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A Comparative Analysis of Dialectal Variations Between the Debbarma and Kalai Dialects Within the Kokborok Language: With Special References on Phonological and Morphological Aspects

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ABSTRACT

This research paper will provide a comparative analysis of the Debbarma and Kalai dialects, focusing on phonological and morphological aspects. While both dialects belong to the Kokborok language family, they exhibit variations in their phonemic systems, including the initial, medial, and final phonemes found within words. Additionally, the structures for word formation differ in certain instances between the two dialects. The purpose of this study is to illustrate the distinctions and similarities between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects within the Kokborok language framework. Numerous words in each dialect differ from one another due to limited communication and the geographical distance between their speakers. Consequently, this research seeks to highlight both the differences and similarities in vocabulary between the two dialects through specific examples. The data for this study were collected through fieldwork, which included the preparation of questionnaires, personal interviews and the use of google forms distributed among speakers of the Kalai dialect. This research project aims to enhance understanding of the variations between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects and broader variability of dialects within the Kokborok language in the linguistic landscape.

Keywords: Kokborok, Dialect variations, Debbarma dialect, Kalai dialect, Phonology, Morphology

Introduction:

The Debbarma and Kalai tribes, two distinct ethnic group in the Indian state of Tripura, are representative of the rich cultural diversity that characterizes the region. The Debbarma tribe is predominantly associated with the Tripuri community, while the Kalai tribe is affiliated with the Halam community (Bhattacharjee, 2002). Despite belonging to different communities and cultural backgrounds, both tribes communicate using the Kokborok language, which serves as a linguistic commonality between them. Notably, demographic data from the 2011 census indicates that the Debbarma tribe has a significantly larger population, boasting approximately

592,255 speakers, in stark contrast to the Kalai tribe, which has around 15,000 speakers (Debbarma, 2014).

Geographically, the Debbarma tribe primarily inhabits the northeastern state of Tripura, with substantial populations also found in the neighbouring state of Assam and across the border in Bangladesh. In Tripura, the Debbarma are predominantly situated in the districts of west Tripura, Khowai, and Sepahijala. Conversely, the Kalai tribe's presence is more localized, with their members residing exclusively in specific areas within Tripura, such as Teliamura, Ampí, Twidu and Jampuijala. This geographic distinction between the two tribes not only influences their modes of living but also contributes to the divergence in their dialects. The varying cultural practices and social settings in which these tribes exist result in distinct phonological and morphological characteristics within their respective dialects.

The aim of this paper is to delve into the dialectical variabilities that exist between the Debbarma and Kalai tribes, offering a thorough examination of their phonological and morphological structures. By investigating these linguistic features, this study will contribute to a broader understanding of the linguistic landscape among the Kokborok dialects. Understanding these variances is crucial, as they not only reflect the unique identities of each tribe but also encapsulate the intricate web of cultural interactions and historical developments that have shaped their languages over time. In doing so, this research aspires to shed light on the broader implications of dialectical differences within the context of the diverse sociolinguistic environment of Northeast India.

Methodology

The investigative procedures employed to gather information for this research study rely exclusively on primary sources. I selected several respondents from the geographical region inhabited by the Kalai tribe. During the investigation, I encountered certain challenges, primarily due to the respondent's limited availability. Despite these difficulties, I was able to collect a sufficient amount of data. Below is a demonstration of their profiles:

Table No.1: Respondents profiles

Sl.No	Name of respondents	Address	Profession/ occupation	Age
1	Sushil Kalai	Twidu	College Teacher	31
2	Nidhan Kalai	Ampi	Student	22
3	Nagrai Kalai	Jampuijala	Farmer	65
4	Surjya Kalai	Jampuijala	farmer	50

Data collection

Prior to commencing fieldwork, I prepared a questionnaire and compiled a wordlist to facilitate the data collection process. Additionally, I created a Google Form containing two hundred fundamental words to examine the variations between the two dialects. This Google Form was shared with Sushil Kalai, an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at ICV College, Belonia, South Tripura, as well as with Nidhan Kalai, a student from the same institution. Their responses enabled me to gather substantial information regarding the major differences between the two dialects. I personally visited Nagrai Kalai and Surjya Kalai at their residence in Jampuijala, where I posed questions in accordance with the prepared questionnaire and wordlist. They provided ample information, contributing significantly to my research.

