

## Asymmetrical Power Relations within Local, Regional and International Languages in Rwanda: In whose Favour and at what Expense?

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### **Abstract**

*This paper argues that the new role and status currently ascribed to English in Rwanda is tending towards creating 'asymmetrical power relations' between English, on the one hand, and other languages used in the country on the other. The study identifies the latter to include Kinyarwanda, Kiswahili and French. In short, the implementation of a policy of promoting English as one of Rwanda's official languages and language of instruction may end up being successful though at a regrettable cost, in the future. Accordingly, the promotion of English will lead to three major problems. The first one is to relegate the use of other languages to a position of inferiority and 'endangerment'. The second imminent problem is that of excluding local and regional languages (Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili) from the epicenter of Rwanda's national development. The third problem could be a conflicting situation between various language speaking communities, leading to unnecessary polarizations and tension among different language-speaking communities. The paper develops the problems of language conflicts between major and minor languages borrowing some examples from the US, Canada, Belgium, the European Union and South Africa. It analyses language planning mechanisms and suggests a way forward for Rwanda. It is inspired by Patten's (2002) three-stage model of 'language recognition' by states characterized by 'official multilingualism', 'language rationalisation' and 'language maintenance'. The model analyses the challenges of giving public recognition to a particular language or set of languages.*

**Key words:** *multilingualism, bilingualism, mother-tongue instruction, language policy and planning, language functions, language education*

### **Introduction**

When Rwanda joined the British Commonwealth in 2009, some measures were introduced to fast-track the implementation of the English as a language of instruction in the country's schools and institutions of higher learning. Some of the reasons that motivated Rwanda to become an English-speaking country were majorly political and economic in nature. By joining the East African Community (EAC), Rwanda wished to be at par with all the other member states in all spheres (economic, linguistic, political, etc.) in

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order to benefit from all the advantages of economic integration. However, probably, there could have been other political reasons for embracing English as a national language which, arguably, are not the focus of this paper. As a result of embracing English, the use of French - which was formerly one of Rwanda's official languages and language of instruction - has reduced in importance and become a mere taught subject in secondary schools. Henceforth, English has started showing early signs of domination in the fields of education, politics, administration, diplomacy, commerce, the media and press, etc. Although the steps taken by government seem plausible, it is important to argue that local and regional languages should be accorded more importance in policy formulation and implementation, given the role they play in national development.

Despite the above higher acquired status for English, several minority languages in Rwanda seem to be threatened with lack of a level playing field. Do the latter need to be protected? Why should they, anyway? Who should protect them and how? Who are the final winners and losers in this linguistic undertaking? This paper attempts to provide some missing links to these questions. It describes the power-relations that exist between languages in some countries of the world. It also analyses the uses, roles and functions of other languages other than English in Rwanda. It argues that in order for Rwanda's minor languages to survive the test of time, especially in the current globalized world, there is need for urgent strategic language planning. In other words, the paper addresses the issue of promoting English without compromising minority languages.

### **Objective**

The objective of this paper is to analyse the current power-relations between languages used in Rwanda. It shows the extent to which minor languages are trying to cope with the current situation and to show how this has impacted on the development of the country. The paper describes the specific roles and functions of major and minor languages in Rwanda with the intention of designing a coherent language policy.

### **Research Gap**

Many African governments have tended to de-emphasize the role played by languages in development. This is contrary to the reform agenda of the African Union (AU) that advocates promoting African languages to contribute to development and scientific research. AU is

in favour of acquiring and disseminating scientific knowledge, technology and research findings in local languages, in addition to promoting Kiswahili as a language for 'African Renaissance' by disseminating it to be used in all African educational systems and carrying out evidence-based research (Ouane & Glanz, 2010). Despite these high sounding phrases, nonetheless, there are no deliberate supportive mechanisms in many African countries to use the mother tongue as a tool for education and scientific enquiry. Limited research continues to be manifest on the role of languages in development in general and local and/or regional languages in particular. The present study is conceived in the framework of filling this research gap.

