

# Social Meaning of Kinyarwanda Morphosyntactic Variation

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# Today we're talking about...

What **morphosyntactic** variation does Kinyarwanda have?

What **social variables** condition this variation?

# Today we're talking about...

Do **ideologies** about variation align with their **actual use**?

Spoiler: **they don't. Why?**

What **facilitates** the acquisition of **sociolinguistic knowledge**?

# Kinyarwanda

Bantu; ~10 million speakers

national lg. of Rwanda (East Africa)

agglutinative morphology



(1) tw-aa-gi-sóm-aga

1PL-PST-OBJ-read-IPFV

'We were reading it.'

(1) **tw-aa-gi-sóm-aga**

Subjects

tense, aspect, etc.

# Kinyarwanda dialectology: regional / phon\* focus

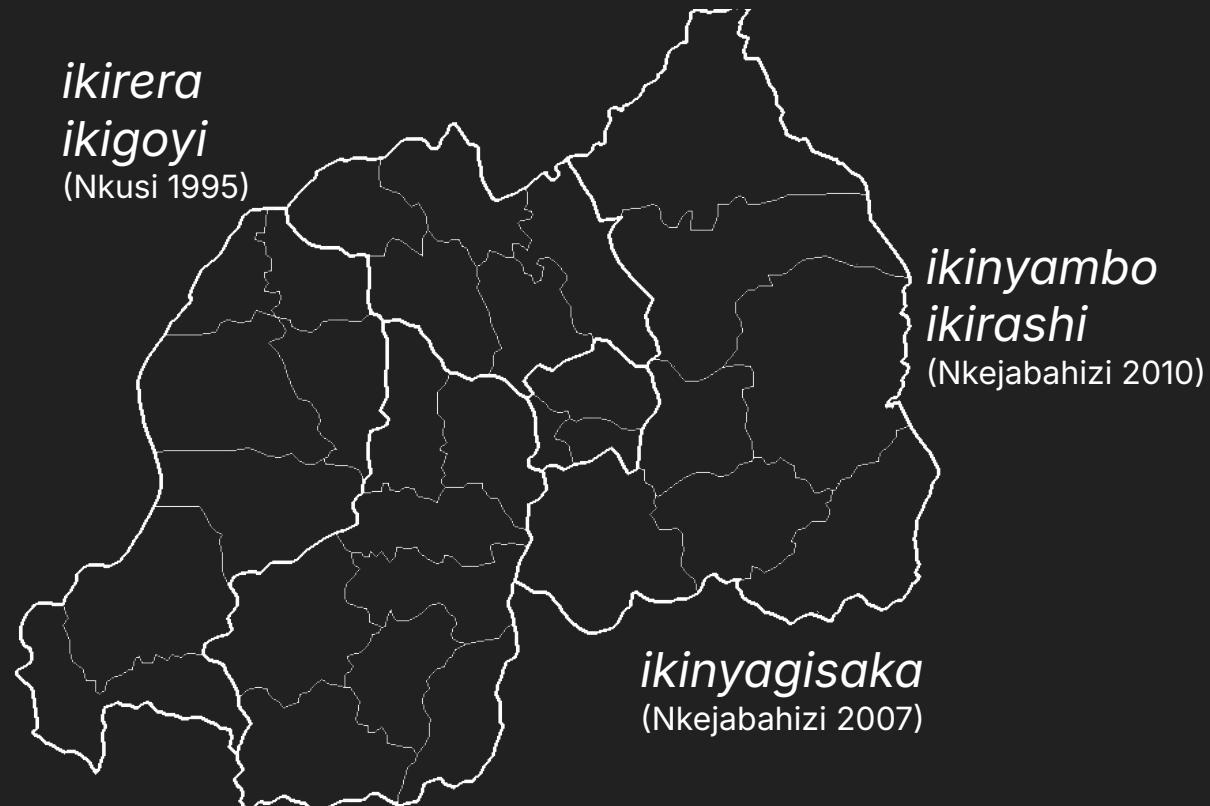


image adapted from  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7b/Rwanda\\_EastProvDistricts.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7b/Rwanda_EastProvDistricts.png)

# Kinyarwanda dialectology: unknowns

morphosyntax?

social  
evaluation?

*ikirera*  
*ikigoyi*  
(Nkusi 1995)

gender?

*ikinyambo*  
*ikirashi*  
(Nkejabahizi 2010)

age?

*ikinyagisaka*  
(Nkejabahizi 2007)



image adapted from  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7b/Rwanda\\_EastProvDi sts.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7b/Rwanda_EastProvDi sts.png)

two variables under  
study: negated *ra-*  
and *g-*

Variable: negated *ra-*

present progressive

ba-**ra**-som-a

'They are reading.'

