

An Approach to the Phonemes of Karbi Language

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Abstract: Karbi is the name of the language and people living in the hill plateaus and plains of the central part of North-East India, especially in Assam. It is spoken mainly in the Karbi Anglong district and in some areas of present Kamrup, Nagaon and Sonitpur districts of Assam. Other than Assam, it is also spoken in some parts of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. Ethnically the Karbi people belong to the Indo-Mongoloid race and linguistically to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages under the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. The Karbi language genealogically falls under the great Tibeto-Burman group of languages, the speakers of which are the inhabitants of this vast north-eastern region of the country. The paper is an attempt to introduce the Karbi language and analyse its phonological aspect.

Introduction:

Karbi is the name of the language and people living in the hill plateaus and plains of the central part of North-East India, especially in Assam. Karbi is spoken mainly in the Karbi Anglong district and in some areas of present Kamrup, Nagaon and Sonitpur districts of Assam. Other than Assam, it is also spoken in some parts of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. Ethnically they belong to the Indo-Mongoloid race and linguistically to the Tibeto-Burman group of languages under the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. The speakers of this language are bilingual. Generally, they can speak both Karbi and Assamese. A small number of the Karbi people cannot speak Assamese, but they can understand Assamese. The linguistic situation of Karbi is a peculiar one. They speak in Karbi in their

domestic life or within community, while they speak Assamese with non-Karbi people. English has been accepted as the first language by the Karbis for academic purpose. The Karbi language has been introduced very recently in lower and upper primary schools as an additional subject. A very limited number of books on different subjects have been published in Karbi language. The books are written with the modified Roman Script.

The Karbi language genealogically falls under the great Tibeto-Burman group of languages, the speakers of which are the inhabitants of this vast north-eastern region of the country. The table No.1 and No.2 prepared by Grierson and Goswami will give a clear idea of its relation with the various languages and dialects of this family of languages.

