

Code-Mixing in Bilingual Communication: A Case Study of Kokborok Spoken in Tripura

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Abstract

This paper investigates the phenomenon of code-mixing in the bilingual communication of Kokborok speakers, with a focus on lexical categories and functional domains. Using a qualitative case study approach, data was collected from natural conversations across domains such as home, education, media, religion, marketplaces, and political discourse. The findings indicate that nouns are the most frequently inserted category, followed by other lexical categories. The phonological nativization processes, including voicing shifts and vowel insertion, demonstrate how borrowed terms are adapted into the Kokboroks phonological system. Despite widespread borrowing, Kokborok retains its core syntactic and grammatical structure. This study contributes to the significance of language contact, code-mixing, and the dynamics of indigenous language maintenance in multilingual settings.

Keywords: Code-mixing; Kokborok; Bilingualism; Language contact; Lexical borrowing

INTRODUCTION

In a linguistically diverse nation like India, code-mixing of words from one language into another is a common characteristic of bilingual and multilingual communication. Among the indigenous communities of Northeast India, the Kokborok speakers of Tripura present a compelling case of bilingual practices which existed in contact with Bengali and English due to educational, administrative, and digital influences. This contact has resulted in significant instances of code-mixing, where English and Bengali are integrated into Kokborok across domains such as home, education, digital media, marketplaces, religious rituals, and politics. These insertions are not arbitrary but functionally motivated, reflecting specific communicative needs.

While much scholarly attention has been given to code-mixing in major Indian languages, relatively few studies have systematically examined this phenomenon in lesser documented languages like Kokborok. The study focuses on how different lexical categories like nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are integrated into Kokborok and how these insertions reflect domain specific communicative functions. Additionally, it investigates how phonological nativization processes reshape borrowed words to align with Kokborok's sound system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of code-mixing has received considerable attention in sociolinguistics, particularly within bilingual and multilingual contexts. Scholars such as Auer (1998) and Myers-Scotton (1993) have examined how code-mixing reflects linguistic flexibility, social identity, and communicative efficiency. In multilingual societies like India, where speakers frequently alternate between regional and dominant languages, code-mixing has become a regular feature of everyday communication.

Muysken (2000) provides a foundational framework by categorizing code-mixing into three main types: insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalization. Among these, the insertion from one element into another is mixed, is a particularly relevant to this study, as Kokborok speakers often insert English or Bengali words in verbal communication.

Gumperz (1982) in his theory of interactional sociolinguistics emphasizes the socio-functional aspect of code-mixing, framing it as a discourse strategy influenced by social context, speaker roles, and communicative intent. This approach supports the view that code-mixing among Kokborok speakers is not random but purposeful.

In the Indian context, studies by Kachru (1983) and Bhatt (2008) have documented the widespread

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practice of code-mixing in regional languages. These studies highlight how English, in particular, serves as a marker of prestige, education, and social mobility.

While comprehensive studies on Kokborok-English-Bengali code-mixing remain limited, foundational resources such as the Anglo-Kokborok-Bengali Dictionary by Binoy Debbarma (2002) provide important lexical documentation. Recent research by Sudeshna and Mousami (2024) also highlights Kokborok's vulnerable linguistic status and the growing influence of Bengali in Tripura. Furthermore, Sreelekha Ray's (2024) study emphasizes the natural bilingual development of students in tribal areas, demonstrating how Kokborok and Bengali intersect in educational settings.

This study builds upon these foundations by providing a domain-based analysis of code-mixing patterns in Kokborok, focusing on both lexical categories and phonological adaptation. It provides valuable understanding of language contact and multilingual practices in indigenous communities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology to explore the patterns and purposes of code-mixing within bilingual communication among Kokborok speakers. The approach is appropriate for analyzing naturally occurring language use in context, focusing on how linguistic elements from English and Bengali are inserted into Kokborok speech across different social domains. The data for this study was collected from a combination of natural conversations, participant observation in educational institutions, religious gatherings, marketplaces, and political events, and informal interviews with bilingual Kokborok speakers. Fieldwork was conducted between February and May 2025 in selected regions of Tripura, primarily in Agartala, Khumulwng, and Khowai.

