

## ***Citizens' Perceptions of Codeswitching in Public Communication in Rwanda***

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### **Abstract**

*Noticing the frequent codeswitching practices in political communication in Rwanda, this study was conducted to investigate the Rwandan citizens' perceptions of this linguistic phenomenon in public communication. The study's objectives were to examine whether the practices of codeswitching affect the citizens' understanding, to investigate citizens' perceptions of codeswitching and to raise awareness among Rwanda's government leaders about this linguistic phenomenon. In order to make it comparative, this study was conducted in two distinct areas: Huye city as urban area and Gisagara district as a rural area. The number of participants was 44: 22 urban citizens and 22 rural citizens. Moreover, a mixed methodology was employed, combining group discussions to collect qualitative data and semi-structured interviews using a questionnaire. The study was accomplished through descriptive statistical analysis of codeswitching. The findings reveal that many Rwandan citizens view codeswitching practices unfavourably for it hinders them from fully understanding the public communication. Comparatively, the study found that codeswitching hinders rural citizens' ability to comprehend public communication more than it does for urban citizens. Based on these findings, this study recommends government leaders to prioritize the use of Kinyarwanda while delivering public communication. It also further recommends the government of Rwanda to organise regular training sessions for all government leaders to raise their awareness of the effect of codeswitching. In recognition that codeswitching is an inevitable linguistic phenomenon (Nilep, 2006:1), this study recommends that Rwandan government leaders provide translations whenever codeswitching occurs in public communication.*

**Keywords:** codeswitching, communication, citizens, perceptions, comprehension.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Rwanda is a multilingual statute country, which uses four official languages. Besides, Kinyarwanda- a native language of all Rwandans, English, French and Kiswahili are recognized as official languages of Rwanda (Art 8 of the 2003 constitution of the Republic of Rwanda, revised in 2015). Despite the fact that Kinyarwanda is the native and widely spoken language in Rwanda, government leaders of Rwanda often resort to codeswitching between Kinyarwanda and the other three foreign official languages (English, French and Kiswahili). Thus, one may wonder to know whether the practices of codeswitching while delivering public communication enriches or endangers effective communication in Rwanda. As a linguistic phenomenon, codeswitching arises from different languages contact. This phenomenon has been given various names such as codeswitching, codemixing, code alternation and so on (Gumperz, 1977; Poplack, Wheler and Westwood, 1989; Muysken, 2000). This linguistic phenomenon (codeswitching) was also given various definitions by different scholars. For example, Bullock and Toribio (2009:1) defined it as the ability of the bilinguals to alternate effortlessly between two languages. Gumperz, (1982:59) defines codeswitching as exchange of passages of utterance belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems.

The scholars, Gumperz (1982) and Auer (2025) attempted to conceptualize this linguistic phenomenon of codeswitching. In his model of known as “Codeswitching and Contextualization”, Gumperz (1977) argues that codeswitching is seen pragmatically and socially meaningful act. According to him, codeswitching should align with the communicate needs of the hearers and be used in ways that fit the context of interaction. Moreover, Auer (2005: 94) defines codeswitching as a language alternation phenomenon, which is part of the realm of everyday rhetoric and not part of grammar. Auer further argues that effective codeswitching occurs when speakers alternates languages strategically with the flow of utterances. Thus, hypothetically, on the side of Rwanda, taking into account that 99.4% (Rosendal, 2010) of local citizens can speak Kinyarwanda, the practice of codeswitching in public messages may not align with the communicative needs of the local citizens. Thus, it may endanger effective understanding of Rwanda’s local citizens.

In Rwanda, a study conducted by Ntakirutimana (2014), categorized the linguistic phenomenon of codeswitching in Rwanda as the practice of “Kinyafranglais” to refer a simultaneous practice of codeswitching between Kinyarwanda, French and English in one conversation. The findings of his study showed that this type of codeswitching was a sign of linguistic incompetence. In the same understanding with Ntakirutimana, Crystal (1987) argued that when some speakers are not able to clearly express themselves in one language, they codeswitch to another language to compensate for their language



deficiency. Another scholar Poplack (1980) argued that codeswitching is a practice that is mostly frequently in the societies of bilinguals. Thus, as a multilingual status country, codeswitching occurs frequently in the communication in Rwanda. It is this vein that this study was conducted to investigate the citizens' perceptions on the use of codeswitching, in order to find out whether it enriches or endangers public comprehension of communication in Rwanda.

