

THE LANGUAGES OF MIDDLE-EARTHby Bob Borsley

The languages of the various peoples of Middle-earth are one of the most interesting features of The Lord of the Rings. Study of them is difficult because of the comparatively few examples of them in the book but, nevertheless, a considerable amount can be learnt about them. This is a description of the languages based on information from both The Lord of the Rings and The Road Goes Ever On. To this information I have added comments and observations of my own. A glossary of linguistic terms is given at the end of the essay.

## THE ELVISH LANGUAGES

Two Elvish languages are seen in THE Lord of The Rings : Quenya or High-elven and Sindarin or Grey-elven \*. Quenya was the ancient language of Eldamar brought to Middle-earth by the High Elves who returned in exile at the end of the First Age. It was in the Third Age no longer a birth tongue, but had become an 'Elven-latin' used only for ceremony and song. The High Elves in the Third Age used the Sindarin of the Grey Elves for every day use. This was originally akin to Quenya but had changed greatly over the years so that it had become far estranged from the High-elven tongue.

## QUENYA

Perhaps the most notable feature of the phonology of Quenya is, as in such languages as Italian or Finnish, the frequency of words ending in vowels. As in Finnish t, s, n, r, and l are the only consonants that occur finally. Another notable feature is that the consonants b, d, and g do not occur initially. Here again there is a similarity to Finnish. b and g only occur after the related nasals - d also occurs after r and l. It seems possible that Quenya originally possessed both initial b and initial g. The relationship between Quenya Valar and the cognate Sindarin word Belain \*\* seems more probably explained by the weakening in Quenya of b to v \*\*\* than by the strengthening in Sindarin of V to b. Similarly the difference between Quenya alda 'tree' and Sindarin galadh seems most likely explained by the loss in Quenya of initial g.

A number of changes in the development of Quenya can be seen. One is the change of w to v, a change which took place in the evolution of the Romance languages from Latin. This is seen in the development of archaic Quenya wilya 'air', 'sky' into Third Age Quenya vilya. Then there is the change of z to r, a change which took place in the early development of Latin and of the Germanic languages. This is seen in the development of early Quenya aze 'sunlight' into afe. The nasal ng (the sound in English 'sing') occurred initially in archaic Quenya as it does in Malayan and the

\* A third language that of the Silvan Elves is mentioned but no examples of it occur. The words Lorien, Caras Galadhon, Amroth and Nimrodel are probably Silvan in origin but adapted to Sindarin.

\*\* Senh in Orbelain, Sindarin name for the last day of the week.

\*\*\* This change occurred in the evolution of modern Greek from classical Greek.

Bantu languages. By the Third Age it had become n. This is seen in the development of archaic Quenya ngwalme 'Torment' into nwalme.

A number of changes occurred in spirants during the history of Quenya. One is the change of th to s. This accounts for the difference between Quenya isil 'moon' and the Sindarin cognate ithil. Another is the weakening of the velar spirant ch (the sound in Scottish 'loch') to h in an initial position. Finally there is the weakening of s to h before l, r, and y. sl became initially a voiceless l, a sound that occurs in Welsh and in some American Indian languages, and then developed into an ordinary l.

Quenya has a highly inflected morphology like Latin or Greek, or, again, like Finnish. Nouns are inflected to show number and case as in Latin and Greek, and also to show possession as in Finnish or Turkish. Two different plural endings occur. These are -r which is seen in tier 'paths' and ramar 'wings' and -i which is seen in eleni 'stars' and lassi 'leaves'. There is also a dual number characterized by the ending -t. This is seen in maryat 'her two hands'.

Genitive, ablative, locative and dative cases can be seen, to use the terms generally applied in Indo-European languages \*. A genitive ending -o is seen in Vardo 'of Varda' and Calaciryó 'of Calaciryá'. Another genitive ending -va is seen in miruvoreva 'of mead'. An ablative ending -llo is seen in sindanoriello 'out of a grey country' and in Romello 'from the East'. Another ablative ending -o is seen in Oloossoe 'from Mount Everwhite'. A locative ending -nen or -en is seen in surinen 'in the wand' and lirinen 'in the song'. A dative ending -mar meaning 'upon' is seen in falmalinnar 'upon the foaming waves\*\*'.

