Bible Terminology in Mongolian Translation

Abstract

The paper deals with the difficulties which translators of the Bible had to face when rendering Christian terms in Mongolian. Which problems did they have to solve in order to convey ideas to people whose cultural-religious background was very different from the the Jewish-Christian setting of the Bible? These problems and the decisions on their solution are shown with the help of six key terms, occuring in three sentences of the Gospel of St. John: "beginning", Word", "saviour", "world", "resurrection" and "life". The study is based on six Mongolian, one Buryat and two Kalmuck translations.

Keywords: Bible, Mongolian, translation, Tibetan, Buryat, Kalmuck

How did the translators of the Bible solve the problem of terminology?¹ This is, of course, an age-old and universal question, but I want to illustrate it with the help of three examples which I took from the Gospel of St. John in six Mongolian, one Buryat and two Kalmuck translations. I also consulted two Tibetan translations.

My three examples are the following:

1. "In the beginning was the Word" (Jo 1:1).

¹ Other studies of Christian terminology in Mongolian are: Klaus Sagaster, "Johann Jährigs mongolische Übersetzung von Kirchensegen und Vaterunser". In: Zentralasiatische Studien 38 (2009), pp. 283–311; idem, "Mongolische und tibetische Übersetzungen des Vaterunsers". In: Rocznik Orientalistyczny LXIII/1: Altaica et Tibetica. Anniversary Volume dedicated to Stanisław Godziński on His Seventieth Birthday. Edited by Agata Bareja-Starzyńska, Filip Majkowski, Jan Rogola, Jerzy Tulisow. Warszawa 2010, pp. 198–214; idem, "Brot und Wein. Matthäus 26, 26-30 in mongolischer Übersetzung". In: Denise Aigle et al.: Miscellanea Asiatica. Mélanges en l'honneur de Françoise Aubin / Festschrift in Honour of Françoise Aubin, Sankt Augustin 2010, pp. 499–515.

- 2. "This is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world" (Jo 4:42).
- 3. "I am the resurrection, and the life" (Jo 11:25).

Here we find six basic terms: "beginning", "word", "saviour", "world", "resurrection" and "life". How were they rendered in Mongolian and Tibetan? How did the translators succeed in conveying the ideas represented by these terms to people who had a cultural background very different from the Jewish-Christian setting of the Bible?

The older Mongolian translations are from 1846 and 1952. The newer translations are from 1990, 1993, 2003 and 2004. The Buryat translation was published in 2010. The two Kalmuck translations are from 1887 and 2002. The two Tibetan translations are from 1933 and 1968.

1. Let us take our first example:

"In the beginning was the word", in Latin *In principio erat verbum*, in Greek Έν ἀρχῆ ἦν ὁ λόγος (John 1:1).

What means "in the beginning"?

Seven of the eleven translations - three Mongol, the Buryat, one Kalmuck and the two Tibetan – use an exact equivalent of "in the beginning" (Mo ekin-dür / echend, Ka erte ekin-dü, Bu anchanhaa naaša; Ti thog-mar).² Four translators – three Mongol and one Kalmuck - decided to explain what "in the beginning" means. They did not translate literally, but by way of interpretation. The shortest Mongol interpretation is the one of 1993. It says: "All began, and the Word was" (Bür echleed Zarlig bui bölgöö). We may understand this formulation in the sense that Christ already existed when all began, and "all" obviously means the world. This is corroborated by the three other translations. The Kalmuck translation of 2002 writes: "The Word was before the world originated (or began)" orčlų üüdchäs urd Üg bääž). The Mongol translation of 2003 is quite similar: "Before the world became established, the Word already existed" (sansar toytanin bütükü-eče urid yosun nigente orosiju abai). The most detailed explanation is given by the interpretative translation of 1900: "This man who mediated between the Lord of the World (= God) and mankind existed before the world came into being" (Ertöncijn Ézén ba chün törölchtnijg choorond zuučilž ögsön tér chün orčlon délchij bij bolochoos ömnö oršin bajžėė). "This man" means, of course, Christ. The Buryat version of 2010 translates "In the beginning" (anchanhaa naaša), adding by way of parenthesis "before the world became established" (yurtémsé délchéjn zochéon butéegdéchéhéé türüün).

