

Getting a Bright Idea in Russian

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Сени: anteroom, covered entryway

January is turning out to be Strange Russian Word Month. Today's word is not as much fun as **фиг** (fig, sort of), but then almost no word is. It is, however, weird and fascinating.

Have I got your attention? The word is the verb **осенить** (and its imperfective form **осенять**). It's not related to **осень** (autumn) or **сено** (hay). It means — well, let's start with where it came from because without that, it seems like a very peculiar collection of utterly unrelated meanings.

Actually, with this weird word, even discovering the etymology was difficult. I can find most words in my dictionaries, but not this one. I finally discovered an analysis in Viktor Vinogradov's "History of Words." Vinogradov writes that the verb **осенить** came from the noun **сень**, which first meant a room people lived in — similar to the word **сени** in use today, but which now means an anteroom. Then it came to mean a tent or object that cast shadows,

related to today's тень (shadow).

I'm not entirely sold on this room-tent-shadow idea, but Vinogradov studied ancient texts to determine meaning so he found evidence of this. In any case, it gets even stranger. Somehow over the centuries (a millennium or so ago) the shadow meaning changed to mist and dreams, which in turn led to the notion of protection. He lost me completely there, but apparently in old Russian осенить meant to overshadow in the physical world and to cover, hide, protect or guard in the metaphysical world. For many centuries осенить was associated with God's protection or blessing — being “safeguarded” by the divine.

But in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a new meaning appeared: меня осеняет means “it occurs to me.” Here, Vinogradov wrote, силу божию здесь заменяет поэтическое озарение, мысль, догадка, вдохновение (the power of God is here replaced by poetic insight, a thought, a supposition, or inspiration).

Today the verb pair осенять/осенить and the reflexive pair осеняться/осениться have retained some of old religious and lofty meanings, and then added the more secular — if no less mysterious — notion of an idea popping into a person's head.

Let's start with осенять/осенить and their loftier meanings. First, the verb pair is commonly used to describe someone making the sign of the cross over someone or something: Священник осеняет парня крестом, кладёт большую тяжёлую ладонь на его голову (The priest blesses the boy with the cross, laying his big, heavy hand on his head).

The words also can mean a somewhat poetic shadowing, covering, or hiding. Мутно-белое небо осеняло землю (A hazy white sky covered the earth). Here the covering turns into concealing: Вдали за рекою, сквозь верхи густых лип, её осеняющих, мелькали огни (Lights sparkled far in the distance beyond the river, which was hidden by the tops of the luxuriant lindens).

You might find the participle осенённый in the sense of “covered”: Я стоял сзади одной толстой дамы, осенённой розовыми перьями (I stood behind a corpulent lady who was covered in rose-colored feathers).

And the words sometimes have the high-minded sense of filling something or someone with a spiritual quality — here in an unexpected place: Есть в сборнике “рыбацкие” стихи прямо-таки репортажного характера, но и они осенены настоящей поэзией (In the collection there are “fisherman's tale” poems that are like journalistic accounts, but even they are suffused with the spirit of true poetry).

Finally, they describe a thought, idea, or inspiration occurring to someone, usually suddenly. It is expressed in the third person — usually the imperfective in the present tense (осеняет) or the perfective in the past tense (for example, осенило) — and the accusative case: идея осеняет Сашу (it dawns on Sasha); вдохновение осенило меня (I was suddenly inspired). Она вышла и через минуту вернулась. Тем временем меня осенила новая идея (She left and then came right back after a minute. In that time, a new idea occurred to me). Вдруг его осенила догадка (Suddenly the realization dawned on him).

This can also be expressed with a participle: Осенённая какой-то мыслью, Мила

перестала плакать и выпрямилась (Struck by some thought, Mila stopped crying and straightened up).

Осеняться/осениться is probably most commonly used to describe making the sign of the cross, blessing someone or something: За годы строительства церковей большинство мастеров стали людьми верующими, сама видела, как к работе приступают с молитвой, осенясь крестом (Over the years that the churches were built, most of the workers began to believe in God, and I saw them being blessed and saying a prayer before they'd begin work).

It can also mean to be covered or shrouded, often in religious texts: Нестерпимой болью, как у Федора Стратилата, осенилось его лицо (His face was shrouded with unbearable pain, like that suffered by Theodore of Heraclea).

You might find it in religious or panegyric texts to mean filled with some kind of glory, like in this sentence about a battle in ancient history: Если они не погибнут, то Афины осенятся славою (If they do not perish, Athens will be crowned in glory).

But sometimes the reflexive form can be used to mean to have a sudden idea or inspiration, too: Совершая свою обычную предобеденную прогулку по Невскому, она остановилась и мигом осенилась вдохновением на гениальный план (As she was taking her usual pre-prandial walk along Nevsky Prospekt, she stopped, and a brilliant plan suddenly popped into her head).

Sometimes the idea or thought is decidedly not brilliant and certainly not spiritual: В первый раз задумается, в первый раз осенится мыслью, что навоз, как и всё в природе, существует не без цели (For the first time he thinks about it, and for the first time it occurs to him that manure, like everything in nature, did not exist without purpose)

I guess this just goes to show that any idea is worth having, even if it is about cowpats.