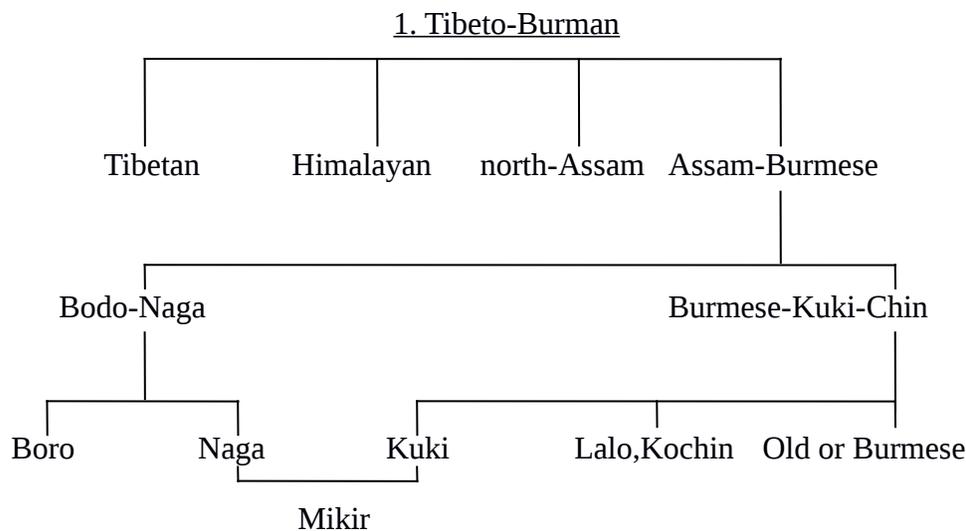


Table No.1. Language Family Prepared by G.A. Grierson

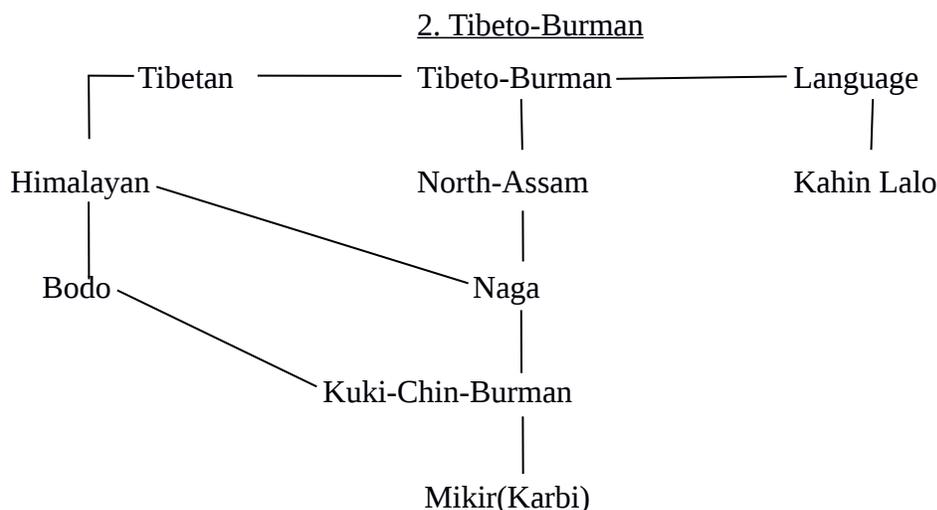


Table- No. 2. Language Family Prepared by S. N. Goswami

Karbi was included in the linguistic Survey of India by Grierson and Konow in the early 20th century (Grierson 1903), which represents the first attempt at classifying Tibeto-Burman language. Already, at that time, there was a fair amount of information available on the language. On the LSI, it is noted that Karbi ‘has received some attention from the missionaries who worked among them and we have a vocabulary and some short pamphlets written in it and an admirable grammar with selected text from the pen of the Late Charles Lyall’ (Grierson 1903:69). A classificatory problem Grierson and Konow encountered is noted in the next two sentences.

In volume III, part II of survey I have classed Mikir as falling within the Naga-Bodo sub-group. The language has affinities with Bodo, but subsequent investigation has shown that it is much more closely connected with Kuki and that it should be classed as belonging to the Naga-Kuki sub-group, in which it occupies a somewhat independent position.

While the absence of a closer link between Karbi and Bodo-Garo has not been controversial since there are three other group in particular that have been linked to Karbi: Meithei, Naga and Kuki-Chin.

However, the evidence that underlies the grouping of Karbi with Meithei might better be analysed as borrowing. The assumed grouping with Naga is complicated due to the fact that it is not currently clear at all what ‘Naga’ actually is, as there is a long standing confusion of ethnic and linguistic labels surrounding the term ‘Naga’. A possible link to Kuki-Chin currently appears hopeful.

Overall, it has remained difficult to come up with a classification proposal that places Karbi in a closer relationship with one of the geographically neighbouring branches. This is despite early availability of information on Karbi grammar and lexicon, but certainly has to be seen in the context of the lack of information on some of the ‘Kuki-Chin’ and so-called ‘Naga’ languages. What appears quite obvious, however, is that a major factor in obscuring the relationship between Karbi and other Tibeto-Burman languages has been language contact and contact induced changes in Karbi grammar and lexicon. In particular, it has been known since the Linguistic Survey of India that Karbi has been in close contact with the Austro Asiatic Khasi languages to the west in Meghalaya.

The Karbi language shows two principal dialect variations: plain Karbi and Hills Karbi. Karbi living in plains come into close contacts in their daily life with the local non-Karbi population who speak other languages like Assamese, Hindi, Bengali etc. The spoken tongues of these languages have influenced the spoken variety of the Karbi language. This way the Karbi spoken in the plain district

shows some differences with that of the hill areas. The minute investigations and extensive field studies among the Karbi people will give some data to trace out some more dialect variations of Karbi language.

Phoneme:

Phonemic inventory of Karbi consists of 24 phonemes of which five are vowels and nineteen are consonants. The phonemic inventory of this language is discussed below:

Vowel:

Karbi has five distinctive vocalic phonemes. These vocalic phonemes are /i, e, a, o, u/. They are two front unrounded vowels; two back rounded vowels and one low central vowel. These vowels of Karbi show contrast in tongue position- front, central and back; tongue height - high, mid and low. Back vowels are rounded while others are unrounded. All the vowels are oral and length is not phonemic. The vowel phonemes are shown in the table below:

Description of Vowel:

The following is the list of vowel phonemes and allophones of Karbi with its descriptions of articulation.

<u>Phoneme</u>	<u>Allophone</u>	<u>Description</u>
/i/	[i]	high, front, unrounded vowel
/e/	[e]	mid, front, unrounded vowel
/a/	[a]	low, central, unrounded vowel
/o/	[o]	mid, back, rounded vowel
/u/	[u]	high, back, rounded vowel

Contrasting Pairs of Vowel:

Above mentioned vowel sounds are established on the basis of the following minimal pairs and where minimal pairs are not available, sub minimal pairs are use for the purpose. Examples are presented below:

