Polysemy, Distribution, and Variation in Kinyarwanda Verbal *ra-*

Child Language Proseminar

Adam An

- Bantu language

- [iciɲargwa:nda]
  "ee-cheen-yar-gwan-da"

- ~ 10 million speakers

- Verbal morphology with many affixes

Kinyarwanda

Morphological complexity

U-ra-gi-som-a-ho.

Morphological complexity

you (subject)   progressive   it (object)   read   incomplete action   there

U-ra-gi-som-a-ho.
2sg.SBJ-PROG-7.OBJ-read-IPFV-16.LOC
'You're reading it there.'

Morphological complexity

you (subject) progressive it (object) read incomplete action there

U-ra-gi-som-a-ho.
2sg.SBJ-PROG-7.OBJ-read-IPFV-16.LOC
'You're reading it there.'

ra-

Five Reasons *ra*- is Hard to Acquire

Reason 1

ra- has (at least!) **three different functions.**

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present progressive

proposition-finality

phonological

you (subject)

progressive

it (object)

read

incomplete action

there

U-ra-gi-som-a-ho.

2sg.SBJ-PROG-7.OBJ-read-APPL-IPFV-16.LOC

'You're reading it there.'

Proposition-finality

Proposition ≈ "facts I'm stating about the world"

Proposition-finality

Proposition ≈ "facts I'm stating about the world"

"You fortunately arrived early."

Proposition-finality

Proposition ≈ "facts I'm stating about the world"

propositional content
corresponds to things in the world

"You fortunately arrived early."

Proposition-finality

Proposition ≈ "facts I'm stating about the world"

not part of the proposition

propositional content
corresponds to things in the world

"You fortunately arrived early."

In Kinyarwanda, the proposition is reflected in **word order**

Wahageze   *kare*   *ku bw'amahirwe.*
you arrived   early   fortunately

Proposition-finality

In Kinyarwanda, the proposition is reflected in **word order**

The proposition has to stay together.

Wahageze   *kare*   *ku bw'amahirwe.*

you arrived   early   fortunately

Proposition-finality

ra- obligatorily appears on a verb that is **proposition-final.**

*Wa**ra**hageze*   *ku bw'amahirwe.*
you arrived   fortunately

Reason 1

ra- has (at least!) **three different functions.**

present progressive

proposition-finality

phonological

Phonological

In some embedded contexts, a *ra-* appears that isn't progressive or proposition-final.

proposition

Nsanga wa**ra**hageze ejo.

I realize you arrived yesterday.

Phonological

I argue that this *ra-* is phonologically inserted for homophony avoidance: *wahageze* is "taken". (curious? ask me!)

Kinyarwanda knowers probably aren't computing homophony on the fly - they're probably memorizing a semantically and structurally unmotivated exception.

Nsanga   wa**ra**hageze   ejo.

I realize   you arrived   yesterday.

Reason 1

ra- has (at least!) **three different functions.**

present progressive

proposition-finality

phonological

FORMS

FUNCTIONS

ra-

present progressive

proposition-finality

phonological

A complicated form-function mapping

Reason 2

The different functions of *ra-* draw on different kinds of linguistic knowledge.

present progressive

proposition-finality

phonological

What do you know when you know *ra-*?

Present progressive

Only one that corresponds to **something in the world**

Aspect is a late acquisition (Valian 2006 via Guasti 2016)

Proposition-finality

Requires **structural knowledge** of a functionally-motivated syntactic boundary

You can't get this right if your structure isn't right

Phonological

If it's computed on the fly, requires **morphophonological knowledge**

If it's not computed on the fly, requires memorization of exception unmotivated by same reasons as other two

Reason 3

Many morphosyntactic contexts **forbid *ra-*.**

A present progressive, proposition-final, or phonologically disambiguated verb **does not always have *ra-*.**

Present progressive

Ba**ra**soma   ibitabo.

they are reading   books

Proposition-finality

Ba**ra**somye   rwose.

they read   definitely

Phonological

Nsanga   ba**ra**somye.

I realize   they read

Negation forbids *ra-*

Present progressive

Ba**ra**soma   ibitabo.

they are reading   books

Ntibasoma   ibitabo.

they aren't reading   books

Proposition-finality

Ba**ra**somye   rwose.

they read   definitely

Ntibasomye   rwose.

they didn't read   definitely

Phonological

Nsanga   ba**ra**somye.

I realize   they read

Nsanga   ntibasomye.

I realize   they didn't read

Negation forbids *ra-*

Present progressive

Ba**ra**soma   ibitabo.

they are reading   books

Ntibasoma   ibitabo.

they aren't reading   books

Proposition-finality

and a whole slew of other environments...

relative clauses
embedded clauses
quotatives
subjunctives
imperatives
infinitives
jussives...

Phonological

Nsanga   ba**ra**somye.

I realize   they read

...sanga   ntibasomye.