## 2. Problem statement

The problem identified by this study was that the Rwandan government leaders codeswitch their public communication while a large number of residents cannot speak or understand foreign languages apart from their native language (Kinyarwanda) spoken by 99.4% of the total population in Rwanda (Rosendal, 2010). The report of National Institute Statistics of Rwanda (NISR 2022: 12) reported that 54% of the population who were 15 years of age and above could speak and understand Kinyarwanda only- they were monolingual speakers of their native language (Kinyarwanda). Thus, it is seemingly that a large number of citizens would prefer receiving public communication in Kinyarwanda for codeswitching could hinder their understanding of those messages. This study intends to investigate the community's perceptions of codeswitching in order to suggest possible ways that government leaders of Rwanda can follow to enhance clarity of their codeswitched public communication.

## 3. History of language planning and codeswitching in Rwanda

Rwanda is a country with four official languages. The scholar Ntakirutimana (2010) argues that the languages planning policy has been characterized by frequent languages changes. These policy changes established English as an official language next to Kinyarwanda and French from 1995 and finally a solely medium of instruction at all levels of education from 2008. In 2023, the constitution of Rwanda recognized Kiswahili as an official language. From that time, Rwanda became a country with four official languages.

Codeswitching as a language phenomenon, which comes because of languages contact, started to be noticed in Rwanda from the colonial times. This was the time when Kinyarwanda started interfacing with other languages like German, Kiswahili and then later with French and English (Karekezi, 1989). According to Gafaranga (2010), the contact of Kinyarwanda with foreign languages seems to be more inclined towards European than African languages and it is an issue that is historically traceable from different periods of Rwandan history. According to Habyarimana (2017: 8-9), before the arrival of colonizers in the country of thousand hills (Rwanda), the pre-colonial period was characterised by Kinyarwanda monolingualism. Therefore, Rwandan citizens could speak Kinyarwanda only. However, during the German colonial rule in Rwanda (1889-1916), Kinyarwanda lost its seat of being used as an official language. As a result, Kiswahili and French took place as official languages to political interests of the



colonizers (Ntakirutimana, 2014). In 1996-1997, Rwanda adopted English as a medium of instruction (MoI) in educational settings (Ryaziga, C. & Musanganya, P. 2025).

Various scholars argued that cohabitation of many languages in one setting often results in codeswitching. In the case of Rwanda, scholar Ntakirutimana (2010) associates codeswitching with the colonial mentality, which instituted a bilingual diglossic situation that imposed the language of the colonial master as a high variety (H) while the language of the colonized was observed as a low variety (L). This situation has continued to impose serious unbalanced power relations between foreign European languages and Kinyarwanda. Nowadays, the native and official language Kinyarwanda cohabits with other three foreign official languages: English, French and Kiswahili (Art 8 of the 2003 Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda, revised in 2015). It can be argued that frequent contact of these languages results into codeswitching (Ryaziga, C. & Musanganya, P. 2025).

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

This part highlights the study design, the types of data collected, the methods of data collection and the tools used while collecting the data, participants and sampling techniques, ethical considerations and data validity and reliability.

##### 4.1. Study design

In order to examine the public perceptions of codeswitching practices by Rwanda's government leaders, this study employed descriptive study design.

##### 4.2. Study population and sampling techniques

This study covered a total number of 44 participants that include 22 urban and 22 rural citizens. These two groups were chosen due to the need to compare whether the urban and rural citizens perceive codeswitching similarly or differently. In order to select the respondents, purposive sampling techniques was employed in order to collect the suitable data on how citizens perceive codeswitching practices in public communication. The data were collected in two distinct areas: Huye city as an urban area and Gisagara district as a rural area of Rwanda. These locations were selected to compare the data from urban area to those from rural area.

##### 4.3. Study instruments

To acquire the qualitative data, this study used semi-structured interviews and to collect the quantitative data, it used a questionnaire.



#### 4.4. Ethical considerations

The participants' rights (Somerville, 2006) were respected and each participant was informed about the objectives of the study for his/her confirmation and commitment to participate in the study. The researcher guaranteed confidentiality of the information and preserved the anonymity of participants by not using their names in the questionnaire.

#### 4.5. Validity and reliability

In order to ensure the accuracy of the study, two strategies were respected. The first strategy of credibility aimed to check whether the study findings were convincing enough in the investigated contexts and if questions asked were valid enough to capture the intended data (Pitney, 2004). The second strategy of dependability helped to ensure whether the research instruments were reliable.

### 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research questions that follow were formulated to investigate the citizens' perceptions of codeswitching in public communication in Rwanda; specifically when codeswitching occurs in the Rwanda's government leaders' communication made while engaging local residents to implement the government policies.

