

# Electronic Corpora and Dictionary Definitions: the Word “Patriotism” in COCA and Online Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Maria Konovalova & Igor Tolochin

Keywords: *Merriam-Webster, patriotism, COCA, word meaning.*

## Abstract

The article analyses the word ‘**patriotism**’ in the Contemporary Corpus of American English (COCA) and the results are compared with the definition of the same word in the Online Merriam-Webster Dictionary. The comparison points out that one of the most comprehensive dictionaries of American English does not provide a consistent and clear structure of the senses of the word ‘**patriotism**’ as it is used today. Some suggestions for the improvement of the definition are offered.

The corpora materials are used by lexicographers as a basic source for writing dictionary definitions; however, modern dictionaries do not represent the corpora materials to the full extent. To illustrate this, we have chosen the Contemporary Corpus of American English (COCA) (2) and Merriam-Webster on-line dictionary (1). We have analyzed the word ‘**patriotism**’ as a key word in American culture (3). Our research is aimed at outlining the principles of working with corpora that will help write more precise dictionary definitions.

According to the information provided on the COCA website, ‘COCA is the largest freely-available corpus of English, and the only large and balanced corpus of American English. It was created by Mark Davies of Brigham Young University, and it is used by tens of thousands of users every month (linguists, teachers, translators, and other researchers). COCA is also related to other large corpora’ (2).

‘The corpus contains more than 425 million words of text and is equally divided among spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts. It includes 20 million words each year from 1990-2011 and the corpus is also updated once or twice a year (the most recent texts are from March 2011). Because of its design, it is perhaps the only corpus of English that is suitable for looking at current, ongoing changes in the language’ (2).

The corpus gives the opportunity to check out examples for each year and for each genre or for a combination of particular year and genre. All genres (Spoken English, newspapers, magazines, fiction and academic) are equally represented with percentage of examples differing for each word, as each word has a particular pattern of usage. As to the word ‘**patriotism**’, there are 2304 examples in COCA. There are 478 examples of Spoken English, 129 from fiction, 437 from magazines, 475 from newspapers, and 785 from academic texts.

‘The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary is based on the print version of Merriam-Webster's Collegiate® Dictionary, Eleventh Edition. The online dictionary includes the main A-Z listing of the Collegiate Dictionary, as well as the Abbreviations, Foreign Words and Phrases, Biographical Names, and Geographical Names sections of that book. It also includes 1,000 illustrations and 25 tables. Selected sections of the print Collegiate Dictionary, notably the Signs and Symbols section, are omitted from the online Collegiate Dictionary because they include special characters and symbols that cannot readily be reproduced in HTML’ (1).

This dictionary is constantly updated and revised. It belongs to the most representative and comprehensive lexicographical sources of the English language in the US available to users and scholars today. As it is stated in its Preface, the dictionary ‘...is meant to serve the general public as its chief source of information about the words of our language’ (1).

The Merriam-Webster Online dictionary offers the following definition:

**‘patriotism:** *love for or devotion to one's country. You may not agree with him politically, but no one can question his patriotism. They supported the war with a fierce patriotism*’ (2).

The structure of the definition implies that the word is polysemous (marker ‘*or*’). However, the difference between ‘*love for*’ and ‘*devotion to*’ is not clear from the definition. Nor is it clear how these two components are relevant for the word's usage.

The corpus gives 138 results for the collocation ‘*love of country*’ versus 45 for ‘*love for country*’, which is three times less. Surprisingly, the authors of the dictionary choose the less frequent collocation for the definition.

The analysis of the typical contexts for ‘*love of*’ and ‘*love for*’ in COCA has shown that the collocation ‘*love of*’ (5535 results in the corpus) indicates a more rational feeling based on a motivated choice and is more often used with the words ‘*life*’ (530 results), ‘*God*’ (373 results), ‘*music*’ (156 results), ‘*country*’ (138 results) and ‘*game*’ (137 results).

There are 3391 results for the collocation ‘*love for*’ in the corpus. It indicates a more irrational feeling based on powerful personal attraction and is most often used with the proper names and pronouns like ‘*her*’ (269 results), ‘*him*’ (156 results), ‘*each other*’ (106 results) and ‘*me*’ (106 results).

‘2001 (20010923) How Do You Explain September 11 Attacks to Your Children? CNN\_SunMorn

*This school is stressing the need to pull together, being better helpers, talking about patriotism, about love of country, and being guardians of its future*’ (1).

In this typical example, the word ‘**patriotism**’ and the collocation ‘*love of country*’ refer to the urge to coordinate one’s actions with the commitment to certain social ideals (‘*being better helpers*’, ‘*guardians of its future*’).

