(REVIEW ARTICLE)

An exploration of kinship terms in Bodo and Kokborok speaking societies

Sibisuli Basumatary *

Department of Bodo, Gossaiagon College, Assam, India.

Abstract

This paper attempt to explore the use of Kinship terms in both Bodo and Kokborok. As sister language of the Tibeto-Burman Sub-family, both Bodo and Kokborok languages share similar linguistic structures and cultural activities. In the way, the kinship terms are also found. Therefore, this study highlights the use of kinship terms in day-to-day communication of the Bodo and Kokborok communities. In both Bodo and Kokborok, kinship nouns are used with particular emphasis on elder and gender roles. Again, the study also highlights how both languages reflect cultural values such as respect for elders, gender roles, and hierarchical family structures.

Keywords: Bodo; Kokborok; Kinship Terms; Addressing relation; Comparative Analysis

1. Introduction

From a linguistic perspective, both Bodo and Kokborok are prominent languages under the Tibeto-Burman sub-family. However, the two languages diverged over the years and became separate ethnic groups at their own convenience, identifying themselves with racial titles such as "Bodo" and "Tipra/Tiprasa" or "Borok". As a result, the Bodos now have traces of statehood in regions such as Assam, Bengal, Nepal, Arunachal Pradesh, and Nagaland, preserving their language, culture, and traditions. On the other hand, the Tiprasa (Borok) continue to sustain their presence in Tripura, Bangladesh, and other areas. Thus, in linguistic backdrop, they have similar language structure as well as a certain similar of cultural heritage. Therefore, it can also obtain some similarities and differences in the ways of expressing relationship of both languages, which makes them ideal for comparative analysis.

Bodo, pronounced as 'Boro', is spoken in Assam. The Bodo community actively works toward the development of their language, which also holds official status in India.

Kokborok is spoken in Tripura and the Chittagong region of Bangladesh by the Tripuri people. They generally identify themselves as 'Tipra/Triprasa' or 'Borok' in Tripura and as 'Tripuri' in Bangladesh.

The understanding of relationship is identified the civilization of human race and relationship identifier words are crucial component of language and fundamental to human societies, reflecting the relationships that bind people together in families and communities. Grammatically, the relationship word is known as kinship term, which describes familial connections such as father, mother, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, and so on. It can also refer to the network of relationships formed through blood relations, marriage, or adoption. Likewise, the kinship terms are significance, they reflect both biological relationships and social and cultural structure of a society. In addition to these terms often serve to convey respect and familiarity, influencing social interaction and communication. However, the focused study of kinship terms, it can also obtain the presence of unique systems of kinship terminology in both Bodo and Kokborok languages respectively.

---

* Corresponding author: Sibisuli Basumatary

2. Use of Kinship Terms in Bodo and Kokborok

Grammatically, in Bodo, the kinship term is called "Swmwndw Swdwbma," and in Kokborok, it is called "Halok Kokthai". Both the Bodo and Kokborok speakers have a hierarchical kinship system and use terms that are deeply intertwined with social roles and relationships. In Bodo and Kokborok, kinship terms often have distinct words for family relationships, with some of these terms being native, while others may have been influenced or borrowed, most likely from neighboring languages such as Assamese and Bengali as well as Hindi. Therefore, in both languages, kinship terms are typically categorized based on linguistic sources as native words and loan words. Examples from both languages are shown below:

2.1. Native Words

The native kinship terms are deeply embedded in the linguistic heritage of Bodo and Kokborok. In both languages, these types terms show gender-specific and hierarchical, emphasizing seniority or juniority and familial roles. These types of words can be found such as:

