

Research Article

# The Contextual Use of Central Determiners in Kinyarwanda: The Case of Possessives

Kiba Ngapoula<sup>\*</sup> , Laure Masabo Umutesi

Department of Living Foreign Languages, Marien Ngouabi University, Brazzaville, Republic of Congo

## Abstract

This scrutiny deals with the contextual interpretation of central determiners in Kinyarwanda, a Bantu language spoken in the Great Lakes region, specifically in the Republic of Rwanda. It particularly tackles the case of possessives. It demonstrates that the pragmatic analysis of possessives in Kinyarwanda can be conceived under the notions of reference, definiteness, deixis, implicature, presupposition, and speech act. It starts by showing how Kinyarwanda possessives are used to point out referred entities, including anaphoric and cataphoric relationships. It also attests to how possessives in this language, used in a given context, refer to definite entities known to both participants. The study also proves that Kinyarwanda possessives are used to express person, social and discourse deixis. Afterwards, the analysis illustrates the way entities, in a given context of communication, impose an extra meaning to Kinyarwanda possessives that goes beyond the literal one, with the violation of different maxims to express implicature. Furthermore, the notion of possessives in Kinyarwanda also denotes that participants in the interaction assume to share common background information about the possessor and the possessee. The research then indicates that Kinyarwanda possessives analysed under the speech act theory emphasise the concepts of locutionary act, illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect, taking into account felicity conditions. Finally, the work demonstrates that, through a cross-linguistic perspective, Kinyarwanda possessives attest similarities and dissimilarities with Embosi, another Bantu language spoken in the north of the Republic of Congo.

## Keywords

Kinyarwanda, Pragmatics, Possessives, Reference, Definiteness, Deixis, Implicature, Presupposition, Speech Act

## 1. Introduction

This paper seeks to analyse possessives in Kinyarwanda, a Bantu language spoken in the East-Central country of Africa called Rwanda. This work approaches pragmatics, which is a field of linguistics devoted to the study of meanings that depend on context. (Cruse [1]). The relevancy of this scrutiny is due to the unavailability of pragmatic research on possessives in Kinyarwanda, and therefore contributes to the documentation of that language. This research also aims at interrelating

pragmatic concepts and Kinyarwanda possessives. In order to achieve the purpose of this study, the following research questions are addressed: (1) What are possessives in Kinyarwanda? (2) To what extent is the meaning of possessives context-dependent in Kinyarwanda? Focusing on pragmatic main concepts, this study deals with theoretical background and the understanding of the contextual use of possessives in Kinyarwanda under the notions of reference, definiteness,

---

<sup>\*</sup>Corresponding author: [kibangapoula@yahoo.fr](mailto:kibangapoula@yahoo.fr) (Kiba Ngapoula)

**Received:** 06 April 2025; **Accepted:** 17 April 2025; **Published:** 22 May 2025



Copyright: © The Author(s), 2025. Published by Science Publishing Group. This is an **Open Access** article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

deixis, implicature, presupposition and speech act. In order to conduct the analysis, we gather information from key informants and observation.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. Kinyarwanda Language

Kinyarwanda is a Bantu language spoken in the Great Lakes region, particularly in the Republic of Rwanda. This language is classified by Maho Jouni in group D61 (J). It belongs to the Rwanda-Rundi group D60 (Nurse & Philippson, [2]). Kinyarwanda is mutually intelligible with Kirundi, a Bantu language spoken in Burundi, and Ha, another Bantu language spoken in Tanzania (Ngoboka, [3]; Lwaboshi, [4]; Mpayimana, [5]; Banerjee, [6]).

The morphological analysis of the word Kinyarwanda reveals that the morpheme “ki” is the noun class 7 used to refer to natural languages and things. “Nya” is a morpheme that means belonging to. Finally, Rwanda is the country where this language is spoken. Thus, Kinyarwanda morphologically means “language of Rwanda” or “the thing that belongs to Rwanda” [3]; Rwigamba & Nkusi & Ruzindana, [7]; Mpayimana, [5].

This language, which is mainly spoken in Rwanda, has some varieties. There are Kigoyi spoken in the region of Gisenyi, Kirera spoken in the regions of Gisenyi and Ruhengeri. Both Kigoyi and Kirera are sometimes called Igikiga. Other dialects of Kinyarwanda are Kinyagisaka, spoken in the north-east of Rwanda, and Kinyanduga, spoken in the regions of Ribuye, Gitaramo and Kigali, etc. The dialect Kinyanduga is the one which is considered as the national language of Rwanda. It is used in political official discourses, in all Rwandan literature and in media (Rwigamba & Nkusi & Ruzindana, [7]; Ngoboka, [3]; Mpayimana, [5]).

