AN INTRODUCTION TO THE KARBI LANGUAGE

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

- i as in Karbi and Kipi (As in English word fit, feat).
- e as in Chek and Lek (As in English word bat).
- o as in Djang and Erchap (As in English word cafe).
- a as in Langkoi and Sak (As in English word pot).
- a as in Arnam 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 place of articulation.

- **Labial**
  - voiced: b, ph, 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: -
Among the consonant sounds, the following classifications are noted.

Aspirated: \(\text{ph}, \text{bh}, \text{th}, \text{kh}, \text{s}, \text{r}\)
Deaspirated: \(\text{p}, \text{b}, \text{t}, \text{d}, \text{k}, \text{j}, \text{ch}\)
Fricative: \(\text{h}\)
Non-africatee: \(\text{l}\)
Semi-vowel: \(\text{v}, \text{y}\)

Personal Pronouns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st person</td>
<td>2nd person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neli (I)</td>
<td>Nang (You)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nelitum (We)</td>
<td>Gantum (You)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tense

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present tense</th>
<th>Indefinite</th>
<th>Progressive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st person</td>
<td>ke lo</td>
<td>lo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd person</td>
<td>lo</td>
<td>etlo, tanglo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd person</td>
<td>lo</td>
<td>etlo, tanglo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past tense</th>
<th>Indefinite</th>
<th>Progressive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st person</td>
<td>etlo, tanglo</td>
<td>etlo, tanglo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd person</td>
<td>etlo</td>
<td>etlo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd person</td>
<td>etlo</td>
<td>etlo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Future tense</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st person</td>
<td>ji, po</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd person</td>
<td>ji, po</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd person</td>
<td>ji, po</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Imperative

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st person</td>
<td>tha, tu, non</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd person</td>
<td>tha, tu, non</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd person</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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' means a change in the tense suffix. The word 'ik' is added to the suffix eg Nangli vang iktha (You come).

Case endings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Si, le,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aphan, phan (to)</td>
<td>There is no plural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajak, pen, pensi (by)</td>
<td>Suffixes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ha, Aphan, phan (to)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pen, Pensi (From)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A -</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Si, Alang, lang (In)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An example of case ending (Noun-Manit).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manitsi (Man)</td>
<td>Manитatumsi (Manit + Atum + Si) (Men)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manit Aphan (Manit + Aphan) (to man)</td>
<td>Manитatum Aphan (Manit + Atum + Aphan)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Affix 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manit Ajak</td>
<td>Manitatum Ajak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manit pen</td>
<td>Manitatum pen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manit pensi</td>
<td>Manitatum pensi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manit Aphan (to man)</td>
<td>Manitatum Aphan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manit pensi (from man)</td>
<td>Manitatum pensi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manit A (-) man's</td>
<td>Manitatum A (-) men's</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manit Alang (in man)</td>
<td>Manitatum Alang (In men)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pronoun of place

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lake</th>
<th>This</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Halake</td>
<td>That</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pronoun of place

Oak, 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 - There?

Numerals

Isi - One
Ini - Two
Hethom - Three
Phli - Four
Pho or Phongo - Five
Throk - Six
Throksi † - Seven
Merkep - Eight
Sirkep - Nine
Kep - Ten
Kre-isi - Eleven
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,
Female 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)
Cso + mar Usomar (Children)
Chainong + Ahur Chainong ahur (Cows)
Imperative mood

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

Vang + tha - Vangtha (Come)
Vang + iktha - 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', 'ane' 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 o', kan, Pik, Ving, Mu 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

Ham               - 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
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
Forhi - 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.
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.

\[\text{Arni} + \text{Kechi} = \text{Nichi (Wi + Chi) West}\]

\[\text{Arlang} + \text{Kechar} = \text{Lang + Char} = \text{Langchar (A small hilly spring)}\]

\[\text{Thengpi} + \text{Aphang} = (\text{Theng} + \text{Aphang} = \text{Thengphang (Similar words)}\]

Coinage of words

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

\[ Ar + i = Ar-i \quad \text{(to wish, to desire)} \]

\[ Ar + u = Ar-u \quad \text{(to love, to show affection)} \]

\[ Ing + i = Ing-i \quad \text{(perspiration)} \]

\[ Ing + nar = Ingnar \quad \text{(elephant)} \]

**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 'phongo'. 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 Lantassam' - a dictionary of the Karbi language. Along with Donkam Terang, he wrote a grammar 'Karbi Lankuru' 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 Aor 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.

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