

IJTBL

International Journal of Tibeto-Burman Languages and Linguistics

A peer-reviewed open-access journal of TiBLANEI

Negation in Karbi spoken in Sonapur and Diphu of Assam

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Abstract

Karbi, a Tibeto-Burman language, has two major dialects. Karbi has both verbal and nominal negation. The verbal negation construction uses the onset-reduplicative verbal suffix -e which repeats the onset of the last syllable of the verb stem. The nominal negation construction uses the negative equational copula kali. The onset reduplicative negative suffix represents the main verbal negation construction.

The study attempts to identify the negative markers in Karbi, spoken in two areas of Assam, namely, Sonapur of Kamrup (Metropolitan) district and Diphu of East Karbi Anglong district, and to find out the similarities and dissimilarities, if any. Data were gathered through interviews and recordings taken from respondents from both the areas. The findings show that various negative markers are used and both similarities and dissimilarities of language use are seen in the areas. Some of the negative elements include 'ke' and 'ʃe'. The negative marker always follows the verb.

Keywords: Karbi, Tibeto-Burman, Negation, Sonapur, Diphu

This is a contribution from IJTBL Vol.1(1): 12–24 (January 2026)

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Website: <https://tiblanei.org/journal/vol-1-issue-i-2026/>

Negation in Karbi spoken in Sonapur and Diphu of Assam

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1. Introduction

Karbis are one of the major and largest hill tribal communities of Assam (Borah, 2012, p. 41). According to Census of India (2011), the total population of Karbi speakers is 5,11,732. Ethnologue (Eberhard, Simons, & Fenning, 2019) mentions 1,25,000 native speakers of Amri Karbi. Karbi is the third-largest minority language in Assam in terms of number of speakers, followed by Bodo and Mishing. It can be considered as vulnerable, looking at UNESCO's level of language endangerment, as most children speak the language, but is restricted to certain domains. The Karbis use both Roman and Assamese script. They retain their language, oral folklore, folk customs, and traditional religion, which testify to the indigeneity of the tribe (Hanse, 2017). The folklore materials of this indigenous tribe of Assam are reserved and performed orally by folk singers called *lunse* and *ochepi* (Datta, 1994, et al.). Based on their habitation, Karbis are divided into three groups- *Chinthong*, *Ronghang* and *Amri*. Those who live in the plains are referred to as *Dumralis*. The Karbis call themselves either *Arleng* meaning 'man' or *Karbi Karbak* (*Karbak* being the echo word for Karbi) in more official domains. Earlier they were referred to as Mikirs.

1.1 Geographical Spread

The Karbi community mainly inhabit the Karbi Anglong district of Assam, which is considered to be the centre of the Karbi-speaking area and political home of the Karbis. Even if the district capital Diphu is in the eastern part of the district, the western part of Karbi Anglong is generally considered as home to the traditions, and cultural centre of the Karbis. Other than that, the community also inhabit other districts such as Kamrup, Morigaon, and Biswanath. Along with that, the Karbis are found in West Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi, and Jaintia hills district of Meghalaya; in the foothills around Dimapur in Nagaland, in Manipur, and in Papumpare district of Arunachal Pradesh. They are also found in Bangladesh and Myanmar (Thakuria, 2023).

1.2 Historical Background

According to Barua (1951, p. 6), Karbis are one of the earliest groups of Tibeto-Burman speakers inhabiting Assam and were originated from Western China. Medhi (1974, p. 17) states that the hilly region between Nagaon and Sibsagar (present Jorhat) districts was their early habitat. Stack and Lyall (1997, p. 4) state that the traditions of the race point to the eastern portion of the Khasi-Jayanti hills as their original abode. Gogoi (1999, p. 118) views that the Nongpilar hill, situated in the North-eastern part of Assam, was their earliest settlement from where they came down and settled in the Lumbajong hill. Phangocho (2008, p. 3) says that they were the earliest settlers on the banks of the rivers Kolong and Kopili and within the entire Kaziranga area. Within the Karbi community, there is no written history. Hence, through oral traditions they trace their origin. According to Karbi folk literature, they lived on the banks of the Kolong and Kopili rivers, and some areas of Kaziranga. Due to the conflict with the Dimasas, the King chased them out, and then the Karbis moved to the Jaintia Hills. Some of them remained there, and the others moved to the other areas of Northeast (Baruah, 2017).

