

Translating God:

A comparison of Bunun, Atayal and Paiwan Bible translations

Rik De Busser
National Chengchi University

This paper looks at linguistic choices that translators make in translating concepts that are central to the Christian conceptual universe, and especially at how they translate the concept that is central to Christian theology, namely that of the divine being itself.

Keywords: Bunun language, Atayal language, Paiwan language, Indigenous Bible translation, historical semantics

1. Introduction¹

Modern translations of the Bible in the Indigenous languages of Taiwan started in earnest only after the end of the Second World War, when the newly established Nationalist government allowed Western missionary organizations access to Indigenous areas. The translation of a book of such complexity and doctrinal centrality is a complicated and often drawn-out process.² It is therefore no surprise that it has not reached completion for most languages, an exception being the publication of a complete Amis Bible in 1997.³ From the onset, the Presbyterian Church, often in cooperation with the Bible Society of Taiwan, played a disproportionately large role in instigating and supporting Bible translations in Taiwan, as part of a deliberate, long-term plan of religious indigenization, although the translation process often involved complex forms of cooperation.

This paper looks at linguistic choices that translators make in translating concepts that are central to the Christian conceptual universe, but would have been entirely unfamiliar to the target language of the Bible translation, and its associated culture. A short overview, based on De Busser's research of the Bunun Bible translation,⁴ will first discuss linguistic strategies that are commonly used in expressing novel concepts associated with the Christian world into the Indigenous languages of Taiwan.

Based on a comparative sample of religious vocabulary, I will then present a case study of the linguistic and doctrinal choices that were made in translating arguably the most central term in the Christian religious vocabulary, namely the name of the Divine Being itself. I will discuss the origins of, possible motivations behind, and linguistic mechanisms involved in constructing terminology to refer to God in Bible translations in Bunun, Atayal and Paiwan, three Austronesian languages of Taiwan.

1.1.Christianization of Indigenous groups

Taiwan has around twenty Indigenous groups,⁵ who all have distinct cultures and speak different languages belonging to the Austronesian language family. This paper will only discuss three: (1) the Bunun, (2) the Atayal and (3) the Paiwan. The former two belong to

¹ This research was made possible by a grant from the Taiwanese Ministry of Science and Technology (grant no. MoST 104-2410-H-004-139).

² See Li for a discussion.

³ Olam.

⁴ De Busser, "An Overview of Linguistic Mechanisms" and "The Influence of Christianity."

⁵ Sixteen are officially recognized by the national government at the time of writing.

largely unstratified societies that traditionally lived relatively high up in the Central Mountain Range of Taiwan and traditionally strongly relied on hunting, supplemented by the cultivation of millet, yams and plants, and by gathering. The Paiwan have a society with at least three social strata (royalty, nobility, commoners) and traditionally relied on a more balanced combination of hunting and various forms of agriculture and foraging. Like most Indigenous groups, their traditional lives changed irrevocably when during the Japanese Occupation the government used a combination of coercion and coaxing to resettle high-land Indigenous groups in (or at least closer to) lower-lying plains.