It is uncertain how the various cases are formed in the plural. Whether they are formed as in agglutinative languages such as Turkish by adding the ordinary singular case endings to the plural noun or whether they are formed with completely different endings as in



\* In view of the similarity between Quenya and Finnish the terms used in Finnish grammar might be more appropriate. These would be genitive, ablative inessive and allative.

\*\* This might be termed an adpositional case to use the Finnish term

inflecting languages such as Latin and Greek is not really clear. From what little evidence there is the former seems to be the more likely. In aldaron 'of the trees' it seems likely that -r is the plural ending and -on an ordinary genitive ending although there are no actually examples of its being used with a singular noun.

As has been said Quenya nouns are also inflected to show possession as are Finnish and Turkish nouns. Unlike Finnish and Turkish Quenya places the possessive suffix immediately after the stem and before any other suffix \*. Two examples of possessive suffixes can be seen: -rya 'her' in marvat and -nya 'my' in Hildinyar 'my heirs'

Quenya adjectives agree in number with the nouns they qualify. Whether they agree in case as well is not certain. The agreement in number can be seen in the first line of Galadriel's farewell song, At! laurie lantar lassi surinen 'Ah! like gold fall the leaves in the wind.' Here laurie 'like gold' is in the plural to agree with lassi 'leaves', its singular form being laurea.

Quenya verbs are seen in three tenses; present, future and perfect. In the present tense the endings -a and -ar, third person singular and plural respectively are seen. Examples of these are caita 'lies' sila 'shines', lantar 'fall' and tintilar 'tremble'. Future tense endings -uvan first person singular and -uva third person singular are seen in maruvan 'I will abide' and enquantuva 'shall refill'. Perfect tense endings -ien and -ier first person singular and third person plural are seen in utulien 'I am come' and avanier 'have passed away'. The personal endings can apparently be omitted where the person is shown elsewhere. Thus hiruvalye 'thou shalt find' but elye hiruva 'even thou shalt find'.

A number of Quenya affixes can be seen. one of the most common is the suffix -a used to form adjectives from nouns. This is seen in taurea 'forested' and lomea 'shadowed'. Another important suffix is -tar which forms agent nouns. This occurs in Telcontar 'Strider' and Envinyatar 'Renewer' \*\*\*. Another is the suffix -ma which denotes an instrument. This occurs in corma 'ring', calma 'lamp' and falma 'wave'. In addition to -a there are a number of other suffixes used to form adjectives :- -in seen in alcarin 'glorious' and in Sindarin, -wa seen in vanwa 'lost' and with -in in Sindarinwa and -ime seen in unotime 'innumerable' \*\*\*\*. Four prefixes can be seen: the negative prefix u- in unotime, a perfective prefix a- in avanier 'have passed away', un- meaning 'down' in untupa 'downroofs' and en- 're-' in Envinyatar and enquantuva 'will refill'

The Quenya definite article is i. It is frequently omitted where it would be used in modern English.

The syntax of Quenya is characterised by comparative freedom of word order as in most inflected languages. Verbs are seen both preceding their subjects and coming at the end of their clauses. Adjectives generally precede nouns, for example ilye tier 'all paths' and linte yuldar 'swift draughts'.

\*In Turkish possessive suffixes come after a plural suffix but before a case suffix; in Finnish they come after both.

\*\* -ryo in omaryo is a contraction of -rya and the genitive -o

\*\*\* Quenya also apparently forms agent nouns with a -d suffix. This is seen in Quendi 'the speakers'.

\*\*\*\* Two other suffixes occur: an instrument noun suffix -we seen in ungwe 'spider's web' and tinwe 'spark' and an abstract noun suffix -me seen in silme 'starlight' and nwalme 'torment'.

SINDARIN

Sindarin, as has been said, was originally akin to Quenya but by the Third Age it had become sharply differentiated. The main steps by which it became differentiated can be clearly seen.

The most important of the sound changes which took place in the development of Sindarin is the weakening of medial consonants. Through this weakening t, c, b, d and m became d, g, v, dh (the sound of th in English 'the') and v respectively \*. p presumably became b although there is no example of it and g apparently disappeared. The change of t to d can be inferred from the relationship between Edain and the Quenya cognate Atani. The change of c to g can be seen in the name Argeleb which is derived from celeb 'silver'. The change of b to v is seen in the name Arveleg which is derived from another name Belog. the change of d to dh is seen in Fanuidhol 'Cloudyhead' where dhol is the same element as dol in Dol Guldur and the change of m to v is seen in Menelvagor which is related to Quenya Menelmacar. The disappearance to g is seen in Harondor 'South Gondor' \*\*. m apparently also disappeared in some cases, this probably explains the relationship between Hithui 'November', literally 'Mist-month', and the Quenya Hisime.

