

**AN INTRODUCTION TO THE KARBI LANGUAGE\*\*\***

The Karbi language has seven vowel sounds namely i, e, u, o, a, a. Prof. Rongkong Terang gave illustrations in his dictionary 'Karbi lantasan'.

- i as in Karbi and Kipi (As in English word fit, feat).
- e as in Chek and Lek (As in English word bat).
- ē as in Ejang and Erchap (As in English word cate).
- a as in Langkoi and Sak (As in English word pot).
- a as in Arnem and lang (As in English word ask).
- o as in Chiklo and losan (As in English word caught).
- u as in Jun and Phutui (As in English word put).

The corresponding consonant sounds are twenty. These are as follows<sup>1</sup> place of articulation.

|                |          |                   |
|----------------|----------|-------------------|
| labial         | voiced   | b, bh, m, v,      |
|                | unvoiced | p, ph,            |
| alveolar       | voiced   | d, j, s, n, l, r, |
|                | unvoiced | t, th,            |
| Palatal        | voiced   | ch,               |
|                | unvoiced | y,                |
| Post - palatal | voiced   | ng,               |
|                | unvoiced | k, kh,            |
| Velar          | voiced   | h,                |
|                | unvoiced | -                 |

B

Among the consonant sounds, the following classifications are noted.

|               |                       |
|---------------|-----------------------|
| Aspirated     | ph, bh, th, kh, s, r, |
| Deaspirated   | p, b, t, d, k, j, ch, |
| Fricative     | h,                    |
| non-africatee | l,                    |
| Semi-vowel    | v, y,                 |

Personal Pronouns

| Singular   |            | Plural          |
|------------|------------|-----------------|
| 1st person | Neli (I)   | Nelitum (We)    |
| 2nd person | Nang (You) | Nangtum (You)   |
| 3rd person | Atang (He) | Atangtum (They) |

Tense

|               |                        | First person    | Second person   | Third person    |
|---------------|------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|               |                        | 1               | 2               | 3               |
| Present tense | Indefinite Progressive | Ke lo           | tha lo          | lo              |
| Past tense    | Indefinite Progressive | lo etlo, tanglo | lo etlo, tanglo | lo etlo, tanglo |
| Future tense  |                        | ji, po          | ji, po          | ji, po          |
| Imperative    |                        |                 | tha, tu, non    | tha, tu, non    |

C

The above mentioned suffixes are used to denote tenses. The suffixes are used just after the verb and thus forming a word. When honour and respect is meant to a person then the honorific affix 'li' is added at the end of the pronoun eg nangli, Alangli. The addition of 'li' is means a change in the tense suffix. The word 'ik' is added to the suffix e<sub>1</sub> Nangli vang iktha (You come).

Case endings

| Singular | Plural |
|----------|--------|
|----------|--------|

Si, le,

Aphan, phan (to)

There is no plural

Ajak, pen, pensi (by)

Suffixes

Ha, Aphan, phan (to)

Pen, Pensi (From)

A -

Si, Alang, lang, (In)

An example of case ending (Noun-Manit).

| Singular | Plural |
|----------|--------|
|----------|--------|

Manitsi (Man)

Manitatumsi (Manit + Atum + Si) (Men)

Manit Aphan (Manit + Aphan) (to man)

Manitatum Aphan (Manit + Atum + Aphan)

D

| Singular   | Plural   |
|--|--|
| Manit Ajak i<br>Manit pen i by man<br>Manit pensii | Manitatum Ajak i by<br>Manitatum pen i men<br>Manitatum pensii |
| Manit Apahn (to man)                               | Manitatum Aphan (to<br>men)                                    |
| Manit pensi (from man)                             | Manitatum pensi (from<br>men)                                  |
| Manit A (-) man's <sup>x</sup>                     | Manitatum A (- -)Men's   |
| Manit Alang (in man)                               | Manitatum Alang ( In<br>men)                                   |

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 xAffix A is followed by a noun.

The affixes si, le, Aphan, phan, Ajak, Pen, Pensi, Ha, Aphan, Phan, A, Si, Alang and lang are added to the words to make complete expressions. There is no difference between the singular and the plural suffixes.

