



## INVESTIGATING THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIOPOLITICAL LETHAL EFFECT OF LANGUAGE: A SEMANTIC STUDY OF THE CAUSALITY BETWEEN THE HUTU- TUTSI OTHERNESS DISCOURSE AND THE GENOCIDE OUTBREAK IN RWANDA

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### Abstract:

This paper is a semantic investigation of the cause-effect relationship between the Hutu-Tutsi otherness discourse and the outbreak of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The semantic analysis carried out is based on extracts from various sources such as investigative documents, court reports and media publications, and broadcastings related to the genocide. Using the qualitative method, the study came to the conclusion that the long-run manipulative use of language resulted in semantic shifts with changes from denotative to connotative meanings that played a large part in the genocide.

**Keywords:** public speech, otherness, semantic shift, speech act, identity construction

### Résumé :

Ce travail de recherche est une étude sémantique de la relation de cause à effet entre le discours d'altérité entre Hutu et Tutsi et l'éclatement du génocide rwandais en 1994. L'analyse sémantique effectuée est basée sur divers extraits tirés de sources telles que des documents d'investigation, des rapports de tribunaux, des publications et émissions radiodiffusées liées au génocide. A l'aide de la méthode qualitative, l'étude conclut que l'utilisation manipulative à long terme du langage a provoqué des glissements sémantiques et des changements des sens dénotatifs vers des sens connotatifs qui ont joué un rôle important dans le génocide.

**Mots-clés :** discours public, altérité, glissement sémantique, acte du langage, construction identitaire

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## 1. Introduction

Language is primarily approached as a tool for social interactions through meaning construction. This simplistic view often relegates to the background the complex and multivariate nature of language. While it is used by speakers to communicate and change the state of affairs out there, language may also deeply affect, manipulate and change its users' minds in rather amazing ways. As Salzmann, Stanlaw, and Adachi (2012: 2) posit, the scientific study of language is one of the keys to understanding much of human behaviors because language is involved in a wide variety of human situations, perhaps every situation. This intertwined aspect between human beings' behaviors and language prompted this researcher to investigate the role that language actually played in the genocide that occurred in Rwanda in 1994. The interest in linguistic study as a way of foregrounding some deep motivations of the genocide seems relevant as Ngabonziza (2013: 33) confirms in his own words and those of Ndahiro (2004) as he cited:

*"It is improbable to resolve or change those conflicts without language means as stated by Tom Ndahiro (2004: 54), 'From the face value, one whose knowledge is limited on what happened in Rwanda may tend to think there is no problem with the concept in the language used several times in press releases. It is only through the analysis of the usage of the words and their connotative meanings that their insinuation can be meaningful."*

While corroborating the utmost importance of language, particularly through its ideological impact on speakers and the manipulation of words' meaning through time, Crystal (1971: 35) indicates that the study of language offers a special vantage point of linguistic sensitization to problems that are of concern to everyone, regardless of discipline and background. Language takes the form and the intention of its users. Based on the subjective nature of ideology, one unique reality may be construed equivocally in a wide range of perceptions. It may be represented in many different linguistic forms, depending on the positive/negative goal to be reached. This is the point where otherness/othering steps in when language is used to routinize a discriminating way of representing a group of people with whom one supposes not to share the same social, racial, economic, political, or ideological background. When othering takes on some ideologically motivated patterns based on real or socio-politically or religiously manufactured characteristics, it may become a real threat.

The critical and causal link of otherness rhetoric in the occurrence of conflict and genocide finds echo with scholars beyond the sphere of linguistics. As Wilson (2015) points out,

*"Prior to the outbreak of the armed conflict, the Serbian Democratic Party started waging a propaganda war which had a disastrous impact on the people of all ethnicities, inciting the Bosnian Serb population against the other ethnicities ..... which resulted into a complicity to commit genocide—in part on the basis of evidence from their public speeches for the causal link between a speech act and subsequent genocidal acts."*