The study involved 25 bilingual Kokborok speakers, aged between 16 to 55 years, representing a cross-section of social contexts. Participants were chosen based on their active use of both Kokborok and either Bengali or English in daily communication. Additional language was observed in group WhatsApp chats, YouTube and Facebook comments related to public debates, and speeches or interactions at public rallies and community events. The data was analysed for patterns of code-mixing with a focus on lexical categories such as the insertion of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, phonological nativisation involving the adaptation of borrowed words to Kokborok phonology, and domain-based variation across home, education, religion, digital media, markets, and political discourse.

Audio recordings were transcribed with participant consent, and key utterances were translated into English. A thematic coding approach was applied to identify recurring patterns of lexical mixing, speaker motivation, and attitudes towards code-mixing practices. The speakers included students, teachers, community leaders, vendors, social media users, and religious leaders to represent an extensive collection of communicative contexts.

CODE-MIXING IN LEXICAL CATEGORIES

The category of lexical nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs demonstrate how Kokborok bilinguals insert those elements to serve for communicational purposes that expresses for ease, expressiveness or necessity.

The noun insertion is the most frequent type of code mixing observed among Kokborok speakers. This occurs when English or Bengali nouns are inserted into Kokborok sentence structure. The main reason for this is that Kokborok lacks lexical equivalents for many modern, technical concepts, especially those related to education, administrative and digital platforms.

Table 1: Noun code-mixing in Kokborok

S.N.	Kokborok Sentence	English Meaning	Inserted	Source
1	nini phone kisa ridi	Kindly give your phone.	phone	English
2	nini exam buphuru?	When is your exam?	exam	English
3	ang meeting manjakgwna	Let me attend meeting.	meeting	English
4	tini ani office kwrwi	I have no office today.	office	English
5	norokni attendance naharbaikha	Taken all your attendance	attendance	English
6	borokni dam kwrwi	There is no human value.	dam = value	Bengali

While most insertions are from English, some nouns (like *dam* from Bengali, meaning ‘value’) show regional bilingual influence, especially from Bengali due to prolonged language contact. These borrowed nouns fill lexical gaps, allowing speakers to express ideas smoothly without resorting to lengthy explanations or imprecise paragraphs.

Although verb insertion occurs less frequently, it typically involves modern, technical, or scientific terms, particularly digital or administrative actions, for which Kokborok lacks direct lexical equivalents.

Table 2: Verb code-mixing in Kokborok

S.N.	Kokborok Sentence	English Meaning	Inserted	Source
1	ang form submit khwlaikha	I have submitted the form.	submit	English
2	ang movie download khwlaikha	I have downloaded the movie.	download	English
3	mung register khwlaikha	Had registered the name.	register	English
4	photo upload khwlaikha	Uploaded the photo.	upload	English
5	Ang admit card print khwlaikha	I printed the admit card.	print	English
6	call khwlaidi	Call the person.	call	English

Adjective borrowing is more stylistic than functional, i.e., speakers can usually communicate without inserting adjectives, but they choose to do so when they want to express modern attitudes or evaluations. These adjectives are commonly used by educated youth, often

influenced by schooling, media, and social prestige associated with English or Bengali medium backgrounds. Adjective insertion allows bilingual speakers to sound more expressive, fluent, or modern, particularly in casual or informal speech.

Table 3: Adjective code-mixing in Kokborok

S.N.	Kokborok Sentence	English/Bengali Meaning	Inserted	Source
1	porinani boring nangkha	Studying was boring.	boring	English
2	memory full wngkha	Memory was full.	full	English
3	bo interesting borok	He is an interesting person.	interesting	English
4	interesting nangkha	Was interesting	aram	Bengali
5	nwng buka	You are foolish.	buka	Bengali
6	Ang dukho nangjakkha	I am feeling sad.	dukho	Bengali

Adverbs are among the least frequently code-mixed elements in Kokborok-English-Bengali

bilingual communication compared to nouns or verbs. See the data and its implications in detail.

