

A Comparative Study of Dialect Variations in the Kokborok Language

Prasanta Debbarma & Reshmi Debbarma

Abstract

The Kokborok language is one of the official languages in Tripura, Northeast India. It is spoken by nine indigenous communities, namely, Debbarma, Reang, Tripura, Jamatia, Kalai, Murasing, Noatia, Rupini and Uchai; but marked by dialectal variations. In the present study, the Debbarma dialect is compared with eight other dialects to find the variations in words and phonemes. Data were collected using Google forms, through telephonic and personal interviews and analysed. The findings show that where the Debbarma dialect ends with a final consonant sound 'k' in a word, it will be 'au' in Reang, Kalai, Uchai and Rupini. Sometimes the medial and final consonant sounds are missing in Debbarma and Jamatia, Uchai dialects. The Tripura dialect makes long words, and Reang and Uchai dialects form very short words where a single letter could be a prefix, that is, 'mkha'. Here, the first letter 'm' is considered a prefix in Reang and Uchai dialects. So, how and where the phonemes of words result in dialectal variations among the dialects of the Kokborok language is discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Language, dialectal variation, words, Kokborok, Tripura

Introduction

According to Sir Grierson (1903–1928, p. 17), the Kokborok is a regional language of Tripura, Northeast India, and belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, the Tibeto-Burman under the Bodo-Garo sub-group. "The speakers of the Kokborok language are spread all over Tripura; some are found in Assam, Mizoram in India and the adjacent country

of Bangladesh with a total population of 9,37,777" (Debbarma, 2012, p. 9; Majumdar & Dev Verma, 2018, p. 102). Kokborok has nine major dialects, excluding sub-clan and the differences are community based; that is, Debbarma, Reang and Tripura dialects are different, so different that sometimes they do not understand one another. That is why the Reang community reclaimed themselves as separate language and not a part of Kokborok language (Debbarma, 2012). However, the language structure (word structure, word order and maximum word similarities) show that the Reang dialect is a part of the Kokborok language

Methodology

The following steps were taken to collect data for the study. A Google form was prepared and shared with the student WhatsApp group comprising the nine Kokborok dialect communities. Over two hundred students responded in their respective dialects. Since some words were misunderstood, resulting in erroneous statements, respondents were interviewed over the phone to seek clarifications. Personal interviews were conducted to observe the accuracy of sounds, as the Reang and Uchai dialects formed very short words. In Jamatia and Uchai dialects, the final consonant sounds were missing, and the Tripura dialect had longer words than the other dialects of Kokborok.

Results

Dialect Variations Between the Debbarma and Reang Communities

Reang's dialect formed very short words compared to other dialects of the Kokborok language. An example of variations between the Debbarma and Reang dialects is given in Table 1 along with their English meanings.

Table 1: *Word Length Comparison Between the Debbarma and Reang Dialects*

Debbarma	Reang	English
Mwsa	Msa	Tiger
Bokhorok	Mkhrouh	Head
Musuk	Msu	Cow
Buphang	Mphang	Tree
Bwlai	Blai	Leaf
Kwtwi	Ktwi	Sweet
Bwthwi	Mthwi	Blood

In the above example, the Reang dialect formed very short words. The prefixes 'mw, bo, bw, kw' in the Debbarma dialect become 'm, b, and k' in the Reang dialect. So, a single phoneme can work as a prefix in the Reang dialect.

The first phoneme 'b' in Debbarma dialect becomes 'm' in the Reang's dialect. Examples of words showing this change are given in Table 2 along with the English meanings.

Table 2: *Initial Phoneme Comparison Between the Debbarma and the Reang Dialects*

Debbarma	Reang	English
Buphang	Mphang	Tree
Bwkha	Mkha	Heart
Bwchang	Mchang	Waist
Buphuru	Mphuk	When
Bumung	Mmu	Name
Bwkhwnai	Mkhnai	Hair

Debbarma and Reang dialects differ in the final phonemes. Words ending with the phoneme 'k' in the Debbarma dialect take 'au' in the Reang dialect. Table 3 provides a few examples with the English meanings.

Table 3: *Final Consonant Sound Comparison Between Debbarma and Reang*

Debbarma	Reang	English
Tok	Tau	Bird
Kok	Kau	Language
Thok	Thau	Oil
Naithok	Naithau	Beautiful
Kwchak	Kchau	Red (Colour)
Kolok	Klau	Tall/high/long, etc.