In the words of Wilson, a speech, broadcast, or publication used as a direct call to exterminate a group ought to be sufficient to establish criminal responsibility (Wilson: 279 - 281). In the above quotation, the semantic perspective in the lexical and phrasal selection of “*propaganda war*”, “*other ethnicities*”, “*genocide*”, “*public speeches*” and “*link between speech act and genocidal act*” sheds light on the cause-effect link between the othering concept, the role of language and its lethal effect. This is the reason why this paper endeavors to proceed along a scientific roadmap as a way of providing answers to the queries relating to (1) the way the otherness construct gets routinised in groups’ minds and (2) the role language actually played in this biased meaning construction as far as to be assigned a lethal effect. In this perspective, this paper hypothesizes that language was used connotatively and in an othering way by authorities amid a conducive context through mass media that led to the commission of massive killings in Rwanda in 1994. This work develops through successive parts that are the theoretical backdrop, the material and method, a gist of the place of language in Rwandan historical and socio-political context, and the role of language in the genocide as well as the discussion of the findings.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This work is based on the theoretical concept of othering which Pandey (2004) views as a technical term used to describe the manner in which social group dichotomies are represented via language. Pandey (2004) explains that for the critical linguist, it is in and through linguistic choices that writers/speakers encode their semantic stance, more specifically, their critical stance. When we start describing ourselves as part of a group of people united in a “we”, while other people are constructed as fundamentally different, united in a “they”, we are using a powerful weapon that might serve to delegitimize others (Leilani van Rheenen <https://www.trainerslibrary.org/othering-and-overpowering>). As Pandey (2004) indicates, othering functions through language with the creation of social, ethnic, religious, or professional dichotomies in the form of “we” and “they” groups. Othering is thus fundamentally built on authentic or mentally constructed differences and then routinised through language in an intentionally selected semantics that satisfies the preset aim. In a corroborative approach, Hadley (2013) pinpoints the role of language in the othering concept as follows:

*“The power of language to ‘other’ people becomes even clearer when we consider the words used to refer to ‘them’. In English, the word ‘foreigner’ derives from the Latin *forās* meaning ‘out of doors’. This literal meaning remained, but by the early 15th century it had been almost entirely overtaken by the metaphorical meaning of ‘of other countries’.*

In this perspective of the established paramount role of language in othering sometimes through semantic change, Wilson (2017:300) cites Benesch (2013) who proposes a gauge whereby public speech could be measured as having a causal link with the subsequently perpetrated massacre. Firstly, he points out the degree of authority and influence of the speaker; secondly

the disposition of the intended audience and its capacity to commit violent acts; thirdly the content of the speech acts and the degree to which they were repetitive, dehumanized the victims, and were understood as a call to violence. Fourthly he pinpoints the socio-historical context and history of inter-group relations and fifthly the form of the speech and its degree of persuasiveness.

### **3. Material and method**

This research work is carried out through the semantic analysis of a corpus of data collected from three major sources. The extracts that were analyzed are those which disclose the intentionally manipulative use of language aimed at achieving the othering goal. The first source is a comprehensive investigative document published by Human Rights Watch in 1999 entitled *Leave None to Tell the Story*. The aspect that was most important in this source is the documented information it provides on the semantic shift and manipulative dichotomic use of language from pre-colonial times to the year of the genocide outbreak. The second source where data were retrieved is the Judgement Report Case No. ICTR-96-4- T, Decision of 2 September 1998 relating to the Prosecutor versus Jean-Paul Akayesu. The extracts culled from this report were instrumental in providing insight into the established cause-effect link between Akayesu's use of language for killing instructions and his being convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity. Another important aspect of the scientific quality of this source is Akayesu's social status as political authority and mayor which increases the impact and influence of his killing instructions. The third source where data were selected is that of media publications and broadcastings on killing incitement messages from Radio Television Mille Collines (RTLM) and Kangura newspaper. The extracts gained from these channels show how widespread was the othering language.

The collected corpus has been analyzed based on five main features that are the speaker (the perlocutionary force and its incitement propensity), the message (the lexical choice and the othering content), the context (the existence or not of violence-inducing conditions), the medium (the potential of the used medium in reaching people) and the audience (the existence or not of sociohistorical preconditions that could incite to violence). The use of language as a tool of stigmatization and othering, as Hadley (2013) specifies, is to be found in many cases in the diachronic evolution of words. She illustrates this aspect of language evolution through the semantic shift in the use of the word "gay" as follows: "*The history of the word "gay" is particularly interesting in this regard. Initially, the word just meant a light-hearted pleasure and it is still possible to come across this use of the word in literature.*" As Saeed (2003) posits, semantic shift or semantic progression is a form of language change regarding the evolution of word usage. In various cases, the shift may reach such a point that the modern meaning is radically different from the original usage.

