

# An Analysis of Phonological and Morphological Differences Between the Debbarma and Reang (Bru) Dialects of Kokborok

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**Abstract**—This research paper seeks to elucidate the significant phonological and morphological variations observed in the Debbarma and Reang dialects, which are prevalent and noteworthy within the linguistic landscape of these two dialects. Understanding these variations is crucial for a comprehensive examination and identification of the fundamental differences that exist between the Debbarma and Reang dialects, particularly with regard to their respective sound system. Due to the notable differences in phonetic sounds and word formation, speakers of the Debbarma and Reang dialects often encounter communication barriers, leading to instances where mutual intelligibility is compromised. This study aims to present a detailed exploration of these major distinctions, thereby fostering a better understanding of the linguistic attributes that set these dialects apart. For this paper, data collection includes conducting personal interviews, administering questionnaires, utilizing Google Forms for broader outreach, and assigning specific tasks to undergraduate students which are designed to elicit insightful responses about their experiences with the dialects in question. The primary objective of this paper is to rigorously explore and analyse the major dialectical variations that exist between the Debbarma and Reang dialects. Through this exploration, it is anticipated that reader will gain a deeper appreciation for the diversity within the Kokborok language family, as well as an understanding of the phonological and morphological distinctions that characterize the Debbarma and Reang dialects. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding the complexities of language variation and its implications for effective communication among speakers of different dialects.

**Index Terms**—Kokborok Dialects, Phonological Variation, Morphological Variation, Mutual Intelligibility.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Debbarma and Reang, also known as Bru, represent the two largest communities within the Tripuri tribes. Among them, the Debbarma constitute the most populous group, followed by the Reang. “According to the census conducted in 2011, the population of the Debbarma (Tipra) stands at 592,255 whereas the Reang population is recorded at 188,220” (Debbarma, 2012) contributing to the total count of the Tripuri tribe. “Genetically, the Tripuri tribes are classified under the Sino-Tibetan language family, specifically within the Tibeto-Burman, Assam-Burmese, and Bodo-Naga sub-groups, ultimately falling under the Bodo category” (G.A. Grierson, 1903-28, Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. III, Part-II, PP-109-113).

The Tripuri possess a distinctive and rich linguistic heritage, with their language known as Kokborok. In the term ‘Kokborok,’ ‘Kok’ translates to ‘language,’ while ‘Borok’ refers to ‘human.’ It is important to note that ‘Borok’ signifies ethnicity rather than humanity, as the Tripuri tribes are also recognised as the ‘Borok people’ in terms of their identity. Notably, “there exists considerable dialectical variation between the Debbarma and Reang, particularly in their phonological and morphological structures” (Chowdhury, 1999). This variation manifests in aspects such as sound systems, word formation, and the application of affixes, as Kokborok is categorized as a tonal and agglutinating language by its nature.

This paper endeavours to explore the dialectal variations present between the Debbarma and Reang dialects. The discussion will primarily focus on their sound systems, syllable structures, word constructions, and affixation processes, among other linguistic features.

## II. AIM & OBJECTIVES

- i) To investigate new insights into dialectal variation between the Debbarma and Reang dialects of the Kokborok language.
- ii) To discern the differences in sound patterns between the Debbarma and Reang dialects.
- iii) To examine the variations in word structures presence in both dialects.
- iv) To enhance the understanding of dialectal distinctions among speakers of these two dialects.
- v) To contribute to the advancement of the Kokborok language and the broader field of linguistics through in-depth research in their dialectal regions.
- vi) To gain a comprehensive understanding of Kokborok dialect variation and its respective dialectal varieties.

## III. METHODOLOGY

For data collection, I employed a primary sources approach, utilizing a Google Form that was distributed

to respondents via WhatsApp. Additionally, I assigned questionnaires to students. This process revealed some inconsistencies, largely stemming from a limited understanding of the Debbarma dialect. To address this, I conducted personal interviews with relevant respondents to gather precise data. One individual I interviewed was Mabita Reang, who serve as a guest lecturer in the Kokborok department at Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar college, Belonia, South Tripura. Through our discussion, I gained insights into the phonological and morphological differences between the Debbarma and Reang dialects. Furthermore, valuable data also obtained from the responses to the Google Form and the questionnaires, where distinct and accurate terminology was present.

## IV. RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1. Phonological Variations:

Phonological distinctions between the Debbarma and Reang dialects are frequently observed in several aspects, such as initial phonemes, final phonemes, and syllabic structure. The following sections will address the phonological variations observed between the Debbarma and Reang dialects:

### 4.2. The initial phoneme /b/ shift to /m/ in the Reang dialect:

In certain instances, the initial phoneme /b/ present in the Debbarma dialect is replaced by /m/ in the Reang dialect. This Variation is illustrated in Table No. 1.

