

THE PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH IN RWANDA: THE DIGLOSSIC SITUATION AFTER A CHANGE IN THE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the perceived importance of English in Rwanda, which changed its medium of instruction from French to English in 2009. The subjects were 1,237 students in Rwanda's Nyagatare and Huye districts. The perceived importance of each official language (English, French, and Kinyarwanda) in four contexts of language use—business, household, church, and medium of instruction—was examined. Regardless of the region or grade level, English was seen as the most important language for business and medium of instruction, whereas Kinyarwanda was most popular in households and at church. As most students still use Kinyarwanda at home, the change in medium of instruction has not immediately affected the stability of the mother tongue, but if the importance of English continues to grow, the viability of Rwanda's native language could become uncertain.

Keywords: Rwanda, diglossia, medium of instruction, official language, language power

1. INTRODUCTION

Rwanda has three official languages: English, French, and Kinyarwanda. The nation's mother tongue, Kinyarwanda, is understood by 99.4% and spoken by 90% of the population (World Bank, n.d.). Kinyarwanda retains great importance in daily activities because nearly 80% of the population is still engaged in the agricultural sector, where English usage is very limited. However, the Rwandan government implemented a new language policy in 2009 that made English the sole medium of instruction from upper primary school onward. This change could affect the current status of diglossia in Rwanda.

1.1 DIGLOSSIA

The notion of diglossia, introduced by Charles Ferguson in 1959, has been applied (with some changes in its definition) to various kinds of speech communities (Hudson, 2002). The most common definition of the term is a "linguistic situation where both standard language and regional dialect co-exist, but are used differentially according to the nature and type of linguistic function which the speaker wishes to realize" (Christopher, 1991, p.39). According to Stepkowska (2012), diglossia is a group phenomenon, not an individual one, and it highlights the importance of studying macro-level societal multilingualism. Although Ferguson limited his view of diglossia to two language varieties, Fishman subsequently modified the definition to encompass situations where more than two languages are used (Stepkowska, 2012).

One important feature of diglossia is its attachment to the idea of prestige. Generally, the standard language is used in formal or high contexts, whereas the regional dialects play lower functions (Stepkowska, 2012); for example, the regional dialect may be used in family interactions, whereas the language with high functions is taught later at school. The high language is usually considered superior to the low dialect in various aspects. According to Jordan (2013, p.53), "the hierarchical classification of languages in 'high' and 'low' varieties is due to asymmetrical power relations, dissimilar prestige and varying language attitudes."

Another characteristic of diglossia is the stability of each language. Since each one has its own clearly distinguished use, the decline of any language due to interaction with other languages is unlikely. Stepkowska (2012) described diglossia as a highly stable phenomenon that can continue for hundreds of years. Fishman emphasized this point contending that the functional difference between languages, regardless of the degree of difference, is the most important feature of diglossia (Fishman, 1967). However, diglossia can endure for a long time only when the function of each language remains unchallenged (Stepkowska, 2012). In Rwanda, the change in the medium of instruction could potentially change the function of the languages spoken.

1.2 CHANGE IN THE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

As of 2009, English became the sole medium of instruction in Rwanda from grade 4 onward. Although it has promoted a trilingual language policy, the Rwandan government shifted from a Francophone toward an Anglophone status after joining the East African Community (EAC) in 2007 and the Commonwealth in 2009 (UN High Commission for Refugees, 2010). Rwanda relies on trade with Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, all three of which have English as an official language and are members of the EAC and the Commonwealth. Also,

Rwanda's two biggest sources of foreign support have been the United States and United Kingdom. The Rwandan government therefore encourages public servants to learn English in order to strengthen economic ties with those countries (Sibomana, 2014). In addition, the government claims that studying in English from primary school onward will improve living standards and life opportunities for all Rwandans and could even facilitate national reconciliation (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). The government has explained that the change is not driven by a shift from the Francophone to the Anglophone world but by a desire to choose a path toward economic success (Steflja, 2012). However, some researchers refer to Rwanda's language policy as part of an "attention-getting" or "modernization and creativity" process, since the Rwandan government wishes to attract greater foreign investment (Rosendal, 2009, p.36).