#### 4. The role of language as an instrument of othering in the historical and socio-political context of Rwanda

Language is our body and our breath, our world and our thought, our perception, and even our unconscious (Sollers, 1968). The role of language in the Rwandan genocide can only be accurately approached when one browses through the history of the country. Indeed, when one embarks on such a venture, language appears to have been used as an instrument of othering most specifically through the semantic shift or semantic evolution of the words Tutsi and Hutu. Indeed, Rwanda first used to be a conglomerate of childhoods and suzerainties with roughly twenty clans and three major occupations. Those involved in cattle rearing were named Tutsi, those who were versed in agricultural activities were named Hutu, and those involved in hunting and gathering, in much lesser numbers, were named Twa. The callings of Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa in their first denotative meaning were thus only occupational and had no ethnic reference. The words of Kressel, (2002) cited by Ngabonziza (2013) on this original meaning in the early period and the subsequent connotation are corroborative in this regard:

*"Indeed, Rwanda is composed by Hutu, Tutsi, Twa but not in an ethnic context. In the early period the terms "Umututsi, Umuhutu, and Umutwa" were used to indicate socio-economic status. The Tutsi cattle owners became an aristocratic elite, while the Hutu were seen as commoners and farmers held in low regard by the Tutsi."*

The identification of Tutsi pastoralists as power-holders and of Hutu cultivators as subjects and commoners was becoming ingrained in the social mind when Europeans first arrived in Rwanda. The linguistic implication of this sociohistorical fact is the semantic evolution of the words Tutsi and Hutu from their original meanings of cattle owners and farmers to aristocratic elites and commoners respectively. This social evolution with its semantic impact developed into the exclusion of the Hutu people from schools and all public work at the arrival of the Belgian colonizers around the 1920s. Up to this level in time and in the socio-political history of Rwanda, the Tutsi Hutu semantic shift was still in the form of word of mouth. Subsequently, it took an official, written, and legal form as the colonial modern administration had it put on identity cards as ethical identification patterns. As indicated by Human Right Watch (1999):

*"The very recording of the ethnic groups in written form enhanced their importance and changed their character. No longer flexible and amorphous, the categories became so rigid and permanent that some contemporary Europeans began referring to them as 'castes'."*

On the linguistic part and along the diachronic line, the words Tutsi and Hutu underwent two main changes that are directly linked to the socio-political history of the country. First, they shifted from the denotative occupational meaning of cattle breeders and agricultural farmers to the connotative social hierarchical distinction markers of power-holding elite and commoners

respectively. Secondly, these same words were made to connote ethnic markers with the very significant evolution from oral language to written form. The discussion of these findings has been instrumental in the semantic analysis and insightful in specifying the role of language.

## 5. Discussion of the findings

The ultimate function of language is to create meaning (Halliday, 1976). In this meaning construction process and beyond their locutionary patterns, the expressed words imply perlocutionary actions and reactions (Austin, 1962). The expressed words move their receptors/audience, in a direction [positive or negative] that depends on the intended goals of the speaker (s), and the prevailing context, together with the morphological, syntactic, denotative, and connotative forms of the utterance. This part of the work discloses through the role of otherness language in the preparation of the genocide on the one hand, and the role of otherness language in the very commission of the genocide on the other.

### 5.1. The role of otherness language in the preparation of the genocide

An insightful look into the role of the language of otherness in the Rwandan genocide needs a check through the way language was used manipulatively to oppose Tutsi and Hutu from precolonial to postcolonial periods. Based on the aforementioned findings, a look at Table 1 discloses the various semantic changes of the denotative occupational appellations "Hutu" and "Tutsi". These semantic changes as routinized in language by colonial and local authorities were based on such socially manufactured ideologies that they eventually got to be taken as true. The semantic shift and the ideological linguistic manipulation that occurred during the precolonial period 2 set the start for the hatred between Hutu and Tutsi, which created a social context that was conducive to violence. Colonial period 1 which represents the start of the colonizer's presence in the country worsened this state of affairs by increasing the created gap between the two groups with the exclusion of the Hutu from schooling and public work. The wrongly labelled identity information which up to then existed in oral saying thus became written. This is highly significant in terms of legal value and the transmission of wrong information to the younger generations.

