

# Umwero Alphabet: Explanation of Ligatures and Ibihekane

## Introduction

In this document, we will dive deeper into the Umwero Kinyarwanda alphabet to better differentiate and relate its characters, sounds, and structure. By the end, you'll understand how it uniquely addresses the linguistic needs of Kinyarwanda while reflecting Rwanda's rich cultural heritage.

## What is Umwero?

The **Umwero Alphabet** is a Kinyarwanda writing system developed to authentically represent the language's unique phonemes and preserve its cultural essence. Unlike the Latin Kinyarwanda script, which often misrepresents native sounds, Umwero stays true to Kinyarwanda phonetic rules and the deep symbolism found in Rwandan traditions.

## 1. Ligatures vs. Ibihekane: Definitions and Distinctions

### Ligatures (In Typography)

In Western alphabets like Latin, a **ligature** occurs when two or more characters are combined into a single glyph to improve aesthetics or readability. For example:

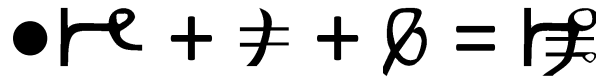
- "fl" (f + l)
- "æ" (a + e)

In Kinyarwanda, we have 39 major sounds, which is why the Umwero alphabet has 39 characters. However, there are more than 39 distinct sounds in the language. At first, these additional sounds might seem like individual sounds, but upon closer linguistic examination, you'll realize that some are actually combinations of two or more of the primary 39 sounds. In Kinyarwanda, we refer to this phenomenon as "**ibihékane**." (form action called Guheka or guhekana)

The word "**guhekana**" refers to the process where a mother carries a baby on her back, appearing as a single unit because they are tied together with a single string. In this context, **ibihékane** describes how combined sounds can appear to be one. However, Latin-based Kinyarwanda does not follow this Kinyarwanda practice of guhekana. For example, in Latin Kinyarwanda, combinations like **R + W = RW** are treated as separate elements, just like typical consonant-vowel pairings.

In **Umwero**, we handle this differently by fully embracing the concept of guhekana. We visually and structurally combine multiple characters to form a single **igihékane**, better representing how the sounds function naturally in the Kinyarwanda language. For


instance, **Rw** is, in fact, a misrepresentation in Kinyarwanda. A critical missing sound is **Gha**, making the correct representation **RGW**, which aligns with how native Kinyarwanda speakers pronounce it. In Umwero, these three characters are combined into a single form to represent the complete sound.

●  (if you see it seems to be one

but many and this is how we speak as it is one but many sounds, note that Umwero W(Ø) when it is combined in igihekane with other sounds it is not heard bold as it's fellow sounds that why in ligatures also you see a small part of it which looks like tinny circle)

●  For this example, you can see that

Umwero T and K both have the same horizontal line. To indicate that they are similar, we simplify it to align with the Ibihekane concept, making it appear as a single unit. Additionally, you can see that Umwero W is

shorter, as it must be in every Igihekane. 

Conversely, not all combinations(in Latin Kinyarwanda) should be considered ibihekane. For example, **SH, SHY, TS** in Kinyarwanda is not a combination of sounds but a single distinct phoneme. Therefore, it has its own standalone character in Umwero rather than being treated as an igihekane or a ligature.

This structural correction is essential because **Latin-based Kinyarwanda is not an accurate representation of true Kinyarwanda phonetics**. Umwero was built to correct these discrepancies while preserving some similarities with Latin-based conventions for familiarity as well as the Latin is it's Parental script.

(Does this help clarify the concept of ibihekane and the structural differences between Umwero and Latin Kinyarwanda? Let me know if you need any additional clarifications.)

so those above are an examples to help understand the syntax, means that there are many looks like RGW, others like SH, after all I hope the table will show all of those,

Before jumping to table let me tell you this, there are many similarities of Umwero and latin for example we know letter 'A' was derrivered from Egyptian Oxe so Umwero also 'A' is a head of a cow/Inyambo which is the same to oxe(᠋ᠠ).

### Cultural and Linguistic Significance

Both ligatures and ibihekane share the idea of combination, but they differ in their origins and purposes. Ligatures in typography are primarily aesthetic, while ibihekane have deep linguistic and cultural roots in Kinyarwanda.

now let Jump on Table:

## 2. Table

this table is going to help us to know and equalize Umwero with Latin, Kinyarwanda.

