

Language moulded by God's hand: The influence of Christianity on the Bunun language

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The Bunun people are an Austronesian people indigenous to Taiwan and their forefathers have lived on Taiwan for at least 5000 years. Their language, which consists of five main dialects, is typically studied in terms of its historical development relative to other Austronesian languages on the island, possibly taking into account contact with the Sinitic languages on the island. However, during the past century another social force has been a major influence on the Bunun language: the introduction of various forms of Christianity by Western missionaries.

Traditionally, Bunun religion was animist and different types of shamans, typically female, played an important role. This changed at the end of the nineteenth and in the first half of the twentieth century with the coming of European and Canadian missionaries. At present, a large majority of Bunun belong either to the Catholic or to the Presbyterian Churches. Both Churches are fully indigenized in that their religious documents and rituals are all available in Bunun and their officiants are all fluent in the languages of their constituencies.

In this talk I will discuss two different ways in which this foreign religion exerted an important influence on the Bunun language. In the second half of the twentieth century, Western Churches were instrumental in the protection of indigenous languages, including Bunun, against the aggressive and destructive policies of cultural and linguistic unification of the Taiwanese government. In a completely different way, the introduction of a Bible translation and various liturgical materials in Bunun led, especially in the Presbyterian Church, to the creation of an artificial variant of the language that is a consensus between the dominant Isbukun dialect and other dialects, and over time has come to resemble a sort of supra-dialectal standard. This in turn resulted in the creation of a pan-dialectal religious vocabulary and an increased influence of Isbukun, the largest of Bunun dialects, on other dialects. Today, a complex relationship exists between this influential religious standard and more localised dialects of Bunun.