Northwestern or just nonstandard?
Social Meaning of Kinyarwanda Morphosyntactic Variation

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Today we're talking about…

What morphosyntactic variation does Kinyarwanda have?

What expectations do Rwandans have about this variation?
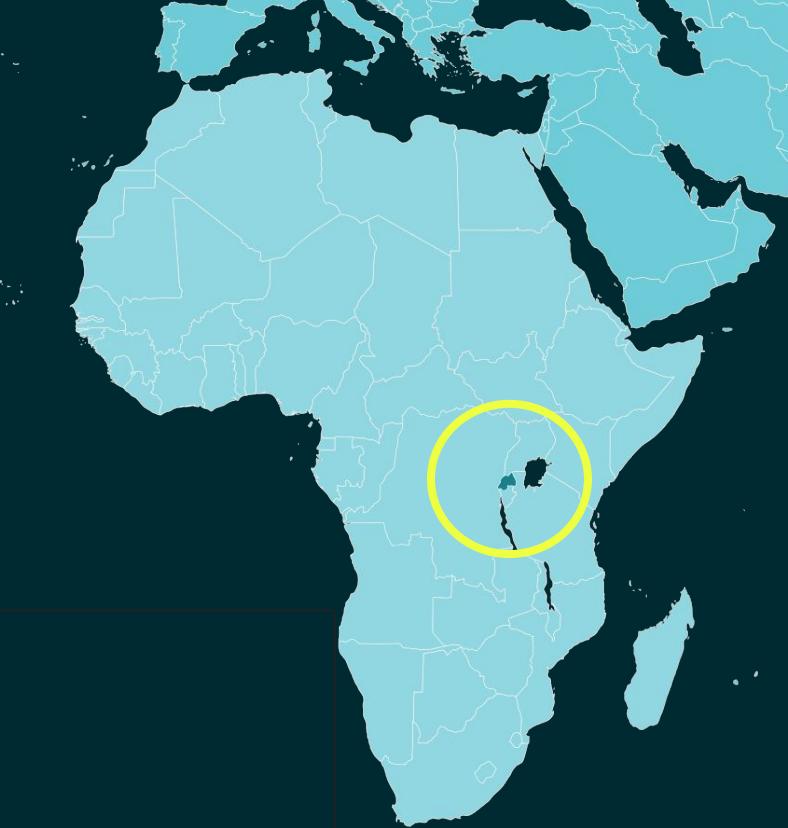
What facilitates the acquisition of sociolinguistic knowledge?

Kinyarwanda

Bantu; ~10 million speakers

national lg. of Rwanda (East Africa)

agglutinative morphology

two variables under study: negated *ra-* and *g-*

Variable: negated *ra-*

ntaabwo ba-som-á
'They are not reading.'

ntaabwo ba-ra-som-á
'They are not reading.'

MORE FREQUENT

LESS FREQUENT

Variable: *g-*

u-mwe
'one'

gu-mwe
'one'

MORE FREQUENT

LESS FREQUENT

What social meaning do these variables have?

negated

ra-

g-

Methods

Survey

15 respondents, ages 23-59, all five regions from Rwanda represented

Self-reported usage and metalinguistic commentary

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)

What do Rwandans say about these variables?

negated *ra-* is Northwestern and young

g- is Northwestern and stigmatized

to the data! →

	mentioned awareness	mentioned Northwest	mentioned young	mentioned stigma	mentioned gender
negated *ra-*	13	3	4	1	0
g-	14	9	1	4	0

(N = 15)

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

	mentioned awareness	mentioned Northwest	mentioned young	mentioned stigma	mentioned gender
negated *ra-*	13	3	4	1	0
g-	14	9	1	4	0

(N = 15)

14

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

required in other environments with 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-

What are the surface distributions of these forms?

