

A Comparative Study of Kokborok and Other Tibeto-Burman Languages

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ABSTRACT

Kokborok, a member of the Tibeto-Burman language family, belongs to the Bodo-Garo group and shares linguistic features with languages such as Bodo, Garo, and Dimasa. This volume explores phonetic, lexical, grammatical, and syntactic similarities and differences between Kokborok and other related languages, providing a comprehensive comparative analysis. The study investigates common phonological traits, such as tonal variations, vowel harmony, and consonant shifts, and examines shared lexicon and grammatical structures among these languages. Additionally, it explores loan words from Indo-European and Indo-Aryan languages, particularly English, Bengali and Hindi, and how linguistic contact has influenced Kokborok's evolution. By analyzing historical linguistics and language divergence, this volume traces Kokborok's development from proto-Bodo-Garo and Dimasa roots to its modern form. The study also considers the impact of migration, cultural exchanges, and socio-political changes on the language's structure and vocabulary. Through this comparative framework, the volume aims to highlight Kokborok's distinctiveness within the Tibeto-Burman language family while emphasizing its historical connections with other Bodo-Naga language family groups.



1. Introduction

The Tibeto-Burman language family is one of the largest and most diverse linguistic groups in Asia, encompassing over 400 languages spoken across South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia. Among its various branches, the Bodo-Garo subgroup holds particular significance in Northeast India, Kuch - Bihar, Bangladesh, and parts of Bhutan. Kokborok, the native language of the Borok people of Tripura, belongs to this subgroup and shares linguistic ties with Bodo, Garo, Dimasa, and other related languages.

1.1 Overview of the Tibeto-Burman Language Family

The Tibeto-Burman languages are part of the larger Sino-Tibetan language family, which also includes Chinese, Burmese, and Tibetan. These languages exhibit a wide range of phonetic, morphological, and syntactic features, making them a rich field of study for comparative linguistics.

Key characteristics of Tibeto-Burman languages include:

- Tonal and non-tonal varieties depending on the sub-group.
- Agglutinative and analytic grammatical structures.
- Verb-final (SOV) sentence structures in most languages.
- Extensive use of suffixes and postpositions rather than prepositions.

