

Multilingualism in Burundi: Languages and their Domains of Use

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ABSTRACT

This study describes multilingualism in Burundi, focusing on the social contexts in which each language is used. The main instrument used was a 16-item questionnaire coupled with informal discussions, and the informants were 20 volunteer students admitted to the National School of Administration – the ENA school for short, a government institution assigned to set up and implement an English Language training programme that teaches English to all civil servants from existing ministries. The questionnaire derives from Fishman's domains of language use, which is the frame adopted for the analysis. The findings reveal that four languages co-exist in Burundi, i.e., Kirundi, the ancestral language; Belgian French, the coloniser's language; Kiswahili, a trade language dominant in neighbouring countries; English, the working language for various East African regional institutions, including the East African Community, and the Economic Community of the Great Lake Countries. While Kirundi is dominant in the family, religion, and friendship domains, French, a colonial language, reigns in various schools in the country, and English, dominant regionally, reigns supreme in the ENA school.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Burundi is a landlocked country in the Great Lake Region of Africa, which shares borders with the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Tanzania. It is a multilingual country where several languages of different statuses co-exist. This study identifies these languages and determines how they are used in the country. The work is guided by two research questions:

- 1) What languages are used in Burundi?
- 2) In what domains of social life is each language used?

The work is significant in that it sheds light on how multilingualism operates today in a country which was monolingual at the onset. The background to the study is presented first. The literature review and the framework of analysis, methodology, and analysis and discussion of the findings follow this. These are considered in turn.

1.1. Background to the Study

Burundi is a small country where three ethnic groups of people estimate that in 2021, there will be 12.3 million inhabitants and cohabit. These ethnic groups are the Hutu, the Tutsi, and the Twa. The languages these people speak are considered first. This is followed by an overview of the country's education system.

1.1.1. Languages Spoken in Burundi

Four languages are reported to be spoken in Burundi: Kirundi, Swahili, French, and English. Kirundi, the sole ancestral language of the country, is spoken by the three tribes mentioned earlier. Under German colonisation (1894–1916), Swahili, used in neighbouring countries, was brought into the country, and its use was encouraged to facilitate trade. Germany had lost the war, and this possession was ceded to the Belgians. Under Belgian rule (1919–1962), French was the official

language, and Kirundi was a medium of instruction (Gahama, 1983). In 1962, the country became independent from Belgium. In its 2005 Constitution, Kirundi was made the national language. As subsequent constitutions stipulate, the official languages are Kirundi and other languages determined by law. One of these “other languages” is English, which, in 2014, became an official language. In short, as France plays a major role in education, government, and business, the country is regarded as part of what is referred to as *la Francophonie*, an international organisation it joined in 1970. Other member countries include Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Gabon, to name only these three.

1.1.2. The System of Education

Relevant works on the system of education in Burundi include Ntawurishira (1985), Ndayip-fukamiye (1996), Passauer (2019), Ndayimirije (2015), Brant (2021), and Nsengiyumva *et al.* (2022). Key terms relevant to this education system include *Ecole Fondamentale* and *Etudes postfondamentales*. In Burundi, classic Primary Education has shifted to what is known as *Ecole Fondamentale*, divided into 4 cycles. Students spend nine years, after which they sit for a national exam and are awarded the *Certificat de Tronc Commun* (Common Cycle Certificate). Successful candidates move on to *Etudes Postfondamentales Générales* (Post Fundamental education), which comprises General Post Fundamental (3 years), Pedagogical Post Fundamental (4 years), and Technical Post Fundamental (4 years). Unsuccessful candidates are admitted to specialised centres to undergo professional training. Students take a national exam at the end of the Post Fundamental training. Successful candidates obtain the end of Post-Fundamental education diploma, known as *Diplôme des Humanités*. Regarding tertiary education, students read for three years to obtain a Licence (Bachelor's degree). One year later, these students sit for the *Mastère*, a postgraduate diploma obtained after defending a thesis. Beyond the *Mastère* is the doctorate, which takes three years. In short, tertiary education in Burundi follows the *Licence-Mastère-Doctorat* (LMD, i.e., the BMD) system, completed in seven years.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND FRAME OF ANALYSIS

