

Verbal suffixes –o and –k^ha in Kokborok

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1. Introduction

This paper evaluates the functions of the verbal suffixes –k^ha and –o in Kokborok. Kokborok (ISO 639-3 trp), a Tibeto-Burman language of the Boro-Garo sub-group is mainly spoken in the North East Indian state of Tripura with a total population of 8,80,537 according to 2011 census, which is 23.97% of the total population of the state. Kokborok means the “language of the people”. “Kok” meaning “language” and borok “people”. The Borok language or Kokborok is the native language of the Tripuri people and it was recognized as an official language of Tripura state in 1979. There is no standard form of writing system in Kokborok. Earlier Bangla script was used to write Kokborok, which was mainly due to the fact that Bengali medium of education was in dominance. But, at present both Bangla and Roman scripts are in use.

The verbal suffixes –kha and -o have been analyzed and identified with two different functions by two different authors. The latter morpheme is identified as aorist by Jacquesson (2008), but as present tense by Debbarma (2014). However, a corpus of natural language and written texts supports an analysis that –o marks habitual aspect, and, in some environments, present tense. In addition, Jacquesson (2008) identifies –k^ha as a marker of perfect aspect, while Debbarma (2014) claims that it marks past tense. The corpus analyzed in this study provides evidence that k^ha marks past tense or perfect aspect, depending on its environment.

2. Verbal suffix –o

This first positional suffix, morphologically, and semantically is the least marked inflectional suffix having many uses. It is identified as aorist by Jacquesson(2008) and as present tense by Debbarma(2014). The Aorist which is described as ‘simply PFV’(Dahl (1985:82) is a term hardly used in relation to Tibeto-Burman languages. It is usually associated with Grammars of Ancient Greek, other Indo-European languages and languages influenced by the Indo-European grammatical tradition. Moreover, there is no clear description given on why this suffix is called an aorist by Jacquesson(2008).

My analysis shows that the suffix –o marks the indicative mood, habitual aspect which is expressed pragmatically, and, it marks the contextual occasion of the progressive with reference to the present time. The following examples (i-v) have been given to exemplify present tense by Debbarma (2014) and aorist by Jacquesson. (Their original glossing has been retained).

1) i. o borok do-wəi him-o
this person quick-CV walk-AOR
'This man walks rapidly.' (Jacquesson (2008))

ii. aŋ tʰaŋ-na musuŋ-o
S1 go-VNF wish-AOR
'I wish to go.' (Jacquesson (2008))

iii. bo t̪əi n̪əŋ-o
3SG water drink-PRES
'S/he drinks water.' (Debbarma (2014))

iv. bo silchar-o tʰaŋ-o
3SG silchar-LOC go-PRES
'S/he goes to Silchar. (Debbarma (2014))

These sentences functions as more like an affirmation or declaration of what the speaker considers to the known state of affairs or fact. We will call this indicative mood (realis) and gloss this as Realis. This suffix functions as indicative mood only when the speaker has a prior knowledge of the situations reported by the predicates. In the second sentence, the predicate is stative. When the situation presented is stative, it usually occurs with the first person. With the second person the passive –zak is used following the verb and preceding the suffix –o.

Further, we will look at the function of the suffix –o in complex clauses and how they behave in a dependent and an independent clause. The function, however, remains the same in both of these clauses. Even in a dependent clause –o still marks the indicative mood. This is illustrated in examples (2) & (3). The dependent clauses have been given inside the brackets/parenthesis.

2) [samuŋ kʰai-bai-kʰa-kʰe] teisa study hall-o ma-tʰaŋ-o
work do-comp-PST-cond once again study hall-LOC OBL-go-REAL
'When the work is done (we) have to go to the study hall once again.'

3) [bu-pʰa sodaibepar-o tʰaŋ-o hən-əi] ca-ja n̪əŋ-ja toŋ-man
3rd-father business-LOC go-REAL say-NF eat-NEG drink-NEG stay-ITE
toŋ-man tʰə-əi tʰaŋ-kʰa
stay-ITE die-NF go-PST
'Because (her) father goes to/for business (she) did not eat or drink and died.'

