

The Common Speech and its speakers in The Lord of the Rings

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All the writers of fantasy stories who want to create credible secondary worlds are faced with the same problem: the languages spoken by the inhabitants of their world. It is clear to everyone that in any 'possible' world nations, tribes or states should have their respective language or languages. This need is in conflict with basic narrative necessities: how will the characters of each story interact with people from other regions? And if the main characters come from different linguistic backgrounds, how will the author minimise the difficulties this fact creates? Each writer provides his or her own solution to this problem. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien resolved the issue by postulating a 'lingua franca' for the area in which his story takes place: the Common Speech or Westron. Most readers accept this as a clever technique on his part, but from a linguistic point of view it should be investigated whether it is indeed justifiable for so many different groups of people to use the same language in order to communicate with each other. The final question is the following: is the idea really credible?

The first impression is that the use of the Common Speech in so many lands by so many people is not quite convincing with respect to particular cases. For instance, it seems strange that the Hobbits speak the same language as the people of Gondor since the two nations had virtually no contact for hundreds of years. Arnor, the North kingdom where Westron was spoken, was dissolved in the year 1974, Third Age (*LOTR 1123*). From that time and for over a thousand years the Hobbits had little contact with people from other areas. During this time, it seems unlikely that Hobbit and Gondorian varieties of the Westron should remain mutually intelligible. There is also the question of how and why Hobbits and other Middle-earth nations adopted the Common speech – in many cases as their native language, in

others as a second language. In particular, it is strange that the Orcs adopted Westron, which was after all the language of their enemies, and spoke it in such a manner that Pippin found much of their talk intelligible (*LOTR 466*). It is these problematic areas that will be discussed in this paper.

Despite the existence of these problems it should not be forgotten that Tolkien had studied linguistics and paid exceptional attention to the credibility of his fantasy or 'secondary' world. If the origins and history of the Common Speech, as Tolkien presents them, are analysed, then most of the problems will disappear.

Númenorean ascendancy

The first thing to point out is that Westron was originally the speech of the people of Númenor, who had ruled the Northwest of Middle-earth for many years. It is therefore quite natural that their language was spoken in all the lands that were part of their empire, and also in many nearby areas. In the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings* we learn that the Númenoreans started their imperial expansion in the year 1800, Second Age (*LOTR 1172*). The end of the kingdom of Arnor and the beginning of the decline of Gondor – the two Númenorean centres of power in Middle-earth – came more than three thousand years later (*LOTR 1123*). Even at the time that the story of *The Lord of the Rings* takes place it is clear that the kingdom of Gondor is the most powerful and prestigious state in the area.

During the years of Númenorean supremacy the Westron tongue was the language of the most prestigious ethnic group in the north-west of Middle-earth. In addition, the Númenorean empire and later the kingdoms of Arnor and Gondor apparently used the Westron as the language of administration, education and perhaps religion. Tolkien explains that the Númenoreans, who at first used the Elvish language Quenya as the official, later abandoned it and replaced it with

their native language, the Westron tongue (*LOTR 1163*). The Common Speech was the variety of Westron that spread throughout Middle-earth during the Númenorean era. The official status of the Westron played an important part in its expansion among the native population. The linguist Janet Holmes mentions that "where one group abrogates political power and imposes its language along with its institutions – government, administration, law courts, education, religion – it is likely that minority groups will find themselves under increasing pressure to adopt the language of the dominant group" (*Holmes 60*). Historically, there are many examples of language shift towards the language of the dominant group. The most relevant ones here are the spread of Greek throughout the empire of Alexander the Great and the spread of Latin throughout the Roman empire. It therefore seems entirely logical that in many areas of Middle-earth the local languages were gradually displaced by the Westron. In some other areas, however, especially in places where strong nationalist feelings existed or in cases of isolated groups, the local languages survived and the Common Speech was learned only as a second language. This seems to be the case with the Rohirrim, and also with the Elves and Dwarves. These groups never abandoned their native languages, although many individuals, especially the most educated ones, had good command of the Common. Among the Drúedain and the Dunlendings, on the other hand, it seems possible that only very few people could speak the Common Speech with fluency.

Hobbit isolation

Although it is logical that the people of Middle-earth adopted the Common, it is not as easy to explain the fact that varieties spoken in different regions remained mutually intelligible after the Númenorean power waned. The Hobbits in partic-

ular, being isolated from the outer world after the fall of the kingdom of Arnor, should have developed (in the one thousand years of their seclusion), a variety which should not be easy for a Gondorian speaker to understand easily, even if the two varieties had common origins. This seems to be the case with such languages as French and Italian in the real world – both had Latin as their ancestor, but still they are not mutually intelligible and are considered to be different languages. How is it possible that the Hobbits in the story could communicate so easily with Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli, king Thëoden, Beregond, Treebeard and so many characters coming from different regions?