**Table 1:** The role of language through the semantic shifts of the words "Tutsi" and "Hutu"

Period	The state of affairs in Rwanda	The role of language
Pre-colonial 1 (Before the 1920s)	Tutsi means cattle breeders. Hutu means agricultural people.	Semantic meaning
Pre-colonial 2 (Before the 1920s)	Tutsi means elite group (power holder). Hutu means a subordinate or follower of a more powerful person, the mass of the ordinary people (cultivators).	Semantic shift. Ideologic and othering linguistic manipulation. Othering is manufactured in a mental ideologic process and language is used to routinize it.
Colonial period 1	Tutsi means those who look more like	Semantic shift.

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(During the 1920s)	the Belgian colonizers than other Rwandans, they are more intelligent, they are the real citizens of Rwanda Hutus are considered as commoners, laborers and excluded from schools and public work.	Ideologic and oral othering through linguistic manipulation. Language is used to praise and construct the identity of one group while insulting and dispraising the other.
Colonial period 2 (1930)	The occupational appellations "Tutsi and Hutu" are considered as ethnic groups and put in writing on identity cards.	Semantic shift. Ideologic and written othering linguistic manipulation.
Colonial period 3 (After 1950)	Hutu are given more and opportunities to enter public work and higher social rank	Increased othering process
Post-colonial 1 (1960 & 1961)	A Hutu government is elected	
Post-colonial 1 (April 6, 1994)	Hutu president is killed in a plane crash. Radio Television Mille Collines spreads the news and wage propaganda for Tutsi massacre.	Othering linguistic manipulations

The otherness language of the Hutu in power in 1994 grew to such a point that the ten commandments (see Appendix 2) were written to ban relationships with Tutsi.

## 5.2. The role of otherness language in the commission of the genocide

In reference to Wilson's gauge, those using the othering language are the political authorities, which makes the influence and the convincing aspects very high. The form of the transmission of the incitement rhetoric was also purposely selected in a way as to catch the attention and to reach the minds of the audience. RTLM broadcasts were entertaining, using catchy music in order to drive the message into listeners' minds (Benesch, 2007). Kangura, a Kinyarwanda and French-language magazine was used to reach the largest possible audience in the spread of otherness discourse. Appendix 1 displays the cover of the November 1991 issue of Kangura. The title on it displays a questioning about the kind of weapons to be used to beat the cockroaches (an insulting word for Tutsi) for good. The cover presents a photograph of Grégoire Kayibanda, a former Hutu Rwandan head of state. In the same line, discriminating metaphors such as "*inyenzi*" (connotatively used to refer to any Tutsi person considered to mean perceived enemies of the Hutu government), Inkotanyi (connotatively used to refer to Tutsi as vermin, cockroach) were profusely used on RTML for genocide incitement. The linguistic analysis conducted herewith is in line with the judicial approach of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) which defines genocide as any acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group through ways such as direct and public incitement to commit genocide (p.18) which includes the role of language in high profile. In fact, the decision of the international court on the Rwandan genocide put special stress on the disastrous role of language as follows:

*"Without a firearm, machete, or any physical weapon, he [Nahimana] caused the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians. ...RTLM 'spread petrol throughout the country little by little, so*

*'that one day it would be able to set fire to the whole country.' This is the poison described in the Streicher judgment."* (Wilson, 2015)

In the same perspective of the role of language, Sebagabo Simon (2004: 21) affirms that the semantic change of Rwandan terminologies to create ethnic concepts in Rwanda is a root cause of genocide genesis. The way language was used over a long period, right from pre-colonial to post-colonial periods fall definitely within Benesch's frame for one to accurately draw a causality link with the genocide. As a matter of fact, as far as the degree of authority and influence of the speakers is concerned, the otherness process took nationwide coverage with the Belgian colonisers who had full authority over the whole country. In the following years of the colonial era, state authorities together with directly and indirectly state-sponsored media were fully involved in the spread of inciting words that are convicted by the international judicial system as bearing criminal responsibility:

*"As Diane Orentlicher (2005: 33 and 37) explains, 'the trial chamber in effected treated Kangura and RTLM themselves as perpetrators of genocide and convicted the defendants by virtue of their relationship to the media organs in question.' .... The three defendants in the Media Trial were also convicted of direct and public incitement to commit genocide, in a verdict that asserted causal nexus between speeches and radio broadcasts and subsequent violence."*

All these contribute to confirming the lethal effect of language in the genocide.