The term Karbi is derived from the word *Thakar kibi* or *Me akar kibi*. The meaning of the word *Thakar kibi* is compulsory customary provision for purifying a newly born baby after six months of his

or her birth. The meaning of *Me akar kibi* is keeping the spark of the fire burning in the fireplace of a house for the purifying ceremony. In the course of time, it became Karbi (Kuriako, 2022).

1.3 Socio-Cultural Background

The Karbis have separate traditional dresses for men and women. The aged men wear a shirt called *choi-angro* and the young men wear a shirt called *choi-hongthor*. The men use a loin cloth called *rikong*. Women and girls wear *pini-pekok*. *Pini* is wrapped around the waist and *pekok* is used to cover the upper part of the body. A waist band called *vamkok* is used by the women. The traditional Karbi cuisine is divided into three categories, namely, *kangmoi* (alkaline), *kalangdang* (boiled) and *han-thor* (sour or acidic). There are culinary styles like- *kemung* (cooked in bamboo tube), *kangthu* (wrapped with banana leaves and shoved into hot charcoal-ashes), *kephi* (roasting), *karnu pakreng* (frying without oil) and *ke-ur* (smoking). Their main food is rice. Pulses are added occasionally to their food items. They prepare rice beer called *horlang*.

Some of the festivals celebrated by the Karbis are: *Chomangkan*- held for the welfare of the spirits of the dead, *Rongker*- where the main purpose is to appease the territorial deity for the welfare of the village and to ward off diseases and other natural calamities, *Cho-jun*- which is the festival of eating and drinking and a ritual associated with ancestor worship, and *Hacha-Kekan*- observed after the harvest of paddy. Their marriage system is known as *adam asar*. The Karbi society is exogamous. A man has to find his wife from the same clan of his mother's. The traditional religion of the Karbis is still practiced, which is known as *xonghari*, even though most of them have converted to Hinduism and Christianity. Chants are orally transmitted from generation to generation. *Arnam Keth* is their supreme religious deity. The five major clans or *kurs* in Karbi society are: *Tungjang*, *Ejang*, *Lijang*, *Hanjang*, and *Kronjang*, which are further divided into sub-clans. Clan membership is passed down from the father to the children. The Karbis believe that the same clan's children are brothers and sisters, hence there is no marriage within them.

In Karbi society, there are three types of traditional institutions viz., *Me* (village council), *Farla* or *Jirkedam* (bachelors' dormitory), and *Kerung Amei* (the grain bank). *Me* consists of the elderly male members of the village. The village head called *Sarpo-Sarthe* presides over the meeting of the council. Karbis who live in the hills practice jhum cultivation and those who live in the plains practice permanent cultivation (Borah, 2012). Their traditional cultural symbol is *Jambili Athon*, which is the most honoured woodcraft. It consists of a large central axis and a whorl of four small branches. The axis and the branches are articulated with local birds (Teron, 2008).



Figure 1: Karbi Traditional Dress

1.4 Dialects

There are two major dialects which are distinguished as the hill's variety and the plain's variety. The hill's variety, treated as Standard Karbi, is spoken in the Eastern and Western parts of the Karbi Anglong district of Assam and the plains variety is spoken in the Assam plains and the Assam-Meghalaya border area. The plains variety is referred to as *Dumra*, *Kamrup*, or *Amri Karbi*. The Karbi variety has the ISO code 'mjw', while the Amri Karbi variety has the ISO 693-3 code 'ajz'. However, Karbi speakers identify themselves only as Karbis. Amri Karbi is further divided into Lower Amri, that is, the variety spoken in the plains of Assam, and Upper Amri, that is, the variety spoken in the Ri Bhoi district of Meghalaya.

