**INTRODUCTION**

Garo (also spelled as Garrow, or else known by the people's own name for themselves, Mande) is the language of the majority of the people of the Garo Hills in the state of Meghalaya. It is a part of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages and comes under the Bodo-Koch branch. With around 900,000 native speakers, Garo has been recognized as one of the official languages of Meghalaya.

**FIGURE 1: CLASSIFICATION OF GARO**

**HISTORY**

The people of northeastern India often construct migration stories in an attempt to explain the history and present distribution of the tribes. These stories assume that language and ethnic (tribal) boundaries coincide, and that they endure through long periods. Garos have no myths about having emerged from the ground or fallen from the sky, but they take for granted that their ancestors had to come from somewhere other than their present homeland. There are a number of conflicting theories about the origin of the Garos. According to one such account, the Garos first immigrated to Garo Hills from Tibet (referred to as Tibetgre) around 400 BC under the leadership of Jappa Jalimpa, crossing the Brahmaputra River and tentatively settling in the river valley. Other ethnic groups later drove them up into the hills in and around the Brahmaputra River till they finally settled the erstwhile uninhabited Garo Hills. Another theory claims that they originated in the in Mandalay as they call themselves "Mande".

The Garo language has a rich varied vocabulary, but prior to the advent of the American Baptist missionaries, no attempt had been made to compile the Garo words. It was only during the period of (1788-89) that John Eliot, the commissioner of Dacca, attempted to compile the Garo vocabulary for the first time. American Baptist missionaries developed a written form of Garo during the last decades of the 19th century. The missionaries based the orthography upon the dialect of the northeastern corner of the Garo Hills. This was the area with the first substantial number of educated and literate Garos, and their dialect has influenced the speech of educated Garos everywhere. The Romanization introduced by the missionaries is now well established, and the language has been used as a medium of elementary education in the Garo Hills for many decades. Missionaries compiled Garo grammar at various stages but the most detailed account is by Dr. Robbins Burling at the University of Michigan. The richness of the Garo language and vocabulary is manifested in the oral
and traditional literature of the Garos like Katta Agana (Epic Lore), Katta Sailing, (A type of folk-song) Doroa (folk song) and Minggrapa (Lamentation during the wake).

DEMOGRAPHY

Garo has an overall population of 900,000 with around 780,000 residing in India and Most of these Garos live in a hilly district in the western part of the Indian state of Meghalaya, but about 100,000 live across the border in Bangladesh, most of them just south of the Garo Hills. Smaller settlements are found in West Assam - Goalpara, Kamrup, Karbi Anglong districts; Nagaland - Kohima District; Tripura - South Tripura District, Udaipur Subdivision, North Tripura District, Kamalpur, Kailasahar subdivisions, West Tripura District, Sadar Subdivision; West Bengal - Jalpaiguri and Koch Bihar districts. In Bangladesh, Garo speakers are found in parts of Mymensingh plains, Tangail Sherpur, Madhupur, Jamelpur, Netrakona, Sylhet and Dhaka. Two small enclaves, one with people known as "A'tong", the other with "Ruga", are found within the Garo Hills. Each of these groups has its own language but they consider themselves to be Garos and are accepted as such by all other Garos. Except for A'tong and Ruga all dialects spoken by Garos are fairly mutually intelligible.

The Garo language is mainly spoken by a tribal group in Meghalaya, India and neighboring areas of Bangladesh, who call themselves A·chik Mande (literally "hill people," from a-chik "hill" + mande "people") or simply A·chik or Mande. The Garos are the second largest tribe in Meghalaya after Khasi and constitute around a third of the population in Meghalaya. Interestingly, the Garos are one of the few matrilineal societies in the world.

The Garo language has some similarities with Boro-Kachari, Rava, Dimasa and Kok-Borok languages. Garo remains in close contact with Bodo from Assam and Khasi in Meghalaya. The literacy rate in Garo is 55% in Meghalaya, which is low as compared to Khasi. There is an interesting overlap between Khasi (Mon-Khmer group) and Garo in the Lyngngam-Megam tribe. The Khasi consider them as a sub-tribe and refer to them as Lyngngam while the Garo consider them their own and address them as Megam! This is yet another example of the perception of strong linkage between tribes and languages. Most languages in the northeast are named after the tribes that speak them.
LANGUAGE CONTACT AND LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

On their northern, western, and southern borders most of the neighbors of the Garos speak Bengali or a closely related dialect of Assamese. Garos always call this language 'Bengali' and they have been borrowing from it for many centuries. The impact of Bengali is particularly strong among the Garos of Bangladesh where all primary education is conducted in Bengali, and where it is needed for everyday dealings. All adult Garos in Bangladesh are able to use Bengali for practical purposes and many are fluent. Bengali presses less insistently upon Garos living in India, for it is not the language of education or government, and even Bengali traders learn enough Garo to deal with their customers in their own language. Nevertheless, even the dialects of the most remote areas of the Garo Hills have absorbed large numbers of borrowed words. These words bring some innovations to the phonology, though mostly by placing familiar sounds in new positions rather than by introducing entirely new sound. The influence of English is more recent, but it now competes with Bengali as a source of borrowings. The influence of English is stronger among the Indian Garos than among Bangladeshi Garos in direct proportion to the relative weakness of Bengali.

