A Comparative Linguistic Study of Kokborok and Manipuri: Structure, Script, and Language Contact in Northeast India

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| ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
	This journal presents a comparative linguistic study of Kokborok and Manipuri (Meiteilon), two major Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in Northeast India. While both languages share typological roots, their phonological, morphological, and syntactic features exhibit distinct evolutionary trajectories. The study explores their structural differences and similarities, focusing on aspects such as script history, grammatical systems, and the impact of language contact - particularly with Bengali, Hindi and English. It also examines how state policies, orthographic choices, and cultural identity movements have influenced their current literacy practices. By drawing on examples from both Kokborok and Manipuri, and referencing educational and script revival case studies, this journal seeks to contribute to a nuanced understanding of indigenous language development and maintenance in multilingual contexts. The findings offer strategic insights for future linguistic preservation, especially in the face of increasing language shift and urbanization.

Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Kokborok and Manipuri (Meiteilon) are two prominent languages spoken in the Northeastern region of India. Both languages belong to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan family, yet they have

evolved under very different historical, political, and socio-linguistic conditions. Kokborok, primarily spoken by the Tripuri people of Tripura, has experienced significant influence from Bengali, Hindi and English due to prolonged political integration and colonial legacies. In contrast, Manipuri, spoken predominantly in Manipur, has developed a robust literary tradition with a long-standing indigenous script—Meitei Mayek—and greater institutional recognition.

Sino-Tibetan Language Family Relation with Kokborok and Manipuri Language
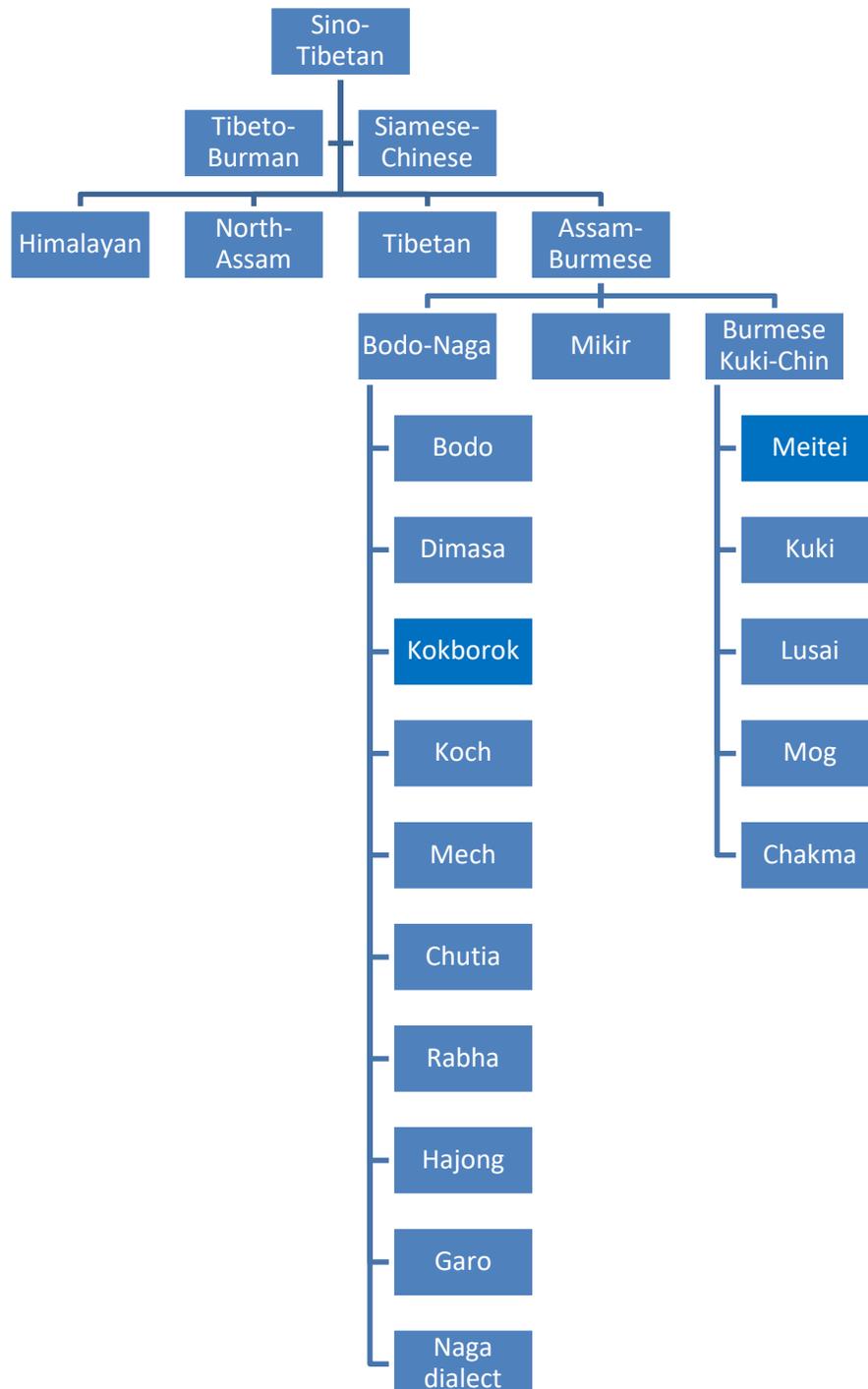
The rationale for comparing these two languages lies in their shared linguistic ancestry but divergent trajectories in script adoption, policy support, and language planning. As North-East India becomes a focal point of multilingual education, digital communication, and ethnic assertion, a deeper comparative linguistic study offers valuable insights into the forces that shape language development, standardization, and survival.

