

Linguistic Mapping of the Regional Varieties of Khasi

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*A Comprehensive
Analysis and Insights*

By

Saralin A. Lyngdoh, Rymphang K. Rynjah
and Barika Khyriem

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PREFACE

This book, titled “*Linguistic Mapping of the Regional Varieties of Khasi: A Comprehensive Analysis and Insights*”, presents a detailed linguistic analysis and empirical insights aimed at mapping the regional variations of the Khasi language. The primary objective is to demonstrate the advantages and benefits of mapping these varieties, emphasising the clear-cut dialect borders and isoglosses that emerge from comparing corresponding forms.

The study focuses on seven varieties spoken in various districts of the Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills, using Standard Khasi as the reference language. Methodologies employed include lexicostatistical analysis using semantic field word lists and the utilisation of the computer software Cog by SIL International for lexical and phonetic comparisons. The findings reveal distinct lexical and phonetic variations among the varieties, with varying degrees of similarity to Standard Khasi.

Furthermore, the study employs a Geographical Information System (GIS) tool to map the distribution of vowels across different varieties of Standard Khasi, illustrating their distribution. The book also discusses the implications of the research findings and their social relevance, highlighting the significance of these variations in terms of their lexical and phonetic similarity to Standard Khasi.

The study’s contribution to research lies in advancing our understanding of language variations and changes within the Khasi varieties. By providing valuable insights and raising new questions, it opens avenues for future dialectological research on the Khasi language and its varieties. Overall, this book significantly enhances our knowledge of linguistic structures and contributes to both theoretical and practical aspects of language study.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Khasi belongs to the Austro-Asiatic family of languages spoken in the central and eastern parts of the state of Meghalaya. Prior to 1813, Khasi had no script of its own. In 1813–14, the Bengali script was used to translate the Bible into Khasi because literacy was then in Bengali. Around 1816, a few translated versions of the Gospel of Matthew were printed and distributed among some Khasis who could read the Bengali script. It was not until 1841, with the arrival of a Welsh missionary, that the Roman script was introduced and works were translated into the standard dialect (Sohra variety).

Khasi has significant dialectal diversity. Grierson (1904) identified four dialects of Khasi: Standard Khasi, Pnar or Synteng, Lyngngam, and War. Acharya (1971) reiterated Grierson's (1904) classification and added that Khasi also has several other sub-dialects, such as Bhoi, which is spoken in the northern open lands of Meghalaya.

Bareh (1977) provides an extensive list of the dialects of Khasi, mainly based on their geographical locations:

- Amwi in the southern Jaintia hills
- Shella in the southern Khasi hills
- Warding in the south of the Khasi hills
- Myriaw, Nongkhlaw, Nongspung, Maram, and Mawiang are spoken in the mid-western area of the Khasi hills.
- Cherra in the mid-southern hills
- Myllem, Laitlyngkot, Nongkrem, and Lynciong-Khasi are spoken in the central parts
- Jowai is spoken in the central Jaintia hills
- Bhoi in the north-east Khasi hills
- Manar, Nongwah, and Jirang in the north Khasi hills
- Khatarblang (Mawpran) is spoken in mid-southern and
- Nongstoin and Langrin in west Khasi

Besides the above dialects, Barih also adds that within each group, several sub-dialects show variations, particularly in phonology.

Barih states that Amwi has been ascribed to be the most typical dialect. Compared with the other dialects, Amwi appears to be the most rudimentary and is not, as a rule, intelligible to the neighbouring people using dialects such as Jowai or Khadar Blang. Compared with the other dialects, Amwi may be said to be more agglutinative in form, which could preserve intact its Mon-Khmer background. The grammar, with some variance, is like that of Jowai, but in morphology and phonology, there are salient differences. The Amwis, however, are acquainted with their neighbouring dialects and could pick them up for communication.