From the four non-literal translations and from the Buryat translation it becomes clear that "in the beginning" means "before the world existed". It is surprising that the translators did not say "before the world was created". After all, the first sentence of the

² Sigla: Bu = Buryat; Ka = Kalmuck; Mo = Mongolian; Ti = Tibetan.

Bible is "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). However this may be, the following verse 3 of the Gospel of St. John clearly states that all things, that means the world, were created by the Word or that they came into being through the Word. The Greek πάντα ... ἐγένετο "all ... originated" and the Latin omnia ... facta sunt "all ... was made" is rendered in the following ways: "all things were produced by him" (qamuy yayumad anu tegün-iyer bolbasurayulaydabai) (Mo 1846); "all things were created by him" (qamuy yayum-a anu tegün-iyer bütügegdebei / chamag yum Tüügéer bütéegdžée) (Mo 1952 / Mo 1993); "The Lord of the World created through him the world and all things which exist in it" (Ertöncijn Ezen tüüger orčlon ertönc ba tüünd oršich büch yumyg bütéélgésén yum) (Mo 1990); "God created all through him" (burqan anu tegün-i tüsiglen tümen bükün-i egüdün bütügebei) (Mo 2003); "All things came into being through the Word" (Büch yum Tüügeer bij bolson) (Mo 2004); "All things were created through Him" (Buchy yuumen Ügöör le büteehdehen bajna) (Bu 2010); "All things originated through him" (xamuq yuuman inu töügēr boluqsan mön, (Ka 1887); "All originated through the Word" (Cugn' Ügär damžž üüdägdž (Ka 2002). The Tibetan translations say "The Word made all whatever there is" (ci-yang yod-pa thams-cad bka'-des mdzad-pa yin) (Ti 1933); "The Word made all things" (dngos-po thams-cad bka'-des mdzad) (Ti 1968).

It remains the secret of the translators why they chose the expressions "to originate," "to become established", "to come into being" in their interpretation of verse 1 of the Gospel of St. John instead of using the word "to create".

Let us now proceed to the term "Word".

The Mongolian translations offer four different renderings of "Word". The translation of 1846 simply uses the Greek word $lo\gamma os$ ($\lambda \delta \gamma o \varsigma$). This did not mean anything for the Mongolian addressee, but the term "Word" in the context of the statement "In the beginning was the Word" is so complicated that it needs explanation in any case, no matter in what language.

The Kalmuck translation of 1887 and the Mongolian translations of 1954 and 1993 render "Word" by $\xi arliq / jarli\gamma / zarlig$. This is an ideal choice, since $jarli\gamma$ means "decree, command, order" and therefore also "word of a superior", "word with reference to a king or a god". Above all, $jarli\gamma$ is the word of the Buddha. Since in Mongolian the words for Buddha and God, the Christian God, are the same -burqan -, $jarli\gamma$ is the proper translation for "Word" which, as the Bible says in John 1:1, is identical with God: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God". The two Tibetan translations use the exact equivalent of $jarli\gamma$, bka'. The Ganjur, bKa'-'gyur, is the translation of the words of the Buddha.

The Mongolian translations of 2002 and 2004 as well as the Buryat translation of 2010 use another expression for "Word": Mo $\ddot{u}ge / \ddot{u}g$, Bu $\ddot{u}ge^3$. This is also correct. $\ddot{U}ge$

³ The Buryat translation explains the reason why the Greek term "Logos" is rendered by "Ügė". See *Šėnė chėlsėėn*, p. 209.

is the general name for "word", but it can also mean "word of a superior". For example, many letters of the Ilkhans of Persia begin with "Our (the Khan's) Word" ($manu \ \ddot{u}ge$).⁴ This, of course, was long ago, and it is doubtful whether for the Mongols of today the term $\ddot{u}ge$ has the same meaning as the term $\ddot{j}arli\gamma$. The word $\ddot{u}ge$ is also the name for a traditional genre of Mongolian folk literature. The $\ddot{u}ge$ are tales in which the rules of right behaviour are explained.⁵ The characters of the tales, however, are animals. Therefore, this kind of $\ddot{u}ge$ hardly evokes the idea of Word of God or of the Word which is Christ.

