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## Mythcon 50

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### Quenti Lambardillion: A Column on Middle-earth Linguistics: The Languages of Middle-earth (Part II)

**Abstract**

A history of the languages of Middle-earth and their relationships with each other.

**Additional Keywords**

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Languages

# Quenti Lambardillion

## A Column on Middle-earth Linguistics

Paul Nolan Hyde

### The Languages of Middle-earth

#### Part II

The history of the Dwarves is difficult to ascertain with any degree of completeness. Their origin is, as was stated above, a result of an act of unauthorized creation by Aule, one of the Ainur. Rather than have them destroyed, Eru gave the Dwarves life, but forbade their waking until after the Quendi came forth into Middle-earth. Of the Seven Fathers of the Dwarves, Tolkien gives the name of only one: Durin, the greatest of them all. Except for the Petty Dwarves (who are the first to come to Beleriand), and Bifur, Bofur, and Bombur, Tolkien relates nothing of the other six families (III,361).

The only language mentioned in the fantasies for the Dwarves of Middle-earth is Khuzdul, which, according to Tolkien, remained pure from the beginning and did not suffer evolution as other languages had. Khuzdul was primarily a ritual language and was not generally used in everyday conversation. The Dwarves typically used the languages of the people about them for their non-ritual given names and ordinary communication. Of the origin of the language of the Dwarves, Tolkien said to Rhona Beare:

The One rebuked Aule, saying that he had tried to usurp the Creator's power; but he could not give independent life to his makings. He had only one life, his own derived from the One, and could at most only distribute it. 'Behold' said the One: 'these creatures of thine have only thy will, and thy movement. Though you have devised a language for them they can only report to thee thine own thought. This is a mockery of me'. (L,287)

The Orcs and Trolls, as debased creatures, have no real historical culture that we know of, except that which is based on geographical location together with the proximity of a controlling evil. Tolkien says that the Orcs were first bred by Morgoth in the First Age of Middle-earth (III,409). The Uruk-hai were bred by Sauron in the Third Age of Middle-earth and (as Robert Foster suggests) probably provided the major leadership corps for the armies of both Sauron and Saruman [1].

Of the Orkish languages, Tolkien explains:

It is said that they had no language of their own, but took what they could of other tongues and perverted it to their own liking; yet they made only brutal jargons, scarcely sufficient even for their own needs, unless it were for curses and abuse. And these creatures, being filled with malice, hating even their own kind, quickly developed as many barbarous dialects as there were groups or settlements of their race, so that their Orkish speech was of little use to them in intercourse between different tribes.

So it was that in the Third Age Orcs used for communication between breed and breed the Westron tongue; and many indeed of the other tribes such as those that still lingered in the North and in the Misty Mountains, had long used the Westron as their native language, though in such a fashion as to make it hardly less unlovely than Orkish... It is said that the Black Speech was devised by Sauron in the Dark Years, and that he had desired to make it the language of all those that served him, but he failed in that purpose. From the Black Speech, however, were derived many of the words that were in the Third Age wide-spread among the Orcs, such as ghash 'fire', but after the first overthrow of Sauron this language in its ancient form was forgotten by all but the Nazgul. When Sauron rose again, it became once more the language of Barad-dur and of the Captains of Mordor. (III, 409-10)

The Stone Trolls used a debased Westron dialect (which Tolkien renders as a kind of English (H,43-45)), the Cave and Hill Trolls communicated in a dialect based on Orkish, and the Olog-hai (a breed of sun-resistant trolls created by Sauron in southern Mirkwood and northern Mordor) spoke Black Speech (III,410). Typically, the languages of the Servants of Evil are either guttural corruptions of other languages or variations on the Black Speech of Mordor, invented by Sauron the Necromancer.

During the Third Age of Middle-earth, many races used languages which were not intrinsically their own. For instance, many groups used the Elven tongues. The Elves themselves used Quenya and Sindarin, although the former had become primarily a ritualistic and literary language. Sindarin served the Elves as a conversational language. The kings of Numenor introduced Sindarin to their peoples, and this language continued into the later kingdoms of Arnor and Gondor. Some individual dwarves took the time to learn Sindarin, especially when relations between dwarves and elves were good, a state of affairs which occurred very seldom. The Ents spoke a form of Quenya, a blending together great sequences of words, a compounding and layering which produced an effect as complex as the leaf and limb formations in the great Fangorn Forest where the Ents lived.

As was mentioned before, only three of the languages of Men actually appear in the text of the fantasies. Dunlending contributes one word to the lexicon, a jeering epithet for the blond Rohirrim which meant "strawheads". The Wild Men of the Druadan Forest, commonly called the Woses, speak only a few words in their language, but enough to demonstrate its harshness. By the time of the War of the Ring, Adunaic had died out as a living tongue, and only a few place names and genealogical references remained. From Adunaic evolved Westron (the Common Tongue) which, ironically, appears very seldom in its genuine Middle-earth form even though it functions as a "lingua

fraca" for the peoples of the Third Age. Hobbitish is, as was noted once before, a combination of Adunaic and Dunlending, which made it seem quite closely related to the language of the Rohirrim. Again, Khuzdul was spoken only by the dwarves, and even then only in ritual. The Black Speech and its affiliated languages were spoken by those indicated above, plus the Istari (like Saruman and Gandalf) who had studied it especially for their confrontations with Sauron.

