Quenti Lambardillion: To Be or Not To Be: A Quest

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Abstract
Discusses the difficulties and pitfalls of translation, illustrated with the example of “The Song of Firiel.”
Quenti Lambardillion
A Column on Middle-earth Linguistics
Paul Nolan Hyde

To Be or Not To Be: A Quest

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them.....

(Hamlet III, 1:57-60)

A preamble to his production of The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Laurence Olivier (dressed as Hamlet) would stand before the audience and declare “This is the story of a man who could not make up his mind”. Linguists, particularly those who publish their views, frequently suffer from this Hamletian affliction; they continually adjust their conclusions, assertions, and (when pinned to a metaphorical or literal wall by an incisive mind) apply caveats to every linguistic axiom and law. Not all of this waffling, however, is founded in original stupidity. Language is, by definition, a mass of ordered confusion. Societal convention and a deep-rooted, Coleridgean desire to communicate thought and emotion have brought a degree of conformity to speech, writing, gesture, art, music, and other forms of expression. Within the conformity, however, individuality runs rampant. In art and literature there are “movements”, “schools”, and the “masters”; in language there are dialects, jargons, and codes. To perfectly describe this incessant uproar at any one moment would require an omniscient comprehension of all living beings; to define this most basic of human experience through the length and breadth of time would require more than a 386 micro-processor and an 80-megabyte harddrive. The art of describing language is as fluid as language itself, as changeable as a shoreline facing an open sea. Thus, the linguist who watches the verbal surf, building his pontifical palaces on the sand, can be as agile as a seagull when the tide comes in.

Compounding the already impossible task of knowing exactly what is going on in language is the additional question as to why a language is the way it is. By its nature, under the circumstances, this quest is the quintessence of speculation, subject to almost every opportunity for emendation. The linguist stands in verbal quicksand as it is; the act of ferreting out the rationale for language aberration often buries him.

Even in Tolkien’s invented languages, the problems are similar though not on the same scale. If we had in our possession all of the linguistic notes, essays, diagrams, and texts which J.R.R. Tolkien produced during his creative years, we might be able to begin to define the various language families and dialects which we know exist, and initiate tentative grammars and primers for each. Christopher Tolkien is bravely attempting to do just that, having produced ten volumes which have bearing on Middle-earth with several more on the way, perhaps even a volume dedicated specifically to the languages. Until that time, we are compelled to resort to the rather dry activity of cataloguing, indexing, and gently manipulating that which is available. So we linguophiles wait patiently for another Rosetta Stone to be unearthed by Christopher in order to rebuild our castles, hopefully with something of more substance than sand.

Why, then, attempt translations or more detailed parsings than those which J.R.R. Tolkien himself has given to us? Primarily because it is an infinitely more interesting endeavor than “the rather dry activity of cataloguing, indexing, and gently manipulating”. Secondly, most linguists (myself included) are rather prone to impatience and would rather be doing something than nothing, even if the something that we produce turns out to be nothing. Thirdly, and I believe of most importance, language and the love of language are the parents of Middle-earth. In the midst of all of the commotion surrounding the child, someone, somewhere, sometime, must look at the progenitors, however annoying that may be to those who love the progeny for its own beauty, wit, and grace.

Translations can take a variety of forms. They may proceed morpheme by morpheme, a parsing if you will, of every semantically significant element in the language text. This is particularly valuable when a linguist is attempting to discover precisely how the grammar of the language functions. The process is quite methodical, generally tedious, and consummately obnoxious to those with a modicum of aesthetic sensitivity. Most Tolkien Linguists fall into this category, the present writer included (See Mythlore issues 33-61: Quenti Lambardillion, Letters, and Articles). It is with this kind of translation that linguistics approaches the sciences, and, because of the attempt at exactness, when most of the ad nauseam polemics develop (See Mythlore, Vinyar Tengwar, Parma Eldalamberon, Beyond Bree, Quettar, Cirth de Gandalf, and others).

Another approach to textual translation has more of an aesthetic aspect. In the original publication of the poem “Narqelion” (Mythlore 56), a great deal of time, energy, and space was devoted to suggesting possible directions the translation might take by providing an elaborate (though not definitive) glossary of morphemes and related words, which when taken all together might suggest a translation. In Mythlore 60, however, I suggested another approach...
which concerned itself with the literary themes in J.R.R. Tolkien's concurrent poetry around the time when "Narqelion" was written, which themes could be used as keys to the overall translation of the poem. Obviously, I still had to utilize all of the tools that I had developed for my treatment in Mythlore 56, but with an aim to soften the science into more of an art. Whether either were successful is not the issue here. They simply illustrate two of the many possible methodologies available to the student of Middle-earth languages.