1.2 Kokborok's Place within the Bodo-Garo Linguistic Group

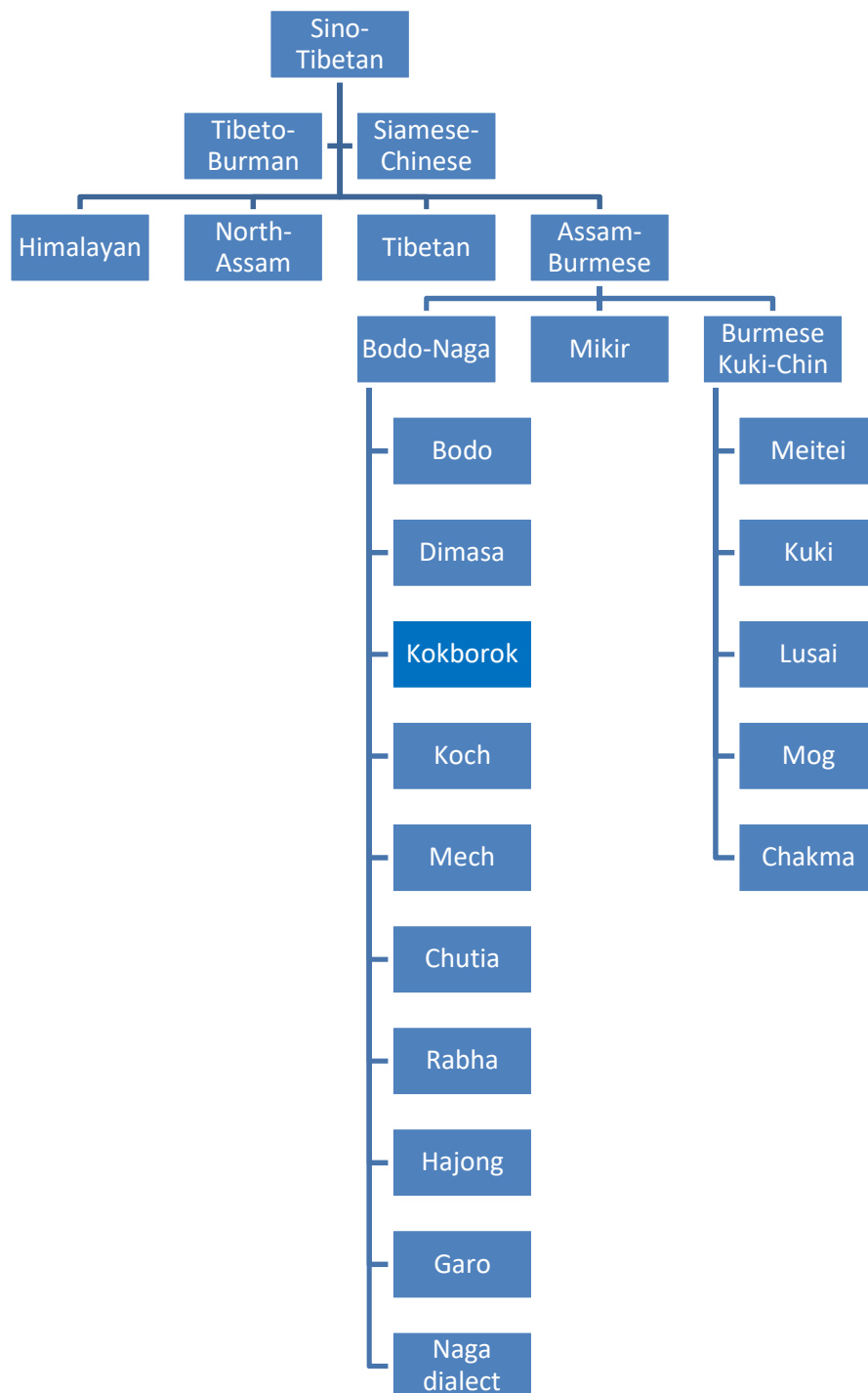
Kokborok belongs to the Bodo-Garo sub-group of Tibeto-Burman languages, which includes Bodo, Garo, Dimasa, Rabha, Hajong, and Tiwa. These languages share phonological, lexical, and syntactic similarities, though each has evolved uniquely due to geographical separation, cultural influences, and historical migrations.

Among the defining features of Bodo-Garo languages, including Kokborok, are:

- Similar vowel and consonant inventories.
- Use of classifiers to categorize nouns.
- Distinctive word order patterns and verb conjugation systems.



Sino-Tibetan Language Family Relation with Kokborok Language



Despite these similarities, Kokborok has developed unique phonetic and grammatical features that distinguish it from other Bodo-Garo languages. Additionally, the historical influence of Bengali, Hindi, and other Indo-Aryan languages has introduced new elements into Kokborok's vocabulary and syntax.



- **Overview of phonemes**

Kokborok has 6 vowel and 2 closing diphthongs, 20 consonants, 2 tones,

Vowels and diphthongs are:

U	o	ə	a	e	i
əi	ai				

A third (phonetic, not phonemic) diphthong is heard [ui] after /m/ and /b; it is round /əi/

Vowels are not common in them beginning of syllables, accept /a, and in pronouns. Open syllables (ending in vowels) are not so common as they are in Dimasa or Bodo.

Phonology & phonemics

Consonants are :

m	n	ŋ	b	d
z	g	p	t	k
<i>p^h</i>	<i>t^h</i>	<i>c^h</i>	<i>k^h</i>	s
r	h	l	w	j

The phonemics & phonology of plosives is one of the most puzzling in Kokborok.

All consonants can begin a syllable, except /ŋ/. The most frequent are s,t,b,k.

Consonants that can end a syllable are m,n,ng,p, k,r,l. Not /t/.

The most frequent are /k/ and /ŋ/.

NB: /r/ and /l/ are distinct in all positions. The /r/ is more frequent.

Two tones are contrastive and are normally heard in words which are otherwise homophonous.

Tones tend to disappear among younger urban speakers, due to Bengali influence.

This volume aims to analyze Kokborok's similarities and differences with its closest linguistic relatives, providing a deeper understanding of its place within the Tibeto-Burman family and its historical development.