The best explanation for this phenomenon is that the language used by Hobbits and people in other areas had been standardised and codified long before the story took place, so that many aspects of speech, and most notably syntax, basic vocabulary and morphology, remained unaffected. Indeed, Tolkien mentions in his prologue that at the time Hobbits started making settlements within Númenorean territory, they "learned their letters and began to write after the manner of the Dunedain" (*LOTR* 16). The writing system was probably similar in Arnor and in Gondor at that time. Its existence made the language spoken throughout former Númenorean territories immune to dramatic changes and makes credible the fact that Hobbit and other varieties of the Common remained mutually intelligible after so many years. The most profound differences should exist in pronunciation, which is less influenced by the writing system, and indeed Beregond tells Pippin that "strange accents do not mar fair speech" (*LOTR* 792). Phonological differences, however, do not necessarily make two varieties unintelligible to each other. Interlocutors have the ability to 'converge' towards the speech of another person, especially when communication is important (*Holmes*). This may be the case with the speakers of the Common Speech in *The Lord of the Rings*.

An additional factor should be taken into account in explaining the mutual intelligibility of Hobbit and Gondorian speech: there was travel

and trade between the North and the South and some travellers, especially Dwarves, passed through The Shire (*LOTR* 56). The Common Speech was therefore still a useful *lingua franca* and there was motivation for Hobbits to preserve a style which would be intelligible to foreigners. It seems that Hobbits, especially the most educated, cultivated and reproduced a relatively formal style of speaking, one that remained close to 'book language', a style which might also serve as means of communication with foreigners. This style was probably prestigious, as Gaffer Gamgee's comments on Bilbo's 'educated' speech implies: "a very nice well-spoken gentlehobbit is Mr. Bilbo" (*LOTR* 34). It therefore seems that a form of 'standard' Westron remained influential among Hobbits, something which explains why Hobbits had few communication problems in the story: they were familiar with this kind of language. It should not be forgotten that with the exception of Sam, the other Hobbits who appear in the story – Frodo, Merry and Pippin – belong to 'noble', aristocratic families and were therefore members of the educated middle or upper classes. This means that they were knowledgeable of 'book language', of low frequency, archaic and formal vocabulary and therefore they had a larger linguistic repertoire than ordinary Hobbits, a repertoire which they could exploit effectively when interacting with foreigners.

Speaking with the enemy

All these factors provide an explanation for the relative homogeneity of the Common Speech varieties spoken by the "good" races of Middle-earth. These races, Elves, Dwarves, Hobbits and Humans, are in some way allied and share the desire to defeat Sauron and expel the Orcs from the territories they occupy in Middle-earth. It is natural that they share a language as well. But what about Orcs? In the text, Orcs also speak a variety of the Common Speech, as Tolkien mentions in the Appendices of *The Lord of the Rings* (1165). Orcs have almost no contact with humans and there is a strong hatred and aversion between the two races. How is it possible that the Orcs adopted the

Westron? Two problems exist here. The first is related to the fact that the contact between the two races was minimal; the second is that, according to Tolkien, Sauron had developed his own 'Black Speech' and tried to teach it to his Orcish subjects but failed. Why did the Orcs adopt the Common instead of the Black Speech?

Let us begin the discussion with the first problem. In order for the Orcs to have developed a version of the Common they must have had in the past some kind of contact with it. The book provides us with little information. It is nowhere mentioned that Orcs had diplomatic or trade relations with Human kingdoms. The only way to address this problem is therefore by making certain hypotheses, for some of which evidence can be drawn from the texts of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

First of all, it is possible that Orcs occasionally came in contact with the Common Speech through Human captives who worked as slaves in Orcish dungeons. There is some evidence that Orcs did use prisoners in such a way. In *The Hobbit*, Tolkien mentions that (non-Orcish) prisoners and slaves were forced to work "till they die for want of air and light" in goblin dungeons (69). It is therefore a possibility that Orcs learned how to use the Common from these slaves. This hypothesis is, however, weak. It is far more likely that the slaves, being the subordinate group both in status and numbers, would be forced to learn whatever language the Orcs might be using rather than the opposite. There would be no motivation for the Orcs to adopt 'slave-language'. Furthermore, the interaction between the two groups would probably amount to no more than a few commands, threats and curses. This could not result in the adoption of the Common Speech by the Orcs.

A place in Middle-earth where the Orcs definitely came under the influence of the Common Speech is Saruman's Isengard. It is known that Saruman's Uruk-hai were an Orcish race that he bred in Isengard (*LOTR* 560). Since Saruman himself spoke the Common and since it would be desirable for him to have servants that could use it, it is highly likely that he taught the language to the Uruk-hai, who learned it as their 'Mother Tongue'. This may

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explain why Ugluk's speech was comprehensible to Pippin (*LOTR 466*). Yet, there is no explanation about the adoption of the Common by other groups of Orcs, those coming from Mordor and the Misty Mountains, for example.