1.3 DIGLOSSIA IN RWANDA

Diglossia is present in many sub-Saharan countries, where the former colonial language carries higher status and prestige, whereas indigenous African languages fulfill lower functions. This is the case in Rwanda, where all three official languages have specific functions in society. According to Jordan (2013), English and French can be categorized as high languages, whereas Kinyarwanda is regarded as having a low status, used mostly in informal domains such as the household. However, most of the population is not competent in English or French: only 7% of Rwandans can read and write English, and just 4% can read and write French (Sibomana, 2014). English is used as the language of administration as well, making it important when one is searching for information. Therefore, not being able to manage in English restricts access to educational and economic opportunities. However, since the higher languages are spoken by so few people, primarily powerful elites, the indigenous language can retain a certain level of power in diglossic situations.

As already noted, diglossia persists unless a language's linguistic function is challenged. Rosendal (2010) argued that there is no longer a stable linguistic situation in Rwanda, since the change to English as the medium of instruction could lead to alterations in language function and to competition in the linguistic market. Jordan (2013) agreed that this shift could reshape Rwanda's nature as a multilingual society. In addition, the growing global trend toward using English as an international lingua franca can impact a society characterized by diglossia. Deneire (1998, p. 394) stated, "The generalized adoption of English could also lead to a process of secundarization of all languages other than English." Therefore, the promotion of English from simply an official language to the language of instruction and administration in 2009 could change significantly the status of Kinyarwanda and French.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

As the status of English is expected to become higher and its use is likely to expand owing to the change in Rwandan policy, the importance of Kinyarwanda and French is likely to decline. Kinyarwanda is spoken by nearly all Rwandans, but its power as a language in Rwandan society could be undermined, as could that of French despite its continuing status as an official language. This study examined Rwandan students' perception of the value of the three languages, as the nation's youth are most directly affected by the change in the medium of instruction and will be primarily responsible for the country's future direction. To identify each language's power in the Rwandan linguistic market, the importance of the three languages in four contexts—business, household, church, and medium of instruction—was considered.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS

The study was driven by two research questions: (1) What is the current diglossic situation in Rwanda from students' point of view after the change in the medium of instruction? (2) Is there a significant difference in the perceived importance of each language by region or grade level? It was hypothesized that the importance of English would be greater in Nyagatare (near Uganda) than in Huye (near Burundi), whereas the importance of French would be greater in Huye.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 TARGETED REGIONS

The targeted geographic regions are two districts in Rwanda: Nyagatare and Huye. Nyagatare, located in the northeastern part of Rwanda, is the largest of the country's 30 districts, with an area of 1,741 km² and a population of 465,855 (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2015b). It shares a border with Uganda in the north and Tanzania in the east; in both of these countries, English is the official language. On the other hand, Huye is located in the southern part of Rwanda, with an area of 581.5 km² and 328,398 residents (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2015a); it shares a border with Burundi, where French and Kirundi (the mother tongue of the Burundi people) are the official languages.

4.2 PARTICIPANTS

The sample for this study consisted of 1,237 students, including 314 primary school students, 475 from lower secondary school, and 448 from upper secondary school. Three public schools in Nyagatare (Rwisirabo, Karangazi secondary, and Nyagatare secondary) and four public schools in Huye (Group Scolaire Butare Catholic, Ecole Secondaire Butare, Ecole Notre Dame de la Providence Karubudanda, and Indatwa Inkesha) took part in the survey. The targeted populations were students in primary grades 4 and 6 and in secondary grades 3 and 6. All the schools have been operating for more than 30 years, and I obtained permission at the district level for my fieldwork operations.

4.3 SAMPLING PROCEDURE

I collected the data from October 5 to 23, 2015. An interpreter, a Rwandan student who attended Rwanda University and was fluent in Kinyarwanda and English, assisted the process. To avoid confusion and reduce response bias, instructions were given in Kinyarwanda before the participants started answering the questionnaire. In addition, an English version of the questionnaire was given to those who said that they had trouble reading Kinyarwanda. The total time to administer the questionnaire in each classroom was 10 to 15 minutes.