A surprising rendering of "Word" is offered by the Mongolian translation of 2003. It is the word *yosun*. This term reflects one of the most important, but at the same time most complex ethical and social concepts of the Mongols. *Yosun* is the right order of things. In this sense, it can mean "rule, principle, custom, doctrine, system, behaviour, manner, etiquette". The Two Orders (*qoyar yosun*) are the right orders of the spiritual and secular matters. All what is without *yosun* – *yosun ügei* – is wrong, bad. The sphere of the term *yosun* also comprises the idea of human rights and even human dignity. I think that *yosun* is an ideal term to convey to the Mongols the meaning of John's difficult concept of "Word". The Word is the right order of things, represented and guaranteed by God and Christ.

Another explanation is given by the Mongolian interpretative translation of 1990: As we already know, here the Word is Christ who mediates between God and mankind.

2. Now we proceed to our second example:

"This is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world", in Latin hic est vere Salvator mundi, in Greek: $ο \tilde{v} τ ό \varsigma \dot{ε} στιν \dot{α} ληθ \hat{ω} \varsigma \dot{ο} σωτ ηρ το <math>\hat{v}$ το \hat{v} το \hat{v} (John 4:42).

Let me begin with a philological remark. The English King James translation of the Bible, which I quote, has the wording "Christ, the Saviour of the world". Christ is also added in two oldest translations, the Mongolian of 1846 and the Kalmuck of 1887. This addition is due to a text different from that used by the other translations, which do not have the word "Christ".

The concepts "saviour" and "saviour of the world" are not very difficult to convey to people who belong to a Buddhist culture. "Saviour" (Mo *aburaγči*, Ti *skyob-pa*) is an epithet of the Buddha.⁶ The Tibetans and the Mongols also call the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama "saviour (helper; protector; deliverer [*skyabs-mgon*])".⁷ For the

⁴ See D. Tumurtogoo With the Collaboration of G. Cecegdari, *Mongolian Monuments in Uighur-Mongolian Script (XIII–XVI Centuries)*, Taipei, Taiwan 2006, pp. 150–156.

Walther Heissig, "Zur Überlieferung der Üge-Dichtung. 1. Vier unbekannte Üge". In: Zentralasiatische Studien 1 (1967), pp. 163–235.

⁶ Yumiko Ishihama and Yoichi Fukuda, *A New Critical Edition of the* Mahāvyutpatti. *Sanskrit-Tibetan-Mongolian Dictionary of Buddhist Terminology*. (Tokyo) 1989, p. -1-, no. 15.

Sarat Chandra Das, A Tibetan-English Dictionary with Sanskrit Synonyms. Revised and Edited by Graham Sandberg and A. William Heyde. Calcutta 1902, p. 99.



Mongols even Chinggis Khan is a "saviour" ($abura\gamma \check{c}i$). He is, for example, addressed by this term in the ritual texts, which are recited in the Chinggis sanctuary in Ordos in Southwest Inner Mongolia.⁸

How is the term "saviour" rendered in Mongolian? The translations use two words: aburayči (avragč / avrač) "protector, provider of refuge" and tonilyayči "deliverer". Both terms are basically identical, but there is a slight semantic differentiation: aburayči is one who gives protection, refuge (abural), and tonilyayči is one who delivers, for example from suffering. The Buryat translation has avragša, the Kalmuck translations have tonilyaqči. The Tibetan translations render "saviour" by the binomial skyabs-mgon "protector". This term is composed of skyabs "protection, refuge" and mgon "protector, master, lord". It is the exact equivalent of Mongolian aburayči "protector". In Buddhism the term skyabs-mgon has a very important meaning, particularly the first element, skyabs "protection, refuge". In this paper, of course, I cannot go into details.

We may state that both "protector" and "deliverer" are adequate equivalents of "saviour". Both protection and deliverance are means of saving the world, mankind, from suffering, from suffering which is the existential condition of both Christians and Buddhists.

We still have to ask how the translators render the word "world". They use the following five terms, all of which have different semantics.