‘1995 (19951108) Text of Powell's Announcement Not To Run for President ABC\_Breaking

*I have a deep love for this country that has no bounds*’.

Here, the collocation ‘*love for country*’ is used to denote the overwhelming feeling which is breaking the borders of rational thought (marker ‘*has no bounds*’) (1).

Thus, the authors of Merriam-Webster define the word ‘**patriotism**’ as an irrational feeling, considering this component of its meaning to be the most important one. At the same time, the authors of the dictionary see the semantic core of the word ‘**patriotism**’ as a strong irrational attraction to the institutions of the state; the latter context is considerably more frequent in COCA.

There are 10 results for the collocation ‘*devotion to country*’ in the corpus. There are 4 results for the word ‘*devotion*’ in the 5 words limit before and after the word ‘*patriotism*’.

‘2004 (20040530) Letters from the Front; Letters from soldiers killed in Iraq NBC\_Dateline

*They were written by men and women in Iraq who gave that last full measure of devotion to the country and families they loved*’ (1).

The collocation ‘*devotion to the country*’ is used to denote the strong positive emotion towards one’s country. The family and the country are of the same importance (marker ‘*and*’). This context characterizes the word ‘**patriotism**’ as a powerful emotion rather than an element of a rationally structured value judgment.

The first example of the word '**patriotism**' provided by the dictionary is the collocation '*question one's patriotism*' (37 results in the corpus): '*You may not agree with him politically, but no one can question his patriotism*' (2). This example represents the political context for the word '**patriotism**'. The word '**patriotism**' stands for a positive character trait of an individual committed to the core political ideals. This context is quite frequent in the corpus (about 50% of all contexts).

'2006 (20060822) NEWS; Pg. A1 Title *Bush defends policy: ^We^re not leaving, so long as I'm president^*; Marc Sandalow, Washington Bureau Chief San Francisco Chronicle  
# *Bush was careful to say he did not question the patriotism of those who oppose his policy, saying ' they're just as American as I am. ' # ' I just happen to strongly disagree with them'* (1).

The situation takes place in the USA ('*Bush*', '*American*'). The word '**patriotism**' is used in a political context ('*President Bush defending his policy*'). The person who has the feeling of '**patriotism**' does not need to agree with the government policy ('*those who oppose his policy*'). This example outlines such American values as the freedom of speech and the respect of opinion differences ('*they're just as American as I am. ' # ' I just happen to strongly disagree with them'*). In such contexts '**patriotism**' stands for a set of rational principles for making important political choices for the benefit of America.

The first example in the dictionary and the corresponding corpus examples have no connection with the definition '*love for or devotion to*'. First of all, the phrase '*love for or devotion to*' signifies the irrational urge as based on strong personal attraction, whereas the word '**patriotism**' in this context denotes the logical and rational readiness to perform one's civic duty.

The second example ('*They supported the war with a fierce patriotism*' (2)) denotes the war context, in which '**patriotism**' represents the positive attitude to and a strong emotional support for the military actions performed by the government (markers '*war*' and '*fierce*'). The word '**patriotism**' is used to express the state of irrational urge; the word '*fierce*' designates the intensity and emotional rather than rational positive motivation in the situation of a war conflict.

There are 4 results for the collocation '*fierce patriotism*' in the corpus.

'1991 (Dec) Vol. 22 Issue 9, p16, 3p, 1bw *Around the Mall and beyond. Park, Edwards Smithsonian*  
*Driven by fierce patriotism, he flew to France in August 1914 with a Lewis machine gun lashed on his feeble Farman two-seater. With it, he tried to attack the first enemy he saw but found his crate was too overloaded to climb higher than 3,500 feet. The Germans, going about their business at 5,000 feet, were apparently unaware of Strange as his gunner angrily sprayed the sky with bullets.'* (1)

This example presents the same structure of the situation as the example from the dictionary. In this example, the irrational nature of the main character's actions is stressed (markers '*feeble Farman two-seater*', '*too overloaded to climb higher than 3,500 feet*', '*gunner angrily sprayed*'). Thus '*fierce patriotism*' is an emotional drive to act without much rational thought. The futility of this emotion is also ironically pointed out in this passage.

There are 52 results for the word '*war*' in the 5 words limit before and after the word '**patriotism**':

'1991 (19910421) AFTER THE WAR; *Pride in Victory Lingers, if Clouded by Middle East Chaos and Kurds' Agony New York Times*  
*'During the war, I was affected by all the patriotism and agreed that the war was necessary, ' said Josie Valderrama, a 17-year-old high school student in Los Angeles. ' Now I*

*think: 'What's so great about what we did? We wiped out an army that didn't have a chance in the first place.'* (1)

In this example the word '**patriotism**' denotes the strong feeling which can make people behave in an irresponsible way they can later regret (marker '*affected by all the **patriotism***'). It is interesting to note the use of the definite article before the word '**patriotism**'. There are 106 results of such use out of the overall number of 2304 results for the word '**patriotism**' in the corpus, which shows that such use is not common.