Table 4: Adverb code-mixing in Kokborok

S.N.	Kokborok Sentence	English/Bengali Meaning	Inserted	Source
1	just nono samanise	Just telling you.	just	English
2	Ang already sogwijak	I already reached.’	already	English
3	Emne nwng sabo wngkha	By the way, who are you?’	emne	Bengali
4	khup kaham wngkha	It was very good.	khup	Bengali
5	ekdom kwlai	Totally/absolutely easy	ekdom	Bengali

These are examples of code mixing adverbs in Kokborok sentences where English or Bengali is inserted into the native Kokborok grammatical structure. Many Kokborok adverbial expressions are already suffice for communication, so borrowing isn’t always necessary. However, when used, adverbs like *just*, *already*, *emne*, *khup*, *ekdom* fulfill emphasis, temporal precision, or discourse functions in casual or expressive speech.

CODE-MIXING IN PHONOLOGICAL CHANGES

The borrowed words of English or Bengali in Kokborok are not always pronounced the same way as in the source languages. Instead, they are nativized i.e., their pronunciation is adjusted according to the sound system and syllable structure of Kokborok.

Table 5: Phonological nativization of code-mixing in Kokborok

S.N	English	Kokborok	Phonological type	Function
1	bus	bas	Voicing shift	Final voiced consonant /z/ becomes voiceless /s/ since Kokborok does not typically have /z/.
2	school	iskul	Prosthesis	Kokborok avoids initial consonant clusters like /sk/. A vowel /i/ is inserted to simplify articulation.
3	sabun (Bengali)	sapan	Metathesis	The vowel /u/ is replaced with /a/, due to native vowel preferences.
4	T.V. (television)	T.P.	Acronym	The sound /v/ is absent in Kokborok, often replaced by /p/. Thus, 'T.V.' becomes 'T.P.', a localized form.

Despite insertion of lexical categories, the syntactic sentence structure of Kokborok (SOV) is typically maintained. Even when code-mixing occurs, the syntactic frame usually remains Kokborok dominant.

CODE-MIXING IN HOME AND FAMILY DOMAINS

In the home and family domain, code-mixing among Kokborok speakers is a common

phenomenon, reflecting the multilingual reality of Tripura. The use of English and Bengali lexical items within Kokborok sentences occurs for several reasons, including convenience, habit, prestige, and domain-specific exposure. Below is an explanation of why code-mixing occurs in this domain and how it functions:

Table 6: Code-mixing of home and family domains in Kokborok

S.N.	Kokborok	English/Bengali	Inserted	Source	Mixing reason
1	nini brain use khwlaidi	Use your brain.	brain, use	English	School exposure
2	problem tongo	Problem is there.	problem	English	Common term
3	homework khwlaidi	Do homework.	homework	English	Academic term
4	mastor kora tongo	Teacher is strict.	mastor, kora	Bengali	Habitual use
5	bodro kwrwi	No manner	bodro	Bengali	Cultural value term
6	thik ase	Okay/alright	thik ase	Bengali	Daily expression
7	darun wngkha	It was great.	darun	Bengali	Expressive use
8	samung kothin tongo	Work is difficult.	kothin	Bengali	Descriptive ease

This multilingual setting naturally gives rise to code-mixing, even in informal, domestic conversations. Although equivalent words exist in Kokborok, speakers often substitute them with English or Bengali terms, which come automatically during casual conversations. This tendency may arise because English as the instructional medium in educational institutions,

and the extensive role of Bengali as a common lingua-franca in Tripura.

CODE-MIXING IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

The bilingual educational terms (mostly English) are commonly mixed in real life communications. The inserted words highlight how code-mixing naturally occurs among Kokborok speakers.