/i/ vs /e/:	/bi/	‘small’	/be/	‘surname’
	/pi/	‘to give’	/pe/	‘cloth’
/e/ vs /a/:	/t ^h e/	‘big’	/t ^h a/	‘to wait’
	/me/	‘fire’	/ma/	‘is it’
/a/ vs /o/:	/da/	‘order to go’	/do/	‘to have’
	/la/	‘this’	/lo/	‘banana leaf’
/i/ vs /a/:	/ni/	‘sister’	/na/	‘where’
	/pi/	‘to give’	/pa/	‘to attempt’
/e/ vs /u/:	/pe/	‘cloth’	/pu/	‘this way’
	/me/	‘fire’	/mu/	‘seed’
/i/ vs /o/:	/či/	‘sun set’	/čo/	‘to eat’
	/pi/	‘give’	/po/	‘father’
/a/ vs /u/:	/ta/	‘also’	/tu/	‘clear’
	/ka/	‘kind’	/ku/	‘spade’
/o/ vs /u/:	/p ^h o/	‘five’	/p ^h u/	‘head’
	/no/	‘ear’	/nu/	‘horn’

Distribution of Vowel:

All the five vowels of Karbi occur initially, medially and finally. There is no contrast in vowel length. The following examples show the occurrence of the five vowels in all the three positions.

/i/	Initial position:	/iŋloŋ/	‘hill’	/ik/	‘elder brother’		
	Medial position:	/mir/	‘flower’	/birta/	‘message’		
	Final Position:	/tumi/	‘yesterday’	/bi/	‘goat’	/saini/	‘lime’
/e/	Initial position:	/en/	‘to take’	/ezaŋ/	‘surname’	/ekai/	‘life’
	Medial Position:	/keŋ/	‘leg’	/lapen/	‘from’	/penap/	‘tomorrow’
	Final Position:	/me/	‘fire’	/pe/	‘cloth’		

/a/	Initial position:	/adap/ ‘morning’/an/ ‘rice’
	Medial Position:	/talo/ ‘ocean’/laj/ ‘water’/towar/ ‘road’
	Final Position:	/la/ ‘this’/birta/ ‘message’/osa/‘son-in-law’
/o/	Initial position:	/oso/ ‘child’ /ok/ ‘flesh’
	Medial position:	/sok/ ‘paddy’/tok/ ‘to write’
	Final position:	/čiklo/ ‘moon’/tomo/ ‘story’
/u/	Initial position:	/urmi/ ‘Monday’/un/ ‘able’
	Medial position:	/lun/ ‘song’/duma/ ‘tobacco’
	Final Position:	/p ^h u/ ‘head’/kimu/ ‘mushroom’

Diphthong:

Karbi has five diphthongs but no triphthong is found in Karbi. They are:

(i)	/ai/	as in	/p ^h airap/	‘zero’
(ii)	/ei/	as in	/pei/	‘mother’
(iii)	/oi/	as in	/doidak/	‘enough’
(iv)	/ui/	as in	/ruipi/	‘python’
(v)	/eu/	as in	/deuri/	‘priest’

Above mentioned diphthongs are established on the basis of the following minimal pairs.

/ai/ vs /ei/	/pai/ ‘fencing’/pei/ ‘mother’
	/kai/ ‘life’ /kei/ ‘nation’
/ai/ vs /oi/	/ai/ ‘wild betel leaf’/oi/ ‘yes’
	/čai/ ‘wild buffalo’ /čoi/ ‘coat’
/ai/ vs /ui/	/dai/ ‘crime’/dui/ ‘to support’
	/phai/ ‘number’ /phui/ ‘to spit’
	/zai/ ‘to open’ /zui/ ‘to roam’
/ai/ vs /eu/	/deuri/ ‘priest’/dairi/ ‘not to protect’

/ei/ vs /ui/	/rei/	‘intelligent’/rui/	‘snake’
	/nei/	‘smoothness’/nui/	‘screwdriver’
/ei/ vs /oi/	/rei/	‘intelligent’/roi/	‘bangle’
	/kei/	‘nation’/koi/	‘to broom and keep the dust in a place’
/oi/ vs /ui/	/oi/	‘yes’	/ui/ ‘to smell’
	/roi/	‘bangle’	/rui/ ‘snake’

Distribution of Diphthong:

All the diphthongs do not occur in all the positions. The data show that all the diphthongs occur in word medial position. The occurrence of the diphthongs in words initial position is very rare. Only two of them viz., /ai and oi/ can occur in initial position of the word. Except /eu/, all the diphthongs can occur in word final position. The occurrences of the five diphthongs in the three positions are illustrated below:

/ai/	Initial position:	/ai/	‘wild betel’	/aini/	‘lazy’	/aina/	‘mirror’
	Medial position:	/zaimē/	‘jhum field’	/čainoŋ/	‘cow’	/zainon/	‘to talk’
		/saihem/	‘office’				
	Final position:	/rai/	‘to reserve’	/p ^h ai/	‘number’	/waŋrai /	‘come’
		/dokai/	‘thief’	/ekai/	‘life’		
/oi/	Initial position:	/oi/	‘yes’	/oizap/	‘being blown way’		
		/oipet/	‘breaking something while taking away’				
	Medial position:	/doidak/	‘enough’,	/moičinjki/	‘old man’		
		/zoike/	‘easy’	/moičo/	‘back pain’	/doipet/	‘sacrifice’
	Final position:	/heloi/	‘to chew’	/soi/	‘to cut’	/roi/	‘bangle’
		/niŋoi/	‘sad’				
/ui/	Initial position:	It is not available					
	Medial position:	/ruipi/	‘python’	/duik ^h rai/	‘devil’	/ruidok/	‘sweet potato’
		/ruichehe/	‘snake’	/huiok/	‘a type of fish’		
	Final position:	/čehui/	‘to help each other’	/zuizui/	‘to amuse’		

/p^hurui/ 'snake' /kerui/ 'again' /pohui/ 'pillow'

/ei/ Initial position: It is not available

Medial position: /heihui/ 'so on'

Final position: /pei/ 'mother' /k^hei/ 'nation' /rei/ 'intelligent'
/arei/ 'boundary'

/eu/ Initial position: It is not available.

Medial position: /deuri/ 'priest'

Final position: It is not available.

Consonant:

There are nineteen (19) consonantal phonemes in Karbi. These consonantal phonemes are: /p, b, t, d, k, p^h, t^h, k^h, m, n, ŋ, s, z, h, č, r, l, w, y/. The consonants, as a whole, include 8 stops and 11 continuants. The stops show voice, voiceless and aspirated, unaspirated contrast. Among the continuants, there are three nasals, three fricatives, one affricate, one trill, one lateral, and two approximants. The nasals, the trill, the lateral and the approximants are all voiced and the affricate is voiceless whereas the fricatives show contrast in voiced and voiceless. Place of articulation can be divided into bilabial, alveolar, palatal, velar and glottal.

All the consonantal phonemes do not occur in all three positions. The phonemes /p^h, b, t^h, d, k^h, s, č, z, h, l, w/ do not occur in the final position. On the other hand, the phonemes /ŋ, y/ do not occur in initial position. The consonantal phonemes of Karbi are shown in the following table:

Description of Consonant:

The following is the list of consonantal phonemes and its description:

/p/ voiceless unaspirated bilabial stop

/p^h/ voiceless aspirated bilabial stop

/b/ voiced unaspirated bilabial stop

/t/ voiceless unaspirated alveolar stop

/t ^h /	voiceless aspirated alveolar stop
/d/	voiced unaspirated alveolar stop
/k/	voiceless unaspirated velar stop
/k ^h /	voiceless aspirated velar stop
/s/	voiceless unaspirated palatal fricative
/z/	voiced unaspirated palatal fricative
/tʃ/	voiceless aspirated palatal affricate
/h/	voiceless glottal fricative
/m/	voiced bilabial nasal
/n/	voiced alveolar nasal
/ŋ/	voiced velar nasal
/l/	voiced alveolar lateral
/r/	voiced alveolar trill
/w/	voiced bilabial semi-vowel
/y/	voiced palatal semi-vowel

Contrasting Pairs of Consonant:

These consonantal sounds are established on the basis of minimal pairs and where minimal pairs are not available, sub-minimal pairs are used for the purpose. Minimal pairs of consonants are presented in the following list:

/p/ vs /b/	/pu/ ‘to cut fire wood’ /bu/ ‘to make handicraft’
	/pek/ ‘to give side’ /bek/ ‘to combat’
/t/ vs /d/	/te/ ‘elder sister’ /de/ ‘tongue’
	/ta/ ‘also/too’ /da/ ‘order to go’
/p/ vs /p^h/	/pu/ ‘this’ /p ^h u/ ‘head’

	/pen/ ‘and/ from’ /p ^h en/ ‘dirty water’
/t/ vs /t^h/	/teke/ ‘tiger’ /t ^h eke/ ‘because’ /te/ ‘elder sister’ /t ^h e/ ‘big’ /ta/ ‘also’ /t ^h a/ ‘stop’
/k/ vs /k^h/	/kelan/ ‘publicity’ /k ^h elan/ ‘an open place’ /kalan/ ‘yes’ /k ^h alan/ ‘ugly face’
/s/ vs /z/	/sok/ ‘paddy’ /zok/ ‘free’ /san/ ‘rest’ /zan/ ‘to fall down’
/s/ vs /č/	/so/ ‘fever’ /čo/ ‘to eat’ /sar/ ‘old man’ /čar/ ‘faraway’
/s/ vs /h/	/si/ ‘to push’ /hi/ ‘dung’ /seran/ ‘loud voice’ /heran/ ‘well’
/č/ vs /z/	/čak/ ‘guarantee’ /zak/ ‘distance’ /či/ ‘to hat’ /zi/ ‘to allow’
/m/ vs /n/	/me/ ‘fire’ /ne/ ‘I’ /men/ ‘cat’ /nen/ ‘relation’
/n/ vs /ŋ/	/patun/ ‘ask to cook’ /patun/ ‘ask to drink with other’s help’ /klan/ ‘spread of smell’ /klan/ ‘appear’ /men/ ‘ripen’ /men/ ‘cat’
/m/ vs /n/ vs /ŋ/	/lam/ ‘language’ /lan/ ‘to show’ /lan/ ‘water’ /hom/ ‘to fasten a body’ /hon/ ‘thread’ /hon/ ‘to make hole’
/l/ vs /r/	/čelon/ ‘buffalo’ /čeron/ ‘to hire’ /inlon/ ‘hill’ /inron/ ‘pistol’
/w/ vs /y/	/we/ ‘to pluck’ /ye/ ‘friend’ /t ^h owi/ ‘to fill’ /t ^h oy/ ‘plain’