First, works on language use in Burundi are rare, as several linguists focused their attention on language policy and language in education policy. Nsengiyumva *et al.* (2022), for example, examined the “old” multilingual training education system in the country in 2005. The data he collected came from two sources: the content materials produced by policymakers for languages of instruction on the one hand and languages that were taught as subjects on the other hand. The data thus collected were analysed using the content analysis methods. It was found that each language used was taught separately, as it was believed then that language separation during teaching would boost language competence development while preventing cross-linguistic transfers. Brant (2021) decried the perpetuation of the colonisers' language in education, which creates a diglossic situation in communities, with the colonisers' language being the High variety and the local languages being the Low variety. Usually, both the students and the teachers are not competent in the foreign language, which tends to affect the output of the teachers and the students' linguistic competence. This perpetuation of the use of Western languages in education in the colonised countries, he observed, is motivated by various factors, some of which are political.

Regarding the present work, the frame of analysis adopted is Fishman's (1972) domain analysis. The main domains of language use include family, friendship, religion, education, and employment. To these, linguists added social interaction contexts such as the workplace and playground. Three major factors influence these domains: topic, role relation, and place. Take the family domain. One factor that influences this domain is the “place,” which is the home. Role relation involves family members, i.e., father, mother, and siblings, and topics may include daily activities, news about family members, household, and meals, to name only a few. In education, place is generally a school, role-relation may be teacher-student, and the topic may be an English lesson in class. The same goes for the other domains.

3. METHODOLOGY

The setting of the present study, the informants, the instruments used, the material collected and the method of data analysis are considered. The study is set in Bujumbura, the economic capital of Burundi. The specific place in the city was the ENA school (*Ecole Nationale d'Administration*-National School of Administration), which trains the country's future executives and civil servants. The informants were a sample of 20 students who had just entered this school and had in common that they were taking their lectures in English, which is not the case in other tertiary-level institutions in the country. The main instrument used was a 16-item questionnaire (see Appendix) designed to follow the domains of language use outlined above. The 20 copies given out were all returned, and all items

were filled in. The informants' answers to the questionnaire items were quantified, and the results were expressed in percentages.

4. ANALYSIS

The various social situations of language use are taken up in turn: family, friendship, religion, education, and employment.

4.1. Family

Five questions were set to check the languages used by parents and siblings in the home environment. [Table I](#) considers the interactions of parents or partners, and shows that in the home setting, parents generally speak their ancestral language (95% of 20% respondents).

Q2 considers interactions between parents and siblings in the home setting. While Kirundi remains the dominant language used in the home in conversations with father and children (75% of 20%), the combination of English and French (15%) is felt, as indicated in [Table II](#).

Q3 examines conversations between mothers and children. As [Table III](#) shows, mothers and their children are found to speak Kirundi predominantly (70% of 20). Besides, they combine French and English as frequently as fathers and their children do (10%). However, they seem to differ from fathers and their children in that they bring in Swahili singly (5%) or in combination with Kirundi and French (5%), and they also speak French singly more frequently (10%).

Q4 asked the respondents to indicate how they communicated with their helpers or servants (see [Table IV](#)). Three languages are mentioned, with Kirundi hitting 90% of the occurrences, while French and Kiswahili scored barely 5% each. The total absence of English may indicate servants' relatively low level of education.

Q5 looked into the interactions of brothers and sisters at home. Again, as [Table V](#) shows, Kirundi is dominant (80% of 20% respondents), with Kiswahili coming up next (10%).

TABLE I: LANGUAGE USE BY PARENTS (N = 20)

Question 1: What languages do you speak with your wife/husband when you are at home? If you are not married, what language(s) does your father speak with your mother when they are at home?		
Language	Frequency	Percentage
Kirundi	19	95%
Kirundi, French, and English	1	5%
Total	20	100%

TABLE II: LANGUAGE USE BY FATHERS AND CHILDREN (N = 20)

Question 2: What language(s) do you speak with your children when you are at home? Or what language(s) does your father speak with his children when they are at home?		
Language	Frequency	Percentage
Kirundi	15	75%
French	1	5%
English and French	3	15%
Kirundi, French, and English	1	5%
English and French	20	100%

TABLE III: LANGUAGE USE BY MOTHERS AND CHILDREN (N = 20)