1.2 Objectives and Scope

The primary objective of this study is to conduct a structural comparison of Kokborok and Manipuri, focusing on their:

- Phonological systems:
- Morphological structures.
- Syntactic constructions in Manipuri language
- Script and orthographic developments
- Effects of language contact and borrowing
- Policy-driven literacy and language maintenance efforts

The scope of this analysis extends beyond linguistic form to explore the socio-political implications of script choice, language identity, and educational access. It uses both historical and contemporary data, including government policies, educational reports, and community language initiatives.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study holds significance at multiple levels. Firstly, it contributes to the documentation and comparative typology of under-represented Tibeto-Burman languages in India. Secondly, it provides a model for examining how state support (as in Manipuri's recognition in the Eighth Schedule) or lack thereof (as seen with Kokborok's ongoing script debates) can dramatically influence a language's growth and visibility. Thirdly, in light of the National Education Policy 2020's emphasis on multilingualism and mother-tongue instruction, this comparative frame-work may inform future curriculum design and language policy decisions in the region. Ultimately, by spot-lighting two linguistically related but institutionally divergent languages, the study hopes to strengthen advocacy for indigenous language preservation through inclusive and culturally sensitive strategies.

2. Phonological Systems

2.1 Vowel and Consonant Inventory

Kokborok and Manipuri both exhibit moderately rich phonological inventories typical of Tibeto-Burman languages, but with notable differences in the organization and use of vowel and consonant systems.

Kokborok has six primary vowel phonemes: /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/, and /w/ or /ə/, with relatively stable pronunciation across dialects. Consonantal sounds number around 20, including voiceless and voiced stops (/p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /g/), nasals (/m/, /n/, /ng/ or /ŋ/), fricatives (/s/, /h/), and approximants (/l/, /r/, /j/), along with consonant clusters /ph/, /th/, /kh/, /ch/, /ua/. Semi-vowels such as /w/ and /y/ are frequently used, with /ng/ (velar nasal /ŋ/) being particularly prominent, as seen in words like nwng (you) and chwng (we). However, the /w/ or /ə/ sound is used in Kokborok as a vowel. Kokborok lacks retroflex consonants, setting it apart from neighboring Indo-Aryan languages.

Manipuri, on the other hand, exhibits a slightly larger phonemic range. It features seven vowels, including long and nasalized variants: /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/, /ə/, and /æ/. The consonant inventory includes stops, nasals, fricatives, approximants, and affricates, totaling over 24 consonants in standard dialects. Unique features include aspirated voiceless stops and glottal stops, which are phonemically contrastive. Nasalized vowels and tone (discussed below) also form part of Manipuri's phonemic system, contributing to its relative phonological complexity.

Here's a more detailed breakdown:

Vowels:

- Manipuri has seven monophthongal vowels: /i/, /e/, /a/, /o/, /u/, /ə/, and /æ/.
- These vowels can be classified by tongue height as high, mid, and low.
- Manipuri vowels do not exhibit length contrasts (short vs. long).

Consonants:

- The consonant inventory includes 24 phonemes.
- These consonants include the letters /b/, /c/, /g/, /h/, /j/, /k/, /l/, /m/, /n/, /p/, /r/, /s/, /w/, /y/, /t/, /x/, /ŋ/, /dh/, /ph/, /gh/, /jh/, /th/, /ch/, and /kh/.

Here's a breakdown:

- **Stops**: /p/, /t/, /b/, /c/, /k/, /x/, /g/, /r/, /j/, /th/, /ch/, /dh/, /ph/, /gh/, /jh/, and /kh/.
- **Nasals**: /m/, /n/, /ŋ/.
- **Fricative**: /s/, /h/.
- **Lateral**: /l/.
- **Semi-vowels**: /w/, /y/.
- Some consonants, particularly those found in loanwords, may exhibit variations in voicing or aspiration. For example, voiceless sounds can become voiced in medial position.