Apart from Rwanda, Kinyarwanda is also spoken in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, in the south region of Uganda, in all regions of Burundi and in the west of Tanzania (Mpayimana, [5]; Muhirwe, [8]; Lwaboshi, [4]; Rwigamba & Nkusi & Ruzindana, [7]; Jordan, [9]). After the genocide of 1994, Kinyarwanda speakers can also be found around Africa and the rest of the world.

Finally, this language has an official orthography in which tones and long vowels are unmarked (Muhirwe & Trosterud, [10]). This research work is mainly based on one of the varieties of this language called Kinyanduga, which is the standard Kinyarwanda. It uses this official orthography without marking tones and lengthening vowels.

### 2.2. Kinyarwanda Possessives

Possessives share the function of central determiners with articles and demonstratives. They refer to the relationship which links at least two entities. One of the entities is called the possessor and the other is called the possessum. The

possessor is the entity which controls the possessum in some ways (Kolkman [11]).

In Kinyarwanda, possessives can be expressed in different ways. It can be expressed by the possessive case or genitive. The possessive morpheme *nya* meaning “belonging to” or “relating to” is also used to create words that can denote appurtenance. However, possessives in Kinyarwanda are mainly expressed by possessive adjectives and pronouns. This paper focuses on possessive pronouns and adjectives.

Indeed, in Kinyarwanda, possessive adjectives and pronouns are composed of two elements. The first element is the noun class possessive marker. These possessive markers are identical to words that express possessive cases. They are used as morphemes and are attached to the second element, which is a pronoun root like: *jye* (the first singular pronoun), *cu* (the first plural pronoun), *we* (the second singular pronoun), *nyu* (the second plural pronoun), etc. The possessive markers in Kinyarwanda have different forms according to the noun class of the possessum. Nevertheless, all of them can be translated in English as “of”.

Consider:

(1a) *Umuhungu wa-njye a-ri he?*

Son of-me he-is where?

“Where is my son?”

(1b) *Uyu mugabo ni uwa-njye.*

This man is of-me.

“This man is mine.”

(1c) *Ikigori cya-we ni gitoya.*

Corn of-you is small.

“Your corn is small.

In the above illustrations, the possessive markers are *wa* in (1a), *uwa* in (1b) and *cya* in (1c). They are all translated in English by “of”, they are combined to pronoun roots like (n)jye “me” in (1a) and (1b), and *we* “you” in (1c) to form possessives. These possessive markers refer back to *umuhungu* “son” in (1a), *mugabo* “man” in (1b), and *ikigori* “corn” that are possessed by or related to the pronoun roots. However, the pronoun roots represent the owners of those possessed entities. Therefore, possessive formation in Kinyarwanda is due to the combination of morphemes representing the possessum and the possessee.

The understanding of Kinyarwanda noun classes (Ncl) is relevant in order to understand the different forms a possessive marker could have in this language. In fact, one possessive pronoun or adjective can have many different forms depending on the noun class of the noun that precedes or follows it. Sibomana & Doldo IV & Brack [12] have identified 16 noun classes in Kinyarwanda. However, Zorc & Nibagwire [13], using the group system of classification, have identified 13 noun classes in Kinyarwanda and Kirundi; their system of classification looks at singular and plural noun classes together as a single unit. Though, the system used by Sibomana et al. separate singular noun class from plural noun class. Let us consider the examples below:

2a) *Umu-hungu wa-njye a-ri-gu-shaka akazi.* (sing Ncl)

Ncl-son of-me he-is-to-look for work.

“My son is looking for a job.”

(2b) Aba-hungu ba-njye ba-ri-gu-shaka akazi. (pl Ncl)

Ncl-son of-me they-are-to-look for work.

“My sons are looking for a job.”

It comes out from the above illustrations that the noun classes used are “umu” in (2a) and “aba” in (2b). These noun classes, used to refer to human beings, are considered as one noun group represented by the first group according to Nibagwire & Zorc. However, Sibomana & Dolvo IV & Brack consider these noun classes as two different noun classes. According to them, “umu” belongs to noun class 1 and “aba” belongs to noun class 2. Additionally, the form of the possessive marker is influenced by the noun class of the possessor. In the example (2a), the possessum is in singular and has “umu” as a noun, therefore the possessive marker is “wa”. However, in (2b), the possessum is in plural and has “aba” as noun class; that is why the possessive marker is “ba”.

Finally, possessive pronouns in Kinyarwanda are attributive and possessive adjectives are predicative.

Consider:

(3) Igihugu cya-nyu.

Country of-you.

“Your country.”

(4) Iki gihugu ni icya-nyu.

This country is of-you.

“This country is yours”

In the example (3), the possessive adjective cyanyu (your) modifies the possessed thing igihugu “country”. It also appears in the postnominal position. It is then attributive. However, in (4), the possessive pronoun icyanyu (yours) appears in the predicate; therefore, it is predicative.