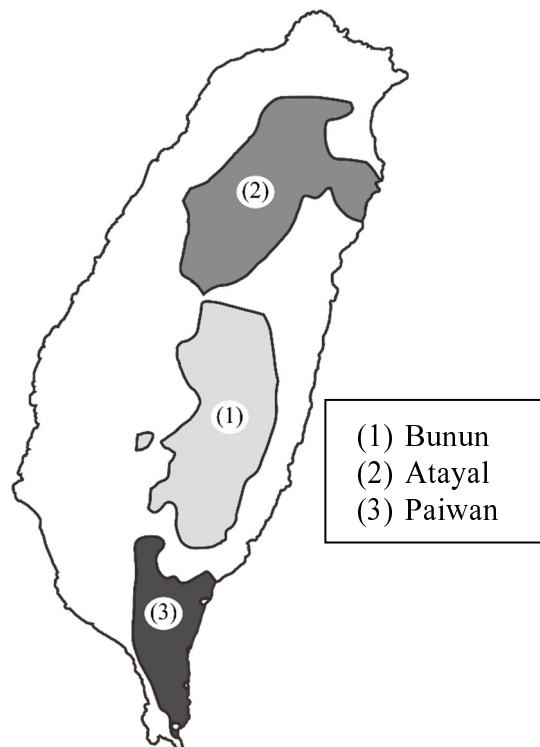


Figure 1. Approximate location of the Bunun, Atayal and Paiwan language areas⁶

Apart from the civilizing program of the Japanese occupation, the main transformative event in the modern history of the Indigenous groups of Taiwan, especially in terms of their internal cultural development, was probably the widespread Christianization that started shortly after the Second World War. The Japanese government had always been suspicious of letting missionaries, who had returned to Taiwan at the end of the 19th century after an absence of nearly two centuries, spread pernicious Western ideologies among the Indigenous peoples, and they had forbidden Western and other missionaries from spreading Christianity in Indigenous areas,⁷ although some form of proselytization did from time to time happen

⁶ Map based on Blust.

⁷ Richardson 161–162.

under the mantle of humanitarian support, for instance by the Christian Japanese doctor Inoue Inosuke.⁸

This situation changed after the end of WWII, when the Kuomintang, eager to please its Western allies, allowed Western Churches access to Indigenous regions (Presbyterian Church in Taiwan). The two main parties involved in this early phase, Catholic and Presbyterian missionaries, used distinctly different strategies.⁹ The Catholic Church mainly relied on foreign missionaries that were stationed permanently in villages, and tried to integrate local customs into the newly introduced religious experience. While an effort was made to translate texts that were central to the liturgy into Indigenous languages, this was not (and still is not) seen as crucial to the missionary movement.

The Presbyterian Church was more averse to traditional Indigenous customs, but considered indigenization as a crucial part of the conversion process. An important aspect of this strategy was educating a generation of Church officials with an Indigenous background, for which goal the Yushan Theological College and Seminary (玉山神學院) near Hualien was founded in September 1946.¹⁰ The Presbyterian Church also started a concerted effort to translate the Bible and hymn books into Indigenous languages, as these two text collections were central to daily religious praxis. This meant, for instance, that already in 1949 Reverend Hu Wen-Chi (胡文池) published a Bunun translation of the flood story, after having spent two years learning the language at the East Coast of Taiwan. A translation of the abbreviated New Testament (NT) was finally published in 1983, and a complete NT and short Old Testament (OT) only in 2000. This is fairly representative of how long Bible translations generally take,¹¹ a testament to how complex the translation of a work like the Bible is.

How this translation process exactly happens, is not well-documented. Although certain Bible translations are the result of the heroic work of a single translator, the general procedure appears to exist in assembling a translation team consisting of translators, language specialists, and theologians. In practice, social dynamics make it probably hard to avoid that one or a few driven individuals take a dominant role in the translation process. A good example can be found in the description by McLean of the ongoing translation of the new Bunun Bible; he describes how the main translation work was performed by a single translator, and

⁸ See Inoue.

⁹ De Busser, "The Influence of Christianity" 350.

¹⁰ Qiu et al. 511.

¹¹ see also Li, Chapter 3.

subsequently corrected by a team consisting of mother tongue speakers and experts in theology.

2. Translation strategies in Bible translations

A considerable part of translation problems has to do with the complexity of the Bible as a written work and a religious message. Not only is the Bible a long book (various counts estimate the King James Version to be over 780,000 words), its content matter, its genesis, and the genesis of its subsequent translations, is also unusually complex. In addition, it is the center of Christian doctrine. It is laden with theological, philosophical and ethical concepts, and Christian theologians and practitioners are sensitive to how these concepts are expressed and how they correspond to doctrinal orthodoxy. It contains descriptions of multiple cultures and the concepts that are part of these cultures, and through its translations and interpretations of multiple other cultures for which its message has been central to their religious and moral lives. When creating an Indigenous Bible translation, these concepts need to be somehow transferred, as accurately and comprehensibly as possible, into a language and culture to which they are completely alien.