Pronoun of time

|          |                        |
|----------|------------------------|
| Pini     | - Today                |
| Penapdik | - Day after tomorrow   |
| Penap    | - Tomorrow             |
| Menapdik | - Day after tomorrow   |
| Tumi     | - Yesterday            |
| Tumidik  | - Day before yesterday |

Pronoun of place

|        |        |
|--------|--------|
| Lake   | - This |
| Halake | - That |

E

Pronoun of place

|            |   |                     |
|------------|---|---------------------|
| Dak, Ladak | - | Here, in this place |
| Maladak    | - | That place          |

Interrogative Pronoun

|            |   |                     |
|------------|---|---------------------|
| Komat?     | - | Where?              |
| Komatchi?  | - | Where?              |
| Pi?        | - | What?               |
| Kapi?      | - | What?               |
| Kolopusan? | - | How?                |
| Ko' an?    | - | How much? How many? |
| Ko' anchi? | - | How much? How many? |
| Kodak      | - | Where?              |

Numerals

|               |   |        |
|---------------|---|--------|
| Isi           | - | One    |
| Mini          | - | Two    |
| Kethom        | - | Three  |
| Phli          | - | Four   |
| Pho or Phongo | - | Five   |
| Throk         | - | Six    |
| Throksi       | ♦ | Seven  |
| Nerkep        | - | Eight  |
| Sirkep        | - | Nine   |
| Kep           | - | Ten    |
| Kre-isi       | - | Eleven |

## F

### Numerals

|               |   |           |
|---------------|---|-----------|
| Ingkoi        | - | Twenty    |
| Ingkoi-ra-isi | - | Twentyone |
| Thomkep       | - | Thirty    |
| Pharo-isi     | - | Hundred   |
| Suri-isi      | - | Thousand. |

### Gender

The Karbi language does not have words indicating gender but when suffixes are added, the words are transformed into masculine feminine genders eg.

|                    |          |
|--------------------|----------|
| Suffixes Masculine | Po, Alo, |
| Femine             | Pi, Pei. |

In case of animals, the suffixes are Alo and lo (masculine) and Api and Pi for feminine are used.

### Number

The plural numbers are denoted by the suffixes 'atum', mar and Hur.

|                 |                      |
|-----------------|----------------------|
| Manit + Atum    | Manitatum (Men)      |
| Arleng+Atum     | Arlengatum (Men)     |
| Ne + Atum       | Netum (We)           |
| Oso + mar       | Osomar (Children)    |
| Chainong + Ahur | Chainong ahur (Cows) |

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### Imperative mood

Imperative affixes are 'tha', 'non', and 'noite'.

Vang + tha - Vangtha (Come)

Vang + ik+tha - Vang iktha (Come)

### Indeclinables

'lapen' and 'ra' for Conjunction

'mate' and bonta for Separation

'tahai' and 'tang' for Suspicion

a, ah, aja, chis!, hai, and ingsali etc. for state  
of mind

ma and tang for interrogation

'a' for address

'Oi, toto, u for answer.

### Negatives

'e', 'ave' and 'kali' are constituent negative affixes in Karbi. The use of 'e' is peculiar. The first letter of the verb is repeated in the rear.

Junje Jun + J + e

Damde Dam + d + e

### Prohibitory negative

'ri' to the Verb indicated prohibition eg Lang + ri = Langri, Jun + ri = Junri.

### Adjectives

In this language, the affixes ke, ki and ka are added to the roots to make adjectives.

## H

Ke + lok Kelok (White)

Ke + er Ke' er (Red)

Ke + ho Keho (Sour)

To denote adjectival adjectives the affixes U', Kan, Pik, Ving, Ku and Par are added. When any of the above affixes are added to the adjective, the original affixes ke, ki, and ka are dropped.

Kelok + pik = Lokpik Perfectly white

Kangdai + par = Ingdaipar Short

Kedak + kan = dakkan Sweet.