Moreover, Kinyarwanda possessive pronouns and adjectives are several. Zorc & Nibagwire [13] have discovered 460 primary forms of possessives in Kinyarwanda and Kirundi. A great number of them are homophones. Consequently, this analysis presents the system of Kinyarwanda possessives based on noun class 1 (Ncl1); the data are collected from tables 56, 57, and 60 of Zorc and Nibagwire [13].

**Table 1.** Kinyarwanda possessive pronouns and adjectives based on the noun group (class) 1 (Ncl1).

Kinyarwanda possessive adjectives and pronouns	
Singular pronoun	Plural pronoun
Wa-njye (of-me) “my”	Ba-njye (of-me) “my”
Uwa-njye (of-me) “mine”	Aba-njye (of-me) “mine”
Wa-we (of-you) “your”	Ba-we (of-you) “your”
Uwa-we (of-you) “yours”	Aba-we (of-you) “yours”
we “her/his”	Be “his/her”
Uwe “his/hers”	Abe “his/hers”

#### Kinyarwanda possessive adjectives and pronouns

Singular pronoun	Plural pronoun
Wa-cu (of-us) “our”	Ba-cu (of-us) “our”
Uwa-cu (of-us) “ours”	Aba-cu (of-us) “ours”
Wa-nyu (of-you) “your”	Ba-nyu (of-you) “your”
Uwa-nyu (of-you) “yours”	Aba-nyu (of-you) “yours”
Wa-bo (of-them) “their”	Ba-bo (of-them) “their”
Uwa-bo (of-them) “theirs”	Aba-bo (of-them) “theirs”

The above table shows that possessive pronouns differ from possessive adjectives only because they are formed by changing the prefix depending on the possessive adjective. It also demonstrates that almost all possessive pronouns and adjectives are formed by combining a possessive marker with a pronoun root. Only the third singular possessive pronouns and adjectives do not seem to have a possessive marker. Let us consider the following illustrations to highlight this argumentation:

(5a) Umwarimu wa-nyu a-ri hano.

Teacher of-you she-is here.

“Your teacher is here.”

(5b) Uyu mukobwa ni uwa-nyu.

This daughter is of-you.

“This daughter is yours.”

(5c) Uriya mugore a-ri-shimye. Umukobwa we a-ra-shyingirwa.

That woman she-is-happy. Daughter her she-is-marry-ed.

“That woman is happy. Her daughter gets married.”

Actually, in (5a), the possessive adjective is wanyu “your”, while in (5b), the possessive pronoun is uwanyu “yours”. Consequently, it is the prefix “u” of the possessive uwanyu “yours” in (5b), which enables us to distinguish this possessive pronoun from the possessive adjective wanyu “your” in (5a).

Besides, in (5c), the possessive adjective we “his/her” of the noun phrase umukobwa we “her daughter” does not have a possessive marker like the other possessives (5a) and (5b). It does not follow the general rule of the construction of the possessive adjective and pronoun in Kinyarwanda.

Furthermore, the possessive can have several forms. It depends on the noun class of the possessive entity. Consequently, a great number of possessive adjectives exist in Kinyarwanda. Let us examine some other noun classes:

(6a) Umuceri wa-cu ni mwiza. (Ncl2-sg). / Imiceri ya-cu ni myiza. (Ncl2)

Rice of-us is good. / Rice of-us are good.

“Our rice is good.” / “Our rice are good.”

(6b) Na-bonye igitabo cya-we. (Ncl4 -sg) / Na-bonye ibitabo bya-we. (Ncl4 -pl)

I-see+edbookof-you. I-see+ed books of-you.

“I have seen your book.” / “I have seen your books.”

(6c) Inzu ye ni nziza. (Ncl5-sg) / inzu ze ni nziza. (Ncl5-pl)  
House his is beautiful. / houses his are beautiful.

“His house is beautiful.” / “His houses are beautiful.”

(6d) Mpereza urupapuro rwa-njye. (Ncl6 -sg) / Mpereza impapuro za-njye. (Ncl6 -pl)

Give paper of-me. / Give paper of-me.

“Give me my piece of paper.” / “Give me my paper.”

(6e) Akaboko ka-we ni kanini. (Ncl7-sg) / Utuboko twa-we ni tunini. (Ncl7-pl)

Hand of-you is big. / Hands of-you are big.

“Your hand is big.” / “Your hands are big.”