Question 3: What language(s) do you speak with your children when you are at home? Or what language(s) does your mother speak with her children when they are at home?		
Language	Frequency	Percentage
Kirundi	14	70%
French	2	10%
Kiswahili	1	5%
English and French	2	10%
Kirundi, French, and Kiswahili	1	5%
Total	20	100%

TABLE IV: LANGUAGE SPOKEN BY PARENTS AND HELPERS/SERVANTS (N = 20)

Question 4: What language(s) do you speak with your helper/servant when you both are at home?		
Language	Frequency	Percentage
Kirundi	18	90%
French	1	5%
Kiswahili	1	5%
Total	20	100%

TABLE V: LANGUAGE SPOKEN BY SIBLINGS (N = 20)

Question 5: What language(s) do you speak with your brothers and sisters when you are at home?		
Language	Frequency	Percentage
Kirundi	16	80%
Kiswahili	2	10%
Kirundi and French	1	5%
Kirundi, French, and English	1	5%
Total	20	100%

In short, it can be posited that Kirundi, the ancestral language of the country, reigns supreme in the family domain. It should be pointed out that, elsewhere in many African countries, indigenous languages tend to be neglected or to be used sparingly.

4.2. Friendship

Two questions were considered in this domain, one focusing on oral communication and the other on texting. Regarding oral interactions, Kirundi was dominant (80% of 20% cases), as shown in [Table VI](#).

Regarding texting (Q7), it was found that Kirundi was still dominant (85% of 20% cases), as shown in [Table VII](#). Unlike the local languages in many parts of Africa, Kirundi is taught in school as a subject.

4.3. Religion

Q8 asked the respondents to indicate the main language the religious leader uses in their place of worship. As shown in [Table VIII](#), in places of worship, Kirundi tended to be the dominant language (85% of 20%), followed by Kiswahili (10%). The combination of Kirundi, French and English was also mentioned (5%).

Q9 aimed to enquire about other languages used in religious practices besides the main language already cited in Q8. As shown in [Table IX](#), generally used in mosques, Arabic was cited in 20% of 20% cases. The combination of French, Kiswahili, and English was more frequently used (80% of 20% cases). Such language combinations are common in Christian places of worship, especially Pentecostal churches.

TABLE VI: LANGUAGE SPOKEN BY FRIENDS (N = 20)

Question 6: When speaking with your friends, what languages do you generally use?		
Language	Frequency	Percentage
Kirundi	16	80%
Kiswahili	1	5%
English and French	3	15%
Total	20	100%

TABLE VII: LANGUAGE USED WHEN TEXTING WITH FRIENDS (N = 20)

Question 7: When texting your friends, what languages do you generally use?		
Language	Frequency	Percentage
Kirundi	17	85%
French	1	5%
Kiswahili	2	10%
Total	20	100%

TABLE VIII: LANGUAGE USE IN WORSHIP (N = 20)

Question 8: In your place of worship (shrine/mosque/church), what is the main language the religious leader generally uses?		
Language	Frequency	Percentage
Kirundi	17	85%
Kiswahili	2	10%
Kirundi, French and English	1	5%
Total	20	100%

TABLE IX: OTHER LANGUAGES DURING WORSHIP (N = 20)

Question 9: Cite any other languages used in these places of worship.		
Language	Frequency	Percentage
Arabic	4	20%
French, Kiswahili, and English	16	80%
Total	20	100%

4.4. Education

Four questions were asked. The first (Q10) inquired about the languages learned in the respondents' schools. As shown in [Table X](#), the informants, who were students at the ENA school, reported that English was the language they were learning (100%).

To be more specific, these respondents were asked to indicate the main languages used in class by teachers when teaching (Q11). As shown in [Table XI](#), this main language turned out to be English (70% of 20% cases), followed by a combination of Kirundi and French (30%). Teachers generally switch to Kirundi and French in beginners' classes. In fact, in primary and secondary schools, French is the main language of teaching, and Kirundi is taught as a subject throughout. At the tertiary level, French is most schools' main language of teaching.

Thirdly, the languages the country's leader used to address the nation were considered (Q12). Unlike the classroom context, Kirundi was the only language the head of state used when talking to his fellow citizens. In other words, while English is supreme in the classroom, Kirundi alone addresses the nation.