Despite changing the language of instruction from French to English, Rwanda still has a big community of French users within the country and abroad to whom French will continue to perform several gregarious functions. Thus, the policy introduced to promote English may be plausible, though probably it has led to a situation where all languages used in Rwanda are no longer on a level playing field. English seems to be on a dominating trend while the other languages like Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili are on the lower scale of being dominated. This paper does not argue that all dominating languages may be devoid of benefits. On the contrary, it shows that minority languages should be protected and adequately supported because they serve a variety of functions in daily routines. In Rwanda for instance, languages like Kinyarwanda, Kiswahili or French still have particular roles and functions they continue to play. Hence, language planners should design and adopt a deliberate, coherent and inclusive language policy to protect them to avoid possible tension and friction in the future

## **Literature Review**

### **Models Explaining Public Recognition of Languages**

In many countries, linguistic pluralism can raise many challenges and concerns. These may range from ethical, political and legal considerations, regarding which language(s) should be used, recognized and retained by government to conduct public business and/or to access public services in schools, hospitals, courts of law, legislature, making advertisements, voting and so on (Patten, 2002). Public recognition is achieved when the selected language(s) is/are used to access such services. Those who subscribe to the liberal egalitarian theory (Rawls, 1971; Dworkin, 1977) suggest that the

best solution in handling the problem of linguistic pluralism may be to adopt a ‘public disengagement’ approach whereby each language should be given freedom similar to that exercised in religious ‘freedom of worship’. According to Dworkin (1977), liberalism is defined as a commitment to the principle of ‘rough equality’ according to which resources and opportunities should be equally distributed to all languages used in the country so that the same share of whatever is roughly available is devoted to satisfying the ambitions of each language.

On the other hand, there are those who are opposed to public disengagement, arguing that, in language matters, it is impossible to avoid the use of language because public services and government business must, after all, to be delivered in, conducted and accessed via the use of one or several languages. Patten (2002) thus proposes three models that help to appreciate the challenges involved in public recognition of languages by states. These include: official multilingualism, language rationalisation and language maintenance.

In official multilingualism, each of the various languages spoken in the country is given equal public recognition. It is based on the liberal egalitarian theory according to which similar valuable institutional spaces and resources which are officially given to speakers of one language in the community (schools, hospitals, social services, research) are also given to speakers of other languages as well. According to this model, linguistic pluralism is handled in the same way as religious pluralism. Public institutions are supposed, therefore, to devote similar resources to each of the languages in the country. Official multilingualism is used, for instance, in federal institutions in Canada, Belgium, and Switzerland as well as in the institutions of the European Union. It has advantages of, among others, accommodating communication needs of minority speakers; it also provides a symbolic affirmation and value to all communities, leading to identity promotion for all language communities, given that language is a central and defining feature of peoples’ identity.

The second model is language rationalisation. To rationalise is to make a working method more effective, usually by combining or stopping particular activities to increase its efficiency. Language rationalisation is an offshoot of official multilingualism. It involves a program of promoting ‘convergence’ on a privileged public language (or set of languages) by limiting or denying recognition of some other

languages in some spheres of language use. Priority here is given to adopting a language policy that leaves people as equal as possible with respect to some aspect or aspects of their social, economic and political lives. Its advantages include enhancing social mobility, facilitating democratic deliberation, and encouraging the formation of a common political identity as well as increasing the efficiency of public institutions.

The critique leveled against language rationalisation is that it may not be able to prevent a shift from some selected languages in preference of one dominant language. This is a big challenge of official multilingualism because the latter ends up not ensuring the survival of vulnerable languages which are originally supposed to be protected and safeguarded. If left to operate without checks and balances, official multilingualism ends up being tolerant to the dictates of social forces, thus leading to a linguistic convergence that promotes a privileged public language or group of languages and as such, limits or denies the recognition of other languages. Language rationalisation is born from the weaknesses of official multilingualism. It deals with the issue of equality from a non-language point of view (Patten, 2002).

The third approach is the language maintenance model which is also a reaction to the inadequacies of official multilingualism. The challenge of official multilingualism is that equal recognition of selected languages does not necessarily imply equal chances of success in the performance and survival of these languages. Equal recognition of languages may not guarantee that a significant number of speakers of the selected language or languages will retain their importance in key spheres of language use (Laponce, 1984; Laitin, 1998). Language maintenance is, therefore, a policy of selective language recognition, adopted to promote the maintenance of some vulnerable languages in the community. It is linked to the idea of equality that satisfies speakers of different languages. It also focuses on social interests such as symbolic affirmation and identity promotion. In this sense, equality is measured in terms of how these interests are satisfied.

### **Consequences of Language Domination and Marginalisation**

In multilingual countries with no proper language planning mechanisms, minor languages can end up being marginalised by major ones with serious consequences (Wardhaugh, 1998). In countries like Uganda where there are 57 linguistic groups, it was

impossible, for example, to “upgrade any indigenous language to national status because doing so was bound to be interpreted as favouring one language community at the expense of others.” (A. Nsibambi, 2000:2). Instead, in order to circumvent the above problem, they opted for foreign languages like English or Swahili to be Uganda’s official/national languages respectively (Nsibambi, 2000). In countries where the linguistic playing field is not level, an escalation of linguistic differences can lead to controversies, polarisations and tensions (Wardhaugh, 1998). This has been amply demonstrated in Belgium between the Walloons and the Flemish, but also in Canada between French speakers in Quebec and English speakers in that country where claims for language rights have become the order of the day. As for Spain, separatist tendencies threatening to tear the country apart have also been manifest among the speakers of Catalan (Wardhaugh, 1998).