Barih further classifies the above dialects into three major branches:

Eastern dialects

1. Jowai (Central Highlands)
2. Amwi and the War dialects (in the south)
3. Bhoi Synteng in the north

Central dialects

1. Nongphlang or Nonglum, Cherra, and related dialects such as Nongkrem, Myllem, Nongkhlaw, Nongspung, Rambrai, Mawsynram, Maram, Laitlyngkot, Mawphlang, etc.
2. Bhoi East (in the north), consisting of Mawrong, Bhoi Lymbong, etc.
3. Bhoi West (in the north), consisting of Manar, etc.
4. War Shala (in the south)
5. Warding (in the south)

Western dialects

1. Nongstoin
2. Lyngam
3. Langrin

Barih (1977), addressing the above dialects, mentions that within each group there are again many sub-dialects that show variations, particularly in phonology. Daladier (2007:341), as cited in Sidwell (2009), remarks that the Mon-Khmer group of languages has three main branches, which include Khasi. Khasi is now standardised and fixed by written use, but conservative unwritten dialects still exist, particularly in the War region. Other dialects include Pnar and War. War has four sub-dialect groups: Nongtalang, Amvi, Tremblang, and Shella. The sub-classification of Pnar dialects remains unknown. There are also dialects of Pnar-War and War-

Khasi in several Jaintia villages. The War dialects of Khasi are subdivided into two groups: War-Khasi and War-Jaintia. These are spoken in the southeast corner of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills districts, respectively. Grierson (1904) has also discussed the War dialects, which vary from the standard Khasi dialect.

Despite the different classifications of the Khasi dialects, mapping them on a regional basis has always been a substantial gap in our current knowledge. For instance, mapping the different vowel occurrences for the corresponding forms across the different dialects requires more research and empirical insight to chart these variations, which are enabled and constrained by the respective region.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 The notion of Dialect

Any language spoken by a substantial number of individuals will invariably exhibit dialectal variations, particularly when geographical barriers segregate different groups of speakers or when divisions based on social class exist (Crystal, 2003). However, it is essential to recognise that providing a clear-cut definition of the term 'dialect', especially in its demarcation from the term 'language', can be a complex undertaking for most linguists.

2.2 Definitions of Dialect

A dialect is commonly construed as a specific variety within a language. According to Stewart (1968), a dialect is an autonomous variety of speech with a homogeneous set of mutually understandable varieties that is spoken by a specific group of people who regularly interact verbally and that is distinguished from other autonomous varieties of speech by several linguistic features. Chamber and Trudgill (1980:3) posit that colloquially, a dialect often carries connotations of being substandard, of lower status, and occasionally rustic in nature, typically associated with rural or working-class communities. They further assert that the term 'dialect' is frequently employed to describe linguistic forms in more remote, unwritten regions of the world. Consequently, these definitions frequently depict dialects as deviations, often incorrect or aberrant, from a presumed linguistic norm, as suggested by Chamber and Trudgill (1980:3).

It's noteworthy that Chambers and Trudgill, along with most other sociolinguists and dialectologists, contest these viewpoints. They advocate the perspective that all speakers inherently belong to at least one dialect. They maintain that even Standard English constitutes a dialect, just like any other form of English. They firmly reject the notion that any one dialect possesses inherent linguistic superiority over others.

To circumvent the complexities surrounding the term ‘dialect’, Chambers and Trudgill (1980) propose alternative terminology, which they deem more impartial. Chambers and Trudgill (1980:5) stipulate that they will employ the term ‘variety’ as a neutral descriptor for any specific linguistic manifestation that they intend to treat as a distinct entity for a particular purpose. They further clarify that this term will be employed ad hoc, allowing them to be as precise as necessary for their specific goals. The conceptualization of dialect advanced by Chambers and Trudgill has gained acceptance and utilisation in contemporary sociolinguistic and dialectological research.

2.3 Dialectology

Dialectology stands as a subfield within sociolinguistics that focuses exclusively on comprehending the intricacies of dialects. Crystal (2003:136) offers a comprehensive definition, characterising dialectology as “the systematic investigation of all forms of dialects, with a particular emphasis on regional dialects”. According to Crystal (*ibid.*), dialectology also goes by the aliases “dialect geography” or “linguistic geography”.

