

# The landscape of Kinyarwanda dialects, with a special emphasis on Kirera

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**Abstract:** We address the variety of Kinyarwanda dialects and the role they play in Rwandan society and culture. We discuss, in particular, the problem that school children, who grow up in families speaking particular dialects, often have difficulties learning Kinyarwanda and even understanding their teaching in Kinyarwanda. After giving a list of dialectal regions of Rwanda, we present the peculiarities of the North-Rwandan dialect **Kirera**, of which the two first authors of this paper are native speakers.

**Zusammenfassung:** Wir befassen uns mit der Vielfalt von Dialekten des Kinyarwanda und die Rolle, welche diese in der Gesellschaft und der Kultur Ruandas spielen. Speziell erörtern wir das Problem, dass Schulkinder, die in Familien mit spezifischen Dialekten aufwachsen, oft Schwierigkeiten haben, Kinyarwanda zu lernen oder den in Kinyarwanda gehaltenen Unterricht überhaupt zu verstehen. Nach einer Liste von Dialektregionen des Landes stellen wir die Besonderheiten des Nord-Ruandischen Dialekts **Kirera** vor, von dem die beiden ersten Autoren dieser Arbeit gebürtige Sprecher sind.

## 1. Kinyarwanda and its Dialects

Language is one of the distinctive features of those living together as a country’s citizens. Language helps citizens to understand each other (i.e., to communicate) when they talk to each other, to participate in traditional festivities and convey news over several generations, because language is the channel and conservation of inherited wealth that exhibits the nature of those living in the country. Language is the basis of culture, because it exhibits the common identity of its speakers. It explains to new generations the origin of what they know to characterize the life and social relations of the people using their language. It is the language that explains how the speech community thinks.

Kinyarwanda is the language spoken und understood by all Rwandans. Rwanda is blessed because all those living here can communicate in one language: Kinyarwanda – in contrast to

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some other nations where one finds each region to have a different language spoken in that region only. Communication is then difficult if there is no common language and, instead, if one uses foreign languages to speak to each other, even though one lives in the same country. In Rwanda, we are therefore lucky to have Kinyarwanda that unites all of us Banyarwanda.

There exist various native dialects attached to Kinyarwanda that are not much different from the major language. They are spoken by people living in particular regions, e.g. *ikigoyi*, *ikirera*, *urukiga*, *amashi* etc. They, too, are valuable because they help us to know the characteristics of those particular regions of our nation. Such native dialects are called *indimi-shami* because they are branches of the main language. What characterizes them is their close relationship to the main (national) language, because they share many features with it. We can say that particular words of the dialects are used in the same way as in the national language.

Native dialects are not numerous. They are found in several regions, like *ikigoyi* in Rubavu, *ikirera* in parts of Musanze and Burera. There are others like *igishobyo* around Nyundo in Rubavu, *uruyaka* and *igisozo*, even though RALC – the Rwanda Academy of Language and Culture (*Inteko Nyarwanda y'Ururimi n'Umuco*)<sup>5</sup> – declares that they keep diminishing, so that in a few years they will cease to be spoken.

RALC has been created in order to preserve Kinyarwanda and those dialects. Its aim is to save the tradition and manage the country's spiritual heritage. The Institution has shown that nowadays there are Rwandans who don't know the correct Kinyarwanda anymore and speak mixed languages, some of them thinking even that it is civilized manners. Many of them say they don't find Kinyarwanda terms. One way of counter-acting this lack of words is to look for them in Kinyarwanda dialects – old ones and regional ones – or to invent them. The advantage of having these dialects is that, instead of borrowing a word from abroad, we could borrow from our own language. Thus, dialects could help us to enrich our common language. It is better to borrow words from such dialects than from foreign languages. The Kirera word *indiga*, e.g., means “knife”. Instead of borrowing *knife* from English or *couteau* from French, we should enrich Kinyarwanda with words like *indiga* belonging to our own language. This could protect us from “swallowing” foreign languages. It is good to sensitize those who know other dialects to write various papers in them, or to create other documents to preserve them, because losing them is to lose some pillars of our culture as Rwandans.

Some teachers and students from parts of Rwanda using dialects like *urukiga*, *ikigoyi*, *amashi* etc. say that they have problems learning and even teaching Kinyarwanda, which is part of the planned curriculum, because they discover that children who were born in dialect regions learn Kinyarwanda like a foreign language.