Two factors are relevant here: (1) the source of the concept, both in terms of its source language and its historical and cultural origin, and (2) the mechanism by which the concept is transferred from the source language to the new translation and its cultural context. I will come back to sources of new concepts in section 3. Below, I will first give a short overview of the main linguistic mechanisms used for transferring Biblical concepts into Indigenous Bible translations, based on my own research on the Bunun Bible translation from 2000.¹²

1. **Lexical borrowing:** The most straightforward way of introducing a concept from another language is by simply borrowing its corresponding word in that language. Borrowing is a popular strategy for names of people or locations, as they are “unique referents which cannot simply be re-labeled”¹³ and there is therefore often no other way to introduce them in the language. It is possible that a word is simply transferred ‘as is’ to its target language, but usually some degree of adaptation to the target language’s sound system occurs.¹⁴

For instance, the name David is borrowed in the 2000 Bunun Bible as *Devid*, from the English form. It only underwent a slight graphological change (a > e), as the

¹² Bible Society in Taiwan, *Tama Dihanin tu Halinga*, discussed in De Busser, “An Overview of Linguistic Mechanisms” 15ff.

¹³ Matras 210.

¹⁴ Haspelmath 41.

pronunciation of Bunun *e* better fitted the English pronunciation. The Bunun form *Ichibutu* ‘Egypt’ is based on Japanese エジプト *Ejiputo*, again with small alterations to the spelling and pronunciation to fit the sound system of Bunun.

2. **Calquing:** A more interesting mechanism are calques or loan translations, in which the target language borrows the constructional template of an expression from the source language, but not necessarily the actual word forms.¹⁵ This is a much more complex process, and as a result a rarer one.

For instance, in Mat 5:14 the expression *light of the world* is in Bunun rendered as *inastu chin tu singhal* ‘the light of the place here below’. The words in Bunun are in no way related to the English expression, but it has a very similar semantic and syntactic structure.

- (1) i-nastu-chin tu singhal
at-down-here of light.ray
‘the light of the place here below
(i.e. the world as opposed to heaven)’

3. **Periphrasis:** The world of the Old and New Testament, its environment, daily habits, political structures are in many ways completely alien to the Indigenous groups of Taiwan. For instance, the traditional Bunun, Atayal and Paiwan did not have princes, or nations, or cities, or lions, or chariots. Just naming these concepts does not necessarily explain them. It is of course always possible to borrow the words for these new concepts from the source language, but this leads to neologisms that are not transparent to normal language users. One way around this is to use periphrasis, that is, simply describing concepts when they are not clearly understandable.

For instance, the concept tabernacle in Heb 8:2 is in Bunun rendered as *masaningsing tu lumah* ‘the house of holiness / purification,’ with the word *lumah* being the common term for a house.

- (2) ma-saningsing tu lumah
ADJ-pure of house
‘the house of holiness / purification’

4. **Conceptual transfer:** Finally, the most common strategy for introducing a new concept, at least in the Bunun translation of the Bible, is by simply appropriating an existing term and assigning a new meaning to it. For instance, to express the concept of praying, the

¹⁵ Haspelmath 2009: 39.

Bunun translators used the term *masumsum*, originally ‘converse with the spirits’; the concept of the Christian heaven was expressed by *dihanin* ‘sky’; and so on.¹⁶

Although the choice of the exact term in a translation of the Bible is in most cases the result of a conscious deliberation process of the translator, they might not always have been fully aware of the linguistic strategies they used. More likely, their decisions were informed by considerations related to how easy it would be for the community to understand or learn the new terms, how well the new word or construction represented the underlying concepts (especially when core concepts of the Christian faith were involved), and how faithful the translation was to the original text.

3. Translations of terms referring to God

This leads us to the sources of translations. Two separate questions need to be answered here: (1) What are the source texts of the Indigenous translation in its entirety and (2) what are the sources of individual word forms (or constructions) referring to specific concepts. Note that these two need not be identical. For instance, a translator could use the Greek Pentateuch as the basis for their translation, but borrow words from an English or Chinese translation they are familiar with.

Although ideally one would probably want to go back to texts that are as close as possible to the original Scriptures, this would require the translator to acquire an in-depth knowledge of at least Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. For various reasons, this is not tenable for Indigenous translations in Taiwan. It is hard enough to find any translators that are both sufficiently qualified and dedicated to undertake the translation of the entire Bible, let alone people that are both specialized in Indigenous and biblical languages. In reality, translators appear to base their translations on a variety of sources,¹⁷ but one (or a small number) are taken as a main template. In Taiwan, this is usually a Chinese or in older translations possibly a Japanese version.