Dialects can be categorised into two fundamental types: regional and social dialects. Those dialects that pinpoint a speaker’s geographical origin are aptly labelled “regional dialects”, though alternative terms such as “local”, “territorial”, or “geographical” are occasionally used interchangeably. Dialects that convey a speaker’s social standing or class affiliation fall under the category of “social dialects” or “class dialects”. It is worth mentioning that “caste dialect”, a subset of social dialects, exclusively exists in the context of India. Recently, the term “sociolect” has also been employed to refer to social dialects. In some languages, social divisions, including class, professional status, age, and gender, lead to pronounced disparities in social dialects. The investigation of these social dialects is formally termed social dialectology. Social dialectology entails the application of dialectological methodologies to the analysis of social structure, focusing on group membership as a determinant of dialectal competence (Crystal, 2003).

The roots of dialectological studies can be traced back to the 19th century, predominantly taking the form of exhaustive surveys that relied on questionnaires and recorded interviews. Researchers collected region-specific words that differed in form, meaning, or pronunciation, and these lexical collections were subsequently charted on maps to produce dialect atlases (or linguistic atlases). As Crystal (*ibid.*) outlines, if a cluster of distinctive linguistic elements consistently emerged within a particular

geographical area, this served as evidence for the existence of a dialect. Delineating the boundaries between dialects often involved plotting the usage of these distinctive elements (isoglosses) and drawing lines to mark the limits of their usage. The intersection of multiple isoglosses defines the boundaries of a dialect. On one side of this intersection, numerous linguistic elements, including words, grammatical forms, meanings, and pronunciations, would systematically differ from their counterparts on the other side. More recently, dialectological methodologies have been complemented by structural dialectology, which endeavours to uncover patterns and relationships linking forms in diverse dialects.

In reference to the Khasi language, the first comprehensive survey of its primary dialects was undertaken by Grierson (1903) in his “Linguistic Survey of India”. The Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, has embarked on the “A Dialect Survey of Khasi” project since 2006, aimed at dissecting the linguistic structure of Khasi dialects.

CHAPTER III

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Objectives of the Study

The research project was undertaken with the following objectives in mind:

1. To analyse the cognates (related lexical forms) and non-cognates (unrelated lexical forms) of the varieties.
2. To identify the phonological variants.
3. To develop isoglosses based on the variants.
4. To map the regional varieties based on the geographical locations of the varieties in the different regions.
5. To classify the dialect types and study their affinity with other Austro-Asiatic languages.

3.2 Sample of the Study

1. The study area encompasses the Khasi Hills and the Jaiñtia Hills within the state of Meghalaya.
2. For this research, seven distinct varieties spoken across various districts of the Khasi Hills and Jaiñtia Hills were meticulously chosen. Additionally, Standard Khasi, spoken in the East Khasi Hills, was selected as the reference language against which other varieties were compared and analysed for mapping purposes, as depicted in Figure 3-1.
3. These varieties encompass the Sutnga and Moolamylliāng varieties spoken in the East Jaiñtia Hills District; the Sahsnīāng variety prevalent in the West Jaiñtia Hills District; the Thangbuli variety spoken in the Southern East Jaintia Hills, representing the War-Jaiñtia varieties; the UmñīuhTmar variety, spoken in the Southern East Khasi Hills, signifying the War-Khasi varieties; and the Pariong and Lyngam varieties, prevalent in the West Khasi Hills District within the state of Meghalaya.