(2)

Variable: negated *ra-*

(3) ntaabwo ba- -som-á

'They are not reading.'

Variable: negated *ra-*

(4) ntaabwo ba-<sup>variant</sup>*ra*-som-á  
'They are not reading.'

## Variable: negated *ra-*

ntaabwo ba-som-á  
'They are not reading.'

MORE FREQUENT

ntaabwo ba-**ra**-som-á  
'They are not reading.'

LESS FREQUENT

Variable: *g-*

(5) umwéembe u-mwe w-aa-gu-ye hasi  
mango one fell down

'One mango fell down.'

Subject = umwembe

Subject = umwembe

Variable: *g-*

(6) umwéembe **gu**-mwe **gw**-aa-gu-ye hasi  
mango one fell down

'One mango fell down.'

Variable: *g-*

u-mwe  
'one'

MORE FREQUENT

gu-mwe  
'one'

LESS FREQUENT

Variants can have social meaning

I'm coming!

I'm comin'!

# Variants can have social meaning

I'm coming!

intelligent

articulate

I'm comin'!

informal

less likely to be gay

What social meaning do these variables have?

negated

*ra-*

*g-*

# Methods

Survey

15 respondents

Age 23-59

All five regions from Rwanda represented

# Methods

Asked for free-response sociolinguistic associations with:

age

gender

region

# Methods

Here is a sentence:

Umwembe umwe waguye hasi.

**MORE FREQUENT**

Some people might say the same sentence like this:

Umwembe **gumwe gwaguye hasi.**

**LESS FREQUENT**

# Methods

## Would you yourself say the second sentence?

I would always say it like that

I would often say it like that

I don't know

I would occasionally say it like that

I would never say it like that

(White & Roberts 2022)

## Free-response questions about more general sociolinguistic awareness and evaluation

e.g. What kind of person says it  
this way?

What do Rwandans say about these variables?

negated

*ra-*

*g-*

What do Rwandans say about these variables?

**'I've heard it  
[negated *ra-*] that  
way because that's  
how we say it in my  
hometown.'**

(West; 25)

***g-***

What do Rwandans say about these variables?

**'I've heard it  
[negated *ra-*] that  
way because that's  
how we say it in my  
hometown.'**

(West; 25)

**'It's [*g-*] used by *ikigoyi*  
speakers from the  
Northern Province.'**

(North; 59)

**'[*g-*] is not good  
Kinyarwanda.'**

(East; 26)

	mentioned <b>awareness</b>	mentioned <b>Northwest</b>	mentioned <b>young</b>	mentioned <b>stigmatized</b>
<b>negated ra-</b>	13	3	4	1
<b>g-</b>	14	9	1	4

(N = 15)

Here's what Rwandans say about these variables.  
Is this how they self-report **using** these variables?

