Policy Brief

Translanguaging in Rwandan social media:

Anew sociolinguistic symbol for unifying social dynamics

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About the authors

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Key findings

• The use of translanguaging drivers (mixing or mingling languages) on social media like WhatsApp was found to be a fairly common practice, across English, French, Ikinyarwanda and Kiswahili languages.

• Survey respondents reported that the use of translanguaging drivers boosted positive social dynamics, measured across seven types of interactions.

Introduction

Language plays a central role in all social interactions and it is used in all aspects of life. It is a vehicle for interactions that carries messages promoting harmony in society, social cohesion and peace-building, but it can also promote the opposite. In today's communication, the current generation uses various languages in different forums, including social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Skype, LinkedIn, Imo, Messenger, WeChat and many others. The use of digital technology is growing rapidly in Rwanda: the Ministry of Information Technology and Communication reported in 2016 a mobile phone penetration rate of 79.2% and an internet penetration rate of 35.4%. In Africa, 172 million out of 191 million active social media users (90%) were using WhatsApp by the end of 2017. All these people communicate through language. Some prefer to communicate through one language, while others rely on all their linguistic repertoires and codes, drawn from different languages. They mix or mingle different languages in their interactions, and this is what we have described as "translanguaging." Hence, our study sought to explore the particular translanguaging drivers that are used on WhatsApp groups, and their effects on both positive and negative social dynamics.

As a language is a communication tool that cuts across all strata of society, this study has implications for various levels in Rwandan policy making. In addition, social media are used by a great number of people, including policy makers and lay citizens. They use languages and mix them in various interactions, but they are not aware of the language dynamics and their effects in peace-building and on social dynamics. For example, media houses and policy makers in general will agree with this study that there is a lack of guidelines that regulate the use of various languages in different social media, including WhatsApp. After the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, the Government of Rwanda promoted the policy of multilingualism based on four languages. This is confirmed by the Rwandan constitution in Article 8, which stipulates that "The national language is Ikinyarwanda. The official languages are Ikinyarwanda, English and French. An organic law may add or remove an official language." In 2017, Kiswahili was added as official language. Although the quadrilingual policy is stipulated, the policy challenge is that the mixing of those languages is not regulated at policy level, for all social forums, including social media. Still on the policy level, the law does not clarify practices of those four languages among Rwandans' friends and their other friends from abroad, who interact through social media like WhatsApp. In addition, the mandate given to the Rwanda Academy of Language and Culture (RALC) is to promote the Ikinyarwanda language, to safeguard and develop it, analyse it and ensure its value, as well as to design policies regulating the use of the languages used in the country and to ensure their implementation. However, guidelines regulating language use in different domains are still being developed by the RALC. Furthermore, the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission(NURC) and other partners in peace-building might not be informed about the effects of language use in promoting peace and harmony in Rwandan society. We observe a common practice on social media, where language use has a kind of freedom; some people even consider this language use on social media as informal, but little is known about its effects in promoting social dynamics. This policy brief contributes in addressing these challenges, by informing policy makers and stakeholders about the types of translanguaging drivers that were identified on the selected WhatsApp groups investigated, as well as their effects on social dynamics.

Study context

Participants in this study were both Rwandans and foreigners who were interacting on WhatsApp groups. Three WhatsApp groups with 600 members were investigated, in which 60 translingual WhatsApp posts were analysed qualitatively, while a five-item Likert scale questionnaire was filled in by 60 WhatsApp users for quantitative analysis. WhatsApp posts were analysed through the lenses of the Ubuntu translanguaging and Translingual practices model. The Ubuntu translanguaging model is premised on the ancient African value system called "Ubuntu" inIsiZulu, which can be equated to "Ubuntu" or "Ubumuntu" in Kinyarwanda. "Ubuntu translanguaging" is embedded in African culture and the African way of life; it is founded in the African sayings "*I am because you are;*" *"You are because we are;"* or *"Stranger, please come to my house so I become complete*" (Makalela, 2015, p.6). In Ubuntu translanguaging, languages are complementary, one to another. Those languages allow translingual practices,where communicators use texts that are meshed and mediated by diverse semiotic codes, and integrate all available codes as a "repertoire" in their everyday communication(Canagarajah, 2013). The scope of this study was the WhatsApp group messages posted between 1 December 2016 and 1 August 2017. The language mixing was mainly limited to Kinyarwanda, English, French and Kiswahili.

Key findings

The first key finding is that seven forms of translanguaging drivers were revealed to be practiced on WhatsApp, within the themes or topics symbolising positive social dynamics and the spirit of togetherness:

(i) *poly-languaging* as a symbol of solidarity in difficult times like death and stressful situations or as a symbol of friendship and literacy daring among speakers with limited linguistic proficiency;

(ii) *vertical and horizontal languaging* as a symbol for social support, sensitisation and financial collaboration;

(iii) *metro-languaging* as a symbol for jokes with words for entertainment;

(iv) *code-translation and code-switching* as boosters of the spirit of togetherness, festive season wishes and distant greetings among international friends;

(v) *code-meshing* as a symbol of togetherness and friendship from distant greetings among WhatsApp group users;

(vi) *transnational language practices* as a provider of the opportunity to learn and use languages across national borders; and

(vii) *translocal language practices* as a symbol of political rally, togetherness and confidence in leadership.

The common feature of all these translanguaging drivers is that the communicators, in this case WhatsApp users, were mixing languages but to differing degrees. While we are used to seeing people communicating in one language (monolingual norm) throughout the entire interaction, the practice on the WhatsApp group investigated showed us a different trend (multilingual norm), where various languages were mingled or mixed up in conveying a particular message or around a particular topic. The seven translanguaging drivers mentioned above were identified within the examples of topics and themes that were posted on WhatsApp groups, but, based on the characteristics of their mixing, they were applied to recent terminologies from other scholars in linguistics and sociolinguistics.