In the US, a language debate has been going on for some time now whereby activists of the English language have been pushing for the “English only” policy while the Hispanic communities are opposed to it. Activists of Spanish argue that in some states or federal governments where Hispanic communities constitute the majority, the latter should be allowed to use their language to access public services (education, social services, etc.) and to conduct public business such as voting in Spanish but not in ‘English only’. In the European Union, the desire to forge common institutions and a shared identity have been severely complicated by linguistic diversity and demands for linguistic space from many minority language communities. They have made protests, arguing that translation is always imperfect inconvenient and expensive. Activists of minority languages have continued to demand that their languages should be standardized and used in the public sphere (Patten, 2002).

Hence, while making language policies, planners should take trouble to identify all possible social factors that can hinder the successful implementation of language policies (Kasozi, 2000) and include these in their planning framework (Cooper, 1989). Failure to do so may lead to unnecessary social tension and frictions.

### **Language Planning: for whom, how and why?**

Wardhaugh (1998) sees ‘language planning’ as one of the solutions to the problems met by minor languages. Language planning is defined as a deliberate, conscience, long-term and sustained effort by

government to alter a language's function in society (Weinstein, 1980). The above effort involves a number of things - mobilization, use and assessment of resources, complex decision making processes, assignment of different functions to different languages, etc. (Wradhaugh, 1998). The processes that seek to alter the status of a language (status planning) can lead to promoting particular languages to a higher status though at the same time compromising others. On the other hand, a given country may wish to directly interfere in the language matters of its population with the aim of changing the internal condition of a particular language (corpus planning) (Wradhaugh, 1998). Status planning may aim at broadening roles, functions or uses of a language in government circles, trade and commerce, public education, and so on. In this case, the status of a language altered by government may start being considered as official, national or even both.

There are many discontented language-speaking minorities in the world complaining about and demanding for fairer and/or just language rights. When a minor language acquires a new status, new measures can be taken through 'corpus planning' to develop and standardize it, empowering it, as it were, to serve all possible functions in society. This can be a very costly exercise because it involves the use of hefty resources to ensure standardization and quality of a written orthography for that language, establishing new sources of vocabulary, producing dictionaries and written literature in that language (Kasozi, 2000; Nsibambi, 2000).

Many African countries have generally grappled with the above language problem given their multi-ethnic and therefore multilingual nature (Parry, 2000; R. Nsibambi, 2000). The former have tended to favor linguistic pluralism of promoting English as their official language and/or language of instruction while relegating local or indigenous languages to lesser functions.

Only in Tanzania and Kenya has the process of "vernacularization" succeeded in favor of Swahili which has served to cement national unity in those countries (Wradhaugh, 1998:348). On the other hand, Uganda's implementation of a pro-Swahili policy has continued to meet with opposition and many social challenges, notably challenges that depict tension between the speakers of Luganda on the one hand and Swahili advocates on the other, the latter being considered socially negatively as a language of repression (Kasozi, 2000:26-27). Another strong argument explaining the poor implementation of

language policies in Uganda is given by Nsibambi (2000:21) who asserts that in African countries, language matters are never a priority in the allocation of government resources:

[...] our country, like many other African countries was misruled for decades and in an attempt to emerge from an economic political and social quagmire, everything seems a priority. Since to most people, the issue of a national language is not a matter of life and death, it tends to be neglected in the allocation of resources. Even English, which is accepted without question as the official language and enjoys the support of foreign donors, is inadequately resourced [...].

Other studies (Parkama, 1995:42; Phillipson, 1992) warn against overreliance by African countries on English or French which they accuse of perpetuating 'linguistic imperialism'. They propose de-hegemonizing the use of English so that the standard forms of English should also give space to and accept colloquial forms of African English.

The argument in favor of language planning is that it can lead to decisions that can help to boost and transform minority languages. This is because an official neglect of any given language can lead to sentiments of discrimination and tension (Wradhaugh, 1998). This is demonstrated in Canada where French speakers of this minority language have been agitating, though with limited success, for their own separate nation. This, after the Quebec federal government realized that they got a raw deal from the Canadian bilingual policy. Canadian bilingualism has proved to be an issue of controversy with demands for language rights in both French and English speaking territories (Wradhaugh, 1998).