Tones:

- Manipuri has two tones: level and falling.

Consonant Clusters:

- Consonant clusters can occur in the initials, medial, and final positions of syllables.

- However, final clusters are mainly found in words borrowed from other languages.

Juncture:

- Manipuri also includes a minor system of accompanying elements called juncture.

2.2 Tonal Features and Syllable Structure

Kokborok is indeed a tonal language, specifically a two-tone language. It utilizes high and low tones to differentiate word meanings, a feature common in Tibeto-Burman languages. High tones are often indicated by adding an "h" or an accent mark (') after the vowel. For example, "cha" (eat) and "chah" or "cha'" (correct) differ only in tone, according to an academic paper, which distinguishes it from many other Tibeto-Burman languages such as Burmese and Karen. Most syllables follow a simple CV (consonant-vowel) or CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) structure. The language tends to avoid consonant clusters and complex codas. Stress typically falls on the penultimate syllable, though it is not phonemically contrastive.

On the other hand, the Manipuri language also follows a tonal system. It uses two primary tones—high and low—which serve to distinguish meaning at the lexical level. For instance, minimal pairs differing only in tone may represent completely different words. This makes tone an essential feature in speech recognition and lexical processing. Manipuri also exhibits more complex syllable structures, including CCV and VCC patterns, though the CV pattern remains the most common.

2.3 Comparative Overview

While both languages originate from the same language family, their phonological divergence reflects differing historical developments. Kokborok's simplicity in tone and syllable structure suggests greater phonological erosion or simplification, possibly due to language contact with non-tonal Indo-Aryan languages like Bengali. Manipuri, which maintained stronger linguistic autonomy due to its early literary tradition and geographic insulation, retains more complex phonemic and tonal features.

Furthermore, the influence of missionary education on Kokborok led to standardized Roman script phonology that aligns closely with its phonetic structure. In contrast, Manipuri's phonology has evolved alongside its revived indigenous script, Meitei Mayek, which supports tone markings and phonemic distinctions more robustly.

3. Morphology and Grammar

3.1 Verb Morphology and TAM Markers

Kokborok employs a relatively agglutinative verbal morphology. Tense, aspect, and mood (TAM) are indicated through suffixes added to the verb root. Common suffixes include:

- /-o/ for present tense (*bo cha-o* = he/she eats)
- /-di/ for imperative (cha-*di* = to eat!)
- /-kha/ for past (cha-*kha* = ate)
- /-nai/ for future (*cha-nai* = will eat)

Negation is typically formed using particles such as /*ya*/ (not) or suffixes like -*ya* (e.g., *thang-ya* = does not go). There is no strict verb conjugation for person or number; instead, pronouns outside the verb clarify the subject.

Manipuri, in contrast, exhibits a more fusional morphology. TAM is expressed through complex verb endings that often combine tense, aspect, mood, and even politeness markers. For instance:

- /-re/ (present progressive: *thok-re* = is going)
- /-khrabadi/ (past habitual: *thok-khrabadi* = used to go)
- /-naba/ (future: *thok-naba* = will go)

Manipuri also employs verbal auxiliaries and suffix stacking, allowing for nuanced expression of temporality and attitude. Negation is expressed by suffixes like /–loi/ or /-ta/ added to verbs.

Down of the key aspects of Manipuri morphology:

1. **Bound vs. Free Roots:**
   - **Free Roots**: These can stand alone as words (e.g., nouns like "treasure").
     - Examples of pure nouns: /mi/ 'man'; /sa/ 'animal'; /hi/ 'boat'; /khoy/ 'bee'; /khon/ 'leg'; /u/ 'tree'; /wa/ 'bamboo'; /napi/ 'grass', etc.
   - **Bound Roots**: These require affixes (prefixes or suffixes) to form a word (e.g., verb roots). Manipuri (also known as Meiteilon) exhibits a rich morphological structure, primarily characterized by agglutination. This means that morphemes, the smallest units of meaning, are added to a root word to create new words or modify existing ones. Manipuri uses both prefixes and suffixes to achieve this.

2. **Affixes:**
   - **Prefixes**: Primarily attached to verb roots and sometimes to derived nouns and bound noun roots.
   - **Suffixes**: Attached to nouns, derived nouns, adjectives, and numerals. They can also indicate case markers and act as coordinators.

Word Formation:

Noun Morphology: Manipuri nouns can be modified by various suffixes to express gender, number (singular/plural), case (nominative, accusative, etc.), and other grammatical functions.

- o Examples: Maicha (chair), kok (head), oak (pig).

