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## **THE HIGH COSTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF RWANDA'S SHIFT IN LANGUAGE POLICY FROM FRENCH TO ENGLISH**

IZABELA STEFLJA

### **SUMMARY**

- Language policy in Rwanda has revolved around three languages—Kinyarwanda, the indigenous language of Rwandans, French and English: 90 percent of the population speaks Kinyarwanda; 8 percent speaks French; and, 4 percent speaks English.
- In the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, the Rwandan government has worked strenuously to develop the country and construct a new national image; the shift in language policy from French to English is part of this ambitious project.
- A shift in language from French to English is expected to have profound effects on the equality of citizens and on the political and economic landscape of the country.

The Rwandan government's decision to transition from French to English as the country's main official language is part of the country's play to join the East African Community (EAC) and to ease economic relations with its neighbours and South Africa. There are other crucial factors to be considered in Rwanda's linguistic policy decision, however, including the desire to break from the colonial past and construct a new Rwandan image, and to incorporate Anglophone returnees employed in public service. This backgrounder examines changing socio-political dynamics as Rwandan communities move toward making the language shift.

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## THE HISTORY OF LANGUAGE POLICY IN RWANDA

Language policy in Rwanda has revolved around three languages—Kinyarwanda, the indigenous language of Rwandans, French and English. Kinyarwanda unifies the population because, unlike most other African countries, Rwanda only has this one indigenous language. Estimates show that almost 100 percent of the population speaks Kinyarwanda and 90 percent of the population speaks only Kinyarwanda whereas 8 percent speak French and 4 percent English (Rosendal, 2009; LeClerc, 2008; Munyankesha, 2004; Samuelson and Freedman, 2010). Despite its unifying characteristics, however, Kinyarwanda has been neglected past primary school and colonial languages have been employed in upper education and in settings of social, economic, political and cultural importance (Samuelson and Freedman, 2010).

French was introduced as an official language in Rwanda during Belgium's rule of the country from 1890 to 1962. Once a school system was established in French, Rwanda became a member of La Francophonie. The significance of French began to decrease after the 1994 genocide, under the new leadership's obvious preference for English. Two years after the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took power in Rwanda, they declared English an official language alongside Kinyarwanda and French.

From 1996 to 2008 the language policy required the first three years of schooling be taught in Kinyarwanda, after which the students chose English or French as the primary language of instruction (McGreal, 2008). University students were expected to perform equally well regardless of their linguistic choice. For the first 16 years after the genocide, French was more widely used among both ethnic groups in Rwanda, including Tutsi returnees from Francophone countries. However, the linguistic reforms of 2008, including the removal of French as one of three official languages, have reduced the dominance of French. Following the reforms, children now begin their study in English from the first grade and take their secondary school entrance exams in grade six in English (Samuelson and Freedman, 2010: 194-5).

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF SUDDEN LINGUISTIC CHANGE

The implementation of English as the official language of instruction has led to serious hurdles in the Rwandan education system. Among them has been establishing a teaching force fluent in English. The country has experienced difficulties in finding adequate foreign and domestic instructors to teach teachers English, yet the pressure for a quick linguistic transition continues (McGreal, 2009). In 2009, out of Rwanda's 31,000 primary school teachers, only 4,700 were trained in English, and out of Rwanda's 12,000 secondary school teachers, only 600 were trained in English (McGreal, 2009). Public service workers are also taking English classes in an attempt to catch up, while elected officials are incorporating English words in speeches, and moto and taxi drivers are struggling to put together simple phrases in either colonial language (McCrummen, 2008).

Officially, the language shift is part of Rwanda's membership in the EAC and economic relations with other member states. Rwanda relies on trade with Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, and since 1994, the country has increased economic ties with the United Kingdom and the United States. It has also traded membership in La Francophonie for membership in the Commonwealth, even though Rwanda was never a British colony. Rwandan officials emphasize that the eagerness to switch languages is not about choosing the Anglophone world but about choosing the path toward economic success. They argue that if Kinyarwanda or Spanish could get foreign investors into Rwanda, Rwandans would emphasize those languages as well (McGreal, 2008; McGreal, 2009). Rwandan ministers emphasize that French is only spoken in France, and parts of West Africa, Canada, Switzerland and Belgium. English, on the other hand, is "a backbone for growth and development not only in the region but around the globe" (McGreal, 2008).

A popular Rwandan newspaper, *The New Times*, pointed out that the French education minister called for English language lessons during holidays for French students in order to keep up with international standards because "very few people outside of France will be able to speak French in the future" (*The New Times*, 2008). Rwandan Senator Aloinsea Inyumba explains that, simply, "English is the language of business" (McCrummen, 2008). English is thus referred to as "the language of work" and Rwandans are eager to

prove that they are not only competitive in the African market, but also in the world market.

