

# Bienvenidos a Costa Rica, la tierra de la pura vida: A Study of the Expression “pura vida” in the Spanish of Costa Rica

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Es una historia sobre vidas en estado puro. Es pura vida.

## 1. Introduction

The quotation above, roughly translated to be “It is a story of lives that are in a pure state. It is pura vida” is taken from the award-winning novel entitled *Pura Vida* by José María Mendiluce, which is set in and dedicated to Costa Rica. Its title is one of many examples of the popularity and ubiquity of the phrase “pura vida” in the Spanish of Costa Rica. To give the most basic definition of the phrase, the invariant semantic content or “core meaning” as per Lawrence Schoroup (1999) would be to say that the expression means literally pure life, a good life. Use of the expression is very positive and includes the speaker and the hearer in the understanding that things are very good.

This paper is an examination the uses of the expression “pura vida” in the Spanish of Costa Rica, using sociolinguistic methodology, discourse analysis and language and identity analysis. This phrase “pura vida” along with other features, such as the palatalization of [r], use of “vos” instead of “tu” for second person singular, and the lexical items “tuanis” –cool- and “mahe” –dude-are unique to and characteristic of the Spanish of Costa Rica. These observable linguistic traits serve within the country, throughout Central America and indeed in many parts of the world to identify the speaker’s nationality. “Pura vida” was chosen for analysis because it occurs abundantly in speech, (both making it easy to observe and perhaps causing it to exist below the level of consciousness), because it seems to serve a function in organizing and managing conversations, and because it appears to do work socially both in maintaining relationships and in constructing identities. “Pura vida” seems to be a verbal device that is drawn upon to illustrate an inter-personal connection; an immediate way to connect; to allude to a shared set of beliefs and way of viewing the world. It is used when the speaker believes that he or she is in the presence of someone who shares his/her cultural experience. This preliminary investigation will identify and examine the various uses of this phrase, understanding first how they function at the level of discourse in managing and organizing spontaneous conversations. Furthermore, this phrase will be considered as a social tool for establishing and maintaining relationships and for creating and expressing identity and solidarity.

### 1.1 Management of Discourse

Essential to the field of Sociolinguistics is the observation of speech as it is actually used in everyday communication. An understanding of language use can help to better understand the speakers themselves and their culture, as the social function of language is to establish, maintain and adjust our relationships with others. Discourse markers are of particular interest in understanding the social and dynamic nature of language in that they rarely occur in written and carefully prepared speech; rather, they occur spontaneously and abundantly in oral conversations. They are frequent in spontaneous talk because that is where people need help organizing and expressing ideas (Fox &

Schrock 1999). Their dynamic nature reflects the fact that they occur when speakers are face to face, and are confronted with all of the social components of talk.

## 1.2 Is “*pura vida*” a Discourse Marker?

“Pura vida” is similar to other discourse markers that have been studied, in that it can serve to call the listener’s attention, to request the hearer’s input, to assist in maintaining a conversation, to mark emphasis, and also to reflect the social hierarchy inherent in any given interaction (Rojas 1999). For Schiffrin (1987) Discourse Markers are a kind of “discourse glue” which typically serve 3 functions: they work as contextual coordinates for utterances by locating them in one or more planes of the discourse model; they index adjacent utterances to the speaker, the hearer, or both; they index adjacent utterances to prior and or subsequent discourse. In examining this expression I will be mindful of these criteria in establishing the discursive nature of “Pura Vida.”

In addition to these functional uses of discourse markers, it is important to note that they serve important social functions as well: Use of “pura vida” diminishes the social distance between two people and reflects a degree of informality, familiarity and confidence. Karla Scott’s study of “Girl” and “Look” in the speech of a community of African American women provides a nice frame for putting this expression in context. She finds that both terms are used as discourse markers to signal a change in speech for the community studied. “Girl” is used when speaking with someone seen as a close friend or someone the speaker believes shares her cultural experience; it is used to embed an in-group message and to signal identity. “Look” on the other hand is used when the speaker feels a need to distance herself from the listener in order to call attention to differences in identity. If these two discourse markers are seen in a continuum, “pura vida” would be closest to the end containing “girl”; it seems to accomplish many of the same social objectives. It identifies the speaker, imbeds an in-group message, and catalogues the utterance as belonging to a very specific type of interaction.