Another series of changes took place whereby double p and double t became ph and th respectively. Single t in some words also became th and c similarly became ch in some cases. ph in ephul 'outerfence' is derived from double p. The change of double t to th is probably seen in Methedras 'last-mountain' which is presumably related to Quenya metta 'end'. The change of single t to th accounts for the relationship between ethuil 'spring' and the Quenya cognate tuile. The relationship between echuir 'stirring' and the Quenya coire is likewise explained by the change of c to ch.

A third series of consonant changes is the assimilation of voiced stops to preceding nasals. By this change mb both medially and finally became double m, subsequently becoming single m finally. Thus Sindarin has rem 'mesh' where Quenya has rombe. nd became double n\*\*\*. This explains the difference between Sindarin Ennor 'Middle-Earth' and the Quenya cognate Endore. Lastly ng became the simple nasal in English 'sing' finally but remained medially.

A number of other consonant changes of somewhat less importance also took place. Firstly qu was lost. This is a common sound in Quenya but does not occur in Sindarin. Secondly hy became h. Thus the Sindarin for south is harad while the Quenya is hyarmen. Thirdly initial whiq became v in Third Age Quenya apparently became gw in Sindarin, a change which took place in the development of Welsh. This explains the relationship between Sindarin Gwirith 'April' and the Quenya cognate Viresse. Finally n before r became dh. Thus Caradhras 'Red horn' is derived from caran and rass.

The most important vowel change in the evolution of Sindarin is the mutation of stem vowels when followed by an ending containing an i.\*\*\*\*

\* m apparently became first a fricative m and then v

\*\* g is, however, retained after x in Argonath and after a vowel in Bregalad

\*\*\* nd remained at the end of fully accented monosyllables such as thond 'root' and also before r, as in Andros 'long-foam'.

\*\*\*\* Similar changes took place in Welsh under the name "i-affection" and in Old English and Icelandic under the name "i-mutation".

As a result of this change Sindarin has Edain 'Men' where Quenya has Atani. The majority of plurals in Sindarin are characterised by similar changes in stem vowels, all presumably resulting from the effect of an old plural suffix -i. Thus: amon 'hill', plural emyn; orch 'orc', plural yrch; barad 'tower', plural beraid and perian 'halfling', plural periaim \*.

Another important vowel change which can be seen to have taken place after the mutation of stem vowels in the loss of final vowels. This produced such pairs as:- Sindarin rhiw 'winter', Quenya hrive; Sindarin laer 'summer', Quenya laire; Sindarin loss 'snow', Quenya losse and so on. Two further vowel changes worth noting are the change of a to o before r and the change of long e to long i. The former can be seen in Sindarin anor 'sun', Quenya anar and the latter in Sindarin Ninui 'February', Quenya Nenime.

Probably the most interesting feature of the phonology of Third Age Sindarin is the mutation of initial consonants. Apparently in earlier stages in the development of Sindarin little phonetic recognition was given to the word unit; as a result initial consonants of words in close-knit phrases underwent the same phonetic changes as affected medial consonants. Words thus occur with different initial consonants in different circumstances, for example Periaim 'halflings' but i-Pherian 'the halflings' and tiw 'letters' but i-thiw 'the letters'.

Another feature of interest is the occurrence of a sixth vowel not found in Quenya, a high front rounded vowel transcribed as y. This vowel which occurs in German as ü, in French as u and in a number of other languages \*\* is derived from o and u by mutation and from the diphthongs iu and eu.

Sindarin morphology is considerably simpler than Quenya's. The loss of final vowels resulted in the decay of the case system it must once have possessed. Sindarin nouns, as a result, are indeclinable except with regard to number. Plurals, as has been seen, are most commonly formed by internal vowel changes. They are also commonly formed by the suffix -ath which is seen in such words as elenath 'stars' and samath 'chambers' \*\*\*.

