

How to Learn Elvish

by Nancy Martisch

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I have sometimes been asked how I learned Elvish. Are there any books on the subject? Did Christopher Tolkien provide assistance? The answer is, I taught myself with help from other Middle-earth enthusiasts. You, too, can teach yourself.

Go through *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, and note down all the foreign words (often they will be in italics). Note also any explanations or content which might provide a clue as to the meaning of the word or the language to which it belongs. Often - but not always! - the English version will be a translation or paraphrase of the Elvish. In *The Lord of the Rings* Quenya is referred to as the high tongue or the noble tongue, Sindarin as Grey Elven or Elvish. The language of the Dwarves is usually labelled as such, as are Orkish and the Black Speech. Note, also, the page number - so you can refer to it again!

Be sure to study the Appendices, because they give a lot of linguistic information. The indices, from *The Silmarillion* on (the index to *The Lord of the Rings* isn't very helpfull contain translations not found in the text. Translations are given in the Appendix in *The Silmarillion* and the "Etymologies" in *The Lost Road and Other Writings*. *The Road Goes Ever On: A Song Cycle* (Tolkien's poems set to music by Donald Swann) is invaluable for its analysis of grammar.

Compare words for which you have meanings. If "Amon Hen" means "Hill of Sight" or "Hill of the Eye", and "Amon Lhaw" means "Hill of Hearing", it is likely that "Amon" means "hill", as in "Amon Sûl", Weather-top (*The Silmarillion* confirms this). Pay attention to word order: in Sindarin place names, the geographical element comes first, followed by the name; there are no words for "of" or "of the". Note the part of speech: "amon" is a noun. And it is singular.

Look for plurals. "Emyn Beraid" means "Tower Hills", so "emyn" is probably the plural of

"amon". A similar pattern can be found in "Dúnadan", plural "Dúnedain", "Man of the West", "Men of the West". Evidently, like the English "man", "men", Sindarin can form the plural by changing the vowel. "Beraid" looks like it might be a plural too (of "Barad-dûr", "Dark Tower"), but it's rendered "Tower Hills" - why? A check of the text shows three towers at that location: probably the Elvish means "Hills of the Towers" - not exactly the same as in English.

Try to sort out the various languages. When you have words for the same thing in different languages, how do they differ? What features distinguish one language from another? You will notice that, whereas Sindarin nouns often form the plurals by changing the vowel, Quenya adds "-r" or "-i". Sindarin words frequently end in a consonant, Quenya in a vowel. Notice the letters that are used in each language, and where: "q" is never used in Sindarin, only in Quenya; "d" can begin a word in Sindarin, never in Quenya; "sh" is never used in Elvish. With practice, you will be able to deduce whether a word or phrase is Sindarin, Quenya, or something else.

Appendix D of *The Lord of the Rings (The Calendars)*, is indispensable because it gives day and month names in both Quenya and Sindarin. Other Quenya-Sindarin pairs can be found scattered through the text, such as "Feanáro" / "Feanor" in *The Silmarillion*. Compare the sound of corresponding parts of the word pairs. Quenya and Sindarin are both descended from a common Elvish ancestor. Certain regular changes took place in the development of each language. These changes are patterned after sound changes that occurred in the development of the Indo-European languages. Some etymology is given in *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, and *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (especially nos. 144, 211, 297, 347). *The Lost Road* contains a tremendous amount of information. Common Elvish "MBAR" - "house" - gives "mar" in Quenya, "bar" in

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TH SARRIN AT ANT NX ROP NPNY RH RIRRA RNPWYK LA

Sindarin. Other words beginning in "ND-" in Common Elvish give "n" in Quenya, "d" in Sindarin. Once you have learned the patterns you can guess the Quenya equivalents of Sindarin words, and *vice versa*, and use this to deduce probable meanings for words.

