

Variation and Awareness in Kinyarwanda Morphosyntax

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Introduction

We **newly document morphosyntactic variation** in Kinyarwanda verbal prefix *ra-*. We present **pilot results** about the variants' distribution and social conditioning and introduce an **upcoming sociolinguistic study**.

Description of variation

Kinyarwanda (JD61, Bantu, Rwanda) contrasts two verb forms known as **disjoint (*ra-*)** (1) and **conjoint** (unmarked) (2):

- (1) Ba-**ra**-som-a. (2) Ba-som-a ibitabo.
 SBJ-**DJ**-read-FV SBJ-read-FV books
 'They read.'

The disjoint marker is variably analyzed as marker of focus or vP-finality and encodes present progressive in some contexts (Ngoboka & Zeller 2017).

Variation in ***ra-*** is largely undocumented and in some cases conflicts with the literature (Ngoboka & Zeller 2017, Coupez 1980, Cadiou 1985, Overdulve 1988).

A **periphrastic** present progressive (3) (Botne 1981, Nkusi 1995, Ngoboka 2016) competes with ***ra-*** (4). Conditioning of this alternation may be dialectal (Nkejabahizi 2007):

- (3) Aka kanya, **n-di** **gu-tekerez-a.** (4) N-**ra**-tekerez-a.
 right now **SBJ-COP** **INF-think-FV** SBJ-**DJ**-think-FV
 'Right now, I'm thinking.'

Ra- is forbidden in **negation** and relativization for most, but can express present progressive meaning in these contexts for some:

- (5) Aka kanya, imvura **nt-i-(ra)**-gw-a.
 right now rain **NEG-SBJ-DJ**-fall-FV
 'Right now, it isn't raining.'

Ra- is optional before **complementizer *ngo*** for most, but obligatory for some:

- (6) Ejo, w-a-**(ra)**-vuz-e **ngo** hanze hijimye.
 SBJ-PST-**DJ**-say-FV **that** it's dark outside
 'Yesterday, you said that it's dark outside.'

Ra- is forbidden before low manner / temporal **adverbials** for most, but a verb focus reading obtains for some:

- (7) Buri muni, Joyeuse a-**(ra)**-ririmb-a **neza.**
 every day Joyeuse SBJ-**DJ**-sing-FV **well**
 'Every day, Joyeuse SINGS_{FOC} well.'

Comparison: previously documented variation

Class 3 and 6 agreement in *g-* alternates with prestige class 3 *u~w-* and class 6 *ya~a-*:

- (8) U-mw-embe **(gw~w)**-aguye hasi.
 AUG-CL3-mango **CL3**-fell on.the.ground
 'A mango fell on the ground.'

G- is associated with the *ikirera* and *ikigoyi* dialects of the **Northwest** of Rwanda (Ngoboka 2016, Dukuzumuremyi et al. 2024).

Pilot methodology

Ideologies

Asked for general sociolinguistic awareness (free response):

- Prompted about age, gender, region
- Prompted about correctness / standardization and associated social categories

Participants

15 participants, aged 23-59, from all five provinces (*intara*) of Rwanda

Ideologies

about negated *ra-* (5):
'I've heard that because that's how we say it in my hometown.'
(West; 25)

about *g-* concords (8):
'It's used by *ikigoyi* speakers from the Northern Province.' (North; 59)

about *g-* concords (8):
'[G- concords] are not good Kinyarwanda.'
(East; 26)

| variable | mentioned having heard variation at all | mentioned region | mentioned age | mentioned stigma |
|------------------------|---|------------------|---------------|------------------|
| periphrastic (4) | 13 | 1 | 3 | 0 |
| negated <i>ra-</i> (5) | 13 | 3 | 4 | 1 |
| comp. <i>ngo</i> (6) | 11 | 1 | 4 | 3 |
| adverbs (7) | 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| <i>g-</i> concords (8) | 14 | 9 | 1 | 4 |



