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Abstract

Detailed analysis of the consonant structure of Quenya, Sindarin, Black Speech, Adunaic, Hobbitish Westron, and Khuzdul.

Quenti Lambardillion

A Column on Middle-earth Linguistics

Paul Nolan Hyde

A Phonetic Analysis of Tolkien's Invented Languages: Consonants

Creating languages motivated by aesthetic tastes as part of an artistic endeavor is a task which staggers the imagination. Any languages so wrought must add to and be consistent with the overall effect of the artist's conception. The languages must fit in with all else in such a way so as not to draw undue attention to themselves and still make a viable contribution to the creation of the Secondary World. Tolkien says that the artist has to make a world for the reader to enter *into* rather than asking him to merely suspend his disbelief:

[The artist] makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it he relates what is "true": it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from the outside.¹

Tolkien, if he is to be successful, must provide his languages with such credible vitality so as to suspend the disbelief of even a fellow-student of languages. Actually, to be truly successful, Tolkien must be able to suspend his own disbelief. All language claims in the fantasy works must therefore operate consistently within the framework of the linguistic laws established for Middle-earth.

Even though Tolkien's orthographic systems have given us some idea of what to expect in spoken versions of the various languages, a detailed phonetic study is essential in order to observe the actual differences between the languages and, thus, to determine the phonological basis of Tolkien's linguistic aesthetic.

In order to fully appreciate the phonetic structure of each of the Middle-earth languages, the linguist must determine the characteristic sounds in each. Although the language utterances in the Middle-earth volumes are limited, Tolkien provides enough linguistic information in the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings* and in other writings to describe (at least partially) several of the tongues spoken during the Third Age of Middle-earth, including Quenya, Sindarin, Westron, Khuzdul, and Black Speech. Of great help in the development of this analysis will be Tolkien's own comments as to what he was attempting to do with the languages, together with the obvious insight that the usage of the various writing systems provides.

Each of the languages will be considered using a descriptive method patterned after that followed by A. C. Gimson.² Because Gimson is British, treats England's Received Pronunciation as standard, and implements

the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) as part of his methodology, his text and method are more compatible with Tolkien's than an American text and methodology would be. Also, in order to avoid confusion in the text of this chapter, three distinct bracketing symbols will be used to distinguish phonetic values, phonemic values, and spelling. Characters placed between square brackets, [], are to be regarded as the phonetic value for a linguistic sequence. Characters placed between slashes, / /, indicate the phonemic value. Characters between pointed brackets, < >, represent simple spelling.

Table 1 lists the IPA symbols which will be used throughout this article.

Table 1
International Phonetic Symbols

b	voiced bilabial plosive
c	voiceless palatal plosive
ç	voiceless palatal fricative
d	voiced alveolar plosive
ð	voiced dental fricative
f	voiceless labio-dental fricative
ʃ	voiced palatal plosive
ʒ	voiced velar plosive
h	voiceless glottal fricative
ʁ	voiced glottal fricative
j	palatal unrounded semi-vowel
ɹ	linguo-alveolar tap
k	voiceless velar plosive
l	voiced alveolar lateral continuant
ɭ	voiced alveolar lateral continuant with velarization
m	voiced bilabial nasal
n	voiced alveolar nasal
ɳ	voiced velar nasal
ɲ	voiced palatal nasal
θ	voiceless dental fricative
ʃ	voiceless bilabial plosive
r	linguo-alveolar roll
ʀ	voiced uvular roll
ʁ	voiced uvular fricative or frictionless continuant
ç	voiceless alveolar fricative
ʃ	voiceless palato-alveolar fricative
t	voiceless alveolar plosive
v	voiced labio-dental fricative
w	labio-velar semi-vowel
x	voiceless labio-velar fricative
ɣ	voiceless velar fricative
ʎ	voiced velar fricative
z	voiced alveolar fricative
ʒ	voiced palato-alveolar fricative
ʔ	glottal plosive (stop)
ə	devoiced consonant
ɹ	dental articulation

(Gimson, vii-ix)

There are many sounds and consonant combinations in Middle-earth languages which are not discussed by Gimson and are not included in the Table above. Table 1 is not intended to be definitive, but,

Sindarin are also the most obvious. The two series of nasal plosive clusters have been reduced to two residual forms /mb/ and /ɲg/ which are almost archaic in the Third Age. Most of these clusters have either coalesced with the respective plosives or have become the long nasals /mm/ and /nn/, an historical development similar to that of English which reduces the /mb/ of "lamb" to /m/. The velar nasal cluster is found only in the medial position in Sindarin.