However, it could also be because both Kokborok (Tripuri) and Meiteilon (Manipuri) languages are categorized under Tibeto-Burman languages and might have been derived from the same origin. Some of the similar words are as follows:

English	Kokborok	Meiteilon
Jackfruit	Thaipung	Theibong
Fish	Ah	Nga
Smelly/Smell	Mwnam	Manam
Dog	Sui	Hui
Pig	Uak	Oak
Name	Mung	Ming
Bamboo	Ua	Wa
You	Nwng	Nang
Pond	Pukhiri	Pukhri

Verb Morphology:

Manipuri verbs are highly inflected, with suffixes indicating tense (past, present, future), aspect, person, and mood.

Examples: *cha* (eat)

English	Kokborok	Meiteilon
Eat (Present Tense)	Cha	Chaabaa
Eaten (Past Tense)	Cha - kha	Thakpaa
Will eat (Future Tense)	Cha + nai	Tha-ga-ni

Nominal Morphology:

Nouns can be inflected for case (e.g., locative, genitive), number (singular, plural), and definiteness.

- Examples:

- *hui* (dog)

- *ya* (tooth)

- *twireng* (small river)

- *thum* (salt)

- *lai* (god)

Agglutination:

Manipuri is highly agglutinative, meaning it uses many affixes, each with a distinct meaning, attached to a root word. While Manipuri is agglutinative, it also exhibits some characteristics of an SOV (subject-object-verb) language in terms of basic word order.

> Examples:

- "*pumba*" (carry): This simple word can be broken down into "*pu*" (carry) and "*ba*" (a verbal noun marker).

- "*pukhi*" (carried): Adding "*khi*" (past tense marker) to "*pu*" gives us the past tense form.

- "*pusinkhi*" (carried in): Adding "*sin*" (in) to "*pu*" and "*khi*" gives us the meaning "carried in."

Verbal Inflection:

A verb like "*paba*" (read) can be inflected with suffixes such as "-e" (present), "-de" (past), "-gani" (future), "-roi" (negative), "-ri" (past continuous), and "-re" (past perfect).

Nominal Suffixation:

A noun like "*lə*" (treasure) can have suffixes added to indicate possession, case, number, and emphasis, as shown in the example: "*mə*/rə/ gi/dəmək/tə/su" (only for the sake of his treasures also).

Finite State Transducers:

Manipuri's morphological analysis often utilizes finite-state transducers to model and process the complex structure of words.

In essence, Manipuri's morphology involves adding morphemes to roots to create a wide variety of word forms, extensive use of affixes, and the rich inflectional system of its verbs and nouns.

3.2 Noun Phrase and Case Marking

In Kokborok, noun phrases are relatively simple and typically follow a noun–modifier order. Case marking is done through postpositions, not inflections. Examples include:

- */ni/, bwsa-ni* (of the child)

- */ni/, bwsa-ni kok* (the child's language)

- */o/,nog-o* (in the house)
- */bai/(with), Bo da-bai bedek tano. (He cut the brunch with knife).*

There is no gender marking or plural suffix in most contexts; plurality is understood through context or numerals.

On the other hand, Manipuri uses more elaborate case-marking particles and nominal inflections. Common case markers include:

- /-gi/ (genitive: *angaang-gimama* = the child's mother)
- /-da/ (locative: *ima-da* = at the mother)
- /-bu/ (accusative: *eibu* = me [object form])

Manipuri noun phrases may also include classifiers, quantifiers, and adjective markers, providing richer syntactic agreement than in Kokborok.

3.3 Pronouns and Agreement Systems

Kokborok uses a minimal but efficient pronoun system:

- *Ang* (I), *nwng* (you), *bo* (he/she), *chwng* (we), *norog* (you-plural), borog (they)

It does not distinguish gender or formality, and there is no inclusive/exclusive distinction for "we".

Manipuri has a more complex pronoun system with distinctions for formality, number, and person. It includes inclusive and exclusive forms for the first-person plural, such as:

- *ei* (I), *nahak* (you), *masi* (this), *masi-na* (by this),
- *eikhoina* (we inclusive), *eigi* (my)

Manipuri pronouns are often marked with case particles, making them more syntactically integrated.

3.4 Word Order and Clause Structure

Both Kokborok and Manipuri follow a Subject–Object–Verb (SOV) word order, typical of many Tibeto-Burman and South Asian languages. However, Manipuri demonstrates greater syntactic embedding, allowing for complex subordinate clauses and embedded questions.

Kokborok maintains relatively simple sentence constructions. Conjunctions are minimal, and coordination is often done using juxtaposition or basic markers like *tai* (and). Subordinate clauses are rare in everyday usage and typically appear in translated or formal texts.

Manipuri, by contrast, features a rich set of subordinators, complementizers, and aspectual auxiliaries, giving rise to more intricate syntactic constructions, especially in formal registers or literary writing.