Children from some places of Northern and Eastern Provinces like Nkombo, born in families speaking Rukiga and Mashi, say that they have problems learning Kinyarwanda, because in the families they grew up in from childhood to the beginning of school, they had only been speaking these dialects. One of them said: “When I started schooling, Kinyarwanda was difficult for me. When we were asked to write ‘k’, it was difficult for us to do it.” And one of their friends said that, because it was the first time he saw Kinyarwanda, it was very difficult for him to adjust to

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<sup>5</sup> In 2020, the RALC has been dissolved and replaced by the HEC – Higher Education Council (*Ikigo gishinzwe Amashuri Makuru*); see the *Official Gazette n° Special* of 04/09/2020, online at <<https://www.minijust.gov.rw/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=10235&token=70632ae804dd36223afc2d5a22358ed7752341b7>>. See also the contribution of Jean-Claude Uwiringiyimana, Deputy Director General of the *Inteko y'Umuco* which now has taken the role of the former RALC.

it and learn it. He said: “It was hard for us because it was the first time we had to do it. For instance, to know the consonant ‘b’ is difficult.”

One of the educators teaching those children says that they do what they can to learn Kinyarwanda, but it is still hard, and it has even consequences for their success. He says: “The consequences for the student are there, they keep following him. Even when he starts learning double consonants, he writes Gikiga, and when he reaches sixth degree at the end of primary school, he still writes Gikiga in his examination. So, our children, when they leave school, have poor credits not because they messed up the exam, but rather because of their writing skills.”

Children from Nkombo, District of Rusizi, are concerned by this problem as well, because you find that even if a child starts with Kinyarwanda, it is like one learning a foreign language, because these children grew up in Mashi speaking families. This makes it difficult to teach them Kinyarwanda, because it requires one teaching *amashi* from grade 2 - 3 to be born in Nkombo and to understand Mashi, in order to be able to explain what he is teaching.

Bavugembure, a teacher in a school called ‘St John’ in Shywa, one of the schools located on the Nkombo island, declares that it is not easy to teach Kinyarwanda to children born in Mashi speaking families. He says: “It requires self-sacrifice to find out how to help a child by using teaching aids. I use something such as drawings I brought from home. You show it to the child, you describe it in English, translate it into Kinyarwanda, and then in the language (Mashi) he used most often at home.”

There are different dialects in Rwanda, such as *igikiga*, *ikirera* and *amashi*. These are dialects specific to some regions, but different from Central Kinyarwanda. Most Kinyarwanda dialects belong to particular Rwandan regions. In the following, we shall show a map of Rwanda and give a list of former regions of dialects and the names of the corresponding places of today.

Below, we shall use the term ‘Standard Kinyarwanda’ (SK) for the official language taught in schools and represented in grammars like those of Coupez<sup>6</sup>, Bizimana<sup>7</sup>, Overdulve and Jacob<sup>8</sup> and Sibomana *et al.*<sup>9</sup>, and in the IRST dictionary by Coupez *et al.*<sup>10</sup> Where we find it helpful, we use the official scientific spelling<sup>11</sup> in which vowel tones and lengths are explicitly marked, exhibiting a high tone by an acute accent and doubling long vowels: e.g.: *usomá*, *byó*, *ikiréera*.

We also want to draw attention to a recent study<sup>12</sup> of two dialects *ikinyambo* and *ikirashi* which are spoken in the East of Rwanda in regions around the Akagera Park and had not been investigated before by linguists.

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<sup>6</sup> Coupez, André: “*Abrégé de grammaire rwanda. Édition provisoire*” (INRS, Butare 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Bizimana, Simon, *et al.*: “*Imiteêrere y’Ikinyarwanda*” (IRST, Butare 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Overdulve, C. M. et Jacob, Irénée: “*Initiation au Kinyarwanda*” (4<sup>ème</sup> édition révisée et augmentée) (L’Harmattan, Paris 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Sibomana, Leo, with Doldo, John IV, and Brack, Matthias: “*Kinyarwanda: An Integrative Approach*” (ifeas – Anthropology and African Studies, Working Papers, No. 207. University of Mainz, 2024); online at <<https://www.blogs.uni-mainz.de/fb07-ifeas-eng/publications-2/working-papers/>> → 207.

<sup>10</sup> Coupez, A., Kamanzi, Th., Bizimana, S., Sematama, G., Rwagukumba, G., Ntazinda, C., *et al.*: “*Dictionnaire rwanda-rwanda et rwanda-français*” (MRAC, Tervuren / IRST, Butare / 2005, 3 vols.).

<sup>11</sup> “Ministerial Instructions governing the orthography of Kinyarwanda”, *Official Gazette n° 41 bis* of 13/10/2014, online at <<https://www.minijust.gov.rw/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=79066&token=479978dd9fd1a164e26f3ba3481a8cd480b472b2>>.

<sup>12</sup> Nkejabahizi, Jean Chrysostome: “Etude linguistique chez les Baráshi/Banyaambo du Rwanda”, *Rwanda Journal, Volume 18, Series A: Arts and Humanities* (2010), pp. 23-40.