Some words in the Debbarma dialect become different in the Reang, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: *Word Differences Between Debbarma and Reang*

Debbarma	Reang	English
Koiphol	Kingkoiya	Papaia/Papaya
Kamchwlwi	Kutai	Shirt

Yongphak	Gingkukma	Worm
Moso	Thamso	Chili
Swtwi	Kormo	Turmeric
Na	La	To take

Dialect Variations Between the Debbarma and Tripura Communities

One can find dialect differences between Debbarma and Tripura. As far as we know, “there are twenty-five sub-cans in Tripura” (Tripura, 2023, p. 25), each of which speak a different dialect. In this study, the Anok dialect of the Tripura community has been taken for comparison.

The prefix sound ‘**kw, mw, bw**’ in the Debbarma dialect becomes ‘**ka, ma, ba**’ in the Anok dialect, as shown in Table 5. These words are given with their English meaning.

Table 5: Prefix in Debbarma and the Anok Dialect of the Tripura Community

Debbarma	Anok	English
Kw-thang	Ka-thang	Alive
Kw-chak	Ka-chak	Red
Kw-chang	Ka-chang	Cold
Mw-sa	Ma-sa	Dance
Mw-khang	Ma-khang	Face
Bw-sak	Ba-sak	Body
Bw-kha	Ba-kha	Heart
Bw-lai	Ba-lai	Leaf
Bw-chang	Ba-chang	Waist

Some words are longer in Tripura dialect than in Debbarma, as shown in Table 6. The longer words occur in very few words.

Table 6: Tripura Dialect Makes Long Words Compared with Debbarma

Debbarma	Tripura	English
Kok	Korok	Language
Kap	Karap	Weep
Tuku	Twikuluk	Take bath
Khwna	Khanap	Tomorrow

Dialect Variation Between the Debbarma and Jamatia

The Debbarma and Jamatia dialects share many common words. However, there are differences, as well. In Jamatia, the final consonant is sometimes missing, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: *Final Consonant Missing in Jamatia But Not in Debbarma*

Debbarma	Jamatia	English
Kaham	Kaha	Good
Kap	Ka	Weep
Mwnam	Mwna	Bad smell
Seman	Sema	Last year
Kwprap	Kwpra	Salty

We came to know from Table 7 that the final consonant sounds ‘m’, ‘p’ and ‘n’ in Debbarma are missing in Jamatia. The Jamatias elongate their speech sounds. For example, boro tháng-nai ká... (where are you going?). The last word ‘ká’, in this sentence will be a long sound.

Dialect Variation Between the Debbarma and Kalai Dialects

“The Kalai community belong to the Halam tribes”, (Bhattacharjee, 2002), but their language is like Kokborok. Our observation shows that when a word in the Debbarma dialect starts with the phoneme ‘y’, it will be ‘j’ in the Kalai dialect, as shown in Table 8.

Table 8: *Initial Phoneme Comparison in Words Between Debbarma and Kalai*

Debbarma	Kalai	English
Yak	Jak	Hand
Yakung	Jakong	Leg
Yongwla	Jongla	Frog
Yapha	Japha	Palm
Yasi	Jasi	Finger
Yongphak	Jongphak	Worm

If a word ends with the final consonant sound ‘k’ in the Debbarma dialect, it will become ‘ow’ in the Kalai dialect. A few examples are given in Table 9.

Table 9: *Final Consonant Sounds in Debbarma and Kalai*

Debbarma	Kalai	English
Kok	Kow	Language
Tok	Tow	Bird
Kosok	Kosow	Roten
Kolok	Kolow	Tall/long
Phantok	Phantow	Brinjal
Naithok	Naithow	Beautiful

The Kalai dialect has words with consonant clusters, whereas this does not occur in Debbarma, as shown in Table 10.

Table 10: *Occurrence of Consonant Clusters in Kalai But Not in Debbarma*

Debbarma	Kalai	English
Tamo	Tma	What
Sabo	Sba	Who
Sepeng	Speng	Make straight

In some words of the Debbarma dialect, the middle and final consonant sounds are missing, whereas they are present in Kalai, as shown in Table 11.

Table 11: *Middle and Final Consonant Sounds are Missing in the Debbarma Dialect*

Debbarma	Kalai	English
Tomasa	Tomasar	Wild cock
Khunju	Khunjur	Ear
Puma	Punma	She goat
Khochai	Khopchai	Beard
Nobar	Nokbar	Wind

Table 11 shows that in the Debbarma dialect, the missing middle consonants are 'n' in 'punma', 'p' in 'khopchai' and 'k' in 'nokbar'. The missing final consonant is 'r' in 'tamsar' and 'khunjur'.

Dialect Variations Between Debbarma and Noatia

The Debbarma and Noatia dialects share several similarities, with a few differences. Table 12 shows the differences. When the second phonemes of a word are either 'a or w' in the Debbarma dialect, it becomes 'o' in

the Noatia dialect.