Most of the historical development of the Middle-earth languages has been presented above. There is, however, one other feature of their development which has not been thoroughly investigated: one which will require some speculation. During the last few centuries in our own world, there has been considerable controversy as to the ultimate origin of Man's languages. Some linguists believe that all languages stem from one original "Adamic" language, which has broken up into the various language families of the world. Others contend that, although there exist various related families, each "family" has its unique "proto-language" which sprang up independently of all other language families. The similarities result because all physiologically normal men possess the capacity to speak.[2] If it is true that all life and culture in Middle-earth ultimately comes from one source, it would be reasonable to assume that all the languages in Middle-earth could be from a single source as well.

Eru somehow communicates with the Valar in what would seem to be a perfect "language", although the process of that communication might not have been totally audible in the sense that language among the Elves or Hobbits would have been audible. The Eldar apparently possessed a similar telepathic capacity, at least as receivers:

Now the Eldar were beyond all other peoples skilled in tongues; and Felagund discovered also that he could read in the minds of Men such thoughts as they wished to reveal in speech, so that their words were easily interpreted. It is said also that these Men had long had dealings with the Dark Elves east of the mountains, and from them had learned much of their speech; and since all the languages of the Quendi were of one origin, the language of Beor and his folk resembled the Elven tongue in many words and devices. (S,141)

If it is as I have proposed, that all culture ultimately reposes in a single source, Eru, it would be reasonable to assume that all languages in Middle-earth descended from that same single source through the instrumentality of the Valar.

Without trying to carry the analogy too far, it is possible to propose that Tolkien's language-culture relationships in Middle-earth might reflect somewhat of his personal view as to the development of language families in the Primary World. If his own languages descended from a common source, an Adamic type tongue which Men were taught in the beginning. The evidence, some of which will be presented later, would lead the student of Tolkien's languages to believe that this original language was vastly superior to anything spoken in the present day.

Tolkien's proliferation of languages is not done merely to provide everyone with a way to talk (particularly since he limits the use of the genuine

languages in the narratives). In a broad sweeping panorama Tolkien artistically develops his linguistic aesthetic for his readers by associating certain ways of speaking with certain kinds of creatures. He bases his approach on a very simple premise.

Most modern languages have several sub-systems within their structure which allow for different modes of expression. Thus, a man uses one type of vocabulary, tone, and mannerism when speaking to his intimate friends that differs from the type he would use when conversing with a high government official or anyone whom he perceives as worthy of formal honor. There are other dialects within every language which are considered sub-standard and come to be associated with certain social classes within the society. Another phenomenon which exists in most living languages is that there are sounds or groups of sounds which are more pleasant to the ears of the native speaker than are other sounds. There are also sounds which evoke a negative feeling. Usually these sounds, combined with the feelings they stimulate, are respectively referred to as euphony and cacaphony.

Tolkien makes an unusual combination of these two features of language to produce a third language-culture distinction for the languages of Middle-earth. As we have seen before (ML-40), each of the languages of Middle-earth is culturally bound phonetically, that is, a predominance of certain kinds of vowels and consonants identify the language as belonging to a particular culture. In Tolkien's world, the races intrinsically have characteristics and attributes which are reflected in the languages. An Elf, who is basically immortal and near perfection in thought and deed, speaks a language which is phonetically different from that of the Orcs and Trolls, whose society is bent upon destroying or subjugating all other societies. So obvious is this technique in Tolkien's fantasies that some critics have taken offense. For example, Mary Ellmann attacked the philosophical implications of this technique vigorously:

His book is based on the assumption that all words, like the pigments of all skins, are indicative of either good or evil. Moreover, it is the supposedly pretty that is good, and the supposedly ugly that is bad, in language as in legs. It even becomes clear in the languages of the Elves and the Orcs (as in the translations of these languages into the Common Tongue) that moral distinctions are embedded in the alphabet itself, that there are good vowels and consonants and bad vowels and consonants.

An unnerving thought, that initial "i" is more virtuous than final "k", and one fortunately obscured in the obligatory formation of words and of sentences. But then styles in turn assume various and yet always patent forms of good and evil: the Elven style, for example, is a high style, expressing virtue in its most delicate and incorporeal aspect. Elven is characterized by a deliquescent charm, like that of the Elf-lady Galadriel. It is not a practical way to speak. It is a language of leisure and contemplation, spoken at the end of a day's work, at the Elves' Hour. It is a fanciful use of the mouth, an afterdinner whim, like chewing lilies of the valley, or fireflies.

