# Establishing the Kromanti-Akan Link: Evidence from the Occurrence of Phonemic /r/

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## Abstract

*Kromanti, the language spoken by the Eastern Maroons of Portland, Jamaica, has been described in the literature as being related to the Akan language complex. While some work has been done on Maroon culture and Kromanti, including ethnographic research and short scholarly papers, there has not been a comprehensive examination of the language. This situation is perhaps due to designations of Kromanti as "not functional" and "dying". However, precisely because of these reasons, my research has been aimed at exploring the current state of the language as well as its source. To this end, this paper will focus on an area of the Kromanti language that establishes a clear link with the Akan languages, that of phonemic /r/. The paper will provide evidence to suggest that not only is there a relationship across the languages, but also by looking at the occurrence of phonemic /r/ across them, a possible conclusion can be drawn about the specific dialect from which Kromanti would have historically descended.*

## Introduction

Kromanti is a language spoken by the Eastern maroons of Moore Town in the parish of Portland, Jamaica. Moore Town was established as a free black village through a treaty signed between the Eastern Maroons and the British colonial authorities in Jamaica in June 1739. Prior to this treaty, the Maroons had been well organized bands of runaway slaves who the British authorities had failed to capture and had grown weary of after engaging them in several battles. Two major wars were fought between the British and the Maroons in the eastern region of the country and before the signing of the peace treaty, the Maroon groups were steadily peopled with runaway slaves.

Kromanti is a dying language. In fact, Bilby (1983) describes the language as "not a functioning language, but rather a highly fragmentary ritual 'language' consisting of a number of set phrases and expressions". Alleyne (1988) views Kromanti as "no longer being a viable means of communication, but still used by Maroons to mark the boundaries between them and others". Alleyne also observes that Kromanti is "based almost exclusively on Twi-Asante" (1988). Hall-Alleyne (1990) suggests that since "(Maroons) refer to the language as Kramanti (derived from Koromantee, a slave fort on the then Gold Coast of Africa) and to themselves as Shanti, this would make their language Asante Twi, the major language of the Gold Coast, which belongs to the Akan dialect group of the Niger-Congo family"

While Bilby (2005) has done ethnographic research on Maroon culture in Jamaica and short papers on Kromanti have been done by Alleyne, Hall-Alleyne and a few others, there has not been a comprehensive examination of Kromanti, perhaps because the language has been designated as "not functional" and "dying". However, precisely because of these reasons, my research on Kromanti has been aimed at answering a few major and lingering questions, namely:
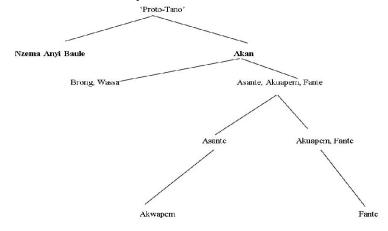
1. What is the state of Kromanti in this contemporary period?
2. What is the source of the language?
3. What are the contexts within which the language would have been historically used?

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For this paper, I will try to examine the first two of these questions by looking at one feature of the language, that is, the occurrence of phonemic /r/.

**The Current State of Kromanti**

Kromanti is no longer used as a means of communication, at least, not among the living. It is a    dying language that is only known by a constantly shrinking percentage of the aging population of the  community of Moore Town. Today, fewer than 10 speakers of Kromanti remain. In addition, the domains within which the language would have been used have virtually disappeared, and  this, along with age and distance between its speakers, renders communication across the speakers non-existent.

Despite the status of Kromanti as dying, I have found a large body of Kromanti data among current speakers that was worth analyzing. Through a combination of data from my research in the community and those of Bilby (2005), it was possible to make concrete statements about the make-up of the language. In general, it was found that the words in Kromanti overwhelmingly resembled Akan and thus could be  attributed to an Akan source. But beyond that, I looked within the Akan language complex to make more specific statements about the dialect to which Kromanti is most likely related.



In presenting data from Akan, the three major literary dialects of Fanti, Asante-Twi and Akuapem are the ones referred to, as they represent distinct developments within the language. The diagram above, taken from Dolphyne (1975), illustrates the grouping of the dialects of Akan " in terms of the stages through which they broke away from each other" (Dolphyne 1975: 14). I would suggest that Kromanti represents one strand of development of Akan, albeit one exported to Jamaica as a result of the slave trade.

We can assume that Akan was at one period a linguistically homogeneous language, and that there was a split which resulted in several groups being formed. The Akan dialects such as Asante, Fante, Akuapem etc. represent one branch of the subsequent development of the language. The Kromanti language represents another branch of this Akan language family. Each of the branches therefore represents a separate cross-generational continuum from a common parent language that exhibits some extent of linguistic change across it. The Kromanti branch would have had to exist in some form by 1739, the year that the Maroon peace treaty with the British authorities was signed. It also marked the end of any new inflow of slaves to Maroon settlements, since this was one of the treaty agreements. Therefore, Kromanti should resemble either one or a combination of two or more of the Akan dialects as spoken during this period.