Lastly, the respondents were asked to indicate the languages they communicate in class with their classmates (Q13). [Table XII](#) shows that these languages were said to be mainly English (95% of 20% cases), followed by a combination of Kirundi, French, and English (5%).

4.5. Employment

Two questions were set for the domain of employment. First, Q14 asked the informants to indicate what languages they overhear people speak at their places of work. [Table XIII](#) shows that Kirundi

TABLE X: LANGUAGE USE IN EDUCATION (N = 20)

Question 10: What language(s) do you learn in school at the moment?		
Language	Frequency	Percentage
English	20	100%
Total	20	100%

TABLE XI: MAIN LANGUAGES USED BY TEACHERS WHEN TEACHING (N = 20)

Question 11: What are the main languages your teachers use when teaching?		
Language	Frequency	Percentage
English	14	70%
Kirundi and French	6	30%
Total	20	100%

TABLE XII: LANGUAGES USED AMONG CLASSMATES IN THE CLASSROOM (N = 20)

Question 13: What languages do you speak in the classroom with your classmates?		
Language	Frequency	Percentage
English	19	95%
Kirundi, French, and English	1	5%
Total	20	100%

TABLE XIII: LANGUAGES HEARD IN PLACES OF WORK (N = 20)

Question 14: What language(s) do you overhear people speak at their places of work?		
Language	Frequency	Percentage
Kirundi	16	80%
English and French	4	20%
Total	20	100%

TABLE XIV: LANGUAGES SPOKEN AT PLACES OF WORK (N = 20)

Question 15: What language(s) do you think you will speak at your place of work?		
Language	Frequency	Percentage
Kirundi	9	45%
French	3	15%
English	8	40%
Total	20	100%

was reported to be the most frequently heard language (80% of 20% cases). This was followed by a combination of English and French (20%).

Secondly, these informants were asked, as they were students, to indicate what languages they thought they would speak at their places of work (Q15). Table XIV shows that Kirundi, the local language, scored 45% of 20% cases. Next came English with 40%, which is the language Burundians aspire to work in, as they will eventually occupy various positions in regional institutions (East African Community, 1999; Oanda & Matiang'i, 2018). Finally, French came up with 15%, which shows that the position of the French in the country is shrinking.

Q16 was intended to get the respondents to comment on what they had already said about language use in their country. They all pointed out that the four languages used in Burundi were beneficial to the country's socio-economic development. Though most of the population speaks Kirundi, the local language, people should learn other languages, especially English, because it is the language of integration and opportunities. Some learners reported that they rarely spoke English because they feared making mistakes.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined multilingualism in Burundi, a country that had been torn by war for many years. The leaders have engaged in nation-building, and multilingualism has become a force to reckon with. The ancestral language is used in various domains, including family, religion, and friendship. Kiswahili is reserved for trade and French for education, with English being a medium of instruction for the elite of the country and a school subject from the primary level of education.

APPENDIX

1. Questionnaire

This exercise is intended to check how the Burundi people use the languages available in their country. It is just an academic exercise. Please answer each question.

- 1) What language(s) do you speak with your wife/husband when you are at home? If you are not married, what language(s) does your father speak with your mother when they are at home?
- 2) What language(s) do you speak with your children when you are at home? Or what language(s) does your father speak with his children when they are at home?
- 3) What language(s) do you speak with your children when you are at home? Or what language(s) does your mother speak with her children when they are at home?
- 4) What language(s) do you speak with your help/servant when you both are at home?
- 5) What language(s) do you speak with your brothers and sisters when you are at home?
- 6) When speaking to your friends, what languages do you generally use?
- 7) When texting your friends, what languages do you generally use?
- 8) In your place of worship (shrine/mosque/church), what is the main language the religious leader generally uses?
- 9) Cite any other languages which are used in these places of worship.
- 10) What language(s) do you learn at school at the moment?
- 11) What are the main languages your teachers use when teaching?

- 12) In what languages does the leader of your country address the nation?
- 13) What languages do you speak in the classroom with your classmates?
- 14) What language(s) do you hear or overhear people speak at their places of work?
- 15) What language(s) do you think you will speak at your place of work?
- 16) Do you have any comments to make on language use in Burundi?

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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