## 2. Methodology

For the purposes of data collection, I placed myself as a participant observer of private and public interaction in the Central Valley of Costa Rica, which includes the cities of San José, Cartago, Grecia, and Escazú. Over the course of three weeks, I collected 68 instances of “pura vida.” I also created and administered a questionnaire about Costa Rican expressions to people of varying ages and socio-economic status throughout San José hoping to elicit attitudes about the expression to further supplement my understanding of the phrase. The first thing that I noticed is that “pura vida” is very salient. It was given by all respondents in response to a request for expressions that are “Costarrican”.

At the Universidad de Costa Rica, I worked with Professors Enrique Margery and Marva Spence within the school of Linguistics both of whom were incredibly generous with their insights and time. Gilda Rosa Arguedas in the Department of English was most generous to share some work that she had done on the “jerga estudiantil” or *student speak*. It is hoped that the results of this preliminary study will highlight the relevant issues surrounding the usage of this expression and will reveal interesting avenues for further research.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1 Discursive Uses of Pura Vida

Although the sample is small, patterns of usage do emerge, which seem to represent distinct discursive functions. It is interesting to note that while many of the functions of this expression may be compared with various expressions found in many other languages, what is interesting is that “pura vida” fulfills many of these functions simultaneously in the Spanish of Costa Rica. Fraser (1990) raises the interesting question, “to what extent do all languages share a basic set of Discourse Markers with the same core pragmatic meaning?” He argues that there are many basic functions that all languages will need to express, and will often employ some sort of discourse marker to meet this

communicative need. These uses of Pura Vida (PV) illustrate many of these possible functions; they are listed in descending order of observed frequency. In my treatment of these discursive functions I have sought to give attention to the parallelism and reciprocity of the functions whenever applicable.

3.2 *Greeting / Leave taking (Hello/Good-Bye)*

“Pura vida” may be used to mark the beginning or the end of an interaction and may be compared to the use of “ciao” as a greeting/ leave taking device in Italian. The following example was observed in a bar as two men were being introduced to each other.

T: Pura Vida / J: Pura Vida

These men were vying for the attentions of same woman, and it may be observed that their greeting is brief and somewhat cursory– effectively conveying that the interaction has begun and ended in the same moment: PV accomplishes both objectives concurrently. Attention should be paid to the reciprocity of this pair, to the Request /Answer pair, and indeed the other discursive pairs which will emerge in this discussion. Given Goffman’s (1969) work on “strategic interaction” reminding us of the crucial importance of both members in a communicative event, I believe it should not be overlooked that the same phrase can be uttered by both participants in an interaction, with similar or different meanings.

The use of PV to mean “Hello/Goodbye” is employed primarily by men in my data. Of eighteen observed tokens, sixteen were used by men, thirteen of these used when a male interlocutor is speaking to male hearers.

3.3 *Request/Answer for State of Being (“How are you?” / “I’m fine, doing well”)*

“Pura vida” may be used as an inquiry into someone’s health or state of being, and may also function as the answer to this request. This may be compared to the expression “ça va” in French which may be either a question or the answer. It is interesting to note that the pragmatic function of this use seems to be something more than simply “how are you?” as illustrated in the following example. A caller into a radio program is asked how she is – she answers that she is well, but the deejay goes on to ask, “but are you PV?”

Deejay: Cómo está Alejandra?	<i>How are you Alejandra?</i>
Alejandra: Bien y Usted	<i>Fine and yourself?</i>
Deejay: Bien. Pura Vida, si?	<i>Good. Pura Vida, yes?</i>
Alejandra: Pura Vida	<i>Pura Vida</i>
Deejay: Ah bueno, que dicha!	<i>Oh good! How fortunate</i>

As is the case with Greeting/Leave Taking, I find that more men than women initiate the use of PV to inquire or answer about state of being. Of sixteen observed tokens, twelve were used by men. Interestingly, the majority of these, eight, were used when the addressee was a woman. Use of PV for this and the prior discursive function are the only ones that show any marked difference in terms of preferred use by men or women, and seem to indicate that the hearer in a given interaction may influence the chosen use of “pura vida”.

With a small sample such as this one, it is at the same impossible and unwise to reach any conclusions about these observations, but the data does suggest that further investigation may prove interesting. The observed distribution of the data begs the social questions of who is allowed to engage in given behaviors and who is allowed to participate in specific social events and what are the settings appropriate for each member of society. If there is an observable gender or even age difference among the different discursive functions of this phrase, these questions would be a necessary part of addressing the issue.

Another factor to take into consideration would be that many of these tokens are taken from observation in public squares, and that many of the tokens were shouted, which raises the question of saliency.

3.4 Adjective/Adverb

“Pura vida” can be used to convey the speaker’s very positive reaction to a situation or a person. Intonation or emphasis may vary, changing the perceived commitment of the speaker to his/her opinion. This category also includes interjections, which seem to have been the original use of this phrase when it came to Costa Rica. In the following example PV receives emphasis.