4.4 INSTRUMENTS

The questionnaire asked respondents to rate the importance of the three official languages in four situations: business, household, church, and as medium of instruction in school. It thus contained 12 items (three languages x four situations; e.g., “French is important as a business language”) and used a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). A translator who works for a government agency translated the questionnaire items into Kinyarwanda.

5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Table 1 shows the results of a two-sample *t*-test of the importance of each official language in both the Nyagatare (northern) and Huye (southern) districts. First, although Rosendal (2009) suggested that French was dominant in Rwanda as of 2009 based on a study of advertisements and signs, and 99% of the population speaks Kinyarwanda, English was surprisingly perceived as the most important language in the business setting and as a medium of instruction. Second, even in the household setting, English is attached with great importance as there is a difference of only 0.05 in the rating score with Kinyarwanda in Huye. Third, the southern students placed greater importance on French; additionally, as a medium of instruction, French exceeded Kinyarwanda in importance.

Table 2 shows one-way analyses of variance regarding each official language by grade. Further information on the role of each language was obtained through interviews with focus groups of six to eight students each on October 12, 13, 21, and 22, 2015. Secondary 6 students were asked about their occupational interests and the universities that they hoped to attend, in order to examine the importance of English to their future plans. The discussions with secondary students were conducted in English, and in the primary-level focus groups, students gave their answers in Kinyarwanda.

Table 1 : Importance of Official Languages by Region

	<i>Nyagatare (North)</i>		<i>Huye (South)</i>		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t value
Business language					
English	4.37	1.374	4.43	0.878	-1.021
Kinyarwanda	3.89	1.178	4.01	1.138	-1.753
French	3.35	1.374	3.96	1.159	-8.323***
Household language					
English	3.62	1.344	3.86	1.254	-3.200***
Kinyarwanda	3.82	1.344	3.93	1.229	-1.451
French	2.60	1.321	3.38	1.339	-10.066***
Church language					
English	3.36	1.342	3.69	1.283	-7.707***

Kinyarwanda	3.83	1.275	4.12	1.098	-4.074***
French	2.54	1.387	3.24	1.343	-8.672***
Medium of instruction					
English	4.26	1,063	4.35	1.014	-1.419
Kinyarwanda	3.76	1,353	3.49	1.471	3.335***
French	3.25	1.405	3.79	1.237	-7.068***

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2 : Importance of Official Languages by Grade

	P4	P6	S3	S6	
Business language	Average	Average	Average	Average	F
English	4.06	3.95	4.48	4.58	26.045***
Kinyarwanda	4.28	3.87	3.88	3.91	5.69***
French	3.47	3.48	3.66	3.77	3.108*
Household language					
English	3.62	3.38	3.94	3.67	7.541***
Kinyarwanda	4.06	3.61	3.87	3.94	2.863
French	3.04	2.81	3.02	3.00	0.833
Church language					
English	3.56	3.37	3.69	3.38	4.438**
Kinyarwanda	4.08	3.89	3.99	3.94	0.735
French	3.30	2.75	2.83	2.83	5.818***
Medium of instruction					
English	4.08	3.94	4.43	4.37	10.476***
Kinyarwanda	3.84	3.98	3.65	3.42	7.841***
French	3.74	3.66	3.49	3.42	2.803*

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

5.1 BUSINESS LANGUAGE

5.1.1 REGIONS

The order of language priority was the same in Nyagatare and Huye, but there was only a slight difference between Kinyarwanda and French among students in Huye. As Huye is close to French-speaking Burundi, this phenomenon is understandable. However, in the interviews, few students cited the proximity of Burundi in explaining the importance of French. More students expected that the value of French could increase because they thought that Rwanda may change its policy direction and move away from its heavy reliance on Anglophone countries. A secondary 3 male student at Indatwa Inkesha stated, "While understanding the merits of English, I am not sure how this country will move forward. It is possible that Rwanda will return to being Francophone, so in order to avoid risk, it is better to study French." A female student in secondary 6 at Indatwa also foresaw this possibility and mentioned that French is important for doing business with West African countries. The importance of Kinyarwanda, however, was not ignored, and some students thought that Rwanda still has room for domestic development.