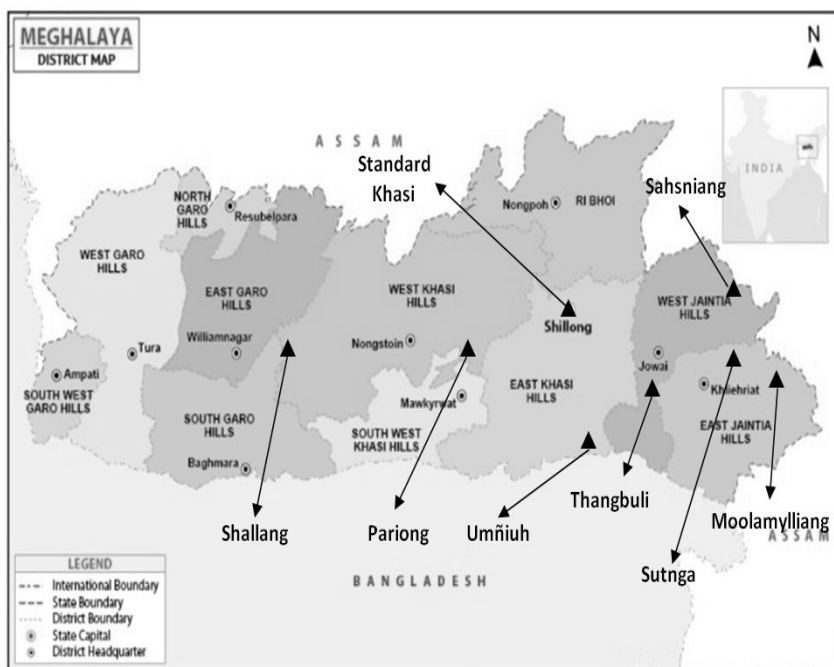


Fig. 3-1: TheStudy Areas That Were Visited to Collect the Data¹

3.3 Hypothesis of the Study

The following hypothesis has been formulated for this study: The Khasi language varieties spoken in the diverse regions of the Khasi and Jaintia hills exhibit substantial structural variations, particularly in terms of pronunciation and lexical elements, specific to their respective geographic locations.

¹Meghalaya District Map.2019. “Maps of India”. Accessed June 10, 2022. <https://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/meghalaya/meghalaya.htm>.

3.4 Research Methodology

3.4.1 Data Source

Primary data were gathered through interviews and interactions with local informants and respondents proficient in their respective dialects. Word lists and sentence lists were utilised as data collection tools to amass a sufficient volume of data, facilitating the mapping of dialects and the assessment of their degrees of linguistic affinity.

3.4.2 Tools

- i. Word lists were meticulously crafted to encompass lexical items associated with the following semantic categories: body parts, kinship and colour terminology, fundamental verbs, adjectives, natural objects, and numerical terms.
- ii. Sentence lists were carefully designed to elicit the following types of sentences: questions involving interrogative words, sentences in both passive and active voice, as well as sentences showcasing various tense, aspect, and mood (TAM) properties.
- iii. The Cog software is employed for lexicostatistical and comparative linguistic analyses when comparing languages. It offers the capability to automate a substantial portion of the process involved in comparing word lists from multiple languages.
- iv. Geographical Information System (GIS) analytical tools are used to generate geolinguistic maps that illustrate the distribution of distinct lexical variants within specific regions.

3.4.3 Data Collection

The data used for the present study were collected in the field by interviewing informants based on word lists of semantic fields and sentence lists involving different types of sentences and syntactic features. The data were collected from both male and female respondents of different age groups, and their conversations were recorded on a smartphone.

3.4.4 Data Analysis

The recorded data underwent transcription in a broad phonetic format. Standard Khasi serves as the reference language for each of the corresponding lexical varieties. The phonological representations of the lexical variants were subsequently inputted into the Google spreadsheet application, as demonstrated in Figure 3-2. Later on, the spreadsheet is transferred to the Cog software to facilitate the comparison of lexical and phonetic characteristics among the languages. Finally, it is integrated into GIS software to create language maps.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
1	VERBS								
2	GLOSS	Standard Khasi	Sutnga	Moolamylliang	Sahsniang	Thangbuli	Shallang	Pariong	Umniuh
3	Eat	bam	bom	bom	bam	boa	ban	biam	bam
4	Drink	di?	di?	di?	di?	de?	det	dec	di?
5	Walk	ja.d	le	ka.p	lai	ka.p	di?	kai	ja.d
6	Cry	jam	jam	jam	jam	niu	wunnaw	k?an	jam
7	Laugh	rk'e	rk'e	rk'e	rk'ai	tranwa	illom	rk'ei	rk'o
8	Sing	rwai	rwe	rwe	rwai	rwai	rinwi	riwoi	rwe
9	Run	mare?	mare?/p'et	mare?	p'et	phet	hir	mare?	mare?
10	Sleep	thia?	thia?	thia?	thi?	thia?	innin	thia?	thia?
11	Pound	dun	dun	dun	dun	tindun	dən	dun	dun
12	Cover/bury	tep	tep	tep	tep	tep	tinnip	tep	tep
13	Sit	fon	c'on	c'on	c'on	fkia	c'on	c'on	fon
14	Stand	jen	jen	jen	jen	sen	nien	c'en	jen
15	Live	im	im	im	im	pi?im	im	im	im
16	Dead	jap	jap	jap	jap	jip	niap	c'ap	iap
17	Love	iec	may	may	may	mayue	pindai	i.d	le