Another significant distinction of Sindarin from Quenya is the loss of the palatalized consonants and the labialized series of velars. As a result, there are only three series in Sindarin: "tincotema", "pamatemala", and "calmatema" (this last being orthographically represented by using the Series III column of the Tengwar). The palatalized fricative /x/ has been reduced to the glottal fricative /h/; the palatalized plosive /tʃ/ changes to either /t/ or /s/.

The voiceless alveolar fricative /s/ still functions under the same conditions as Quenya, but many /θ/ consonants in Quenya articulate further back in Sindarin and become /s/, even though the same orthographic character from the Tengwar is retained. Thus the difference between the Quenya and Sindarin words for 'moon', <isil> and <ithil>, respectively.

Another conspicuous change has to do with the introduction of the voiceless laterals and medials (actually, to be historically accurate, the Sindar probably retained the voiceless laterals and medials from an earlier Proto-Eldarin; ancient Quenya had these voiceless consonants but they were lost, for the most part before the formalization of the Tengwar). There is also the noticeable absence of the retroflex /w/.

The overall effect of the differences would seem to be that Sindarin was more "whispered" than "hummed" as was Quenya.

Grid 3
Black Speech:
Consonants and Consonantal Clusters

[illegible]

Although there is very little of the Black Speech given in the Middle-earth works (The Ring Inscription (I, 267), the Mordor orkish curse on the Isengard orcs

(II, 47; *Letters*, 178), and as Jim Allen suggests (*Introduction*, 166), a few orc names), a simplified idea about the nature of the consonantal system can be constructed. Grid 3 represents what is known about the language of Mordor.

The prominent feature of Black Speech is the plenitude of velar consonants. Velar <g>, /g/, is used exclusively, combining as it does with back vowels. Tolkien asserts that the Orcs "used a back or uvular," "r", a sound which the Eldar found distasteful (III, 392). Allen suggests (*Introduction*, 166) that this was probably the essential value for all <g>'s in the language. /g/ k/ is a speculation on Allen's part given without explanation, but I feel that he is correct and that it undoubtedly replaces the /ng/ nasal cluster that would normally be in this position. I also suspect that there are no /gʰs/, /gʰs/, or /gʰs/. The presence of /gʰ/, /gʰ/, /gʰ/ is a kind of symmetrical arrangement within the fricatives and, to my ears at least, Tolkien has chosen the three most serpentine-sounding fricatives in this articulatory plane.

The almost complete absence of nasal plosive clusters, together with the emphasis on back consonants and "serpentine" fricatives, Tolkien has created a phonic base which conveys a darker, more hollow articulation than either of the two Elven tongues.

Although Adunac is seldom presented in its pure form in the Middle-earth works, some of its phonological structure is given in the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings* in conjunction with the discussions on Quenya. Most of what appears on Grid 4 has been compiled from Numenorean references in *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and *Unfinished Tales*, primarily from proper names both personal and geographical. This compilation, however, pretends to be a tentative hypothesis, and does suggest the probable frequency with which phonological elements appear and, without too much speculation, put the Adunac language into a kind of perspective.

Grid 4

Adunaic: Consonants and Consonant Clusters

[illegible]

Although it is difficult to tell from the Grid, the preponderance of the plosives in the corpus are voiced: /p/ does not occur; /t/ appears once as a

The Elves and Dwarves are long-lived and slow to change; Men and Hobbits are short-lived and ephemeral; speakers of the Black Speech live negative lives and degenerate. It is possible that because of the longevity, certain races have the time to learn to distinguish such subtle distinctions like those which exist in Quenya and Sindarin.