5.1.2 GRADES

There were significant differences between the primary and secondary students. As business languages, French and English became greater in importance among older students. This is presumably because primary students tend to take a Rwanda-centered perspective, whereas secondary students can think more objectively from other countries' points of view. A female student in primary 4 at Rwisirabo said, "Other people need to know

Kinyarwanda in order to do business with Rwanda”; in contrast, a male student in secondary 3 at Indatwa responded, “Thinking about Rwanda and taking steps toward Anglophone countries, it is necessary for Rwandan people to speak English for our survival.” The difference in attitudes toward French by grade can be explained in the same way.

5.2 HOUSEHOLD LANGUAGE

5.2.1 REGIONS

As a household language, Kinyarwanda outweighed both English and French in importance—not surprisingly, since most of the students have parents who do not speak English. Among the 28 secondary 6 students who participated in the interviews, 24 had parents who were engaged in farming and did not speak English. Therefore, their main language at home is Kinyarwanda. However, English placed a closed second in student ratings, as many students believed that they would have a better chance of improving their English skills if they spoke the language at home. It seems that most students would prefer to use English at home if their parents could speak it. As for French, students in the south valued this language more than those in Nyagatare. However, this does not mean that parents of students in Huye speak French. Rather, because students in Huye consider French more important as a business language, they wish to practice it wherever they can in addition to English.

5.2.2 GRADES

Few significant differences by grade were found with regard to household language use. Kinyarwanda placed first except among secondary 3 students; primary 4 students gave the highest ratings to Kinyarwanda, with an average score of 4.06. It became apparent in the interviews that primary 4 students considered it important to use Kinyarwanda at home because this language would become extinct if not used. On the other hand, students in primary 6 and beyond were looking ahead to the national exams, on which all subjects are tested in English, and said that their first priority was to improve their English.

5.3 CHURCH LANGUAGE

5.3.1 REGIONS

In Huye, average ratings of all three languages exceeded three. Interviews revealed their concern for serving tourists from outside Rwanda. A male secondary 6 student at Indatwa said, “People coming from outside can pray at church if we provide English and French as church language along with Kinyarwanda.” Most churches in Rwanda currently use Kinyarwanda, but some churches have English-language services; for example, Saint Therese Catholic Church in Huye has an 8:00 a.m. service in English. Although churches with French-language services are rare, students consider it important to also provide French for foreigners.

5.3.2 GRADES

Although some significant differences were found, no consistent differences appeared between grades.

5.4 MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

5.4.1 REGIONS

English is dominant as the medium of instruction in both Nyagatare and Huye. Students stressed that the more time they spend using English, the more they improve in the language. As for Kinyarwanda, many said that it is sufficient to study the language at home. There was little support for French as the primary medium of instruction, but some in Huye said that it would be good to have English and French as dual languages in school. A male secondary 6 student at GS Butare Catholic, for example, described the best time for introducing French as “P1–P4 ... because it is hard to learn. English is easy. If you study one year, you can speak it. So French should be taught in the early grades.”

5.4.2 GRADES

Significant differences were found between all three languages. The importance of English as the medium of instruction increased with age, whereas the importance of Kinyarwanda and French tended to decrease. Although many secondary students said that studying Kinyarwanda at home was sufficient, primary students claimed, “If you do not get explanations in Kinyarwanda, you will not understand other languages” (quoted from primary 6 students at GS Butare Catholic). In the current education system, the medium of instruction changes at primary grade 4. As observed from the focus group discussions, primary students have difficulty in English, and therefore it is easier for them to learn in their mother tongue. The decrease in the importance of French with age can be attributed to the national exam, as a male secondary 6 student at Indatwa commented: “At primary 6 and secondary 3 and 6, we have to take national exams and they are all in English, so there is no turning back—we just need to focus on English.”

5.5 CAREER PATHS

Twenty-eight secondary 6 students in the focus groups were asked about their career and university plans. The results underscored the growing importance of English, as 19 of them indicated a desire to attend foreign universities whereas only five wanted to enroll in Rwandan universities. Many students named universities in which they were interested; 11 cited universities in the U.S. or U.K., six named Uganda's Makerere University, and two expressed interest in Kenya's Mount Kenya University. In addition, although most of their parents were engaged in farming, none of the 28 indicated farming as their own occupational preference. The main reason for this trend is economic, as the students know from their parents that farming offers limited earning potential. Many said that they wanted to get a job outside Rwanda. Even those who wanted to stay in Rwanda for business expressed a readiness to use English in their jobs. One male secondary 6 student from Indatwa stated, "Even if you do business in Rwanda, you can get investment from other countries if you are proficient in English or French."