In fact, (6) demonstrates how variable a possessive marker is in Kinyarwanda. It changes according to the noun class and the number of the possessed entities. Indeed, in (6a), the possessive marker becomes “wa” for a singular possessum and “ya” for a plural possessum if the possessed entity belongs to noun class 2. It changes from “cya” for a singular possessum to “bya” for a plural possessum when the possessed entity belongs to noun class 4 as, in (6b). Moreover, the third singular possessive of the noun class 1 we “his/her” becomes “ye” and “ze” when the possessum belongs to the noun class 5, as illustrated in (6c). In addition, it becomes “rwa” in singular and “za” in plural when the possessum noun belongs to the class 6 as, in (6d). Finally, (6e), the possessive marker is “ka” for singular and “twa” for plural for the noun class 7.

So, in Kinyarwanda, there are many possessive adjectives and pronouns, depending on the noun classes. The possessive pronouns of Kinyarwanda are paronyms of possessive adjectives. Only a vowel at the beginning of the possessive pronouns brings a distinction between them and possessive adjectives. Possessive pronouns are usually predicative.

(7a) Uyu mwana ni uwe. (Ncl1-sg) / Aba bana ni abe. (Ncl1-pl)

This child is his. / These children are his.

“This child is his.” / “These children are his.”

(7b) Uyu mukobwa ni uwa-we. (Ncl1-sg) / Aba bakobwa ni aba-we. (Ncl1-pl)

This girl is of-you. / These girls are of-you.

“This girl is yours.” / “These girls are yours.”

(7c) Uyu mugabo ni uwa-cu. (Ncl1-sg) / Aba bagabo ni aba-cu. (Ncl1-pl)

This man is of-us. / These men are of-us.

“This man is ours.” / “These men are ours.”

(7d) Uyu mukozi ni uwa-njye jye-nyine. (Ncl1-sg) / aba bakozi ni aba-njye jye-nyine. (Ncl1-pl)

This worker is of-me me-only. / These workers are of-me me-only.

“This worker is only mine.” / “These workers are only mine.”

It comes out from the above illustrations that the possessive pronouns uwe and abe “yours” in (7a) differ from the possessive adjectives “we” and “be” because of the vowels “u” for the singular and “a” for the plural. The possessive pronouns uwabo and ababo “theirs” in (7b) differ respectively

from the possessive adjectives wabo and babo “their” because of the same vowels. The same thing occurs in (7c), where uwacu and abacu “ours” differ from wacu and bacu “our” because of the prefixes “u” and “a”. Additionally, the possessive pronoun uwanjye and abanjye “mine” in (7d) differ from the possessive adjectives wanjye and banjye “my” because of the prefix “u” and “a”. That is why, it can be said that the prefixes “u” and “a” are used to form possessive pronouns that agree with the possessum of noun class 1.

Moreover, the prefixes used to link to possessive adjectives in order to form possessive pronouns change when the noun class of the possessum is not noun class 1. Let us consider the examples taken from other noun classes:

(8a) Uyu muguzi ni uwa-njye. (Ncl2 -sg) / Iyi migozi ni iya-njye. (Ncl2 -sg)

This clothesline is of-me. / These clotheslines are of-me.

“This clothesline is mine.” / “These clotheslines are mine.”

(8b) Iyi nka ni iwa-we. (Ncl5 -sg) / izi nka ni iza-we. (Ncl5 -pl)

This cow is of-you. / These cows are of-you.

“This cow is yours.” / “These cows are yours.”

(8c) Aka kaboko ni aka-we. (Ncl7 -sg) / Utu tuboko ni utwa-we. (Ncl7 -pl)

This hand is of-you. / These hands are of-you.

“This hand is mine.” / “These hands are mine.”

These illustrations demonstrate how the prefixes used to form possessive pronouns change their forms to agree with the noun class of the possessum. When it is the possessum of the noun class 2 (Ncl2), it is “u” in singular and “i” in plural, as in (8a). It becomes “i” in singular and in plural when the possessum belongs to class 5 as illustrated in (8b). Then, these prefixes become “a” in singular and “u” in plural when the possessum belongs to the noun class 7 as in (8c).

Finally, the above chart focuses only on the agreement of the possessive pronouns and adjectives with the noun class 1. The examples from other noun classes presented above do not include either all noun classes or all forms of possessive adjectives and pronouns in Kinyarwanda. Zorc & Nibagwire [13] elaborate a deep study on Kinyarwanda possessives for a better understanding. However, let us analyse the contextual use of possessives in Kinyarwanda.

### 3. Pragmatic Analysis of Kinyarwanda Possessives

Pragmatics is one of the fields of linguistics which, according to Yule [14], “is concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader).” It studies the meaning that a locutor imposes on the literal meaning of the utterance he performs in a specific context. Consequently, a pragmatic analysis of possessives aims at examining how the meaning of possessives is communicated by locutors in a given context.

As far as Kinyarwanda is concerned, the pragmatic analysis of possessives emphasises the concepts of reference, defi-



nitensness, deixis, implicature, presupposition and speech act.