Table No. 1: initial Phoneme difference between Debbarma and Reang

SL.No	Debbarma	Reang	English
1	Buphang	Mphang	Tree
2	Bwkha	Mkha	Heart
3	Bumung	Mmung	Name
4	Bwsak	Msak	Body
5	Bwthwi	Mthoi	Blood
6	Bosok	Msouh	Fronde of the leaf

As demonstrated by the data provided, the phoneme /b/ initiates words in the Debbarma dialect, such as “Buphang”, “Bwkha”, “Bumung”, “Bwsak”, “Bwthwi”, and “Bosok.” In contrast, the corresponding terms in the Reang dialect employ the initial phoneme /m/, resulting in variations such as “Mphang,” “Mkha,” “Mmung,” “Msak,” and

“Msouh.” This transformation elucidates a significant phonological characteristic that is specific to the Reang dialect, thereby further underscoring the linguistic richness that exists within these distinct dialectal forms.

4.3. Phoneme /y/ and /J, [dʒ]/ alteration between the Debbarma and Reang dialects:

Moreover, it is important to note that in certain instances, “the phoneme /y/ present in the Debbarma dialect undergoes a transformation to /J, [dʒ]/ when express in the Reang dialect” (Directorate of kokborok

& Other Minority Languagees, March, 2014). conversely, the phoneme /y/ also experiences a shift to /J, [dʒ]/ within the Debbarma dialect. This phenomenon is illustrated in Table No. 2, which provides a detailed comparison of specific lexical items in both dialects.

Table No. 2. Alteration of the Phonemes /y/ and /J/ between the Debbarma and Reang dialects:

SL.No	Debbarma	Reang	English
1	Yang	Jang	This side
2	Ayang	Ajang	That side
3	Hamjakma	Hamyauomo	Belove
4	Sajak	Sayak	Have been said

As evidenced by the examples highlighted in the table above, it can be concluded that the phonemes /y/ and /J, [dʒ]/ exhibit alterations across both dialects, occurring particularly in the initial and medial positions of words. However, it is essential to acknowledge that this phonetic variation is observed in a limited subset of vocabulary. This nuanced interplay between the two dialects underscores the complexity of phonetic shifts in language and contributes to our understanding of dialectal variations within the linguistic landscape.

4.4. The interchange of the initial phoneme /k/ and /g/ between the Debbarma and Reang dialects:

Additionally, in the Debbarma dialect, the phoneme /k/ can alter to /g/ in the Reang dialect. For instance, the word “Kubui,” which translates to “True” in

Reang, is rendered as “Gbui,” while “Kwbai,” meaning “Broken” become “Gbai” in Reang. This phonemic variation occurs in a limited number of words across both dialects. For example, the term “Genda,” signifying “Boar” in Reang, is pronounced as “Kenda.” The occurrences of this initial phoneme substitution are restricted within the vocabulary of the Debbarma and Reang dialect.

4.5. Differences in Consonant Cluster:

In the Reang dialect, the occurrence of consonant clusters at both the initial and medial positions within words is quite prevalent. In contrast, the Debbarma dialect lacks consonant clusters at the initial position, though such clusters do appear frequently in medial positions. The following discussion will provide a detailed analysis along with examples:

	Debbarma	Reang	English
Initial Positions –	Mokol	Mkoih (mk)	Eye
	Musuk	Msuh (ms)	Cow
	Bwlai	Blai (bl)	Leaf
Medial Positions –	Mwkhwra	Mukhra (k <sup>hr</sup> )	Monkey
	Khangwrai	Khangrai (gr)	Crab etc.

In addition to the examples presented above, it is noteworthy that the Reang dialect features three-letter sequences at the initial position, a phenomenon absent in the Debbarma dialect. For instance, the word “Bokhorok,” which translate to “Head” in English, is expressed as “Mkhrouh” in the Reang dialect. Similarly, “Bwkhwnai,” correspond to

“Mkhnai” in Reang. Here, the three-letter consonant sequences include “mkhn” and “mkhn” in the Reang dialect. however, it should be noted that some medial consonant clusters are present in the Debbarma dialect, as illustrated by the words “bwkra” (meaning “Father-in-law”) and “Okra” (meaning “older”), among others.