6. DISCUSSION

As shown in Table 1, there were significant differences between regions in all four situations of language use, with Huye students viewing French as having more value than those in the north. As suggested above, this result can be explained by geographic characteristics, in that Nyagatare shares a border with Uganda and Tanzania, both English-speaking countries, whereas Huye is close to Burundi, where French and Kirundi are the official languages. In addition, whereas schools in Huye used French as their medium of instruction before the new language policy was introduced, all three schools in Nyagatare where the study took place used English as the main medium of instruction even before 2009 (at the Rwisirabo primary school, English was limited to upper-grade students) and French was taught only as a foreign language. According to the principal at Karangazi Secondary School in Nyagatare, many of the students there had returned from Uganda, and almost all the students taking French were getting zeros.

Social factors also contribute to the difference in the importance of French. Many people have migrated to Nyagatare from outside Rwanda in search of business opportunities. According to the 2002 census, 48% of the total population of Umutara province in northeastern Rwanda (which includes Nyagatare) constituted immigrants, most of them from Uganda (Gregory, 2013). Owing to these high rates of in-migration, community ties are relatively weak in Nyagatare (Gregory, 2013). In a survey conducted by Ansoms (2005), 45% of respondents in Nyagatare agreed that it is naive to trust others. Similarly, 46% said that people in Nyagatare cannot implement a community development project because people distrust each other too much to work together (Gregory, 2013). Therefore, from these previous studies, it can be inferred that people in Nyagatare tend to avoid participating in community activities and that English is considered sufficient as a tool for communication. Students in Nyagatare are presumably affected by the weak community ties and thus see less value in French as a communication tool, in contrast to students in Huye, where people have more chances to use French as a means of communication.

The study hypothesis was confirmed with regard to the greater importance of French in Huye but not in terms of the importance of English, which was not considered more important in Nyagatare than in Huye. In fact, the mean scores for English as a household language and church language were significantly higher in Huye, although these differences should be viewed with caution, since the mean scores were higher in Huye than in Nyagatare on all but one of the 12 questions (Kinyarwanda as the medium of instruction being the exception).

7. CONCLUSION

This study looked at the student perspectives of the linguistic importance of Rwanda's three official languages in four settings: business, household, church, and medium of instruction. Contrary to Rosendal's (2009) earlier finding that French was dominant among the official languages on advertisements and signs, students perceived English as the most important language in business and teaching contexts. Students of both regions and almost all grades (except S3) rated Kinyarwanda first as a household and church language. However, the importance of French was viewed very differently between the two regions, with students in Huye giving higher ratings. Moreover, as a medium of instruction, French was seen as more important than Kinyarwanda in Huye. These results can be explained by geographic and social factors. First, Nyagatare borders Uganda and Tanzania, both English-speaking countries, whereas Huye is close to Burundi, a Francophone country. Second, Nyagatare has a weak civil society in which about half of the population consists of migrants (mostly from Uganda) and in which residents are discouraged from bonding in relationships of social trust; this dynamic may undermine the value of French as a communication tool. Unlike with French, no significant difference was found between regions with regard to the importance of English, contrary to the study's hypothesis that English would be considered more important in Nyagatare than in Huye.

The importance of English in Rwanda's future can also be observed from students' projected career paths. All students indicated a preference not to work in farming, and most wanted to attend universities in the U.S., U.K., Uganda, and Kenya, where instruction is in English. Although Kinyarwanda maintained its popularity as the language of choice at home and at church, English is threatening its position. Interviews clarified that many young people would prefer to use English even at home if their parents could speak it. As a large majority of students currently use Kinyarwanda at home, the change in medium of instruction does not have the power to affect the mother tongue's stability immediately. However, if the number of students receiving education in English and seeking opportunities to speak that language increases, diglossia in Rwanda could be under attack by the time this generation of students becomes parents.

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