Kokborok, a short analysis

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<p style="text-align:center">KOK-BOROK, A SHORT ANALYSIS</p>

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This is not a technical paper and all readers are welcome, although most serious matters are discussed! Some parts are more linguistic, and some others (1,2, 11, 16, 18, 20, 22 tell of the language more generally.

This short description results from the generous help many people gave me during my stay in Agartala (March the 27 th to April the 5 th 2002). I must confess I had never met before so many people anxious to help a linguist, and doing it so efficiently. Many of these people were linked with the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council and the Khumulwng institutions, which I also visited, and several also worked within the Kokborok Tei hukumu Mission . I cannot cite all of them, but let me give the names of kandai Utpal Debbarma (who kindly managed to prepare my stay in Agartala), Twimuk Prasenfit Debbarma, Bijesh Debbarma, koloy Debbarma, Nanda kumar Debbarma, and of course Bikash Roy Debbarma and Binoy Debbarma. To these people, and many others who visited me when I was in Agartala, I am very grateful and this short linguistic description is entirely thanks to them. Only the mistakes and blunders are mine.

1. Introduction

Kokborok, the language of the Borok people, belongs to the large Tibeto-Burmese group. This group of about 250 languages, spoken in Eastern Asia , is related to the Chinese languages with which it forms the Sino-Tibetan super-group. Tibeto-Burmese languages can be divided into several sub-groups, among shish we find the Bodo-Garo sub-group. Linguistic, analysis shows that a good number of languages, spoken mainly in North-eastern India , belong to this Bodo-Garo sub-group:

Dimasa Boro, Kokborok form a first branch Garo, Rabha Tiwa form a second branch Deuri forms a third branch by itself.

Other languages exist, but are not documented enough, such as Koch, Wanang, Atong. Other languages existed but disappeared, such as Moran, a language of Upper Assam , which was very close to Dimasa.

Dimasa, Boro and Kokborok are close to each other, In some not so remote past (say, 1000 years ago) these three languages probably formed only one language whose speakers could understand each other without any difficulty. These three groups of people were later separated by historical events. Dimasa speakers were very cmmon in Upper Assam, but many of them moved southwards after the ahom king Suhummung conquered most of Upper Assam in the 16 th century. To day, Boro speakers are found mostly on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra, Dimasa speakers in southern Assam in the North Cachar Hills, and Kokborok speakers in present-day Tripura (Twipra). Because of these historical movements, the relations between these three peoples became less frequent, and each of them developed its own form of language.

Very important is also the linguistic context. In Assam , the Assamese language became prominent during the 2 nd millennium A.D. Consequently, many Boro, Rabha, Tiwa speakers can also speak Assamese, and many Assamese words have found their way into these languages, In the southern regions, Bengali is much spoken, and for this reason many or most speakers of Dimasa and Kokborok also speak Bengali, and often use Bengali words when speaking their language. Assamese and Bengali are not Tibeto-Burmese languages: they both belong to the Indo-Aryan sub-group of the Indo-European group of languages

2. How to write Kokborok ?

From a linguistic point-of-view, the script is not much important, because a language lives when it is spoken. You may write Kokborok with the Bengali script if you feel like it, or with the Roman script if you find it better, or any other script you may like. Anyway, it is easy to decide on a systematic correspondence between these different systems. The good question (from a linguistic point-of-view) is not "which script will I use?" but "how to use it correctly to be faithful to the language?" In this paper, I will use the Roman script because this paper is written in English: it is a matter of convenience. Several Borok scholars, of course, have been thinking about the script, and a good system is used in the remarkable dictionaries edited by Binoy Debbarma. I will use this system in this paper. The only weak point in these dictionaries is the writing of tones, which are not consistently written. In Kokborok, ew have a low tone and a high tone, for instance what Binoy Debbarma writes thwi 'to die' (low tone) and thwih 'blood' (high tone). This scholar, as others before him, writes the high tone with a final h, and wisely decided that all words without final h have the low tone. Of course, in this case all high tones should be written with h, because of you don't do it consistently, words without h will be understood as being low tone.

3. The sounds of Kokborok

All languages have local pronunciations, and Kokborok is not pronounced exactly the same way everywhere. This is true of all languages, English and French included, and is not at all a sign of 'being backwards'. On the contrary, in many ways it shows that the language is alive and that many villages feel easy with the language, easy enough to have it in their own way; nevertheless, there is a global agreement on main features. Kokboro speakers use (I give main facts, and I will discuss them soon after):
6 vowels i,e,w,a,o,u 2 closing diphthongs ai, wi 20 consonants m, n ,ng, b, d, g, p, t, k, ph, th, kh, j, ch, s, r, l, h, y, w 2 tones low tone (not written) and high tone (written with final h)
This means that all Kokborok words are made of these sounds (here represented by Roman letters or group of letters), and only these sounds.

Vowels. Older writers decided to use was a symbol for a vowel, which does not exist in English. Phonetically, it is a central vowel. It can be found at the beginning of a word, but rarely. This sound technically a 'phoneme' is pronounced differently in different areas, sometimes closer to o, sometimes closer to i, for instance 'clothes' is ri among most people in Agartala but ro among may jamatia people, and rw in the southern regions.

Diphthongs. A diphthong is a group of 2 vowels. ai and wi are the basic clip thongs. The wi diphthong is normally heard as ui after the sounds m and p: chumui 'cloud', thampue 'mosquito'. The ui diphthong is a variation of the wi diphthong; technically speaking, it is the same diphthong, but there is no inconvenience in writing ui instead of wi in such cases. Other diphthongs can be found, for instance oi, but they are rare. These are what we call closing diphthongs, which means you normally cannot find a following consonant in the same syllable: they close the syllable. You can have words like phai 'to come', but no words like * phaik (here, the * means this is not a true word). When to have for instance a word within 'script', you may be sure that it is made of swi +thaih, not *haih.