The impact of borrowed words is great enough, particularly in Bangladesh, to worry some Garos. A few despair at the flood of Bengali words that they feel are corrupting their language, but they feel powerless to avoid them. Garos in Bangladesh receive all their education in Bengali and even in the Garo Hills, Garo medium education stops after elementary school. All high school subjects come with their foreign vocabulary. Too little has been printed in Garo to sustain a richly literate community, and well-educated Garos must rely upon English or Bengali for many literate purposes. Nevertheless, with 700,000 speakers, Garo is not yet on the list of endangered languages. Even in outlying areas like Bangladesh, most children of Garo parents still learn Garo as their first language. It might be a question of time when this trend changes.

DIALECTS

Garo has a number of dialects. It can be said that the language follows distinctive patterns in the different areas of Meghalaya. Some of the common dialects of Garo include A'beng (A'bengya, Am'beng), A'chick (A'chik), Achik (A'we, Chisak, Dual, Matchi), Dacca, Ganching, Kamrup. A'tong and Ruga present the greatest dialectal variations. A'chik is considered to be the standardized dialect. A'beng is spoken in Bangladesh but is not mutually intelligible. A recent study revealed the following new dialects of Garo namely,

- The Matchi dialect is spoken in the central highlands on the upper reaches of the Simsang river
- The Chibok dialect is spoken in the upper Bhugi Valley
- Dual, spoken in the upper reaches of Simsang
- Chisak occupies a contiguous position from Matchi whereas Dual is much spoken in the South
- Gara Ganching is spoken in the mid southeastern portion West of Atong

The Department of Garo, the only one of its kind in the world, was established in 1996 at the inception of North Eastern Hill University. The Department documented in audio and videotapes parts of A'chick (Garo) epic poetry of "Katta Agana", the legend of "Dikki & Bandi", some folktales, folksongs, and traditional oral poetry.
ALPHABET

As a result of the missionary influence, Garo developed a Latin-based spelling system during the 19th century. A version of Bengali is also used to write Garo in some parts of Bangladesh.

![Garo alphabet and pronunciation](http://www.omniglot.com/writing/garo.htm)

FIGURE 2: THE GARO ALPHABET AND PRONUNCIATION
(SOURCE: HTTP://WWW.OMNIGLOT.COM/Writing/GARO.HTM)

PHONOLOGY

VOWELS

Garo has five simple vowels. This is phonologically appropriate and the only complication is that /i/ embraces both high front and high back unrounded vowels. Since, in native Garo words, high front vowels are found only in open syllables and high back unrounded vowels only in closed syllables, they are in perfect complimentary distribution. Similar though less salient ambiguities arise with all the vowels, since they are all shorter in closed than in open syllables, but even native speakers find the phonetic difference between open and closed syllable /i/ to be highly salient while the rather modest length variation shown by other vowels is hardly noticed. The following is the list of vowels and diphthongs in Garo:

- **Long Vowels** - /iː uː ɛː əː/ <ɨ ʉ ɐ̯ aː>
- **Short Vowels** - /i u ɛ æ/ <i u o e a>
- **Oral Diphthongs** - /ɛi æi ɛi ɔi uɛ ɛi æi æɔɛ/ <ei eo ai ao iu ei eo ai ao>

CONSONANTS

- **Nasals** - /m n/ <m n>
- **Stops** - /p t k cʔ/ <p t k c q>
- **Palatalised Stops** - /pʲ tʲ kʲ/ <b d g>
- **Fricatives** - /ɸ ɕ ʃ ç χ/ <f s z h x>
- **Approximants** - /ʋ ʟ/ <v l>
- **Tap** - /ɾ/ <ɾ>
There are some patterns that have been found regarding the placement of the consonants. For example, [k] occurs only in medial and final positions (tsa?lwkom -> shade, agalsak -> world), the glottal stop(?) occurs only in the medial position etc.

**The Glottal Stop**

Glottal stops can occur syllable finally, either alone or in combination with a nasal or an /l/. Minimal pairs for the presence and absence of a glottal stop are plentiful: cha-a 'grow', cha?-a 'eat'; ring-a 'drink', ring?-a 'sing'. A glottal stop never occurs in the final syllable of a Garo word, and whenever a glottal threatens to appear as word final, an echo vowel is inserted that protects it. For example, the combining form do?- 'bird' (do?-ni 'bird's'; do?-tip 'nest') becomes do?-o when no other bound morpheme follows. Syllables that end with both a glottal and another consonant undergo a similar change: gol?- 'stick' (gol?-chok 'pointed stick'; gol?-ko 'stick' accusative) becomes go?-ol when used without a suffix.

**Grammar**

Garo holds an agglutinative structure for derivational and verbal morphology and an analytic structure for nominal and pronominal morphology. The predominant grammatical device seems to be affixation, particularly the use of suffixes.