### Important Verbs

|        |   |                      |
|--------|---|----------------------|
| Dam    | - | To go                |
| Cho    | - | To eat               |
| Jun    | - | To drink             |
| Jeng   | - | To spin              |
| Jor    | - | To sell              |
| Pi     | - | To give              |
| Ingnek | - | To laugh             |
| Lang   | - | To look              |
| Chak   | - | To allow, To promise |
| Kat    | - | To run (animal)      |
| Tengne | - | To forget            |
| Vang   | - | To come              |
| Tun    | - | To cook              |



## I

|          |     |          |
|----------|-----|----------|
| Toi      | -   | To send  |
| Thak     | -   | To weave |
| Chok     | -   | To beat  |
| Sai      | -   | To walk  |
| Pu       | -   | To speak |
| i        | -   | To sleep |
| bi       | -   | To put   |
| Chong    | -   | To jump  |
| Thi      | -   | To die   |
| Kekek    | -   | To bend  |
| Thek     | - - | To see   |
| Porhi    | -   | To read  |
| Van      | -   | To bring |
| Ing-u    | -   | To bark  |
| Klo, kli | -   | To fall  |

### Foreign loan - words

The language collected words from different foreign sources.

- (i) From Indo - Aryan languages Assamese, Bengali,
- (ii) From Austro-Asian languages - Khasi,
- (iii) From miscellaneous sources.

In this language, the sounds g, gh, dh are absent and therefore the Foreign words with those sounds are transformed and naturalised when those were adopted in Karbi.

## J

|                       |   |                    |
|-----------------------|---|--------------------|
| Can kan               | - | Song, dance        |
| Caonbura Kangbura     | - | Village headman    |
| Char Kahar            | - | House              |
| Dhan Dahan            | - | Wealth             |
| Madhuri Am<br>Maduram | - | Guava              |
| Samaj Hamaj           | - | Society            |
| Srigal Siyal<br>Hijal | - | Jackal             |
| Asam Aham             | - | Assamese           |
| School Iskur<br>Sekur | - | School, Christian. |

A peculiarity in the Karbi language is that when 'l' is there as the last letter, it is invariably dropped and replaced by the letter 'i'. The deep sound 's' (as in English word slash) is absent in the language.

### Haplological changes

Some words undergo haplological changes and new words are created.

Arni + Kechi = Nichi (Ni + Chi) West

Arlang + Kechar = Lang + Char = Langchar (A small hilly spring)

Thengpi + Aphan = (Theng + Aphan = Thengphan (Similar words)).

### Coinage of words

Some words are created by adding affixes and pieces of words. The words thus created acquire completely new meaning.

## K

|                    |   |                              |
|--------------------|---|------------------------------|
| Ar + i = Ar-i      | - | (To wish, To desire)         |
| Ar + u = Ar-u      | - | (To love, To show affection) |
| Ing + i = Ing-i    | - | (Perspiration)               |
| Ing + nar = Ingnar | - | (Elephant)                   |

## Conclusion

The language is monosyllabic and it is noticed that the bulk of the words are formed by adding affixes. In the sphere of numerals, the following variations are noticed.

In the plains, the numeral five (pho) is called 'phong'o'. For the numbers 11 to 19, another word for 'ten' is used and it is called 'kre'. Therefore, the numeral 11 is kre-isi. Twenty is Ingkoi but 21 is Ingkoi-ra-isi. Thirty is thomkep. Hence to express 'ten' the language has got two expressions - 'kep' and 'kre'.

The language produced a good lexicographer in Prof. HONG-bong Terang who wrote his monumental book 'Karbi Lamtasam' - a dictionary of the Karbi language. Along with Lonkam Teran, he wrote a grammar 'Karbi Lamkuru' for school children. He is now busy trying to standardise the language for the people who now speak variety of dialects. The Hongkhang dialect spoken around Donkamokam is accepted as the standard dialect and it is now demanding a place of honour in the language. The Amr dialect because of its proximity to the Khasi hills acquired for the dialect a certain amount of Khasi influence.

The plains Karbis, on the other hand, took to the forms akin to the plains-dwelling Assamese. Prof. Terang elaborated these changes in his dictionary.

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1. Terang, Prof. R.B. 'Karbi Lamtasam' (Karbi dictionary) chapter 'Introducing Karbi language'.

\*\*\*'Karbi Lamtasam' by Prof. R.B. Terang 1st. edition, 1974, Diphu.