Table 12: Differences in the Second Phonemes of Words Between Debbarma and Noatia

Debbarma	Noatia	English
Tamo	Toma	What
Sabo	Soba	Who
Thwi	Thoi	Blood
Kwtwi	Kwtoi	Sweet

Dialect Variation Between Debbarma and Murasing

The majority of words are the same in the Debbarma and Murasing dialects. However, some prefixes are different, as shown in Table 13.

Table 13: Comparison of Prefixes Between Debbarma and Murasing

Debbarma	Murasing	English
Ku-mun	Ka-mun	Ripe
Ko-sok	Ka-sok	Rotten
Ko-phon	Ka-phon	Decay

These examples show that the prefixes 'ko', and 'ku' in the Debbarma dialect become 'ka' in the Murasing dialect.

Dialect Variation Between Debbarma and Uchai

The Uchai dialect is very similar to the Reang dialect. In some nouns of the Uchai dialect, the final consonant sound is missing, while it is available in the Debbarma dialect. Table 14 shows that the final consonants 'r', 'l', 'p', 'n', and 'k' are missing in the Uchai dialect.

Table 14: The Final Consonant Comparisons Between Debbarma and Uchai

Debbarma	Uchai	English
Hakhor	Hakho	Cave
Mokol	Moko	Eye
Kap	Ka	Weep
Tal	Ta	Moon
Seman	Sema	Last year
Borok	Bro	Man

In comparing the Debbarma and Uchai dialects, one can find differences

in the initial phonemes. The first phoneme ‘ch’ and ‘y’ in Debbarma becomes ‘j’ in Uchai, as shown in Table 15.

Table 15: *Initial Phoneme Differences Between Debbarma and Uchai*

Debbarma	Uchai	English
Chumui	Jumui	Cloud
Yongwla	Jongla	Frog
Yongphak	Jongphaw	Worm

In the case of a few rare words, if the final consonant sound is ‘k’ in the Debbarma dialect, then it is ‘au’ in Uchai dialect, as shown in Table 16.

Table 16: *Final Consonant Sound Difference Between Debbarma and Uchai*

Debbarma	Uchai	English
Yak	Yau	Hand
Kok	Kau	Language
Kolok	Kolau	Tall/long
Phantok	Phanthau	Brinjal
Tok	Tau	Bird

Like the Reang dialect, Uchai forms very short words. A few examples are **msu (cow)**, **spo (who)**, **Ste (small)**, **mkoih (eye)** and so on.

Dialect Variations Between Debbarma and Rupini

“The Rupini community, like the Kalai are a part of the Halam tribe” (Das, 2020), and share similarities in their dialects; but their language is Kokborok. The Debbarma and Rupini dialects differ in their initial phonemes as shown in Table 17. The first phoneme ‘y’ of the word in the Debbarma dialect becomes ‘j’ in the Rupini dialect.

Table 17: *Initial Phoneme Difference Between Debbarma and Rupini*

Debbarma	Rupini	English
Yak	Jak	Hand
Yakung	Jakong	Leg
Yasku	Jasku	Nail
Yongphak	Jongphak	Worm
Yongwla	Jongla	Frog

Another difference between the two dialects is the prefix. The prefixes,

'ko', 'ku', 'pho', and 'mo' in the Debbarma dialect becomes 'kw', 'phw', and 'mw' in the Rupini dialect. Table 18 lists a few such words.

Table 18: *The Distinction of Prefix Between Debbarma and Rupini*

Debbarma	Rupini	English
Ko-lok	Kw-lau	Long / tall
Ku-mun	Kw-mwn	Ripe
Pho-lok	Phw-lau	To extend
Mu-phun	Mw-phwn	Make ripe

The table also shows that the words with 'k' as the final consonant ending in the Debbarma dialect become 'au' in the Rupini dialect. In the case of the prefix with the second phoneme 'ko' in the Debbarma dialect, it becomes 'kw' in the Rupini dialect. The difference between the two dialects is evident in 'o' and 'w' sounds. The Rupini dialect has a unique feature. The final consonant sound 't' is used in Rupini but not in other Kokborok dialects, as for example, **kuphut'** (white).

The table shows that Debbarma and Reang show maximum dialect variations and Kalai and Rupini share several similarities as both belong to the Halam tribe. The Uchai dialects form very short words and some words take double consonants in the initial position, as 'mkoih' 'mkha', and 'ktwi', etc. The final consonant 'k' in the Debbarma dialect becomes 'au' in the Rupini and Kalai dialects. Sometimes the Reang and Uchai dialects follow this rule, in the presence of 'kau', 'thau', 'Tau' etc. The Tripura community elongate their speech sounds. For instance, 'kok' in the Debbarma dialect becomes 'korok' in the Tripura dialect. Other dialects of the Kokborok language, Murasing, Jamatia, and Noatia, are similar to the Debbarma dialect.