Doña A: Pero Don H, ¡Ud. se ve muy pura vida!      But *Harold*, you are looking very well!

The pragmatic function is very close to that of “I’m fine, doing well,” after all it is not much of a difference to say that I am doing great or that I think that something is great. However, I maintain that it is important to treat this category separately.

3.5 Agreement

A speaker’s use of “pura vida” illustrates positive acceptance or agreement to a situation, circumstance or proposal. This can be compared to the positive use of “ok” and “whatever” in American English. The degree of commitment may vary and be reflected in intonation and other paralinguistic phenomena.

Muchacha 1: ¡vamos a su casa para las vacaciones!      *Let’s go to your house for vacation*  
Muchacha 2: si , vamos      *Yeah, let’s*  
Muchacha 3: ¡pura vida!      *Pura Vida!*

3.6 Expression of Gratitude / Response to Gratitude (Thank you /You’re welcome)

Use of “pura vida” can also convey gratitude or serve as a response to someone expressing gratitude, much as the expression “ok” in American English can be used neutrally to express “you’re welcome.” At the library, a clerk’s response to my turning in a form to him was “pura vida.”

3.7 Ironic / Negative (Sarcasm)

A speaker’s use of “pura vida” can show a negative reaction to a circumstance, or the speaker may also use the phrase ironically, aware that PV is used when everything is going well, to draw attention when things are not. This may be compared with a negative use of “whatever “ or “ok” in American English. I observed an interaction between two women passing each other at the University. Girl #2 had just dropped her ice-cream cone as #1 poses this question.

Muchacha 1: ¡Díay! ¿cómo me la va?      Hey, how are you doing?  
Muchacha 2: Pura Vida      Pura Vida (dripping with sarcasm)

This use of PV was the least frequently observed; I have only five examples of these, the only uses that are not overwhelmingly positive uses of the phrase. One respondent to the questionnaire told me that Costa Ricans are so accustomed to saying “pura vida” that they will say it even if things are going very badly, unaware themselves that they are being ironic. It is significant that most respondents to the questionnaire told me that there was no meaning of PV that was not extremely positive. This helps us to understand the emblematic nature of the phrase as it is understood by people who employ it.

Although I did not observe this usage in my data, I was also told that PV can be used as a type of threat, for example a person who borrows things frequently may ask you for the tenth time to borrow a pencil from you. When you finally say “no,” this person may respond to you with a threatening intonation of “pura vida.”

## 4 The Social Role of “pura vida”

There is one final observed use of “pura vida” to be discussed, but as the primary function of this last use does not seem to be one of discourse management, I would like to finish the discussion of those treated thus far before proceeding. At this point, I would also like to broaden the discussion to include some of the social factors surrounding the use of this expression. First it should be noted that when queried as to the appropriateness of using “pura vida” in different circumstances, respondents to the questionnaire made it very clear that this expression is to be used in informal situations, and between two people that are friends or between two people that are showing informality and friendliness to one another. According to my respondents, this expression would generally not be used by an employee speaking to her boss, or by the president speaking to a meeting of the congress. In many ways, the distribution of PV may be seen as parallel to that of Usted (2<sup>nd</sup> person formal) versus vos (2<sup>nd</sup> person informal) in the Spanish of Costa Rica. However, in some cases PV may be shown to be used with someone addressed as “Usted.” Obviously, this parallelism with the pronouns of solidarity is not a hard and fast rule, and reflects the fact that social interaction is flexible and always changing. Indeed, some respondents to my questionnaire could not find any situation in which use of “pura vida” would seem inappropriate to them (it should be noted that these were some of the younger informants to the questionnaire).

Understanding these general societal guidelines, it is interesting to observe how a person in a position of power may choose to make use of this expression to minimize social distance for the purpose of showing solidarity. One example was a boss at the supermarket using the phrase to tell his employee that his work was “pura vida.” Another observed use was the wife of the Costa Rican ambassador to Honduras who said in the post-game commentary of a soccer game that the team played “pura vida.” Her choice of expression is not arbitrary: within the social framework its use achieves a very particular objective.