2.1.1. Bodo

- **Ai (mother) and apʰa (father):** Both these two terms are used to refer to the parents. Also, the son-in-law or daughter-in-law also use these terms to describe their in-laws. Further, the Bodos also invoke deities with these kinship terms. But when it comes to describing the second person and third person relationship, the terms "nɯmpʰa" (your father), "bipʰa~pʰipʰa" (his/her father), "nɯma" (your mother) and "bima" (his/her mother) are used respectively.
- **Ada (elder brother) and bazɯi (sister-in-law):** The term "ada" is typically called elder/older brother and as the sister-in-law the kinship term "bazɯi" is signify elder or older brother's wife. Furthermore, the term "bazɯi" is also used to refer to the elder sister of a husband in the Bodo community.
- **Abo (elder sister) and gumɯi (brother-in-law):** In the Bodo language, the term "abo" refers to one's female sibling, while "gumɯi" (brother-in-law) refers to the husband of one's elder sister. Additionally, if the husband has elder brothers, younger brothers, or cousin brothers among his relatives, the wife's younger siblings or younger cousins also address them as "gumɯi". In the Baksa district, the term "bai" is used to refer to an older sister, similar to its usage in the Kokborok language. In Kokborok, the term "bai" also signifies an older sister. The use of "bai" in both Bodo (as spoken of Bodos in Baksa district) and Kokborok languages suggests a shared linguistic influence.
- **Amai (maternal uncle) and anɯi (maternal aunt):** In Bodo society, the term "amai" is used not only to address the elder or younger brothers of one's mother but also the husbands of one's paternal aunts. Similarly, the term "anɯi" refers to the wife of the maternal uncle as well as the elder or younger sisters of one's father. But when it addresses the second person and third person relationship, the terms "nɯmai" (your maternal uncle), "bimai" (his/her maternal uncle), "nɯmanɯi" (your maternal aunt) and "bimanɯi" (his/her maternal aunt) are used respectively.
- **Adɯi (uncle) and madɯi (aunty):** The term "adɯi" refers to the brother of one's parent and "madɯi" specifically refers to the wife of one's younger paternal uncle. In addition, the term madɯi also refers to the younger sister of the mother, while her husband is referred to using the term "adɯi". But when it addresses the second person and third person relationship, the terms "nɯmtʰɯi" (your uncle), "bibtʰɯi" (his/her uncle), "nɯmadɯi" (your aunty) and "bimadɯi" (his/her aunty) are used respectively. Again, in the Baksa district, among Bodo speakers, the term "adɯi" is used to refer to the younger paternal uncle's wife, while her husband is referred to as "dadɯi".
- **Abou (grandfather) and abɯi (grandmother):** In Bodo language, both maternal and paternal parents are equally referred to by the terms "abou" and "abɯi". But when it addresses the second person and third person relationship, the terms "nɯmbou" (your grandfather), "bibou" (his/her grandfather), "nɯmbɯi" (your grandmother) and "bibɯi" (his/her grandmother) are used respectively.
- **Ajoŋ:** The term is used to refer to the relationship between the elder brother of the father and his wife, as well as the elder sister of the mother and her husband. The terms 'hɯɯwa' and 'hinzao' are used to denote gender differences in this relational context, likely appearing as "ajoŋ hɯɯwa" (for men) and "ajoŋ hinzao" (for women). Interestingly, in the Bodo language, the relationship between the grandmother and the grandfather's parents is described using this mentioned term. But when it addresses the second person and third person relationship, the terms "nɯmajoŋ" and "bimajoŋ" are used respectively.
- **Pʰoŋbai (younger brother) and binanao (younger sister):** The term "pʰoŋbai" is typically used to refer to a younger brother, while "binanao" refers to a younger sister.