Consonants. The Roman alphabet is a foreign alphabet, and is not perfect for writing Kokborok. For a good number of Kokborok sounds, two Roman letters have to be used. In Kokborok, ng is one sound, not two; the same is true with ph, th, kh, ch. This is not a big problem, because the sound h itself is never found in the same syllable after p, t, k, c, so that there no possible confusion between for instance ph (one sound) and p-h (two sounds). The sound h itself is found only at the beginning of a syllable, for instance in huk 'shifting cultivation'. This is the reason why the same symbol 'h' can be used at the end of a syllable to indicate high tone: this 'h' at the end has nothing to do with the true h.

Tones. Tones are very important in Kokborok, and many words are different only by the tone. For this reason, tone should be consistently written. it should be emphasized that words with different tones, such as ba 'five' and bah 'to perch', or twi 'water' and twih 'sweet', are difference words. Tones make

as big a difference as any other sound does: the difference is as big between ba and bah as between ba and bo.

4. The syllables of Kokborok

Several times before, we noticed the importance of syllables. In Kokborok, as in many languages in Eastern Asia , it is very important to analyses a word in its syllables, and many words are made with a main syllable (the root) and affixes. For instance, a word like kuchuk is made of a root chuk 'to be high, tall' with a prefix ku; phaidi 'come! is made of a root phai 'to com' with a suffix di marking the injunction. This is important for many reasons.

First, the sounds that are used to build up a syllable are not equally distributed. (A) At the beginning of a syllable, you can find any Kokborok Sound, except ng. There is no Kokborok word beginning in ng. (B) At the end of a syllable, you can find (B-1) any vowel except w: in Agartala Kokborok, very few syllables end in w, although it is possible in other Kokborok speaking regions (and they may sometimes influence the Kokhorok spoken in Agartala); (B-2) a limited number of consonnants: p,k,m,n,ng,r,l. This means that b or ph, d, t or th, g or kh, s, j, ch, h, w are never found at the end of a syllable (but see5); moreover, y is found only in closing diphthongs like ai and wi. The fact that fewer sounds are possible at the end than at the beginning of a syllable is not surprising: this happens in virtually all languages in Eastern Asia and actually in most languages in the world. What is more interesting is that in Kokborok, one may have p or k at the end of a syllable (and k is far more common than p in this position), but never t. In Binoy Debbarma's dictionary, I could find only one example of final t: phlat phlat 'very fast'!

Secondly , comes the problem of clusters. By 'cluster', I mean a group (cluster) of consonants at the beginning of a syllable, like phl (2 consonants: ph+l) in phlat phlat phlat, or sl in kungsluk kungsluk 'foolish man'. This is a very interesting problem in Kokborok, and more generally in Bodo-Garo languages. The first point, is that clusters are quite impossible at the end of a syllable: of course you can say ting tang but this is ting-tang and not tingt-ang. For the same reason kunglouk is actually kung-sluk, not kungsluk. Now, in Agartala Kokborok, such clusters are very rare. They become common in the countryside, or in country songs. Agartala people asy pun 'goat' but many country people say prun; Agartala people say pung 'full', but in the countryside you often find prung. However, some words have the cluster even in Agartala for instance prang 'brother in-law' If you look through Binoy Debbarma's Kokborok-English-BangaliDictionary, you can find several cases of would-be clusters, like phran 'to dry', but this is a false cluster' because actually it is the prefix phw with ran 'to dry'. True clusters are very rare in Agartala speech. They are common in the countryside, and also in Dimasa, a cousin-language. Still more interesting, they become very very common in echo-words (see11): phlat phlat, phre phre, prai prom etc. All these clusters are made in the same way: a consonant + r or l.

Thirdly, we have the prefixes with a changing vowel. In Kokborok, there are at least 3 prefixes with a changing vowel: the vowel of the prefix depends on the following vowel, the vowel of the root syllable. For instance you say bekreng 'bone', but you say bokhrok 'head'. Actually, here is the same prefix bw, but when e follows the prefix becomes be when o follows the prefix becomes bo, when u follows it becomes u as in bukung 'nose' (and the same with i: bihik 'his wife'). When the following vowel is a (or ai) or w (orwi), the prefix stays with w: bwlam 'hole', bwrei 'lady'. When the next consonant is m, b, p or ph, it is pronounced as u as in bubak 'stalk' or buma '(his/her) mother'. These rules apply in a fairly regular manner. They apply also with the prefix kw- which makes adjectives, as in kuthuk 'deep' but kosok 'rotten', kwthwng 'unripe' and kwchak 'red', kaham 'good' is an interesting exception (we would expect kwham). Finally, these rules apply also for the factitive prefixes phw- and sw-, as in ran 'to be dry' (and kwran 'dry', to dry something', but with these last two prefixes the vowel of the prefix is often dropped and we just have phran the result is only one syllable.

5. Changing consonants

In some positions a final k may become g; for instance you say nok 'house', in the same way, with nuk 'tosee', you say ang nugo (nuk+o)'I see' or nugnai (nuk+nai) 'shall see'. Technically, we say that the consonant is voiced before a vowel or a nasal consonant.

Something similar may happen (but rarely) at the beginning of a syllable. For instance 'elder brother' is ta, but 'my elder brother' is ata or ada. Of course t cannot become d at the end of a syllable, because t is never found as the last sound of a syllable. Suffixes may adapt in the same way, as chwla (for males), which becomes jwla or simply jla after vowel; the same of course for chwk and jwk (for females).

6. Nouns and verbs

There is a clear-cut difference, in kokborok, between nouns and verbs. You can say ang borok 'I am a person' or ang kolok 'I am tall', but you cannot asy *ang phwrwng 'I teach'. You have to say ang phwrwngo. This means that words like borok or kolok are actually nouns (even if 'tall' is not a noun in English, but an adjective), while phwrwng is a verb, and cannot be found alone: with a verb, you must have a suffix at the end (except in questions 18).