Table 7: Code-mixing of educational institutions in Kokborok

S.N.	Kokborok sentence	English sentence	Inserted	Source
1	ang nini result nukkha	I have seen your result.	result	English
2	oro marksheet tudi	Bring the marksheet here.	marksheet	English
3	chini exam khwna tongo	We have exam tomorrow.	exam	English
4	nwnng pass wngkha	You have passed.	pass	English
5	nwnng pass wngkha	You have failed.	fail	English
6	khwna class tongo	There is a class tomorrow.	class	English
7	rang manage khwlaidi	Manage the money.	manage	English
8	routine nailaigwrana	Let's see the routine.	routine	English

These code-mixing examples show how English educational terms are mixed into Kokborok syntax.

Such usage is frequent in classrooms, school corridors, peer discussions, and even in parent-

teacher meetings. These English terms are often more accessible or widely understood than their native equivalents, especially among students and teachers.

CODE-MIXING IN DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The list below is a common bilingual code-mixing term frequently used by Kokborok speakers in

digital and social media platforms. These English words are often inserted into Kokborok sentences in casual speech, texting, and online interaction.

These terms are often phonetically nativized when spoken in Kokborok but retain the English form. Most of the terms are technology-specific with no direct Kokborok equivalent.

Table 8: Code-mixing of digital and social media in Kokborok

S.N.	English term	Context of use / Meaning	Remarks
1	mobile	Phone, Smartphone	Fully absorbed into daily speech
2	message	Text or DM (send a message)	No native Kokborok equivalent
3	chat	texting online	Widely used on social media
4	Facebook	Social media platform	Widely used on social media
5	You Tube	Video platform	Used directly
6	photo	Picture	Often used instead of mangpili
7	video	Video content	Popular in digital sharing
8	download	Downloading media or data	Often used as uploading content
9	status	WhatsApp/Facebook status	Direct use; no native equivalent
10	online	Connected to the internet	Used in daily conversations
11	offline	Not connected to the internet	Antonyms of online, commonly used
12	admin	Group admin (social media)	Tech-related, no equivalent terms
13	link	Hyperlink or URL	No native equivalent
14	share	Share content (post, message, etc.)	Used as a verb in code-mixed
15	subscribe	YouTube channel subscription	Used by content creators or viewers

CODE-MIXING IN MARKET PLACES AND PUBLIC INTERACTIONS

The list of code-mixing in market places and public interactions are enlisted below. The Bengali origin words like dukan, bazaar, somporko, and mal are commonly code-mixed in Kokborok due to long

term language contact. Although Kokborok equivalent words exist, words such as dam, bisi, kom, and jaga are so frequently used that they have become almost natural in everyday mixed speech. English terms like customer, income, loss, and discount are widely used because of their dominance in commercial and digital contexts.

Table 9: Code-mixing of market places and public interactions in Kokborok

S.N.	Kokborok sentence	English sentence	Inserted	Source
1	anikhe dukan kwat	'my shop is new'	dukan	Bengali
2	thaichukni dam kwbang	'the price of the mango is high'	dam	Bengali
3	o mobile dam bisi	'this mobile is expensive'	bisi	Bengali
4	o mobile dam kom	'this mobile is cheap'	kom	Bengali
5	bazarkhe chini nok ganaose	'the market is near to our house only'	bazar	Bengali
6	phalnaini somoporko hamya	'the shop keepers relation is bad'	somporko	Bengali
7	nokol manwi taphaldi	'don't sell the duplicate products'	nokol	Bengali
8	oro jaga kwrwi, kutuldi	'there is no place here, move away'	jaga	Bengali
9	tini lap kwrwi	'there is no profit today'	lav	Bengali
10	bebosa bahai wngkha tini?	'how was the business today?'	bebosa	Bengali
11	oro mal tubudi	'bring the goods here'	mal	Bengali
12	loss da wngkha?	'did you suffer a loss?'	loss	English
13	customer kwrwikho	'there is no customer still'	customer	English
14	bo kisaphano discount riya	'he didn't give any discount'	discount	English
15	tini income kwrwi	'there is no income today'	income	English

CODE-MIXING IN PUBLIC AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE

In the public and political discourse of Kokborok speakers, a notable set of code-mixed terms mainly from Bengali and English are frequently used in speeches, media, protests, meetings, and everyday conversations related to governance.