Thus, the COCA materials allow us to conclude that The Merriam Webster Online Dictionary fails to distinguish between two senses of the word '**patriotism**' in contemporary use: in the political context the word '**patriotism**' is used to denote an element of a rational value judgment, motivating the individual to make decisions for the benefit of America; in the military context, the same word represents a powerful emotional drive to fight the enemy or to support the government's military actions. Moreover, the COCA materials allow us to establish one more sense of this word, which has been overlooked by the Dictionary:

*'2002 (20020704) Interview: Mario Aberle discusses painting the front of his house as the American flag ROBERT SIEGEL NPR\_ATC*

*After September 11th, we went out to try to find a flag so we could show our **patriotism** and our support of the victims, and we couldn't find one, so we ended up painting the entire front of our house as the American flag.'*(1)

The word '**patriotism**' denotes an attachment to rituals involving state symbols (marker '*went out to try to find a flag*'). This type of situation can not be attributed to either of the two senses discussed above; such contexts often demonstrate the evaluative ambivalence of the word '**patriotism**' as it can be used negatively. This sense is common in fiction and political cartoons. For instance,

*'2009 (091125) Pg. B-10 The Open Forum Denver*

*Many of our 'real Americans' who publicly spout their **patriotism** and religiosity hide behind God and the flag to cover up the fact that their greedy, partisan (and indeed, un-American) deeds represent their real agendas' (1).*

Or

*'1995 (19950925) DISCUSSION OF O.J. SIMPSON'S STATEMENT IN COURT, WELFARE AND MEDICARE REFORM Ind\_Limbaugh*

*Actual American people showed up, ladies and gentlemen. And they're waving the flag, proud to illustrate their **patriotism**. But they weren't there with the Democrats when they conducted their own hearings. I mean -- and it's so illustrative. These people are on the outside. They are all wet. They are out in the rain. They are so out of the mainstream now. They make fools of themselves. And they do it on purpose. The Republicans didn't schedule any of that' (1).*

The markers of positive evaluations are '*proud to illustrate their **patriotism***', '*They are all wet*', '*The Republicans didn't schedule any of that*' (1).

The typical markers of this context are '*the nation significantly embraced the flag as a symbol of American **patriotism***', '*to fly the flag more ostentatiously*', '*wearing flag pins*', '*wear an American flag, hang the flag, wear red, white and blue, say "I love America"*', '*take **patriotism** to new length with red, white and blue silk tie*', '*don't burn that flag kid. Someday you may want to wrap yourself in it*', '*a maple-leaf-on-the-sleeve style of **patriotism***', '*flag-waving displays of **patriotism***', '*in a fit of **patriotism** Big Tom has built a twenty-foot replica of the Statue of Liberty*' (1). In such contexts '**patriotism**' is often evaluated negatively as a form

of ritualistic bigotry, which allows us to conclude that American society is currently going through a value conflict with regard to the meaning of the word '**patriotism**'.

To conclude, we can say that the corpus shows that the word '**patriotism**' has three senses:

- 1) Sense 1 patriotism is a positive character trait of an individual committed to the core political ideals ('*We press our demand for the ballot from purest patriotism for the highest good of every citizen, for the safety of the Republic*' (2));
- 2) Sense 2 patriotism is an urge to support the state in a military conflict and manifests itself in waves of strong emotions (may be ambivalent) ('*Russell has always laid claim to a brand of patriotism that's proudly sent boys marching off to war*' (2));
- 3) Sense 3 patriotism is an attachment to rituals involving the state symbols (negative evaluation prevalent) ('*Use of the song in the first year of the Civil War, in fact, marked the first time that the nation significantly embraced the flag as a symbol of American patriotism. Northerners spontaneously unfurled American flags in front of their houses, places of business, churches, schools, and colleges as soon as they learned of the fall of Fort Sumter*' (2)).

The third sense is not recorded in The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. It is also important to note that the word '**patriotism**' is mostly used in the American context.

Our analysis demonstrates that a careful systematic overview of electronic corpora can yield a lot of valuable information about the way the word '**patriotism**' is used in modern American English. Classifying contexts according to typical situations may provide us with a clearer idea about the number of senses a word can have in actual use. Our analysis also allows us to claim that '**patriotism**' has three distinct senses in modern American use and that two of them (sense 2 and sense 3) are characterized by the evaluative ambivalence of the word in similar contexts. The latter may be interpreted as an indication of a value conflict in American society today.

## References

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