Nouns can have suffixes also, to be sure, but not the same as verbs. Verbs may have a rather complicated collection of suffixes. Nouns are on the whole, more simple, and this is the reason why I will begin with nouns.

7. Number and gender

In traditional grammars, which are written on the model of English, sometimes on older models like Latin or Sanskrit, you find long pages about number (singular, plural, dual) and gender (masculine, feminine, neuter). In Tibeto-Burmese languages, these categories have next to no importance: in other languages you have to indicate number ('man: men', 'cow: cows') or gender (not very clear in English, often very clear in Bengali), but in Kokborok this is not compulsory, or just considered unimportant. In some cases, especially when persons are concerned, number can be indicated by the suffix rok. When important animals are considered, one may indicate male and female, and little ones also. A 'dog' (male or female, any dog) is swih; if you want to kake clear it is a bitch, you can say swihma or swihjwk; 'puppies' are swihsa. In the same way, 'cattle' is musuk, either male or female, if you non't care if your care you can use musukchwia for 'ox' Chicken: the mommon name is tok, but for 'cock' you say togla (tok+la), and for chicks toksa (tok+sa) It is clear that sa is used like a suffix for 'little ones', but for the adult male sometimes –chw-la (or –jw-la or –j- la) while for the female you use –chwk (or –jwk). Another example is sa-j(w)-la 'son' and sa-jwk 'daughter'. In many cases you use quite different words for male and female, for instance sai 'husband' and hik 'wife'.

8. How to make nouns?

Examples like bekreng 'bone' and bohok ' belly' remind us that many nous are compounded. We find either 'true compounding', or purification, and intermediate situations. True compounding is when a noun is made either with noun + noun, or with noun + verb. Examples are very common. Especially interesting are words with a first element like 'bamboo' wah (you may also write uah: uahsung, uahnal etc), 'water, twi (twima, twimuk, twilam etc), 'paddy' mai (maibung, maikol, maiphang etc)', 'arm, hand' yak (yaksi, yuakshu etc),' 'leg, foot' ya (yakung, yathop etc)', On the same model, many names for birds begin with the syllable tok 'bird'. In some cases (not so common, it seams) the second element is a verb, as in rangchak 'gold': 'colour' + 'to be red'. In this true compounding, each of the two elements is left intact and can easily be identified.

An intermediate situation is provided by the names of bigger four-legged animals. Most of these names begin with a first syllable in m + vowel: mwkhra 'monkey', mwswi 'deer', mwsah 'tiger' matham 'otter', sisip 'buffalo', musuk, 'cattle', muphuk 'monitor lizard' etc. The rules for the vowel follow only in part those we have given in 4 about the changing vowels.

The typical prefix situation is when the first syllable is b + changing vowel. This is an interesting prefix, and it is found in many other Bodo –Gara languages. In Kokborok, it is found in names of parts of body or plants, and with a different use in kinship names. Names of body or plants are numerous: bwkha 'heart, liver', bwsak 'body', bwthai 'fruit', bedek 'branch' etc. This prefix b + vowel is different from wah, mai, tok or even from m + vowel, because it does not have any meaning by itself. It only indicates that the word (for rather: what the word means) belongs to a group: that this is only a part in a larger reunion, that there is no 'liver' or no 'branch' without a complete body or a complete plant.

This is also the reason why many kinship names begin with this same b- prefix: because you cannot be a 'husband', a 'wife' a 'father' etc. if you have no family where this makes sense. With kinship names, the b- prefix has an ambiguous meaning: it may just form the word, as in bihik (and in this case you can often just drop it and say only hik), or it indicates the 'relation' of somebody else (not mine, not yours). In other words, it becomes a kind of 3 rd person possessive. Here comes an interesting detail. With many kinship names, if you mean 'your relation', you drop the b-prefix and you put a nprefix instead: 'wife' can be bihik or hik, 'his wife' is bihik, 'yourwife' is nihik. You have to be more cautious when it come to 'my instead of 'your' because you can say bupha 'father, somebody's father, his father', nwpha 'your father' and also apha 'my father', with a a prefix meaning 'my' but for 'my wife' you cannot much say *ahik, you may say and hik or more commonly ani hik; for 'my elder brother' you can say ata (or ada), but for 'my younger brother' you say and phayong. Of course, these sophisticated details may change from one region to another.

9. Noun suffixes

Many nouns may have prefixes (syllables before the root), as we just remarked; but all nouns can have suffixes (syllables after the root), mainly because of their role within the sentence. These suffixes are often called case suffixes. In Kokborok, the most common case suffixes are – ni no and –o. Here we reach the kingdom of grammer.

The –in suffix has a large range of meaning, from so-called possession, through complementation, to origin; technically, these are the genitive and ablative values. When you say bwthai bwphangni kwlaio 'fruits fall rom trees', the ni addded to bwphang indicate 'from' the origin. The same with: nwng buroni phai? You come from where? An extended value indicates complementation or even possession: o musukni bukur bwlai milik 'the hide (skin) of this cow is very smooth'. Here we should note the difference between susuk bukur 'cowhide' (the hide of any cow) and musukni bukur 'the hide of a (definite) cow'. If you say o susuk bukur you mean 'this cowhide' (the hide is definite, not the cow), but if you say o musukbukur you mean 'this cowhide' (the hide is definite, not the cow), but if you say o musukni bukur you probably mean 'the hide of this cow' (the cow is definite also). This ni suffix is of course also used with personal pronouns: ani 'my', nini 'your', chini 'our', although some kinship names (see above 8) behave differently.