- **Bibuꭑnaŋ:** In the Bodo language, this term is used to refer to the younger brother-sister relationship on both the husband's and wife's sides, with a similar meaning. It also encompasses their other younger cousins.
- **Saltʰe:** In the Bodo language, this term is used to refer to the relationship between the husbands of the elder sister and the younger sister. But when it addresses the second person and third person relationship, the terms "nuꭑŋsaltʰe" and "bisaltʰe~pʰisaltʰe are used respectively.
- **Beoai:** The beoai relationship is regarded as a respectful bond within the Bodo society. With this term, the wife refers to the elder brother of her husband. Similarly, the husband uses the same term to refer to the elder sister of his wife.
- **Bihao (father-in-law) and bikʰunzuꭑ (mother-in law):** In Bodo, the terms "bihao" and "bikʰunzuꭑ" are used to describe the parents of a person's spouse, referring to the father-in-law and mother-in-law, respectively.
- **Aguꭑi (little brother/sister):** This term specifically refers to the youngest brother or sister in the family. But when it addresses the second person and third person relationship, the terms "nuꭑŋguꭑi" (your little brother/sister) and "biguꭑi" (his/her little brother/sister) are used respectively.
- **Pʰisa:** This term generally refers to a child of the family, whether a son or a daughter. However, when specifying the gender, the term "pʰisa" is modified. For the masculine gender, the morpheme 'zuꭑla' or its alternate forms {-zla/-la} are attached, resulting in "pʰisazuꭑla". For the feminine gender, the morpheme 'zuꭑ' is added, forming "pʰisazuꭑ". Additionally, among local speakers of Bodo, another term, "kʰudija", is also used with a similar meaning to "pʰisa", referring to a child of the family.
- **Pʰisuꭑu (Grandchild):** In Bodo, this term is also used to refer to a grandchild. To specify a grandson, the morpheme 'zuꭑla', {-zla}, or {-la} is attached, forming "pʰisuꭑuzuꭑla/ pʰisuꭑuzla/pʰisuꭑula". Similarly, to indicate a granddaughter, the gender-specific female meaning identifier gender morpheme 'zuꭑ' is added with the word "pʰisuꭑu", resulting in "pʰisuꭑuzuꭑ". These linguistic modifications help distinguish between male and female grandchildren within the familial or social context.
- **Bisi-pʰisai:** These two terms in Bodo refer to a married couple or spouses. The word "bisi" denotes the wife, while "pʰisai" refers to the husband.
- **Luꭑguꭑ (friend):** This term refers the common friend; it may be male or female. But when it is used as "nuꭑŋluꭑguꭑ"; it addresses the second person's best friend among female and as "biluꭑguꭑ"; it refers best of girls. On the other hand, to refer the best friend of boys or men, they use the word "sukʰe". When it addresses the second person's best friend, they are used the "nuꭑŋsigi" and for third person best friend they use the word "bisukʰe".

2.1.2. Kokborok

- **Apʰa (father) and ama (mother):** In Kokborok, both "apʰa" and "ama" terms are used to refer to parents, similar to their use in Bodo. Additionally, Kokborok speakers use the term apʰa to invoke male deities, such as "Gorya" and "Jesus Christ". Historically, before the use of the term "bubagra" (king), the term "pʰa" was also used to refer to the king of Tipra. Additionally, in Kokborok, sons-in-law and daughters-in-law also use these terms to refer to their in-laws. But when it addresses the second person and third person relationship, the terms "nuꭑpʰa" (your father), "bupʰa" (his/her father), "nuꭑma" (your mother) and "buma" (his/her mother) are used respectively.
- **Ata (elder brother) and bachuꭑi (sister-in-law):** Like in Bodo, in Kokborok as well, the term "ata" is used to refer to an elder or older brother, and "bachuꭑi" (sister-in-law) refers to the older brother's wife.
- **Kumui (brother-in-law) and bai (elder sister):** In Kokborok, both kinship terms have the same meaning and features as "gumuꭑi" and "abo" of Bodo language.
- **Moi and mua:** In Kokborok, the term "moi" refers to the relationship of the mother's younger sister, while "mua" refers to her husband. In light of these two words, the terms "moi" and "mua" from the maternal side can be considered morphologically modified under the influence of the Hindi language words "mausi" and "mausa".
- **Pi and pia:** In Kokborok, opposite to the terms "moi" and "mua", the term "pi" refers to the father's younger sister, while "pia" refers to her husband.
- **Pʰajuŋ (younger brother) and hanok (younger sister):** In Kokborok, the term pʰajuŋ refers to a younger brother, while hanok signifies a younger sister.
- **Kuꭑkuꭑi/muꭑnai (little bother/sister):** These terms refer to the youngest brother or sister, similar to the terms pʰoŋbai and binanao in Bodo.
- **Joŋ:** The word "joŋ" has the same structure and meaning as the word "ajoŋ" in the Bodo language. In Kokborok, from the father's side, this term is used to refer to the father's elder brother and his wife. On the other hand, from the mother's side, "joŋ" is used to refer to the elder brother of the mother, his wife, and the mother's elder sister and her husband. In Kokborok, similar to Bodo, the gender specific identifier terms 'chuꭑla' and 'buꭑruꭑi' are used to denote gender differences in this relational context, typically appearing as "joŋ chuꭑla" (referring to men) and "joŋ buꭑruꭑi" (referring to women).