4.6. The central vowel phoneme /i [w]/ change into /o/ [o]/ in the Reang dialect within a word:

The transformation of the central vowel phoneme /i [w]/, as observed in the Debbarma dialect, offers an intriguing insight into the phonetic variations present within the Reang dialect. Specifically, this phonetic alteration occurs when the /i [w]/, phoneme is located in a medial position within a word. The underlying

reason for this transformation can be attributed to the absence of the central vowel sound /i [w]/, in the phonetic inventory of the Reang dialect. The following section elucidates this phenomenon, with supporting examples meticulously outlined in Table No. 3, which clearly illustrates the phonemic shift from /i [w]/ to /o/ [o]/ within specific lexical items in the Reang dialect.

Table No. 3: Medial phoneme /i [w]/ change into /o/ [o]/ in the Reang dialect:

SL. No.	Debbarma	Reang	English
1	Twii [tii]	Toi [tɔi]	Water
2	Thwii [thii]	Thoi [thɔi]	Blood
3	Swii [sii]	Soi [sɔi]	Dog
4	Kwtwii [kitii]	Ktoi [ktɔi]	Sweet
5	Twimaa [tiima]	Toima [tɔima]	River

In addition to the aforementioned examples, it is important to note that the /i [w]/ phoneme may also experience a shift to /u/ in certain instances within the Reang dialect. For example, the word “Chwng,” which translates to “We,” is adopted to “Chung” in the Reang dialect. Similarly, the term “Nwng,” meaning “you,” is modified to “Nung.” These phonetic alterations further underscore the dynamic nature of dialectal variations and the intricate ways in which sound systems can evolve in different linguistic environments.

transformations that occurred between closely related dialects. One such transformation is found in the phoneme alteration involving the final consonant sound /k/ as observed in the Debbarma dialect compared to its counterpart in the Reang dialect. Specifically, it has been documented that when the final consonant phoneme /k/ appears in words from the Debbarma dialect, it undergoes a phonetic change, resulting in the transformation into the /au/ sound within the Reang dialect.

4.7. Final consonant sound “K” altering into /au/ in the Reang dialect:

In linguistic studies, particularly within the context of dialectology, it is noteworthy to observed the phonetic

The following discussion expounds upon this phenomenon in detail, as illustrated comprehensively in Table No. 4, which elaborates on the variations of final consonant sounds between the Debbarma and Reang dialects.

Table No. 4: Final Consonant Sound Variation between the Debbarma and Reang dialect:

SL. No	Debbarma	Reang	English
1	Kok	Kau	Language
2	Thok	Thau	Oil
3	Nok	Nau	house
4	Tok	Tau	Bird
5	Phantok	Phanthau	Brinjal
6	Borok	Brou	Human

The examples listed in the above tableau clearly demonstrate that in the Reang dialect, the final consonant phoneme /k/ consistently transforms into a vowel-like sound represented as /au/ or /ou/. This phonetic alteration signifies a distinguishing feature of

the Reang dialect, highlighting the unique phonological rules that govern each linguistic variant. However, it is important to note that the final consonant sound /k/ is entirely absent in the Reang dialect, and certain instances, the las sound /au/ is not

preserved. For example, the word “Thailik” (Debbarma), which translates to “Banana,” becomes “Thaili” in the Reang dialect. Similarly, the term “Kichik” meaning “torn,” is transformed to “kchi” in this dialect.

4.8. Variation in the syllabic structure between the Debbarma and Reang dialects:

The examination of syllabic structures within the linguistic frameworks of the Debbarma and Reang dialects reveals intriguing distinctions. From a syllabic perspective, the Reang dialect is characterized by its constraint on word formation, as it predominantly

consists of monosyllabic and tetrasyllabic structures. In contrast, the Debbarma dialect exhibits a greater flexibility and complexity, allowing for the formation of words up to six syllables, thereby representing a hexa-syllabic framework.

Table No. 5 presents a comprehensive comparison of the syllabic structures found within these dialects, offering a clear illustration of their differences. The table delineates examples of syllables categorized by their respective structures, highlighting various forms from monosyllabic to hexasyllabic.