The –no suffix on nouns indicates on which definite object or person the action is done, or for whom it is none. These are technically called the accusative and dative cases. Grammarians make a difference between intransitive and transitive verbs. Intransitive verbs in Kokborok are like thahng 'to go', ran 'to dry (become dry)', phur 'to be white' etc, they can describe an active process like thahng or qualify something like phur but they do not indicate an action of something (or somebody) upon something else (or somebody else); only one thing or person is concerned by the process. Acting upon something else implies transitive verbs like nuk 'to see', sini 'to know', chah 'to eat'; when you see, know, eat, you see or know or eat something (or somebody), even if you do not describe what or chich; two things or persons are concerned in the process. In Kokborok, the crucial difference is slightly different, and the point is: so you act upon something definite or not? If you don't act upon anything no problem; it you act upon something general, you just mention it before the verb: and musuk nugo 'I see a cow, I see some cows'. If you act upon something definite, something specific (not 'any cow' or 'group of cows', but 'this very cow), you would normally add the suffix no: nwng ano nude nuk? 'Do you see me?' or o phainaino ang siniwo 'this one who comes, I know him'. In this latter example, the no suffix

is important also because it makes immediately clear who knows whom; you could say o phainai ano siniwo 'this one who comes knows me'. With verbs like ri 'to give', three things or persons are conceded: the person who gives, the thing which is given, and the person to whom it is given; in such cases, the no suffix is normally reserved for the person 'to whom': and bono laisi rikha 'I gave book(s) to him'. Here, the interesting question is: if the object is specific (and would normally have the no suffix), what happens? We find two solutions. The first one is to reserve the no suffix for 'to whom': ang o laisi nono rikha ' I gave this book to him'. The second one, if you want to stress with no that 'this specific book' is concerned, is to use a different wording for 'to whom': and bini bagwi laisino rikha 'this book, I gave it to him'.

The –o suffix indicates location or moment: ang nogo (nok-o) thahngo 'I go to the house'; phungo (phungo) sal kao 'in the morning, the sun feses'. If you mean 'inside' something, you use bising 'the inside', either with the noun as a compound: noksingo (nok+sing+o)' inside the/a house', or as a full noun with the b- prefix: twi bisingo 'inside the water'.

10. Personal pronouns

Pronouns are a difficult chapter; it is not possible to deal with it here. I will restrict the topic to the personal pronouns. Not because they are often used (actually, we can often speak a lot without much using them, because who is who is often dear in a dialogue), hut because they provide opportunities for comparisons.

All Bodo-Garo languages (Goro and Deuri included) have the same basic. Set of 3 personal pronouns: ang 'I' nwng 'you', chwng 'we'. For 'he, she, it' (the so-called 3 rd person), the demonstrative pronoun bo si used, and is found under a number of compounded forms (like obo). Nwng and bo can use the plural suffix –rok, but the plural of nwng if made from a shorter form *nw-rok which is pronounced norok, according to these rules we met several times before; the plural of bo is as expected borok, and is identical with the word meaning 'person' – the word for 'Borok people' is written Bohrok. 'We' chwng is not the plural of 'I' ang because 'we' does not mean 'several l's', but 'I and some other people'.

The forms with the –ni suffix are made from shorter forms of these 3 basic pronouns: ani 'of me', nini ' of you' (from *nw-ni and w becoming i before a syllable with i), chi-ni (from *chw-ni); bini follows the same pattem (as if from *bw-ni); the plural forms are regular, and add –ni to the forms with –rok: norokni, borokni. The forms with the suffix –no are slightly different: ano, nono, bono are parallel to ani, nini, bini, but chongno (from *chwng-no) is built no the longer form of the pronoun.

The specific possessive forms with many kinship nouns have been briefly dealt with in 8. In such cases, the shorter forms a-, nw- and bw- appear clearly: ata, nwta, bwta 'my /you/ his or her elder brother'.

In Boro, the basic pronouns are ang, nwng, jung; in Disasa: ang, ning, jing; in Garo: anf(a), na'a, chwgh(a). This use of ang for 'I' is specific for the Bodo-Garo languages, because most other Tibeto-Burmese languages use nga or ka instead .

11. Echo words

We have mentioned echo words like phlat phlat in 4, when describing syllabic patterns. Echo words can be found in many languages through Eastern Asia , and not only among Tibeto-Burmese languages, for instance in the Mon Khmer group as well. They are remarkable in many ways in Kokborok. first because they often have complicated syllables with consonant clusters. Secondly because they give very fine meaning especially to describe sounds, shapes or colours. Thirdly, of course, because they give very fine meaning especially to describe sounds, shapes or colours. Thirdly , of course, because they are made of two identical (or similar) syllables. But also because they can modify the meaning of Either nouns or verbs.

They are a very interesting topic. At the end of his Anglo-Kokborok-Bengali Dictionary, Binoy Debbarma gives a list of many of them (Appendix 31, pages 381-384), but alas without translation. I think that a full study of them, with examples, should by made by Kokborok speaking scholars.

I discussed this topic with Binoy And some other people, and here are some of my notes from these interviews. It is only a short example to show how interesting it is. In Kokborok, som means 'black, dark'; but you can qualify this 'blackness' in many ways thanks to echo words. Som kloklo is a darkgrey, much blacker than ash-grey. Som chumuchumu (or chmuchmu) is a darkened colour, usually brownish, like a darkened piece of old wood; it can also be said for brown skin. Som plikplik is the good word for naturally brown skin; not for Black people (who are kosom by all means), nor for the kerala people, but for the true seasoned Native; it is considered pretty. som sasa is a wide dark zone, like the sky during a starless night, or the ghastly vacant zone over a lake at night; this is frightening. Som prom prom (my favorite) is a darker spot upon the darkness of the night, like a bush or a grove among the open rice fields.

12. Verbs

Verbs are a complicated part of Kokborok grammar, and only some indications are given in this paper. Nevertheless, they are in many ways much more simple than verbs in Assamese of Bengali or Hindi, because they do not change for person, and Their change for tense or moods are fairly systematic.

The first thing to be done when analyzing verbs is to draw a sharp distinction between true verbs, which normally stay at the end of the sentence, and forms made on verb roots but which do not behave like verbs: verbal nouns and adjectives. We will first consider the true verbs ($14 to 16). Verbal nouns will come after ($17).