## **LANGUAGE, ECONOMICS AND POLITICS**

Rwanda's economic problems are serious. Overpopulation and struggles over land continue to challenge the country and its path toward development and prosperity. Policymakers expect that a move toward adopting the English language will accelerate the country's ability to improve standards of living and facilitate national reconciliation. Overall, the Rwandan population has a positive attitude towards the use of English language: they perceive English as a valuable commodity (Samuelson and Freedman, 2010: 203). It is important, however, to keep Rwandan realities in perspective when examining policies.

While Kigali is packed with experienced technocrats functioning in a booming high tech sector, the rural picture is different. Nearly 90 percent of Rwandans are dependent on subsistence farming and the country's new and projected prosperity is not reaching many villages (Whitelaw, 2007). It is thus difficult to see how potential benefits of language reform will reach most Rwandans.

While the government has specified economic incentives, critics of the language shift point to political motives, such as the government's attempt to distance itself from France and realign with the English-speaking world. These same critics also highlight the current RPF government's animosity over France's relationship with the former regime of President Juvenal Habyarimana.

In 2006, a French anti-terrorism judge accused the current Rwandan president, Paul Kagame, of involvement in the shooting down of Habyarimana's airplane, which killed then-president Habyarimana and set the scene for genocide in the country (McCrummen, 2008). In the end, the judge could not indict Kagame because of his post, but he issued arrest warrants against nine people from Kagame's regime and asked the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) to undertake justice on the matter (McCrummen, 2008; McGreal, 2008; McGreal, 2009). Kagame responded by closing down the French Embassy, the French cultural centre and taking Radio France Internationale off the air (Hasselriis, 2010).

Stirring diplomatic relations even further, in 2007, under Kagame's rule, an official Rwandan commission accused 33 senior officials in the French military and government, including former President Francois Mitterrand, of direct involvement in the 1994 genocide. The commission's report suggested that French forces committed crimes against humanity and assisted the fleeing of organizers of genocide through Operation Turquoise, a military operation during which French troops entered Rwanda and allegedly aided genocidaires. French officials denied any such actions and quoted "political errors" as the only oversight made on their behalf.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POST-GENOCIDE RWANDA

The decision to distance Rwanda from the French language also has implications for the country's post-genocide identity project. It allows for a break from the colonial past and ties with Belgium and France, factors which the Rwandan government specifies as key in the development of genocidal ideology. To this end, the government has taken ambitious steps to change how Rwandans perceive their identity. In an effort to "eradicate genocide ideology" the government is hoping to eliminate affiliations based on ethnicity and create a single national identity (Samuelson and Freedman, 2010: 196). "The way to heal the divide and heal Rwanda is to promote Rwandan identity above all other identities," meaning "Rwanda first, Hutu and Tutsi later" (Whitelaw, 2007). Adopting one foreign language for the purpose of economic and social betterment of all — "a language of progress" — seems appropriate in a country that is trying to overhaul its image.

Yet, there are problems with using English as the only language of work. Particular identities and sections of society are linked to this language more than others, putting English-speaking groups at an advantage in socio-economic relations, and non-English speaking groups at a disadvantage. English language is the language of Rwanda's elite and the language of the RPF leadership, as well as other Tutsis raised in exile in Anglophone countries. This includes the Tutsi RPF members who organized the invasion from Uganda, which stopped the genocide, as well as many Tutsis who were in exile in Uganda, Congo, Burundi, Tanzania, Kenya and South Africa, and returned to Rwanda after 1994. Some returnees speak French but most of them are Anglophone. Analysts estimate that the number of returnees is

somewhere between 500,000 and 800,000 people. They argue that this situation has resulted in language being a proxy for two rival elite ethnic groups (Hintjens, 2008). Language is also telling of power dynamics since government offices are full of Anglophone returnees, especially former refugees from Uganda.

In the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, the Rwandan government has worked strenuously to develop the country and construct a new Rwandan image; the shift in language policy is part of this ambitious project. Questions regarding the motives behind the government's preference for English are warranted; however, at the end of the day, the government is responsible for developing policies that aim to improve opportunities for citizens. Officials are taking into consideration which language policy is best suited to ensure improvements in literacy levels, quality education, and benefits across Rwandan society, including rural areas. With its roots in past events and current power struggles, the new language policy will have profound effects on the future economic and political landscape of the country. It will be up to Rwandans to manage the consequences of the link between language and identity as they build toward a peaceful post-genocide Rwanda.

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