Notice the endings of words. What do words with the same ending share in common? Might certain endings correspond to certain parts of grammar? Since "-ul" is found on many Sindarin adjectives, it is likely to be an adjective ending.

Pay attention to the elements which make up words, especially compound words. An element with the same or similar meaning may be spelled differently in different words. "Mor-", "mori-", "morna", "morn", "-vorn" all have the sense "black, dark, night". Is there any pattern to the different spellings? Might one be found in compounds, another alone? Do they vary according to grammar? Position in the word or sentence? Language?

Real languages can be instructive, too. Not all tongues express themselves the same way as English. French, Spanish and Italian all put the adjective after the noun, and the adjective agrees with the noun in gender and number. Elvish doesn't seem to possess gender, but Elvish adjectives can follow the noun, and they agree in number (plural nouns have plural adjectives). French places the object pronoun before the verb - so does Quenya. *Sí man i yulma NIN enquantuva?* "Now who the cup FOR ME will refill?"

How are the sentences put together? The analyses of "Galatriel's lament" (Quenya) and the "Hymn to Elbereth" (Sindarin) in *The Road Goes Ever On* are vital. You will notice that in Quenya what appear to be prepositions are added to the end of the noun. This use of suffixes is typical of *inflected* languages. The endings to the noun are actually *case* endings, expressing the relationship of the noun to the rest of the sentence. Similar usage can be found in Latin, Finnish and the Slavic languages. See if you can figure out the

forms of nouns and verbs. This will enable you to understand sentences.

Humphrey Carpenter's *Tolkien: a biography* does not provide much linguistic information *per se*, but it does describe Tolkien's linguistic interests. The Professor knew Latin, Greek, French, German, Spanish, Old English, Gothic, Old Icelandic, Welsh, Finnish. Might any of these have influenced the languages of Middle-earth? Upon learning that Tolkien's Sindarin was inspired by Welsh, Quenya by Finnish, the truly dedicated will study grammars of these languages. Though of course such studies can be enlightening, it is not necessary for you to do so, since their findings have been published in Jim Allan's *Introduction to Elvish*. Many English speakers are not aware of Welsh lenition (changing the initial consonant in certain positions - such as the "G" in "Pinnath Gelin", "Gelin" is the lenited plural of "calen", "green"). This is a key to understanding Sindarin (Ruth Noel's *Languages of Middle-earth* omits Sindarin lenition).

If you can do so, take a course in historical or comparative linguistics. This is easier to learn in school because there aren't many linguistic texts available for the layman. An academic course can give you the concepts and the technical terminology, which can be very useful later.

By now you should have some familiarity with Elvish and other languages of Middle-earth. You'll find *An Introduction to Elvish* and other "graduate-level" studies far more helpful if you do some homework first. And you'll learn a lot about real-world languages, too!

Elvish enthusiasts have an advantage today because so much of Tolkien's work has been published. It was not always so. And it still isn't so in non-English-speaking countries, where many of Tolkien's works have not yet been released. The serious foreign student should try to obtain copies of Tolkien's works in English, because foreign translations are not always accurate, even when available. (Readers of English language editions should

RNAY QXJYQX QARNE YNLNFFQBBE RNAY CY LA QXJY LA

watch out for errors, too: Gildor's greeting to Frodo should be "Elen sila lúmen" omentielvo", not "lummen omentilmo" as in the Ballantine paperback).

If you want to consult unpublished material, Tolkien's manuscripts for *The Lord of the Rings* and others are at the archives of Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Other material is in the Wade Center at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois, and the Bodleian Library in Oxford. And no, Christopher Tolkien does not give

out information. But Elvish scholars will help you.

Teaching yourself Elvish (and other Middle-earth languages) is like detective work: the clues are in the text, you hunt 'em down. The forensic lab (linguistic study) provides technical assistance. A lot of the fun is in the chase. Good luck, and good hunting!

[For Nancy's bibliography, see facing page]



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are indicated by an asterisk*)

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