negated

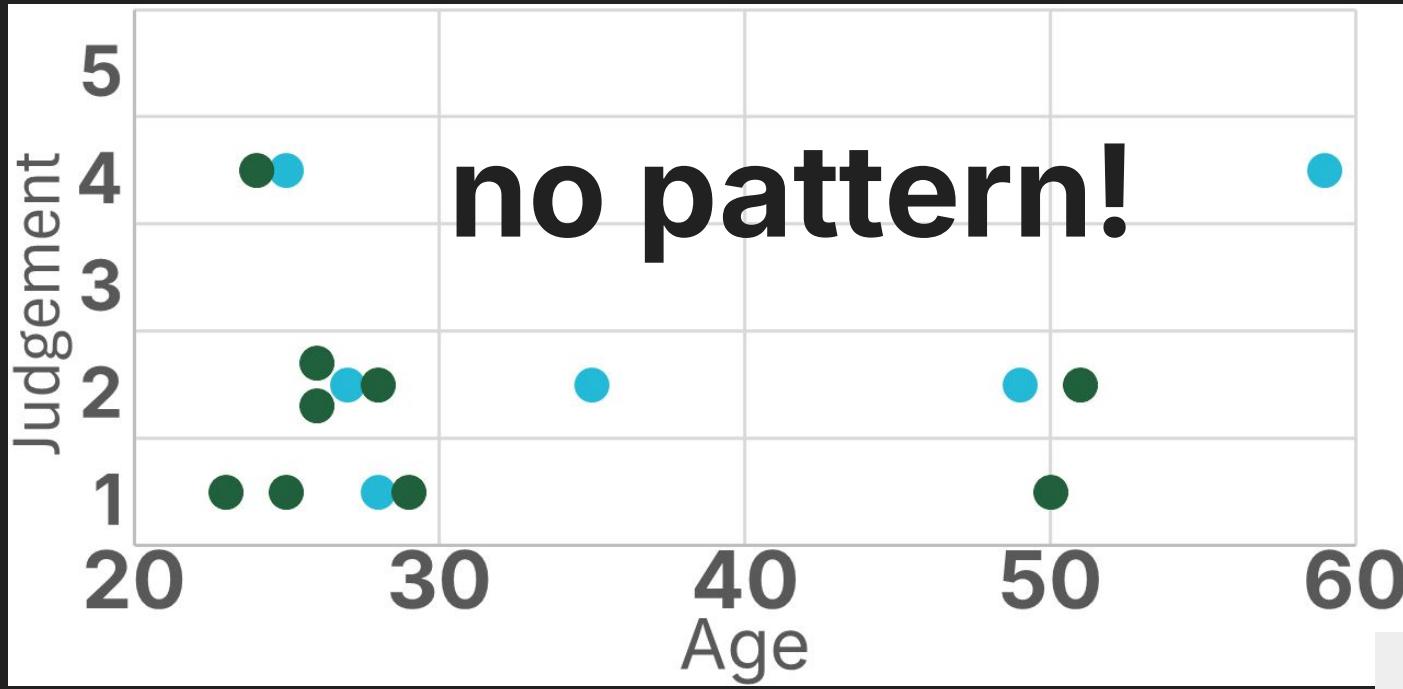
*ra-* is

**Northwestern**  
**and young**

*g-* is

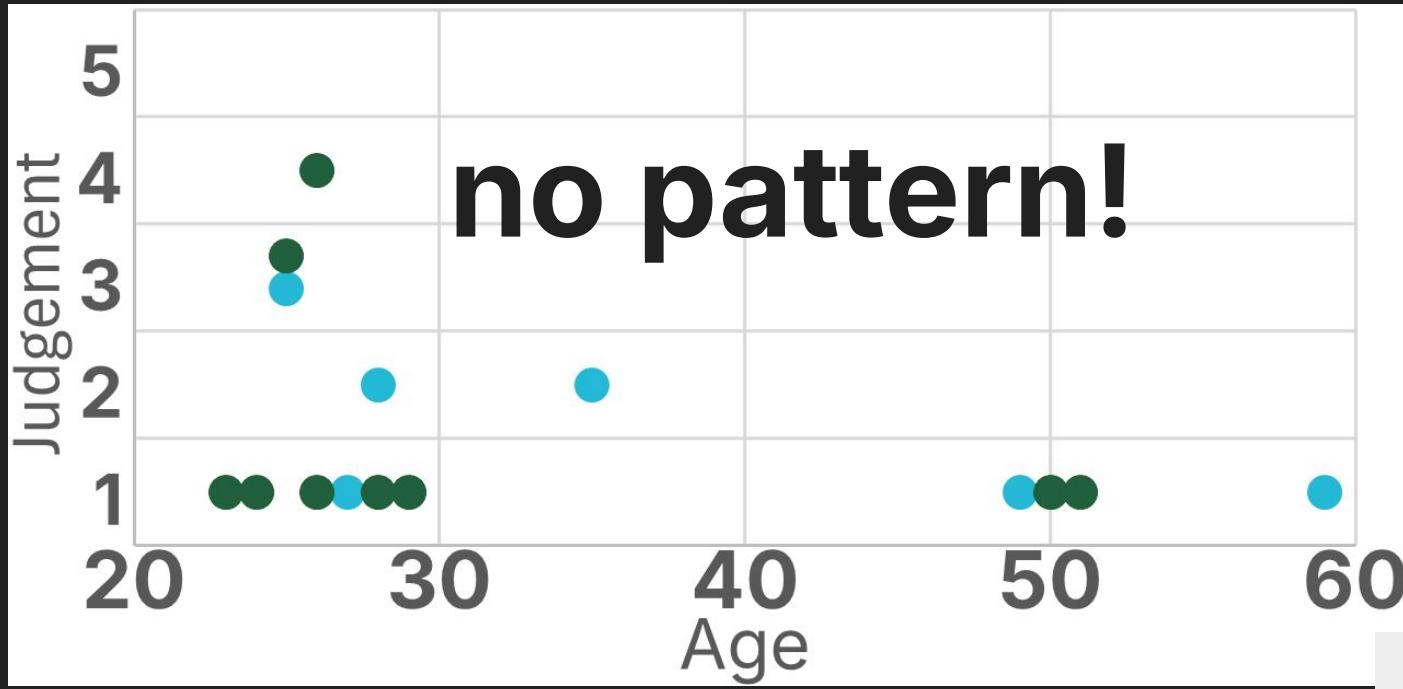
**Northwestern**  
**and stigmatized**

to the **data!** →



negated *ra-*

5 = would always use  
1 = would never use  
● Northwest  
● Elsewhere  
(coded by location ages 5-17)