All true verbs are made with a verbal root followed by a number of suffixes. These suffixes are not placed at random, but according to definite rules. For convenience, we may define 3 types of verbal suffixes. The 1 st type indicates if the process is far or near, or up or down; this first type of suffixes is placed next to the root. The 2 nd type gives information about who does what: if somebody does something, or makes someone else do the thing, or if something is does without mentioning by whom, or if people do something to each other, these suffixes come after the first type, just a bit farther from the root. The 3 rd and last type gives information about time and mood: if you will, if you should, if you already did, if you intend to, etc. The negative suffix –ya usually comes last.

13. The locative verbal suffixes, or 1 st type

A good number of suffixes belong here, and I will mention only some of them: -sa and –khlai-, har, and –phi'.

The suffixes –sa- and –khai- form a pair, and you cannot use them together because they have a contrary meaning: -sa- means the action is going up, -khlai- that it goes down. For instance sosa- 'to pull up' and sokhlai- 'to pull down'; toksa- 'to sail upstream' and tokkhla- 'to sail downstream'; kosa- 'to pick up (with fingers)'; kakhlai- 'to push sown (with the foot)'. Of course, many verbs can have only one of these two suffixes because some actions are mostly directed up, or down, and only this way. The suffix –har- or –hor- is very interesting, because rather difficult to translate in English or Bengali. It means that something is done at a distance. For instance Kokborok has a verb ring 'to call'; if you call from a long distance you may use ringhor-, and this is why this verb is used when you use the telephone! If the telephone communicatio9n becomes very bad, you may say: ang khnahorliya 'I do not hear any more' (from khan 'hear' with –hor-). Nuk is 'to see', nai is rather 'to look'; when you look at something from a distance, you will probably use nahar- (from nai+har).

The suffix –pai- has an iterative meaning: it indicates a repeated action: ang thahngphinai (thahngphi-nai) 'I will go again'. This –phi- suffix is placed close to the root thahng, and the suffix for futurenai comes last.

14. The actancy suffixes, or 2 nd type

Among this type, we find the factitive in – ri- , the passive in –jak- and the reciprocal in –lai-. The factitive indicates that somebody makes someone else do something (this is certainly why this suffix is indentical with the verb 'to give': you 'give' it to do to someone else). You may use it with intransitive or with transitive verbs (these terms are described in $9, about the –no suffix). From an intransitive verb like srap 'stick, be sticky', you may build srapri 'to make (something) stick, to paste something'. From a transitive verb like chah 'eat' you may build chahri- 'to make (somebody) eat, to feed'. This is a very common and useful suffix. We should remember that some verbs have a distinct factitive, mostly in phw- (a prefix, this time; I mentioned it in $4) like ran 'to be dray' and phwran or phran 'to make something dry, to dry'. But this phw- prefix is rare now, and you cannot use it with any kind of verb as you do with the – ri- suffix, which is very alive and productive.

The passive in –jak- (equivalent to the Dimasa –jao- suffix) is used when you want to mention not the thing or person who acted, but this which was acted upon. Suppose that mwsa musukno watharkha 'the tiger killed the cow'; now, if you want to stress that 'the cow was killed, you say musuk watharjakkha; of course, you may want to add by whom mwsabai 'by the tiger', but this is not so important in this case: the result is more important. Here also, we note that the passive suffix –jak- comes before the past tense suffix –kha-. The compounded verb wathar- means 'to kill by biting'. You cannot use it if you killed the cow (Presumably by shooting, rather than by biting!)

The reciprocal suffix –lai- is also very much used when people do things at each other, or simply together. Him means 'to walk', and himlai- is 'to walk together'. The Kokborok verb for 'to fight' is walai because you need somebody to fight with, or against. Suppose the fight becomes very serious, and you can conclude: butharlaikha 'they killed each other', from the compounded verb buthar- 'to kill by beating', in the past tense in –kha. An amusing case is chahlai- which normally means 'to eat to gather', not 'to eat each other'!

15. Tense and mood, the 3 rd type

At the end of the verbal phrase (except for the negation –ya, which will come last, if it comes at all), you find the suffixes which indicate if the thing was done, is finished, is still to be done, or is being done. This is a delicate group of suffixes, and I am not sure I am able to describe everything property (actually, this reservation should be added to all paragraphs in this paper). The most common among these last suffixes, by far, is the suffix –o which means roughly a present action or state. If it is negative, you drop the –o and put negative –ya instead (you never find *-oya). Examples are infinite in number. ang bwthai khubo (from khup+o) 'I peel fruits'. The negative is ang bwthai khupya.

If you want to stress the fact that you are doing it, you use quite a different pattern: tok birwi tongo 'bird is flying' or 'birds flying (presently: they are doing it now). This requires putting the very frequent suffix –wi at the end of the verb (here bir 'to fly'), and then using the verb tong which is something like 'to be', here with the –o suffix.

Past is commonly marked with the –kha suffix: (nwng) bahaikhe phaikha? 'How did you come? implies of course that you are here, that the 'coming' action is over. Indeed, the –kha suffix often marks the present result of a past action: you can say bohok pungkha '(my) belly is full' (more strictly: 'has been filled up'), and consequently you can say in the negative bohok pungkhaya 'my belly is not quite full' (i.e. 'has not been filed up).

In order to express that something (a) is not any more (the final limit has been reached), or (b) is still not ready (the beginning limit has not been reached), you have standard possibilities in Kokborok. 'I do not hear any more' (this example was commented earlier, $13, because of –hor-) is ang khnahorliya, with the negative –ya added to –li-. 'I have still not seen him' is ang tabukno bono nugyakho, a rare case when the negative –ya is not the last suffix: it is followed by –kho.