It is a tempting assumption that this base text(s) for the translation would also have been used as the source of introduced expressions referring to novel concepts. However, this is not the case. We can illustrate this, and trace the actual origin of translated concepts, by creating

¹⁶ This is sometimes referred to as analogical extension (cf. Geeraerts 30) or loan meaning extension (Haspelmath 39).

¹⁷ Especially after the advent of Bible translation software such as Paratext (United Bible Societies and SIL International).

an equivalence map of translations. In this paper, we will have a look at a single concept, but one which is central to the Christian faith: that of the Divine Being itself.

Figure 2 is such an translation equivalence map. It represents how expressions used to refer to God appear in a sample of locations in the Bible, mapping translation equivalences for individual occurrences of a term across languages and editions. For contrastive reasons, terms referring to non-Christian deities were added as well. The following editions were included in our analysis:

- The Greek New Testament (1904)
- The Latin Vulgate (Stuttgart version)
- The English King James Version (KJV; modern spelling)
- The Japanese Kougo-yaku (1954)
- The Chinese Union Version (1919)
- The Bunun NT (1983)
- The Bunun Bible (NT, partial OT; 2000)
- The Atayal Bible (NT, partial OT; 2003)
- The Paiwan Bible (NT, partial OT; 1993)

They are generally ordered chronologically in the map, with the exception of the Paiwan Bible, which is put at the end of the series. Arrows indicate the most likely translational pathways, based on phonological, constructional or semantic similarities. This gives us a way to assess how translators selected the translations for individual words in specific locations in the Biblical texts, either through deliberate choice, or through sub-conscious selection based on factors such as prior exposure to Biblical texts, the cultural environment, etc.

For instance, the diagram indicates that the Greek term *πατήρ* consistently occurs as *Pater* in Latin, *Father* in English, 父 ‘father’ in Japanese and Chinese, *tama* ‘father’ in Bunun, and that therefore the most likely source of the term *tama* ‘father’ is the Chinese CUV. In contrast, Paiwan and Atayal do not have a uniform term for CUV instances of 父 ‘father’: the Paiwan term *kama* and Atayal *yaba* are not used to refer to the Christian God. Other expressions, such as Greek κύριος ‘lord, master’, have a much more complicated equivalence.¹⁸

¹⁸ Note that in the arrows between Indigenous translations, especially between the Atayal and Paiwan translation, indicate common origin rather than that one Indigenous translation served as the source for the other. The Paiwan Bible in fact precedes the Atayal translation.