#### Research question 1: How often do you hear codeswitching in public communication?

This question was asked to investigate whether the local residents were aware of codeswitching and to determine whether the government leaders really codeswitch while delivering public messages.

**Table 1:**  
*Citizens' awareness of codeswitching*

Respondents	Tot Resp	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Urban citizens	22 (100%)	20(91%)	2(9%)	0 (%)	0 (%)
Rural citizens	22(100%)	21(95.4%)	1(4.5%)	0 (%)	0 (%)
Overall tot	44(100%)	41(9.1 %)	3(6.8%)	0 (%)	0 (%)

The findings show that 41 (93.1%) of the total respondents were aware of the government leaders' frequent codeswitching practices in the public communication. Only 3 (6.8%), reported that they sometimes hear these leaders practicing codeswitching. Remarkably, no respondents from the rural or the urban areas reported never or rarely hearing government leaders' codeswitching. Furthermore, the practice of codeswitching by government leaders was reported similarly in both rural and urban areas. For instance, 21 (95.4%) of the rural citizens out of 20 (91%) of the urban area



argued that they very often hear government leaders codeswitching. Based on these findings from both urban and rural settings, it can be concluded that Rwanda' government leaders frequently practice codeswitching. Furthermore, this practice is not limited to any specific region rather, it is a widespread phenomenon practiced in all regions. In addition, the results clearly point out that many Rwandan residents are aware of this behavior practiced in the government leaders' public communication.

### **Research question 2: How does codeswitching affect your understanding?**

*This research question targeted to investigate how codeswitching affects citizens' comprehension. This enabled the study to find out how this practice hinders the local residents' effective comprehension.*

**Table 2:**  
*Effect of codeswitching citizens' comprehension*

Respondents	Tot Resp	It hinders full message capture	It aids message capture	It distorts parts of message	It does not affect message capture
<b>Urban citizens</b>	22 (100%)	2(9%)	2(9%)	6(27.2%)	12(54.5%)
<b>Rural citizens</b>	22(100%)	4(18.1%)	2(9%)	10(45.5%)	6(27.2%)
<b>Overall tot</b>	44(100%)	6(13.6%)	4(9%)	16(36.3%)	18(40.9%)

*The findings in the table above reveal that the majority of the respondents in the urban area 12 (54.5%) do not see any effect caused by codeswitching on message comprehension. For them, they reported that either codeswitching does not affect positively or negatively the way they understand their local leaders' public communication. This suggests a general tolerance or neutrality of codeswitching practices in the urban areas, probably due to higher level of multilingualism or more frequent exposure to multilingual media. Interestingly, 2 (9%) in this are reported that codeswitching codeswitching helps them to better and fully understand the leaders' messages. Through verbal conversation, these respondents argued that they have a strong background in speaking the four official languages of Rwanda.*

*Contrarily to the urban area, the data collected from the rural area reveal a more critical view of government leaders' codeswitching practices. For instance, in this area, a notable number of 10 (45.5%) respondents reported that codeswitching distorts some parts of messages and hinders them from effectively comprehending the messages in full. These respondents justified this standpoint by arguing that they are monolinguals*



who speak Kinyarwanda only- their native language. Consequently, they consistently report experiencing comprehension barriers whenever codeswitching is used. In the rural area again, 4 (18.1%) of the participants confirmed that codeswitching hinders full message capture; these participants justify their perspective by explaining that whenever they fail to understand the codeswitched parts, they lose the logical sequence of the entire communication. In the same area, 2 (9%) argued that codeswitching aids message capture and 6 (27.2%) reported that codeswitching does not affect the public message capture; these participants reported that they are multilingual and it can be assumed that their multilingualism ability helps them to understand the meanings of the codeswitched parts of messages.

As conclusion, based on the data in this part, it is confirmed that many residents in Rwanda perceive codeswitching as a barrier to effective understanding of public communication. These citizens may not be as comfortable with the codeswitching probably due to their low levels in multilingualism ability. In addition, the lower tolerance for codeswitching in the rural area signifies also the limited access to bilingual media, lower education attainment or less exposure to diverse languages use. Contrarily to rural area, the findings from the urban area prove a largely indifferent of accepting of codeswitching. This acceptability is confirmed by a high number 12 (54.5%) of the respondents who confirm that codeswitching does not affect their comprehension. This suggests that urban citizens may possess the linguistic competences necessary to follow and decode the codeswitched messages more than the rural citizens.