1.5 Overview of the Karbi language

The Karbis call their language *Arleng alam* meaning 'the language of Arleng'. Burling (2003) following Shafer prefers to consider Karbi in a separate category in spite of its resemblance with Mizo-Kuki. Some lexical items show a distant affinity to the Bodo-Garo group. The Karbi language has absorbed numerous words from the Bodo, Kuki-Chin, and Assamese into its vocabulary. Sarthe Teron Milik created The Arleng or Karbi alphabet to write Karbi while Karbi Mek'lek alphabet was invented by Ripu Rahang.

1.6 Language Classification

The earliest classification of Karbi is of Grierson (1903) and the recent classification is by Burling (2003). Grierson (1903) considered it as a member of the Naga-Bodo sub-groups of the Tibeto-Burman group. According to Lyall (1908), the Karbi language belongs to the Indo-Chinese speech called Tibeto-Burman under the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. Burling (2003) following Shafer prefers to consider Karbi (also called Arleng) in a separate category in spite of its resemblance with Mizo-Kuki. Shafer (1974) and Bradley (1997) however have classified it as Kukish. Some lexical items show a distant affinity to the Bodo-Garo group. It is often classified as close to Meithei (DeLancey, 1987, p. 800).



Figure 2: Classification of languages according to Bradley (1997: 28)

Figure 2 shows language classification provided by Bradley (1997) in his Tibeto-Burman languages and classification.

2. Literature Review

Some of the previous works on Karbi include: *English-Mikir Vocabulary* by Kay, S.P. (1904); *A Dictionary of the Mikir Language* by Walker, G.D. (1925); *Arleng Alam, die Sprache der Mikir: Grammatik u. Texte* by Grüssner, K.H. (1978); *Preliminary Description of Amri Karbi Phonology* by Gope, A. and Sarmah, P. (2012) where the paper aimed at providing a preliminary description of Amri Karbi phonology. Further an acoustic analysis was also conducted to determine the vowel's duration and perceptual differences; *A Grammar of Karbi* by Konnerth, L. (2014) which is an expansion on the research findings as reported in Grüssner's (1978) grammar of the language, highlighting the issues in Karbi syntax, semantics and pragmatics; *An Approach to the Phonemes of Karbi Language* by Narzary, D. (2019); *A Grammar of Amri Karbi* by Philippova, N. (2021) which is the first comprehensive and wholistic description of the Amri Karbi language.

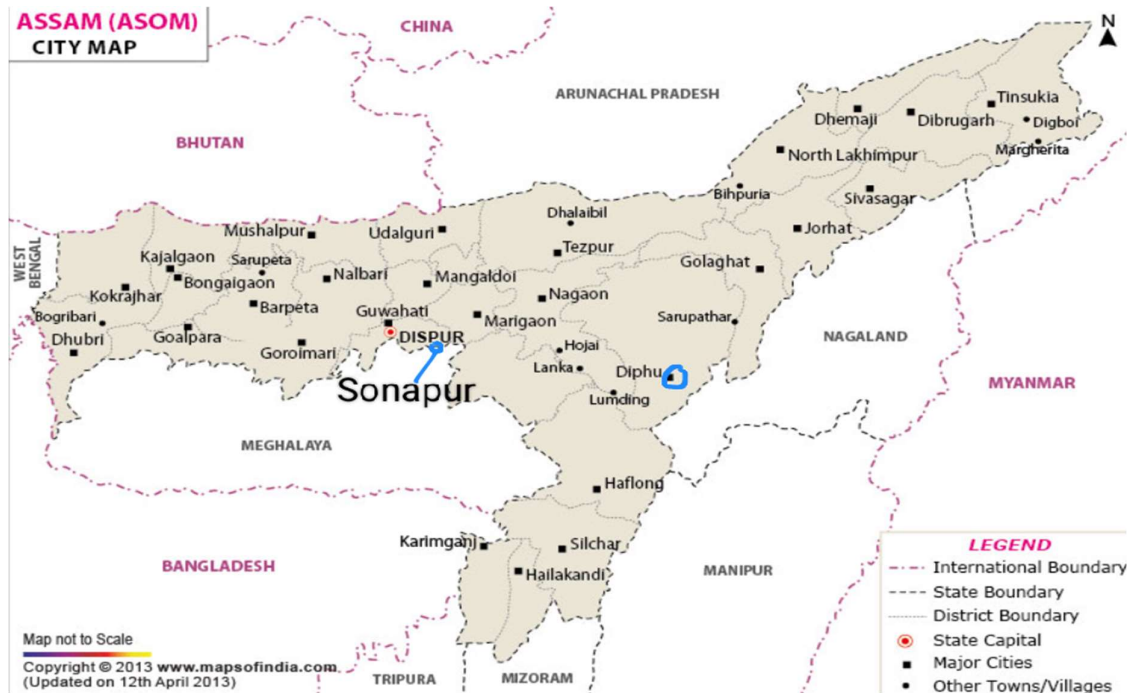
Other than documentary work on grammar and language description, works on sociolinguistics are scantily available. Abraham and Daimary (2021) did a sociolinguistic study of Amri Karbi in Northeast India. The aim of the study was to assess the difference in language attitude between the Amri Karbi and Karbi speaking people and to determine which variety is best understood and accepted among each of the different varieties. Kuriako (2022) did a survey on the inculturation and dialogue as the mission of the catholic church among the Karbis in the Diphu diocese, Assam. The study aimed at understanding the implications of inculturation among the Karbis in the diocese of Diphu and to discover their rich cultural heritage.