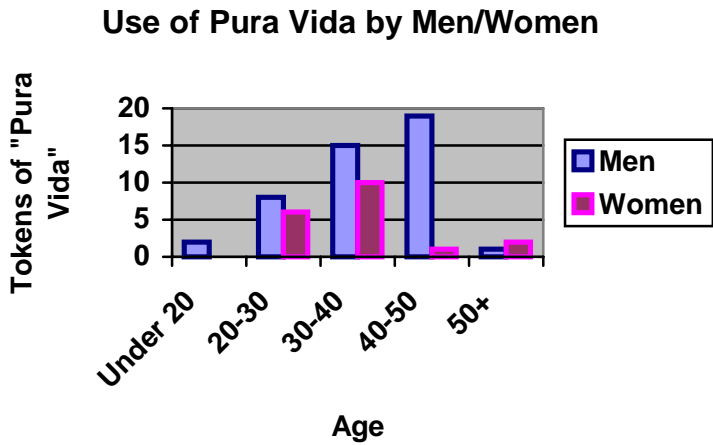
### 4.1 Can PV's myriad of functions be called discourse markers?

There is currently a lack of consensus in the field as to what exactly constitutes a discourse marker. PV as I have shown has many parallels to other Discourse Markers studied, although for Bruce Fraser's (1990), treatment of discourse markers they are seen as a separate lexical category. “Not drawn from a single grammatical source, but reflecting sources from throughout the lexical inventory.” Although they may have a homophonous form that is able to be analyzed differently, [a Discourse Marker] does not serve in both roles in the same sentence, (as is expected were it to have a separate lexical category). By his criteria, and comparing “pura vida” against the criteria of Schifffrin, I would say perhaps this phrase should be not called a discourse marker. It does not seem to pattern with makers such as “ok” in accomplishing a change of topic, although it can be said to index the speaker's reaction to prior discourse. I believe that for this expression the primary role it plays is in establishing relationships and communicating solidarity, and although it manages discourse, this is perhaps secondary to the more important social functions that it serves.

### 4.2 The Origins of the Phrase

A film called *Pura Vida* came from Mexico in 1956, in which “pura vida” is the expression of eternal optimism used by a comic character who unfortunately can't seem to do anything right. The phrase struck a cord in Costa Rica and has been used ever since, according to José Melendez, a Costa

Rican journalist who has done extensive research about the origins of the phrase. He explains that CR was at that time one of the few countries in Central America that had no standing army and was accepting many refugees from neighbors Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador, who told stories of war which seemed so different from life in Costa Rica. The optimism expressed by the phrase seemed to be emblematic of CR, and had caught on widely as a popular expression by the 1970's. It was first used by "pachucos" (a rebellious adolescent group – something akin to what in American English we would term "juvenile delinquents" - whose speech is perceived as "improper" and very informal)



Again, although the data sample collected is very small, the usage of the phrase for men between the ages of 40 and 50 seems to indicate something interesting for examination in a larger study. For this age group, only one woman was observed using the expression. Speakers who are currently in their 40's would have been young kids and teenagers at the time when this phrase was beginning to be employed popularly in the 1970's. Teenagers are often at the vanguard of linguistic change, (Guy 1986) and were indeed the group to first employ this expression popularly in Costa Rica. Because of the fact that this expression was introduced to the community by these pachucos – it seems that the prestige associated with this form was covert. (Labov 1980) It could even be postulated that the phrase has since undergone a semantic shift and originally had something of a vulgar or ironic twist to it. It's unique syntactic construction, given that in Spanish adjectives usually follow nouns, may be further evidence of this, and suggests a parallel to another expression "puta vida" a very vulgar expression, but certainly one that is commonly understood. It certainly seems that at that time use of the phrase was rarely employed by women, and this dispreference for the expression still carries over to the speech of that age group, although no longer holds for the younger population.

Indeed, in every questionnaire respondents first told me that both men and women can use the expression in all of its meanings, although when pressed, a few did admit that perhaps men may tend to use it more. I believe that this is a carryover from the past usage of the phrase, when the phrase was a gender marker, which could be further evidence of a semantic shift.

The phrase is now ubiquitous on T-shirts, as the name of tours, travel agencies, hotels, spas, resorts, books, and even coffee companies. Remarkably, a vendor at a crafts market went so far as to say that "if a person leaves CR without buying a Pura Vida T-shirt, he/she wasn't in CR." This brings me to the last use of the phrase which I am calling the evocative, as it evokes a meaning that is shared, understood and agreed upon by the community. This use of the phrase really gets at the heart of the matter – why this phrase is so popular and what it really means to the people who use it. It is emblematic.