### **Research question 3: What type of switch complicates your understanding the most?**

This research question was prepared to investigate how the switches between four official languages of Rwanda (Kinyarwanda, English, French and Kiswahili) affect citizens' comprehension of public communication.

**Table 3:**  
**How switches complicate citizens' understanding**

Respondents	Tot Resp	Kinyarwanda and English	Kinyarwanda and French	Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili	CS causes no effects
Urban citizens	22 (100%)	4(18.1%)	10(45.5%)	3(13.6%)	5(22.7%)
Rural citizens	22(100%)	5 (22.7%)	13(59%)	3(13.6%)	1(4.5%)
<b>Overall tot</b>	<b>44(100%)</b>	<b>9(20.4%)</b>	<b>23(52.2%)</b>	<b>6(13.6%)</b>	<b>6(13.6%)</b>

The findings in this section indicate in both urban and rural areas, the highest number of respondents 23 (52.2%) face difficulties when the government leaders



codeswitch between Kinyarwanda and French. This was particularly noticeable in rural area, where 13 (59%) of the participants reported that they struggle with this switch. These respondents went on emphasizing that this switch causes more confusions in the understanding of the public message than other switches do. To explain this, the rural respondents said that French is not used in their everyday lives and that they did not attend formal schools where this language is taught.

In contrast, Kinyarwanda and English switches poses fewer challenges, with 9 (20.4%) of the respondents indicating difficulties. The rural areas show 5 (22.7%) of the respondents reporting challenges slightly higher than 4 (18.1%) of urban respondents. These respondents reported that that apart from being an official language, English is more used in every day communication in Rwanda more than French does. This language (English) is used again as a medium of instruction (MoI) in Rwandan education sector whereas French is learnt as a course and is given few hours in a week. Thus, the mastery of French is lower than that of English in Rwanda. Although some respondents reported that they face challenges when the latter (English) is codeswitched in Kinyarwanda utterances, English is generally perceived easier to manage, reflecting its boarder use and more familiar role in Rwanda society.

Interestingly, Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili switches are considered the least problematic in comprehension with only 6 (13.6%) of the respondents across both areas reporting that they encounter challenges with this switch. This acceptability of Kinyarwanda-Kiswahili switches root from different reasons such as the similarities between these two languages: Despite that Kiswahili is a language that is less commonly used in Rwanda than English and French are, it is still a language that local citizens find relative to Kinyarwanda as it shares some syntactical, morphological and grammatical elements with Kinyarwanda. Moreover, the familiarity of Kiswahili in East African countries is likely to contribute to its ease of use, particularly through regional interactions or media. Both urban and rural areas reported similar acceptability of Kiswahili, reinforcing that this language is not seen as a major barrier. Another reason testified by the respondents is that the government leaders do not frequently switch between Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili; instead, tend to switch mostly between Kinyarwanda and English.

It is evident that 6 (13.6%) of the total respondents with more from urban area 5 (22.7%) and fewer from rural area 1 (4.5%) consider codeswitching between Kinyarwanda and Kiswahili not to be a barrier at all. These respondents mostly from urban area show that confirmed they do not meet any challenges when codeswitching



occurs in public messages. For them, codeswitching is easily managed, potentially due to their high levels of education and exposure to multiple languages use in their daily lives. Based on the findings in this part, this study confirms that Rwandan citizens perceive French as a language which complicates citizens' comprehension whenever it is codeswitched in Kinyarwanda while English is perceived as the less and Kiswahili is seen the least problematic for communication comprehension in Rwanda.

#### **Research question 4: How do you comprehend codeswitched communication?**

*This question aimed to know how citizens manage to get message whenever codeswitching occurs in the government leaders' public communication.*

**Table 4:**  
*How citizens comprehend codeswitched messages*

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Tot Resp</b>	<b>I get the message easily</b>	<b>I ask my neighbor to translate</b>	<b>I fear to ask for translation</b>
<b>Urban citizens</b>	22 (100%)	4(18.1%)	14(63.6%)	4(18.1%)
<b>Rural citizens</b>	22(100%)	2(9%)	12 (54.5%)	8(36.3%)
<b>Overall tot</b>	44(100%)	6(13.6%)	26(59%)	12(27.2%)

*The findings in the above table, reveal that seeking for translation is one strategy that local citizens use as a second channel to comprehend codeswitched utterances. A large number of respondents, 26 (59%) reported that they seek for translations of the codeswitched parts of message. This response was highly reported by the urban participants 14 (63.6%) whereas the rural respondents who reported this issues are 12 (54.5%). Among all respondents, only 6 (13.6%) argued that they could understand the codeswitched public messages easily.*