- **Tʰagu/dai:** In some regions of Tripura, the Kokborok term "tʰagu" is used to denote the relationship of a grandfather, encompassing both the paternal grandfather (on the father's side) and the maternal grandfather (on the mother's side). Among Kokborok speakers, the term "dai" is also used to refer to a grandfather, particularly in some specific regions. Kokborok, being spoken by different communities in Tripura and neighboring areas, exhibits regional variations in vocabulary and usage. Additionally, in different dialects of Kokborok, such as in Tripura dialect, the term "chuchu" is used to refer to the relationship of a grandfather, while in the Jamatia dialect, the term "achu" is used.
- **Sa:** In Kokborok, this term carries a meaning similar to "pʰisa" in Bodo. To specify the gender difference, such as son and daughter, the masculine gender morpheme 'chuɭa' or {-zla} is attached to "sa", forming "sachuɭa" or "sazla" for son. To indicate a daughter, the feminine gender suffix {-zuɭk} is added to "sa", resulting in "sazuɭk". These modifications highlight the gender distinctions within the familial context in Kokborok.
- **Suk:** These terms generally refer to the relationship of a grandchild. Similar to the gendered terms "sazla" and "sazuɭk", the term "suk" is also modified to indicate gender. To refer to a grandson, the masculine gender morpheme 'chuɭa' is attached, forming "sukchuɭa". To indicate a granddaughter, the feminine gender morphemes 'buɭruɭi' or {-zuɭk} are added, resulting in "sukbuɭruɭi" or "sukzuɭk".
- **Sai and hik:** In Kokborok, the native terms "sai" and "hik" are used to denote marital relationships, where "sai" refers to a husband and "hik" refers to a wife.
- **Kichiŋ and mare:** Generally, the term "kichiŋ" is used to refer the common friend meaning, it may be either male or female. But the term mare is only used to refer female friend.

It noteworthy that there is no any specific emphasis on relationship of maternal versus paternal distinctions in Bodo language. This is because the sub-languages of the Tibeto-Burman language group do not contain other source contact terms representing paternal and maternal lineage. Therefore, retaining the characteristics or structure of this linguistic features, the Bodo language also includes the aforementioned examples of words that reflect paternal and maternal relationships equally. Again, in Bodo society, the aforementioned source words are used to refer to both older and younger relationships among social individuals, in addition to those within the same family.

On the other hand, the Kokborok language shares a similar structure and examples with the Bodo language in terms of source-related kinship semantics. However, Kokborok also has distinct kinship terms that differentiate paternal and maternal relationships. For example, the terms "pi" and "pia" are used to refer to paternal relatives, while "moi" and "mua" are used for maternal relatives, highlighting the distinction between the two sides of the family. This differentiation is a primary feature of Kokborok kinship terminology both paternal and maternal family lines.

2.2. Loanwords

The introduction of influenced or loan words for kinship terms into Bodo and Kokborok from other languages can occur for several reasons, reflecting both social and linguistic factors. Possible reasons include the influence of neighboring languages, linguistic simplification in communication, and educational influence. For example, Bodo-speaking people have been found to use different words, including kinship terms, as loanwords to facilitate communication with Assamese and Bengali people in their surroundings. In light of this factor, examples of the influence of kinship words in the Kokborok language have also been found. Also, due to the lack of equivalent terms in Kokborok, there may be situations where the Kokborok language doesn't have a direct or widely recognized equivalent for certain kinship terms. In such cases, borrowing from the Bengali language may fill this gap. Additionally, Bodo speakers who are educated in Assamese, Hindi, or English, and Kokborok speakers who are educated in Bengali and English, may adopt kinship terms from these languages into their spoken Bodo or Kokborok. In short, the borrowing of kinship terms in Bodo and Kokborok happens due to social, cultural, and linguistic influences, as well as practical reasons related to communication in multilingual environments. Thus, the words used in the Bodo and Kokborok languages are shown below:

