patria’ figures in the novel, were selected and grouped into logical groups according to their meaning. Then the descriptive method was used to characterize the linguistic context of the concept ‘patria’ in the novel, as “the linguistic picture of the world, which is embedded in human languages, is employed to describe the world in which we live with all of its natural laws, human experiences and activities” (Uberman, 2018). The methods of semantic and stylistic interpretation were used to interpret the data obtained.

Results and Discussion

The central character of the novel *Mister President* is a person named Miguel Cara de Angel, the right hand man of a tyrannical president. The president always acts through his people, as R. Cardoso points out, in such universe, where those, who possess power, can do anything they want, the President never gets his own hands dirty (Cardoso, 2017). As long as his people are fully devoted to him and execute his orders, they can do whatever they like – they are free to torture or to kill men, to rape women, to steal money (not from the president, of course). But every action or even thought against the president is severely punished by the latter. Thus, Miguel Cara de Angel is unofficially allowed to kidnap and to rape the daughter of the president’s enemy. He is even forgiven for marrying her, but at the very same moment, when the president discovers that Cara de Angel loves his wife so much, that this feeling is stronger than his loyalty to the president, the former right hand man is doomed. The president (acting through the others, as usual) destroys him with all the violence imaginable and unimaginable, hypocritically ‘forgiving’ the woman – his enemy’s daughter and his traitor’s wife.

The studied concept of ‘homeland’ can be found 18 times in the novel, and mostly in the political context connected with the idea that the president has absolute power in the country.

The word ‘patria’ is defined by dictionaries as “tierra natal o adoptiva ordenada como nación, a la que se siente ligado el ser humano por vínculos jurídicos, históricos y afectivos” (*native or adoptive land organized as a nation, to which a human being feels attached by legal, historic and affectionate links*) (<https://dle.rae.es>). It has the following synonyms: “País. Tierra. Nación. Pueblo. Cuna. Suelo natal. Natío. Nido. Origen. Nacionalidad. Naturaleza. Naturalidad. Abanderamiento. Patria celestial: cielo, gloria. Patria chica: término, pueblo” (Sainz de Robles, 1968). But none of the synonyms fully coincides in its meaning with ‘patria’.

According to the definition suggested by the dictionary, tender sentiments toward one’s homeland are natural for a person. And we can find such sincere affection for homeland in one of the characters, general Eusebio Canales, the person, who has made the same mistake Miguel Cara de Angel will make – his love towards his homeland, his truth have become stronger than his loyalty to the president. When general Canales speaks or thinks about his homeland, the linguistic

context suggests bitterness or sorrow, because all the good things are mentioned in the past tense, and the present is perceived negatively: “ todo lo que él amaba con ternura de niño, patria, familia, recuerdos, tradiciones, y Camila, su hija – *everything he loved tenderly from his childhood, homeland, family, memories, traditions, and Camila, his daughter*” (Asturias, 1999); “Los ciudadanos que anhelaban el bien de la patria están lejos – *The citizens who were longing for the prosperity of their homeland are far away*” (Asturias, 1999); “Así abracé a tu madre cuando salí a la última guerra en defensa de la patria – *Thus I embraced your mother, when I was leaving for the last war to defend my homeland*” (Asturias, 1999); “un hombre que salvó a la Patria de uno de los muchos bandidos – *a man, who saved his Homeland from one of the many bandits*” (Asturias, 1999). Such attitude is not shared or even understood by the representatives of the hypocritical society depicted in the novel and provokes mockery: “¿La patria? ¡Sálvese, general, yo sé lo que le digo: qué patria ni qué india envuelta! – *Homeland? Save yourself, general, I know what I say: what the hell homeland!*” (Asturias, 1999). A man who values homeland higher than his own life is no longer welcomed, as he is not capable of feeling fear, necessary in his society to be considered a ‘reliable’ person.

The hypocrisy of the described society is revealed through the antithesis of the honest general Canales’s perception of homeland with his deep feelings and the hypocrisy of the pompous, but vain mentioning of homeland by those, who have not fallen from the president’s grace yet. Thus, the president himself is referred to as “Presidente de la República, Benemérito de la Patria, Jefe del Gran Partido Liberal y Protector de la Juventud Estudiosa – *President of the Republic, Honoured Citizen of the Homeland, Head of the Great Liberal Party and Defender of the Assiduous Youth*” (Asturias, 1999); or “la Patria se habría quedado huérfana de padre y protector – *our Homeland would have become an orphan without its father and defender*” (Asturias, 1999).

In an emotional speech on the occasion of a celebration an unpleasant man announces things like: “¡Viva la Patria! – *Long live the Homeland!*” (Asturias, 1999); “Como ciudadanos libres, conscientes de la obligación en que estamos de velar por nuestros destinos, que son los destinos de la Patria... – *As free citizens, realizing our obligation to keep watchful guard of our destinies, that are the destinies of our Homeland...*” (Asturias, 1999); “¡Patriotas, mi pensamiento es de Poeta, de ciudadano mi lengua patria! – *Patriots, my thoughts are those of a Poet, and my patriotic language is that of a citizen*” (Asturias, 1999); “nuestra adorada Patria – *our adored Homeland*” (Asturias, 1999); “Patriotas, compatriotas – *patriots, compatriots*” (Asturias, 1999).

People, who are considered to have betrayed their homeland are equated with thieves or exploiters: “una casta de ladrones, explotadores y **vendepatrias** – *a caste of thieves, blood-suckers and homeland traitors*” (Asturias, 1999). They are mentioned more than once, and always with strongly negative connotation: “malos hijos de la Patria – *bad sons of the Homeland*” (Asturias, 1999), “traidor a la Patria – *traitor of the Homeland*” (Asturias, 1999).

Conclusions

The analysis of the linguistic means used to verbalize the concept ‘homeland’ in Miguel Angel Asturias’s novel *El señor presidente* proves the famous statement of Dürrenmatt that “A state always calls itself fatherland when it is ready for murder” (‘fatherland’ is a traditional translation of the same concept from German into English, and can be regarded as a synonym of ‘homeland’). Further analysis of the concept ‘homeland’ in other literary works will help us to understand the perception of this concept by the representatives of different cultures, speaking different languages or sharing one language, in particular, to understand the linguistic differences of the national variants of Spanish.

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