Future moods or tenses are also complicated. The average future tense suffix is –nai, but a close future ('very soon') suffix is –ano,. Mai munnai 'the paddy will be ripe'. Ang thahngano means ' I will go now, I go', while ang thahngnai means 'I will go sometime', maybe some other time, or next time, or next year! If you want to stress that 'he will definitely go' (but later), you may say: bo thahngnaino, adding –no to –nai. Future cannot be negated: you can say no to what exists, but you cannot say no about something that (still) does not exist. In English, you say I will go and I will not go, but you cannot say ang *thahngnaiya in Kokborok. The most common way, is to use a suffix –glak which i8s perhaps from a noun *kwlak meaning 'impossible' or 'unlikely': thahngglak 'I will not go' or would not go'.

16. The string of verb suffixes and Kokborok Grammar

Start, for instance, from a verb nai- 'to see, to look'. You may add a 1 st type suffix like –chom- 'hiddenly' and get naichom- 'look hiddenly'. The you may add a 2 nd type suffix like –lai- (together, each other') and you get naichomlai- 'look hiddenly at each other'.

Then, you should add a 3 rd type suffix, for instance the past in –kha, and you get naichomlaikha '(they) looked hiddenly at each other'. Of course, all Kokborok verb phrases are not as long as this, but they may. This is a very natural and common way of building up verbs in the language. Some people think that languages like Kokborok 'have no grammar', but this is very stupid because we can easily see that such verbs are build in a precise way, with suffixes with a definite meaning in a definite order. Grammar means that you have to follow rules. Kokborok speakers (as speakers of all languages) follow the rules of their language, and these rules are sometimes rather difficult. The Book children sometimes make blunders when they learn speaking – and the foreigner makes many more blunders! If there were no rules (and no grammar), there would be no blunders. When you try to write a grammar of Kokborok, which means that you have to explain (some of) these rules in a logical manner, you realize that many things are to be explained, because there are many delicate rules acting together.

17. Verbal nouns and adjectives

In most languages, and Kokborok among them, you can form nouns from verb roots. In Kokborok, you can do that either with suffixes or prefixes.

The most common prefix for this purpose is kw- (with a changing vowel, see $4) and provides the equivalent of English adjectives. Examples are very many: rak- 'to be hard' and kwrak 'hard', thwi- 'to die' and kwthwi 'dead', som- to be black' and kosom 'black' etc. The designation 'adjective' is useful in English, because in English adjectives are root words: hard, soft, red, long etc. and to get verbs from them you have to add to be. In Kokborok, the contrary is true: verbs are basic roots, and so-called adjectives are derived from verbs, thanks to the kw-prefix. Moreover the Kokborok words with the kw-prefix do not behave exactly like English adjectives; in fact, they are nouns in Kokborok, and since they are derived from verb roots, they form one important class of verbal nouns.

We saw in $6 why words like kwrak or kolok are nouns: because, like simple nouns, they can be used at the end of declarative sentences without any of these verbal suffixes we just reviewed in $$13-14-15. You can say bo kolok 'he is tall', as you say bo ata 'he is my elder brother', but you cannot say bo *thahng 'he goes': you have to add something of this huge collection of verbal suffixes, for instance bo thahnglija 'he does not go ('any more). The other side as true as well: you cannot say bo *Kologo (kolok+o) 'he is is tall', because you cannot use these verbal suffixes with nouns, even when they are verbal nouns.

In Kokborok, 'adjectives' in kw- normally follow the noun they qualify: musuk kosom 'black cows'.

A different class of verbal nouns is formed with suffixes –ma(ni), -na(ni), -nai. The last one, -nai, usually determines nouns and in this respect looks also like an adjective: phainai bofok 'the person who comes' –but we note that it comes before the noun it qualifies. The –nai suffix provides

equivalents for English or Bengali relative clauses. The fact that it nevertheless forms nouns is obvious in examples like: o phainaino ang siwiwo 'I know (the man) who comes' (I know the coming one).

The –ma(ni) and –na(ni) suffixes cannot qualify other nouns; they are verbal nouns and act as nouns in a sentence, but have their own complements: ang borok phaimani nugo 'I see (that) they come'. It is the equivalent of an English completive secondary clause. If this secondary clause is a purpose or a prospect, you use –na(ni) instead of –ma(ni) ang thahngnani haio 'I intend to go'.

18. Questions

Kokborok has a remarkable way of asking questions. In fact, there are different ways of asking questions, and I will reserve the most interesting one for the end of this $18.

The first method is most simple: bahai tong? 'How are you' (how be). The point here is that the verb does not have any verbal suffix –it is the only case where verbs behave like nouns.

The second method is to finish with de: nwng thahngnai de? "Will you go?"

The third (and most interesting) recipe is (a) select the beginning of the verb, (b) add the interrogative de (c) go on with the full verb. The interesting part is the technique for slicing the verb. Normally, you take only the first consonant and the following vowel: ano nu de nuk? 'Do you see me?' (nu-, then full nuk). When the verb consists of only consonant + vowel, this boils down to repeat it: thu de thu? 'do (you) sleep? When the vowel is actually a diphthong, you slice the diphthong: pha de phai? 'Do (you) come? When it begins with a vowel (this is rare), you take this vowel only: a de Alai? 'Do (you) weep? When it begins with a true (this is rare) or a false consonant cluster, you slice the cluster and add the hidden vowel w: sw de srap? 'does (it) stick?', or phw de ph(w) rwng? This is a pretty rare system, and (in my opinion) a very funny one.