But, here the indicative mood is also combined with of the habitual aspect. The semantics of the Habitual in Kokborok is contributed from the context and not morphologically or lexically. See examples (4) & (5).

- 4) komlapoti pun mərək-o tei bolong-o t^hu-o
 komlapoti goat guard-HAB and forest-LOC sleep-real
 ‘Komlapoti guards the goat and sleeps in the forest.’

- 5) abo-hai kəbaŋ-ma mui-bai-no cəŋ gudok k^hai
 DEM-similar many-quantity vegetable-INS-ACC 1PL gudok do
 ca-o
 eat-REAL
 ‘with this similar kind of vegetables we make gudok and eat.’

The former example demonstrates the personal habit of a person, whereas, the latter marks the personal habit of the community people. Sentence (4) is a narrative of the folk story ‘Komlapoti’ which tells the story of Komlapoti who is treated cruelly by her step-mother and is given the work of a goatherd. And sentence (5) is from a procedural text describing the traditional recipe of the community people. Here, the habitual aspect has already been coded in the pre-existing sentences in the context of the story.

Dahl makes a distinction between Habituals(HAB) and Habitual-generic(HABG). HABG differs from HAB primarily by being used also in generic sentences (Dahl 1985). Habituals describe individual persons’ habits, whereas, Habitual-generic sentences describe the “typical or characteristic properties of a species, a kind, or an individual” (Dahl 1985: 99). Their “lawlikeness” (Dahl 1985: 97) makes them similar to eternal truths or generalizations. The habitual and Habitual-generic in Kokborok is marked by the same suffix. –o also marks sentences that express “eternal truths and generalizations” like “the sun sets in the west”, etc.

- 6) bət^hai bup^haŋ-ni kəlai-o
 fruit tree-ABL fall-REAL
 ‘Fruits fall from the tree.’ (jacquesson (2008))

- 7) obo haik^he-no sal t^haŋ-o tal puŋ-o bisi
 this like.this-focus day go-HAB moon fill-HABG year
 k^honchor-əi p^hai-o
 float-NF come-REAL
 ‘Just like this the sun goes (down), the moon rises, the year floats by.’

2.1 –o in progressive

The progressive presents the world as an activity. It establishes that a process exists-is going on-at the contextual occasion (Timberlake 1985). The progressive aspect in Kokborok is “rather consistently marked periphrastically” (Dhal 1985:93) through auxiliary constructions. These constructions involve the auxiliary verb *toŋ* and the infinitive suffix *-ai* on the main lexical verb.

root + progressive *toŋ* + tense/aspect

There are three tense markers that go on the auxiliary, *-o* “present”, *-k^ha* “perfect”, and *-nai* “future”. Change of the suffix on the auxiliary changes the meaning of the sentence.

In Kokborok, when one wishes to describe a speech-time event it is usually expressed through the progressive construction. The *-o* suffixed on the auxiliary marks the temporal reference in the present. However, when *-k^ha* (which will be dealt with in section 3) is interchanged with *-o* in the auxiliary the meaning slightly changes.

- 8) *o* *bo-rok* *do-wai* *him-ai* *toŋ-o*
 DEM 2SG-PL fast-NF walk-NF AUX-PRES
 ‘This person is walking fast.’ (Jacquesson (2008))

- 9) *sai-bo* *səŋ-ai* *toŋ-o* *amiŋ-bo* *puŋ-ai* *toŋ-o*
 dog-also bark-PROG AUX-PRES cat-also mew-PROG AUX-PRES
 ‘...The dog is also crying, the cat is also mewling.’

3. Verbal suffix *-k^ha*

This suffix is identified as past tense by Debbarma(2014) and as perfect by Jacquesson(2008). There is no dedicated past tense marker in Kokborok which makes a striking difference from Boro or Dimasa. The past time in Kokborok is expressed through the perfect. Timberlake(1985) describes “the perfect presents a situation as a state. The contextual occasion of a perfect includes the here-and-now of the speech event and extends back, as a continuous interval, to include the actual event reported by the predicate” and by Bybee & Dahl (1989) “the most important characteristic of perfects is that the situation described in the sentence is viewed from the perspective of – or described as being relevant at – a later point in time, most typically the point of speech”.

