

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.'

subjects

tense, aspect, etc.

(1) **tw**-**aa**-gi-sóm-aga

Kinyarwanda dialectology: regional / phon* focus

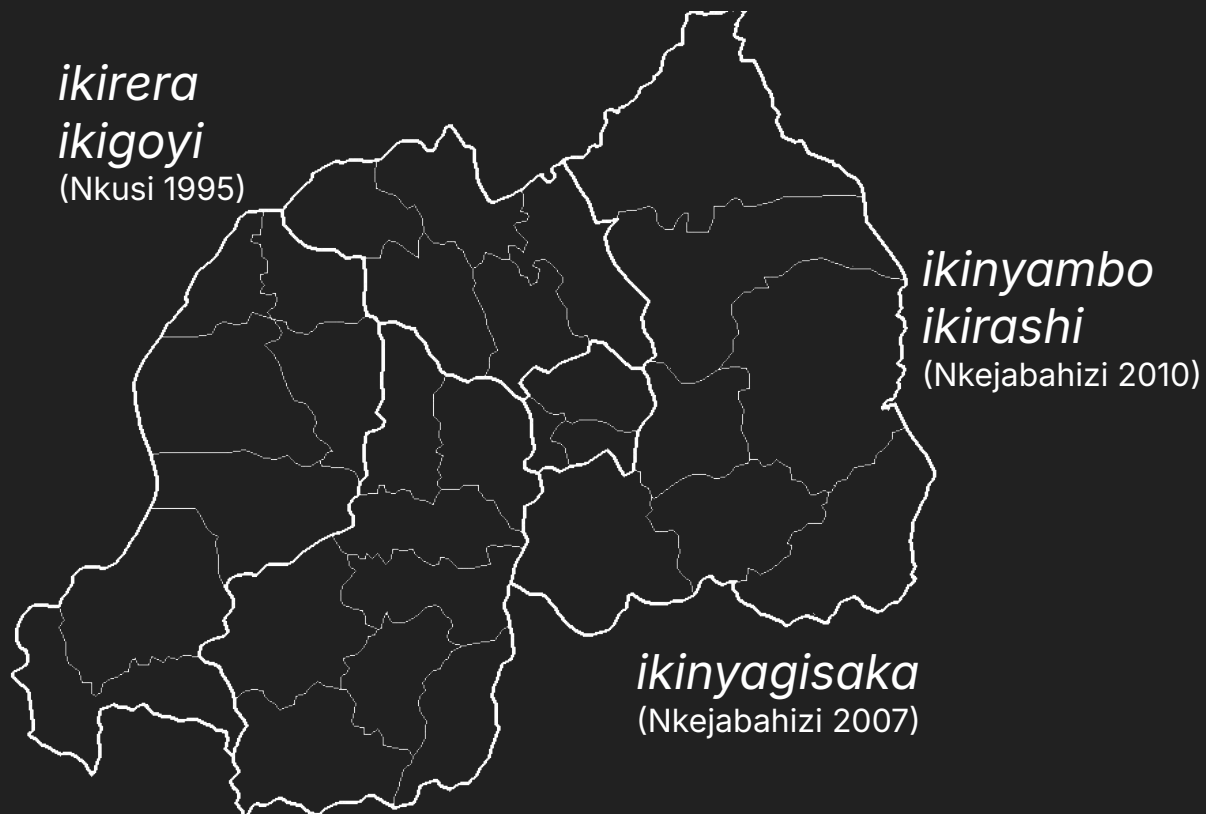


image adapted from
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7b/Rwanda_EastProvDi sts.png

Kinyarwanda dialectology: unknowns



image adapted from
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

(2)

ba-*ra*-som-a

'They *are* reading.'

Variable: negated *ra-*

(3) ntaabwo ba- -som-á

'They are not reading.'

Variable: negated *ra-*

(4) ntaabwo ba-^{variant}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	<i>u</i> -mwe	<i>w</i> -aa-gu-ye	hasi
	mango	one	fell	down

subject = umwembe

subject = umwembe

'One mango fell down.'

Variable: *g-*

(6) umwéembe *variant* *gu*-mwe *variant* *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!

I'm comin'!

intelligent

informal

articulate

less likely to be gay

Campbell-Kibler 2010

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

(N = 15)