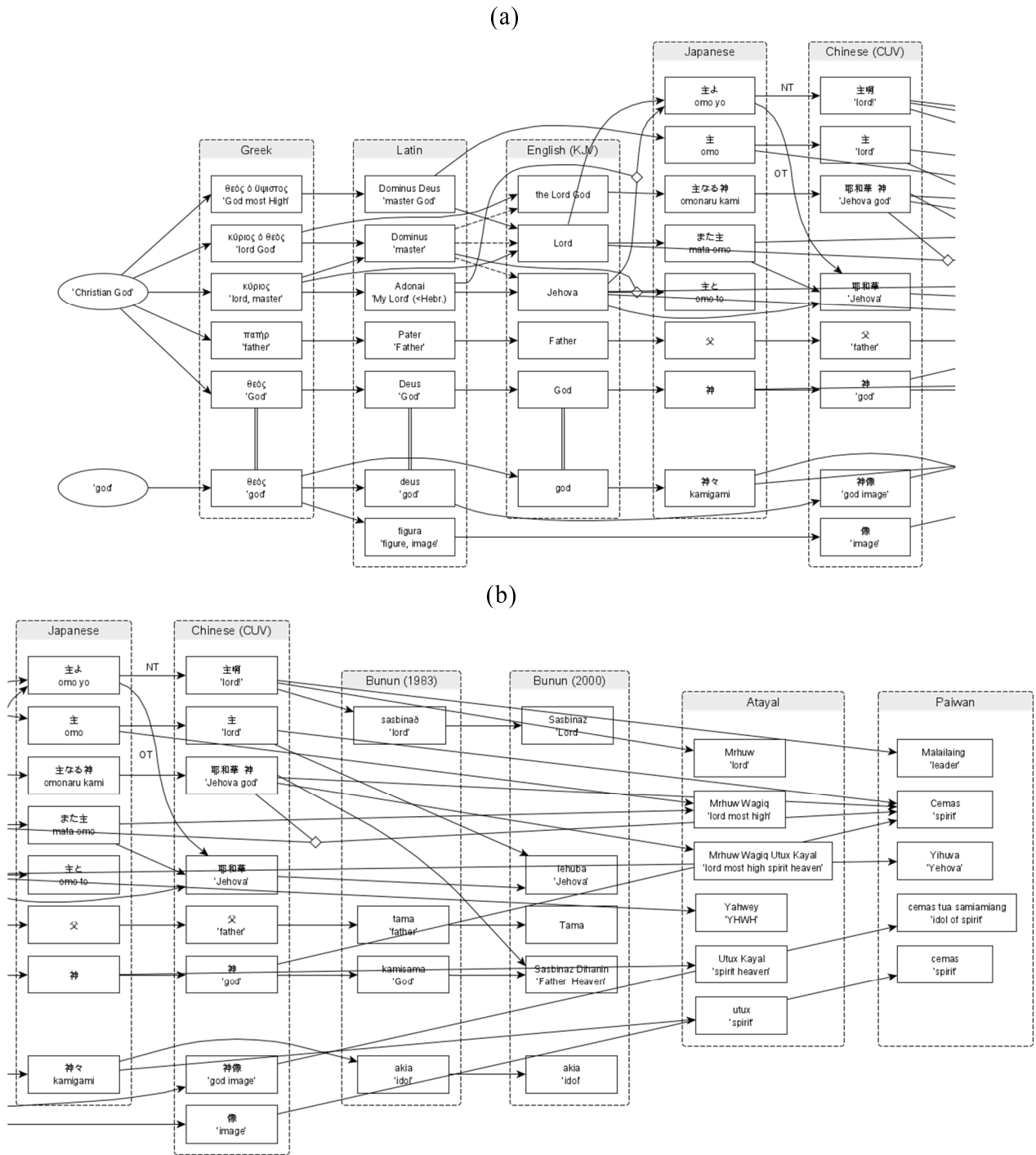


Figure 2. Translation equivalencies (combined)

Figures 3 to 5 are simplifications of Figure 2, and represent the expressions that are used in individual Indigenous translations.

Figure 3 contains the equivalence pathways for the two Bunun Bible translations, the Bunun NT of 1983¹⁹ and the Bunun Bible of 2000.²⁰ A number of conclusions can be drawn. First, it is clear that the choice of terminology in both translations is strongly influenced by

¹⁹ Bible Society in Taiwan, *Bahlu Sinpatumantuk*.

²⁰ Bible Society in Taiwan, *Tama Dihanin tu Halinga*.

the Chinese CUV version. Second, the two Greek terms *θεος* and *πατηρ* are translated isomorphically in all subsequent languages, until they arrive in the 2000 Bunun Bible as *Tama* and *Sasbinaz Dihanin* respectively. This can only be the result of deliberate choice and an in-depth knowledge of Biblical exegesis.

Third, although certain core terminology (e.g. *sasbinaz*, *tama*, *akia*) are shared between the 1983 NT and the 2000 Bible, a number of terminological innovations were introduced in the 2000 translation. With the term *Iehuba*, this is because expressions referring to God only occur in the Old Testament. In other cases, the translator felt that certain expressions in the 1983 translation needed correction. Notably, the term *kamisama* ‘God’ was replaced by *Sasbinaz Dihanin* ‘Lord of Heaven’ because the former was a Japanese loan that originally referred to Japanese Shinto deities and was therefore seen as an unsuitable for reference to the Christian God.