### 3.1. Kinyarwanda Possessives Under the Notion of Reference

Reference, according to Cruse [15], “is concerned with designating entities in the world by linguistic means.” This amounts to saying that it is an expression used in a given context of communication that helps the listener to identify the referred person or thing. Let us analyse (5c).

(5c) Uriya mugore a-ri-shimye. Umukobwa we a-ra-shyingirwa.

That woman she-is-happy. / Daughter her she-is-marry+ed.  
“That woman is happy. Her daughter gets married.”

Indeed, the possessive adjective used in (5c) is referential. The possessive *we* “her” of the noun phrase *umukobwa we* “her daughter” refers back to the entity *uriya mugore* “that woman”. It is therefore anaphoric.

In Kinyarwanda, possessive adjectives as referential expressions can also be cataphoric and express an associated anaphora. Let us consider the following examples:

(9a) Ni umuvandimwe wa-njye, wa muhungu wa-bonye.

He-is brother of-me, the boy you-see+ed.

“He is my brother, the boy you have seen.”

(9b) Uyu mubyeyi arishimye. / Abana be ba-ra-kize ubu.

This parent he-is-happy. / Children his they-are-rich now.

“This parent is happy. / His children are now rich.”

It comes out that in (9a), the possessive *umuvandimwe wanjye* “my brother” is used to refer to what is said later in the discourse. In this context, this possessive, whose understanding depends on the next part of the utterance, is cataphoric. Accordingly, Ngapoula [16] attests that “the subsequent part of the utterance, which qualifies it as referential, determines its understanding, leading to its classification as cataphoric in nature.” This means that we need the other part of the sentence, *wa muhungu wabonye* “the boy you have seen”, to identify the referring entity.

Otherwise, in (9b), the possessive construction *abana be* “his children” does not explicitly refer back to anything. However, taking into account our background knowledge, we know that someone called parent has a child or children. Consequently, the use of the possessive *be* “his” indicates that the speaker refers to the children of the formerly named parent. The use of the possessive adjective helps to identify that the quoted children are not of every parent but of the precedent cited in the utterance. The possessive construction *abana be* “his children” in this context is then associated with the parent previously evoked at the beginning of the utterance; it is therefore called associative anaphora. The next subsection deals with the expression of definiteness by possessives in Kinyarwanda.

### 3.2. Kinyarwanda Possessives Expressing Definite Entities

Definite entities refer to the entities known by the partici-

pants in a specific context of communication (Valeika and Verikaite, [17]). They are concerned with the second mention of the referred entity (Ngapoula, [18]).

Actually, possessives in Kinyarwanda usually refer to the entities that participants have in their background knowledge. Let us examine (5a).

(5a) Umwarimu wa-nyu a-ri hano.

Teacher of-you she-is here.

“Your teacher is here.”

In the above illustration, the presence of the possessive adjective *wanyu* “your” indicates that the referred entity *umwarimu* “teacher” is specific and particularized. By using this possessive adjective, the speaker indicates that he/she does not refer to any teacher but to a specific one, known to both the speaker and the hearer. This means that the participants share the information about the teacher’s identity in their common background. Furthermore, in Kinyarwanda, possessives are also used to express deictic expressions.

### 3.3. Possessives in Kinyarwanda Expressing Deixis

Deixis or deictic expressions refer to words or phrases that can be interpreted in relation to the situation in which they are uttered (Griffiths, [19]). They are expressions that have a meaning in a specific situation. Among different types of deixis, Kinyarwanda attests possessives pragmatically under the notions of personal deixis, social deixis, and discourse deixis.

#### 3.3.1. Kinyarwanda Possessives Acting as Personal Deixis

Personal deixis is a kind of indexical expressions, which is used to identify a particular entity in the context in which that entity may not have been mentioned (Birner, [20]). Let us reexamine (5a).

(5a) Umwarimu wa-nyu a-ri hano.

Teacher of-you she-is here.

“Your teacher is here.”

It comes out from the above sentence that the possessive adjective “your” is a personal deixis. It is used to point out a particular entity which has a relationship with a specific teacher. In this context, the possessive *wanyu* “your” is a pure personal deixis. In fact, it points out entities which are directly engaged in the communicative process. However, Kinyarwanda possessives can also be impure when they point out entities that are not directly engaged in the communication. Let us analyse the following example:

(10) Umugore we ya-giye ku isoko.

Wife his she-go-ed to market.

“His wife went to the market.”

In this illustration, the possessive *we* “his” functions as a personal deixis. It is used to point out an entity which has a wife. Nevertheless, this possessive adjective is impure because it refers to a possessor who is not involved in the communication. Kinyarwanda also attests social deixis.