4. Script and Orthography

4.1 Script History: Roman, Bengali, and Meitei Mayek

The evolution of script has played a defining role in the identity and literacy movements of both Kokborok and Manipuri.

Kokborok was traditionally an oral language, and its first written form is Koloma (Kokborok own script), Bengali and emerged in the early 20th century through Christian missionaries who used the Roman script for religious and educational purposes. This version gained traction in tribal communities through church publications, literacy primers, and Bible translations. However, the post-independence state administration, influenced by Bengali officials and educational frame-works, introduced the Bengali script for use in government schools and textbooks. This dual-script environment has created a persistent tension that continues today.

In contrast, Manipuri (Meiteilon) has a rich and ancient writing tradition. Its original script, Meitei Mayek, dates back to at least the 11th century and was used until the 18th century, when it was displaced by the Bengali script due to political and cultural influence from Bengal. However, following intense community-led movements for cultural revival in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Meitei Mayek was officially reinstated in the Manipur education system in 2006 and is now taught in schools and used in public signage and literature. The current situation involves a dual-script system, with Meitei Mayek being actively promoted and used in various contexts, including education, alongside the continued use of the Bengali script.

Detailed Look:

Early Use of Meitei Mayek:

The earliest known use of Meitei Mayek dates back to the 6th century, with evidence found on coins.

Shift to Bengali Script:

Meitei Mayek was the primary script until the 18th century, when the Bengali script was adopted, linked to the spread of Vaishnavism in Manipur.

Revival Efforts:

In the 20th century, scholars and activists initiated efforts to revive and standardize Meitei Mayek.

Official Recognition:

In 2021, the Government of Manipur officially recognized and adopted Meitei Mayek alongside the Bengali script.

4.2 Script Politics and Language Identity

Script in both Kokborok and Manipuri is deeply tied to identity politics. For the Tripuri community, the choice between Roman and Bengali scripts has been more than a technical issue—it is seen as symbolic of broader struggles for cultural autonomy and political recognition. Supporters of the Roman script

argue it aligns better with Kokborok phonology and continues a legacy of tribal self-expression. Conversely, the state's continued use of Bengali script is viewed by many as a remnant of cultural domination and linguistic assimilation.

In Manipur, the revival of Meitei Mayek has become a symbol of ethno-linguistic pride and decolonization. The reintroduction of the indigenous script in educational and administrative spheres is viewed as an act of reclaiming Manipuri identity from centuries of Bengali cultural influence. It also demonstrates the political will of the Meitei community to institutionalize their linguistic heritage.

4.3 Literacy Practices and Standardization Efforts

In Kokborok, standardization has suffered due to the lack of a unified script policy. Educational institutions under the Tripura state board continue to use the Bengali script, while autonomous bodies like the TTAADC (Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council), church-based schools, and NGOs promote Roman-script literacy. This bifurcation leads to fragmentation in textbook production, teacher training, and digital literacy resources.

By contrast, Manipuri's script revival was accompanied by a structured institutional response. The Board of Secondary Education Manipur (BOSEM) and the Manipur Language Directorate have coordinated efforts to print textbooks in Meitei Mayek, train teachers, and create digital tools for students and professionals. The government's clear stance has facilitated a smoother transition and broader public acceptance.

4.4 Comparative Overview

While both languages have experienced external influence on their writing systems, Manipuri has succeeded in reclaiming and institutionalizing its indigenous script, whereas Kokborok remains divided between two competing scripts with no final resolution.

From a linguistic standpoint, Roman script suits Kokborok due to its phonetic simplicity and compatibility with digital technologies. However, Bengali script's dominance in state machinery makes its usage almost unavoidable in formal education.

In Manipuri, the Meitei Mayek revival has been bolstered by strong political advocacy, curriculum integration, and public support, showing how coordinated policy and grassroots effort can transform language visibility. Kokborok's path illustrates the challenges faced when political consensus and linguistic autonomy remain unresolved.

5. Syntactic Structures

5.1 Basic Word Order (SOV) and Sentence Construction

Both Kokborok and Manipuri follow the Subject–Object–Verb (SOV) word order, which is typical of many Tibeto-Burman and South Asian languages. However, the application and flexibility of this structure differ significantly between the two.

In Kokborok, sentence structure is generally straightforward and rigid. For example:

- *Ang mai cha-o.* (I eat rice.)
- *Bo khwna thang-nai.* (He/she will go tomorrow.)

Modifiers typically follow nouns, and syntactic embeddings such as subordinate clauses are less frequent in colloquial usage. The simplicity of Kokborok sentence construction reflects its primarily oral tradition and less-developed formal literary register.

Manipuri, in contrast, demonstrates greater syntactic flexibility and complexity. While it also follows SOV, the language allows various types of subordination, topicalization, and embedding. For instance:

- *Ei chaakchaare.* (I eat rice.)
- *Ei chaakchaabaphangbayeng-i.* (I saw that I was eating rice.)