19.Numbers and counting

The basic device in Kokborok for counting things is to pile up (a) the thing you count (b) the appropriate classificatory noun (c) the number. Example: nok khung-sa 'one house' (house classifier –on). As in all Bodo-Garo languages, and most Tibeto Burmese languages (but not in Tibetan itself), and actually in most languages in eastern Asia , including Chinese, Khmer, Vietnamese or Thai, you cannot normally add directly the number to the noun of the things you count. You add the number to an appropriate representative (called 'classifier') of the category to which this noun belongs. you say nok khungsa because the classifier for 'houses' is khung in Kokborok. But you say musuk masa 'one cow ' because the classifier for most animals is ma-. You say khum barsa 'one flower' because for flowers' you must use bar- as classifier etc. You have to know the proper classifiers for everything. This system looks awful, but is not so. When you learn French, German or Hindi, you have to learn the gender of every noun; in Kokborok, you have to learn the classifier. Moreover, it is not so complicated, because in may cases the classifier is just the root of the noun: bedek deksa one branch', bophak phaksa 'one bundle of firewood'. Also, some classifiers have a rather clear kingdom: many animals require ma, like musuk, persons use khorok, which means 'head' (so, borok khoroksa means 'one head of people). And some nouns do not require any classifier: salnwi 'two days'.

The numbers themselves are added, as suffixes, to the classifier, and when there is none to the noun itself. The enumerative suffixes are : - sa '1', -nwi or- gnwi '2', -tham or –ktham '3', -brwi '4', -ba '5', -dok '6', -sni '7', -char '8', -chuku '9', -chi '10',. The numbers '2' and '3' have two forms, a shorter (-nwi, -tham) and a longer (-gnwi, -ktham) one; the longer form is used after the classifier, and the shorter form when there is none: musuk magnwi '2 cows', but salnwi '2 days'. These –g-nwi and –k-tham come from older 'adjectives' ni kwnwi and kwtham.

The Kokborok system of counting is not much alive. Most Borok people count in Bengali. For bigger numbers, like '24'or '245', even if they do not use Bengali (they always do, I am afraid), they use the

Bengali system of building numbers: '24' is '2 tens and4', nwichibrwi. We have some reasons to think that this system is not much traditional ni Kokborok.

20.Dialects a fascinating field of investigations

We remarked before ($3, beginning) that Kokborok, as all other languages, has local varieties where pronunciations, some words, and even some gram mar may not be exactly the same as in Agartala for instance. Every local variety can be called a dialect (for linguists, there is nothing wrong in a dialect), and all dialects taken to nether make up a language. It is exactly the same with English or Bengali, which have many dialects: in London , you can find people who speak a number of different English dialects (because they come from different regions) and of course there are several dialects that are specific for London itself. When a region or a city becomes prominent for some reason, it often happens that its dialect becomes prominent as well, as is the case for Paris in France , for Calcutta and Dacca in different parts of Bengali-speaking areas, and for Agartala in Kokborok-speaking regions. The consequence is that one specific dialect becomes prominent, and when people write the language they usually (and very naturally) choose to adapt their writing to this dialect, which becomes 'literary'. There is nothing wrong in that – except when people begin believing that this written form is 'the language' while other varieties are 'only dialects'. From the linguistic point of view, the written variety is a dialect also, because it is one variety among others.

A variety of dialects is a normal situation, and is considered in professional circles as a good sing that the language is alive. When a language is reduced to only one dialect, and especially if it is a written dialect, it means that the language is nearly 'dead'. Between dialects (because they form together one language) there is constant communication: words and phrases from different regions travel with speakers, who influence each other. But since each region is often proud of its local features, the mixing up is never completed, and each local dialect remains delicately different from its fellow dialects: the whole of it is the life of the language.

For these people who love their language, and for linguists also, a variety of dialects is a rich treasure. Linguists, whose duty is to describe languages, dialects, the more you know the language. In some countries, scientific institutions have programmed (and published) Linguistic Atlases, where maps in dicate varieties. Words or phrases that change (slightly or totally) from one place to another are chosen, and put on maps; the result is that you can survey the full variety of the language, as illustrated by the collection of maps. This requires some work, of course, and requires the active participation of local speakers who can tell local pronunciations, words, and grammar (the participation of older people, grandmothers and grandfathers, is much welcome); and drammar (the participation of older people, grandmothers and grandfathers, is much welcome); to collect this kind of information, either you travel from one place to another, or you kindly request gentle people who come from these places to teach you; you can do both. You have to proceed with a definite plan, in order to get information that can be compared and mapped: you have to ask systematically the same questions in all places, as far as possible. In $3 I gave the example of the word for 'clothes' or 'cloth', ri in Agartala, but I know that the same word is pronounced differently in other places. In his Dictionaries, Binoy Debbarma printed many local varieties, for instance tok, tau 'bird', or sopre, swpre 'to drag or graze forcefully; he gives the Agartala pronunciation first, so we know which variety is Agartala's, but he could not indicate from which place come the pronunciations he gives after, yet, this shows a keen perception of the importance of dialects.

21. A comparison with other languages

In Boro (at least in some Boro dialects, not in all of them), the word for 'cloth, clothes' (Agartala kokborok ri) is pronounced hw; the fact that in some Kokborok dialects it is pronounced rw becomes very interesting because it shows that some Kokborok dialects are closer to Boro, in this respect. We can make comparisons between kokborok and other languages in Eastern India (or farther), and build some ideas about which languages are closer to Kokbrok. The result of such inquires is often shaped

into a 'classification' of languages, and a cautious view on such a classification was briefly given in $ 1.

Comparative linguistics is a rather technical science, requires systematic charts, long researches, and some precautions. It is not possible here to give even a short idea of it; this would require another paper. But I will give some of the facts that show how kokborok is closer to Dimasa and Boro and, to a slightly lesser extent, to Garo and Rabha. A first view about comparisons within the Bodo-Garo group was given in $10, concerning personal pronouns.