Since there are few works available which look into negation in Karbi language, the study attempts to examine the language looking into its negative constructions, rather than a documentary work.

3. Objectives & Methodology

The objectives of the study are to identify the negative markers used in Karbi language spoken in two districts of Assam, namely, Sonapur town of Kamrup (Metropolitan) district and Diphu town of Karbi Anglong district, and to find out if there is any similarity or dissimilarity in the Karbi spoken in these two areas.

A field study was conducted for two days in Teteliguri village of Sonapur town on 20th and 21st of October, 2024, and two days in Diphu town on 6th and 7th of November, 2024, two of the Karbi speaking areas of Kamrup Metropolitan district and Karbi Anglong district of Assam, respectively. For data collection, a respondent each from Sonapur and Diphu, of age group 50-80, was randomly selected for interview. The collected data has been crosschecked with two other Karbi speakers from the selected areas. A total of 60 elicited sentences (30 from Sonapur and 30 from Diphu) were collected, consisting of affirmative, negative strengthening, conditional and interrogative sentences from both the districts.



Map 1: Map of Assam showing Sonapur and Diphu
(<https://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/assam/cities.html>)

4. Negation in Tibeto-Burman languages

Negation is a language universal, found in all languages, and unique to human languages (Lindstad, 2007, p. 3). Negation calls for particular grammatical structures in different languages (Khemlani, Orenes & Laird, 2012). It can vary from one language to the other. Negation is a process or construction in grammatical and semantic analysis which typically expresses the contradiction of some or all of a sentence's meaning (Brahma, 2014).

The Proto-Tibeto-Burman form for negation is *ma* or *maŋ* (Matisoff, 2003). Tibeto-Burman languages in and around North East India tend to show innovative negation constructions. Most languages in the family retain the negative prefix *ma-* which is reconstructed for Proto-Tibeto-Burman, but in North East India the negative morpheme is usually post-verbal (DeLancey, 2015). For instance,

- (1) *ne* *an* *ŋfo* *niŋhaŋ-he* (Karbi)
 1SG rice eat like-NEG
 'I don't like to eat rice'

Here, the negative element '*-he*' is post-verbal, and is suffixed to the verb through affixation.

Dryer (2008) discusses the order of negative morphemes with respect to the verb in Tibeto-Burman languages. There are two patterns: VNeg and NegV. His data shows that the VNeg order is mainly observed in languages in Southeast Nepal and Northeast India (most Bodo-Garo, Tani, and Kuki-Chin languages), while the NegV order is more dominant in other areas (Kiryu, 2022).