The approach being taken here is the examination of sound change and the phonology of the  languages. This approach is ideal since according to Welmers (1973: 4) "the only historical change in language that is systematic or regular is phonetic change". As a result, words descended from the common parent should have correspondences that demonstrate that the languages are related, and that would make it possible to reconstruct something of the phonologic system and the vocabulary of the common parent.

The occurrence of /r/ is a good way to determine the origin of the language, because, like nominal prefixes in Kromanti, there seem to be both correlations across Kromanti and the Akan dialects as well as some level of variation and difference in patterns found across them. This feature is important to a discussion of the origin of Kromanti since the occurrence of /r/ has different developments across the dialects of Akan. To the extent that it can be established that Kromanti is a descendant of Akan, /r/ can assist us in making statements about which dialect of the language Kromanti most resembles.

## Phonemic /r/

Kromanti has two (2) processes governing the occurrence of /r/ within the syllable.
1. /r/ may be the second element in a consonantal onset
2. /r/ may occur in syllable onset position

## Pattern 1 - /r/ in a consonantal cluster

Within this category, two major subdivisions may be made according to:

a.      clusters which are created in Kromanti where no clusters exist in contemporary Akan, e.g.

Kr. – *obrafo* /   Ak. - ɔ-*bófo*, and Kr. – *brubu* / Ak. - *búu buu*.

b.   clusters which are retained in Kromanti where clusters already existed in contemporary                Akan,  e.g.

Kr – *insikre* / Ak. – *asíkré* and Kr. - *pre-ko* / Ak. - *prɛ-ko.*

There is also an issue of variability in Kromanti. That is, there are some items which fall within this pattern that show variation between the presence and absence of /r/. For example, *bubu / brubu,  abebu / abrebu*, and *sabreke / abeke*.

With regard to the first set, that is, clusters which are created in Kromanti where no clusters existed in the Akan cognates, the examples show that there are two ways in which the cluster may be  created. It may be achieved through

a.      contraction of a CVrV stem where the first vowel in the stem is deleted producing CrV.

b.      expanding a syllable through insertion of an /r/ into a previously CV syllable to produce     CrV.

## Pattern 2: /r/ in syllable onset position

The items in Kromanti in which /r/ occurs as the only consonant in the onset are:

1. o.ba.rii.ma  'man'          2. ba.ri 'tie'          3.  ya.ri.fo
'sick/dead'

The first observation here is that in Kromanti there is variation between *obariima* and *obaiima*, where the Akan cognate is *o-bàrímà*. Absence of the /r/ in Kromanti may be representative of a pronunciation which comes about in normal or fast speech, as against the presence of /r/ which would likely occur in more careful or deliberate speech. The absence of the /r/ may also relate to the presence of the tone on the original word.

The categorization of *bari* and *yarifo* as having two and three syllables respectively is based on the syllable structure rules observed in Akan. Syllable types that are permitted are V, CV and C. Akan does not allow syllables of the type VC or CVC (Dolphyne 1988: 53). Based on these rules, there is a close correlation between the Kromanti words and their Akan cognates *bàrí* and ɔ -*yaréfó.*

### Explaining the patterns

Some explanations of the patterns present in Kromanti may be gained by examining the syllable structure rules of the Akan dialects. Dolphyne (1988) has demonstrated that there are differences in these syllable structure rules across the different dialects. It has been shown that these differences are a result of

phonological changes that each of the dialects has undergone over a period of 500 years.

In relation to the occurrence of /r/ within the syllable, Dolphyne identifies two developments.

*The first development*

In Akuapem and Asante, syllabic /r/ (i.e. when /r/ carries the tone of the syllable in the absence of a tone bearing vowel) "carries the tone of the first vowel which is not pronounced" (Dolphyne, 1988: 54). These vowels are high and high-mid front vowels which occur between consonants. The examples below taken from Dolphyne demonstrate this point:

ɔkyèrɛ ------- ɔkyɾɛ    "he shows / teaches"

òfìrí ------- òfɾí    "he buys on credit"

In these examples, /r/ in the items to the right belongs to a different syllable from the following vowel. The CCV structure which is evident in the examples to the right reflects a reduced form of the disyllabic CVCV stems to the left.

This type of reduction is also evident in Kromanti: Proto-Akan *a.se.bé.re.kyi-e* may become Kromanti *sa.bre.ke*. The CVCV pattern evident in Akan becomes CCV in Kromanti by the same process of reduction identified in Akan. However, there may be some divergence between the varieties as the basic syllable structures identified in Akuapem and Asante do not seem to have been retained in Kromanti. The /r/ in the two Akan varieties carries the tone of the deleted vowel and is syllabic. There is no evidence however that suggests that the /r/ in Kromanti is syllabic. It is possible then, that the CCV stem in Kromanti may constitute a

syllable and represent some level of divergence from Akan. This development may also be observed in other items in Kromanti. The following items show a similar process:

| Akan | Kromanti | Meaning |
|---|---|---|
| ba (bra) | (ba.rá) bra | "to come" |
| o-bû.ro-ní | o.bruo.ni | "European, whiteman; mulatto" |
| ɔ-kye.rɛ.mã | o. ɔ re.ma | "drummer, by the fetish- called priests cyamfo" |
| a.kõ.rõ.mã | o.kra.man | "a bird of prey,hawk" |
| o-ba.re.hyí.a | o.bra.ye | "a cartouche, cartridge belt all around the loins" |

**Bra** is included here as the cognate form which alternates with **bará** because Christaller (1933: 46) also lists **bará** as an alternate form of the verb 'to come'. It is this CVCV stem which is reduced to the CCV structure in the way identified by Dolphyne above. Kromanti seems therefore to reflect a similar type of historical change to that which Dolphyne (1988) refers to as affecting Akan stems of the CV.CV type, where the second consonant is /r/. The process that occurs in this case is a reduction of the first syllable.