Latin	Umwero
A	᠋ᠠ
E	᠋ᠡ
I	᠋ᠢ
O	᠋ᠣ
U	᠋ᠤ
NC	᠋ᠨ᠋᠘
NCW	᠋ᠨ᠋᠘᠋ᠠ
CW	᠋᠘᠋ᠠ
D	᠋ᠳ
DW	᠋ᠳ᠋ᠠ
RY	᠋ᠷ᠋ᠢ
NK	᠋ᠨ᠋᠌
NKW	᠋ᠨ᠋᠌᠋ᠠ
F	᠋ᠼ
MF	᠋ᠮ᠋ᠼ
MFW	᠋ᠮ᠋ᠼ᠋ᠠ
MFY	᠋ᠮ᠋ᠼ᠋ᠢ

FW	፹
FY	፺
G	፻
GW	፺
H	፻
SH	፺
NSH	፺
NSHW	፺
SHW	፺
PF	፻
PFW	፻
PFY	፻
J	፻
JW	፻
K	፻
KY	፻
NKY	፻
KW	፻
JY	፻
NJY	፻
M	፻
MW	፻
MY	፻
MYW	፻
N	፻
ND	፻
NDW	፻
NDY	፻
NW	፻
NG	፻
NGW	፻

NT	ᄒ
NTW	ᄒᆫ
NNY	ᄒᆯ
NYY	ᄒᆯ
NZ	ᄒᆮ
NZW	ᄒᆮᆫ
MV	ᄒᆮ
MVW	ᄒᆮᆫ
MVY	ᄒᆮᆫ
MPY	ᄒᆮᆫ
P	ᄒᆮ
PW	ᄒᆮᆫ
PY	ᄒᆮᆫ
MP	ᄒᆮ
SHY	ᄒᆮᆫ
SHYW	ᄒᆮᆫᆫ
NSHY	ᄒᆮᆫᆫ
NSHYW	ᄒᆮᆫᆫᆫ
R	ᄒᆮᆫ
RW	ᄒᆮᆫᆫ
S	ᄒᆮᆫ
SY	ᄒᆮᆫᆫ
SW	ᄒᆮᆫᆫ
NS	ᄒᆮᆫᆫ
NSY	ᄒᆮᆫᆫᆫ
NSW	ᄒᆮᆫᆫᆫ
TW	ᄒᆮᆫᆫ
TY	ᄒᆮᆫᆫᆫ
NJ	ᄒᆮᆫᆫᆫ
NJW	ᄒᆮᆫᆫᆫᆫ

V	ᄒ
VW	ᄒᄒ
VY	ᄒᄒ
W	ᄒ
TS	ᄒ
TSW	ᄒᄒ
Y	ᄒ
NY	ᄒ
NYW	ᄒᄒ
Z	ᄒ
ZW	ᄒᄒ

## Basic 39 Basic phonemes

Ø ɔ ɪ ɾ ɔ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ  
ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ  
ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ  
ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ

ɪ

This character is used in Kinyarwanda only in some Ibihekane it can't be used In

Kinyarwanda it self as others, is sound the same as English B, **ex: BG= ɪ ɪ BY=**

ɪ

but in other ntu language it can be used as other consonants but not in Kinyarwanda

Other Umwero used for another Rwandaphone speaker from DR Congo and Burundi with other Ntu language are:

ɪ ɪ ɪ ɪ

NOTE: I have tried to present the basics in a table by using colors (5 vowels = red, consonants = blue, and yellow highlighting to show phonemes derived from other sounds). Some are differentiated by nasal sounds, but I am not sure of the exact linguistic terms ex for ɪ with ɪ. However, I noticed an issue with the table as it is incomplete, which is why I added this page for more clarity.

All others are Ibihekane Ligatures

## **Conclusion**

While ibihekane may visually resemble ligatures in typography, their roots are deeply phonetic and linguistic, reflecting the natural speech patterns of Kinyarwanda. The Umwero alphabet was meticulously crafted to correct the inaccuracies present in the Latin-based Kinyarwanda script. It preserves native sound structures while maintaining some familiar conventions for readability. Through its design, Umwero not only addresses linguistic needs but also celebrates the cultural heritage of Rwanda.