The verb root for 'to buy' is pai in Agartala kokborok (kok), bai in Boro (Bor), brai in Dimasa (Dim), pri in Rabha (Rab), pre in Tiwa of Lalung (Tiw), bre in Garo (Gar). All forms are probably related, and what I will call the model form is probably *sing before it, because it is a theoretical form which is supposed to explain all actual forms, and we have no direct evidence of how 'to buy, was pronounced 1000 years ago or more: as an 'ancestral' form it does not exist, it is only a guess. Now, it is a good guess because (a) usually the diphthong ai may be simplified into e but the contrary, an evolution from e to ai, is less likely (a lot of explanations would be needed to make this clear); (b) the cluster br can be simplified into b but the contrary is not likely. The problem which remains is; was the model form *brai or *prai, was it p or b? To explain what is at stabs would require more pages than are reasonably possible here; so, you have to believe me (or not), and see how far reliable is the model form *brai. This model form happens to be identical with the present-day Dimasa word; in this case, we can say that Dimasa is more 'conservative' than, say, Boro or Garo.

What about 'to sell'? Agartala Kokborok is phal, and is to be compared with Bor phan, Dim phaing, Rab phar, Tiw phal, and Gar pal. The first move to be done is to find other Kokborok words that end in I, check what happens to this I in the other languages, and see if this variation between Kok. Tiw Gar –I, Rab –r, Bor –n, Dim –ng with a diphthong is a regular correspondance or some random joke. We can check with 'sun': Kok sal, Tiw sal, Gar sal, Bor san, Dim saing. Other examples could be added, but this one is enough to show that the –n-ng variation (some difficulties with Rab san: we would expect *sar) is not a fancy imagination: it is to be taken into account if you want to compare these languages at all. The result of this checking is that the comparison for 'to sell' is on solid ground. The model forms are probably *sal for 'sun' and *phal for 'sell'. Why not –n as in Boro? Compare with 'to be dry' Kok ran (should probably be written rahn, high tone), Tiw rahn, Gar rahn, Bor rahn, Dim raihng: this shows that Bor –n (and Dim –aing) corresponds either to –l or to –n elsewhere; since it is not likely that *-n became two different things (for what reason?) But much more likely that two different things were confused in Boro and Dimasa (because the general tendency is to have fewer different sounds in syllable endings), one has to support the model form *ran for 'to be dry' and the model form *sal for 'sun', and the model form *phal for 'to sell'. In this case Dim phaing is less "conservative' than kok phal.

My last example is 'to be deep': Kok thuk, Bor thwuh, Dim thuh, Gar tu', Rab thuh, Deu tuh. There is a good general agreement, but some difference in details. The vocal stop in garo (written) normally corresponds to high tone, and the Garo p, t, k normally correspond to aspirates (remember Kokphal and Gar pal). The only discrepancies are the wu diphthong in Boro and the final k in Kokborok. This is a small gate into a wide question of Comparative Bodo-Garo research and even further than Bodo-Garo itself. For us the question is: can we find other words where the same discrepancies occur? Yes, there are several well-documented cases, I give only two: 'cow' Kok musuk, Bor mwswu, Dim musu, Gar catchu, Rab mahsu, Deu musu; 'snake' kok chibuk (chubu in some other dialects), Bor jibwu, Dim jibu or jubu, Gar chipu, Rab tubuh or tupuk, Deu dubu. In these three words, all languages have final –u, except Boro –wu, and Kokborok – uk , which shows there is a regular correspondence, and that we are on safe ground. The problem of the model form for 'deep' is ...too deep for this paper! My purpose in this $21 is twofold. First, I wanted to give selected examples of words showing why linguists speak of a Bodo-Garo group of languages. Secondly, I wanted to show what kind of methods they follow in comparative linguistics: they carefully compare every part of words, and check if the correspondences between languages are 'regular', in order to make sure if the words are normally

related. Words are never the same from one language to another, of course, but when the languages are related the differences between them are normally always the same: a final Kokborok –ai always corresponds to a final Garo –e, a final Kokborok – uk always corresponds to a final Boro wu etc.

22. The future

A language is nothing without the speakers who use it, and actually make it. There are old and new songs in Kokborok, stories of old and new times, and poems of many kinds. Now, we have writers who publish books in Kokborok, this is asso very good. In its vocabulary, Kokborok reflects the peasant life of most of its speakers, and maybe some of my Borok friends who live in towns feel the. Need to make the language easy also for city dwellers. This is quite possible, all languages have to find new words for new things: sometimes you just borrow a foreign word and pronounce it 'Kokborok fashion', or you may try to create compounded words that describe the new things, or you use an old word with a new meaning. When railways were new, people had to coin words for this strange kind of vehicle. English used railway and French chemin de fer (iron way), train was an older word, which was aptly renewed for the new thing (it a French word, the French verb trainer means 'to drag'); for the big machine that drags the whole train, British people mostly use engine, which was an older word, French say locomotive which was funny new word made of Latin words (many languages in Europe use Latin as people in northern India use Sanskrit, as a kind of curiosity shop where you can discover useful implements), and chinese people say huoche (fire car). The same problem arose of course for bicycle and car –I mean the motorcar. The history of languages show that people are very clever in this respect, and always finds their way. Sometimes serious scholars try to use a learned word, and the average people promote another one! The average people usually win in the long run, and why not. Words become oldiesh, or are reduced to a shorter and easier form, or find their way to a specialized and often unexpected meaning: this is very natural and sound.

The main thing is to use the language. Foreign words will become adapted to Kokborok manners and will become easier (there are a lot of words of French origin in English, but English people mostly do not care: they just use them, since they are useful), and some new Kokborok words from Kokborok stock will be circulated, and some others smoothly rejected. As long as the language is spoken in a variety of situations, it is safe.

Kokborok has a strong and interesting grammar, a rich vocabulary, and a long tradition, which the comparison with other languages helps to demonstrate. The linguists cannot, and will not, change anything. But the linguists can notice the rich resources of Kokborok through the many villages and towns of its speakers, remind the city-dwellers that other local dialects are a rich store for a language and certainly not a shame, and convince the reformers that their audacity will be rewarded as long as they remember the rich lore they live upon.

Learned societies that help with research and publishing are to be joyously encouraged: from Paris where I write and think of you, please accept my most sincere wishes in this happy circumstance.

(Article from MUKUMU book)