On the other hand, the Orcs speak in the Coarse style. So do the Woses, the Wild Men, though for primitive rather than pernicious reasons — this distinction is apt to slip out of place at times. On Middle-earth Coarse was very coarse, and Tolkien mentions having been obliged to censor several remarks made by Orcs. This censorship reduces them to expressions like "dung" and "dirty old wizard", which risk seeming merely quaint in Detroit and Chicago. The Orcs' intentions, however, are not genteel and behind Tolkien's back they undoubtedly say terrible things.[3]

On the other hand, W.H. Auden appreciates the linguistic effect of Tolkien's technique of attributing virtue or evil to specific phonemes. After discussing Tolkien's capacity for inventing names, he says:

Of course, he is a famous philologist, but what colleague of his could invent such convincing examples of a "good" and a "bad" language as the following quotations?

A Elbereth Gilthoniel  
silivren penna miriel  
o menel aglar elenath!  
Na-chared palan-diriel  
o galadhremmin ennorath  
Fanuilos, le linnathon  
nef aear, si nef aearon!  
\*

Ash nazg durbatuluk, ash nazg gimbatul  
ash nazg thrakataluk agh burzum-ishi  
krumpatul. [4]

In another place, after making the same comparison between the two languages, Auden says that "An Imaginary world must be as real to the senses of the reader in a way completely consistent with his personal aesthetic and the genre as the actual world." [5] This needs to be true also with that world's languages. I feel that Professor Tolkien has made his languages vividly real to his readers in a way completely consistent with his personal aesthetic and the genre which he has chosen to follow.

Ellmann's observations, however, display the essence of what Tolkien has done philologically with his languages. Tolkien evidently accepts the philosophy that a culture's language reflects the culture's psychology as much as anything else, for the reader seems to know intuitively the kind of character he is dealing with merely by the way he talks. This is not only true in the narrative English, but also in the genuine language segments.

For example, Elven tongues in the trilogy avoid harsh sounds and make use of the fluid consonants extensively. Phonetically, the language is very smooth and tends to be spoken softly. Yet it is not insipid. There is a subliminal quality of vitality, and the feeling one has upon hearing it is one depicting enduring reserved strength. Although an example of this language has been cited above in conjunction with Auden's comment, the following will add to the feeling for the language:

Si man I yulma nin enquantuva?  
An si Tintalle Varda Oiolosseo  
ve fanyar maryat Elentaril ortane  
ar ilye tier undalave lumbule;  
(I,394)

Over a period of time, the languages of Men were influenced somewhat by those of the Elves. Originally Mannish speech was hard and clipped and had many elements that the Dunlending and the Woses languages had. As the influence of the Elven cultures increased, however, a softening took place in the consonants and the vowels. Adunaic represents the closest that any Mannish tongue ever came to imitating the Elven tongues. At that point, Men adopted the Elven languages for their own. An interesting comparison can be made between the name of one of the kings of Numenor, Ar-Inzilladun, and that of the chief of the Woses, Ghan-buri-Ghan. The main consonants of the former are toward the front of the mouth in articulation because the name is in Adunic, while in Woses they are back aspirants. This technique is typical of Tolkien's delineation of the languages of Middle-earth.

Khuzdul, the tongue of the Dwarves, sounds as ancient and strong as the Elven, but it is hard and sharp as the sounds of hammers on anvils that filled the caverns of the "folk of Durin", and it is as majestic as the mountains that they carved. As was mentioned before, their language was sacred to them and rarely spoken except in times of war or when the Dwarves were met solemnly on special occasions. Their personal names in Khuzdul were never used among those of other races, and were never written, even on tombstones. So it is that, except for the place names and the battle-cry which Gimli the dwarf gives in the narrative of The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien gives very few examples of the language. Although these are fragmentary, they still give the reader a feel for Khuzdul. For example, Gimli's battle-cry is "Khazad ai-menui". Typical of the language are the place names: "Khazad-dum", "Barazinbar", "Zirak-zigil", "Bundushathur", and "Kheled-zaram".

Other than place names and the passage cited by W.H. Auden above, very little is extant in the Black Speech and the related languages of evil. The Ring inscription leads one to believe that a servant of Sauron or Saruman would speak a language that would be the kind of saliva-ridden cacophony which a person would expect if a snake with a mouth full of razor-sharp rocks were to speak. Even the translations of these languages into English, as Ellmann suggests, are hateful, bitter, gross-sounding renditions of the original, which indicate the hopeless, tyrannical society of which they are a part.

The phenomenal thing about the manifestation of Tolkien's linguistic aesthetic and cultural-linguistic philosophy is that it does not stop with the diachronic cultural background nor the phonological aspects, but it is to be found in the orthographic systems, the morphology, and syntax, plus all the other elements of formalized languages. All this is correlated into one credible, functioning entity: verbal Middle-earth.

#### NOTES

[1] Robert Foster, The Complete Guide to Middle Earth (New York: Ballantine, 1978), 517-18.

[2] Stuart Robertson and Cassidy, Fredric G., The Development of Modern English (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1954), 5-8; Dwight Bolinger, Aspects of Language. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 319-21.

[3] Mary Ellmann, "Growing up Hobbitic," New American Review #2 (1968), pp. 266-7.

[4] W.H. Auden, "A World Imaginary, but Real," Encounter, 3 (Nov., 1954), p. 60.

[5] W.H. Auden, "The Quest Hero," Texas Quarterly (Winter, 1961), p. 88.