## 6. Conclusion

This research work focused on the critical role of language in the Rwandan genocide. The involvement of language has been identified through a semantic analysis that sheds light on the manipulative use of language in the forms of semantic shifts and stigmatizing metaphors. The qualitative analysis of the collected data was forceful to uncover the leading role of language in the long-term preparation of an othering social context and the actual commission of the killings. Right from the pre-colonial to post-colonial periods, language was used to change the semantic occupational meaning of Hutu and Tutsi appellations into social class ranking features and then into biased ethничal meaning. Within this context prone to crisis, the high level of authority and influence of those who took the floor, the message they phrased, the mass media that were used, and the predisposition of the audience all contributed to the occurrence of the genocide. This allows inferring that much more than its commonly known role as means of social interaction, language definitely had a lethal impact. Such occurrence rings the bells for higher attention regarding the way language is used in general and more specifically in public speech.

## Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## About the Author

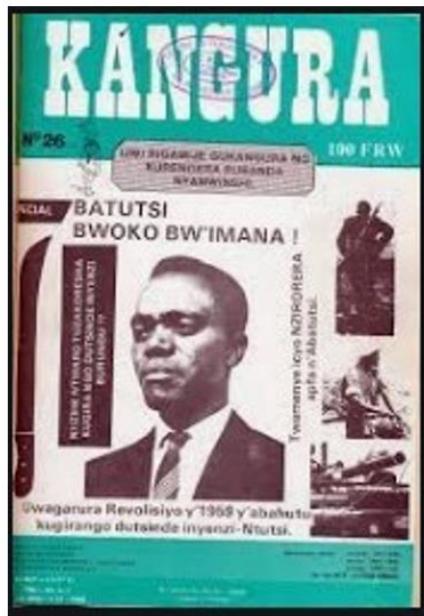
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**Appendix 1:** Kangura newspaper front page



**Appendix 2:** The 'Hutu Ten Commandments' as published in Kangura, No. 6 (December 1990)

1	Every Hutu must know that the Tutsi woman, wherever she may be, is working for the Tutsi ethnic cause. In consequence, any Hutu is a traitor who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Acquires a Tutsi wife;</li> <li>- Acquires a Tutsi concubine;</li> <li>- Acquires a Tutsi secretary or protégée.</li> </ul>
2.	Every Hutu must know that our Hutu daughters are more worthy and more conscientious as women, as wives and as mothers. Aren't they lovely, excellent secretaries, and more honest!
3.	Hutu women, be vigilant and make sure that your husbands, brothers and sons see reason.
4.	All Hutus must know that all Tutsis are dishonest in business. Their only goal is ethnic superiority. We have learned this by experience from experience. In consequence, any Hutu is a traitor who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Forms a business alliance with a Tutsi;</li> <li>- Invests his own funds or public funds in a Tutsi enterprise;</li> <li>- Borrows money from or loans money to a Tutsi;</li> <li>- Grants favors to Tutsis (import licenses, bank loans, land for construction, public markets...)</li> </ul>
5.	Strategic positions such as politics, administration, economics, the military and security must be restricted to the Hutu.
6.	A Hutu majority must prevail throughout the educational system (pupils, scholars, teachers).
7.	The Rwandan Army must be exclusively Hutu. The war of October 1990 has taught us that. No soldier may marry a Tutsi woman.
8.	Hutu must stop taking pity on the Tutsi.
9.	Hutu wherever they be must stand united, in solidarity, and concerned with the fate of their Hutu brothers. Hutu within and without Rwanda must constantly search for friends and allies to the Hutu Cause, beginning with their Bantu brothers. Hutu must constantly counter Tutsi propaganda. Hutu must stand firm and vigilant against their common enemy: the Tutsi.
10.	The Social Revolution of 1959, the Referendum of 1961 and the Hutu ideology must be taught to Hutu of every age. Every Hutu must spread the word wherever he goes. Any Hutu who persecutes his brother Hutu for spreading and teaching this ideology is a traitor.

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