4.1 Negation in Karbi

In Karbi, verbal negation is indicated by the onset reduplicating suffix *-e*, which repeats the full onset of the last syllable of the verb stem (Konnerth, 2014). As in, *kroi-kre* ‘to agree-NEG’. Here, the suffix ‘*-e*’ repeats the onset of the last syllable of the verb stem.

5. Findings

This section analyses the data collected from Sonapur and Diphu, and further discusses the negative strategies implemented in the language while differentiating the findings from prior research works.

According to the findings of Konnerth (2014), the commonly used negative equational copula is *kali*. It is most frequently used when predicate nominals are negated, or when negating nominalised verbs (although the verbal negation strategy, i.e., the onset reduplicating suffix *-e*, may also be used). There is no positive equational copula. Instead, nouns typically act as predicates by themselves. However, what sometimes appears to act as an assertive counterpart to *kali* is the realis marker *-lo*. The negative suffix *-e* may only co-occur with the irrealis suffixes *-dzi* and *-po* if perfective *-det* intervenes. On a morphological level, it is possible to add *-dzi lang* to a negated stem. It is acceptable to say *-men-me-dzi-lang* ‘be ripe-NEG-IRR-still’ meaning ‘(the fruit) won’t be ripe yet’. The onset reduplicative negative suffix represents the main verbal negation construction (for nominal negation, the negative equational copula *kali* is used. It appears that nominal negation is generally more emphatic, while verbal negation is specifically non-emphatic.

From the collected data, two negative equational copulas have been identified, which are *kali* and *kalek*.

Question:	(2)	<i>anaŋ-li-baŋ</i> 3SG-HON-CLF ‘Is he Ram?’	<i>ram-ma</i> Ram-Q	(Diphu)
Response:	(3)	<i>anaŋ-li-baŋ</i> 3SG-HON-CLF ‘He is not Ram.’	<i>ram</i> Ram	<i>kali</i> NEG
Question:	(4)	<i>anaŋ</i> 3SG ‘Is he Ram?’	<i>ram-ma</i> Ram-Q	(Sonapur)
Response:	(5)	<i>anaŋ</i> 3SG ‘He is not ram.’	<i>ram</i> Ram	<i>kalek</i> NEG

From the sentences (3) and (5), the difference in regional lexical negative forms can clearly be identified, for instance, the negative copula *kali* is used in Diphu variety, and *kalek* is used in Sonapur variety.

Similarly, two other negative forms, which differ regionally have also been identified- *inɟɟɔŋ* and *awe*.

(6)	<i>alaŋ</i> 3SG	<i>awi</i> blood	<i>awe</i> NEG	(Diphu)
	‘He/She is bloodless.’			

- (7) *anaŋ awi iŋdʒəŋ* (Sonapur)
 3SG blood NEG
 ‘He/She is bloodless.’

In the following sections, some of the examples from the data collected, consisting of different types of sentences, during the field study will be discussed.

5.1 Affirmative Sentences

An affirmation sentence is a sentence that affirms a statement. It is a positive declaration that states something.

In verbal negation, the onset of the last syllable of the verb stem is repeated by the onset reduplicating suffix ‘-e’, which means, negation is post-verbal in Karbi, that is, it is suffixed to the verb.

- (8) *ne an fʊo-man* (Sonapur)
 1SG rice eat-HAB
 ‘I eat rice.’

ne an fʊo-ŋfe
 1SG rice eat-NEG
 ‘I do not eat rice.’

- (9) *ne an fʊo* (Diphu)
 1SG rice eat
 ‘I eat rice.’

ne an fʊo-ŋfe
 1SG rice eat-NEG
 ‘I do not eat rice.’

Here, *-ŋfe* is the negative element, which negates (8) and (9), and which repeats the onset of the last syllable of the verb stem *fʊo*. The negative element is suffixed to the verb. In the above examples, *fʊo* becomes *fʊo-ŋfe* when negated.