In an attempt to solve this problem, the Canadian government responded by appointing a Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism and an Official Languages Act of 1969/1988, leading to a Commission of Official Languages which was charged with the implementation of the findings arrived at. The outcome was that French speakers in the minority were granted some language rights in the entire country so as to preserve the bilingualism policy in the country. Unsatisfied with the implications of this policy, the federal government of Quebec tried to restrict the use of English in public education, thus restoring French unilingualism, which was seen as a violation of language rights in the Canadian constitution. The



French–English polarization later led to separatist tensions which were defeated in the national referendum of 1995, implying that the minority language issue in Canada is far from being solved (Wradhaugh, 1998).

In Belgium, similar tensions have always existed between two languages—French and Flemish—used on Belgium soil. Thus, some elements of language discrimination were harbored by the speakers of the majority language—Flemish. At one time, “Flemish was banned from government, law, army, universities and secondary schools” (Wradhaugh, 1998:352). However, a linguistic and social parity was later established after introducing some measures of language status planning. These included policy and constitutional measures in which Belgium was reasserted as a bilingual country and Brussels recognized as a bilingual city and giving each territory occupied by either the Flemish or Walloons the right to use their own language in all spheres of life.

South Africa is yet another example of countries where the problem of language inequalities has been accorded national importance, notably after apartheid (Kateregga, 2013). The studies conducted by Webb (2002 a, b and d) on the language question in South Africa shows various language planning mechanisms and strategies. Before apartheid, only English, and to some extent, Afrikaans<sup>i</sup> exclusively dominated all spheres of ‘essential’ activities. As a result, the remaining 80 South African languages were relegated to the periphery. Bantu languages only served minor and insignificant functions such performing wedding and burial rites as well as servicing cultural parties.

The first phase of language planning consisted of tabling a language bill in Parliament—*The South African Languages Bill*. The second stage was to provide a legal framework in the national constitution. The third phase was to produce a researched paper—the LANGTAG report of 1996—on the implementation of the integrated national language policy. Accordingly, 11 South African languages were retained—out of 80—to serve official functions. This choice was based on 4 linguistic families: Bantu-Nguni language family, Sotho-Venda family, Songa-Shangaan and the Afrikaans-English family.

The goal of the SA language policy is fivefold: (1) To promote the culture of linguistic parity and tolerance between indigenous languages and English (2) To change people’s mindset *vis-à-vis* indigenous languages (3) To enhance the economic capacity of local

languages by transforming them to become instruments to access jobs and education. (4) To support minority languages to become instruments of human rights and cultural identity. (5) To preserve the South African ethno-linguistic diversity so that all languages could contribute to national development (Kateregga, 2013).

Capacity enhancement of Bantu languages aimed to empower them to gain a prestigious status and to serve in high function contexts. The South African government has taken measures to standardize them and has embarked on producing written orthographies and vocabulary enrichment as well as teaching these languages in schools. As to whether the South African government has successfully achieved the above goals is not the objective of this paper.

### **Methodology**

This is a qualitative study underpinned by a survey design. It relied on statements voiced by various categories of respondents who tried to construct a multiplicity of meanings associated with language issues in Rwanda. The research dealt with reality that is socially constructed, whereby the respondents were supposed to interpret and make meaning out of what was investigated within given situational contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The study was intended to generate views, opinions and attitudes from various categories of respondents from the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS), civil servants and residents of Huye, Rwanda's second largest town which is regarded as a university town because it hosts several universities and institutions of higher learning. The respondents included university and secondary school students, high school teachers, university lecturers and selected civil servants, parents, and town residents.

Data was collected from a total of 100 people who participated in the study with the help of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews which were administered to three categories of respondents: 80 respondents answered questionnaires while semi-structured interviews were administered to 20 respondents. The questionnaire and interview content reflected several themes: language domination, language planning and policy, language roles and functions, minor and major languages in Rwanda, language curriculum, how to protect minor languages, perceptions of Rwandans on languages in national development, and so on. The themes retained were based on their frequency in the current

language debate on language policy and use rate in the literature reviewed.

Respondent sampling was done basing on a general assumption of being knowledgeable about and interested in language matters although some few were also selected on the basis of their role in society as parents whose children may be interested in studying and specializing in language studies. In this connection, two sampling methods were preferred - purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was used because, apart from a few participants from a few university lecturers whose level of understanding and interpreting language issues was relatively high, not very many participants outside university were interested in and amply informed about language issues. As for the snowball method, it was used for triangulation purposes to supplement the above sampling technique and credibility. Some interviewed colleagues helped in the identification of other informants within and outside the university. The respondents were free to choose between being interviewed either in either English or Kinyarwanda.