## 2. Names of former regions and where they are today

1. Ubwanacyambwe: Nyarugenge, Kicukiro and some parts of Gasabo
2. Uburiza: some parts of Rulindo including Mugambazi
3. Ubumbogo: Gasabo (rural) and some sections of Rwamagana
4. Ubuganza: Kayanza (almost entirely), large parts of Rwamagana and Gicumbi, e.g. Rutare
5. Igisaka: Ngoma and Kirehe plus some parts of Rwamagana
6. Indorwa: Nyagatare and Gatsibo
7. Umubali: parts of Gatsibo and Kayanza in Akagera National Park
8. Urukiga: Gicumbi plus some parts of Gatsibo, Rulindo and Burera
9. **Uburera**: Burera, Musanze and Gakenke (including also Ubukonya, Ubugarura ...)
10. Ubushiru: Nyabihu
11. Ibigogwe: Nyabihu
12. Icyingogo: in Ngororero
13. Ubugoyi (some parts of former Gisenyi): Rubavu and some parts of Rutsiro
14. Nyantango: some parts of Karongi
15. Ubwishaza: Karongi
16. Ikinyaga: Rusizi plus Nyamasheke (including some parts such as Ubusozo and Ubukunzi)
17. Akanage: Rutsiro
18. Ubunyambiriri: Nyamagabe
19. Ubufundu: Nyamagabe plus some parts of Nyaruguru
20. Inyaruguru: Central Nyaruguru
21. Ubuyenzi: Southern Nyaruguru in Nshili and Kivu
22. Mvejuru: Buhanga, Ndara, some parts of Nyaruguru, Huye and Gisagara (around Nyakizu)
23. Bwanamukari: Huye and Gisagara
24. Ubusanza: some parts of Nyanza, Huye and Gisagara (plus Rusatira, Rubona ...)
25. Induga: Muhanga, Ruhango and Nyanza, plus even Kamonyi
26. Amarangara: parts of Muhanga and Ruhango, such as Mukingi, Kanyarira
27. Ndiza: parts of Muhanga, such as Nyabikenke, and some parts of Kamonyi
28. Amayaga: parts of Southern Kamonyi, Muhanga, Ruhango, Nyanza and Gisagara (each bordering on Kanyaru)
29. Ubugesera: entire region of Bugesera



Map of Rwanda showing today's Provinces and Districts

### 3. The Kirera dialect and its distinctive features<sup>13</sup>

**Kirera** (*ikiréera*) is a dialect of Kinyarwanda with its own identity. It is spoken in some parts of Northern Rwanda. Its speakers, the Abarera, live in Musanze, Burera and Gakenke, i.e., in regions that used to consist of the Communes Kinigi, Kigombe, Gahunga, Cyabingo, Gatonde and Ndsu. (In Gakenke, there are also parts of Bugarura and Bukonya).

#### 3.a Pronunciation and orthography

The spoken Standard Kinyarwanda (SK) sounds softer and more diffuse than Kirera (K), which is due to palatalized consonants in SK that are replaced by unpalatalized ones in K. Thus, the spoken Kirera sounds harder, but clearer. It is also spoken more slowly than SK.

Characteristic replacements are:

SK: *shy* → K: *sh*

*ishyano* → *ishano* = “danger / mishap”

*umwenda mushyashya* → *umwenda mushasha* = “a new dress / cloth”

*amashyiga* → *amashiga* = “stove / kitchen”

*ibishyimbo* → *ibishimbo* = “beans”

*gushyuha* → *gushuha* = “to be hot / to sweat”

*umushyo* → *umusho* = “knife”

SK: *iy* → K: *j*

*njewe* → *njewe* = “I” (personal pronoun, emphasized)

*turajyana ku isoko* → *turajana ku isoko* = “we go to the market”

*bijyane mu nzu* → *bijane mu nzu* = “take them (the things) into the house”

*umujyanama wanjye* → *umujanama wanje* = “our adviser”

*ntabwo njyayo* → *ntaa bwo ndajayo* = “I don’t go there”

*umujoyojo* → *umujojo* = “hoe” (new)

*umujoyojo ni isuka nshyashya* → *umujojo ni isuka nshasha* = “umujojo is a new hoe”

SK: *cy* → K: *c*

*icyaha* → *icaha* = “error / offense”

*icyambarwa* → *icambarwa* = “clothing”

*shyira icyo cyuma mu cyumba* → *shira ico cuma mu cumba* = “put that knife into the room!”