5 = would always use  
1 = would never use

- Northwest (teal circle)
- Elsewhere (dark green circle)

(coded by location ages 5-17)

g-

**limited evidence for  
relationship between  
age and usage**

**unclear if  
relationship between  
region and usage**

Is this how Rwandans self-report using these variables?

negated

*ra-* is

**Northwestern  
and young**

*g-* is

**Northwestern  
and stigmatized**

Is this how Rwandans self-report using these variables?

negated

**not really!**

and stigmatized

Northwestern

and young

Why?

1. migration
2. stigmatization
3. outgroup homogeneity
4. default categorization of unfamiliar forms

# migration

all participants  
coded as  
Northwestern  
**spent time in  
other regions**

# stigmatization

avoidance of  
**stigmatized  
forms**

# outgroup homogeneity

(Park & Rothbart 1982; Wade 2023)

features only used by  
**subset** of NW

non-NW Rwandans  
**attribute features to  
entire region**

default  
categori-  
zation of  
unfamiliar  
forms

unfamiliar  
features could  
be lumped into  
**“outgroup  
category”**

(Weissler & Brennan 2020)

# default categori- zation of unfamiliar forms

“outgroup category”  
→ **more specific  
social meaning**

e.g. Black American  
English in USA  
context

(Weissler & Brennan 2020)

default  
categori-  
zation of  
unfamiliar  
forms

Rwandan  
“outgroup  
category” →  
**Northwest?**

# Features ascribed to Northwesterners

negated *ra-*

*g-*

periphrastic present progressive (Nkejabahizi 2007)

jussive *iik-* / \_ V

lack of palatalization / \_ { i, e } ...

# Features ascribed to Northwesterners

negated *ra-*

*g-*

has one dialect region:

been **unusually innovative** and

had **outsize effect** on language **across Rwanda?**

lack of palatalization / \_ { i, e } ...

# Features ascribed to Northwesterners

negated *ra-*

*g-*

or could this be an  
periphrastic present progressive (Nkejabohizi 2007)  
**"outgroup category"**?

jussive *iik-* / \_ V

lack of palatalization / \_ { i, e } ...

	mentioned <b>awareness</b>	mentioned <b>Northwest</b>	mentioned <b>young</b>	mentioned <b>stigmatized</b>
<b>negated ra-</b>	13	3	4	1
<b>g-</b>	14	9	1	4

(N = 15)

**fewer people** have detailed social knowledge  
about **negated *ra-*** than ***g-***

	mentioned <b>awareness</b>	mentioned <b>Northwest</b>	mentioned <b>young</b>	mentioned <b>stigmatized</b>
<b>negated <i>ra-</i></b>	13	3	4	1
<b><i>g-</i></b>	14	9	1	4

(N = 15)

# Interface Principle

(Labov 1993)

sociolinguistic  
evaluation only  
targets **surface**  
**form, not**  
**underlying**  
**representation**

How are these variables evaluated?

negated

*ra-*

*g-*

What are the surface distributions of these forms?

~~negated~~

*ra-*

*g-*

What are the surface distributions of these forms?

~~negated~~

*ra-*

*ra-* is **pervasive**

many other **functions**

present in presumably **all**  
**Kinyarwanda varieties**

(Ngoboka & Zeller 2017)

What are the surface distributions of these forms?

*g-* is **absent** from many  
Kinyarwanda varieties,  
including **prestige**  
varieties

(Ngoboka 2016)

*g-*

# How are these variables evaluated?

**negated *ra-***

hard to identify  
morphosyntactically  
unusual *ra-* from  
**abundance of expected,  
socially-unmeaningful**  
instances

***g-***

**easy** to identify and  
assign social meaning

# How are these variables evaluated?

*negated* *ra-*

social evaluation mediated by

*hard to identify*

*morphosyntactic*

**frequency of surface form?**

*unusual* *ra-* from

**abundance of expected,  
socially-unmeaningful  
instances**

*a-*

**easy** to identify and  
assign social meaning

wrapping up

morpho-  
syntactic  
variation exists  
in Kinyarwanda!

wrapping up

ideologies ≠  
use!

wrapping up

Northwest as  
outgroup  
category?

# wrapping up

social evaluation  
mediated by  
**frequency of**  
**surface form?**

# Murakoze!

## 'Thank you!'

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