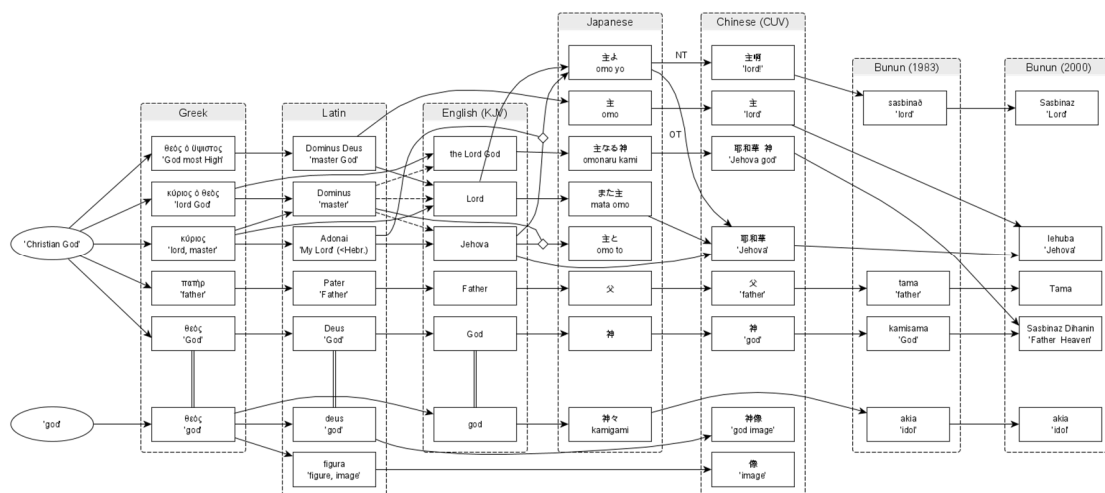


Figure 3. Translation equivalencies in the 1983 and 2000 Bunun Bible translations

Figure 4 is an equivalence chart of the 2003 Atayal translation.²¹ The influences of translation sources here is more complicated than for the Bunun texts: it appears the Atayal translators were influenced by the Chinese CUV as well as the Japanese Kougo-yaku translation, which is in itself not surprising if one remembers that many older members of the committee would have had a Japanese education when they were young.

²¹ Bible Society in Taiwan, *Sinsmas Ke Utux Kayal Biru Na Tayal*.

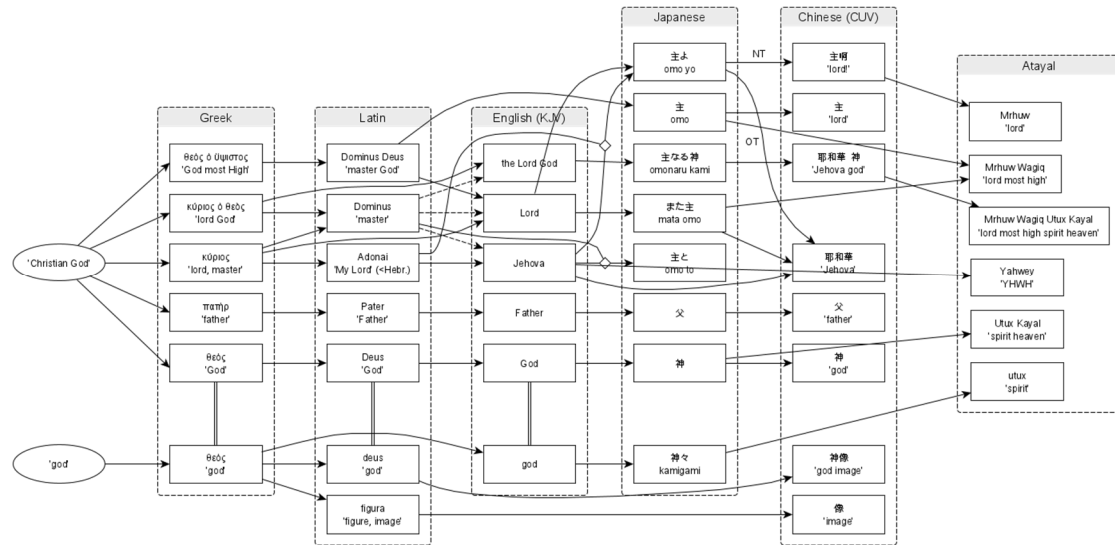


Figure 4. Translation equivalencies in the 2003 Atayal Bible translation (Bible Society in Taiwan 2003)

Second, Atayal appears to have a tendency towards using longer, descriptive expressions, such as *Mrhuw Wagiq* ‘The Lord Most High’ and *Mrhuw Wagiq Utux Kayal* ‘The Lord, the Most High Spirit in Heaven’. Third, we have so far found no references in Atayal to God as a father, contrary to the Bunun translations and translations in various Western languages. Finally, the expression *utux* ‘spirit’, an expression originally referring to supernatural beings in the traditional religion, is used both to refer to the Christian God and to the gods of other religions. This does not happen in the Bunun translation, where the similar form *qanitu* ‘spirit’ typically has a negative connotation and refers to demons, evil spirits, or even Satan.²²

Finally, Figure 5 is a translation equivalence chart for Paiwan.²³ Much like the Bunun translations, expressional choices in the Paiwan Bible translation appears to be strongly influenced by the Chinese CUV. Like Atayal, Paiwan refers fairly strongly on a traditional Indigenous religious vocabulary to refer to the Christian God.