Manipuri accommodates post-posed relativization and conditional clauses with greater structural nuance, making it more suitable for extended narrative and academic writing.

5.2 Clause Types and Negation

Kokborok primarily uses simple declarative and interrogative clauses. Negation is generally marked with particles like *ya* (not) or suffixes such as *-khu*. For example:

- *Ang cha-ya.* (I do not eat.)
- *Nwng cha-yakhu.* (You are not eating.)

Complex or embedded clauses are rare and usually appear only in formal or translated materials, which limits syntactic depth in spontaneous discourse.

Manipuri, on the other hand, exhibits an elaborate system of negation that interacts with TAM (tense–aspect–mood) marking. Negative constructions may involve suffixes like *-loi*, *-taba*, or auxiliary verbs:

- *Ei chaakchaare.* (I eat rice.)
- *Ei chaakchaare-loi.* (I do not eat rice.)
- *Ei chat-taba.* (I didn't go.)

Manipuri, also known as Meiteilon, follows a Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) word order, which is typical of the Sino-Tibetan language family's Tibeto-Burman language group. It heavily relies on suffixation to express grammatical relations and tense, rather than using prepositions or auxiliary verbs as in English.

Key Syntactic Features:

SOV Word Order:

The basic sentence structure in Manipuri follows the order of subject, then object, and finally the verb.

Suffixation:

Manipuri verbs are bound roots and rely heavily on suffixes for inflection and grammatical function.

Nominalization:

Verbs can be nominalized using suffixes like -pə or -bə, allowing them to function as nouns or modifiers in a sentence.

Embedded Clauses:

These are formed by attaching nominalizers to verb roots or by adding complementizers or case markers to the nominalized form.

Case Markers:

Manipuri utilizes case markers to indicate the grammatical roles of nouns within a sentence.

Adjectival Usage:

Nominalized verbs can function as adjectives, sometimes with the prefix ə-.

Negative Adjectives:

Negative adjectives are formed by adding a negative marker (e.g., -tə or -də) before the nominalizer.

Examples:

Basic Sentence:

Ibumcha-na Ball-du kao-i (Ibumcha-NOM Ball-DISTAL kick-ASP) — "Ibumcha kicks the ball."

Nominalized Verb as Modifier:

ləy-rə-k-pə (buy-DTC-NZR) — a nominalized verb phrase functioning as a modifier in a relative clause.

Embedded Clause:

Tomba-nə kolom əmə ləy-rək-pə du məcanupi-nə ləw-khre (Tomba-NOM pen one buy-DTC-NZR DET daughter-SPEC take-ASP) — "The pen that Tomba bought was taken by his daughter."

Manipuri features conditional, causative, and relative clause constructions, offering a higher degree of syntactic embedding than Kokborok

5.3 Use of Postpositions and Particles

Both languages rely heavily on postpositions, a common feature in head-final languages. In Kokborok, postpositions are generally simple and consistent:

- */o/, Nog-o.* (In the house)
- */o/, hati-o.* (To the market)

Particles are also used to indicate question forms (*haiya-da?* = is it?) or emphasis, but these are limited in number and relatively stable across dialects.

In Manipuri, postpositions are more numerous and inflectionally rich. The use of case particles is more systematic and essential for syntactic clarity:

- *Ima-da* (At mother)
- *Angang-gichaak* (Child's rice)
- *Chaak-buchaare.* (I eat rice — accusative case on 'rice')

Particles in Manipuri also serve modal and aspectual functions, increasing syntactic density and expressive range.

5.4 Comparative Syntactic Overview

In summary, while both Kokborok and Manipuri follow an SOV structure, Manipuri demonstrates a significantly more complex syntax, enabled by a rich inventory of clause types, inflected particles, and a literary tradition that has encouraged syntactic elaboration.

Kokborok, though structurally simpler, provides clarity and ease of learning, particularly in oral communication. However, this simplicity may limit its adaptation in academic, legal, and administrative domains unless expanded through systematic standardization and literary development.

The syntactic divergence between the two languages reflects their historical trajectories: Manipuri's script revival and sustained literary use have encouraged syntactic growth, whereas Kokborok's delayed standardization and dual-script challenges have constrained syntactic expansion.

6. Language Contact and Borrowing

6.1 Lexical Borrowing and Code-Switching

Both Kokborok and Manipuri have under-gone significant lexical influence from neighbouring dominant languages due to historical, political, and socio-cultural contact.

Kokborok, situated within Tripura where Bengali is the administrative and majority language, has absorbed numerous Bengali loanwords—especially in domains such as education (*skul* for school), governance (*sarkar* for government), and religion. English loanwords are also prevalent, particularly among the youth and in technical or academic contexts (*komputar for Computer*, *ekjam for Exam*), kaka, jetha for paternal uncle etc.

