

An Overview of the Phonological Elements of Assamese in Karbi

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Abstract

The linguistic sphere of North East India is full of diversity. The Assamese language is seen as predominant language of the north-east India. Assamese Language with its own script and literature has been considered as a universal language is widely used in Assam and its adjacent states of Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh for a long time.

The Karbi is one of the predominant hill tribes of Assam. The language of this tribe is known as Karbi. Karbi belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group of Sino Tibetan language family. The Karbis are bilingual. They are seen to use the Karbi language while exchanging ideas among the people of their own tribe and in the social life. They use Assamese with the non-Karbis. They are equally proficient in using both the languages – Karbi and Assamese for spoken communication. Due to various factors such as co-habitation of Karbi and Assamese people, cultural interaction, the use of Assamese script, etc., the influence of Assamese on Karbi has been found more active. As a consequence, a lot of Assamese features are used in Karbi language. Various phonological, morphological and syntactic elements of Assamese are found to have entered the Karbi language.

Here, an analysis is done regarding the phonological elements of Assamese available in Karbi.

Key words: Assamese, Karbi, phonological features of Assamese in Karbi

1. Introduction

Assam is considered a miniature India for its synthetic nature of culture and typical population structure which comprises of the representatives of some major races like Aryans, Dravidians, Austriacs and Mongoloids, etc. Moreover, many of the tribes and sub-tribes of these races preserve their own customs, traditions and languages for which Assam is now considered a multilingual state. Thus, Assamese culture appears to be a composite culture of various elements of all these tribes and sub-tribes. The Karbi community is one such important hill tribe of Assam.

The Karbi language belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages under the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. The speakers of this language live mainly in the Karbi Anglong District, which was formerly a part of a district known as North Cachar and Mikir Hills District. This District was bifurcated on 11-02-1970 and one part of the district was renamed 'Karbi Anglong' with effect from 14-10-1976.

Karbi speakers live in different places of Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh also. The Karbi speaking areas of Assam at present cover parts of Karbi Anglong District and the adjoining border areas of the districts of Kamrup, Nagaon, Galaghat and Sonitpur in Assam and Khasi-Jayantia districts in Meghalaya, and Tuensang district in Nagaland. But it is considered that the Karbi standard colloquial is basically developed from the spoken Karbi of the Diphu Sub-Division of the Karbi Anglong District.

The Karbi people had developed very good neighborly relations with the people of the plains of Assam, especially of the Brahmaputra valley since the Pre-Ahom era, i.e., during the rules of Kacharis and the Jayantias. They had migrated to Assam during the Ahom rule. During the reign of Jayadhaj Sing (1648-1663), a few Ahom officers visited the Mikir Hills and gave settlement to some Karbi people in some villages. Subsequently, when they came in contact with the Ahom, they were allowed to settle permanently within the Ahom Kingdom on condition that they should pay annual tax to the king. Afterwards, when the British established their administration in Assam, the Mikirs had to come under the British rule. In course of time, the Karbis picked up the Assamese language for communication with others. They learnt it on their own initiative.

In this way, Karbi language came into contact with the Assamese language and Assamese, being the language of the rulers or the prestigious group, had a lot of influence on Karbi language mainly in the areas of vocabulary. The Karbi language has taken a good number of words from the Assamese language. These words have undergone some phonological and morphological changes. Here an analysis is done regarding the phonological elements of Assamese available in Karbi.

2. Phonological Elements of Assamese in Karbi Language

The Karbi language has incorporated many elements of Assamese through changes in sound. The incorporation happens in Karbi as the Assamese words are used freely by speakers due to necessity in communication. The words borrowed from Assamese into Karbi are pronounced using the features of Karbi language. The Assamese words used in Karbi seem to have changed in the use of vowels as well as consonant sounds. Such changed elements are illustrated below in brief.

2.1. Changes in Vowel Sounds

There are eight primary vowel phonemes in Assamese and five vowel phonemes in Karbi. The Assamese words incorporated into Karbi have notable changes in sounds. Examples are given below.

2.1.1. Assamese lower mid /o/ changes into Karbi low central /a/ and high back /u/ due to the absence of lower mid phoneme in Karbi.

Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
/Oŋkur/	/aŋkur/	‘bud’
bota	bata	‘a small utensil for keeping betel-nut’
doloŋ	deloŋ	‘bridge’
dokait	dakait	‘dacoits’
moina	maino	‘a kind of bird’
rokom	rukum	‘type’

bondi	bundi	‘arrested person’
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2.1.2. Assamese low central /a/ changes into Karbi high front /i/, mid back /o/, high back /u/ and diphthong /ai/.

Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
barta	birta	‘message’
bari	biri	‘garden’
takon	tokin	‘stick’
kani	kaini	‘opium’
dag	aduk	‘spot’

2.1.3. Assamese high back /u/ changes into Karbi mid back /o/, low central /a/, high front /i/ and mid front /e/.

Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
takuri	takeri	‘a whirl round’
upor	apor	‘upper’
uja	oča	‘priest’
dukan	dokan	‘shop’
buddhi	bidi	‘intelligence’

2.1.4. Assamese higher mid front /e/ changes into Karbi high front /i/ and mid back /o/ phonemes.

Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
kerahi	korahi	‘cauldron’
pera	pira	‘a kind of sweets’

2.1.5. Assamese high front /i/ changes into Karbi mid front /e/.

Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
muthi	muthe	‘a bundle’

2.1.6. In very rare cases, Assamese diphthong /oi/ becomes /ui/ in Karbi.

Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
moi	mui	‘harrow’

