

Rwandafoni: The Transnational Linguistic Community of Kinyarwanda Across the African Great Lakes Region and the Global Diaspora

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Abstract: Language holds major significance because it helps people to develop their personal identities while enabling them to pass their identities through time and it helps people to stay connected with each other in regions where international interactions take place. This article considers Kinyarwanda as a transnational linguistic system, meaning that it is not only the official language of Rwanda but it is also a culturally and communicatively binding element for the Great Lakes African region and the Rwandan diaspora. Adopting a qualitative paradigm for sociolinguistics and history, the study is carried out with secondary sources (linguistic databases, scholarly literature, demographic reports, and cultural literature). The findings of this research show that Kinyarwanda belongs to a very homogenous Rwanda-Rundi language group in the Bantu group of the Niger-Congo language family with many structural and phonetic correspondences and a high degree of intelligibility with other languages such as Kirundi or Rufumbira. The spread of Kinyarwanda across countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Burundi and Tanzania suggests a unified language community in the region, rather than national language communities, and migration has helped Kinyarwanda to become a diaspora language. The paper refers to this situation of cultural identity through language as a theory of “Rwandafoni,” and compares it with other language groups in the world. The authors explain that people use language as a process which exists beyond the limits of national territory.

Keywords: Kinyarwanda, Rwandafoni, Rwanda-Rundi Languages, African Sociolinguistics, Great Lakes Region, Transnational Identity, Diaspora Language, Bantu Languages.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language functions as a crucial element that defines both individual identity and social identity while preserving cultural traditions in areas where political boundaries have historically been crossed through intercultural contact. One such language is Kinyarwanda in the African Great Lakes region which is not only a national language in Rwanda but also a transnational language used across borders (Kayigema & Mutasa, 2014). For instance, in border cities such as Goma (Democratic Republic of the Congo) and Kisoro (Uganda), Kinyarwanda (and its dialects) is commonly used for trade, social interaction and administrative purposes to demonstrate its transnational nature (Vlassenroot & Büscher, 2013). This usage is based on a long history of interconnections that spans the pre-colonial kingdom, migration and shared institutions (Barnard, 2015).

Recent migration and diaspora further highlight the transnational nature of Kinyarwanda (Turner, 2018). There is a substantial diaspora from the Great Lakes region in countries such as Belgium, Canada and the United Kingdom where Kinyarwanda remains important in family life, community organisations and cultural groups (Ainsworth, 2015). For

example, in the Rwandan diaspora in Brussels, Kinyarwanda is often used in community centres and social gatherings, ensuring cultural transmission across generations (Féron, 2024). Similarly, digital media spaces, such as YouTube channels and WhatsApp groups, managed by members of the Rwandan diaspora, also serve as virtual spaces for Kinyarwanda use for cultural storytelling, learning and sharing. These examples show that language is not necessarily irrelevant in the globalised world because it is more accessible, despite geographical distance (Godin & Heritier, 2015).

In this vein, this study suggests the term "Rwandafoni" to describe the transnational network of Kinyarwanda and its sister dialects. Like any other language-based identities such as Anglophone or Francophone, the Rwandafoni identity includes a collective identity with language, culture and history (Bayiga, 2016). The existing research in cross-border marriage and marriage market activities between Burundi and Rwanda and the eastern Congo demonstrates that people from both countries use language to create their social identity (Nuwamanya 2020). The research investigates Kinyarwanda through sociolinguistic methods to demonstrate how language unites people from different countries more effectively than traditional country-based systems.

Objectives of Study

1. To discuss the classification, structure and geographical distribution of the Kinyarwanda language family and its relationship with other Rwanda-Rundi languages in the African Great Lakes region to understand its transnational nature.
2. To explore the concept of "Rwandafoni" as a transnational linguistic and cultural identity, including its origin, spread among the diaspora, and significance in maintaining social unity and culture in the transnational environment.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research on the African Great Lakes region shows that there is an interplay between language, identity, culture and transnationalism, in which linguistic systems play a significant role in the preservation of social unity in the trans-national context. Rwengabo conducted a research study in 2013 which examined diaspora connections and found that people who possess cross-border national identities experience both social unity and social division. She demonstrated how transnational identities created social and political effects. According to Mugabowagahunde (2015), the study of indigenous culture preservation focused specifically on the Batwa people who faced marginalization throughout both the colonial period and the postcolonial period.