The Bengali words commonly used by politicians and the public, these Bengali words often replace or coexist with Kokborok equivalents due to their familiarity and ease of understanding in formal or mass communication: sadiron ‘development’, sashti ‘punishment’, rajniti ‘politics’, chesta ‘try’, kosto ‘suffering’, soi ‘signature’, dorkhasto ‘application’, niyom ‘rules’, songbidhan ‘constitution’, sarkar ‘government’, desh ‘country’, nagorik ‘citizen’, andulan ‘movement’, chukti ‘accord’, adhikar ‘rights’, dabi ‘demand’, puron ‘fulfill’, bipod ‘danger’, birudi ‘opposition’, dukho ‘sadness’, somotsa ‘problem’, gotna ‘incident’, poriseba ‘service’, besirbag ‘majority’, etc.

Additionally, many discourse particles and functional words like asole ‘in reality’, jeta ‘those who’, jekunu ‘anything’, ekta ‘one’, choli ‘is happening’, pwrai ‘since’, kintu ‘but’, jara ‘those’, mane ‘means’, baire ‘outside’, khushi ‘happy’, etc.

The English words frequently appearing in both formal and informal settings, these include: development, implement, list, member, court, census, issue, card, leader, long live, complain, vote, voter, election, *complain*, etc.

Despite the availability of native Kokborok equivalents, the widespread use of these Bengali and English terms reflects socio-political influence and the prestige attached to these dominant languages in public discourse.

CODE-MIXING IN RELIGIOUS, RITUALS OR CEREMONIAL EVENTS

The bilingual words are frequently used in religious, ritual, or ceremonial contexts among Kokborok speakers, taking from Bengali or English that are integrated into Kokborok language are listed below.

Table 10: Code-mixing of religious, rituals or ceremonial events in Kokborok

S.N	Kokborok	Borrowed	Source	Usage context
1	mandop	mondop	Bengali	Ceremonial tent/structure
2	puja	puja	Bengali	Worship ceremony
3	dan	daan	Bengali	Offering/donation
4	dormo	dhormo	Bengali	Religion or religious duty
5	guru	guru	Bengali	Spiritual teacher
6	songskar	shongshkar	Bengali	Rite of passage
7	shratdo	shraddha	Bengali	Funeral rite (Hindu)
8	asirbat	ashirbad	Bengali	Blessing
9	pat	path	Bengali	Recitation (scripture or holy text)
10	bisas	bishwas	Bengali	Faith or belief
11	baibel	Bible	English	Holy book of Christian
12	Jisu	Jesus	English	The Lord of salvation
13	chargsh	Church	English	Building for Christian worship
14	Pastor	Pastor	English	Leader of a church
15	prayer	prayer	English	A religious service
16	Gospel	Gospel	English	Message of Christ

CONCLUSION

These findings indicate that Kokborok speakers frequently engage in code-mixing as a flexible strategy within Tripura’s bilingual environment. This study shows that code-mixing is a common and adaptive practice among Kokborok speakers in the bilingual context of Tripura. English and Bengali words are frequently inserted into Kokborok to fill lexical gaps and express its communicative

purpose. Noun insertions are most frequent, particularly in educational, technical, and administrative contexts. Verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are also used, often for stylistic or expressive purposes. Phonological adaptations reveal that borrowed words are nativized to align with phonological patterns. Code-mixing patterns vary across domains such as education, religion, media, markets, and politics, reflecting both social function and cultural context. Despite external

influences, Kokborok maintains its core grammatical structure, and maintains language and does not affect with code-switching. Overall, code-mixing plays a key role in lexical adaptations, identity expression, and the ongoing bilingual development of the Kokborok language.

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