### 3.3.2. Kinyarwanda Possessives Acting as Social Deixis

Social deixis are used to describe the way the speakers index or pick out the social status of their listeners according to the place they have in society (Cruse, [15]). It indexes the social status of the entity through the use of honorific titles. In Kinyarwanda, a specific possessive can be used as a social deixis.

Consider:

(11) Nya-ku-bahwa perezida wa repubulika.

of-to-respect president of republic.

“His Excellency the President of the Republic.”

The morpheme *nya* meaning “belonging to” can also refer to the social status of the referred entity, as in (11). When it is combined with the base “*kubahwa*”, which means to respect, it gives the noun *nyakubahwa* “His Excellency”. This expression is used to refer to any person who deserves respect because of their actions or their social position. It is mostly used to refer to people of higher status like: president, minister, mayor, etc. Kinyarwanda possessives also pick out the discourse of the participants.

### 3.3.3. Possessives in Kinyarwanda Acting as Discourse Deixis

Discourse deixis is defined by Birner [20] as a, “(...) deictic term (...) used in reference (...) to a part of the utterance itself, or a proposition evoked by the utterance itself.” They are expressions that point out the part of the text. Possessives in Kinyarwanda can also be used in a linguistic situation to assist the listener in picking out the discourse of an entity. Let us reanalyse (9a)

(9a) Ni umuvandimwe wa-njye, wa muhungu wa-bonye.

He-is brother of-me, the boy you-see+ed.

“He is my brother, the boy you have seen.”

The possessive *umuvandimwe wanjye* “my brother” in (9a) is a discourse deixis. In fact, it points forward to the other part of the utterance, *wa umuhungu wabonye* “the boy you have seen”. The understanding of this possessive noun phrase depends on the other part of the discourse. Depending on the context, Rwandan speakers could impose a different meaning to possessives that goes beyond ownership or belonging and membership.

### 3.4. The Implicit Meaning of Possessives in Kinyarwanda

Implicature refers to the meaning that a speaker imposes on the literal meaning of the sentence (Valeika and Verikaite, [17]). It is about what a speaker means when uttering a sentence, which is different from what he says. The concept of implicature was developed by Grice (1913-1988) with the notion of maxims. In his theory of cooperative principle, he [21] distinguishes four maxims: quality maxim, quantity maxim, relation maxim and manner maxim. The implicature arises when the speaker flouts one of the four maxims. Consider the following conversation in Kinyarwanda:

Speaker A- Uriya mugore ni mwiza cyane.

That woman is beautiful very.

“That woman is very beautiful.”

Speaker B- Ni umugore wa-njye.

Is woman of-me.

“She is my wife.”

The above conversation illustrates a case in which the speaker A tells the speaker B the fact that he finds a woman beautiful. The speaker B replies by focusing on the appurtenance of that woman. So, instead of replying about the beauty of their referred entity, B provides an utterance that has no relationship with A's. At that time, he violates the relevance maxim, and consequently, an implicature emerges. Indeed, besides this expression of ownership, speaker B essentially denotes a warning. In fact, he warns the speaker A that this woman is my possessee, in order to prevent A from his following comment. Instead of telling the speaker A to be respectful and watch his words, he simply points out his relationship with that woman. Therefore, he violates the maxim of manner. Possessives are usually parts of the information that participants have in their background knowledge.

### 3.5. Possessives in Kinyarwanda Expressing Presupposition

Presupposition is defined by Cruse [1] as “a proposition whose truth is taken for granted by the producer of an utterance and which must be known and taken account of for the utterance to make sense to an interpreter.” It is about what the speaker and the listener know about a given information or a specific entity before starting a conversation. In Kinyarwanda, possessives are part of the shared information. Let us consider the following illustration:

Umuhungu we ya-ra-kize.

Son his he-was-recover+ed.

“His son has recovered.”

In (13), the use of the possessive noun phrase *umuhungu we* “his son” presupposes that the participants of this conversation are aware of the existence of an individual who has a child and that child is sick. This information shared to both participants before the utterance is qualified as old or presuppositional information. The entire sentence takes for granted the fact that the son of the possessor had some condition that required recovery. The new information unknown by the listener is the recovery of the possessor's son. Let us reexamine example 10:

(10) Umugore we ya-giye ku isoko.

Wife his she-go+ed to market.

“His wife went to the market.”

Indeed, the presupposition in the above illustration is that participants in this communication know the referred entity, and the fact that this entity has a wife; this is the presupposition. The assertive information which is not taken for granted is the fact that the possessor's wife went to the market. This information is only known to the speaker and is the basis of

the communication. Otherwise, Kinyarwanda possessives can also be tackled under the speech act theory.