**The second development**

Another development identified by Dolphyne relates to the Fante dialect where the syllabic /r/ "carries the tone of the ... second vowel which is not pronounced" (1988: 54). This second vowel is not pronounced if both the first and second vowels are high vowels. The Fante dialect, then, shows differences in stem formation when compared to what occurs in Akuapem and Asante. Some examples from Dolphyne highlight this situation:

*(Akuapem and Asante)*

ɔkyèrɛ ------- ɔkyɾ́ɛ       "he shows / teaches"

òfìrí   ------- òffí        "he buys on credit"

                    *(Fante)*

òfìrí   ------- òfir

The data presented from Kromanti, though not extensive, more closely resemble the  developments which have taken place in Asante and Akuapem than those which are at work in Fante. The examples that   follow illustrate this point:
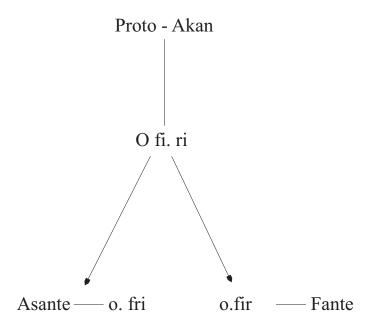
akõrõmã 'a bird of prey, hawk'        okrema 'chicken/hawk'

o-bûro-ní 'european/White man'        obruoni 'whiteman'

As can be seen in the examples, the first vowel in each of the Akan stems may be considered a high  vowel[1]. However, the second vowel is also high. This means that if Kromanti were reflecting a pattern that resembles Fante the contraction of the CVCV stem would have taken place in the following way:

o-bûro-ní 'European/White man' o.bur.ni 'White man'
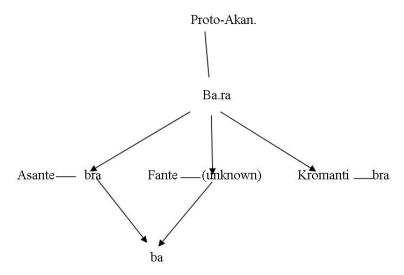
\        This would conform to the Fante rule that if both the first and the second vowel are high, then the second vowel is not pronounced and results in a final /r/. Instead, the occurrence of *obruoni* suggests an Asante and Akuapem pattern of development in which the first vowel, when it is a high back vowel, is often not pronounced.

The development that has taken place in Akan can therefore be diagrammatically   expressed in the following way:

Proto - Akan

O fi. ri

Asante —— o. fri          o.fir    —— Fante

In the diagram above, one major divergence in the development in the two major dialects is illustrated. Asante is characterized by deletion of the first vowel in the stem of the proto-Akan form of the word to cause an initial consonant cluster while in Fante the development is a deletion of the final vowel, causing /r/ to occur in word final position.[2]

This can be compared with what occurs in Kromanti. The lexical item meaning "to come" in Kromanti is diagrammed below. This, unlike the examples above, does not use a high vowel, but is  interesting.

Proto-Akan.

Ba.ra

Asante —— bra     Fante —— (unknown)     Kromanti —— bra

ba

Here, the Kromanti variant of the word has not reached the same level of phonological change as that found in the Akan dialects. As it is, it is difficult to determine which of the Akan dialects the pattern of development in Kromanti more closely resembles. I have no information about the intermediary level of the change that **bará** underwent in Fante before it was reduced to **bà**. No assumptions can be made at this time about the way in which the original form of the word would have been reduced in Fante, as the vowel is not a high vowel. Additional information is therefore required before a conclusion can be drawn in that regard

**Conclusion**

The evidence seems to suggest that to a great extent Kromanti shows a pattern of development more like that which has been at work in the Asante/Akuapem dialects, at least in relation to how /r/ functions within the syllable. However, placing

Kromanti among the Akan dialects will require much more effort and layering of additional linguistic and even historical data. Nominal prefixes in Kromanti, for example, are a rich source of data that needs to be explored. In addition, since Kromanti had to exist prior to 1739, a look at the historical development of the Akan language complex, particularly during the late 17th and early 18th centuries, will provide valuable insight into the language situation from which Kromanti would have originated. Finally, the Maroons have rich oral traditions about their ancestry and origins and these will undoubtedly reveal their own insights into the origins of their language.

**Notes**

[1] I am describing /o/ here as high even though it is not as high as /u/. However, it may be described as such, especially when compared to /ɔ/.

[2] This is of course taking into consideration the importance of the type of vowel which occurs in the syllable

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