- (10) *ne sal-po tiki-e* (Sonapur)
 1SG work-DEF do-FUT
 ‘I will do the work’

ne sal-po tiki-ke
 1SG work-DEF do-NEG
 ‘I will not do the work’

- (11) *ne sai klem-dʒi* (Diphu)
 1SG work do-FUT
 ‘I will do the work’

ne sai klem-ke
 1SG work do-NEG
 ‘I will not do the work’

Here, **-ke** is the negative element, which negates (10) and (11), and which repeats the onset of the last syllable of the verb stems *tiki* and *klem*. As in the examples, *tiki* and *klem* become *tiki-ke* and *klem-ke* when negated, in Sonapur and Diphu, respectively.

- (12) *ne dam-e* (Sonapur)
 1SG go-FUT
 'I will go'
- ne dam-de*
 1SG go-NEG
 'I will not go'

- (13) *ne dam-dʒi* (Diphu)
 1SG go-FUT
 'I will go'
- ne dam-de*
 1SG go-NEG
 'I will not go'

Here, **-de** is the negative element, which negates (12) and (13), and which repeats the onset of the last syllable of the verb stem *dam*. In the above examples, when negated, *dam* becomes *dam-de*.

- (14) *anaŋ lo-po ne-jok ki-pi* (Sonapur)
 3SG book-DEF 1SG-DAT PST-give
 'He/She gave me the book.'
- anaŋ ne-jok lo-po pi-pe-joŋ*
 3SG 1SG-DAT book-DEF give-NEG-PRF
 'He/She has not given me the book.'

- (15) *alaŋ ne-p^han lo-t^hui ki-naŋpi* (Diphu)
 3SG 1SG-DAT book-DEF PST-give
 'He/She gave me the book'
- alaŋ ne-p^han lo-t^hui naŋpi-pe-laŋ*
 3SG 1SG-DAT book-DEF give-NEG-PRF
 'He/She has not given me the book'

Here, **-pe** is the negative element, which negates (14) and (15), and which repeats the onset of the last syllable of the verb stem *pi*. In the examples above, *pi* becomes *pi-pe*, when negated.

5.2 Conditional Sentences

A conditional sentence expresses a condition with a possible outcome, where one action depends on the other action.

The word *tene* symbolises condition in Sonapur, and in Diphu, both the words *dʒɔŋsi* and *te* symbolise condition.

- (16) *anaŋ waŋ-we tene ne dam-de* (Sonapur)
 3SG come-NEG COND 1SG go-NEG
 ‘If he/she doesn’t come, I won’t go.’

- (17) *alaŋ dʒɔŋsi waŋ-we te ne dam-de* (Diphu)
 3SG COND come-NEG COND 1SG go-NEG
 ‘If he/she doesn’t come, I won’t go.’

There are two negative elements *-we* and *-de* in (16) and (17), which repeat the onset of the last syllable of the verb stems *waŋ* and *dam*. In Sonapur, *te* states condition, and in Diphu, condition is stated by *dʒɔŋsi* and *te*.

5.3 Interrogative Sentences (Yes/No Question)

A yes/no question is an interrogative construction which expects an answer of either yes or no, that is, there are only two possible responses. In Karbi, the question particle is *-ma* for both Sonapur and Diphu. It occurs as a suffix and comes after the verb.

- (18) *naŋ holek waŋ-e-ma* (Sonapur)
 2SG here come-FUT-Q
 ‘Will you come here?’

naŋ holek waŋ-we-ma
 2SG here come-NEG-Q
 ‘Won’t you come here?’

- (19) *naŋ ladak waŋ-dʒi-ma* (Diphu)
 2SG here come-FUT-Q
 ‘Will you come here?’

naŋ ladak waŋ-we-ma
 2SG here come-NEG-Q
 ‘Won’t you come here?’

Here, in the above examples, *-we* is the negative element and *-ma* is the question particle. The question particle occurs post-verbally. The future tense marker for both the varieties is different, i.e., *-e* in Sonapur and *-dʒi* in Diphu.

5.4 Interrogative Sentences (Tag Question)

A tag question is a short question which is added to the end of a sentence to ask for confirmation, that is, whether the sentence is true or not. In both Sonapur and Diphu, the question particle *-ma* comes after the negative elements.