### 3.6. Possessives in Kinyarwanda Expressing Speech Acts

Speech act refers to what is done in saying something (Verschuieren, [22]). This theory was developed by Austin in his book *How to Do Things with Words*, published posthumously in 1962. It states that any utterance we perform is an action. As Cruse [1] stated, speech acts have “three basic types: locutionary acts, illocutionary acts and perlocutionary acts.” The locutionary act is about what is said by the speaker. Then, the illocutionary act is the action performed after the speaker said something. Finally, the perlocutionary act refers to the effect of the speaker’s utterance on the addressee. Considering Kinyarwanda possessives, let us analyse the following conversation taking into account felicity conditions.

Speaker A- Uriya mugore ni mwiza cyane.

That woman is beautiful very.

“That woman is very beautiful.”

Speaker B- Ni umugore wa-njye.

She-is woman of-me.

“She is my wife.”

The conversation illustrated above is a locutionary act. Actually, it is what is said by the speakers A and B. The speaker B warns the speaker A to be careful with his remark by pointing out his relationship with that woman. His speech is then an illocutionary act. Furthermore, the effect of speaker B’s utterance is that speaker A will watch his words next time. That is the perlocutionary act.

Nevertheless, for this conversation to be felicitous, some conditions must be satisfied. The participants of this conversation have to speak the same language. This is the general condition. The speaker B must believe that the intention of his speech is to prohibit the speaker A from stating such remark on his wife. This is the content condition. He must also believe that by saying the woman is his, the speaker A will not try to dredge that woman for its own sake. This is the preparatory condition. The speaker B should be sincere when he says that he is the husband of that woman in order to respect the sincerity condition.

Moreover, to respect the essential condition, the speaker B has to believe that his speech essentially denotes a prohibition and a warning. If all of these conditions are respected, the speech acts illustrated above can be said to be felicitous. Finally, the speech acts expressed by speaker A and speaker B are assertives. The speaker A asserts the fact that a woman is beautiful. Then, the speaker B asserts that she is his wife. Let us analyse the following example:

speaker A- Genda w-oze umuvandimwe wa-we umukobwa wa-njye.

go you-wash brother of-you daughter of-me.

“go and wash your brother my daughter.”

speaker B- Ni byo mama.

That is it mom.

“okay mum.”

The above speech acts are locutionary acts. In fact, both speakers perform an utterance. What is said by speaker A is an illocutionary act. Actually, that speaker is performing the action of ordering B to do something. Moreover, the effect of her speech on B is the perlocutionary act.

However, these speech acts must respect some conditions to be felicitous. Firstly, both speakers must understand the utterances of each other by using the same language, for instance, so as to respect the general condition. Then, A must be convinced that her intention is to order B to wash her brother. This is the content condition. Moreover, the speaker A must believe that she has authority over her daughter who will obey her. This is the preparatory condition. Furthermore, the speaker A must believe that her daughter will surely wash her brother so as to respect the sincerity condition. Additionally, the speaker A must believe that her utterance is essentially an order so as to respect the essential condition. When all of these conditions are respected, these speech acts can be said to be felicitous.

Finally, the speech act stated by the speaker A is essentially directive. In fact, she is ordering speaker B to do something. Alternatively, the speech of speaker B is commissive. Since she states her agreement with the speaker A’s utterance. That is, she commits herself to a future action consisting of washing her brother.

## 4. Cross-linguistic Perspective

Based on Ngapoula [16] work on Embosi possessives, a language spoken in the northern part of the Republic of Congo, we realise that the analysis attests to similarities and dissimilarities in possessives among the Kinyarwanda and Embosi languages. Indeed, both languages have similarities in the formation of possessives with the association of a marker to a personal pronoun. Ngapoula [16] indicates that, in Embosi, “the main associative morpheme is ya “of”. Depending on the noun class (Ndongo Ibara [23], this morpheme may vary to either la “of” or a “of”. In Kinyarwanda, however, the possessive markers also depend on different noun classes and may vary from wa, uwa to cya. In addition, Embosi possessives, like Kinyarwanda, attest to the pragmatic features of deixis, definiteness, reference, presupposition, implicature and speech acts [16].

However, Kinyarwanda attests to some dissimilarities with Embosi in the study of possessives. Indeed, where in Embosi, all possessive adjectives and pronouns are formed from the personal pronoun subject with an associative morpheme without exception, in Kinyarwanda, in the third person singular, the associative morpheme is not required. Another dissimilarity in the pragmatic analysis is observed with the presence of the honorific nyakubahwa “His Excellency” in the expression of social deixis that Embosi does not attest.