*In the urban area, 4(18.1%) reported their effective understanding of the codeswitched public communication while 2 (9%) reported the same in the rural area. This suggests that that codeswitching particularly creates communication barriers in the rural than in the urban area. A big challenge was found to citizens who reported not understanding the codeswitched parts and not asking for translations. This was reported by 8 (36.3%) of the rural respondents and 4(18.1%) of the urban respondents. These participants said that they fear to be laughed or being considered illiterate or unskilled when they ask for translations. The fear to ask for translations indicates both communicative and possible social and psychological barriers that could prevent*

citizens from seeking for translations. Generally, the findings in this part confirm that citizens rely on seeking translations of codeswitched utterances thought there are citizens who neither understand nor ask for translations whenever codeswitching is employed in public communication.

**Research question 5: What is your standpoint on the use of codeswitching?**

By asking this question, the researcher wanted to give citizens the opportunity to voice their concerns and opinion about codeswitching practices in public communication.

**Table 5:**  
**Citizens' standpoint on the use of codeswitching**

Respondents	Tot Resp	To avoid codeswitching	To codeswitch and translate	To codeswitch
<b>Urban citizens</b>	22 (100%)	10(45.4%)	8(36.3%)	4(18.1%)
<b>Rural citizens</b>	22(100%)	14(63.6%)	6(27.2%)	2(9%)
<b>Overall tot</b>	44(100%)	24(54.5%)	14(31.8%)	6(13.6%)

The findings reveal citizens' differences in codeswitching preference. Urban participants provided these answers: 10 (45.4%) needed that codeswitching could be avoided entirely, 8 (36.3%) seek the government leaders to provide translations whenever they codeswitch. A very small number 4(18.1%) reported that government officials might continue codeswitching. These respondents show a high level of understanding multiple languages and that is why they tolerate codeswitching.

In contrast, rural citizens highly reported with 14(63.6%) that they do not tolerate codeswitching practices choosing they the government officials may stop codeswitching completely. 6(27.2%) reported that there can be no comprehension barriers whenever each codeswitched part is directly followed by its translation. Only 2 (9%) see no problem caused by codeswitching and reported that it should continue.

Overall, the citizens' point of view to the use of codeswitching emphasize the importance of using a language of the majority (Kinyarwanda) whenever delivering public communication. Predominantly, a large number of participants who suggested that codeswitching should be avoided; these respondents claimed that Kinyarwanda, a language widely spoken across Rwanda, should a predominant place in public



communication in Rwanda. Some other participants suggested that direct translations should be provided whenever codeswitching occurs. Interestingly, a small number of respondents who encounter no challenges in comprehension supported the continuation of codeswitching. These individuals show higher levels in multilingual competence.

## 6. Conclusions

The study's findings show that citizens perceive codeswitching as a common practice in public communication by many Rwanda's government leaders across both rural and urban areas. Generally, the frequent use of codeswitching exposes public comprehension barriers with varying perceptions between the rural and urban citizens. Specifically, rural citizens who are mostly monolingual and have limited exposure to multilingual settings perceive codeswitching as a barrier that hinders them from fully understanding public communication. Contrarily, due to their higher levels of education and exposures to multilingual environments, the urban citizens meet fewer comprehension barriers than the rural citizens do. Overall, Kinyarwanda-French switches are regarded as the most challenging in the comprehension of public messages in Rwanda, probably due to the less use of French in Rwandan contexts. Kinyarwanda-English switches are associated with less comprehension barriers while due to its less frequent use and its similarities with Kinyarwanda; Kiswahili is considered the least problematic in comprehending Kinyarwanda utterance in which it is codeswitched. In general, the majority of the participants in this study regard codeswitching as a hindrance to effective comprehension of public communication in Rwanda. Only, few of the respondents testify codeswitching as tool that helps them to comprehend public messages in full.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Based on the findings, this study recommends that government leaders in Rwanda prioritize the use of Kinyarwanda- a native language of the majority when engaging local community, particularly in rural areas. This strategy will improve the understanding of a number of citizens.
- Taking into account that some government leaders reported being unaware of the effects of codeswitching, this study further recommends that the government of Rwanda organize regular training sessions for all leaders to raise their awareness of its impact.
- Given that codeswitching is an unstoppable linguistic phenomenon, this study recommends that the government leaders in Rwanda ensure clarity of public communication by providing direct translations of the codeswitched parts while delivering messages in public. This strategy will reduce or avoid confusions and promote citizens' full comprehension of public communication.

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