~~negated~~ *ra-*

most instances are expected and socially unmeaningful

only a few instances are unusual

g-

always unusual

How are these variables evaluated?

negated *ra-*

hard to identify unusual *ra-*
from abundance of
socially-unmeaningful
instances

g-

easy to identify and assign
social meaning

Interface Principle

(Labov 1993)

sociolinguistic evaluation only targets surface form, not underlying representation

Interface Principle

(Labov 1993)

prediction: forms that are similar on surface but structurally different → similar evaluation

How are these variables evaluated?

negated *ra-*

evaluation influenced by abundance of socially-unmeaningful ra-

g-

nothing comparable to influence its evaluation

How are these variables evaluated?

negated *ra-*

evaluation influenced by

abundance of

nothing comparable to

influence its variation

g-

this is but one path to this idea others?

socially-unmeaningful ra-

Here's what Rwandans say about these variables. Is this how they use them?

negated *ra-* is Northwestern, young, and not gendered

g- is Northwestern, stigmatized, and not gendered

Here's what Rwandans say about these variables.
Is this how they use them?

negated *ra-* is Northwestern, young, and not gendered
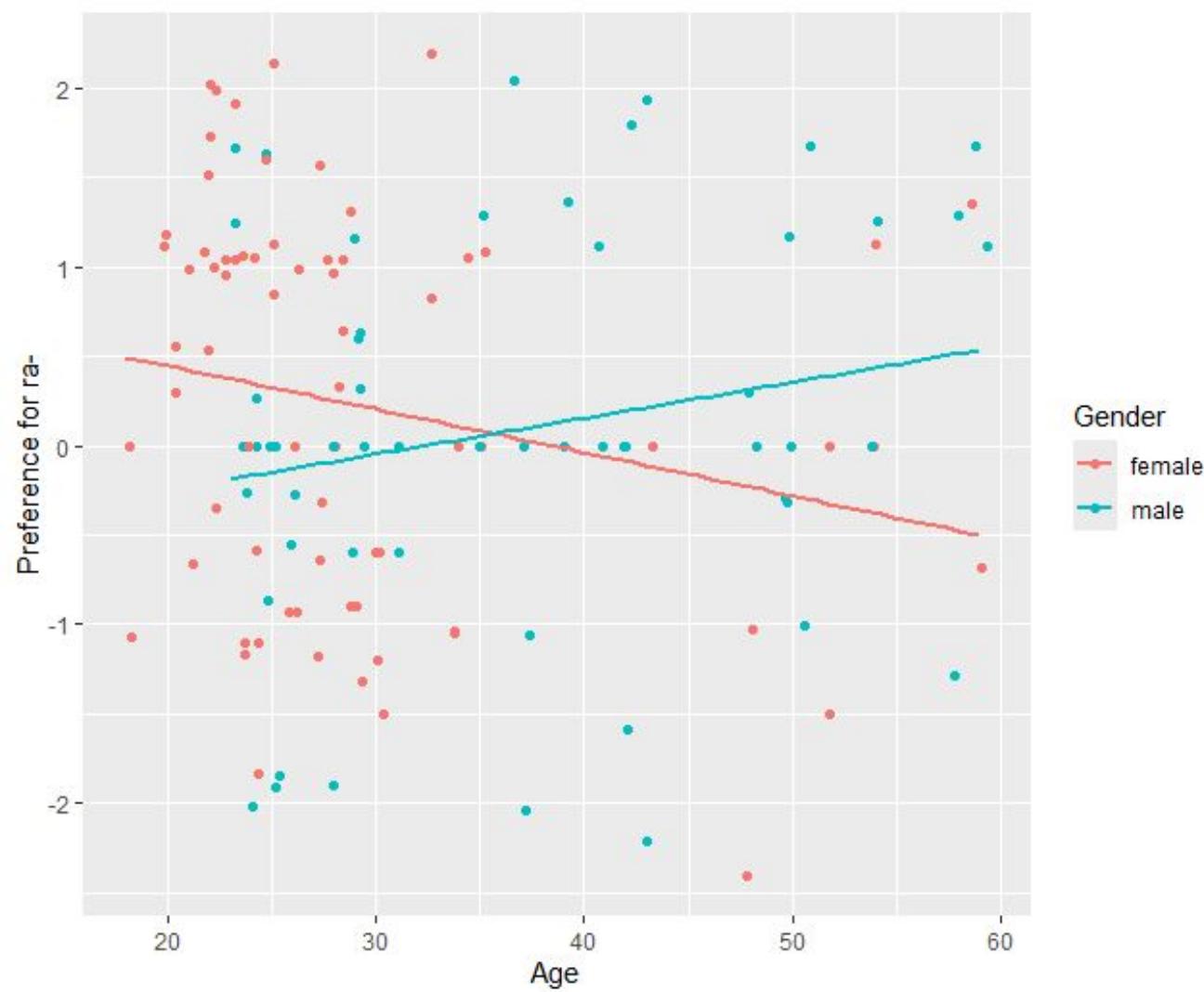
*g-* is Northwestern, stigmatized, and not gendered

