

How do we evaluate what we don't know?

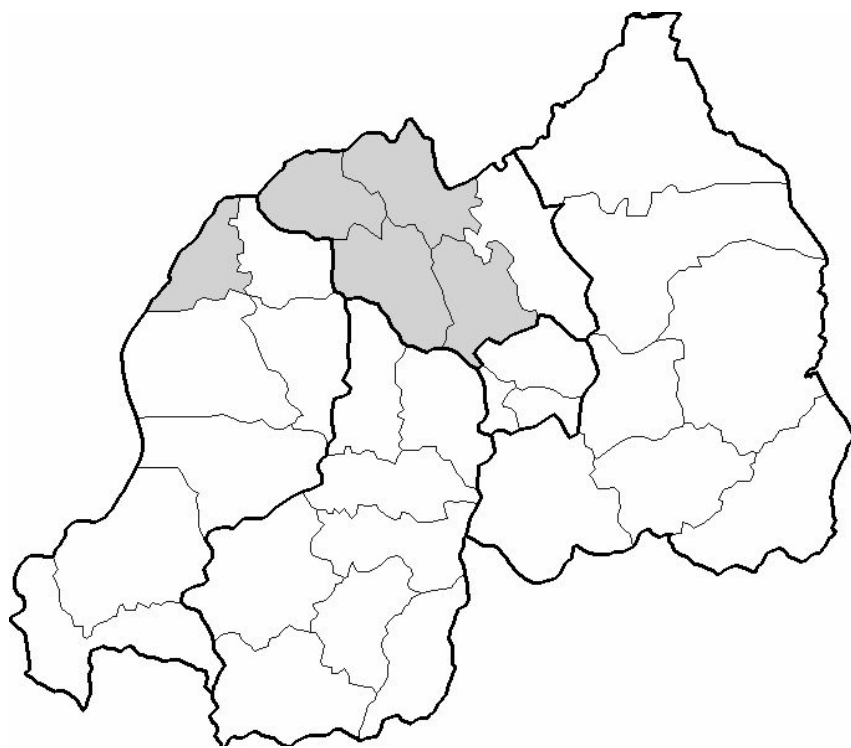
Social evaluation of ambiguous variables in Kinyarwanda

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Introduction

Kinyarwanda: Rwanda (East Africa), Bantu, ~10M speakers
agglutinative verbal morphology with subject and tense prefixes
ikirera, *ikigoyi* dialects spoken in **Northwest** of Rwanda



Variation

two NW variables: *u~g-* and *0~ra-*
(An & Ngoboka 2025)

prestige *u-* ~ NW *g-*

subject agreement markers

(1)	Umwembe	(g)umwe	(g)waguye	hasi.
	mango	one	fell	down
	'One mango fell down.'			

almost all Rwandans: *g-* is **NW and stigmatized**

prestige *0* ~ ambiguous

NW/young *ra-*

negated present-progressive prefix

(2)	Ntabwo	ba(ra)soma.
	not	they.are.reading
	'They are not reading.'	

ra- also **NW**, but unlike *g-*, *ra-* **spreading** among young Rwandans

some Rwandans: *ra-* is **NW**

other Rwandans: *ra-* is **young**, not regional
→ social meaning of *ra-* **ambiguous**