Data analysis

I developed a questionnaire based on relevant literature, aimed at exploring phonological and morphological variations. My observations focus on sound patterns and pronunciation processes. I have identified that initial, medial and final phonemes differ in certain words, while morphologically, some word forms are notably abbreviated, and suffixes vary within the Kalai dialect. Additionally, I have found that some words differ significantly from one another. Consequently, I categorize all collected data into groups for comparative analysis, facilitating the identification of major variations between the two dialects, as well as recognizing the similarities and differences in vocabulary.

Phonological Variations

Distinct phonological characteristics can be noted between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects, manifesting in various components, including the initial, medial and final phonemes of words, as well as the presence of consonant clusters that are characteristic of the Kalai dialect. The subsequent section will explore the phonological differences identified between The Debbarma and Kalai dialects.

The initial phoneme /j/ shifts to /ɟ/ in the Kalai dialect:

The comparison of initial phonemes in both the Debbarma and Kalai dialects reveals differences within individual words. In the Debbarma dialect, the initial consonant phoneme is /y (j)/, while in the Kalai, it is represented by the /ɟ/ phoneme. The following table (Table 2) provides examples of this phonetic variation:

Table 2: Transition of initial phoneme /y (j)/ to /ɟ (ɟʒ) / in the Kalai Dialect

SL. No	Debbarma dialect	Kalai dialect	Gloss
1	/ja:sku/	/ɟa:sku/	Nail
2	/jaku:rai/	/ɟaku:rai/	Heel
3	/jɔk/	/ɟa:u/	Fry
4	/jariŋ/	/ɟariŋ/	Root
5	/jak ^h ep/	/ɟak ^h ep/	Thongs
6	/japha/	/ɟapha/	Palm

The examples outlined above illustrate that the initial consonant phoneme /y (j)/ transforms into /ɟ (ɟʒ)/ in the Kalai dialect. this phonetic variation is limited exclusively to the initial position of words and does not occur in the medial position.

Variability of medial and final phonemes between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects

The distinctions in medial and final phonemes between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects are evident in certain words. While the Debbarma dialect lacks specific medial and final phonemes, these sounds are present in the Kalai dialect. The following table (Table No. 3) illustrates these examples:

Table No. 3: Variations in Medial and final Phonemes between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects

Sl. No	Debbarma dialect	Kalai dialect	Gloss
1	/khɔtʃaɪ/	/khɔptʃaɪ/	Beard
2	/nɔbar/	/nɔkbar/	Wind
3	/tɔmsa/	/tɔmsar/	Wild cock
4	/khundʒu:/	/khundʒu:r/	Ear
5	/lendʒu:/	/lenʒu:r/	Dragon fly

The above examples reveal that the medial consonant phonemes /p/ and /k/ are absent in the Debbarma dialect, while the final phoneme /r/ is similarly missing. Nevertheless, these variations are observed in a limited number of words and serve to highlight the distinctions between the two dialects within the Kokborok language.

Variability of final consonant sound between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects

The final consonant /k/ in the Debbarma dialect transitions to the /au/ sound in the Kalai dialect. the following examples illustrated in the Table 4 support this observation:

Table No. 4: Variability of final consonant sounds between the Debbarma and Kalai dialect

Sl. No	Debbarma dialect	Kalai dialect	Gloss
1	/kɔk/	/kaʊ/	Language
2	/thɔk/	/thaʊ/	Oil
3	/kɔsɔk/	/kɔsaʊ/	Rotten
4	/phɔɔk/	/phɔlaʊ/	Extend
5	/si.kɔk/	/si.kaʊ/	Thief

The examples provided indicate that the final consonant sound /k/ is represented in the Debbarma dialect, whereas it transforms into the /aʊ/ sound in the Kalai dialect. It is important to note, however, that this change occurs in a limited set of words; not every instance of the final consonant /k/ converts to /aʊ/ in the Kalai dialect.