Okoth (2016) used a socio-political framework to study transnational insurgencies while demonstrating how border security issues affect both diplomatic relations and regional security operations which indicate that common cultural and linguistic ties are essential elements for effective border management. In linguistics, a synchronic analysis of the Kinyarwanda language conducted by Gabriel (2018) has revealed its internal variation, but it has also demonstrated the unity of the Kinyarwanda language, thus providing further confirmation to the idea of language continuum in the Rwanda-Rundi cluster.

The literature is also widened to incorporate the elements of diaspora and digital environment, in which language also remains an important tool for preservation and transfer of the identity and culture. For instance, Townley (2020) discussed African Great Lakes migrants in Western Sydney and demonstrated how norms and language use can be maintained through common language in the case of migrants. In turn, Le Lay (2021) talked about the role of cultural performance in building peace and changing societies by emphasising how culture and culture expressions play a vital role in collective identity. At the same time, Munyaneza (2025) analysed the role of Kinyarwanda in digital space and demonstrated that the language makes the interaction between the local and global knowledge. The sources which we previously mentioned demonstrate that Kinyarwanda functions as a linguistic tool which people use to create their cultural identity and transmit their cultural heritage to future generations who live in different countries.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. The researchers conducted a sociolinguistic qualitative study through historical research methods to investigate how Kinyarwanda speakers developed their transnational linguistic identities. The study required this method because it investigated how language functions as a cultural and social power instead of using quantitative measurement tools. The interpretative nature of the research enabled an exploration of the function of Kinyarwanda in identifying identity, culture and society in the African Great Lakes and diaspora.

- The research design was descriptive-exploratory. The descriptive focus enabled the study to describe the classification, geographical distribution and language structure of Kinyarwanda and other Rwanda-Rundi languages. The exploration allowed the creation of the concept of a "Rwandafoni" transnational language. This allowed the study to build on prior research and bring a new dimension to the field of African sociolinguistics.
- Secondary data sources were used by conducting a literature review. These included language databases (such as Ethnologue), historical literature of the African Great Lakes region, sociolinguistic literature on language and identity, population reports and literature on Bantu languages. Purposive sampling was employed to select suitable and relevant literature, making sure that the sources were relevant to Kinyarwanda, Rwanda-Rundi languages and transnational language communities.
- Data collection included classifying the literature into themes, then analysing it using qualitative methods. Comparative linguistic analysis was applied to investigate linguistic similarities in vocabulary, grammar and phonology of Kinyarwanda to Kirundi, Rufumbira and other dialects, establishing linguistic unity. Other qualitative methods such as thematic analysis to identify major themes about language, identity and diaspora and historical analysis to understand the evolution and diffusion of Kinyarwanda were also used.
- The study applied triangulation tactics in the use of information from different and credible sources to achieve reliability and validity and consistency in analysis. The study followed ethical considerations such as referencing and representation of diversity. However, using secondary data in the study meant no direct contact was made with contemporary Rwandafoni communities. Future research could build on the study's methodology in terms of gathering primary data through interview, survey and ethnographic approaches to gain empirical insights.

4. RESULTS

The study established that Kinyarwanda functions as a transnational language which connects different countries to establish a single cultural and communication system that extends throughout the African Great Lakes region and its diaspora. The results are reported with language classification, geographical distribution and sociolinguistic identity.

Language Classification of Rwanda-Rundi Cluster

The results of the comparative linguistic study showed the languages within the Rwanda-Rundi cluster are structurally similar and therefore belong to the Bantu branch of the Niger-Congo language family.

Table 1. Classification of Rwanda-Rundi Languages.

Language	Country/Region	Language Family	Key Characteristics
Kinyarwanda	Rwanda	Bantu (Niger-Congo)	National language, high mutual intelligibility
Kirundi	Burundi	Bantu (Niger-Congo)	Official language, similar grammar structure
Rufumbira	Uganda (Kisoro District)	Bantu (Niger-Congo)	Dialect closely related to Kinyarwanda
Kinyabwisha	Eastern DRC	Bantu (Niger-Congo)	Regional variation with lexical similarities
Ha	Western Tanzania	Bantu (Niger-Congo)	Shares phonological features

Spatial Demography of Rwandafoni Population

The findings indicated that Rwandafoni communities are present in various countries, revealing a transnational language presence.

Table 2. Estimated Distribution of Rwandafoni Speakers.