- 1. Mongolian and Kalmuck *yirtinčü*: This word corresponds to '*jig-rten* in the Tibetan translations. *Yirtinčü*.means the world in Buddhist cosmography. Since there exist innumerable world systems, *yirtinčü* can also be rendered by "cosmos". In the Mongolian translation of 1990, the name of God is rendered as "Lord of *yirtinčü* / (*ertönc*)" (*ertöncijn ėzėn*), that means the Lord of the World or the Cosmos.
- 2. Mongolian *orčilang*, Kalmuck *orčlon*: *orčilang/orčlon* is the Mongolian equivalent of Sanskrit *saṃsāra* (Mo *sansar* in John 1:1), the Buddhist cycle of existences.
- 3. Mongolian delekei, Buryat dėlchėj is the "earth", in particular "surface of the earth".
- 4. Mongolian orčilang delekei. Here the word orčilang is combined with delekei.
- 5. The Buryat translation clearly states what "world" means "the people of the world" (dėlchėjn zon), i.e. mankind. (In John 1,1 the Buryat version uses the binomial jurtėmsė dėlchėj.)

3. Our last example is

"I am the resurrection, and the life", in Latin *Ego sum resurrectio*, *et vita*, in Greek ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ἀνάστασις καὶ ἡ ζωή (John 11:25).

For both the Mongols and the Tibetans the Christian term "resurrection" is not easy to understand. For them, a new life comes about through reincarnation, which is a typical

⁸ Klaus Sagaster, "Ein Ritual aus dem heutigen Činggis-Heiligtum in Ordos". In: Zentralasiatische Studien 23 (1992/1993), pp. 145–151 (p. 146).

⁹ Bod-sog-rgya gsum-gyi shan-sbyar tshig-mdzod chen-mo / Töbed mongyol kitad qaričayuluysan yeke toli / Zang-meng-han duizhao da cidian, Liaoning 2001, p. 73.

Buddhist concept: It means continuous change of existences. Resurrection, however, is something else. Resurrection is a unique event: Christ resurrected only once, and human beings will also resurrect only once. In order to make this clear, the Christian translators deliberately did not choose a Buddhist term, like "to change, to take another form, to be reincarnated". They solved the problem in different ways:

The Tibetan translations render the term "resurrection" almost literally by "rising" (Tib. lang-ba). The Tibetan translation of 1968 writes "I am the rising and the life" (lang-ba dang gson-pa-nyid nga-yin). The translation of 1933 additionally explains that "rising" means "rising from the dead": It writes "I am the rising from the dead, and the life" (nga ni shi-nas lang-ba-nyid dang gson-pa-nyid yin-te). In the non-Tibetan translations, however, we do not find, with one exception, the words "rising" or "to rise", but another term, which obviously is more comprehensible for the Mongols, the Buryats and the Kalmucks. It is the term "revival" (amilal, Mo 1993; amilalt, Mo 2004; amidyralga, Bu 2010; ämdrllhn, Ka 2002) or, as an interpretation of what "revival" means, the term "the one who revives" (amidurayuluyči, Mo 1846, Mo 1952; dakin amidurayuluyči, Mo 2003). Therefore, Christ says, according to these translations, either "I am the revival, and the life" (bi bol amilal ba am' mön [Mo 1993]; bi bol amilalt ba am' mön [Mo 2004]; Bi chadaa Amidyralga gééšéb, Ami nahan gééšéb [Bu 2010]; Bi – ämdrllhn boln žirhl [Ka 2002]) or "I am the one who revives, and (I am) the life" (bi ber amidurayuluyči kiged amin mön [Mo 1846]; .bi ber amidurayuluyč i kiged amin mön bui [Mo 1952]; bi bolbasu darui dakin amidurayuluyči mön. bi bolbasu darui ami nasun mön [Mo 2003]). Only the Kalmuck translation of 1887 preserves the idea of "rising" and says: "I am the one who, by reviving, causes to rise, and (I am) the life" (bi amiduruulun bosxoqči bolōd amin čigi mön). A quite particular rendering is given by the Mongol translation of 1990. It reads: "I am able to revive all the dead men and to give (them) life" (Bi nas barsan chünijg chürtel dachin amiluulž, am'dral ögč čadna).