Conclusion

The Kokborok dialectal variations occur due to geographical differences in their settlements. The Reang community lives in Kanchanpur, North Tripura, and a few in South Tripura. Most of the Tripura Community's habitation is South Tripura and Gomoti Tripura. Most of the Debbarma communities live in west Tripura, Sepahijala district of Tripura and Khowai district of Tripura. Communities living in Kailashahar, Kamalpur (North Tripura) speak a dialect that is different from the dialect in West Tripura. The dialect variations in the Kokborok language occur because

Table 19: Shows the Sound Variations in Nouns Among the Nine Kokborok Dialects

Debbarma	Reang	Tripura (Anok)	Jamatia	Kalai	Noatia	Murasing	Uchai	Rupini	Gloss
Swi	soi	swi	swi	swi	swi	swi	soi	swi	Dog
Tok	Tau	Tok	Tok	Tau	Tok	Tok	Tau	Tau	Bird
Musuk	msuh	Musuk	musuk	musuk	musuk	musuk	Msuh	Musuk	cow
Mokol	mkoih	mokol	mokol	mokol	mokol	mokol	moko	Mokol	Eye
Twima	Toima	Twima	Twima	Twima	Twima	Twima	Toima	Twima	River
Hakhor	hakhau	hakhor	hakor	hakhor	hakhor	hakhor	hakho	Hakhor	Cave
Khunju	khunji	khunju	khunju	khunjur	khunju	khunju	khunju	Khunchur	Ear
Hoku	hokhu	duma	hoku	huku	hokhu	hoku	hokho	Hokhu	Smoke
Kamchwlwi	kutai	kamchilik	kachwlwi	gamli	kamchwlwi	kamchwlwi	khotai	Kamchwlwi	Shirt
Larima	taubak	tokbak	tokbak	lalima	larima	larima	mkokanama	bebepma	Butterfly
Kasing	toimui	tetok	kaising	kasing	kasing	kasing	tuimui	kaseng	Tortoise
Swtwi	kormo	Silik / selik	sotwi	swltwi	swltwi	soltwi	sotwi	swltwi	Turmeric
Moso	thamso	mwsww	moso	moso	moso	moso	thamso	mwsww	Chili
Thalik	thailik	thailik	thalwi	thalik	thailik	thailik	thailik	thailik	Banana
Phantok	phanthau	phandok	phantok	phantau	phandok	phantok	phanthau	phanthau	Brinjal
Nok	Nouh	Nok	Nok	Nok	Nok	nok	Nok	Nok	House
Punjua	Puinya	Prunda	Punjua	Punjua	Punda	Punjua	Pujua	Pundua	He goat
Sikhok	Sikhau	Sikhok	Sikhok	Sikau	Sikhok	Sikhok	Sikhau	Sikhau	Thief

Debbarma	Reang	Tripura (Anok)	Jamatia	Kalai	Noatia	Murasing	Uchai	Rupini	Gloss
Chwla	Kla	Chala	Chwla	Chwla	Chwla	Chwla	Chala	Chwla	Boy/Man
Yongwla	Yongla	Yongla	Yongwla	Jongla	Yongla	Yongla	Jongla	Jongkra	Frog
Yongphak	Gingukma	Yongphak	Yongphak	Jongphak	Yongphak	Yongphak	Jongphau	Jongphak	Worm
Kok	Kau	Korok	Kok	Kow	Kok	Kok	Kau	kau	Language
Kwtwi	Ktwi	kwtwi	Kwtwi	Kwtwi	Kwtwi	Kwtwi	Kotwi	Kwtwi	Sweet
Bwkha	Mkha	Bakha	Bwkha	Bwkha	Bwkha	Bwkha	Mkha	Bwkha	Heart
Nobar	Nouhba	Nobar	Nobar	Nokbar	Nobar	Nokbar	Nokba	Nokbar	Wind
Puma	Puinma	Pruma	Puma	Pumma	Puma	Puma	Puma	Punma	She goat

the nine communities do not live together. If they continue to live separately with minimal interactions with other Kokborok communities, there is a chance for the dialectal variations to increase.

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Prasanta Debbarma is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Kokborok, ICV College, Belonia, South Tripura.

debbarmaprasant09@gmail.com

Reshmi Debbarma is a Graduate Teacher at PM Shri Akhailiya Cherra HS School, Sonaram, West Tripura.

saobaipa@gmail.com