The prototypical use of perfect in Kokborok is mostly in the past indicating a past event of some present relevance. See examples below:

10. *bok^horok-ni* *poza* *hilik-ma* *noŋk^hor-ai* *t^haŋ-k^ha*
 head-GEN burden heavy-big climb.down-NF go-PRF
 ‘The heavy burden from my head has climbed down (subsided) and went.’

11. *o kami-ni bəraichək kʰorok-sa tʰəi-kʰa*
 DEM village-GEN old woman CLF-one die-PRF
 'one old woman from this village has died.'

In modern Standard Arabic, the category variously called 'Perfect' or 'Perfective normally has only past time reference but may refer to the future in certain subordinate clauses (Dahl 1985). This is also true of Kokborok. In a conditional clause the perfect can be used in the future. For example,

12. *amo pai-kʰa-kʰe teisa hor-ni cha-muŋ atta-ni*
 that finish-PERF-when once.more night-GEN eat-NMLZ eight-GEN
simi noita
 only nine
 'when that is over/ after that is over, once again the food is from eight to nine.'

13. *cəŋ jambi bəlai rə-kʰa-kʰe kisa bahai motom-o*
 1PL lemon leaf give-PERF-when little smell good-REAL
 'When we give lemon leaf (the food) smell good little more.'

The perfect –kʰa can also occur in progressive sentence. As mentioned in section 2.1 the progressive expressed through auxiliary construction describes the contextual occasion in the speech-time. The perfect –kʰa when suffixed to the auxiliary *toŋ* in a periphrastic construction indicates the 'entrance into the state'.

14. *lok cetʰuaŋ lok hin-əi lob-əi toŋ-kʰa*
 grow chethuang grow say-NF pray-PROG AUX-PRF
 '(She) kept praying saying grow chethuang grow.'

This sentence indicates that the speaker has seen the dancers getting ready or already starting to leave the place where they have previously been dancing and moving towards the speaker's home. This is also possible if the speaker has earlier already been informed of dancer's arrival time and she/he is sure that the dancers are on their way.

3.2 –kʰa as second positional suffix

In the second position –kʰa can occur only following –nai "future tense" and –gəlak/glak "negated future". However, –kʰa can occur in the second position following –gəlak/glak only in desiderative/irrealis constructions.

15. *bo-rok-ni bətai bəsa-no bo ca-gəlak-kʰa-mu*
 3SG-PL-GEN egg child-ACC also eat-NFUT-PERF-IRR
 '...would not have eaten their eggs and their children.'

When –k^ha occurs after -nai it gives a sense of ‘about to’ or the immediate. Such kind of sentence constructions describes an imminent state. When you witness the situation predicted in the sentence is about to take place.

16. *cati t^hok pai-nai-k^ha*
 lamp oil finish-FUT-PRF
 ‘The lamp oil is about to finish.’

17. *sal hab-nai-k^ha*
 sun enter-FUT-PRF
 ‘The sun is about to enter.’ (the sun is about to go down/set).

The same combination can also occur in an interrogative sentence.

18. *aŋ tabuk tamo k^hlai-nai-k^ha*
 1SG now what do-FUT-PRF
 ‘What should I do now?’

Abbreviations

1PL	First person plural	CV	Converb	NMLZ	nominalizer
3SG	Third person	DEM	Demonstrative	PL	plural
singular		GEN	genitive	PRES	Present
ABL	Ablative	HAB	Habitual	PRF	perfect
ACC	accusative	INS	Instrument	PROG	Progressive
AOR	Aorist	IRR	irrealis	S1	First person
AUX	Auxiliary	LOC	Locative	singular	
CLF	classifier	NF	nonfinite	VNF	Verbal nonfinite

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