2. Comparative Phonetics & Phonology

Phonetics and phonology play a crucial role in distinguishing languages within the Tibeto-Burman family. While Kokborok shares many phonetic traits with Bodo, Garo, and Dimasa, it also exhibits distinctive features that set it apart. This section explores similarities and differences in the sound systems of these languages, focusing on vowel and consonant inventories, tone patterns, and syllable structures.

2.1 Sound System Similarities in Kokborok, Bodo, Garo, and Dimasa

The Bodo-Garo languages, including Kokborok, have a relatively simple vowel system compared to Indo-Aryan languages. Most languages in this subgroup have a five to seven-vowel system, with minimal diphthongs.

Common phonetic features include:

- Monophthong vowel system: /a, e, i, o, u/ are present in Kokborok, Bodo, and Garo.
- Consonant inventory similarities: Aspirated and unaspirated stops are present in all three languages.
- Syllable structure: Mostly CVC (Consonant-Vowel-Consonant) or CV (Consonant-Vowel) patterns.

Example: /Kok/ means /Language/ (Consonant-Vowel-Consonant) monosyllable.

Example: /cha/ means /eat/ (Consonant-Vowel) patterns monosyllable.

2.2 Unique Phonetic Features Distinguishing Kokborok

Despite these similarities, Kokborok has some phonetic features that set it apart from its linguistic relatives:

- Use of retroflex sounds: Kokborok has developed retroflex consonants (/ʈ, ɖ, ɳ/), possibly due to contact with Bengali.



- **Absence of tones:** Unlike some other Tibeto-Burman languages such as Garo and Dimasa, Kokborok is generally considered a non-tonal language. However, pitch and stress variations can sometimes function similarly to tones.
- **Vowel length distinctions:** In Kokborok, vowel length can sometimes distinguish meaning, though this is less prominent than in Bodo or Dimasa.

2.3 Influence of Contact Languages on Phonetics

Kokborok has undergone phonetic shifts due to historical contact with Indo-Aryan languages like Bengali and Hindi. Some notable influences include:

- **Borrowed phonemes:** Sounds like /f/ and /v/, which are uncommon in native Tibeto-Burman languages, have been introduced through Bengali borrowings.
- **Consonant cluster adaptation:** Kokborok tends to simplify Bengali-origin consonant clusters, making them more compatible with its native phonology.

The phonetic evolution of Kokborok highlights its complex linguistic history, demonstrating both ancestral connections to Bodo-Garo languages and influences from Indo-Aryan languages.

3. Lexical Similarities & Borrowings

Lexical similarities and differences provide valuable insights into historical language contact, divergence, and evolution. Kokborok shares a significant portion of its vocabulary with other Bodo-Garo languages, yet it has also undergone lexical shifts due to its prolonged contact with Indo-Aryan languages, particularly Bengali and Hindi.

3.1 Common Vocabulary & Cognates Among Related Languages

Kokborok, Bodo, Garo, and Dimasa exhibit strong lexical similarities, with many shared root words and cognates that suggest a common ancestral language. Some examples of shared words include:

<i>English</i>	<i>Kokborok</i>	<i>Bodo</i>	<i>Dimasa</i>	<i>Garo</i>	<i>Bengali</i>
I	Ang	Ang	Ang	Anga	Ami
Rice	Mairum	Minong	Mainong	Menung	Chaul



Water	Twí	Dwí	Di	Chi	Jal
You	Nwng	Nwng	Nwng	Nangna	Tumi
House	Nok	Nok	Nok	Nok	Ghar
Egg	Bwtwi	bidwi	Bidih	bitsi	Dhim
Oil	Thok	Tao	Thau	Tho	Tel
Rice	Mai	Inkham	mai	Mi	Bhat
His wife	Bihik	Bihi	Bihi	Jwk	Tar stri
Fire	Hor	Or	Wa.al	hor	Agun
Sun	Sal	Sun	Sal	Sal	Surjya
Moon	Tal	Akhaphwr	Jajong	Tal	Chand
Fish	Ah	Nah	Nahtok	Na	Machh

These cognates illustrate historical linguistic connections within the Bodo-Garo subgroup.

3.2 Loanwords from Bengali, Hindi, and Other Languages

While Kokborok has retained many native Tibeto-Burman words, its lexicon has absorbed a significant number of loanwords due to interactions with Bengali and Hindi-speaking populations.