Sindarin verbs show a much more fully preserved case system than do nouns. Present tense endings -on first person singular and -a third person singular are seen in Hallon 'I call' and penna 'slants down'. In the past tense first person singular endings -en and -in are seen in onen 'I gave' and chebin 'I have kept', and a third person singular ending -ant is seen in teithant 'drew'. The future tense has a first person singular ending -athon seen in linnathon 'I will chant'. An imperative ending -o occurs in edro! 'open' and pedo! 'speak!'. Finally two participle endings are seen, a present participle ending -iel in diriel 'gazing' and a past participle ending -in in remmin 'woven'.

Examples of a number of Sindarin prefixes and suffixes occur. Firstly there is the ending -iel which, in addition to its use in forming participles is used to form adjectives from nouns. This is

\* Such English pairs as 'foot' and 'feet', and 'mouse' and 'mice' are similarly derived.  
\*\* For example Turkish, Finnish and Icelandic.  
\*\*\* -ath was formerly a collective noun suffix. This meaning is still seen in Periannath 'The Hobbits (as a race)' contrasted with the ordinary plural periaim.

seen in miriel 'sparkling like jewels' derived from mir 'jewel'. Adjectives are also formed from nouns by means of two other suffixes -ui and -en. The former occurs in lithui 'ashen' derived from lith meaning ash and the latter in lossen 'snowy' derived from loss 'snow'. One final suffix is the augmentative -on seen in aearon 'the Great Ocean'. One prefix is seen, the augmentative g- in gloss 'dazzling white', another derivative of loss.

There are one or two points of interest in Sindarin syntax, Possibly the most interesting point is that Sindarin, like Welsh, uses simple juxtaposition of nouns to show possession, the possessed object preceding the possessor. Thus 'Prince of the Halflings' is Ernil i-Pheriannath. Sindarin adjectives likewise follow the nouns they qualify as do Welsh adjectives, but again like Welsh compound nouns with the adjectival element first are common. Morthond 'Blackroot' and Anfalas 'Long-shore' are examples of such compounds. One further point of interest is the use of demonstrative adjectives with words that are already limited by the definite article. This is seen in i-thiw hin 'these signs'. Here again Sindarin resembles Welsh.

### MANNISH LANGUAGES

Many of the Mannish languages of the Third Age are ultimately derived from the language of the Edain in the First Age or from the languages of their near kin. The Edain passed across the sea to Numenor at the start of the Second Age and came increasingly under the influence of Elvish culture. As a result their language was greatly softened and enriched. The Numenoreans brought this enriched version of their ancestral tongue back to Middle-earth at the downfall of Numenor.

It subsequently spread, adopting many words from ~~l~~hasser languages as it did so, to become the Westron, a Common Speech spoken throughout the Western lands of Middle-earth.

Descended from the languages of the Edain's near kin are a number of the languages of the Third Age. The language of the Rohirrim is the most important example. Other languages of this group are those of the Beornings, the Woodmen of Western Mirkwood and the men of Dale and Esgaroth. A number of other languages unrelated to the Westron were still spoken in the west of Middle-earth in the Third Age. Such languages are those of the Dunlendings, the Wild Men of Druadan Forest and the Dead Men of Dunharrow.

Of the various Mannish tongues the Westron is the only one of which examples occur \*. Even here examples are few and only a very little can be learnt about the language. In phonology the most notable feature is the occurrence of a series of palatal consonants: ch, j, sh and zh (the sound of z in English 'azure'). Also of interest is the occurrence of a z sound and of an obscure vowel like that occurring initially in such English words as 'away' and 'about'. Neither Quenya or Sindarin possesses either of these sounds. Two points of Westron grammar can be noted. Firstly there is the plural suffix -il seen in mumakil 'oliphaunts' and secondly there is the distinction made between familiar and deferential forms in both second and third person pronouns. \*\*

\* A solitary word of the speech of the Dunlendings occurs, namely Forgoil meaning 'Strawheads', the name they gave to the Rohirrim.

\*\* The former is a common occurrence, found for instance in such languages as Welsh, French, Icelandic and Malay. The latter is more rare.