Fig. 3-2: Google Spreadsheet sample

CHAPTER IV

THE COMPARATIVE LEXICOSTATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF THE REGIONAL VARIETIES OF KHASI

PLEASE SEE CENTREFOLD FOR COLOUR IMAGES

This chapter presents a comparative lexicostatistical analysis of the regional varieties of Khasi, based on several semantic field word lists. Standard Khasi serves as the reference language, forming the basis for the other varieties. The lexicostatistical data will be utilised to explore the lexical and phonetic similarities and differences present among the seven varieties of Standard Khasi.

To conduct this analysis, we employ the computer software Cog, developed by SIL International (2014). Cog provides us with the capability to compare and analyse wordlists of different types using an iterative technique. This tool enables us to swiftly gain insights from the data, allowing us to refine the wordlists and adjust settings as necessary, thereby enhancing our understanding of the differences in greater depth.

4.1 Body Parts

This section is dedicated to the lexicostatistical analysis of the semantic field ‘Body parts’ across the various varieties in comparison to Standard Khasi. Table 4-1 presents the diverse lexical variants along with their corresponding glosses in each of the varieties, as detailed below.

[illegible]

Varieties of Khasi

	ec	ac	a:c	ac	ksian	ec	ec	kaitap
<i>stool</i>	sɔʔpet	sepɛt	sepɛt	sapɛt	sɔʔpet	ʃɔʔpet	sɔʔpet	sɔʔpit
<i>navel</i>	tɪrsim	tɪrsim	tɪrsim	tɪrsim	snim	tɪrʃɪm	tɪrsim	tɪrsim
<i>nails</i>	sneʔdɔʔ	sneʔdɔʔ	sneʔdɔʔ	sneʔdɔʔ	ʃniɑʔdɔʔ	sneʔaʔ	sneʔ	sneʔ
<i>skin</i>	met	dɔʔ	dɔʔ	met	dɔʔ	met	met	mim

Table 4-1

4.1.1 ‘Body parts’ Lexical Similarity and Analysis

In this study, lexical similarity pertains to corresponding forms that, while related in meaning, may not precisely align with the phonetic realisation found in the lexicon. Figure 4-1 illustrates the percentages of lexical similarity within a range of 0% (minimum) to 100% (maximum) among the various varieties.

Figure 4-1 reveals that the Umñiuh, Pariong, and Sahnsniang varieties exhibit a notably high level of ‘Body parts’ lexical similarity to Standard Khasi, boasting 84% and 90% lexical similarity, respectively. On the other hand, the Sutnga and Moolamyliang varieties demonstrate a lexical similarity of 65% and 61% with Standard Khasi. Meanwhile, the Thangbuli variety displays the lowest level of ‘Body parts’ lexical similarity, ranging from 13% to 35% when compared to Standard Khasi and the other varieties.

	Standard Khasi	Umñiuh	Pariong	Sahnsniang	Sutnga	Moolamyliang	Shallang	Thangbuli
Standard Khasi		90	90	84	65	61	39	23
Umñiuh	90		84	81	58	58	39	19
Pariong	90	84		77	58	55	39	19
Sahnsniang	84	81	77		77	65	35	23
Sutnga	65	58	58	77		90	35	35
Moolamyliang	61	58	55	65	90		35	32
Shallang	39	39	39	35	35	35		13
Thangbuli	23	19	19	23	35	32	13	

Fig. 4-1: ‘Body Parts’ Lexical Similarity Matrix

4.1.2 ‘Body parts’ Phonetic Similarity and Analysis

Phonetic similarity, in contrast to lexical similarity, refers to the phonetic realisation of the lexicon as compared across the varieties and Standard Khasi in this study. Pariong, Umñiuh, and Sahnsniang have a high degree of phonetic similarity to Standard Khasi, with 93%, 91%, and 87%, respectively, as well as with the other varieties. Sutnga and Moolamyliang have relatively high phonetic similarity (78% and 75%), although Thangbuli

(52%), and Shallang (61%), have the least ‘Body parts’ phonetic similarity to Standard Khasi, as seen in Figure 4-2.