## 5. Conclusion

This research study has revealed that possessives in Kinyarwanda are mainly concerned with possessive adjectives and pronouns. It has demonstrated that these possessives are attributive and predicative. They are formed from personal pronoun roots combined with possessive markers. The analysis has also shown that the form of the possessive marker agrees with the noun class of the possessum and their number. Therefore, there are many possessive pronouns and adjectives in Kinyarwanda because of the noun class agreement. Moreover, the contextual use of possessives in this language has attested that they can be studied under the notions of reference, definiteness, deixis, implicature, presupposition and speech act. Possessives in Kinyarwanda can refer to particular entities known by the participants. It can be used to point out definite entities, and to serve as deictic expressions, as far as person, social status or discourse are concerned. In Kinyarwanda, possessives are used to communicate information that goes beyond their literal meaning. This scrutiny has also attested that possessives in this language are part of the shared information between participants either about themselves or the world around them. Finally, this analysis has proved that speech acts, using possessives in Kinyarwanda, express the locution, the illocution and the perlocution, taking into account the felicity conditions.

Nevertheless, in this work we have mainly focused on possessive adjectives and pronouns. Future studies in Kinyarwanda possessives should consider the derivative possessive morpheme “nya” and possessive cases of this language. A deep study of Kinyarwanda and Embosi possessives will provide a successful contrastive analysis between both languages.

## Abbreviations

Ncl	Noun Class
Pl	Plural
Sing	Singular

## Author Contributions

**Kiba Ngapoula:** Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

**Laure Masabo Umutesi:** Data curation, Investigation

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## References

- [1] Cruse, A. A Glossary of Semantics and Pragmatics. 2006: Edinburgh University Press.
- [2] Nurse, D. & Philippson, G. The Bantu Languages. 2003: Routledge.
- [3] Ngoboka, J. K. Locatives in Kinyarwanda. Ph.D. Thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2016.
- [4] Lwaboshi, J. K. Cultural and Historical Preservation Through Onomastic Materials: A Case of Toponyms and Anthroponyms in Kinyarwanda. International Journal of Business and Social Science Research, 2021. 2(8), 1-8.  
<https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijla.20210906.23>
- [5] Mpayimana, P. Phonologie et Morphologie du Kinyarwanda. M. A. Thesis, The University of Yaounde I, 2002-2003.
- [6] Banerjee, N. Templatic Morphology through Syntactic Selection: Valency-Changing Extensions in Kinyarwanda. Glossa: A journal of General Linguistics, 2019. 4(1), 1-31.  
<https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.920>
- [7] Rwigamba, B. & Nkusi. L. & Ruzindana, M. La Langue Kinyarwanda son Usage et Impact dans les Divers Medias pendant la Periode 1990-1994. 1998: Media Team du TPI.
- [8] Muhirwe, J. Computational Analysis of Kinyarwanda Morphology. International Journal of Computing and ICT Research, 2007. 1(1), 85-92.
- [9] Jordan, K. Language Use in Rwanda: Multilingualism in Public and Private Contexts. M. A. Thesis, Universit ä Wien, 2013.
- [10] Muhirwe, J. & Trosterud, T. Finite State Solutions for Reduplication in Kinyarwanda Language. Asian Federation of Natural Language Processings, 2008. 73-80. URL:  
<https://aclanthology.org/108-3013/>
- [11] Kolkmann, J. The Pragmatics of Possession: Issues in the Interpretation of the Pre-nominal Possessives in English. PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 2016.
- [12] Sibomana, L. & Doldo IV, J. & Brack, M. Kinyarwanda: An Integrative Approach. 2024: Johannes Gutenberg-Universit ä Mainz.
- [13] Zorc, R. D. & Nibagwire, L. Kinyarwanda and Kirundi Comparative Grammar. 2007: Dunwoody Press.
- [14] Yule, G. Pragmatics. 1996: Oxford University Press.
- [15] Cruse, A. Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics. 2000: Oxford University press.
- [16] Ngapoula, K. Embosi Possessives: A Pragmatic Account. Open Journal of Modern Linguistics, 2025. 15, 101-116.  
<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2025.151008>
- [17] Valeika, L. & Verikaite, D. An Introductory Course in Linguistic Pragmatics. 2010: Vilnius Pedagogical University.
- [18] Ngapoula, K. Embosi Indefiniteness: A Pragmatic Analysis. International Journal of Linguistics, 2023. 15(3), 39-53.  
<https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v15i3.20917>



- [19] Griffiths, P. *An Introduction to English Semantics and Pragmatics*. 2006: Edinburgh University Press.
- [20] Birner, B. J. *Introduction to Pragmatics*. 2013: Wiley-Blackwell.
- [21] Grice, H. P. *Logic and Conversation*. In H. P. Grice (Ed.), *Studies in the Way of Words*. 1989: Harvard University Press. p. 22-40.
- [22] Verschueren, J. *Understanding Pragmatics*. 1999: University of Antwerp.
- [23] Ndong Ibara, Y. P. *Embosi-English Dictionary*. 2012: Peter Lang.