Variability of the final “iŋ” sound between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects

In the Debbarma dialect, when a word concludes with the sound “iŋ,” this sound is transformed into “eŋ” in the Kalai dialect. The examples provided below illustrate this phenomenon:

Table No. 5: Transformation of “iŋ” to “eŋ” in the Kalai dialect

Sl. No	Debbarma dialect	Kalai dialect	Gloss
1	/ha.tʃiŋ/	/ha.tʃeŋ/	Ginger
2	/tɔliŋ/	/taʊ.leŋ/	Eagle
3	/kha.tʃiŋ/	/kha.tʃeŋ/	Bulldog ant
4	/baɪ.liŋ/	/baɪ.leŋ/	Winnowing basket
5	/wajiŋ/	/wajeŋ/	Swing
6	/amiŋ/	/ameŋ/	Cat

These examples clearly indicate that the “iŋ” sound in the Debbarma dialect converts to “eŋ” in the Kalai dialect. It is noteworthy that the “iŋ” sound is characterised by a high tone, whereas “eŋ” is associated with a low tone. This variation is prevalent across a significant number of words in both dialects, with the Debbarma dialect consistently using “iŋ” at the end of words. However, some words maintain their form without change in both dialects.

Variability in consonant clusters between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects

Generally, the formation of consonant clusters in the Debbarma dialect is rare when examined scientifically; conversely, the Kalai dialect readily accommodates consonant clusters, especially at the beginning of words. The examples provided in Table No. 6 illustrate this point.

Table No. 6: Variability in Consonant Clusters at the Initial position in the Debbarma and Kalai dialects

Sl. No.	Debbarma dialect	Kalai dialect	Gloss
1	/sabɔ/	/sba/	Who
2	/tamɔ/	/tma/	What
3	/sepeŋ/	/speŋ/	Make Straight

The examples presented above indicate that the Kalai dialect easily forms consonant clusters in the initial position of words, whereas the Debbarma dialect appears unable to accommodate consonant clusters at the beginning of words.

Variability in Diphthongs between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects

In essence, the Debbarma and Kalai dialects exhibit a total of six diphthongs, namely /aɪ, eɪ, ɔɪ, iɪ, uɪ, aʊ/. A notable distinction among these diphthongs pertains specifically to the “aʊ” sound, which appears in the initial position within the Debbarma dialect. In contrast, this diphthong can be found in initial, medial and final positions in the Kalai dialect. The distinctions are illustrated in Table 7 below:

Table No. 7: Distinction of Diphthongs between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects

Dialects	Diphthongs	Initial	Medial	Final
Debbarma	/aɪ/	/aɪ.tʃʊk/ [dawn]	/naɪ.thɔk/ [beautiful]	/laɪ/ [leaf]
Debbarma	/eɪ/	x	x	/teɪ/ [and]
Debbarma	/ɔɪ/	x	/kɔɪ.phɔl/ [papaya]	/kɔ.sɔɪ/ [bean]
Debbarma	/iɪ/	x	/khiɪ.tʃaŋ/ [fig]	/thiɪ/ [blood]
Debbarma	/uɪ/	x	/muɪ.tu/ [memory]	/muɪ/ [curry]
Debbarma	/aʊ/	/aʊ/ [indicating to agree or yes]	x	x
Kalai	/aɪ/	/aɪ.tʃʊk/ [dawn]	/naɪ.thaʊ/ [beautiful]	/laɪ/ [leaf]
Kalai	/eɪ/	x	x	/teɪ/ [and]
Kalai	/ɔɪ/	x	x	/mɔɪ/ [sister of mother]
Kalai	/iɪ/	x	/miɪ.sɾɔm/ [ant]	/tiɪ/ [water]
Kalai	/uɪ/	x	/muɪ.tu/ [memory]	/muɪ/ [curry]
Kalai	/aʊ/	/aʊ/ [indicating to agree or yes]	/taʊ.thu/ [dove]	/thaʊ/ [oil]

The examples provided illustrate that all instances of boldface represent diphthongs. The primary distinction is observed in the /aʊ/ sound across both dialects. In the Kalai dialect, this sound occurs in initial, medial, and final positions, while in the Debbarma dialect, it only

appears in the initial position. Similarly, the /oi/ sound is found in medial and final positions in the Debbarma dialect, whereas in the Kalai dialect, it is limited to the final position. These variations can be attributed to the geographical separation of the communities speaking these dialects. Nonetheless, this divergence highlights the linguistic diversity present within the Kokborok language.