Distribution of Consonant:

It is found out that most of the consonants do not occur in all three position of a word. The twelve phonemes /p^h, b, t^h, d, k^h, s, č, z, h, l, w/ do not occur in the final position. On the other hand, the phonemes /ŋ, y/ do not occur in initial position. The following examples are given to show the occurrence of the nineteen consonantal phonemes in three positions.

/p/	Initial position:	/pen/ ‘and’ /po/ ‘father’
	Medial position:	/apor/ ‘time’ /lapu/ ‘this side’
	Final position:	/zop/ ‘to decrease’ /top/ ‘to repair’ /ke-ap/ ‘Karbi surname’ /iŋhap/ ‘door’
/p^h/	Initial position:	/p ^h ak/ ‘pig’ /p ^h li/ ‘four’ /p ^h o/ ‘five’
	Medial position:	/ap ^h isi/ ‘finally’ /wop ^h ri/ ‘sparrow’ /hemep ^h i/ ‘house wife’ /hemp ^h u/ ‘god’
	Final position:	It does not occur.
/b/	Initial position:	/bap/ ‘grass’ /bi/ ‘goat’ /bikron/ ‘betel leaf’ /birik/ ‘chilli’
	Medial position:	/zamburoŋ/ ‘bag’ /abin/ ‘shade’
	Final position:	It does not occur.
/t/	Initial position:	/teke/ ‘tiger’ talo/ ‘ocean’ /tomon/ ‘wind’ /tari/ ‘knife’
	Medial position:	/iŋtaŋ/ ‘strong’ /nitur/ ‘south’ /aŋtaŋ/ ‘heat’ /pirte/ ‘planet’ /iŋti/ ‘salt’
	Final position:	/musit/ ‘a kind of radish ant’ /marat/ ‘animal’ /monit/ ‘man’ /bilit/ ‘lizard’ /lamet/ ‘literature’
/t^h/	Initial position:	/t ^h engpi/ ‘wood’ /t ^h ok/ ‘to write’ /t ^h oi/ ‘plain’ /t ^h ero/ ‘monkey’
	Medial position:	/sart ^h e/ ‘village headman’ /lot ^h e/ ‘banana’

		/turt ^h ak/ ‘upper lip’ /iŋt ^h ur/ ‘lip’ /zaŋt ^h u/ ‘oil’ /met ^h an/ ‘dog’
	Final position:	It does not occur.
/d/	Initial position:	/dak/ ‘here’ /ding/ ‘long’ /dam/ ‘to go’
	Medial position:	/adun/ ‘next’ /nudeng/ ‘umbrella’ /aduk/ ‘dust’
	Final position:	It does not occur.
/k/	Initial position:	/kalaŋ/ ‘yes’ /kep/ ‘ten’ /kodak/ ‘where’
	Medial position:	/akri/ ‘coal of firewood’ /lamkan/ ‘drama’ /iŋkoi/ ‘twenty’ /iŋki/ ‘insect’
	Final position:	/dak/ ‘here’ /ok/ ‘flesh’ /p ^h ak/ ‘pig’
/k^h/	Initial position:	/k ^h i/ ‘wealth’ /k ^h an/ ‘quick’ /k ^h alun/ ‘a kind of basket’
	Medial position:	/ok ^h i/ ‘deer’ /roŋk ^h aŋ/ ‘a name place’ /lank ^h aŋ/ ‘place’
	Final position:	It does not occur.
/s/	Initial position:	/se/ ‘voice’ /saŋtimi/ ‘desert’ /suriŋ/ ‘sky’
	Medial position:	/aso/ ‘calf’ /lunse/ ‘singer’ /isi/ ‘one’
	Final position:	It does not occur.
/z/	Initial position:	/zutaŋ/ ‘culture’ /zun/ ‘to drink’ /zaŋt ^h u/ ‘oil’ /zamboroŋ/ ‘bag’
	Medial position:	/lamzir/ ‘sentence’ /čozun/ ‘a feast of Karbi’ /nizaŋ/ ‘west’
	Final position:	It does not occur.
/h/	Initial position:	/hemepi/ ‘widow’ /hanso/ ‘ginger’ /homsira/ ‘orange’
	Medial position:	/iŋhun/ ‘cloud’ /boŋhom/ ‘pumpkin’ /iŋhan/ ‘mud’
	Final position:	It does not occur.
/č/	Initial position:	/čo/ ‘to eat’ /čoŋho/ ‘frog’ /čiklo/ ‘moon’ /ček/ ‘bamboo’
	Medial position:	/kačarli/ ‘learning’ /arčim/ ‘drop of water’ /kačerop/ ‘twin’ /kaču/ ‘plate’ /iŋčim/ ‘iron’