It may be assumed that only the Orcs that were high in the hierarchy could use the Common. It would be natural for Orcish officials, favoured by Sauron, to have a language with which they could communicate with both Orcs from other regions and other races. This hypothesis is, however, undermined by several 'facts'. For one thing, it seems that even simple Orcish soldiers had knowledge of the Common. This is evident in the case of Merry and Pippin's guards when they were captives. One of them says to Pippin in the Common: "Rest while you can, little fool", and the other adds: "If I had my way, you'd wish you were dead now" (*LOTR 466*). In addition, Tolkien explicitly mentions in the Appendices that many Orcish tribes in the Third Age "had long used the Westron as their native language" (1165). Finally, even if the hypothesis was correct, there would still be no explanation for the fact that low-standing Orcs chose the Common instead of the Black Speech as their native language.

To solve these riddles, it must be accepted as an axiom that in order for the Orcs to adopt any language it should be a language of some status within their community. The Westron must have been the language of a major Orcish tribe – which it was not – or it must have been used by high officials in Sauron's regime. It should be a language connected with social advancement and power. There is a strong possibility that the answer to the riddles is found in these last observations. We know, for example, that the lieutenant of Sauron's fortress, 'the Mouth of Sauron', was a renegade who came from the race of those that are known as 'the Black Númenoreans' (*LOTR 922*). These were Númenoreans – therefore speakers of the Westron – who entered Sauron's service during the

Second Age of Middle-earth. Apparently, they occupied important and strategic posts in Sauron's regime. In addition, as Robert Foster mentions in *The Complete Guide to Middle-earth*, three of the Nazgûl (probably the Black Captain himself), were also initially Black Númenoreans (282-3). It therefore seems likely that these Westron speakers introduced the Common Speech to Orcish dialect speakers through a direct chain from leader to subordinate. It is not unlikely that Orcs adopted the Common initially by imitating their Númenorean superiors, thinking that in this way the other Orcs would fear and respect them.

The above hypothesis is very strong, as it agrees with the principle that dominant group language is much more likely to spread to members of subordinate groups rather than the opposite. Once the Orcs learned the language, they found that it was a useful tool for communicating with other tribes, and in some cases the new language gradually displaced older ones. In other cases, a situation of bilingualism was established. Soldiers and officials should have a knowledge of the Common Speech as well as the tribal language.

The Black Speech

The only question that still remains unanswered is the failure of Sauron to impose his own 'Black Speech' on his Orcish subjects. It seems that this speech never acquired native speakers, and although it remained a prestigious language variety among the Orcs it was not spoken. Of course, it left its trace on Orcish language. Tolkien mentions that "from the Black Speech were derived many of the words that were in the Third Age wide-spread among the Orcs, such as *gâsh*, fire" (*LOTR 1165*). This means that for some time the Orcs were exposed to this language, but its influence was limited for some historical or other reason. It may be that the retreat of the Black Speech was connected to the historical events of the Second Age.

Tolkien points out that "after the first overthrow of Sauron this language in its ancient form was forgotten by all but the Nazgûl" (*LOTR 1165*).

It is possible that the Westron started to spread among the Orcs long before the development of the Black Speech. If this is true, then at the time the Black Speech was introduced the Orcs were already using the Common as a *lingua franca*. Sauron's attempt to introduce the Black Speech was probably disrupted when in the year 3262 (Second Age), he was defeated by the Númenorean army and taken prisoner to Númenor (*LOTR 1120*). During the years of his captivity it is highly likely that his subjects were ruled by the Nazgûl, who were only nine, and a larger number of Black Númenoreans, who might still be using the Westron. In this way, the Westron became once again the "official" language for Orcs. There followed the War of the Last Alliance and the defeat of Sauron. These events resulted in the gradual decline of the Black Speech in Orcish communities.

In conclusion, during the Third Age the Orcs retained the Common as a useful instrument of communication. The need to preserve this language was strong, not only as an Orcish *lingua franca* but also as the means through which the Orcs would occasionally come in contact with Humans or other races. Wars were quite frequent, and captives were taken as prisoners to Orcish dungeons. Thus, although the Orcish varieties of the Common were indeed different from the 'Standard Common', they never became totally incomprehensible to 'outsiders'. This means that even Orcs were capable of preserving a language and not only of "corrupting" it. It is therefore doubtful whether their race is as evil and 'irredeemably wicked' as presented by members of the 'Good' races, most notably by the Elves. And, as a final comment, it should be noted that language change is totally natural and there is no reason at all to label language change as 'corruption'.

Works cited

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