One of the limitations of the sampling methods chosen was that some of the selected respondents claimed to be having limited knowledge on the subject under study saying that only language teachers/specialists should be interviewed. On the other hand, those who seemed to be knowledgeable on language issues, that is those employed in government departments, were not very free to discuss government policies relating to languages. They claimed that what they were giving was a personal opinion but not an official version on such matters.

Given the qualitative nature of this study, a thematic approach was deemed relevant in the analysis of the data.

### **Findings**

The objective of this paper was to describe and analyse Rwanda's linguistic landscape by identifying power-relations between major and minor languages in the country and to show how this has impacted on the development of the country. It describes specific roles and functions of languages used in Rwanda with the intention of proposing an appropriate language policy for the country. In achieving these objectives, six major themes were identified for analysis from the data collected. These included language roles and functions, language awareness in Rwanda, dominating and dominated languages, Rwanda's language curriculum, the role of

language in national development and language planning strategies in Rwanda.

### **Theme 1: Language Roles and Functions**

The respondents (abbreviated as R1, R2, etc.) were asked to compare the roles and functions of various languages used in the country and to show which languages they considered to be playing more important roles than others. This is how they reacted:

R1: “University and school employees in Rwanda prefer to use Kinyarwanda in transacting many routine activities and academic business such as giving and/or responding to instructions in work places.”

R2: “Kinyarwanda is used while making speeches during major social events such as graduation parties, marriage ceremonies as well as in political meetings.”

R3: “Students mainly use Kinyarwanda to discuss academic assignments even at university. They only use English in writing assignments.”

R4: “Most students use Kinyarwanda to conduct telephone conversations and some find it more practical to send casual telephone messages (SMS) and e-mail messages to friends than using English.”

R5: “Many students rarely use Kiswahili or English at campus; those who do are mostly students who originated from Congo DRC or Tanzania.”

A close look at these statements shows that although Kinyarwanda seems to be associated with low context functions that are not directly associated with national economic development such as ordinary oral conversations and speeches during social events, its gregarious role is outstanding and ubiquitous. High prestige functions reserved for English or French such as conducting school lessons and lectures as well as writing official documents are reserved for English which is mastered minority elites. As for French and Kiswahili which currently play an insignificant role - because the former is no longer the language of instruction following the policy which replaced it with English in 1998 - they are still spoken by a significant number of interlocutors. As shown by the above statements, Kinyarwanda seems to be creating strong social ties between many interlocutors in the country and thus helps to

preserve social identity and solidarity between Rwandans at many socialization levels such as family, peer groups, religious and political congregations. This makes the above local language more socially practical and relevant than English, French or Swahili which are foreign in nature because they will never adequately fulfill the above functions for Rwandans. We need to point out that, unlike many African countries, Kinyarwanda is Rwanda's lingua franca used to transact economic and political business, and as such, this language should be strengthened to forge a bond of nationalism, patriotism and national unity and identity. Given that each of these languages plays separate roles, it means that no language should be left behind but instead should coexist though, probably, with unequal roles. In other words, however important English may be in terms of its prestigious functions, it will never succeed alone in Rwanda.

### **Theme 2: Importance of Learning Languages**

On this theme, the respondents were asked to show the importance and relevance of learning of languages for Rwandans and how these should be taught. Their reactions are summarised as follows:

- R6: "All studies from nursery and primary should be given in English because this helps to synchronise Rwanda's system of education with that of EAC countries assumed to have a better education system."
- R7: "I support of a bilingual language curriculum that combines both English and French in nursery and primary but at university, English should dominate."
- R8: "Bilingual education is very good for Rwanda because it can prepare our children to compete for international jobs in the EAC, AU and UN."
- R9: "When applying for international jobs, newspapers always quote that 'knowledge of English and French is as an added advantage'."
- R10: "I don't support my child learning in Kinyarwanda alone at nursery school because young children have a potential of learning at least six languages."
- R11: "More scholarships and more foreign aid currently given to Rwanda are from English-speaking countries compared to France and Belgium combined."

R12: “Compared to the other EAC countries, Rwanda has an advantage because it generally enjoys a good background of French and English. This could be exploited to Rwanda’s benefit.