	Standard Khasi	Pariong	Umniuh	Sahsniang	Sutnga	Moolamyliang	Thangbuli	Shallang
Standard Khasi		93	91	87	78	75	52	61
Pariong	93		87	81	72	69	48	61
Umniuh	91	87		82	72	69	50	60
Sahsniang	87	81	82		85	79	53	58
Sutnga	78	72	72	85		92	61	59
Moolamyliang	75	69	69	79	92		58	57
Thangbuli	52	48	50	53	61	58		42
Shallang	61	61	60	58	59	57	42	

Fig. 4-2: ‘Body Parts’ Phonetic Similarity Matrix

4.2 Kinship Terminology

This section focuses on the lexicostatistical analysis of the semantic field ‘Kinship Terminology’ across the various varieties, in reference to Standard Khasi. Table 4-2 provides an overview of the diverse lexical variants along with their respective glosses in each of the varieties, as detailed below.

Kinship Terminology								
Gloss	Standard Khasi	Sutnga	Moola mylliang	Sahnsiang	Thangbuli	Umñiuh	Pariong	Shallang
Mother	kme	be	be	bej	kme	kmej	mɔj	bej
Father	kpa	pa	pa	pa	pa	kpa	pa	kpa
Child	k ^b on	k ^b on	k ^b on	k ^b on	hun	k ^b on	k ^b on	k ^b on
Son	k ^b onjɪnraŋ	k ^b on ^b inraŋ	k ^b on ^b inraŋ	k ^b on ^b inraŋ	huntaɾme	k ^b onjɪnraŋ	k ^b on ^b inraŋ	k ^b onkoran
Daughter	k ^b onkint ^b ej	k ^b onkint ^b e	k ^b onhint ^b e	k ^b onkint ^b aj	hunhint ^b e	k ^b onkint ^b ej	k ^b onkint ^b ej	k ^b onrakmow
Siblings	ɟi para	c ^b ipaju	c ^b ipaju	c ^b ipaju	ɟiparo	ɟi para	c ^b ikinbow	c ^b ehimbu
Elder brother	himnenjɪnraŋ	pajəheʔ ^b inraŋ	pajuheʔ ^b inraŋ	pamen	jaʔaɾme	kijeʔ jɪnraŋ	kinmen ^b inraŋ	himinkoran
Elder sister	himnenkint ^b ej	pajəheʔkint ^b e	pajuheʔhint ^b e	bemen	jaʔhint ^b e	kijeʔkint ^b ej	kinmenkint ^b ə	himinrakmow
Younger brother	para jɪnraŋ	pajə ^k hanc ^b inraŋ	pajuk ^b hanc ^b inraŋ	pajuc ^b inraŋ	parotaɾme	para jɪnraŋ	kinbow ^b inraŋ	himbukoran
Younger sister	para kint ^b ej	pajə ^k hankint ^b h _e	pajuk ^b hant ^b hint ^b h _e	pajukint ^b aj	para ^b ohint ^b e	para kint ^b ej	kinbowkint ^b ə	himburakmow
Maternal-grand mother	meje:c	be men	be men	bej men	mu	meji:c	moɪ:c	bej jaw
Maternal-grand father	pa e:c	pa men	pa men	pa men	wəʔ	pa i:c	pa i:c	pa ^b aw
Paternal-grand mother	mej ^k a	be k ^a	men k ^a	bej ^k a	k ^a	jaw k ^a	moik ^a	bej ^k a
Paternal-grand father	pa k ^a	pa k ^a	wəʔk ^a	pa k ^a	k ^a	wəʔk ^a	pa k ^a	pa k ^a
Grand child	kse:w	ksu	ksu	kse:w	hinsew	kfəw	ksew	ksəw

Table 4-2