



# a n Introduction to Elvish

AND TO OTHER TONGUES AND PROPER NAMES AND WRITING SYSTEMS OF THE THIRD AGE OF THE WESTERN LANDS OF MIDDLE-EARTH AS SET FORTH IN THE PUBLISHED WRITINGS OF PROFESSOR JOHN RONALD REUEL TOLKIEN.

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This book takes a bit of absorbing. Partly, that sentence is an apology for missing the last number of *Amon Hen*, but just the same it's true. The hard core of *An Introduction to Elvish* is Jim Allan's Quenya and Sindarin Grammars and Dictionaries, plus Chris Gilson and Bill Welden's surveys of 'Proto-Eldarin Vowels' and 'Proto-Eldarin Consonants', and all these are *full*: they consist *entirely* of such statements as: "PE *i* > S *e* by final *ā*-affection. PE \**sinda* 'grey' > Q †*sinda*, S \**send* (M). The only evidence for this change from the published corpus is indirect: S *Cair* 'ship' < \**ceir* < \**keir* < PE \**kiryā* (Q *cirya* 'cleft', cf. also *Ciryaher*, one of the four 'ship-kings' of Gondor)", and so on and so on and so on. There's no point in pretending that anyone can read this, any more than you can read a table of logarithms; and unlike logarithms, surveys of Proto-Eldarin vowels aren't even data: they're inferences, and inferences furthermore about something that has no historical reality. So what does this book do, and what is it for?

Well, the first thing you can say about it is that it tackles head-on the most daunting aspect of *The Lord of the Rings* (all the work in the book was done pre-*Silmarillion*), as also the most mysterious one: which is that according to Tolkien, he saw his trilogy not as a myth nor an epic nor a fairy-story, as most critics have preferred to think, but as "an exercise in linguistic aesthetic". Practically nobody knows what this means, and most of Tolkien's early reviewers never even stopped to ask, thundering off instead on one literary hobby-horse or another. Still, it meant something. On the lowest level, it meant Meriadoc Brandybuck sitting in the gloom among the Riders, and hearing every now and then a snatch of song: "and Merry felt his heart

leap, though he did not know what it was about . Or Sam listening to Gimli's poem and deciding that he might not follow the story, but he liked the sound of the names: "In Moria, in Khazad-dûm". Or the snatches of Quenya and Old Entish and Durlending preserved inside the story of *The Lord of the Rings*, and helping to make that story work. You don't have to know a language to feel it (Tolkien kept saying implicitly), and in this he was dead right. But the common view that takes language as a kind of coding-system for thought, all matter and no manner, could never explain *why* this was so. As a result a large part of the evident effect of *The Lord of the Rings* has always remained just outside the scope of reasoned argument, like the propulsion system of UFO's.

Jim Allan's book has shaken that up quite a lot. If you like, its central statement is Tolkien's own: "Most English speaking people, for instance, will admit that *cellar door* is 'beautiful', especially if dissociated from its sense (and from its spelling). More beautiful than, say, *sky*, and far more beautiful than *beautiful*". Now what's beautiful about Elvish? With Quenya, you might say it is the prominence given to dental/alveolar consonants. "All words in the extant corpus of Quenya end either in a vowel or in one of the dental/alveolar consonants *l*, *r*, *n*, and more rarely *t* and *s*", notes Jim Allan. He adds that "In Finnish also these are the only allowable final consonants": and perhaps that too offers a guide, for Quenya is clearly modelled on Finnish in, e.g., its system of complicated case-endings, like illative and inessive. Does it feel like Finnish - alien, complicated, not Indo-European, but nevertheless using at least the same sounds (unlike African languages with their ranges of tongue-clicks or Semitic ones with their queer vowel-changes)? I don't know, but at least the comparisons made between Quenya and Finnish help you to realise that you do put even completely unfamiliar languages on a little mental scale of alienness: and on this Quenya occupies a rare middle position on the edge of recognition. Another thing this book makes me realise is that most of us do much the same thing just for sounds. Quenya again has a strikingly regular system of 'front' and 'back' vowels, and of diphthongs (unlike English, which has short vowels without corresponding long ones and a set of diphthongs that looks as if the cat's been at it). So when Galadriel lets fly with "*Ai! laurië lantar lassî sûrinen...*" it sounds light, quick and civilised to an extent that English can't match. Against that the Ring says, "*Ash nazg durbatulûk, ash nazg gimbatul, ash nazg thrakutulûk agh burzum-ishi krimpatul*", and to us it sounds brutal. "All trembled, and the Elves stopped their ears", indeed. Why? Because the language is dominated by back vowels; by consonant clusters; and by voiced clusters we don't use in English, like *-zg-*, though its voiceless counterpart *-sk-* is common. Black Speech sounds rasping, gargled, full of ominous sounds like 'crimp' and 'thrak'.