In everyday Kokborok discourse, code-switching between Kokborok and Bengali or English is common, especially among urban speakers. For instance, one might hear a sentence like: *Ang ekjam dino cha-ya* ("I did not eat on exam day")—a hybrid of English, Bengali, and Kokborok structures.

Manipuri also exhibits extensive borrowing, primarily from Sanskrit, Bengali, and English. Its long exposure to Sanskrit during the Hindu revival in the 18th century led to lexical Sanskritization, especially

in religion, law, and literature. The use of Bengali and English words continues in modern Manipuri, particularly in education, administration, and media.

However, the Manipuri lexicon has also seen a reverse trend in recent years—deliberate efforts to revive and standardize pure Meitei vocabulary, especially in textbooks and official documents, as part of its cultural and linguistic revival. Language contact and borrowing have significantly impacted the Manipuri language, leading to the incorporation of new sounds, vocabulary, and even grammatical structures from other languages such as Sanskrit, Hindi, and Bengali. This influence is particularly noticeable in the lexicon, where loanwords from these languages have become integrated into the everyday vocabulary of Manipuri.

Examples of Loanwords:

From Sanskrit: artha (meaning), atma (soul), bhugol (geography), vidhya (knowledge).

From Bengali: anka (mathematics), almari (almirah), bondhu (friend).

From Hindi: alu (potato), andolan (agitation), dahi (curd).

From English: "good morning," "good night," and other terms for modern professions and greetings.

6.2 Influence of Bengali and English

The dominance of Bengali in Tripura and its official status have had a deeper impact on Kokborok than Bengali has had on Manipuri. Kokborok has long co-existed in a linguistic hierarchy, with Bengali occupying the upper administrative and educational tiers. This dynamic has contributed to a gradual lexical and grammatical assimilation. Even sentence constructions in Kokborok are increasingly influenced by Bengali syntactic models among bilingual speakers.

In contrast, Manipuri—though also influenced by Bengali—has benefited from official language status in Manipur and its inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. These institutional supports have buffered it somewhat against over whelming external influence. English, however, is increasingly prevalent in both speech and writing, particularly among younger Manipuri speakers.

In both cases, English functions as a prestige language and is often code-mixed or code-switched with native languages in urban communication, education, and social media. While English expands access to modern knowledge systems, it also contributes to linguistic displacement at the community level.

6.3 Bilingualism and Language Shift

Among Kokborok speakers, especially in urban and semi-urban areas, bilingualism with Bengali is almost universal. However, this bilingualism is asymmetrical, with Bengali dominating formal domains and Kokborok often relegated to domestic or informal use. This imbalance has led to concerns about

language shift, particularly among younger generations who receive schooling in Bengali or English and may lack proficiency in reading and writing Kokborok—especially in Roman script.

Manipuri, though also experiencing bilingualism with English and Hindi, has a stronger inter generational transmission, aided by its wide spread use in schools, literature, cinema, and media. However, among Manipuri diasporas or border communities in Assam and Myanmar, the influence of dominant regional languages (Assamese, Burmese) poses a challenge to language retention.

6.4 Comparative Implications for Language Vitality

The nature of language contact in both communities underscores different trajectories for language vitality.

- Kokborok, though rich in oral tradition and community identity, faces greater risk of attrition due to limited institutional support, script conflicts, and over whelming Bengali influence. The lack of a unified education policy and absence from the Eighth Schedule further weakens its status.
- Manipuri, despite similar external pressures, remains robustly maintained, supported by script revival, curriculum integration, and a strong literary ecosystem. Its use across religious, cultural, and administrative domains ensures continued vitality.

To safeguard Kokborok's future, policy intervention, community mobilization, and standardized education will be essential, including embracing language contact strategically (e.g., through bilingual education) rather than passively yielding to it.

7. Comparative Insights and Implications in Kokborok and Manipuri

7.1 Typological Similarities and Differences

Kokborok and Manipuri, as members of the Tibeto-Burman language family, share several typological features—such as SOV word order, agglutinative morphology, and postpositional grammar. Both languages exhibit minimal gender marking, use particles for grammatical relations, and maintain a noun–modifier phrase structure.

However, Manipuri stands out in several aspects:

- Manipuri has a richer case-marking system and more flexible clause structures.
- The revived Meitei Mayek script supports phonemic nuance, whereas Kokborok's split between Roman and Bengali scripts has hindered standardization.

The divergence reflects not only linguistic evolution but also the institutional support and language policy choices each speech community has encountered over time.

7.2 Policy Case Study 1: Meitei Mayek Revival in Manipur

The successful revival and reintegration of Meitei Mayek into public life is a landmark achievement in language planning. Beginning in the 1980s, a strong civil society movement—including scholars, youth organizations, and artists—campaigned for the replacement of Bengali script with the traditional Meitei Mayek.