²² A discussion can be found in Subalivan.

²³ Bible Society in Taiwan, *Kai nua Cemas*.

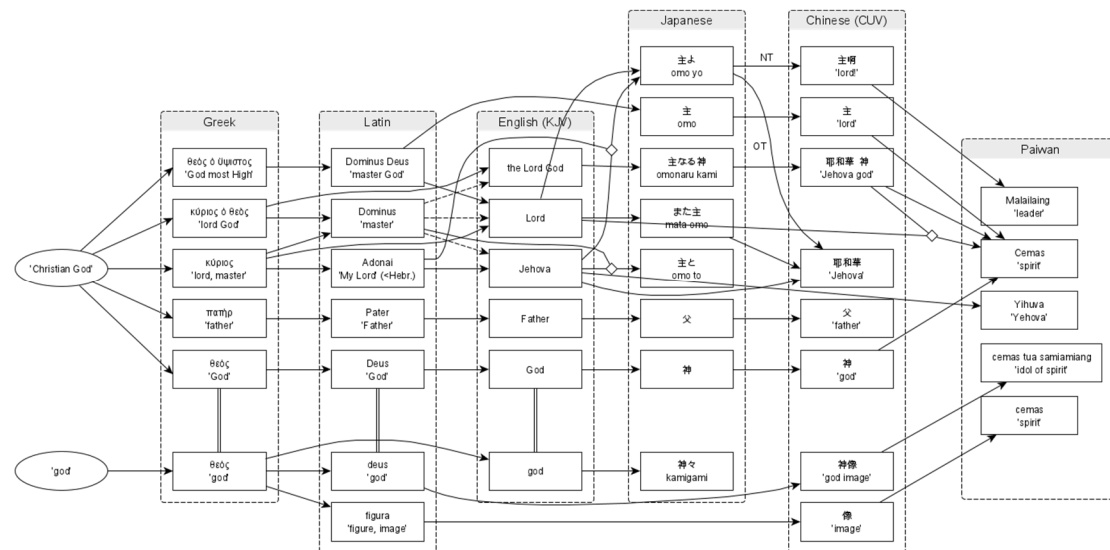


Figure 5. Translation equivalencies in the Paiwan Bible (Bible Society in Taiwan 1993)

4. Conclusion

A number of interesting conclusions can be drawn. It is clear that Bible translators in the three different languages investigated here make significantly divergent translation choices, both in the texts they choose as a basis for their translation and in how they translate different references to God into their target language. From cross-linguistic correspondences it is also evident that translators rely heavily on Chinese translations of the Bible, and in the Atayal case also on Japanese, at least in selecting the terminological framework employed to refer to the Christian God. The influence of classical languages appears almost non-existent (we did not check for Hebrew and Aramaic equivalences).

Finally, there is a distinct difference in how tolerant translators are towards the use of terms that are related to traditional religious traditions. Bunun stands out in trying to avoid references towards non-Christian religious entities. The Atayal and Paiwan translators take a diametrically opposed stance and try to re-interpret references to traditional concepts of higher beings in a Christian context.

The present study is only a single example of how the introduction of Christianity through translation of the Bible has led to the creation of a new vocabulary for referring to concepts that must at least initially have appeared challenging to the Bunun, Atayal and Paiwan converts. Using the terms created or adopted to refer to the Christian God, I illustrated some of the mechanisms and the complexities associated with this process of establishing a new religious conceptual framework.

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的話語：布農族、泰雅族與排灣族的聖經翻譯的比較

Rik De Busser
國立政治大學

摘要

本文著眼於譯者翻譯基督教世界概念時所使用的語言選擇，尤其他們如何翻譯基督教神學的核心概念與神本身的概念。

關鍵字：布農語、泰雅語、排灣語、土著聖經翻譯、歷史語義