Morphological Variations

Both dialects exhibit considerable morphological similarities in their word formation patterns, including processes such as prefixation, infixation, circumfixation, and various grammatical categories such as gender and tens markers. However, notable differences exist in the areas of suffixation, plural markers, and contractions between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects. The distinctions will be elaborated upon in the following sections.

Variability in suffixations and Plural forms between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects

Certain suffixes distinguish the Debbarma and Kalai dialects from one another. Additionally, the plural marker /rok/ in the Debbarma dialect transform to /rau/ within the Kalai dialect. The differences are illustrated in the Table 8 below.

Table No. 8: variability in suffixes and plural markers between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects

SL. No	Debbarma	Kalai	Gloss
1	/phai.la/	/phai.le/	Please come
2	/tʃaja.bila/	/tʃaja.ble/	Not eat
3	/phaja.khuda/	/phaja.khudɔ/	Not come yet
4	/tɔk.rɔk/	/tao.rao/	Birds
5	/sii. rɔk/	/sii. rao/	Dogs

The aforementioned examples illustrated that the suffixes found in the Debbarma dialect, such as /la/, / bila /, and /khuda/, transition to /le/, /ble/, and / khudɔ/, respectively, in the Kalai dialect. Likewise, the plural marker /rok/ in the Debbarma dialect change into /rau/ in the Kalai dialect. This variation highlights the morphological diversity present within the Kokborok language.

Variability in contraction word between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects

The discrepancies in contraction words were identified between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects. The examples are presented in table no. 9 below.

Table No. 9: differences in contracted words between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects

SL. No	Descriptions in Kokborok	Debbarma	Kalai	Gloss
1	Hao kwaijak bwthai	/ha.kirai/	/haɔ.kilai.dʒak/	Fruit that falls on the soil
2	Pun tonma nok	/tai.nɔk/	/pun.nɔk/	The house where the goats are kept
3	Musuk tonma nok	/gɔi.nɔk/	/gual.nɔk/	The house where the cows are kept
4	Mai tonma nok	/majam.nɔk/	/mai.nɔk/	The house where the paddy is stored
5	Rang-ri gwnang borok	/khurumpui/	/ginan/	One who possesses substantial wealth and property
6	Chwchwi-chuchu-ni mapha	/matɔ.batɔ/	/matɔr.batɔr/	Parents of grandma & grandpa

The aforementioned examples demonstrate that contraction words exhibit differences between the two dialects, although such variations are confined to a limited number of terms. Nevertheless, this variation underscores the distinctions present in the word formation systems of both the Debbarma and Kalai dialects. This phenomenon emphasizes the linguistic diversity and richness inherent within the Kokborok language and its various dialects.

Conclusion

In summary, the analysis reveals that the phonological distinctions between the Debbarma and Kalai dialects are more pronounced than the morphological variations. While certain initial, medial, and final phonemes differ between the dialects, the tonal levels remain consistent; for instance, the word for ‘nail’ is pronounced as ‘yasku’ in the Debbarma dialect and ‘jasku’ in the Kalai dialect, with the only difference being the initial phonemes ‘y’ and ‘j’ both exhibiting a low tonal level. Furthermore, instances where medial and final phonemes are absent in the Debbarma dialect but present in the Kalai dialect can be observed; for example, “khochai” in Debbarma contrasts with “khopchai” in Kalai, where the medial phoneme “p” is omitted in the former. Morphologically, the word formation processes largely mirror each other in both dialects; however, it is noted that the plural marker “rok” transform into “rau” within the Kalai dialect, numerous contraction forms differ significantly between the two. This phenomenon highlights the inherent variations among the dialects of the Kokborok language. Such differences can be attributed to the geographical separation of their respective communities, as the Debbarma and Kalai populations inhabit distinct societal areas, with their individual customs and cultural practices contributing to these dialectal divergences. Nevertheless, these

discrepancies affirm that the Kokborok language is characterized by a rich diversity of dialectal forms, presenting a valuable opportunity for linguists to explore and investigate the linguistic aspects of Kokborok in greater depth.

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