nope!
a sneak peek →
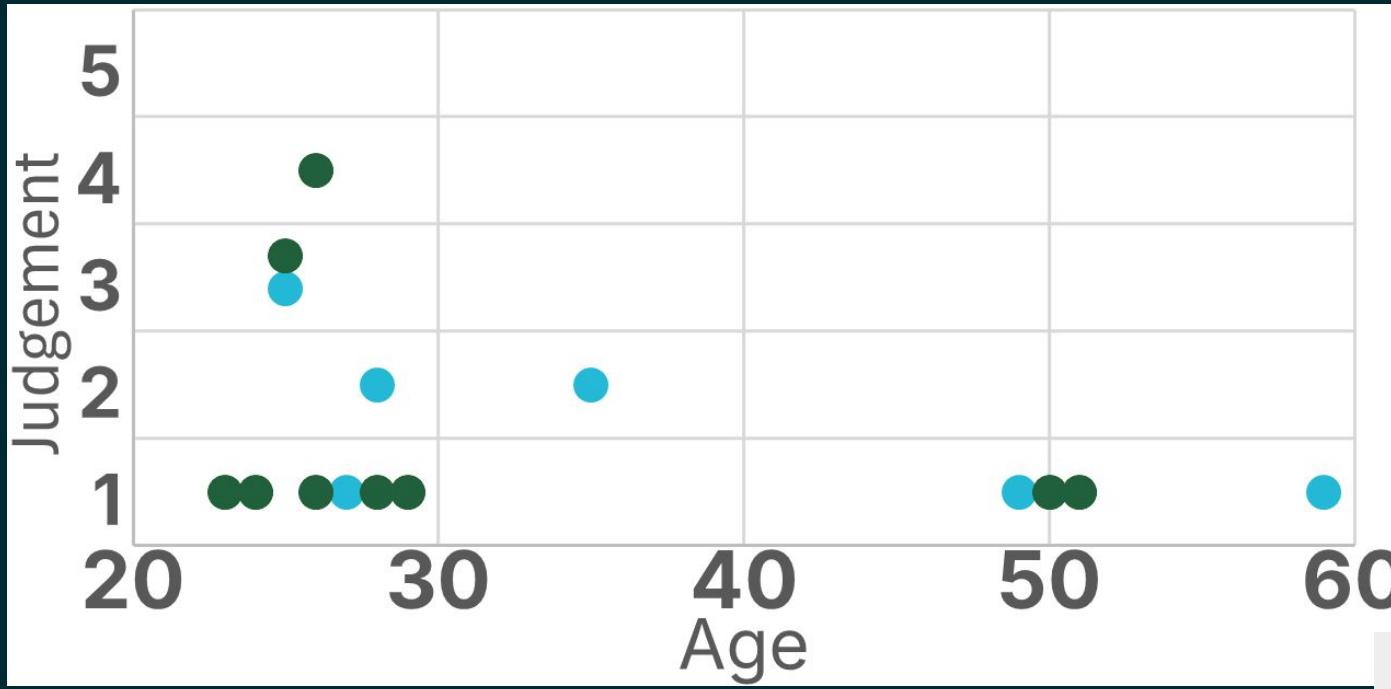
negated *ra-*

N = 65

young women more
likely to use negated *ra-*
(β = 0.035, p = 0.022)

no effect of region here,
but…
regional effects found
for *ra-* in other, less
frequent environments

g-   (N=15)
no apparent predictors
(but stigma could have lowered self-reported use)

5 = would always use
1 = would never use
● Northwest
● Elsewhere
(coded by location ages 5-17)

There's more!
Ask me about…

what do Rwandans say?

N=65 usage survey about *ra-*
grammatical change led by young women, Northwest
mediated by frequency of morphosyntactic environment

why are ideologies different from use?

default categorization? (Weissler & Brennan 2020)

Murakoze!

'Thank you!'

CAMPBELL-KIBLER Kathryn
DUNCAN Phil
GLUCKMAN John
McKENZIE Andrew
NDAYIRAGIJE Dieudonné
ROBERTS Gareth
UMUHOZA Solange
VELLEMAN Leah
WADE Lacey
WHITE Yosiane

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Weissler, Rachel & Jonathan R. Brennan. 2020. How do listeners form grammatical expectations to African American Language? University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics 25(2).