

# Some Linguistic Musings on the Word *Transfiguration*

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Since I was a child, I always liked the Feast of the Transfiguration. Maybe it's because it fell during summer vacation, or because I like our Carpathian Tone 7 (Greek Grave Tone) used in both the Troparion and Kontakion for the day, or perhaps for some other vague childhood reason.

As an adult, I learned something about the true meaning of the Transfiguration, and only now realize that its theological significance is far deeper than my thoughts can penetrate. It is far easier for me to understand and delight in the human words used to name the event. When we examine the English, Greek, and Slavonic names for this event—*Transfiguration*, Της Μεταμορφώσεως (Tis Metamorphoseus), and Преображение (Preobrazhenie)—we are looking at words made up of exactly the same parts.

**Transfiguration** is an English word, but its components are all Latin. We know *trans-* means across and, by extension, to change. *Transport* is literally across + carry, and when one transports something, he carries it across to another place, hence the idea of changing place or position. We are familiar with the root of transfiguration in the word *figure*, some sort of shape or form, often referring to a human shape. The combination of suffixes in *-ation* makes a verbal action into a noun.

What if we called this event **Transformation** instead of Transfiguration? The meaning is essentially the same, yet the difference lies in the fact that *transform* is a rather common word, and there is a sense that when we describe the extraordinary mysteries that God performs, ordinary, everyday words are not good enough. We may talk about the *birth* of Christ, His *rising* from the dead and subsequent *going up* to heaven, but when we name the events, we use the less common Latin roots in *Nativity*, *Resurrection*, and *Ascension*. Somehow we need these more unique words to describe such unique events and to give honor to God in much the same way we do when we put on our best clothes to go to church and when we decorate those churches with the most beautiful icons we can obtain.

Words from Latin abound in English, which is a Germanic language, and are especially prevalent among vocabulary used to describe more abstract terms, words such as *conflagration* rather than Germanic *fire* and *consecrated* rather than Germanic *holy*. They are not limited to ecclesiastical terms but come from all areas of scholarship. Such words are not generally known to primary school children and are not widely used in speech. Vocabulary expansion in this area takes place starting from the adolescent years and continues throughout life; its primary means of acquisition is through reading.

The word transfiguration is, however, an exception and is known to all English-speaking children who are fans of the “Harry Potter” books. From his first year at Hogwarts School, Harry has to take a course called Transfiguration; in it the pupils

practice turning toads into teacups and the like. Here is a good opportunity for Orthodox parents of young Harry Potter fans to use their knowledge of the word transfiguration from the fantasy of children's literature as a springboard for telling their children something age-appropriate about the marvelous Transfiguration of Jesus Christ into the Uncreated Light on Mount Tabor and what this revelation means for us.

**Metamorphosis**, the Greek term, has also become an English word. Again, *meta* means across and, by extension, change; *morph* a form or shape; *-osis* makes an abstract noun. However, like transformation, metamorphosis would also be an unacceptable substitute for Transfiguration in English, but for different reasons. The meaning of transformation is too broad, and the word transform can be used to describe nearly every sort of change. We find transformers as parts of car engines and electrical equipment. Metamorphosis, on the other hand, is too narrow. To the English speaker, the word metamorphosis conjures up thoughts either from biology, such as the caterpillar emerging from the cocoon as a butterfly, or from Kafka and the horror of a man seeing himself slowly turning into a spider.

While Latin is the basis for many abstract terms in English, Greek is the primary source of scientific terms, which often refer to somewhat more concrete activities. That is, *metamorphosis* implies that some animal is physically changing in nature; and even though the term *gynecology* is abstract, the image it calls to mind may be a very concrete clinic full of pregnant women waiting for examination by the doctor.

During my childhood, I was more likely to hear the term **Preobrazhenie** when August 6 came around. In many of the Slavic languages even today, the prefix *pre-* or *pere-* means across and also change; *obraz* is a shape or face or form; and *-enie* is a noun-making suffix that often refers to a process. Thus when our congregations made up of people from both Greek and Slav backgrounds get together in English speaking contexts on this day, we can say exactly the same thing no matter which language we use. Latin, Greek, the Slavic languages, and also English as a Germanic language, are all part of the Indo-European family of languages, so it is not surprising that their rules for forming words, their grammar, works in much the same way.

This is not to say our translations are trouble-free; far from it. The Slavonic *Bogoroditse* is an exact translation of the Greek *Theotokos*, both made up of God (*Bog/Theos*) + root for birth (*rod-/tok-*) + suffix for person (*-itse/-os*). Thus we have the meaning "the one who gave birth to God." However, English does not have such a term, neither from its Germanic roots, which would be something like "The God-birthgiver," nor from any Latin sources. So to be exact in our theology, Orthodox use *Theotokos*, although many native speakers of English who regularly attend their church may have trouble explaining why this foreign-looking and sounding word has taken up residence in English Liturgy books.

The only other reasonable option is to use "Mother of God." Etymologically, it is not the same. The term *Theotokos* has the theology built in: the one who gave birth to God. Yet both have the same referent, Mary, who is also referred to in Orthodox theology as the Mother of God. Here in Asia we are often using English to introduce Orthodoxy to those who have little or no knowledge of any Christian tradition and who use English as a second or even third language. In this context, one wonders whether use of the theologically precise yet foreign term *Theotokos* serves to clarify or to ob-

secure comprehension. If the participant at Liturgy hears *Theotokos* and draws a blank but then hears “Mother of God” and has in his mind’s eye an image of Mary, is not the latter situation preferable?

As Orthodox theology is translated into Asian languages with different sorts of rules for word formation and different cultural connotations of specific words, there are sure to be additional and far more challenging linguistic decisions facing us. Words do matter, and balancing the many variables of etymological precision, connotation, and comprehensibility is no easy task.

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