	Final position:	It does not occur.
/m/	Initial position:	/mir/ 'flower' /me/ 'fire' /mejkalu/ 'cat'
	Medial position:	/komat/ 'who' /zamboroŋ/ 'bag' /risomar/ 'bachelor' /arme/ 'tail'
	Final position:	/arnam/ 'god' /kardom/ 'thanks' /him/ 'cake'
/n/	Initial position:	/naŋ/ 'you' /non/ 'now' /niŋ/ 'heart'
	Medial position:	/arni/ 'sun' /donri/ 'gate' /hanso/ 'ginger' /hini/ 'two'
	Final position:	/han/ 'curry' /lun/ 'song' /an/ 'rice'
/ŋ/	Initial position:	It does not occur.
	Medial position:	/iŋham/ 'throat' /keŋp ^h u/ 'knee' /iŋlit/ 'leech' /iŋhap/ 'door'
	Final position:	/iŋloŋ/ 'hill' /čeloŋ/ 'buffalo' /siruŋ/ 'fox' /laŋ/ 'water'
/l/	Initial position:	/la/ 'this' /lam/ 'language' /laŋ/ 'water' /lat ^h um/ 'they'
	Medial position:	/kleŋ/ 'eldest, senior' /klem/ 'to do' /p ^h li/ 'four' /talo/ 'ocean'
	Final position:	It does not occur.
/r/	Initial position:	/ri/ 'hand' /ričo/ 'king' /roŋ/ 'village'
	Medial position:	/sarpo/ 'old man' /arni/ 'sun' /barat/ 'to divide' /are/ 'dew' /pirte/ 'planet' /arwe/ 'rain'
	Final position:	/dor/ 'enough' /iŋnar/ 'elephant' /osomar/ 'children' /towar/ 'road'
/w/:	Initial position:	/we/ 'to pluck' /wo/ 'bird' /waŋ/ 'to come'
	Medial position:	/arwe/ 'rain' /kowe/ 'betel nut' /awe/ 'no more' /towar/ 'road'
	Final position:	It does not occur.
/y/	Initial position:	It does not occur.

Medial Consonant Cluster:

The language has medial two consonant clusters and the various combinatory possibilities are presented below with a table and examples. However, the occurrences of medial two consonant clusters are very few. In the medial clusters, the first member can be /p, p^h, k, k^h/ while the consonants viz. liquids /l, r/ occupy the position as the second member of the clusters.

Final Consonant Cluster:

A small number of two consonant clusters occur in the final position in Karbi. Most of the consonants which occur in the final cluster do not occur in the word initial position. Interestingly, most of the words, where the final clusters occur are the loan words from English. At the same time, it is also seen that the final cluster is found only in the speech of educated persons where there is a case of final consonant cluster deletion when the same words are used by uneducated native speaker. The possible combinations of final two consonant clusters are given below:

/-nt/	/siment/	‘cement’
/-ns/	/saens/	‘science’
/-st/	/post/	‘pillars’
/-lm/	/philm/	‘film’

Consonant Sequence:

As per investigation, consonant sequences in Karbi have a wide variety of consonant sequences. A consonant sequence in Karbi generally occurs in word medial position. Karbi permits up to three consonantal sequences which are discussed below:

Geminate:

It is a cluster of two identical adjacent segments of a sound in a single morpheme. In Karbi, unaspirated stops and nasals form geminates. Geminate occurs only in the medial position in Karbi. Consider the following examples:

/-pp-/	/zappur	/ ‘to blow wind’/dappraŋ/ ‘early mornings’
	/zappet/	‘breaking a small portion’

/-kk-/	/čakkluk/ ‘protected’ /trokkeptrok/ ‘sixty’ /lokkliŋ/ ‘whiteness’
/-mm-/	/damme/ ‘opposed to go’ /bammeyo/ ‘embracing’ /čemmu/ ‘to feed’
/-nn-/	/zonni/ ‘two animals’ /tonni/ ‘two baskets’ /sonni/ ‘two things’ /thanni/ ‘two pieces’
/-tt-/	/luttot/ ‘to enter’ /tottap/ ‘sitting unnecessarily’ /zuttaŋ/ ‘to finish’

Supra Segmental:

Tone:

Tones are prominent in Karbi which play a very important role in varying the meaning of a word. Tones are the supra-segmental features in Karbi. Karbi has two registered tones, high, low. The level tone is unmarked. Like the other Tibeto-Burman languages, tone plays a significant role.