These findings reveal that many respondents are aware of the importance of leaning languages, both local and foreign. Many of them agree on one point that learning foreign languages can increase employment opportunities. Although some seem to favour an English-oriented curriculum, others are for a bilingual one. According to them, the scope of language learning seems to be restricted to only English and French. None of them seems to be interested in learning and teaching of mother tongue to children. To them, being bilingual means the ability to master English and French for purposes of getting employed in international organisations. They seem not to be aware that according to many existing studies on foreign language leaning, children learn other languages better if they already have a mastery of their mother tongue. The above findings show that the respondents poorly rank mother tongue in Rwanda’s language landscape. The negative attitude towards mother tongue is associated with a colonial mentality. There are many schools in Rwanda where speaking of mother tongue is sanctioned with punishment. Children are therefore, by school regulation, supposed to communicate in English or French alone. This practice is also carried forward by the wish of many Rwandan parents who get satisfaction when their children are more fluent in English or French than in mother tongue.

### **Theme 3: Dominating Versus Dominated Languages**

The respondents were also asked whether they felt that some languages in Rwanda dominated others and to suggest the consequences of this scenario. They had mixed reactions as shown below:

R13: “Kinyarwanda still dominates but this is just in the short run because English will soon overtake Kinyarwanda in the long run and other languages will be threatened.”

R14 “Government and foreign donors are putting a lot of funds to support English. For example, in 2010, the government recruited 600 teachers of English from Uganda and Kenya to promote the English Language Mentoring program.

- R15: Knowledge of English is very useful in the banking and telecommunication institutions which are controlled by rich multinationals.”
- R16: “Even with local petrol stations which formerly used to advertise their product in French, they have now switched to English!”
- R17: “In Radio and televised broadcasts, Kinyarwanda and English programs dominate French or Swahili programmes.”

These findings reveal that although English has a recent history in Rwanda, it is poised to dominate Rwanda’s linguistic landscape. It is used as a language of instruction in schools; it is used in the broadcasting and telecommunication fields, in advertisement and in government and multinational institutions like banks. Government tenders and job advertisements are dominantly quoted in English in the English daily (*The New Times*). Even in the Kinyarwanda newspaper—*Invaho Nshya*—English advertisements are conspicuous. There is currently no single daily written in French in Rwanda. In Huye town where this study was conducted, many posters, billboards and signposts along the main roads and streets, especially those displaying government policies on HIV/ AIDS, family planning, gender issues, environment appear in Kinyarwanda with many upcoming ones in English.

While Kinyarwanda still dominates the local print media—*Imvaho nshya*, *Izuba*, *Gasabo*, *Ishema*, *Rugari*, *Rushyashya*, *Umusingi*—French signposts have significantly faded out. The few that still exist advertise petty businesses like small-scale restaurants, secretarial services for students and stationer’s shops. French can also be found in hardware shops, motor-vehicle garages, electrical shops and carpentries where items like: *quinquillerie*, *ampoule*, *traverse*, *triplex*, *fer à béton*, *serrure*, *H/S*, are still referred to by their French names. There is no newspaper, signpost or advert written in Kiswahili despite the latter being elevated to the status of Rwanda’s fourth official language.

According to the above statements the consequence of Rwanda’s current language scenario is that if nothing is done to boost other languages (apart from English), the former will only remain as a mere footnote, that is to say official languages which are practically not empowered to serve any important function.

**Theme 4: Rwanda's Language Curriculum**

The respondents were asked to suggest the best language curriculum for Rwanda's schools. Most of their reactions focused on Kiswahili whose teaching seems to be having several problems compared to other languages. They had this to say:

R18: "I think that Kiswahili should be integrated in the primary curriculum."

R19 "Government should advertise and hire languages consultants and experts to do this job."

R20: "I think languages are quickly learnt at a young age, therefore English, French and Kiswahili should be compulsory at nursery and primary levels."

R21 "Many students have lost interest in language options because government gives limited bursaries to humanities."

*R22:* "Kiswahili serves as Rwanda's language for the army and therefore needs to be strengthened in the curriculum."

R23: "In order to improve the teaching of Swahili, Rwanda should hire teachers from Tanzania and Kenya to train Swahili teachers."

R24: "Lack of appropriate reading materials in English or Kiswahili" in which case government should spend more money" on this item."

Many of the statements above suggest that there has been no language curriculum review in the country. They also single out the problem of teaching Kiswahili in Rwanda. Kiswahili is the regional lingua franca in the East African Community. It is the national language for two EAC countries—Tanzania and Kenya. Article 137 of Chapter 29 of the EAC Treaty stipulates that Kiswahili shall be developed as a lingua franca of the Community while English shall be the official language of the EAC. The African Union has already promoted it to the level of being one of its working languages (Ouane and Glanz, 2010). Nonetheless, Uganda, which is a member state of EAC has never succeeded in implementing a Kiswahili teaching policy because, among other things, there is lack of qualified teachers and teaching materials for Kiswahili in that country. Since 1992, Uganda committed herself to implement the teaching of Kiswahili in all her secondary schools but this has never been implemented due to lack of trained teachers and inadequate teaching materials.