Laurence J. Krieg was asked by Jim Allen to use the facilities of the Phonetics Laboratory at the University of Michigan to make a detailed analysis of the recordings made by J.R.R. Tolkien reading his own works.¹ The thrust of the study was to discover if Tolkien's pronunciations of Quenya and Sindarin differed from the description of those languages given in *The Lord of the Rings*. One of the by-products of that study was the "Note on Tolkien's Reading Styles" in which Krieg asserts that Tolkien had several reading styles depending on the tone of the material being read. Although the stylistic differences show up in rhythm and intonation, Krieg says:

It is in the pronunciation of "r" that the difference is most noticeable. There appears to be a set of /r/ pronunciations ordered according to degree of elevation of style:

Trilled r	Most Elevated
Tapped r	
Approximate r	
Lengthen preceding vowel	Least Elevated

In his ordinary pronunciation, syllable-final /r/ is an alveolar approximate, while syllable-final /r/ simply makes the preceding vowel longer, as in most speech of England at the present time. But the more elevated style, the more likely the /r/ is to be tapped or trilled. (*Introduction*, 155-6)

Quenya has four types of <r>: /rd/, /r/, /ry/, and /r/. Sindarin has two, a voiced and a voiceless rolled <r>. Black Speech has only the rolled uvular <r> which the Elves despised. Hobbitish Westron and Adunaic have only the rolled <r>. Khuzdul has both the alveolar and the uvular rolled <r>, but the use was dependent upon the individual speaker as to which one was used. A possible ranking of the languages based on the elevation of speech discovered by Krieg in Tolkien's speech patterns could be:

Chart 2
"r"-Based Elevation of Speech

Quenya	Most Elevated
Sindarin	
Khuzdul	
Hobbitish Westron	
Adunaic	
Black Speech	Least Elevated

What are we to conclude by the foregoing? I suspect that when J.R.R. Tolkien suggests that the linguistic systems of Middle-earth are based on scientific principles that we ought to whole-heartedly accept his declaration. He was first a philologist, then a story teller. The framework of the linguistic material as developed for the Third Age is extraordinarily detailed and wonderfully elaborated upon with etymologies and narrative. The tales delight the heart; the philology illuminates the mind. The mind and the heart jointly experience a profound awe.

NOTES

- ¹ "On Fairy Stories", *Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), 37.
- ² A. C. Gimson, *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970).
- ³ Paul Nolan Hyde, *Linguistic Techniques Used to Develop Character in the Writings of J.R.R. Tolkien*, (Purdue University, 1982), 75-81.
- ⁴ *Angles and Britons: O'Donnell Lectures* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1963). Also in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 162-197.
- ⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien Reads and Sings his "The Hobbit" and "The Fellowship of the Ring" (New York: Caedmon Records, No. TC1477, 1975); J.R.R. Tolkien Reads and Sings his "The Lord of the Rings": "Two Towers" and "The Return of the King" (New York: Caedmon Records, No. TC1478, 1975).

Become Involved in The Mythopoeic Fantasy and Scholarship Awards 1988 Committees

The Mythopoeic Fantasy Award and Scholarship Award Committees Chairperson would like to remind members that it is time to think about nominations for the 1987 awards -- and about volunteering to serve on the selection committee. Eligibility requirements for nomination of books for the Scholarship Award and for serving on the selection committee are the same as for the Fantasy Award: you must be a member of the Society; for nominations, no more than five books; for serving on the committees you must state your willingness to read or reread all finalists. Members may nominate books for both awards, and may serve on both committees.

Criteria for book selection: for the Fantasy Award, a fantasy work published during 1987 that best exemplifies "the spirit of the Inklings." A work reissued in paper during 1987 that was published earlier may be nominated whether or not it has previously been nominated, as long as it did not make the finalists' list. At the nominations level, and at the finalist level, a majority of "no award" votes (if the committee members feel none of the choices should receive the award) will require we make no award for the year. The scholarship award is given for a book on Tolkien, Lewis, and/or Williams that makes a significant contribution to Inklings scholarship. Books published during 1985-7 are eligible for the award; books may be renominated.

Nominations for both awards, and for selection committee volunteers, should be sent to Christine Lowentrout, 1017 Seal Way, Seal Beach CA 90740, by February 20, 1988. Committee members, please state your willingness to read all the finalists, and also state whether or not you are willing to have your name and address included on a list to be distributed only among the members of your committee for purposes of intercommunication. There will be a preliminary vote due May 1, and the final vote is due July 15. The awards will be announced at the XIXth Mythopoeic Conference in Oakland. Let your voice be heard!