2.2.1. Commonly prevalent loanwords in Bodo and Kokborok

- **Baba:** The term "baba" is used in many South Asian languages, such as Assamese, Bengali, and Hindi, with similar meanings. Nowadays, urban Bodo and Kokborok speakers frequently interact with Assamese, Bengali, and Hindi-speaking communities, where "baba" is widely used.
- **Ma/mummy/mom:** The word "ma" in languages like Bodo and Kokborok likely reflects a blend of native Tibeto-Burman linguistic development and influence from the Indo-Aryan linguistic heritage, which traces its roots back to Sanskrit. In Bodo, "ma" (mother) and in Kokborok (with a similar meaning) may have developed independently within the Tibeto-Burman framework while being shaped to some extent by Indo-Aryan elements, particularly through contact with neighboring languages like Assamese and Bengali.

Additionally, the terms "mummy" or "mom" have found usage in the urban societies of both Bodo and Kokborok-speaking communities. These terms, likely borrowed from English or other neighboring linguistic traditions, are used as affectionate references to the mother. This adaptation reflects the evolving nature of these languages, influenced by globalization and urbanization.

- **Dada/dara:** Urban Bodo and Kokborok speakers are increasingly exposed to Assamese, Bengali, and Hindi-speaking communities, where the word "dada" is commonly used for older brothers. This term has further popularized its use among younger generations in both Bodo and Kokborok societies. Currently, local Kokborok speakers mostly use the term "dara" as a modification of the Bengali word "dada" to refer to the relationship of an older brother, showing respect.
- **Brother and sister:** In Bodo and Kokborok, the English words "brother" and "sister" are sometimes used, especially in urban settings or among younger generations who are exposed to English through education, media, or social interactions. The adoption of these English terms has become more common due to globalization, modern education, and the influence of Indian and international media.

2.2.2. Particularly prevalent loanwords in Bodo and Kokborok

Bodo

- **Mama:** In Bengali and Assamese influenced Bodo, the term "mama" is used by some younger generations in urban Bodo-speaking communities in place of the native term "amai" to refer to both the maternal uncle and the husband of the father's sister. This reflects the influence of Bengali on Bodo, particularly in urban areas.
- **Nani and babu:** These terms are most commonly used in the Kokrajhar district. In a loving or cherished sense, the word "nani" is used to refer to a little girl, while "babu" is used to refer to a little boy in present Bodo society.

Kokborok

- **Nana/nanu and dadu:** In the Debbarma dialect, which is the standard language of Kokborok, there are no native kinship terms specifically for the relationship of grandmother. As a result, local Kokborok speakers commonly use the terms "nana" or "nanu" to refer to grandmother, without distinguishing between the paternal and maternal sides. On the other hand, in the Tripura and Reang dialects of Kokborok, the native term "achwi" is used with a similar meaning. In the Jamatia dialect, another variation of Kokborok, the term "nai" is used. Additionally, with the native word "tʰagu", the term "dadu" is also used to refer to the relationship of both paternal and maternal grandfather.
- **Mama and mami:** Unlike in Bodo, Kokborok does not have native terms to specifically describe the relationships of a mother's younger brother and his wife. In Bengali-influenced Kokborok-speaking society, two kinship terms, "mama" and "mami" are commonly used. Specifically, "mama" refers to the mother's younger brother, while "mami" refers to his wife.
- **Kaka and kaki:** In Kokborok, like mama and mami, there is no native word to specifically describe the relationship of a father's younger brother and his wife. As a result, the Bengali words "kaka" and "kaki" have been adopted and are commonly used in daily conversation.
- **Jetʰa and jetʰi:** In Kokborok, the elder sister of the mother and her husband are natively referred to by the native terms "joŋ chɯla" and "joŋ bɯrɯi" respectively. However, under the influence of Bengali, the terms "jetʰi" (for the elder sister of the mother) and "jetʰa" (for her husband) have also been adopted and are now commonly used by local Kokborok speakers.