According to the above statements, Kiswahili has a lot of relevance to Rwanda's social, political and economic interests. If Rwanda wishes to learn from Uganda's experience, it can improve Kiswahili teaching by introducing it in its primary curriculum. It should concentrate on training its own Kiswahili teachers first before embarking on the project of teaching it. The government therefore needs an urgent national debate on how to promote and sustain a sound multilingual situation in the country.

### **Theme 5: Role of Languages in National Development**

The researcher asked respondents whether they felt that learning of languages has a contribution to Rwanda's national development. Their answers were mitigated:

- R25: "I think languages don't have a direct and immediate linkage to development.
- R26: "Learning of languages is a liability compared to learning of science subjects."
- R27: "Instead of studying languages, my child should study marketable disciplines like management, law or science studies."
- R28: "I think local language is important because it is used by the masses to implement government policies."
- R29: "English is a global language used in all emerging countries like China, India, and South Africa and Dubai and many Rwandans go there for commerce and trade, and English can be useful."

The responses from the above respondents are divided: some think that languages are associated with development while the majority does not share that view. However generally, the respondents do not seem to adequately justify their statements, hence described as lacking adequate awareness in terms of linking language with development. The statements also raise a general problem of mindset among Rwandans who feel that colonial languages are better than local languages. Overall, no respondent seems to associate development with culture and yet culture is an ensemble of attributes: customs, norms, values, attitudes of which language is an important part. Yet, these days Rwanda has realised that meaningful development is one associated with homegrown initiatives or indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). Kinyarwanda is one of the basic homegrown or indigenous resources which should be

strengthened because, as revealed in the above statements, Rwanda's civil servants and politicians use it to interact with local communities to implement government policies for purposes of national development. From this set of statements, it seems that education stakeholders in Rwanda have not adequately used career guidance departments in schools to advise students on the various job profile requirements. The statements seem to give overall importance to English as a tool for international trade. In order for the English curriculum to actively contribute to development, it should be reviewed to include English for business purposes.

### **Theme 6: Language Policies and Planning**

When asked what should be done to improve the current language situation in Rwanda, the respondents voiced a concern that all languages, apart from English, seem not to be given due attention. They were also concerned with the absence of a coherent national language policy which handles all languages used in Rwanda.

R30: "People should stop despising those who specialize in local languages."

R31: "Rwanda's academy in charge of Culture and Languages (RALC) should start a sensitization campaign in all schools in the country on the importance of all languages."

R32: "Local and foreign languages should be treated equally because, if well learned, all languages can complement one another."

R33: "There should be a national language policy but not simply a policy for promoting English only."

From the above statements, three major points emerge: that those who study and specialize in local African languages are generally despised by the Rwandan society; that the public is not aware of the importance of studying languages in general; that there is no coherent and comprehensive national language policy that harmonises the teaching of local and foreign languages in the country. The statements also reveal that there is no deliberate strategy by government to link African local languages to the epicenter of development. It is also suggested by these statements that the existing policy on teaching languages seems to be asymmetrical, that is to say it favours some languages (especially English) at the expense of others. In other words, English seems to be threatening local and minor languages. This scenario, according to

the above statements, has created a sense of frustration and despondency in studying languages, especially French, Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili. The statements blame this on the lack of a comprehensive language policy in the country.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study show that Rwanda should support English out of 'institutional' reasons (Calvet, 1987). English enjoys many institutional advantages as echoed by the above author and justified by the findings of this paper. English is now Rwanda's language of instruction and doubles as a regional and international lingua franca that links Rwanda with her new EAC partners. The English language also has other numerous advantages in the international arena because it mediates international politics and trade in countries within and outside Africa. The findings of this study have established that for many Rwandan students, English seems to have an edge over French given the number of scholarships available to study in English speaking universities abroad. However, despite all these advantages, there are still many domains in Rwanda where English scores zero: it is an elitist language, spoken and understood by a very small percentage of Rwandans. The majority of Rwandans find it more practical to use their mother tongue while transacting social, political and economic business. This study has also shown that the new regional block that Rwanda has decided to join (EAC) is aware of the importance of an African lingua franca in achieving national and regional development. Hence, EAC has strongly lobbied and succeeded in making Kiswahili an official working language for the African Union. Rwanda is therefore left with no choice but to accept and promote Kiswahili alongside other languages used within its territory. Although there are no current available statistics on the use of Kiswahili, it seems that the latter is spoken and understood by many more Rwandans than English and French combined. This therefore implies that the country can easily translate the benefits of Kiswahili into Rwanda's development.