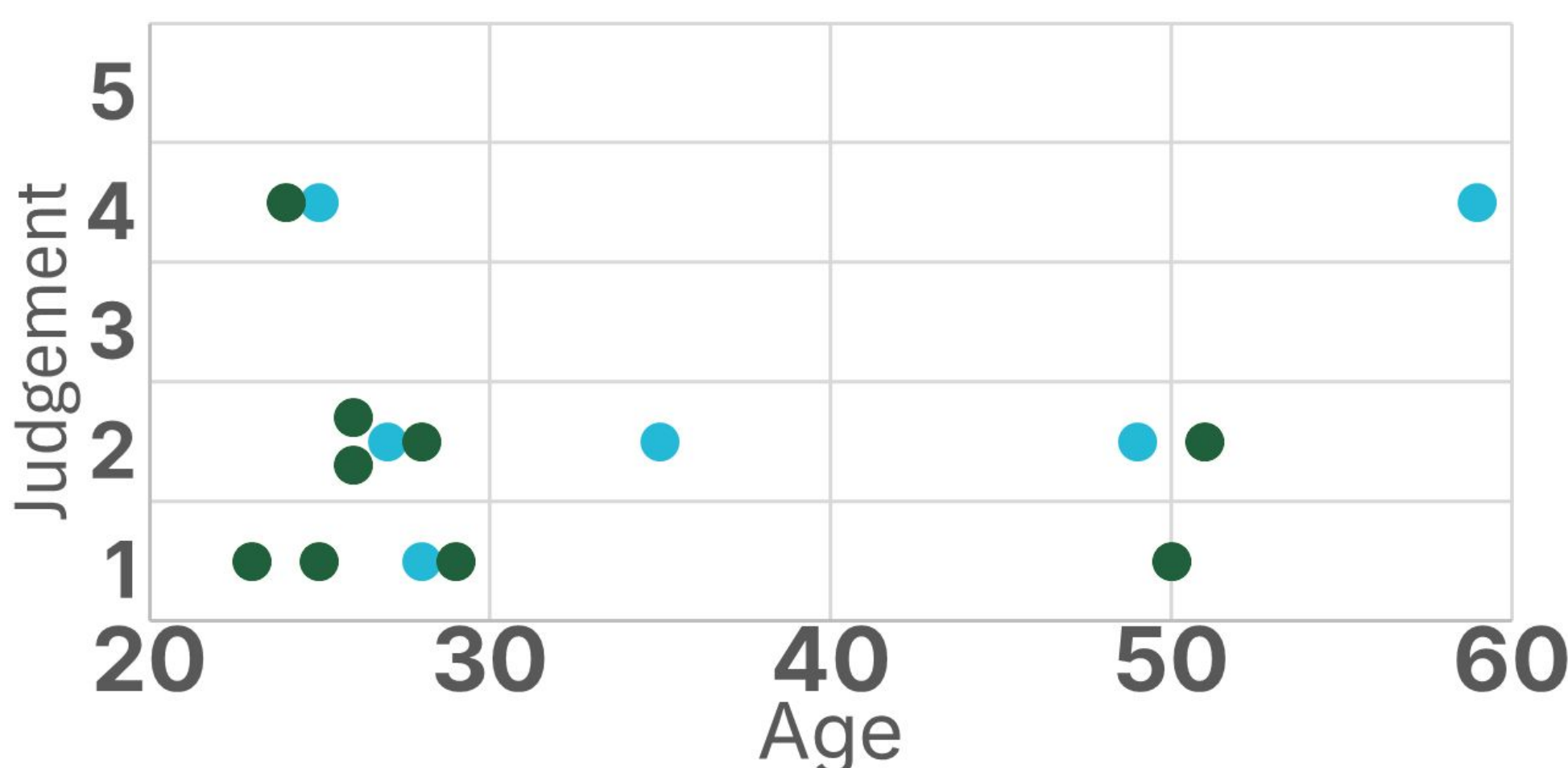
Supplemental data, including graphs of reported usage for other variables

Participant ideologies:

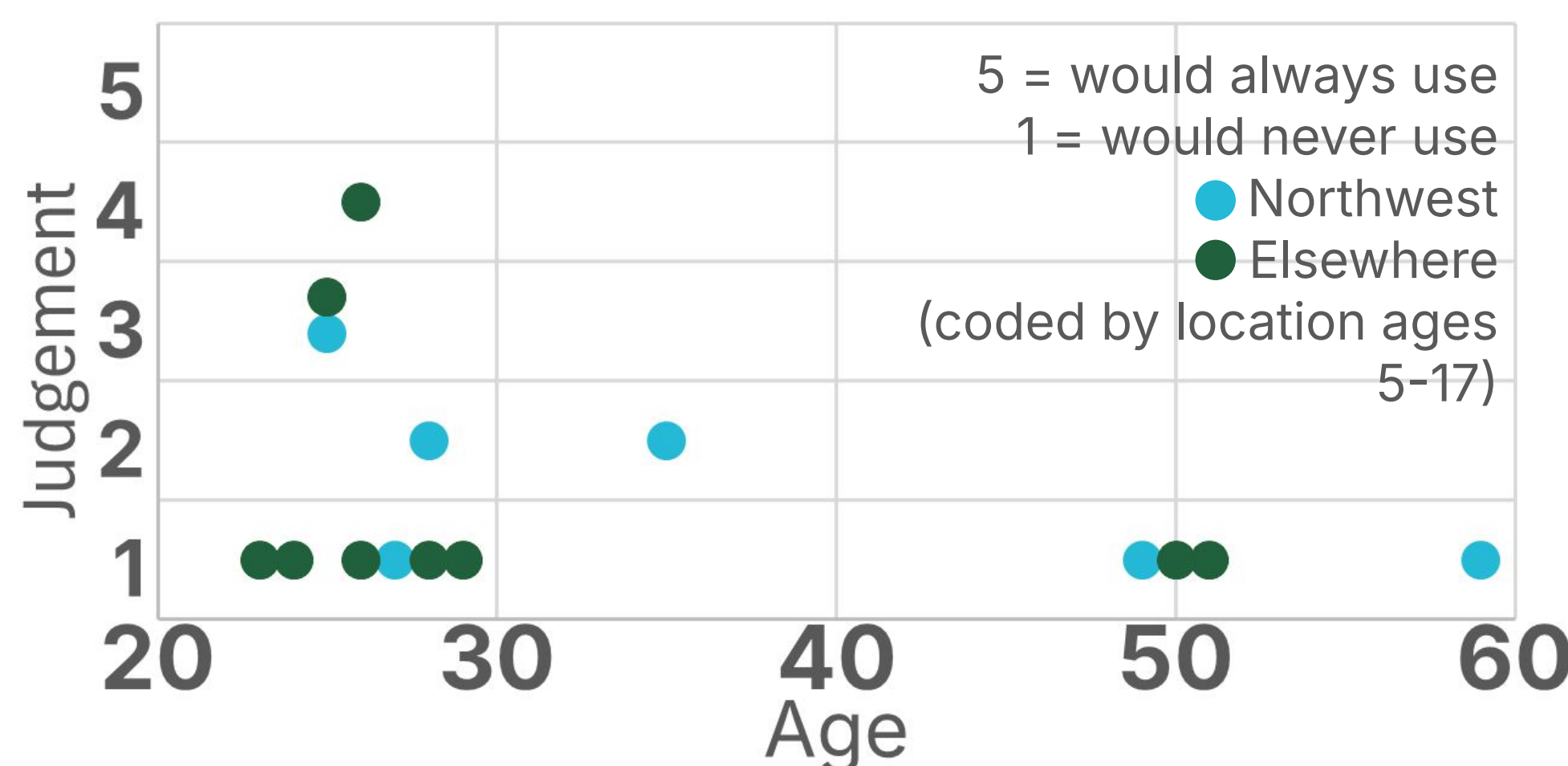
negated *ra-* is Northwestern and young
***g-* concords are Northwestern and stigmatized**

Reported usage

Negated *ra-*: Aka kanya, imvura ntiragwa. (5)



***G-* concords:** Umwembe gumwe gwaguye hasi. (8)



Despite participant ideologies,
only limited evidence for relationship between **age and usage**
unclear if relationship present between **region and usage**

Discussion

Despite **participant expectations** about Northwestern / young speech, **Northwestern / young respondents** did not show greater use of any feature. Why?

- Avoidance of stigmatized forms
- All participants coded as Northwestern spent time in other regions
- ***g-*** could be present only in subset of Northwest, but non-Northwestern respondents could ascribe to entire Northwest: **outgroup homogeneity bias** (Park & Rothbart 1982, Wade 2023)
- ***g-*** could not be unique to Northwest, but non-Northwestern respondents could assume unfamiliar forms to be **Northwestern by default**
 - Evidence that unfamiliar forms can be lumped into "outgroup" category (Weissler & Brennan 2020)
- Exposure to ***ra-*** in other contexts lowers salience of ***negated ra-***, impeding acquisition of detailed social knowledge

Main study

Currently running larger survey

- informed by pilot results
- **temporal readings** of *ra-* in negation, relativization, participials and before comp. *ngo*
- more precise **social conditioning**
- presence / direction of **change**
- effect of cross-country **migration / lg. experience**
- variation in **syntactic status** of *ra-*

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