The following are the words used to establish tones.

/bi/ ‘goat’ /bi\ ‘to keep’ /bi/ ‘small’
/ti/ ‘egg’ /ti\ ‘to clean’ /ti/ ‘packet’
/me/ ‘fire’ /me\ ‘sister’s husband’ /me/ ‘good’
/pi/ ‘what’ /pi\ ‘to give’ /pi/ ‘a piece of cloth used to carry child at the back’
/p ^h i/ ‘to bear fruit’ /p ^h i\ ‘to burn’ /p ^h i/ ‘grandmother’
/ri/ ‘hand’ /ri\ ‘rope’ /ri/ ‘search’
/teŋ/ ‘to measure’ /te\ŋ/ ‘cutting cleanly’ /teŋ/ ‘damp’
/da/k/ ‘gap’ /da\k/ ‘proud’ /dak/ ‘here’
/čo/ ‘to eat’ /čo\ ‘axe’ /čo/ ‘the eatable portion of coconut’
/p ^h u/ ‘head’ /p ^h u\ ‘grandfather’ /p ^h u/ ‘to pull’

Morphophonemics:

Morphophonemic refer to the analysis and classification of the phonological factors which affect the appearance of morphemes or correspondingly, the grammatical factor which affects the appearance of phonemes. The morphophonemic rules of Karbi are presented below.

. Voicing Assimilation:

If a morpheme ends in a voiceless stop and the following morpheme begins with a voiced consonant then the voiceless becomes voiced.

/dop/ ‘packet’ /dop + ni/ → /dobni/ ‘two packets’
 packet+Num.

/waɣet/ ‘come’ /waɣet + ma/ → /waɣedma/ ‘has come?’
 come + Intr.

/ap/ ‘shoot’ /ap + non/ → /abnon/ ‘you shoot’
 shoot+Imp.

/ap/ ‘shoot’ /ap + ri/ → /abri/ ‘don’t shoot’
 shoot+Neg.

. Aspiration:

When the numeral marker or numeral is added to noun root that ends with unaspirated sound becomes aspirated. The application of this rule is illustrated in the following example.

/lek + i+zir/ → /lek^hizir/ ‘a small necklace’
 necklace + Num.+Clf.

/nuk + isi/ → /nuk^hisi/ ‘one horn’
 horn + Num.

/marat + ni/ → /marat^hni/ ‘two animals’
 animal + Num.

. Consonant Deletion:

If the final consonant of the preceding morpheme and the first consonant of the following morpheme are identical, one of the identical consonants is optionally dropped.

/waŋwer – ri/ → /waŋweri/ 'don't come'

come + Neg.

/arzap – po/ → /arzapo/ 'will stand'

stand + S.Fut.

. **Vowel Deletion:**

When a morpheme beginning with the vowel /i/ and if /a-, ka-/ prefixed, then the first vowel of the following morpheme is dropped.

/iŋlon/ /a + iŋlon/ → /aŋlon/ 'of hill'

Poss.+hill

/iŋsam/ /ka + iŋsam/ → /kaŋsam/ 'feeling cold'

Adj.Pref.+cold

Sometimes when possessive case marker /a/ is added between two nouns to give a new related meaning, this case marker is dropped automatically.

/sok + a + puru/ → /sokpuru/ 'granary'

rice + Poss. + building

/honki + a + hom/ → /honkihom/ 'cocoon'

silk + Poss. + cover

. **Syllable Deletion:**

Some words are formed by dropping one or two syllables. It happens when the last word is disyllabic. In that case, the first syllable of the disyllabic word gets dropped.

/mir+kardon/ → /mirdon/ 'an orchid flower'

flower + mount

/mek + awe/ → /mekwe/ 'blind'

eye + no

/pini + niŋwe/ → /piniŋwe/ 'tonight'

today+night

/dim+kerap/ → /dimrap/ 'post position'

place+help

/dim+awe/ → /dimwe/ 'no place'

place+no

/ren + hini/ → /renni/ 'double lines'

line+Num.

/ton + hini/ → /tonni/ 'two baskets'

basket+Num.