Some borrowed words from Bengali and Hindi include:

<i>English</i>	<i>Kokborok</i>	<i>Bengali/Hindi Source</i>
Book	Boithang	Boithok (Bengali)
Government	Sarkar	Sarkar (Bengali)
Work	Kaj	Kaaj (Bengali)
School	Iskul	Iskul (Bengali)
Money	Taka	Taka (Bengali)

These loanwords reflect sociolinguistic interactions and the influence of Bengali as an administrative language in Tripura. However, efforts are being made to preserve indigenous Kokborok vocabulary in formal and literary use.



3.3 Retention vs. Adaptation of Indigenous Vocabulary

- Some borrowed words have fully replaced indigenous words (e.g., Taka for money).
- Other borrowed words coexist with native terms (e.g., Boithang for book, alongside Bangla-derived Boithok).
- In some cases, borrowed words are adapted phonetically to fit Kokborok pronunciation patterns.

The lexical evolution of Kokborok illustrates a balance between preservation and adaptation, ensuring linguistic continuity while embracing external influences.

4. Grammatical Structure & Syntactic Patterns

The grammatical structure of Kokborok, like other Bodo-Garo languages, follows a subject-object-verb (SOV) word order and exhibits unique features in verb conjugation, tense formation, and sentence structure. This section explores the similarities and differences between Kokborok, Bodo, Garo, and Dimasa in terms of syntax and grammar.

4.1 Differences in Sentence Formation and Word Order

Kokborok and its related languages share the SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) structure, which is distinct from the SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) order found in Indo-Aryan languages like Bengali and Hindi.

Examples of sentence structure:

English	Kokborok	Bodo	Garo	Hindi
I eat rice	Ang mai chao	Ang inkham jaiw.	Anga mi chha.jok/ Cha.a	Main chawal khatahoon.
She is singing	Bo rwchap tongo.	Aijwa rwchapdwng	Ua ring.enga.	Woh ga rahihai.
They go to the market	Borog hatio thangw	Beswrw hatio thangw	Uamang bazaar chi re.anga.	Ve baajaar jaate hain.

While the Kokborok, Bodo-Garo languages maintain SOV order, Indo-Aryan languages like Hindi tend to use postpositions instead of case markers and place verbs earlier in the sentence.



4.2 Verb Conjugation and Tense Usage

Kokborok verbs are inflected for tense and aspect, similar to Bodo and Dimasa. However, there are variations in tense markers among these languages.

Examples of verb tense changes in Kokborok:

<i>English (Kokborok)</i>	<i>Present</i>	<i>Past</i>	<i>Future</i>
Eat (Cha)	Chao	Cha+kha	Cha+nai
Go (thang)	Thango	Thang+kha	Thang+nai
Sleep (thu)	Thuo	Thu+kha	Thu+nai

Unlike Bengali and Hindi, which use auxiliary verbs to indicate tense (e.g., Bengali: "khachhi" for eating), Kokborok and its related languages use affixes or modified verb stems to express tense distinctions.

4.3 Influence of Linguistic Contact with Indo-Aryan Languages

Due to long-term linguistic contact with Bengali and Hindi, Kokborok has incorporated some syntactic changes and borrowed Indo-Aryan grammatical constructions. These include:

- Use of postpositions instead of native case markers (e.g., "bazar jak" for "going to the market" instead of an older marker-based structure).
- Influence on question formation (e.g., "Nwng da?" for "Are you?" resembles Bengali "Tumi ki?").
- Some adaptation of word order in modern usage, especially in urban settings where Bengali-Kokborok code-switching is common.

While grammatical shifts are occurring due to language contact, Kokborok has retained its core structural patterns, particularly in rural and traditional contexts.



5. Language Evolution & Historical Linguistics of Kokborok

The evolution of Kokborok is deeply intertwined with the migration patterns, socio-political changes, and linguistic influences that have shaped the Tibeto-Burman languages over centuries. This section examines the historical divergence of Kokborok from other Bodo-Naga languages, the impact of external linguistic influences, and the ongoing changes in its structure and usage.