J.R.R. Tolkien, a linguist by profession and inclination, also possessed a deep sensitivity for sound and rhythm, the strings of a poet's soul. Except in cases where he is being a linguist explicitly (as in *The Road Goes Ever On*), his translations of his own Elvish passages have a tendency to be loose, more artistic than linguistic. It is because of this, Tolkien's artistic bent, that many of us who attempt translations fall into grievous errors while formulating grammars and declensions, and why we are continually having to revise our views as more linguistic material is published. It is the nature of the beast, but the beast bites and is bitten.

In order to illustrate some of the more obvious problems when translating from one language to another, the rest of the column will deal with a long passage in Elvish given with translation — the Song of Firiel in the *Lost Road*.

### The Song of Firiel

In the third chapter of *"The Lost Road"*, Elendil and his son, Herendil, are walking in the star-lit garden of his home in Numenor. The voice of Firiel, the daughter of the Elvish given with translation — the Song of Firiel in the Lost Road.

Now her voice sang an even-song in the Eressean tongue, but made by men, long ago. The nightingale ceased. Elendil stood still to listen; and the words came to him, far off and strange, as some melody in archaic speech sung sadly in a forgotten twilight in the beginning of man's journey in the world.

*Ilu Iluvatar en kare eldain a firimoin*

*ar antarota mannar Valion: numessier.....

The Father made the World for elves and mortals, and he gave it into the hands of the Lords. They are in the West.

Toi aina, mana, meldielto — enga morion:

*They are holy, blessed and beloved: save the dark one.*

*talantie. Mardello Melko lende: marie.*

*He is fallen. Melko has gone from the earth: it is good.*

Eldain en karier Isil, nan hildin Ur-anar.

*For Elves they made the Moon, but for Men the red Sun.*

Toi irimar. Ilqainen antar annar lestanen

*which are beautiful. To all they gave in measure the gifts*

Iluvataren. Ilu vanya, fanya, eari, of Iluvatar.

*The world is fair, the sky, the seas,*

i-mar, ar ilqa imen. Irima ye Numenor.

*the earth and all that is in them. Lovely is Numenor.*

Nan uye sere indo-ninya simen, ullume;

*But my heart resteth not here for ever;*

Nan uye sere indo-ninya simen, ullume;

But my heart resteth not here for ever;

ten si ye tyelma, yeva tyel ar i-narqelion,

*for here is ending, and there will be an end and the Fading,*

ire ilqa yeva notina, hostainieva, yallume:

*when all is counted, and all numbered at last,*

ananta uva tare farea, ufarea!

*but yet it will not be enough, not enough.*

Man tare antava nin Iluvatar, Iluvatar

*What will the Father, O Father, give me*
enyaë tar i tyel, ire Anarinya qeluva?
in that day beyond the end when my Sun faileth?

Working the Glossaries

The first problem to be addressed is the glossing of the vocabulary used in the language text. Tolkien's accompanying translation is of inestimable value. The problem is that by exclusively depending on or accepting the translation as it stands deprives the translator of a level of meaning that may be more profound than the English translation. This is not Tolkien's fault as much as it is the basic conception and difference between English and Elvish. For example, Ilú (#1) is obviously "the World" in the translation, but it is equally important to know that in other places the same word is glossed as "the Universe" and "the slender airs among the stars". Would the variant semantic values alter the significance of the poem or of our conception of Fíriel, or of the entire episode as contained in the Lost Road? It is worth some thought. Word #42, i-mar, is in the translation "the earth", but elsewhere we find "dwelling, land, home" which semantically add endearments to the earth in addition to it merely being a lump of dirt that happens to hold us up. Homographs can be confusing, as in #63. The word ire can be glossed as both having to do with "eternity" and with "desirer" from sources outside of the present text; in the text, however, it seems to be translated as the temporal qualifier "when". The degree of profundity may deepen as we attempt to accommodate all of the meanings; on the other hand, it may just muddy the waters. It is at junctures like this when one begins to doubt one's sanity or determines to cast his lot in with the rather obtuse and obnoxious arguments that roll in obscure and arcane publications which cater to this sort of mind-boggling trivia.