Key outcomes include:

- Official inclusion of Meitei Mayek in school syllabi from primary to secondary levels
- Teacher training programs and textbook publication
- Adoption of the script in signage, newspapers, and digital platforms
- Integration into official documents and examinations

The movement was successful because of cohesive political will, grassroots mobilization, and alignment with identity politics. It has significantly increased literacy in the traditional script and fostered linguistic pride.

7.3 Policy Case Study 2: Kokborok Multilingual Education in Tripura

In contrast, Kokborok's trajectory illustrates the challenges of fragmented language policy. While Kokborok was recognized as an official language of Tripura in 19th January, 1979, its implementation has been inconsistent. Schools in TTAADC areas may use the Roman script, while government schools typically follow the Bengali and Roman script, creating pedagogical confusion.

Efforts by NGOs and cultural bodies such as the Kokborok Sahitya Sabha and Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission have contributed to community-level education and publication in Roman script, but these remain largely unsupported by formal state policy.

The absence of a state-endorsed unified script or standardized Kokborok curriculum across educational levels continues to affect learning outcomes and undermines literacy expansion.

7.4 Challenges in Documentation and Revitalization

Kokborok suffers from:

- Lack of comprehensive dictionaries and grammar books
- Minimal digitized corpora or NLP (natural language processing) tools
- Sparse literary production in formal genres

By contrast, Manipuri has a growing body of literature, digital tools like Meitei Mayek keyboards, online learning resources, and university-level academic programs.

This imbalance limits Kokborok's adaptability in digital and academic spaces, a major concern in the 21st-century knowledge economy.

7.5 Sociocultural Impacts

Language and script are not just communication tools—they are cultural vessels. Manipuri's script revival has re-kindled traditional practices, festivals, and literature. Its cultural institutions have embedded the language in theatre, films, and music.

Kokborok, while vibrant in oral forms, remains under represented in mass media and cultural production due to script confusion and policy neglect. The absence of Kokborok language films, digital apps, and mainstream publications contributes to inter generational detachment in urban areas.

7.6 Strategic Recommendations

To strengthen Kokborok literacy and align it with successful models like Manipuri's, the following steps are recommended:

- Official adoption of a double script (preferably Roman, as per community demand)
- Expansion of mother-tongue education across all districts, not just in autonomous regions
- Development of dictionaries, grammar books, and digital resources
- Encouragement of youth content creation in Kokborok
- Investment in teacher training and script transition support

Comparative studies like this suggest that language vitality depends not only on heritage and usage but also on proactive institutional support.

7.7 Concluding Insights

The linguistic futures of Kokborok and Manipuri provide two contrasting narratives—one of resilience and structured revival, the other of potential and neglect. Both languages are emblematic of Northeast India's rich diversity and deserve equal opportunities for preservation and growth.

With the right combination of community engagement, policy clarity, and educational reform, Kokborok can emulate the successful revitalization path of Manipuri. This study reaffirms that script matters, not just for literacy, but for identity, access, and survival.

8. Conclusion

The comparative study of Kokborok and Manipuri highlights the intricate relationship between language, identity, policy, and cultural survival in Northeast India. Although both languages share a common ancestry in the Tibeto-Burman family and similar syntactic frameworks, their developmental trajectories reveal profound differences rooted in history, script policy, and institutional support.

Manipuri (Meiteilon) presents a case of successful linguistic revival through the reintroduction of Meitei Mayek, coordinated language planning, and its status as an officially recognized scheduled language of

India. These elements have empowered Manipuri speakers with educational infrastructure, literary access, and digital presence—all essential for modern language vitality.

Kokborok, while rich in oral tradition and community-driven educational initiatives, remains hampered by unresolved script debates, inconsistent policy application, and limited institutional recognition. The absence of a unified script standard and adequate curriculum design across the state continues to impede its development as a fully functional language of education and administration.

Language contact with Bengali and English, while inevitable, has affected both languages differently. Manipuri has integrated external elements into its structure without displacing its core grammatical and cultural identity, whereas Kokborok remains vulnerable to language shift, particularly among younger generations.

This study underlines that linguistic resilience is not solely a product of structural richness or historical legacy, but also of community advocacy, political recognition, and educational implementation. With deliberate action—such as script standardization, inclusive multilingual education, and digital content creation—Kokborok can not only preserve its heritage but also emerge as a dynamic, literate, and modern language.

In a multilingual India where language is both a right and a resource, empowering indigenous languages like Kokborok is critical to ensuring linguistic equity and cultural justice. The comparative insights offered here should inform future language policy in Tripura and serve as a model for other minority languages facing similar crossroads.

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