

A tale of two tribes – and the emergence of a language

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1 Introduction

This is the story of two “Black tribes” from the Americas that both ended up in Sierra Leone in West Africa. Their members were descended from slaves, in the one case from the southern part of America, in the other from Jamaica, and now, around the year 1800, they made the journey in the opposite direction. Apart from this, however, the two tribes could not have been more different, in terms of their origin and background, the migration route they took and, most importantly for this squib, the varieties of English they spoke and what happened to these varieties after the two tribes had settled in Sierra Leone.

In this squib, I will tell the stories of the two tribes and their languages. Section 2 will be devoted to the first tribe to make the journey, who referred to themselves as the Settlers, and who spoke a form of Black English. Section 3 will deal with the second tribe, which in the context of this squib will be referred as the Maroons; they spoke a kind of creole language. Section 4 looks at what happened to this creole after the Maroons had settled in Sierra Leone, and how it may have developed into what is now known as Krio.

2 The Settlers

2.1 *Background and migration route*

By the end of the 18th century, the Settlers were free Blacks, who owned land in the southern part of what became the United States. However, during the fight for an independent North America, they had supported the British cause, i.e. the losing side, and because of this all their possessions were confiscated (Rankin 1836: 81). The British tried to compensate for these losses by offering the Settlers lands in Nova Scotia in Canada. However, the climate there did not suit them, used as they were to the warm conditions of the American south. So when they were given the opportunity to travel to Sierra Leone in West Africa, the land of their forefathers, with the promise fertile lands and a more congenial climate, they decided to take it. But when the group, 1,131 strong (including wives and children), arrived in 1792, they found nothing. They were assigned to a particular quarter of the capital Freetown, but there were no houses fit for

habitation. And the land they were promised had not been cleared and prepared for growing crops (Rankin 1836: 87). To make matters worse, it was the rainy season and many succumbed to fevers. So the introduction to their new (old) homeland was a miserable affair. As a result, they rebelled against the government, but were defeated (see also Section 3).

2.2 *Tribal status and language*

Originally the Settlers were not a separate tribe; consisting of assorted subgroups, they were not even a coherent group. However, by reason of shared experiences and vicissitudes, they had gradually welded into what may loosely be described as a tribe by the end of the 18th century (although they would probably not have thought of themselves as a tribe). The language they used was English, but due to the lack of homogeneity of the tribe, we may assume that the forms of English they used ranged from the Black English of the period to standard English, and that speakers probably controlled more than one variety. As Figaniére e Morão (1822: 23) observed, “[t]he Settlers (...) occupy the south-east part of Freetown, speak English well, which is their mother tongue ...”.¹

3 The Maroons

3.1 *Background and migration route*

The Maroons were descended from Jamaican slaves, who had rebelled and fought for independence, some of them already having gained freedom before the end of the Spanish period (1509–1655). Their independence was acknowledged by both the Spanish (whom they helped to defend the island against the British), and the British, after these had defeated the Spanish and taken over the island. At the end of the 18th century (1795–1796), however, a conflict arose between the Trelawney Town community and the British rulers, which led to a brutal guerilla war, ending in defeat for the Maroons (Rankin 1836: 106–107; see also Bilby 1984: 1–2). By way of punishment they were sent to Nova Scotia, from where they were deported, some years later, to Freetown in Sierra Leone, to a quarter next to that of the Settlers. They landed in Sierra Leone in 1800, right at the time of the Settlers’ uprising, and joined forces with the British, saving them from defeat (Rankin 1836: 104–105). The Maroons knew nothing about agriculture, but being astute tradesmen, they soon managed to obtain a superior social position, their number rapidly rising, as those of the Settlers’ decreased (Rankin 1836: 97; 108–109).

¹ I am grateful to Lachlan Mackenzie for the English translation of the Portuguese texts.

3.2 *Tribal status and language*

By the time they were deported from Jamaica, the Maroons were a tribe, having already formed a community even when Jamaica was still Spanish (notionally at least, as the Maroons largely governed themselves). Also linguistically, they were very different from the Settlers. In Jamaica they first spoke Western Maroon, a Creole Language of Jamaica; this later developed into a variety spoken in Trelawney Town (Trelawney Maroon). This variety became extinct in Jamaica after the Maroons were deported – in fact the only evidence we have for its existence is its presence in West Africa. As noted by Figaniére e Morão (1822: 23-24), “[T]he Maroons ... who occupy the north-east [of Freetown] ... speak their own language, which is a corrupted English”.