Being Ordered About

The next problem to be confronted has to do with word order. English speakers without a second language are conditioned to what is called by linguists an SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) system of grammar. That is to say, normal sentences in English usually begin with the subject of the sentence, followed by the verb, and then any objects of the verb. Other languages may follow other conventions like SOV, as in German, where the audience is compelled to wait until the end of the sentence to find out what is going on. The implications of these systems are enormous (See Mythlore 58, pp. 26-30, 57 for a discussion of analytical vs synthetic languages, bagels, and editors). In the first line of the Song of Fíriel, the object of the verb kaë (#4) is Ilú (#1) and the subject, Iluxatar (#2). This would constitute an OSV, "The World Father made...". The passage contained in #20-22 is literally "Earth-from Melko has gone"; odd in English, but quite acceptable in the more synthetic grammar of Elvish. The word order in #74-79 seems odd as well: "What in addition will give to me the Father, Father". This last, as the others, is readable, but it feels quaint, perhaps a little archaic. Learning to discern the word order while translating is one of the first hurdles a beginning Tolkien enthusiast learns to surmount, with well-barked shins.

Moving from ! to ?

A basic rule of thumb in endeavors such as these is to work from the known to the unknown. Glossaries and etymologies are useful, but typically they are noun-oriented and usually in the nominative case (that is, uninflected). Noun declensions, such as the one suggested in Mythlore 58, are helpful if they are accurate. Fortunately, an unabridged, unedited, unmended version of J.R.R. Tolkien's letter to Richard Plotz (circa 1966) which included two Quenya noun declensions, cirya and lasse, has finally appeared in Vinyar Tengwar (#6: July 1989) with the permission of both Dick and the Tolkien Estate. Doubly fortunate, I had an unexpurgated, unsullied copy of those declensions in front of me while writing Quenti Lembardil- lion for Mythlore 58. Applying that system, together with Tolkien's translation for the Song of Fíriel, confirms the usage and clarifies the meaning of the text.

Many declined words are easily identified in this fashion. The allative or illative case (#10), the genitive case (#11, #18), the locative case (#12), the ablative case (#20), and the instrumental or instructive case (#33, #36) are probably identifiable as such, particularly in light of Tolkien's translation. The existence of a dative case seems to be confirmed by #5, #7, #24, #29 and possibly #45. The words #3 and #25 appear to be a separate dative grammatical marker; the familiar #77 confirms not only the dative, but also the existence of a declined pronominic system. The appearance of the separate dative marker in the Song of Fíriel and the absence of the dative declension in the Plotz letter ought to give one pause as to the direction and nature of the development of the languages of Middle-earth.

From Equation to Description

Probably the most elusive aspect of Elvish grammar studies up to this point has been the conjugation of verbs. The parsings presented in The Road Goes Ever On suggest that the system is quite elaborate. To my knowledge, no one has even claimed to have seen a complete verb conjugation similar to the noun declension Tolkien provided for Dick Plotz. That such a document exists is certain; if and when it will appear is uncertain. The Song of Fíriel, however, gives us some clues in addition to the ones revealed elsewhere. Without going into an elaborate discussion of the possibilities, I would draw attention to several words which suggest an aspect of Elvish grammar which, though common to English, is not understood by many: the copula verb.

The words meldielto (#16), talantie (#19), marie (#23), ye (#47, #57), yë (50), yepa (#59, #65), hostainiea (#67), and uwa (#70) have related forms in Tolkien's translation; they involve phrasing that use the verb "to be". While we ought to be cautious, given the nature of translation in general, still some tentative observations might be made. In #46-48, ye is used almost as an equals sign, "Numenor = lovely". In #56-58, the equation is visible as well, "here = ending".
except that the right side of the equation is either a gerund or a present participle rather than an adverbial modifier. Although it is affixed with the negative prefix u- and is translated in an unusual way, #50 can be seen to function in the same manner. The translation confirms our initial suspicion that #59 and #65 are the future tense forms of ye. The negative future tense, #70, demonstrates how diverse conjugated verb forms of the same verb can be. (It must be admitted that excessive use of a form like *uyeva might injure the lips of the most articulate Elf.) Without going into the pronominal markers and other devices present, I find it interesting that #16, #19, and #23 have a suffixal form of ye, -ie, rendered in the translation as “They are... beloved”, “he is fallen”, and “it is good”. Although someone may wish to quibble, this equation construction in English is usually referred to as a “copula”, meaning literally “to couple together, to pair, or equate”. For many linguists, the copula is the historical basis for the formation of the adjective. I find it fascinating that Tolkien’s translation of the Song of Firiel only has one legitimate adjective, “dark”, as part of the translation of the patronymic *morion (#18) (although a weak case might be made for #52, “my heart”, and #85, “my Sun”). At some point, one has to consider the explicit statement in *The Road Goes Ever On* (p. 62) that *laurie* is a plural adjective. In addition, the many identified singular adjectives such as *yaimea* (MC-223), *lindornea* (LR-355), *telerea* (LT-267), *laurea* (R-62), and *kuivea* (LR-366) become extremely interesting when it is remembered that *Ea* and *ea* are both glossed as being a form of the verb “to be”. Could it not be that J.R.R. Tolkien also viewed the Elvish adjective as developed aspect of the Elvish copula verb?