In some cases, the first syllable of first word and first syllable of second word are deleted. Consider the following examples:

/arni + atur/ → /nitur/ 'sunlight'

sun + ray

/arlonj+aplak/ → /lonjplak/ 'broad or flat sized stone'

stone+flat

/arlonj+kerej/ → /lonjrej/ 'solid rock'

stone+alive

/keza+abanj/ → /zabanj/ 'one who leads'

lead+Clf

Addition of Vowel:

The addition of vowels is found in all positions of a word (i.e. initial, medial and final position). The function of the vowel addition process is to break up consonant cluster for simplifying the syllable structure of the language.

a. Prosthesis: It is the addition of vowel in the word initial position to remove the initial cluster.

English	Krbi	
/skul/	[iskul]	‘school’
/stul/	[istul]	‘stool’

It must be noted here that the phonemes /g/, /g^h/, /b^h/ and /d^h/ occur only in borrowed words, never in native Karbi words. For example, /gak^hir/ ‘milk’, /gyani/ ‘wise person’, /bogori/ ‘a fruit’, /b^hag/ ‘share’, /g^hori/ ‘clock’, /g^honti/ ‘bell’, /g^hiu/ ‘ghee’, /d^hila/ ‘become loose’ /d^hubi/ ‘washer man’ /d^huni/ ‘rich’ /ad^ha/ ‘half’

The above mentioned words have been borrowed from Assamese. Hence, i am not showing these four phonemes separately in the inventory of Karbi consonants. The other reason is that minimal pairs for these borrowed phonemes are also not available. Therefore, it seems that Karbi has not nativized these phonemes. They remain only as distinct sounds.

Conclusion:

Phonology of Karbi established five vowel phonemes /i, e, a, o, u/ which occur word initially, medially and finally. As far as diphthong is concerned, this language has 5 diphthongs. These five diphthongs are: /ai, ei, oi, ui, eu/. All the diphthongs do not occur in all the positions. The occurrence of the diphthongs in word initial position is very rare. Only two of them viz., /ai and oi/ can occur in initial position of the word. Except /eu/, all the diphthongs can occur in word final position.

It has 19 consonantal phonemes. These consonantal phonemes are: /p, b, t, d, k, p^h, t^h, k^h, m, n, ŋ, s, z, h, č, r, l, w, y/. All the consonantal phonemes do not occur in all the three positions. The phonemes / b, d, p^h, t^h, k^h, s, z, h, č, w/ do not occur in the final position. On the other hand, the phonemes / ŋ, y/ do not occur in initial position. Therefore, all the consonantal phonemes of Karbi occur word medially. All the above mentioned vowels, diphthongs and consonants are established on the basis of minimal pairs and where minimal pairs are not available; we used sub minimal pairs for the purpose.

We have also found that the phonemes /g/, /g^h/, /b^h/ and /d^h/ occur only in borrowed words, never in native Karbi word. For example, /gak^hir/ ‘milk’, /gyani/ ‘wise person’, /bogori/ ‘a fruit’, /b^hag/ ‘share’, /g^hori/ ‘clock’, /g^honti/ ‘bell’, /g^hiu/ ‘ghee’, /d^hila/ ‘become loose’ /d^hubi/ ‘washer man’ /d^huni/ ‘rich’ /ad^ha/ ‘half’. Hence, we are not showing these four phonemes separately in the inventory of Karbi

consonants. On the other hand, it is to be said that the minimal pairs for these borrowed phonemes are also not available. Therefore, it seems that Karbi has not nativized these phonemes. They remain only as distinct sounds.

The roots of Karbi are mono-syllabic. Even a simple vowel can be a syllable of a word, for example, /i/ 'lying down as sleeping', /e/ 'to plant', and /u/, 'to rise (head) in this language and the monosyllabic words of this language have both CV and VC structure.

In the Karbi language, consonant clusters occur only in initial and medial positions, whereas a lot of consonant sequences occur in medial position. The two consonant clusters are found in all the three positions namely, initial and medial and final. It is found that the second member of the cluster is always a liquid /r, l/. In fact, the first member of the consonant cluster is always stops. In case of two consonant clusters, a small number of two consonant clusters are occurring in the final position of words which are borrowed from English. The three consonant sequences of this language are also available. In this language, unaspirated stops and nasals form geminates. Geminate occurs only in the medial position in Karbi.

This language has two registered tones, high and low. The level tone is unmarked. The other tone plays a significant role in this language. The following are the words used to establish tones.

/bi/ 'goat'

/bi/ 'keep'

/bi/ 'small'

As far as morphophonemic is concerned, Voicing Assimilation, Aspiration, Consonant deletion, Vowel deletion, Syllable deletion and Addition of vowel are found in Karbi language.

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