*nzajya guhaha mu majyepfo* → *nzaja guhaha mu majepfo* = “I’ll go shopping in the South”

*icyo cyuma cyazanywe na Majyambere* → *ico cuma cazanywe na Majambere*

= “this knife was given to me by Majambere”

#### 3.b Appearance of the consonant ‘g’

There are several ways in which the consonant ‘g’ appears at new places. One way is to have ‘g’ in instead of ‘y’:

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<sup>13</sup> We give here a sketch of only some of the most salient characteristics of Kirera. We are grateful to Jean Paul Ngoboka of the University of Rwanda (another native speaker of Kirera) and to John Doldo IV (Oneonta NY) for pointing out that even within the indicated regions, specific words may be used and/or pronounced differently from town to town. Actually, the dialects in the North of Rwanda rather form a language continuum. Close links exist also between the dialects Kirera and Rufumbira; see the contribution of Nico Nassenstein (University of Mainz) to this workshop.

1. SK: *yo* → K: *go*

*amashyiga yo gutekaho* → *amashiga go gutekaho* = “(three) stones to cook upon”

2. SK: *(a)ya* → *(a)ga*

*aya mafaranga uyampere Majyambere* → *aga mafaranga ugampere Majambere*  
= “give Majambere this money from me”

The ‘g’ can appear in front of a possessive prefix *w-*:

SK: *w-* → K: *gw-*

*umurima wanjye* → *umurima gwanje* = “my field”

The ‘g’ may also appear in front of a demonstrative pronoun:

SK: *ariya* → K: *gariya*

*jya gucyura ariya matungo* → *ja gucura gariya matungo*  
= “Bring those domestic animals home!”

### 3.c The habitual present

The most frequent new appearance of ‘g’ is in the verb suffix **-ga** used to mark a **habitual present**. Remember that in SK, **-ga** is used for habitual actions in **past tenses** only :

SK: *nasomaga* = ”I used to read / I was reading”

*bubakaga* = ”they used to build / they were building” (a house)

Kirera examples for the habitual present:

*turyaga sa sita* = “we normally eat at noon”

*aratekaga* = “she is cooking”

*abana batinyaga ishamba* = “children are (usually) afraid of the forest”

*arasetaga = akundaga gusetaga* = “he likes joking.”

*iwacu turahingaga* = “our usual occupation is farming”

*Papa aracuruzaga* = “my dad is a trader”

*Mukuru wanjye atwaraga igare* “My senior sibling rides a bike.”

*Uriya mwana ararwanaga* “That child likes fighting.”

*iyo arwaye aryaga nabi* = “When he is ill, he eats badly”

*uriya muntu akundaga kubesha* = “That person likes telling lies”

*Umushitsi uri iwacu uriya mwana nta bwo amutinyaga* “That child is not afraid of our guest.”

*iyo umuhaye amafaranga arishimaga* = “When you give him money, he is happy”

*iyo arakaye nta bwo avugaga* = “When he is annoyed, he doesn’t talk”

*ibishimbo byumye bitindaga gusha* = “dried beans take longer to be cooked”

*buri gitondo tujaga mu kiriziya* = “every morning we go to church”

### 3.d Use of explicit relative pronouns

In contrast to SK, where relative clauses are always formed using the relative mood (with a postradical high tone), Kirera can make use of explicit relative pronouns:

SK: *igitabo usomá* → K: *igitabo có usomaga* = “the book **which** you are reading”

SK: *ibitabo nasomyé* → K: *ibitabo byó nasomye* = “the books **that** I have read”

### 3.e Use of different word(s)

In Kirera, one is using the word *kugamba* [kugaamba] for ‘to speak’ instead of *kuvuga* in SK  
*baragambaga* = “they are talking”, *ugambaga iki?* = “what do you say?”

In Kirera, one uses the word *indiga* [indiga] for ‘knife’ instead of *umushyo* in SK.  
*indiga ni umusho* = “indiga is a knife”

In Kirera one uses the word *ishoka* [ishóoká] for ‘axe’ instead of *intorezo* [intóorezo] in SK.

Other examples for Kirera versus SK expressions are:

K: *uje kwenda iki?* ↔ SK: *uje gufata iki ?* = *uje gushaka iki?*

= „what do you want to do here?“

K: *ugereyo amahoro* ↔ SK: *usohore amahoro* = „have a safe journey!“

### 3.f Relation to the Kigoyi dialect

The dialect **Kigoyi** (*ikigoyi*), spoken in the North-West of Rwanda (parts of former Gisenyi, now parts of Rutsiro, Rubavu along Lake Kivu), is very similar to Kirera in most respects. The main different feature is that ‘*nt*’ of SK or Kirera is replaced by ‘*nd*’, i.e., the spoken ‘*h*’ sound of SK / Kirera becomes a soft voiceless ‘*d*’ in Kigoyi:

SK / Kirera: *nti-*, *nta*, *umuntu* → Kigoyi: *ndi-*, *nda*, *umundu*.