5.1 Timeline of Kokborok's Divergence from Other Bodo-Naga Languages

Kokborok is a member of the Bodo-Garo sub-group of the Tibeto-Burman language family, which originated from Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB), an ancestral language spoken thousands of years ago.

Estimated timeline of divergence:

- 3,000–2,500 BCE: Proto-Tibeto-Burman speakers migrate from the Sino-Tibetan homeland (possibly in Tibet or Yunnan).
- 2,000 BCE: Proto-Bodo-Garo splits from other Tibeto-Burman branches and spreads across Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Bangladesh.
- 1,500–1,000 BCE: Distinct languages such as Bodo, Garo, Dimasa, and Kokborok begin to emerge due to geographical separation.
- 1,000–500 BCE: Interaction with Indo-Aryan languages begins, influencing vocabulary and phonetics.
- Medieval Period (900–1500 CE): Kokborok is spoken widely in Tripura's royal courts but remains primarily an oral language.
- Modern Era (1800s–Present): Increased Bengali and Hindi influence, formalization of written Kokborok, and gradual recognition in governance and education.

5.2 The Role of Migration & Socio-Political Influences in Kokborok

Migration played a crucial role in language diversification within the Bodo-Garo group. As the Borok people settled in Tripura and surrounding areas, they developed unique phonetic and grammatical features while still retaining core linguistic structures of their ancestral language.

Key factors that influenced Kokborok's evolution:



- Geographical separation: The Borok people's settlement in Tripura led to distinct dialectal variations within Kokborok.
- Influence of Indo-Aryan languages: Centuries of political and cultural interaction with Bengali and Hindi speakers led to lexical borrowing and phonetic shifts.
- Colonial impact: British rule and administrative policies in Tripura and Northeast India reinforced Bengali as the dominant language, slowing down the development of a written Kokborok tradition.
- TTAADC and language revival movements: The establishment of the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) and linguistic activism in the 20th and 21st centuries have contributed to the revival and standardization of Kokborok.

5.3 The Future of Kokborok in Historical Linguistics

Modern research in historical linguistics and computational methods can help trace Kokborok's deep linguistic roots and connections to other Tibeto-Burman languages. Future studies can focus on:

- Glottochronology: Using lexical comparison to estimate how long ago Kokborok diverged from Bodo, Dimasa, and Garo.
- Phonological reconstruction: Identifying ancestral sounds and words that link Kokborok to its proto-language.
- Corpus development: Creating digital archives of traditional Kokborok literature and oral histories to preserve linguistic heritage.

Understanding Kokborok's historical evolution is crucial for language preservation, revitalization, and academic research, ensuring that its rich linguistic heritage remains accessible for future generations.

6. Conclusion

The comparative study of Kokborok and other Tibeto-Burman languages highlights the deep linguistic connections and unique evolution of Kokborok within the Bodo-Garo subgroup. While it shares phonetic, lexical, and grammatical similarities with languages like Bodo, Garo, and Dimasa, Kokborok



has also undergone significant changes due to geographical separation, socio-political influences, and prolonged contact with Indo-Aryan languages like Bengali and Hindi.

Key Findings from This Study:

1. Phonetic and Phonological Similarities:

- Kokborok, like Bodo and Garo, maintains a simple vowel system and SOV word order.
- It has distinct retroflex sounds and vowel-length contrasts influenced by language contact.

2. *Lexical Evolution:*

- Common cognates exist across Bodo-Garo languages, but loanwords from Bengali and Hindi have influenced modern Kokborok vocabulary.
- Indigenous words have been replaced or coexisted with borrowed terms, reflecting sociolinguistic adaptation.

3. *Grammar and Syntax:*

- Shared morphological patterns exist, particularly in verb conjugation and tense formation.
- Influence from Indo-Aryan languages has led to syntactic adaptations, such as postpositional structures.

4. *Historical Evolution and Language Development:*

- Kokborok evolved from Proto-Tibeto-Burman and diverged from Bodo-Dimasa-Garo around 1,200–1,400 years ago.
- The language has survived despite periods of colonial suppression and linguistic marginalization.

5. *Future Prospects:*

- Revitalization efforts through education, governance, and digital technology are crucial for Kokborok's continued growth.



- Comparative linguistic studies and historical reconstruction can further enrich our understanding of Kokborok's linguistic heritage.

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