As an extension of the above argument, one cannot help but ask the question (assuming that the conclusions drawn in *Mythlore* 58 have any substance in fact) if *uva, yeva,* and *hostainieva* have anything to do with the partitive case as well as their obvious markings for the future tense. I think that it would be wise to consider every possibility as being worth consideration, realizing that Tolkien created his languages methodically. Similarities in suffixes and prefixes, in declensions and conjugations, cannot always be fortuitous. If we unwashed dabblers can make such unabashed observations, certainly the Master Linguist must have noted the same and accounted for them in some fashion.

The poem and interlinear translation below, *LR-72 B,* are taken from the version given on page 72 of *The Lost Road*. The Eressean is in bold type, my glossings are in regular type, and J.R.R. Tolkien’s prose version is in italics. Be aware (beware!) that these are mere ruminations, designed to open up new vistas (and old wounds) and ought to be taken as such.

**Translation LR-72 B**

**The Song of Firiel**

*Ilu Iluvatar en kare eldina firimoin*  
World Father of all / for make elves and mortals  
Universe Sky-father (dat.) build (dat.) (dat.)
and-but (fut.) in addition sufficient enough
but yet it will not be enough, not enough.

Man tare antava nin Iluvatar, Iluvatar
What beyond give me Iluvatar Iluvatar
in addition (fut.) (dat.)
What will the Father, O Father, give me

enyare tar i tyel, ire Anarilya geluva?
yonder beyond the end when Sun-my fail
future point in addition (fut.) (dat.)
in that day beyond the end when my Sun faileth?

It is with greater caution, it is to be hoped, yet with renewed determination that we reconsider what J.R.R. Tolkien has accomplished in his languages. The mountains rise above us, the crevices and escarpments gape before us, and the breezes from the far away sea urge us on. This is not sand on the beach, it is the real thing.

.....To die, to sleep—
No more, and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir. 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished.....

(Hamlet III, 1:60-64)

Notes

1 Vinayar Tengwar, Carl F. Hostetter and Jorge Quinonez eds. A publication of the Elvish Linguistic Fellowship (ELF) of the Mythopoeic Society issued bi-monthly at $10.00 (USA) per year; Beyond Bree, Nancy Marthch ed. The newsletter of the American Mensa Tolkien SIG published monthly at $7.00 (USA) per year; Quettar, David Doughan ed. The Bulletin of the Linguistic Fellowship of the British Tolkien Society published quarterly at $7.50 (British Sterling), Cirth de Gandalf, Nathalie Kotowski ed. A bimonthly periodical published in Belgium in French at 450 (FB) per year. All of these publications have appeal and each has its own flavor and approach to the languages of Middle-earth.

2 Not only did I use my own Concordances, Indexes, and Glossaries (which are shamelessly advertised elsewhere in this issue), but also Christopher Tolkien was kind enough to send me hitherto unpublished references from the Quenya Lexicon in personal letters. Such blatant esoterism is unpardonable, but my reason for mentioning the unpublished material is to give fair warning that all assertions, even my own, are suspect until all of the linguistic materials have passed into print.

3 One must at least entertain the idea that -ye may very well have something to do with ye, albeit in some oblique fashion.

14. "But when sir Launcelot sere he was so ashamed, [and] that bycause he drew hys swerde to her on the morne aftir that he had layne by her, that he wolde nat salewe her nother speke wyth her. And yet sir Launcelot thought that she was the farest woman that ever he sye in his lyef dayes."

15. "Sir Launcelot began to resorte unto queene Gwenivere agayne and forgate the promise and the perfection that he made in the queste...so they loved togydirs more hoten than they dud toforehonde..."