The Mongolian translation of resurrection as revival points to the close relation between resurrection and life. The Mongol terms for "revival" (Mo *amilal*, *amilalt*; Bu *amidyralga*; Ka *ämdrllhn*), and for "to revive" (Mo *amidurayulqu*, *dakin amidurayulqu*; Ka *amiduruulxu*) are derived from the word *amin* "life". The reasoning is that reviving leads to resurrection, and resurrection leads to life, to the real, the eternal life.

The word "life" (Mo. amin, am'; Bu ami nahan; Ka amin, žirhl; Tib. gson-pa) did not create any problem for the translators. As we could see, this was not the case with many other terms. To translate the Bible is not an easy task.

Christian Terms

1. John 1:1:

"In the beginning was the word" Latin: *In principio erat verbum*, Greek. Έν ἀρχῆ ἦν ὁ λόγος.



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"In the beginning":

"in the beginning": Mo ekin-dür / echend; Ti thog-mar (Mo 1846, Mo 1952, Mo 2004; Ti 1933, Ti 1968)

"in the beginning": Bu anchanhaa naaša (Bu 2010)

"in the beginning": Ka erte ekin-dü (Ka 1887)

"all began, and": Mo bür echleed (Mo 1993)

"before the world originated (or began)": Ka orčlų üüdchäs urd (Ka 2002)

"before the world became established": Mo sansar toytanin bütükü-eče urid (Mo 2003)

"before the world came into being": Mo *orčlon dėlchij bij bolochoos ömnö* (Mo 1990) "Word":

"lógos": Mo *loyos* (Mo 1846)

"word (of a superior), decree, command, order": Ka žarliq (Ka 1887); Mo jarliy/ zarlig (Mo 1952, Mo 1993); Ti bka' (Ti 1933, Ti 1968)

"word": Ka üg (Ka 2002); Mo üg (Mo 2004); ügė (Bu 2010)

"order, principle, rule, custom": Mo yosun (Mo 2003)

2. John 4:42:

"This is indeed the Christ, the Savour of the world",

Latin: Hic est vere Salvator mundi,

Greek: οὖτός ἐστιν ἀληθῶς ὁ σωτὴο τοῦ κόσμου.

"saviour of the world"

"protector of the world": yirtinčü-yin aburayči (Mo 1952)

"protector of the world": ertöncijn avragč (Mo 2004)

"protector of the world": 'jig-rten-gyi skyabs-mgon (Ti 1933, Ti 1968)

"protector of mankind": chün törölchtnij avragč (Mo 1990)

"protector of the people of the world": dėlchėjn zoniie Abaragša (Bu 2010)

"protector of the world": orčlongin avrač (Ka 2002)

"protector of the world": dėlchijn avragč (Mo 1993)

"deliverer of the world": orčilang delekei-yin aburayči (Mo 2003)

"Christ and deliverer of the world": kristos bolun yirtinčü-yin tonilyayči (Mo 1846)

"deliverer of the world, Christ": yirtinčiiyigi tonilyaqči kiristos (Ka 1889)

"saviour":

"protector; provider of refuge": Mo aburayči, avragč (Mo 1952, Mo 2003, Mo 1993, Mo 2004); Bu abaragša (Bu 2010); Ka avrač (Ka 2002); Ti skyabs-mgon (Ti 1933, Ti1968)

"deliverer": Mo tonilyayči (Mo 1846); Ka tonilyagči (Ka 1887)

"world":

"world, cosmos": Mo yirtinčü, ertönc (Mo 1846; Mo 1952, Mo 2004); Ka yirtinčü (Ka 1887); Ti 'jig-rten (Ti 1933, Ti 1968). "God": "Lord of the World / Cosmos" (ertöncijn ėzėn) (Mo 1990)

"world, cycle of existences, Samsara": Ka *orčloŋ* (Ka 2002) (= Mo. *orčilang*; Mo *sansar* in John 1:1)

"world, surface of the earth": Mo delekei, dėlchij (Mo 1993)

"world, cycle of existences – surface of the earth": Mo orčilang delekei (Mo 2003)

"mankind": Mo chün törölchtön (Mo 1990)

"people of the world", mankind: dėlchėjn zon (Bu 2010)

3. John 11:25:

"I am the resurrection, and the life",

Latin: Ego sum resurrectio, et vita,

Greek: έγώ είμι ή ἀνάστασις καὶ ή ζωή.