...realize   they didn't read

Reason 3

A Kinyarwanda-acquiring child does not get to rely on *ra-* as the **sole cue of any of the three functions.**
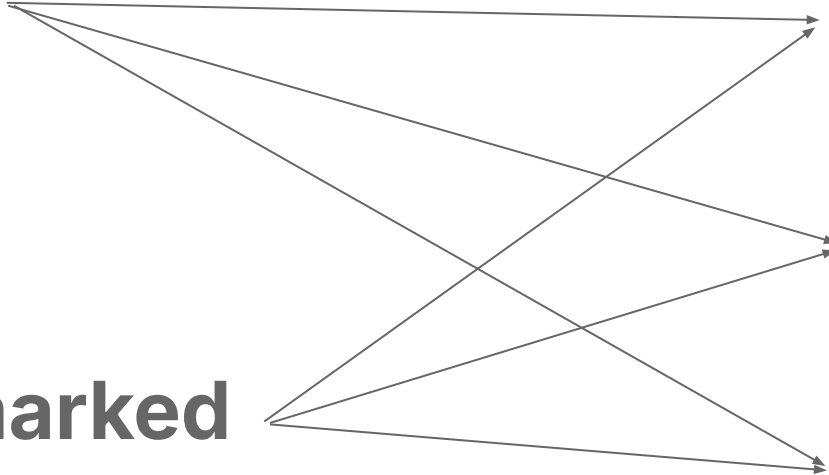
FORMS

FUNCTIONS

ra-

present progressive

proposition-finality

unmarked

phonological

A very complicated form-function mapping

Reason 3

The unmarked verbs themselves have a host of other functions.

This frequently results in **ambiguity.**

Ba**ra**somye ibitabo.
"They're reading books."

Basomye ibitabo.
"They read books."

In positive sentences, *ra-* disambiguates present progressive from other aspects.

Ambiguity

Ba**ra**somye ibitabo.
"They're reading books."

Basomye ibitabo.
"They read books."

But with *ra-* forbidden in negation, there's nothing to disambiguate these two.

Ntibasomye ibitabo.
"They aren't reading books."

Ntibasomye ibitabo.
"They don't read books."

Ambiguity

A very, very complicated form-function mapping

Reason 4

Ra- use is subject to **variation.**

Negation forbids *ra-*

Present progressive

Ba**ra**soma   ibitabo.

they are reading   books

Ntibasoma   ibitabo.

they aren't reading   books

Proposition-finality

Ba**ra**so...

th...

Nt...

they didn't r...

Phonological

...e.

...asomye.

...hey didn't read

Remember this slide?

Negation forbids *ra-*

Present progressive

Proposition-finality

Phonological

Ba**ra**soma   ibitabo.

they are reading   books

Ba**ra**so...   somye.

they...

In other work, I show that **about 25% of Rwandans can in fact say** *ra-* **here:**

Ntiba**ra**soma ibitabo.

Ntibasoma   ibitabo.

they aren't reading   books

they didn't re...   somye.
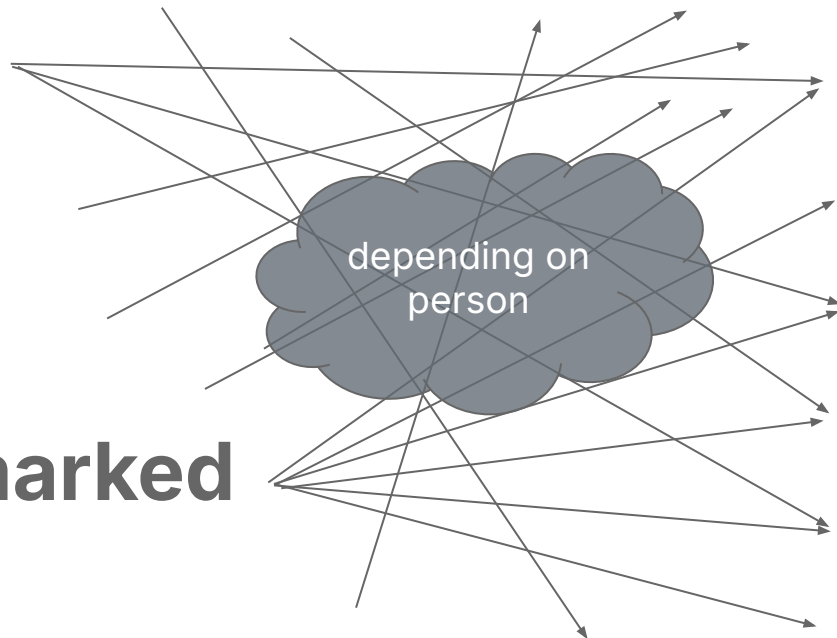
                                       they didn't read

Reason 4

Ra- use is subject to **variation.**

→ Kinyarwanda-acquiring children are exposed to **conflicting grammars** in their input!

A very, very, very complicated form-function mapping

Reason 5

In practice, *ra-* is **infrequent.**

"Rwandan beef, you'll find it here!"

The only *ra-* I saw in twelve days of being in Rwanda

Reason 5

Instances of *ra-* in the input are relatively infrequent.

These infrequent tokens are all a Kinyarwanda-acquiring child has to work with!

Five reasons why *ra-* is hard to acquire

1. *ra-* has different functions.
2. Those functions draw on different kinds of linguistic knowledge.
3. *ra-* does not consistently mark those functions.
4. *ra-* use is subject to variation.
5. *ra-* is infrequent.

A comprehensive literature review of Kinyarwanda acquisition

Let's talk!

What interests you? Teach me!

Language Acquisition, second edition: The Growth of Grammar - Guasti 2016

Young Children's Understanding of Present and Past Tense - Valian 2006

Thank you: Utako Minai

Murakoze!

Thank you!

Murakoze!

Thank you!