Table No. 5: Syllable structure comparison between the Debbarma and Reang dialects:

Syllable	Debbarma	Reang	Gloss
Mono-syllable	Ah [vc]	Ah [vc]	Fish
Di-syllable	Mokol [cv.cvc]	Mkoih [c.cvvc]	Eye
Tri-syllable	Chengkharu [cvc.cv.cv]	Singyarwi [cvc.cv.cvc]	Fire fly
Tetra-syllable	Nokbwraisa [cvc.cv.cvv.cv]	Nouhbarama [cvvc.cv.cv.cv]	Lizard
Penta-syllable	Mwkhwidongsiya [cv.cvv.cvc.cv.cv]	Not found yet	A kind of wild fruit
Hexa-syllable	Muikhumuhapolok [cvv.cv.cv.cv.cv.cvc]	Not found yet	Wild mushroom

The examples provided in this table elucidate the notable differences in syllabic structure between the Debbarma and Reang dialects. Notably, while the last syllable in the tri-syllabic structure of the Debbarma dialect exhibits a simple ‘cv’ form, the Reang dialect demonstrates a more complex ‘cvc’ structure. This indicates not only a variation in syllable formation but also suggests underlying phonetic distinctions that characterize each dialect.

Moreover, additional observations reveal that both penta-syllabic and hexa-syllabic structures are conspicuously absent in the Reang dialect. In contrast, these syllabic forms are present and actively utilized within the Debbarma dialect, further emphasizing the linguistic richness and structural diversity of the latter. Such findings contribute to the broader understanding of dialectical variation within the region and highlight the intricate patterns that define the phonological landscapes of the Debbarma and Reang dialects.

V. MORPHOLOGICAL VARIATION:

In addition to phonological variations, morphological differences are also evident in the Debbarma and Reang dialects. Both dialects exhibit notable distinctions in the use of prefixes and suffixes. The structure of word formation and grammatical categories, such as gender markers, plural indicators and shifts in word class, play a significant role in the creation of words. There are also morphological disparities between the Debbarma and Reang dialects in this context. The following section will explore the morphological variations, including examples from both dialects:

5.1. Variability in Prefix usage between the Debbarma and Reang dialects:

In Reang dialect, prefixes can manifest as singular letters that precede root words in order to create entirely new words. This approach demonstrates a concise methodology to word formation whereby the prefix serves to modify the meaning of the root word

significantly. In contrast, the Debbarma dialect utilizes two-letter prefixes for similar purposes, showcasing a more elaborate structure in its prefixation process. This dichotomy raises interesting questions about the underlying linguistics principles and historical developments that may have influenced these dialects.

To illustrate these differences clearly and facilitate a more comprehensive understanding, Table No. 6 presents a comparative analysis of prefixation between the Debbarma and Reang dialects.

Table No. 6: Prefix Comparison between the Debbarma and Reang dialects:

SL. No	Debbarma	Reang	English
1	Kw-thwi	K-thui	Dead/lifeless
2	Kw-rak	K-rau	Strong
3	Sw-kak	S-kau	To Separate
4	Phw-ran	Ph-rain	To dry
5	Phw-rwng	Ph-rung	To teach

The examples provided in the table serve to elucidate the prefixes used in both dialects. As observed, prefixes from the Debbarma dialect such as /kw/, /sw/, and /phw/ undergo transformation into their singular letter counterparts, /k/, /s/, and /ph/ respectively in the Reang dialect. This phenomenon suggests that the Reang dialect may favour a more streamlined approach to prefixation, perhaps reflecting specific phonetic or morphological tendencies that favour brevity.

dialect, illustrating a significant morphological change that can affect both pronunciation and meaning.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that some prefixes exhibit complete alterations when transitioning from the Debbarma dialect to the Reang dialect. A case in point is the word “Bu-phang,” which translates to “tree” in English within the Debbarma dialect; when expressed in the Reang dialect, this becomes “M-phang.” In this instance, the prefix “Bu” in Debbarma has transformed into “M” in the Reang

5.2. Variability in Suffix usage in the Debbarma and Reang dialects:

The variations in suffixes observed within grammatical categories, such as gender marker, plural indicators, and tens markers in the Debbarma and Reang dialects, are noteworthy. These suffixes contribute significantly to the semantic content of words by being affixed to root forms. The following section will provide a detailed discussion of the differences in suffix usage between the Debbarma and Reang dialects.

5.2.1. Differences in Gender markers:

There are certain gender distinctions evident in the Debbarma and Reang dialects, as illustrated in Table 7 below, which presents examples of these variations:

Table No. 7: Variability in Gender between the Debbarma and Reang dialects:

SL No	Debbarma	Reang	English
1	Sa-jwk	Imsai-yu	Daughter
2	Kwra-jwk	Imkrai-yu	Mother-in-law
3	Wai-jwk	Wai-yu	Sister-in-law
4	Pu-jwk	Poing-cho	She goat
5	Tok-jwk	Tau-cho	Hen

The aforementioned examples clearly illustrate that in the Reang dialect, the female gender marker “jwk” transforms into “yu.” It is worth noting, however, that in the Debbarma dialect, “jwk” remains consistent for both human and animal genders. In contrast, the Reang

dialect exhibits a change in the animal context, where “yu” is altered to “cho.” The masculing gender markers are identical in both dialects and therefore are not included in the examples presented above.