4 Krio

4.1 *The emergence of Krio*

In this section I will argue that present-day Krio has its origin in the creole spoken by the Maroons who settled in Sierra Leone in 1800. This may seem unlikely, given that

1. they were small in number (smaller than the Settlers) and some of them even returned to Jamaica (Anderson 2013: 117);
2. they arrived later than the Settlers;
3. they spoke a creole language.

Nevertheless, it seems to be the case that it was their language that, in a relatively short time, developed into the most prominent language in Sierra Leone, now known as Krio, the (still expanding) national language.

So how did this happen? First of all, as we have seen, the Maroons were more successful in establishing themselves in Sierra Leone, where they soon became socially superior to the Settlers. In addition, the British, who were in control of Sierra Leone, realized that it was important for the two tribes to be able to communicate. By helping the British to bring down the Settlers' uprising, the Maroons had curried favour with them. This may have played a role in the decision of the British to encourage the use of the Maroon creole by both groups. Finally, as shown in Table 1, it was exactly at this time that different groups of people, all liberated slaves from various African countries, migrated to Freetown and environs. Liberated slaves were also enlisted by the navy and the army “to augment a force consisting primarily of British army convicts”, the supply of which was unsteady (Anderson 2013: 104–105). This created the

perfect conditions for the creole to transition into a general language, which, subsequently, was given its own name: Krio.

Table 1: Enlistment and Migration at Freetown 1808-1840 (partially taken over from Anderson 2013, Appendix II).²

Year	Army	Navy	Gambia	Other	Total
1808-1810	73	16		1 (Gorée)	90
1811-1815	2,031	93		7 (Gorée)	2,131
1816-1820	273	25	22		320
1821-1825	140	15	20	14 (Isles de Los) 4 (Ascension)	193
1826-1830	738	46	436	13 (Isles de Los) 55 (Ascension)	1,288
1831-1835	210	68	2,582		2,860
1836-1840	145	29	218	45 (Ascension)	437
Total	3,610	292	3,278	139	7,319

4.2 *Some examples*

The short passages in examples (1) and (2) were recorded by Rankin as early as 1834, when he visited Freetown. They show that by that time the younger generations of the two tribes spoke virtually the same language, although the animosity between the two groups prevented them from admitting this.

The first example records the speech of some Maroons, who, after a sermon by a British preacher denouncing the their “Plurality of wives”, came to deliver the abandoned wives into the hands of “his Excellency”:

(1) “*What do you all want from me?*” cried his Excellency in surprise.
Upspake the Maroons:
“Preacher, good man; preacher say, wife no wife. Go to de Debbil, or put away wife but one. Well, den, here our wife all for you!” ...
“Him take away wife,” said his flock.
“she no sabby where get yam-yam. Have no home, no sunting: missa parson, who tak away wife, good man, can feed and keep her.”
 (Rankin 1836: 111–112)

² I have not included the entire table (which covers the period from 1808 to 1863), as I did not consider the second part of this period to be relevant here. Also, I noticed that in the original table the numbers in rows 2 to 5 do not add up; I have corrected this to the best of my ability. This does not, however, affect the argument presented here.

When we compare this to example (2), spoken by a Settler, we see that the language is very much the same (and certainly no example of knowing “English good”), despite the speaker’s remonstration that she does not speak “bad-palaver like Maroon girl”. Note in particular, in both texts, the use of *sabby* for ‘know’, the pronunciation (or at least spelling) of words like *then* (*den*), the use of the oblique form of pronouns in subject position, and the invariant use of the negator *no*.

(2) “*Why for, den, you no can ‘peak a me like Settler-girl? why for you done curse me wid Maroon word? pish, pho for true; me sabby de English good; no talk bad-palaver like Maroon girl; ...*”
 (Rankin 1836: 107)

5 Conclusion

In this squib, I have given a (very brief) history of two tribes that crossed the Atlantic, arriving in Freetown around 1800, the Settlers, who spoke English, and the Maroons, who spoke a Jamaican Creole. I hope to have shown that, due to a very specific combination of factors, the descendants of the first group, as well as other groups of migrants arriving in Freetown at around the same time, may soon have started speaking the language of the second, thus licensing its development into a general language – now Krio, the national language of Sierra Leone.

References

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