

Prosperity and Exploitation: Language and Sociolinguistic Structure in Capitalist Rwanda

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Since 1994, Rwanda has been considered something of an 'economic miracle'. It has experienced year-on-year GDP growth, expanded access to education, and significantly increased the value of its exports. The government has combined central planning with key neoliberal reforms, reshaping Rwandan society in the process. This has provided a rationale for the imposition of English as a language of instruction in Rwandan schools (mandated in 2008). There are certainly other factors at play, but in this paper I will examine the economic (and therefore social/political) logic of the shift to English, tracing its implications for the largely 'monolingual' Kinyarwanda-speaking population. In economic terms, I suggest that the policy facilitates the creation of a stratified hierarchy of labour, in which the prosperity of educated English speakers is inseparable from the exploitation of (more or less) monolingual Kinyarwanda speakers, many of whom work in the extraction of raw materials. On this basis, I raise questions as to whether attempts to secure linguistic equality, and social justice more broadly, are complicated or frustrated by capitalism. Finally, I look briefly to the work of Franz Fanon and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o to explore alternatives to the neoliberal vision.