On the other hand, the findings of this paper have also shown that Kinyarwanda must be promoted not only for its 'gregarious' functions (Calvet, 1987) but also for its sociocultural functions. It is the mother tongue for all Rwandans, and as such, helps in maintaining and preserving unity, solidarity and social identity between all Rwanda's sub-communities. The findings have also shown that all government programmes permeate to the grassroots via Kinyarwanda. This language therefore has an important political function.

Although many respondents in this study (especially parents) seem not to be aware of the importance of the mother tongue in early childhood development (ECD), the government should sensitise them on this importance so that, as stakeholders in the educational undertaking, they should be on the same page with government in supporting instruction of and in Kinyarwanda at lower levels of education. Studies already exist elsewhere (Keshubi, 2000) which support the view that mother tongue instruction at early stages of development helps learners to gain self-confidence and to express themselves spontaneously. Other studies have shown that in many developing countries, many children start losing their self-confidence and self-esteem at nursery and early primary stages. Yet others show that any attempt to use foreign languages as a medium of instruction during early stages of learning may be detrimental to the child's mental development (Bagunywa, in Keshibi, 2000). Based on similar considerations, the present paper advocates for mother-tongue instruction in Rwanda's in nursery and lower primary cycle.

As a reflection of the objective of this study, the government of Rwanda should seek to uphold the principle of 'rough equality' between all the languages on the territory (Dworkin, 1977). In other words, a reasonable number of resources and opportunities should be 'roughly' equally availed to the all the languages used in Rwanda to avoid a situation of discontentment and social friction among Rwanda's various language speaking communities as illustrated in some countries. In this context, Kinyarwanda should be supported for its importance in early childhood education (self-esteem, children's mental development, social identity). As for Kiswahili it is both a continental and regional lingua franca with a number of trade-related benefits. French is also important for Rwanda due to political and diplomatic reasons. The country still needs to maintain her ties with her historic and colonial past. There is a big community of French speakers in Rwanda which is still a member of the Francophone countries. The findings of this paper resonate with the AU program that urges African governments to enhance and support the use of African local languages in education and research (Ouane & Glanz, 2010). In this perspective, the 'AU language reform agenda' that advocates for the multiplication of reading materials in local languages and the promotion and dissemination of Kiswahili as a 'language for African Renaissance' should be conceived to cover other languages like Kinyarwanda. Finally in achieving all the above language initiatives suggested in this paper, there is need for strategic planning for languages used in Rwanda so that minority

languages are protected from the threat imposed by major ones, in this case English.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed at analyzing power-relations between the languages used in Rwanda. In achieving the above goal, it was found that power relations between various languages used in Rwanda are asymmetrical. They seem to be favouring English to the detriment of French, Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili. The findings of this study have shown that Rwanda does not have a coherent and comprehensive national language policy that states clearly the roles, functions and reasons why these languages should be supported and protected. This has led many Rwandans to develop a negative mind-set towards studying mother tongue and Kiswahili, the latter being one of the most promising Africa's *lingua francas*. In short the paper has argued in favour of the country's minority languages (Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili) which should be protected and developed because they can help to achieve a number of social economic and mental benefits: cultural cohesion, national unity, social cohesion and identity, trade, self-confidence and self-esteem. In order to promote these languages, the findings of this study have shown that there is need for a national debate on languages whose end result should be to set up a national language policy that is supportive of African languages. The policy should also be inclusive with an intention to change people's mindset on the learning and teaching of these languages in schools. Secondly, there should be a curriculum review intended to streamline the teaching of Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili at nursery and primary levels. Thirdly, government should concentrate on training teachers and providing teaching materials for these languages to offset the challenge of inadequate trained teachers. Lastly, research and publications on mother tongue and Kiswahili should be funded to enhance a positive public image for these languages. All these initiatives would go a long way in avoiding negative sentiments towards studying African languages and reducing conflicts among different language speaking communities. In this way, national development would be achieved.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations are made in view of the research findings in this study:

- 1) Rwanda's should debate a national language policy that seeks to promote Kinyarwanda, Kiswahili and French.
- 2) There is need for a coherent language curriculum that links nursery and primary and higher institutions of learning;
- 3) The university should take a leading role in teaching and conducting research on language matters.
- 4) Minority languages in Rwanda should be protected to avoid creating conflict between communities that speak different languages.
- 5) Government should support writers of and publishers in local and regional languages.

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