After identifying those seven translanguaging drivers, further analysis revealed that communicators perceived that those translanguaging drivers boost positive social dynamics among communicators at a higher level than negative social dynamics. The evidence is summarised in the histogram below, which compared the extent at which translanguaging drivers promote positive and negative social dynamics.
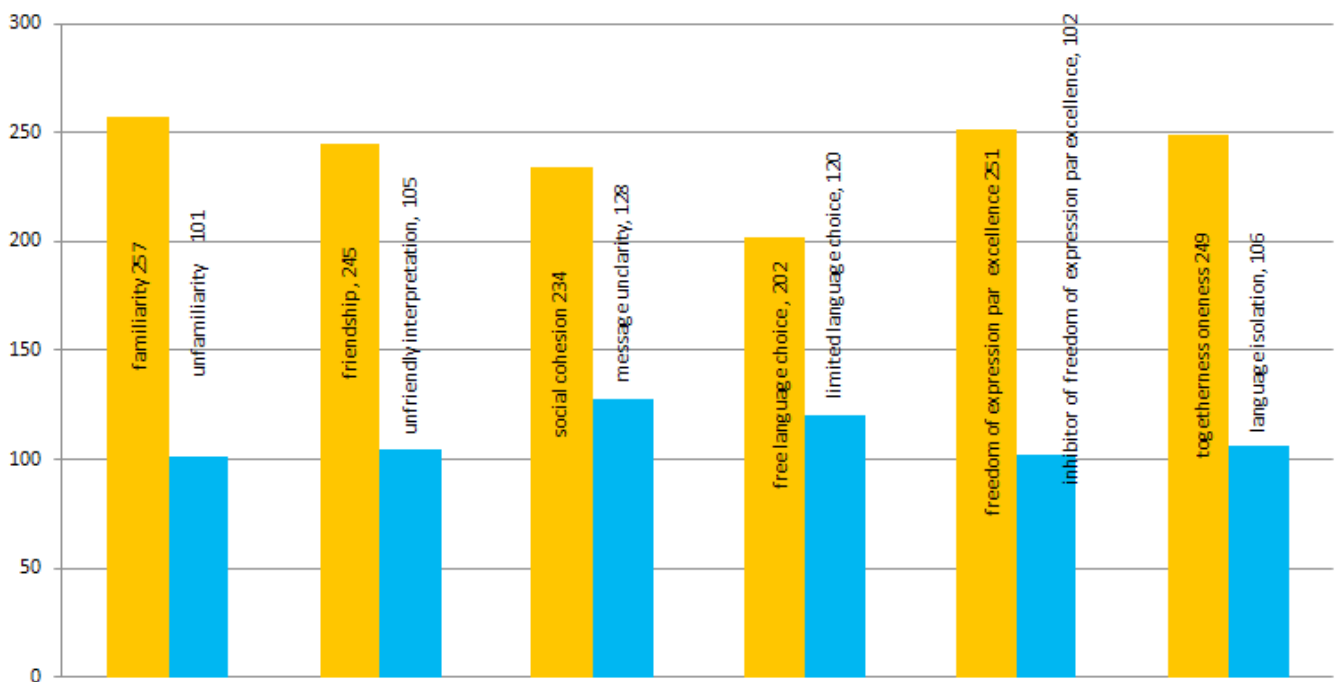
Histogram 1: Comparison between paired positive and negative social dynamics on the extent to which translanguaging drivers promote them

The histogram, shows that all components of positive social dynamics scored higher than all components of negative social dynamics. The summation score for the five Likert scales for familiarity is 257 against 101 for unfamiliarity; friendship scored 245 against 105 for unfriendliness. Social cohesion scored 234, while mes-

sage unclarity that may hinder cohesiveness scored 128. Free language choice scored 202 against 120 for limited language choice, freedom of expression par excellence scored 251 against 102 for inhibition of freedom of expression par excellence, while togetherness scored 249 against 106 for oneness or language isolation. Across the indicators, positive social dynamics scored almost double the scores for negative social dynamics.

Recommendations

The findings from this study revealed that translanguaging drivers are commonly practiced on WhatsApp and they have a positive effect in boosting positive social dynamics. Policy makers, researchers of language dynamics and lay citizens should debate and revisit their viewpoints about language practices, to compare monolingual ideology with multilingual ideology and weigh up the new trends in the 21ˢᵗ century. This policy brief therefore recommends the following:

- People will practice languages as they wish, but there is a need for policy guidelines on their use on social media, in line with guidelines on their use in other settings such as the classroom.

- In the classroom context, our findings reinforce previous recommendations that teachers and learners use translanguaging strategically and purposefully so that it is not detrimental to their learning. This study also recommends strategic use of translanguaging drivers on social media so that they do not lead to negative social dynamics.

- As translanguaging drivers have been revealed to promote positive social dynamics, leading to peace-building and harmony in society, we recommend to engage with translanguaging drivers as a component of the peace-building and reconciliatory barometer in post-genocide contexts.

- The African Ubuntu and togetherness ideology could usefully be deployed in various social forums, as it appears to stimulate positive social interactions, peace-building and harmony in society in this study.

- The policy making bodies who are directly linked to findings from this study, like NURC , RALC, the Ministry of Information Technology and Communication, media houses and all partners in peace-building, including Aegis Trust, should motivate researchers to advance this kind of research further, so as to discover more about the effects of language use on social well-being, peace-building and harmony in society, as it was shown that those areas are under-researched.