"resurrection":

"rising": Ti lang-ba (Ti 1968)

"rising from the dead": Ti shi-nas lang-ba-nyid (Ti 1933)

"revival": Mo amilal (Mo 1993), Mo amilalt (2004); Bu amidyralga (Bu 2010); Ka ämdrllhn (Ka 2002)

"the one who revives": Mo amidurayuluyči (Mo 1846, Mo 1952); dakin amidurayuluyči (Mo 2003)

"the one who, by reviving, causes to rise": Ka amiduruulun bosxoqči (Ka 1887)

"to be able to revive all dead men": Mo *nas barsan chünijg chürtel dachin amiluulž* ... čad(ach) (Mo 1990)

"life":

"Life": Mo *amin / am*" (Mo 1846, Mo 1952, Mo 1993, Mo 2004); Ka *amin* (Ka 1887); Mo *ami nasun*; (Mo 2003); Bu *ami nahan* (Bu 2010); Mo *am'dral* (Mo 1990); Ka *žirhl* (Ka 2002); Ti *gson-pa* (Ti 1933, Ti 1968)

Bible Translations

a) Mongolian

1. Mo 1846

Bidan-u eğen ba tonilγαγči iisus keristos-un sine tistamint kemegči nom anu orosibai: Wiliyam Swan [William Swan]. Idward Stalibras [Edward Stallybrass] qoyar anu egün-i griyeg eke-eče mongγol kelen-dür orčiγulbai:: Anggliy-a oron-u London qotan-a. 1846 on-a daruγdabai

New edition:

The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Translated out of the original Greek into the Mongolian Language, by Edward Stallybrass und William Swan. St. Petersburg: British and Foreign Bible Society 1880

2. Mo 1952

The New Covenant commonly called The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in Mongolian. Revised Version. Hongkong: Hongkong Bible House 1952

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3. Mo 1990

Šinė gėrėė. Gongkong: Olon ulsyn Biblijn nėgsėn nijgėmlėg 1990

4. Mo 1993

Šinė gėrėės. The New Testament. Recovery Version. Mongol-angli bibli. Ulaanbaatar: Mongol Bayaryn Mėdėė 1993

5. Mo 2003

Ibegeltü nom (Kökeqota 2003)

6. Mo 2004

Ariun Bibli. Chuučin Gėrėė. Šinė Gėrėė. (Ulaanbaatar:) Ariun Bičėės Biblijn Nijgėmlėg 2004. (Previous editions: 1995, 1996, 1997, 2000.)

b) Buryat

7. Bu 2010

Šėnė Chėlsėėn. Moskva: Nangin Bėšėg oršuulgyn institut 2010

c) Kalmuck

8. Ka 1887

Novyj zavet gospoda i spasa nešego Iisusa Christa. Tom pervyj. S grečeskago podlinnika na kalmyckij jazyk perevel Aleksej Pozdneev. Izdano iždiveniem Velikobritanskago i inostrannago biblejskago obščestva. Sanktpeterburg: Depo Velikobritanskago i inostrannago biblejskago obščestva. 1887

9. Ka 2002

Šin boocan. Moskva 2002

d) Tibetan

10. Ti 1933

Dam-pa'i gsung-rab čes-bya-ba bzhugs-so. Zhal-chad gsar-ba'i mdo-rnams ni / Tibetan New Testament, R.V., Ed. 2933. British & Foreign Bible Society, Shanghai 1933

11. Ti 1968

Zhal-chad snga-phyi gnyis-kyi mdo bzhugs-so / The Holy Bible In Tibetan. (No place indicated): United Bible Societies 1983. ("This Edition comprises a reprint of the 1948 Old Testament and the 1968 New Testament".)

e) Greek/Latin

Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine*. 26th edition, 7th impression. Stuttgart 1984

f) English

The Holy Bible. Authorised King James Version. Oxford / London / New York / Toronto. Undated