Research Questions

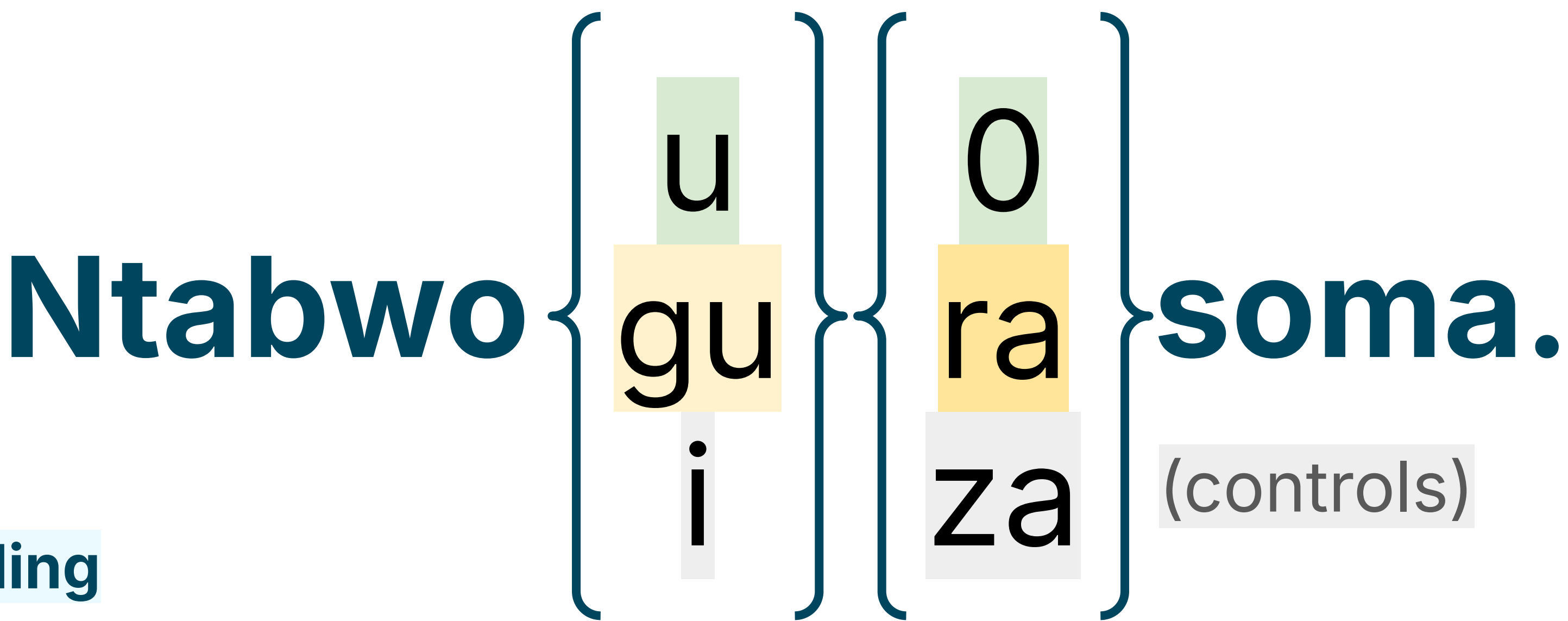
- (1) What **social meaning** is indexed by **prestige**, **NW**, and **ambiguous** forms?
- (2) Do prestige variants **contribute different social meaning** if a nonstandard alternant exists?
- (3) Is there a difference between the contribution to meaning of **phonetically zero and non-zero forms**?
- (4) Can evaluation of ambiguous variables be influenced by **co-occurrence** of nonambiguous variables? (Pharao & Maegaard 2017)
- (5) How are forms with **conflicting** meaning evaluated?

Method

matched-guise experiment

audio stimuli adapted from news articles
recorded by two prestige speakers and two NW speakers

stimulus format:



respondents will evaluate stimuli on Likert scales informed by previous work: **age, region, correctness, humorousness**

(An & Ngoboka 2025)

Predictions

NW variable alone (*g-*)

social evaluation of NW (1)

prestige variable(s) (*u-*, *0*)

prestige evaluation (1) greater than control due to contrast with nonstandard alternant (2); nonzero *u-* has greater contribution than *0* (3)

nonambiguous, conflicting variables (*NW g-* × *prestige 0*)

NW “overrides” prestige or vice versa (5)

ambiguous variable alone

(*NW/young ra-*)

bimodal responses representing Northwesternness and youth (1)

ambiguous × nonambiguous variable
(*NW/young ra-* × *prestige u-* or *NW g-*)
evaluation of ambiguous *ra-* influenced by prestige or NW variables as disambiguators (4)

Summary of Predictions

	prestige <i>0</i>	NW/young <i>ra-</i>	control
prestige <i>u-</i>	prestige	ambiguity disambiguated by prestige variable	prestige, nonzero
NW <i>g-</i>	evaluation of conflicting social information	ambiguity disambiguated by NW variable	NW
control	prestige, zero	ambiguous, bimodal	control