

## Englising the Byzantine

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### Abstract

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Arguing that English is not to be viewed as a poor cousin to a richer Greek or other source text but has its own history and richness, Prof. Ugolnik suggests Orthodox Christians must not be inhibited from using that richness while avoiding the trap of making English but another form of the original language. The truly faithful translator of a Byzantine text is a custodian of its meaning rather than a guardian who imprisons its poetry and metaphors in an academic or trite translation or in deadly archaisms. The model to follow here is the Anglican tradition of vernacular translations at once faithful and beautiful, executed into a more synthetic than analytic English. Anglican translations provide us with six points for successful translations. Those who produce such translations are increasingly rare and therefore Catholics and Orthodox must work together if the Byzantine patrimony is to shine through in our day beautifully and intelligently.



The natural eye at a conference such as this is on the source texts and hence the source languages. Since I am not a Byzantine expert, but rather a professor of the English language to which the Byzantine is to be translated, I presume I am here to look at the question from another angle. What is the nature, not of the source, but of the medium? That is, what is the linguistic stuff of which we are to make a new textual celebration?

The artist has to know, intimately and with great practice, the medium, the "stuff," through which he conveys his vision. Michelangelo knew not only his David, but also the marble

through which it is rendered. Monet had a love of landscape but also, an intimate familiarity with the oil through which he conveyed it. An artist with a contempt for his medium is unthinkable.

Unfortunately, it is common in the realm of translation, particularly of religious texts, to entertain a kind of condescension to the language in which the text is conveyed. This is particularly true of English, for historical reasons which I will touch upon later. That tendency redoubles itself, however, among us Orthodox Christians. The presumption, spoken or implied, is all too often that this Anglo-Saxon tongue we speak is inferior in one way or another to the Greek from which we translate, that it is clumsy and base, that it is incapable of conveying the vision or complexity of the original, but that we must do our best with it nonetheless. Even if we were blessed, then, with the Michelangelo among translators, the assumption can reign that he must work with Play-Doh or even Silly Putty.

The thesis of this talk is that English is in no way inferior to these languages; rather, it possesses its own rich history and its own genius. We cannot do justice to the original – its spirit, life, lyricism – without an intimate mastery of the language into which it is to be conveyed. This vision demands a re-reading of the concept of “tradition,” not as a static but as a dynamic principle. What is more, given the daunting and exacting nature of the task before us, it demands a profound humility. Not only the possibility, but also the probability, exists that it is far too early for us Anglophonic Orthodox to undertake this task in any but the most provisional way.

### *I. Nature of Sacred Language*

We must begin with the nature of this medium, which I am now using, the words which you are now receiving from me. Anglophonic Orthodox are now a significant portion of the Orthodox world. Yet we “come at” our Anglophonic status through other languages and ethnicities which are source tongues for us; primary among these is, of course, the Greek. Greek presumptions about the genius of Greek are inferior only to the presumptions of non-Greeks who labour through

their lives to learn it. Yet none of our source languages is immune to that same sensibility; each of us can, no doubt, call to mind a priest or a professor who has assured us of the superiority of his or her own native tongue to the language which we now speak. That presumption of superiority, or specific genius, often lies beneath the resistance to using English in the first place. English can never master the theological subtlety of Greek, the innate spirituality of Slavonic, the rich poetry of Arabic, and so on through our various traditions.

To argue from genius is subjective. Each language can presume to possess its own genius, and English possesses linguistic advantages of its own. To “get at” those advantages, however, we have to work through the presumptions about language itself which inhabit our Orthodox mindset. And those presumptions are often, unfortunately, completely at odds with modern linguistic sensibility and clear scientific evidence.

Those assumptions are both diachronic – that is, historical, looking at language across time – and also synchronic – a comparative look at languages which are sacred and secular within our own era.

### *Diachronic Assumptions*

Diachronically, we Orthodox tend to privilege the more ancient forms of our tongues as superior in sacred, and prayerful discourse. This is an anthropological as well as an intellectual tendency: the mystery languages used by shamans and priestly castes of pre-technological tribes are most often archaic forms of the tongues now spoken by them. Spells and curses in Old English, for example, incorporate archaisms in the earliest eras which record them. As languages closest to the original form of linguistic revelation, then, the older forms seem to embody “tradition.” But we cannot say, in any sense, that more recent forms are somehow “corruptions” of an older form. Corruption is a value statement, implying that newer language is less apt for the task, whereas precisely the opposite is true; the newer language meets the needs which generate it.