## OTHER LANGUAGES

Of the other languages of Middle-earth Dwarvish is the one of which most can be said. This was used principally for matters of lore, the Dwarves using the languages of the men among whom they dwelt for day to day use. In phonology there are two interesting features that can be mentioned. Firstly there is the occurrence of aspirated consonants: 'th and kh. Such sounds occurred in Classical Greek and are found in a number of modern Indian languages. Secondly there is the use of a uvular r such as occurs in many dialects of French and German. In morphology a genitive ending -u can be seen in Khazaddumu 'of Khazad-dum'. The use of inflexions, however, appears to have been limited. Khazad 'Dwarves' appears in the same form both as a nominative in Khazad ai-menu 'the Dwarves are upon you' and as a genitive in Baruk Khazad 'Axes of the Dwarves'. A single derivative suffix -ul meaning 'son of' can be seen in Fundinul 'son of Fundin'.

The only other languages of which anything can be said are the Black Speech and Entish. Black Speech was devised by Sauron in the Dark Years to be the language of all his servants but in the Third Age was only used by the captains of Mordor. Other orcs used dialects of their native Orkish or dialects of the Westron. Like Dwarvish Black Speech uses a uvular r. Another interesting feature of its sound system is the occurrence of a voiced velar spirant gh. It is an agglutinative language making great use of suffixes. Of particular interest is the use of suffixes attached to verbs to represent pronoun objects \*. Of Entish little can be said. It is, we are told, slow, sonorous and agglomerated. It has a multiplicity of vowel shades and makes use of distinctions of tone like Chinese and some African languages. The Ents used it only themselves for no others could learn it.

\* As in Arabic

Please turn over for Glossary



GLOSSARY

- ABLATIVE: a noun case with the general meaning 'from' or 'out of'.
- AGGLUTINATIVE: (of languages) making use of many suffixes-(or prefixes) each generally with a single clearly defined grammatical function.
- ASPIRATED: (of consonants) followed by a puff of breath resembling an h sound.
- CASE: any one of a set of variant forms of a noun (or pronoun or adjective) used according to the different grammatical relationships entered into.
- COGNATE: (of words) derived from the same word in a parent language
- DATIVE: a noun case with the general meaning of 'to' or 'into'.
- DUAL: special form of a word to show that two persons or things are referred to.
- FRONT: (of vowels) articulated with the highest part of the tongue far forward in the mouth, e.g. the vowels of 'beat', 'bit', 'bet', 'bat'.
- GENITIVE: a noun case indicating possession.
- HIGH: (of vowels) articulated with the tongue high in the mouth, e.g. the vowels in 'sea', 'who'.
- INDO-EUROPEAN: family of languages including most of the languages of Europe, Persian and the languages of Northern India.
- INFLECTING: (of languages) having suffixes and stems closely fused together.
- LOCATIVE: a noun case with the general meaning 'in' or 'at'.
- MORPHOLOGY: the permissible uses of inflexions and affixes in a language.
- PALATAL: (of consonants) articulated against the hard palate in the roof of the mouth.
- PERFECTIVE (of prefixes) indicating completed action in a verb.
- PHONOLOGY: the sound system of a language.
- ROUNDED: (of vowels) articulated with rounded lips.
- SPIRANT: a consonant in which the air passage in the mouth is narrowed so much that audible friction is produced, e.g. s,z,f,v,th.
- SYNTAX: the permissible ways in which words can be arranged to form utterances.
- UVULAR: (of consonants) articulated with the uvula, the small fleshy lobe hanging at the back of the mouth.
- VELAR: (of consonants) articulated against the velum, the soft backward part of the roof of the mouth.
- VOICED: (of consonants) articulated with the vocal chords vibrating.

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BELLADONNA'S POSTBAG

First, greetings to you all --- Pedo Mellon a Minno! whenever you are passing the door of my lofty Flet. I had a surprise visit a few days ago from Graham ('of Graham') Wells, who unfortunately found me completely surrounded by grandchildren -- and if you doubt that two mini-hobbits under the age of four can completely surround one -- just try it! However when the mini-hobbits had gone on their way, we had a long and interesting talk, during which it appeared that Graham may be settling in London soon. It will be nice to have him within reach of other London Hobbits.

The Hobbit Picnic at Hampstead was a great success. On Saturday, June 27th, the Hobbits assembled at Hampstead Underground Station, and following a beacon flag (or Banner with a Strange Device) made their way across by Whitestone Pond through the woods of Golders Hill (very