Like native words, a similar structure can be found in the case of loanwords used in the Bodo language. However, in Kokborok, which has been influenced by borrowed loanwords, the kinship system clearly distinguishes between the maternal and paternal sides of the family. For example, the terms "kaka" (paternal uncle) and "mama" (maternal younger uncle) reflect this distinction, as well as "kaki" (paternal uncle's wife) and "mami" (maternal younger uncle's wife). These borrowed terms from Bengali, such as "kaka" and "mama", are used to specify different family relationships, illustrating how loanwords in Kokborok maintain the distinction between maternal and paternal relatives, a structure not found in Bodo.

3. Conclusion

This comparative study of relative terms in Bodo and Kokborok illustrates the similarities and differences in the linguistic structure involved in kinship words, as well as the social significance. Despite sharing common linguistic

lineages, the Bodo and Kokborok have displayed unique features in their genealogical lexicons that are shaped by their own socio-cultural themes.

References

[1] Anderson; J.D. A Short List of Words of the Hill Tipperah Language. Shillong, printed at the Assam secretariat press, 1895.

[2] Baruah, S.L. A Comprehensive History of Assam. New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2013.

[3] Basumatary, Phukan Ch. An introduction to the Boro Language. New Delhi, Mittal publications, 2005.

[4] Basumatary, Phukan Ch. Boro and Rabha: Two Tibeto-Burman Languages of the North-East India. Lambert Academic Publishing, 2014.

[5] Bordoloi, B.N. Tribes of Assam: Part-III. Guwahati, Published by Assam Institute of Research for tribal and Scheduled Caste, 1991.

[6] Chainary, Swarna Prabha. Tibeto-Burman Language of North East India. Delhi, Mittal Publication, 2018

[7] Chainary, Swarna Prabha. Boro Raokhanthi. Guwahati, Gumur Publication, 2008.

[8] Chainary, S.P. & Basumatary P.C. Raoni Mohor. Guwahati, Gumur Publication, 2004.

[9] Chainary, S.P. & Basumatary P.C. Raoni Mohor-II. Baganpara (Baksa), Nilima Prakashani, 2009.

[10] Chainary, S.P. & Basumatary P.C. Raoni Mohor-III. Kokrajhar, Onsumoi Library, 2011.

[11] Chakraborty, S.K. A Study of Tripura Language. Agartala, Tribal Research Institute, 1981.

[12] Chakraborty, U. & Das, S. Kokborok Morphology and Phonology. New Delhi, Akansha publishing house, 2015.

[13] Chatterji, S.K. Kirata-Jana-Krti. Calcutta, the Asiatic Society, 2014.

[14] Debbarma, Binoy. Anglo-Kokoborok- Bengali Dictionary. Agartala, Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission, 2002.

[15] Debbarma, Binoy. English-Kokborok-Bengali Dictionary. Agartala, Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission, Puspa printing Works, 2010.

[16] Debbarma, Binoy. Kokborok-English Dictionary. Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission, Agartala, Caxton printers, 2017.

[17] Debbarma, B. & Debbarma Nakhrai. The Tipra: A Common Identity of the Indigenous People of Tripura. Agartala, Published by Kokborok Tei Hukumu mission, 2018.

[18] Debbarma, Birendra Kishor. Kokborok: Kokma Kwtal. Agartala, Kokborok Tei Hukumu mission, 2015.

[19] Debbarma, Nagendra. Kokthaih Chwlwi Bijap (Root of Words Book). Agartala, Lokmath Printers Private Ltd., 2016.

[20] Debbarma, S.B.K. Kok-Thum. Agartala, Agartala Central University, 1999.

[21] Debbarma, Samir. The Structure of Kokborok. Unpublished thesis, Silchar, Assam University, 2014.

[22] Grierson, George A. Linguistic Survey of India: Vol.-I, Part-I. Delhi, Kalpaz Publications, 2017.

[23] Grierson, George A. Linguistic Survey of India: Vol.-III, Part-II. Delhi, Kalpaz Publications, 2017.

[24] Jacquesson, Francois. A Kokborok Grammar: Agartala Dialect. Agartala, Kokborok Tei Hukumu Mission, 2008.

[25] Karapurkar, Pushpa P. Kokborok Grammar. Mysore, Central Institute of Indian Languages,1976.

[26] Mochari, Moniram. Sungdo Boro-English Swdwb Bihung (Concise Bodo-English Dictionary). Barma, Published by Sodomsri Harimu Afat, 2012.