2.1.7. Prothesis. In Karbi, the addition of vowel is found in the initial position of a word borrowed from Assamese.

Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
dan	adan	‘gift’
dor	ador	‘price’

2.2. Changes in the Consonant Sounds

The Karbi language has 20 consonant phonemes. In Karbi, /b^h, d^h, g, g^h/ are mainly incorporated from Assamese and these remain in Karbi only as sounds as no minimal pairs are available for these. These sounds are used very less when compared with the use of other phonemes. There are numerous words borrowed from Assamese into Karbi. These words are used as Karbi words with slight modifications. Such Karbi modifications in the features of consonants are illustrated below:

2.2.1. Devoicing of Consonant: The Assamese words used by Karbi speakers are sometimes changed from voiced to voiceless. This change may have happened due to the absence of voiced sounds in Karbi based on the position of occurrence in the words.

	Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
g>k	gora	kora	‘the stiff of a river’
	gakhir	kakhir	‘milk’
	bogori	bokori	‘a kind of plum fruit’

gh>kh	ghonta	khonta	‘bell’
	ghori	khori	‘clock’
	ghiu	khiu	‘ghee’

2.2.2. Voicing of Consonant: There are also a few Assamese elements that are incorporated into Karbi through the voicing of consonants.

	Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
t>d	ator	ador	‘distance’

2.2.3. De-aspiration: This is a notable feature in Karbi. Many Assamese words are used by de-aspirating the final aspirated sound. This modification happens because the aspirated sounds do not occur in the final position of the words. So, it is de-aspirated in Karbi. Some examples are given below:

	Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
kh>k	tarikh	tarik	‘date’
	dukh	duk	‘sorrow’
bh>p,b	robha	roba	‘pandal’
	bheleki	beleki	‘witch craft’
	labh	lap	‘profit’
dh>d	dhon	dohon	‘wealth’
	bondho	bondo	‘close’

2.2.4. Nasalization: Assamese words are nasalized in Karbi. This is also called epenthesis that inserts /ŋ/ in medial position of the words when the words are Karbinized.

	Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
	kokila	koŋkila	‘a kind of fish’

toka	taŋka	‘money’
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2.2.5. The phoneme /l/ changes into /i/ in the final position of the word: The Assamese words ending with phoneme /l/ are changed into /i/ in Karbi. This change of phonemes is found among the illiterate speakers only.

Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
kopal	kopai	‘forehead/luck’
naŋol	naŋoi	‘plough’
narikol	narikoi	‘coconut’
pitol	pitoi	‘brass’

2.2.6. Loss of Initial Consonant: Some Assamese words lose their initial consonant in Karbi.

Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
kotari	tari	‘knife’
sthir	thir	‘stability’

2.2.7. Loss and Change of Final Consonant: Sometimes the Assamese loan words either lose or change their final sounds in Karbi.

Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
koloh	kolo	‘earthen pot’
kur	ku	‘spade’
bih	bi	‘poison’
mal	mar	‘goods’
kul	kur	‘clan’

2.2.8. Assamese fricative /s/ changes into affricate /č/ in Karbi: The /s/ of Assamese changes into affricate sound /č/ in Karbi in the initial position.

Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
sabi	čabi	‘lock’
sikar	čikar	‘hunting’

2.2.9. Some Assamese words retain same phonetic features in Karbi: Some Assamese words used by Karbi speakers are noticed to retain the features as found in Assamese.

Assamese	Karbi	Meaning
napit	napit	‘barbar’
pap	pap	‘sin’
kuli	kuli	‘labour’.

3: Conclusion

Karbi is predominantly spoken in Karbi Anglong Autonomous District Council of Assam. The Karbi speakers, due to co-habitation with the Assamese, picked up the Assamese language for the inter-group communication and for schooling. As a consequence, many Assamese elements got incorporated into Karbi vocabulary. It is seen that Karbi has taken quite a good number of words from the Assamese language. These words have undergone some phonological changes as the typical Assamese elements are either not available in Karbi or these could not be pronounced by a typical Karbi speaker.

In connection with the vowels, the Assamese words have been incorporated into Karbi vocabulary through modification. For instance, Assamese phoneme /o/ changes into /a,u/ in Karbi as in rokom> rukom meaning ‘type’; /a/ changes into /i,o,u/ and /ai/ diphthong in Karbi as in barta>birta meaning ‘message’; /u/ changes into /o,a,i/ in Karbi as in upor > apor meaning ‘upper’; /e/ changes into /i,o/ in Karbi as in pera > pira meaning ‘a kind of sweets’; /i/ changes into /e/ in Karbi as in muthi > muthe ‘a bundle of cut paddy’; /o/ changes into /a,u/ in Karbi in dokan > dukan meaning ‘shop’; /ai/ changes into /ui/ in Karbi as in moi > mui meaning ‘horror’ and some process of prosthesis of Assamese words are found in Karbi as mentioned above in detail.

Similarly, the changes of consonants are also noticed in Karbi words. The words are incorporated into Karbi through modification such as devoicing and voicing of consonants, de-aspiration, nasalization, by changing of /l/ phoneme into /i/, losing initial sound and losing and changing final sound, etc. It is also observed that Assamese fricative /s/ sound becomes affricate /ç/ in Karbi and some are incorporated with retaining same phonetic features in Karbi. In view of the above discussion, it is clear that in Karbi vocabulary, there are Assamese elements incorporated through the modification of vowels, consonants and to some extent retaining same phonetic shapes. However as regards the supra-segmental phonemes, such incorporation has not taken place as Assamese is not a tonal language but Karbi is.

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