- (20) *kaveri hemtuŋ, kalek-ma* (Sonapur)
 Kaveri married, NEG-Q
 ‘Kaveri is married, isn’t she?’

- (21) *kaveri penando-etlɔ, kali-ma* (Diphu)
 Kaveri marry-PRF, NEG-Q
 'Kaveri is married, isn't she?'

Here, *-ma* is the question particle in both (20) and (21), and the negative elements *kalek* and *kali* are used in (20) and (21) respectively. The occurrence of both the question particle and the negative element in both the varieties is observed in the case of independent and dependent clauses. The question particle occurs as suffix after the negative element.

5.5 Negative Strengthening

Negative strengthening can be said to be a pragmatic strengthening under negation. The negative emphatic particle comes after the verb in Sonapur, and before the verb in Diphu.

- (22) *ne dam-de penei* (Sonapur)
 1SG go-NEG EMPH
 'I will not go at all'

- (23) *ne damamai dam-de* (Diphu)
 1SG EMPH go-NEG
 'I will not go at all'

Here, *-de* is the negative element, *penei* and *damamai* emphasise (22) and (23) respectively, where the emphatic particle comes after the verb in (22) and before the verb in (23). Thus, they appear only in negative sentences.

6. Negation in Syntactic Relations

In certain instances, negation is used in syntactic relations based on the speakers' intentions. This process often occurs with repetition of the negative words. In Karbi, negation is also formed by the process of reduplication of the negative words.

For example, *kali-kali* (Diphu) and *kalek-kalek* (Sonapur). Thus, it can be seen that negation is also realised through complete reduplication, primarily to intensify the notion that an event or an action cannot occur in any possible way.

By looking at the data collected, it can be said that negation in Karbi is post-verbal, that is, it is suffixed to the verb. It can also be seen that the negative element reduplicates the onset of the last syllable of the verb stem.

For example- *ʃo-ʃe* 'eat-NEG'; *tiki-ke/klem-ke* 'do-NEG'; *dam-de* 'go-NEG'; *pi-pe* 'give-NEG' and; *waŋ-we* 'come-NEG'.

Question particle is *-ma* for both Sonapur and Diphu. Other than that, we also find some lexical and syntactic dissimilarities in Karbi spoken in Sonapur and Diphu of Kamrup Metropolitan and East Karbi Anglong districts respectively, along with their similarities. For instance- negative equational copula *kali* is used in Diphu and *kalek* is used in Sonapur. There are also negative forms- *inɔʒɔŋ* in Sonapur and *awe* in Diphu.

7. Conclusion

The study focuses on negation in Karbi in two areas of the state of Assam, namely, Sonapur town of Kamrup Metropolitan district and Diphu town of East Karbi Anglong district. It also attempts to find out, in that process, whether there is any similarity or dissimilarity in Karbi spoken in the two areas.

Through the field study, it can be interpreted that there is similar negative marker and question particle in both the areas, which are expressed through affixation. The negative element occurs after the verb. Some similarities as well as dissimilarities between the Karbi language spoken in Sonapur and Diphu are also seen on lexical and syntactic levels.

The study concludes that the negative markers are similar in both the areas being studied. The question particle *-ma* occurs with negation in both the varieties. The negative marker is suffixed to the verb stem, that is, the negative element occurs post-verbally. The negative particle is also formed through complete reduplication and reduplicating the onset of the last syllable of the verb stem.

There are also different negative forms like *kali* ‘not’ and *awe* ‘non-existent’ in Diphu and *kalek* ‘not’ and *inɔ̃ɔ̃ɔ̃* ‘non-existent’ in Sonapur.

Due to the constraint of time, only two districts, i.e., Sonapur for the Plains variety, and Diphu for the Hills variety, were taken into consideration for field study. However, a detailed investigation using tools, like negation questionnaire, for broader documentation and diversified data, needs to be conducted in other districts of Assam as well to form a holistic interpretation of negation in Karbi in the state which would be helpful for further research in this field.

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