5.2.2. Variability in Plural indicator:  
There are noticeable differences in the plural indicators are present within the Debbarma and Reang

dialects. The examples of these plural distinctions are presented in Table 8 below:

Table No. 8: Variability of plural indicators in the Debbarma and Reang dialects:

SL No	Debbarma	Reang	English
1	Takhuk-rok	Takhu-rao	Brothers
2	Kormo-lala	Kormo-sasa	Yellows
3	Phu-dudu	Phu-didi	Whites
4	Som-kla kla	Som-sasa	Blacks

The examples provided illustrate that the plural marker “rok” in the Debbarma dialect change to “rao” in the Reang dialect. Additionally, the plural indicators from the Debbarma dialect, specifically “lala,” “dudu,” and “klakla,” transform into “sasa,” “didi,” and “sasa,” respectively in the Reang dialect. It is important to note that the plural markers “lala,” “dudu,” and “klakla” are exclusively used with the aforementioned colours and not with others.

reveals a significant variability in the structure of words, with the Reang dialect exhibiting a propensity for brevity and conciseness, in stark contrast to the Debbarma dialect, which typically generates longer and more complex word forms. This characteristic variation not only underscores the unique phonetic and morphological attributes of each dialect but also serves to illustrate the rich linguistic diversity present within these communities.

5.3. Variability of Word Structures of the Debbarma and Reang dialects:

The linguistic distinctions between the Debbarma and Reang dialects are prominently reflected in their respective word forms. An analysis of these dialects

For a clearer understanding of this phenomenon, reference is made to Table No. 9, which offers a comparative analysis of selected word structures from both dialects:

Table No. 9: Word structure comparison between the Debbarma and Reang dialects:

SL No	Debbarma	Reang	English
1	Bwsate	Ste	Small
2	Kisa	Sa	Less
3	Tamo	Tma	What
4	Kuchuk	Kchu	High
5	Kisi	ksi	Wet
6	Kwprap	kpra	Salty

The examples presented within the table illustrate a clear trend: the words in the Reang dialect are characteristically shorter, whereas their Debbarma counterparts tend to be lengthier. For instances, the Reang word “Ste” signifying “Small,” is succinct and direct, while the Debbarma equivalent “Bwsate” is notably more elaborate. This pattern is observably across a majority of the vocabulary in the Reang dialect, thereby establishing a fundamental distinction between the two dialects.

This phenomenon of brevity in the Reang dialect as compared to the Debbarma dialect signifies more than mere lexical differences; it reflects deeper cultural and communicative nuances that may be inherent to the speakers of these dialects. The inherent variability in word structure can be indicative of differing linguistic frameworks, sociolinguistic factors, and potentially varying historical contexts that have shaped the evolution of these dialects over time. Such distinctions, therefore, not only enrich the linguistic tapestry of the region but also provide valuable

insights into the cultural identities and communicative styles of the communities that speak them.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In summation, it is evident that a range of phonological differences exist between the Debbarma and Reang dialects, indicative of their distinct linguistic attributes. For instance, initial phonemes such as /b/, /y/, and /k/ found in the Debbarma dialect undergo transformations into /m/, /j/, and /g/ respectively when observed in the Reang dialect. Furthermore, the medial phoneme /i[w]/ that is prevalent in the Debbarma dialect is represented as /o/ in the Reang dialect. Notably, the final consonant phoneme /k/ which is an integral part of the Debbarma dialect, is conspicuously absent in its Reang counterpart. This distinct absence illustrates a significant phonological divergence, particularly regarding the vowel /i [w]/ and the final consonant /k/, which are entirely missing in the Reang dialect.

Additionally, when analysing morphological variations, it becomes apparent that the Reang dialect tends to utilize remarkably shorter word structures. A single consonant often serves as a prefix preceding the root word, while suffixes primarily manifest in grammatical categories such as gender markers and plural indicators, demonstrating a more streamlined approach to word construction compared to the Debbarma dialect.

This linguistic phenomenon can be understood as a consequence of the historical and sociocultural context in which these dialects have evolved. The Debbarma and Reang communities cultivated their respective linguistic identity in relatively isolated geographical regions for an extended period, allowing for emergence of pronounced dialectical variations. Should these groups continue to reside apart, it is conceivable that their dialects will drift further apart over time, potentially giving rise to the development of an entirely new language, distinct from both the Debbarma and Reang dialects.

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