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

negated

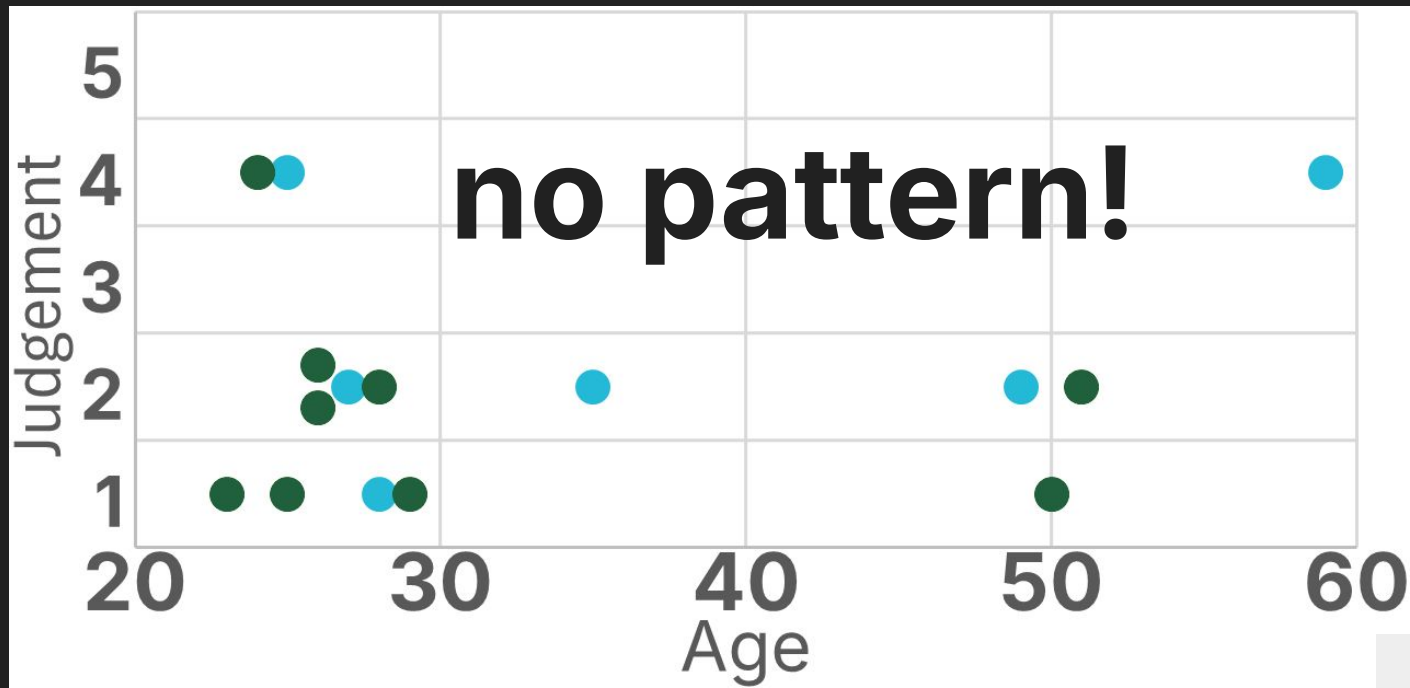
ra- is

**Northwestern
and young**

g- is

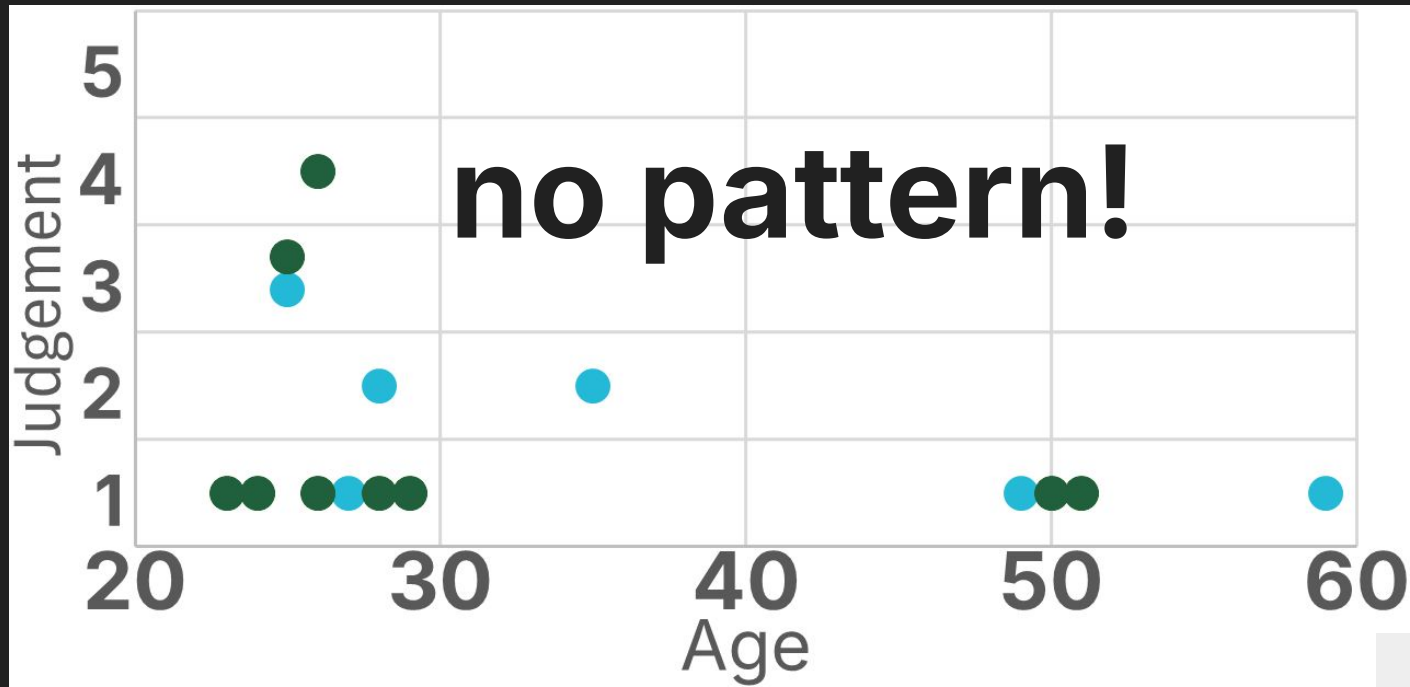
**Northwestern
and stigmatized**

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
● Elsewhere
(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!

Northwestern
and young

and stigmatized

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
**ascribe 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 / $_ \{ i, e \} \dots$

Features ascribed to Northwesterners

negated *ra-*

g-

has one dialect region:

been **unusually innovative** *and*

had **outsized 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 (Nkeiabehizi 2007)

“outgroup category”?

jussive *iik-* / *_V*

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

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

(N = 15)

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

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

social evaluation mediated by
frequency of surface form?

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

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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