### 4.3 Evocative

A person may use “pura vida” simply for the sake of referring to a shared meaning that is commonly understood by members of the community in Costa Rica. The title of this paper, for example:

Bienvenidos a Costa Rica, la tierra de la pura vida      *Welcome to CR the land of pura vida*  
is a direct quote of the flight attendant as we were landing into the central airport at San José. The fact that this token is a noun is secondary to the objective achieved by choosing to employ it. The flight attendant was translating the captain’s message, which was simply “Welcome to Costa Rica”. When the flight attendant translated he understood that this addition would make sense to many members of his intended audience and that they would respond to it accordingly; and they did – there was laughter on the airplane as he said these words. His deliberate use of this phrase illustrates his awareness of his audience and also calls attention to the role of this phrase as a communicator of ideology and identity for this audience (Bell 1984).

### 4.4 Constructing Identities

A person choosing to use this phrase thus is not only alluding to this shared ideology and identity, he/she is at the same time constructing that identity by means of expressing it. Language is a very important tool of self-construction. “How people talk expresses their affiliations with some and their distancing from others, their embrace of certain social practices and their rejection of others – their claim to membership in certain communities of practice and not others” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1995). Contained within this expression is a collective sense of belonging, an evaluation of the community and a positive identification with it. Therefore a person choosing to evoke this meaning seeks to align himself/herself with it as a member of it, as belonging to it. “Consciously or unconsciously, speakers use speech to signal their sense of themselves as belonging to Group A and being different from Group B.” (Cameron 1995)

One may well ask why a member of this community would be interested in using this phrase to construct an identity. I believe that the mass influx of tourists to Costa Rica whose number increase every year, presents an environment in which it becomes important to be able to draw on a collective sense of identity. Tourism and has now become the mainstay of the country’s economy, more than 769,000 tourists came through the national airport in Costa Rica in 2000. For a country whose population is approximately 3 million, this volume is significant.

### 4.5 The Role of Tourism

Interestingly, the Costa Rican Institute for Tourism (ICT) had just begun an ad campaign when I arrived which was “Costa Rica es Pura Vida:” *Costa Rica is Pura Vida*. At the ICT I spoke with members of the press office who described PV as a natural choice for this advertising campaign. The target audience for this campaign was Costa Ricans, and this phrase would be instantly recognizable by them and understood as expressing something very positive and also something very Costa Rican. PV in this ad is meant to apply to the country, the people, and its atmosphere, and seems to have been very well received by the public. Many of the people that I spoke to with my questionnaire asked me if I had heard it, and seemed to feel that the ad was very appropriate. The ICT’s choice of this particular phrase shows their awareness of people’s attitudes and the role that PV plays in the culture. PV is emblematic of the country, much as the campaign “Oklahoma is OK” effectively encapsulates a feeling about the state. The expression which was quoted to me by one of my respondents in the questionnaire seems to encapsulate this sentiment: “Donde hay un Costarricense en cualquier parte del mundo, hay pura vida.” *Wherever there is a Costa Rican in any part of the world – there is pura vida*.

When originally considering this research project, I understood that this phrase “pura vida” bore an intricate and complicated relationship to tourism. My initial theory was that this phrase was

employed by an older generation of speakers to express and construct an identity as a Costa Rican in the face of an onslaught of tourism and the problems that it brings. I believed that Costa Ricans employ this linguistic device much as the residents of Martha's Vineyard chose to make use of certain phonological variants as a way of expressing community identity and rejection of what is perceived as an outsider's way of life in Labov's (1966) classic study. Firstly, it would require a study infinitely much broader than this one to begin to arrive at any such conclusion, but I also came to realize that the tourism industry's use of this phrase seems to be nothing more than a natural extension of its current use as a communicator and constructor of identity on the society currently. Clearly, there are cultural reasons which make PV a desirable tool for creating and communicating a unified and very positive ideology. The fact that the phrase is used so widely and in such varied ways is a testament to its effectiveness and acceptance. People that create ads such as "Comienze el dia con Tico Tico eggs – Pura Vida" (*Start the day with Tico Tico eggs – Pura Vida!*) are simply good marketers and understand that.

## 5. Subjects for further Research

This small study suggested many avenues which may prove fruitful for further research on this topic. The first thing that I would want to do would be to pay attention to the prosody of this phrase to see if it contained any further information as to pragmatic function. I would also want to have a much larger sample collected over a longer period of time to both test the categories suggested in this research and seek out any new ones that were not observed. Lastly, I would want to better understand if speakers are conscious of why they use this phrase, and would like to put it on the questionnaire. It is a question that I neglected to put on the questionnaire, and although it may prove a very difficult question for informants to answer initially, I feel that it may provide some insight. Clearly the effect of tourism on Costa Rica is also very complicated and further exploration would no doubt prove very interesting and fruitful.

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