Region/Country	Estimated Presence of Speakers	Key Areas
Rwanda	Very High (13+ million)	Nationwide
DRC (East)	High	Goma, Masisi, Rutshuru, Uvira
Uganda	Moderate	Kisoro District
Burundi	Very High (Kirundi speakers)	Nationwide
Tanzania	Moderate	Kigoma Region

(Source: <https://www.worlddata.info/languages/kinyarwanda.php>)

Global Diaspora Expansion

Emigration patterns have led to the spread of Rwandafoni speakers around the world, especially in the developed world.

Table 3. Rwandafoni Diaspora Distribution.

Region	Presence Level	Key Countries
Europe	High	Belgium, France, UK
North America	High	USA, Canada
Africa (Other)	Moderate	South Africa
Australia	Moderate	Australia
Middle East	Emerging	UAE, Qatar

(Source: <https://bilinguistics.com/languages/kinyarwanda-speech-and-language-development/>)

Linguistic Similarity Analysis

The study showed a high degree of similarity among the Rwanda-Rundi languages.

Table 4. Comparative Linguistic Similarity (Indicative) (Nassenstein, 2019).

Linguistic Feature	Similarity Level
Vocabulary	High (80–90%)
Grammar Structure	Very High
Phonology	High
Syntax	Very High

Rwandafoni Identity: A Transnational Notion

The research articulated and legitimated the notion of Rwandafoni as a linguistic construct similar to other languages around the world.

Table 5. Comparative Linguistic Identity Framework.

Language	Linguistic Community Term
English	Anglophone
French	Francophone
Portuguese	Lusophone
Kinyarwanda	Rwandafoni

Kinyarwanda is a highly coherent language within the Bantu language family of the Niger-Congo language family, according to the findings of the study. The language exhibits multiple structural and lexical similarities with the Rwandese languages which exist as its sister languages. The research demonstrated that Kinyarwanda extends beyond the boundaries of Rwanda into the neighboring territories of the Democratic Republic of the Congo Uganda Burundi and Tanzania which create a unified linguistic area instead of distinct language communities. The fact that all countries share borders with Rwanda proved this point. The research established that migration factors played an essential role in Kinyarwanda expansion which led the language to develop into a widely spoken diaspora tongue that has active speakers throughout Europe and North America and other international locations.

The comparative linguistic study demonstrated that languages like as Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, and Rufumbira have a high degree of mutual intelligibility with one another. The evidence shows that Rwandan people share both cultural traditions and linguistic practices. The research results established "Rwandafoni" as a fundamental sociolinguistic category. The language community speaks this language across multiple countries while using their language to connect with people from different national and regional and political backgrounds.

5. DISCUSSION

The research demonstrates that Kinyarwanda functions as a transnational sociolinguistic category which belongs to the Bantu language family through its connection to the Rwanda-Rundi language group. The language displays high levels of linguistic integration which enable speakers to understand each other. This view is consistent with linguists' suggestions like Joseph Greenberg and other Bantu linguists who consider the existence of dialect continua rather than languages. The widespread geographical distribution of Kinyarwanda speakers in Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Burundi and Tanzania also demonstrates that language in the African Great Lakes is not bound by political borders, and shows historical and cultural links and exchanges.

And the global movement of speakers to other parts of the world has promoted Kinyarwanda as a diaspora language, as claimed by Joshua Fishman that language is a vital identity-vehicle for migrant groups. The close relatedness of the Rwanda-Rundi languages also suggests a single language system, and also that boundaries between the varieties are sociopolitical. In this vein, the term Rwandafoni is an important and theoretically relevant term that refers to the linguistic and cultural unity of Kinyarwanda speakers in various regions, and indicates that Kinyarwanda is not only a national language but a transnational cultural system which underpins identity across geographical and political boundaries.

6. CONCLUSION

The research shows that Kinyarwanda functions as a transnational language system which creates identity and community in African Great Lakes regions and their diaspora. The research shows that Kinyarwanda belongs to a tightly-knit Rwanda-Rundi language system which possesses structural similarities and allows high mutual understanding between its speakers. Its extensive use throughout multiple nations demonstrates historical and cultural links which span political boundaries while its relocation to different nations has enabled its use as a language for diaspora communities. The concept of Rwandafoni provides a sociolinguistic approach to the understanding of this unique linguistic and cultural community, akin to other language communities around the world. As a matter of conclusion, this research highlights the importance of recognizing language as a dynamic and uniting force that unites various communities from different backgrounds. Moving forward, the scope of future research may entail the use of fieldwork data to explore the reality of the Rwandafoni community in other regions as well.

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