**Verbs**

Verbs in Garo are highly inflected taking on a number of affixes to show number, person, tense, aspect and mood. At its simplest, a Garo sentence requires nothing except a verb base and a tense suffix. Optionally, one or more nouns, noun phrases, pronouns and adverbs can precede the verb, and with the help of additional affixes, the verb itself can be made very complex. Single word sentences are very common - e.g.,

\[ A-gan-chak -tai -ja -wa -kon. \]

speak -answer-again-NEG-FUT-probably

'[He] will probably not answer again'

**Number**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>mi:bapanu</td>
<td>1/he/she eat(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>pi:bapanu</td>
<td>They/We Eat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### PERSON

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st Person</td>
<td>mibapanu hai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Person</td>
<td>mibapanu te</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Person</td>
<td>mibapanu neo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TENSE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>mibapanu hai pa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near-Past</td>
<td>mibapanu hai co</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>mibapanu hai tāo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Near-Future</td>
<td>mibapanu hai mou</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future</td>
<td>mibapanu hai ge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### ASPECT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imperfect</td>
<td>mibapanu hai tāo ki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive</td>
<td>mibapanu hai tāo na ai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfect</td>
<td>mibapanu hai tāo qoi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### MOOD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>mibapanu hai tāo na ika</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>mibapanu hai tāo na iilo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pronouns

In Garo, several pronouns have a free (or nominative) form that differs from the form to which other case markers are attached.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>Free form</th>
<th>Combining form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>ang-a</td>
<td>ang-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>na?-a</td>
<td>nang'-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you, pl</td>
<td>na?-sim-ang</td>
<td>na?-sim-ang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he</td>
<td>bi-a</td>
<td>bi-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we, exclusive</td>
<td>ching-a</td>
<td>ching-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we, inclusive</td>
<td>an?-ching</td>
<td>an?-ching</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the case markers can be added to pronouns as easily as to nouns: ang-o 'with /by me' (locative), nang'-ni 'your' (genitive), ching-ko 'us' (accusative), na'-sim-ang-na 'to you all' (dative). An interesting feature to note is that Garo has dialectal pronoun variability.

Adverbs and Reduplication

Garo has a large class of adverbs, many of them reduplicative or partially reduplicative, that take no affixes at all: pang-nan 'always'; bak-bak 'quickly'; sruk-sruk 'quietly, secretly'; jol-jol 'directly, systematically' pil-ap-pil-ap 'in a flapping manner', pil-eng-pil-eng 'rocking back and forth', gu-rung-ga-rang 'aimlessly' (of wandering about). Many reduplicative, or partially reduplicative, adverbs are transparently derived from verbs: ring-reng-ga-reng 'in a back and forth swinging manner', from ring-reng-a 'to swing back and forth'; rip-ong-rip-ong 'flying around' from rip-ong-a 'to fly around'; srot-srot 'in a sliding manner', from srot-a 'slip, slide'. Such adverbs, however, cannot be productively created from any verb at all.

Some adverbial affixes that are used within verbs also have reduplicated forms, many of them conveying a sense of repetition or continuous action: chot-tip-tip-a 'break (string) into bits', from chot-a 'break'; ru-kring-krang-a 'pour all around', from ru-a 'pour'; sel-gol-gol-a 'leak a lot, rapidly', from sel-a 'leak'. A few verb bases, again often conveying repetitive actions, are reduplicated in form: jok-jok-a 'bounce (as when riding in a bus)', deng-deng-a 'squirm, wiggle'.

Reduplication of numbers to convey a distributive sense is fully productive: gong-gin-i-gin-i 'two rupees each' (gong- 'classifier for rupees', gin-i 'two'); le-ka king-git-tam-git-tam-ko on'-bo 'give three sheets of paper to each' (le-ka 'paper', king 'classifier for thin flat things', git-tam 'three').

Adjectives

Adjectives in Garo generally follow the noun they qualify, the case ending being in that case attached to the adjective and not to the noun. They undergo no change to make them agree with the gender and number of the noun. The Garo numerals, take varying prefixes according to the class of objects to which they are applied. When human beings are referred to, sak- is prefixed; for irrational animals the corresponding prefix is ma-ng-, and for inanimate objects ge-.

Classifiers

A notable feature in Garo is the extensive use of classifiers. The combination of such classifiers with a noun or a numeral in constructing phrases, also occur abundantly.
/sak/ for people of all sorts, even Gods and ghosts.
/may/ for animals.
/ge/ for all objects of daily use and also for fingers.
/kiN/ for thin flat things.
/pat/ for paper.
/miN/ for words, stories, songs, etc
/roN/ for round objects.
/poN/ for hollow cylindrical objects.
/goN/ for rope-like things.
/te/ for houses, rice pots, cups and other hollow objects.
/goN/ for bank notes.
/paN/ for plants and trees.
/baN/ for parts of a whole
/dot/ for things that stick out from the ground
/nok/ for households.
/jak/ for leaves and pages of books
/gar/ for bunches of things.
/pak/ for half of anything.

FIGURE 3: GARO CLASSIFIERS

Examples of combining classifiers, nouns and numerals:

mikroN roN sa
eye classifier one

reka kiN gittam
paper classifier three

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