But, you may say, there's still no sense in this. 'Crimp' and 'stomp' and 'thrash' needn't be any more ominous as sounds than 'fletch' or 'twitch' or 'stork'. They needn't, it's true. One of the points about modern languages is that in them the relation of sound to sense is arbitrary, and this of course was the point Tolkien was making about 'cellar door' and 'beautiful'. Still, that's their defect, and maybe it's not an essential one. Readers of C.S.Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* may remember what he said about the language of Numinor (*sic*), that "This was the language spoken before the Fall and beyond the Moon, and the meanings were not given to the syllables by chance, or skill, or long tradition, but truly inherent in them as the shape of the great Sun is inherent in the little waterdrop." No human being could really achieve that. But in Quenya Tolkien was doing his best - making 'cellar door' mean 'beautiful' and 'beautiful' mean 'cellar door'.

That goes some way towards explaining 'linguistic aesthetic'. But another

er point arising from *The Lord of the Rings* and drawn out into the open by *An Introduction to Elvish* is that there is an aesthetic between languages as well as in each single one. You can feel the beginnings of that even in English words - or at least Tolkien could, having spent his life at it - because of their variant origins in Old English, Old Norse, Old French, Latin. You can feel it even in meaningless words like names. Marske, Anlaby, Allerton and Staithes are identifiably different from Poppleford, Sidmouth, Piddletrenthide and Exeter, and for that there are good historical reasons. You may not know the reasons, but you can feel the difference! Tolkien exploited this sort of dumb philological sense in making the relationships between Westron and Rohirric and Northern/Dwarvish, as also in the much older set of Quenya and Sindarin (and Adûnaic). Another thing that Jim Allan's work does is to open up the historical links between Quenya and Sindarin, to show how between the languages there is a set of correspondences of which most readers were aware without quite comprehending it. Looking back on LotR I got a new sense of the point of Galadriel's poem in Quenya (in Lothlórien, where they actually spoke a sort of Sindarin), and also of the slight shock when Fangorn starts to use it, though he hasn't seemed a terribly dignified character up till then. Nor is he ever, not in an Elvish sort of way: but he is old, and also somehow fossilised or changeless in a way that even Elrond isn't.

The 'English - Quenya/Sindarin Entry Index' helps you with such thoughts, and brings out some unexpected links: *Isildur/Minas Ithil*, yes, I knew, but *tumbale/implad* I hadn't noticed. It makes you realise how powerful and yet predictable was Tolkien's linguistic system. And these correspondences are important not just for showing that Tolkien did a lot of work on languages, nor for adding a sense of age and history to his story: what they also do is make fantasy seem real, even in a way *be* real. As far as languages go most of us are in the position of a savage in a supermarket - there's a lot there to use, we don't know where it's all from, but we're dimly aware of the presences that must have made it all. Tolkien *did* know about the processes (phonetic change, semantic shift, word-borrowing, culture-shock), and he brought them into his fiction. Now the fiction is fantasy, but the processes aren't: ignoring them, in the non-historical way of much modern fiction and criticism, is an ostrich manoeuvre. 'Bless' is a nice word now, but it comes from \**blōdisōjan*, 'to mark with blood'. It's not really very long ago since the two concepts were the same. Know a language, know nothing special: know language-change, know reality. That's an aphorism I think Tolkien would have subscribed to, and that's what *An Introduction to Elvish* really puts across.

