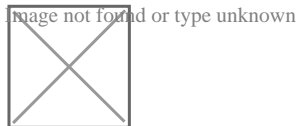


## “Our Father”, the Perfect Prayer (George Babiniotis, Professor)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



When the bell rings and everybody tries to avoid saying their prayers (a parody of a prayer, but one which just may be, for some, the last thread connecting their lives with God and therefore the only little window through which they can get into Paradise), let's remember those reading the following text.

“Say the prayer”

(From an article by a school pupil against school prayer)

### **The perfection of the “Lord’s Prayer”**

*To Vima* newspaper: Νέες Εποχές (New Eras), p. 53, 26/8/2001

**\* A text that, with communicative-linguistic criteria, could be called “perfect”**



People's need to communicate with God (whichever god they believe in), their need for prayer, is one of the oldest known to humanity and is present in the languages of most peoples. In Greek, the word *προσεύχομαι* (to direct a wish, request or intercession to the gods) makes its first appearance in Aeschylus, while, as a technical term, the word *προσευχή* is confirmed much later in Scripture, in the text of the Old Testament and with particular weight and depth in the text of the New Testament. I do not have, unfortunately, the academic, theological armoury to be able to interpret the more profound content, the dogmatic meaning and significance, which the notion of prayer has in Orthodox tradition in particular. What I should like to touch upon briefly here, in the framework of the textual/linguistic analysis which goes back to Roman Jakobson, is the linguistic structure of the Lord's prayer (*Matth.* 6, 19-13 and *Luke* 11, 2-4), which I consider an ideal text. According to the text of the Gospel, it was given to people by the Lord Himself (hence "the Lord's prayer"), when He said: "You shall pray like this", accompanying his words with a very instructive, but also linguistic, comment: "When you pray, do not heap up empty phrases, as the Gentiles do; for they think they will be heard because of their many words. So do not be like them. For your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (*Matth.* 6, 7-9).

By definition, as a prayer, as a text of wishes, and requests/intercessions, the text of the Lord's prayer (familiar to us as the "Our Father") works with a mechanism central to language: modality. This is a mechanism in languages which may be expressed in terms of grammar (in the shape of different forms for the imperative,

subjunctive and optative, as in the case of many ancient languages), or particular words (modal markers), such as “let’s”, “should”, “will” etc. in, say, modern English, to express communicative needs such as volition, request, supplication, exhortation, command, prohibition, threat and so on.

The text of the Lord’s prayer is a model of succinctness, content and straightforwardness. It contains: a) an invocation to God, expressed in the vocative case of the noun, with which it begins, “Our Father” [the point Babiniotis is making here is clear in Greek, where there is a different form of the word when someone is being addressed. The same would be true in Slavonic, for example, “Отче наш”, but not in English, even in Anglo-Saxon “Fæder ure”. The vocative is often, but not here, expressed as “O Father” in English]; three wishes/requests, expressed in Greek in third person, single-word verb forms, the pre-eminent modal ending, the imperative [cf. the English “your kingdom *come*]; and three requests/supplications expressed in the second person of the imperative: give, forgive do not lead, but deliver.

Each wish and each request is modified (modification is another central mechanism of language) through the most immediate and essential elements. The three wishes by a uniform nominative subject: may your name be hallowed, your kingdom come, your will be done. The three requests with two additions (person and thing) to each verb: give us our bread, forgive us our debts, do not lead us into temptation and deliver us from the evil one (“into temptation” and “from the evil one” are prepositional objects).

Beyond this, and always succinctly, modification is accomplished through very few references to manner, place and time: Our Father Who are in heaven (modifier of place); your will be done on earth as in heaven (modifier of place); give us today our daily bread (modifier of time); forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors (modifier of manner).

The content of the text expands conceptually: first there are the wishes and these are followed by the requests. It begins with what refers to God Himself and then goes on to the requests. Here, too, there is escalation, from material to spiritual requests: from what we need in order to live, to forgiveness of sins and protection from temptation. In linguistic terms, the text is dominated by verbs: hallowed be, come, be done, give, forgive, do not lead, deliver. The dominant features, which are imperative, are the wishes and the requests. Their modification is made imperative, that is their objects and subjects (except for the object of “give”).

Conclusion. The text of the Lord’s prayer is one that, with communicative and linguistic criteria, could be characterized as “ideal”. It is succinct, because it is

restricted to basic informational structures (invocation, wish, request), to equally basic modifying information) nominative subjects in the wishes, double nominative complements in the requests) and very few modifiers of manner, place and time. With impressive economy of linguistic means, the text employs only the imperative, with the exception of the only declarative verbal expression, the affirmative “we forgive”, and achieves a substantial, timely and genuine form of communication, without rhetorical flourishes or superfluous verbal weight. The symmetry and intensely felt repetition of the same syntactic and morphological structures (the well-known phenomenon of parallelism) which I hope has appeared, even vaguely in this brief analysis, guarantees for the text of the Lord’s prayer a sense of rhythm and metre (which we have not touched upon here) which makes the text easy to understand and recall. It is a wonderful text, perfect in its simplicity and depth, and demonstrates boldly the expressive power to which human language can attain, as a product of the attribute people share “by grace” with God, an offshoot of the spirit.