There are some things outside the hard core that can be criticised. Paula Marmor's "Etymological Excursion among the Shire-Folk" isn't always on the button. She derives the hobbit-name *Holman* from *Holm-man*, 'man from the island', and that's what it is in English. In Hobbitic it's more likely *Hol-man*, 'hole-man', i.e. 'hobbit' once again, near enough. Jim Allan spots this little joke elsewhere. There's a similar joke over 'Quickbeam'. The Ent of that name 'is' clearly a rowan-tree (or rowan-Ent), which is odd, since the big Old English dictionary lists *cwicbeam* as 'poplar'. But Tolkien knew the dictionary compilers were wrong - they'd just guessed from *cwic-beam* to 'live-tree' to 'tree that's always shaking'. However *quicken* or *wicken* is good modern English (in dialect) for 'rowan', and the compilers were as vulnerable as the Four Wise Clerks of Oxenford in *Farmer Giles*, carefully writing up the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for 'blunderbuss' and getting it mostly wrong. Tolkien was amused by the ignorance over language even of specialists, and never stopped making jokes about them, from the 'jabberwocks of antiquarian research' to the Master of the Houses of Healing, who has no kingsfoil (but can tell you lots of names for it), or even to Gollum, careless of hilltops, leaves and

flowers because of his devouring interest in 'roots and beginnings'!

That comic element needs to be recognised a bit more; it's no good just looking up standard works of reference to see what Tolkien thought. I can't help feeling too that English readers wouldn't make the repeated error in this book of confusing *sk* and *sh*. We ought to realise that *sk* is Northern/Norse and *sh* Southern/English, as in the many doublets *shirt/skirt*, *shriek/screech*, *Shipton/Skipton*, etc. So the North Yorks. name cited by Jim Allan on page 203 is *Thirsk*, not '*Thirsh*', and the dragon name *Scatha* is not "of Norse/Danish origin" at all, but perfectly good Old English (or Rohirric), and found all over the place in *Beowulf*. Of course they spelt *sh* as *sc* and said 'shatha'. Norse/Dwarvish would be *skathi*. Only a little point - but it shows Tolkien was dead consistent in such matters, because he knew that (left to themselves) languages were, too - and people. It's part of the disaster of modern civilisation that a curse of Babel has fallen on us, and especially hard on poor English; true resistance is found in dialects, illiterates and hillbillies (as you can see from Appalachian ballads, where the term 'middle-earth' was still being used long after everyone else had forgotten it). This is why - just to mention another section of the book - nearly all the Tolkienians cited in Lawrence J. Krieg's "A Survey of some English-Tengwar Orthographies" won't use the tengwar properly, i.e. phonemically, but just transliterate letter by letter, in spite of the fact that English spelling as it is now would have reduced any Gondorian scribe to helpless laughter - or, more likely, tears, as he derived from it its depressing evidence of cultural takeover and collapse. For most of us, "the written word is incontrovertibly basic to the psychological lexicon", writes Mr Krieg thoughtfully. Just so. But what that means is that we've all been driven (quietly, and in this one particular way) mad. The tengwar, by contrast, are sane. There's *another* compulsion latent in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Perhaps I ought to say that I myself would not keep up the pretence that all this is about real languages and historical truth in quite the way that the compilers of this *Introduction* have - Lise Menn's "Elvish Loanwords in Indo-European"! - partly because taking or pretending to take it seriously means you can't give proper weight to Tolkien's sense of fun, but mainly because I think that in one way and another Tolkien's work turns continually back to the real world, and cutting off the sort of comparisons and allusions he made is an impoverishment. Still, this criticism doesn't much *matter*. The raw material of anything you want to do with Tolkienian language is there. The book guesses accurately a lot of the time at the further material of *The Silmarillion* (which shows it's well-based). It shows you how and in what way Tolkien's favourite languages, Finnish, Welsh and Gothic, were used. And it says a lot incidentally and *en passant* about language itself. This surely is an aspect of which the Professor would have thoroughly approved.

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