THE VOICES OF ELVISH LINGUISTS

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Let us start with the iconic moment from *The Lord of the Rings*: Gimli asks Galadriel for a strand of her hair "which surpasses the gold of the earth as the stars surpass the gems of the mine." The chivalrous tone of the exchange between the Elf and the Dwarf and the intimacy of Galadriel's gift often divert the reader's attention from what is really going on between them. The first reply that Gimli gives to Galadriel when she suggests he should name a gift is a refusal: he declares that it was enough for him to have seen her and "to have heard her gentle words." When Galadriel insists, Gimli does ask for a strand of her hair, but he reiterates the same sentiment concerning the gentle words, stating that he would treasure her gift "in memory of your words to me at our first meeting." What were those words that he keeps mentioning? Why did they mean so much to the Dwarf? We will come back to Gimli and the gentle words that made such an impression on him at the end of the essay. To grasp their full significance, we have a lot of ground to cover.

Words were everything for Tolkien – his raison d'être for any kind of writing. Tolkien revelled in the study of languages, both theoretical and practical, relishing sound patterns and particular combinations of word forms and meanings. In a letter to W. H. Auden, he wrote of his "linguistic sensibility" and used a memorable metaphor to describe his discovery of the Finnish language: "a complete wine-cellar filled with bottles of an amazing wine of a kind and flavour never tasted before". Tolkien's language enthusiasm was indeed intoxicating – both for him and for his readers. Since many academic papers have been written on the role of philology in Tolkien's fiction, let me be brief: philology was his gateway into fiction. One of the best summaries of the matter can be found in Verlyn Flieger's *Splintered Light*, where she states that Tolkien's scholarship together with his imagination formed "the matrix of his fiction":

> Research into early forms and uses of words, the search after obscure meanings and the revealing of lost nuances—scientific study in the truest sense of the term—led him through science into art and through art into an almost spiritual realm wherein the word was the conveyer of primal truth, the magic vehicle not just of communication but of communion. (Flieger, p.8)

In the same chapter, Flieger writes about the contrasts in Tolkien's work, the ever-present polarities that underpinned everything he created. In this essay, I will consider a specific set of language-related polarities as they are voiced by Elvish linguists. Yet, as often happens in Tolkien's Legendarium, specific issues have a fractal nature: they reproduce a larger, more general pattern. I will attempt to discern the bigger picture, hoping that the voices of Elvish linguists will help with this as well.

Language-related polarities present themselves when one attempts to trace the history of the languages invented by Tolkien. This history, both internal and external, is complicated, to say the least. From an early draft of a Qenya lexicon that Tolkien called a "nonsense fairy language" to the mature forms of Quenya that Galadriel weaves skillfully into her musical lament *Namárië*, his linguistic invention and its underlying principles underwent significant changes. Indeed, "change" is the key word, in every respect. Tolkien changed the grammar and vocabulary of his languages, he changed the ways these languages were connected to and embedded within his Legendarium, and the main object of these changes was… change itself.

Why do languages change? Sounds that disappear, new meanings that develop, shifts in grammar – what brings it all about? On a more philosophical level, can we consider a new development good or bad? What happened to our beautiful language? –

we might hear someone complain, deploring new coinages and stating that the golden age of the language is now in the past. Or, in a totally different framework, someone may optimistically suggest creating a new language, the language of the future. A simpler one, a more logical, a more beautiful or a *better* one. But how do we know what is good and bad in a language? How do we establish that one linguistic phenomenon is better than another? What are the criteria? And who are the judges?

Let us listen to the voices of those in Middle-earth who, through long study, gained the right to make such judgements. The first speaker today is "the garrulous and whimsical philologist of Kortirion", as Christopher Tolkien described him. It is Rúmil, a Noldorin language master and inventor of writing systems. Rúmil is a nerd figure, who is obsessed with languages, being aware that others may not share his enthusiasm. In *The Book of Lost Tales*, he narrates many important tales, including the *Ainulindalë*. Lapsing inevitably into linguistic rants, he is concerned about his listeners: "I weary you again. Never have I found another ear yet in the world that grew not tired ere long of such discourse." Please, Rúmil, bring it on – we are willing to listen to Elvish philologists for as long as they are prepared to talk.

Let us peruse his principal work, *The Lhammas,* a treatise on languages from *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, in which he speaks at length on the subject of linguistic change. It occurs, according to Rúmil, because "the Elves love the making of words". It accounts for the swiftness of change and the variety of languages. But there are external factors as well: different groups of Elves who either went to Valinor or refused to go; who later departed from Valinor or remained there; who stayed close to the Valar or grew distant and independent. There are also bigger issues, especially metaphysical ones: those of time and death – or deathlessness and eternity. In his philosophical mode, Rúmil writes of the languages that "…they changed less than might be thought in so great a space of time; for the Elves in Valinor did not die, and in those days the Trees still flowered, and the changeful Moon was not yet made, and there was peace and bliss."

This pattern is part of a larger one: in Middle-earth, the passage of time inevitably moves history away from its mythological beginnings; the age of sacrality and magic is over, and the immortal beings have to give way to the mortal ones. Accordingly, languages change swiftly not only because Elves love linguistic invention, but also because they are unable to stop time, no matter how many time-defying artefacts they create. This is the drama of Middle-earth that we see unfolding through its ages. This brings us to the question of linguistic polarities.

Writing of the language of Gondolin, Rúmil states that the ancient tongue was kept there "most pure". The notion of *purity* would seem to indicate a desirable quality in a language, would it not? So, preserving a language in an unadulterated form is a worthy and noble endeavour, as members of L'Académie française would surely attest (incidentally, its members are called *les immortels).* The opposite of linguistic purity would be *corruption*, and sure enough, Rúmil writes of "the corrupted speech of the thrall-Gnomes, spoken by the Noldor that were held captive in Angband, or compelled to the service of Morgoth and the Orcs." Not merely corruption, but outright perversion – that was how Morgoth treated languages, which he, according to Rúmil, "perverted willfully to evil, as he did all things". This is linguistically interesting, because it suggests that certain changes – presumably, phonetic, lexical, grammatical and stylistic – can be regarded as evil. And yet, Rúmil also stated that Morgoth "spoke all tongues with power and beauty, when so he wished". It is reassuring to know that even a corrupted language can be spoken with beauty.

If linguistic purity is desirable, then interaction with other languages and borrowing from them are threats to purity. But what about inventing new forms – something that Elves delight in – or adopting new linguistic phenomena? And,

correspondingly, what about abandoning old language practices to make room for new developments? Is it a threat to purity, too? Let us listen to another great Elvish loremaster, perhaps the greatest of them all, Fëanor of the Noldor, the maker of the Silmarils.

Fëanor role as an influential Elvish philologist is perhaps a lesser-known page in his eventful biography. Nevertheless, he created Tengwar, one of the Elvish writing systems, and was generally regarded as one of the chief language masters of Valinor. This side of Fëanor features prominently in *The Shibboleth of Fëanor*, a significant text included by Christopher Tolkien in the twelfth volume of *The History of Middle-earth*. Styled as a linguistic essay, *The Shibboleth* gives the account of a single phonological change in Quenya, from *þ* (as in 'thought') to *s*, especially in dialect of Quenya spoken by the Noldor exiles in Middle-earth. The shift from one consonant to the other was based primarily “on phonetic ‘taste’ and theory”. The word *taste*, given in *The Shibboleth* in quotation marks, is particularly interesting. The taste in question is what Tolkien referred to as *lámatyávë* in *Laws and Customs among the Eldar,* where he defined it as “individual pleasure in the sounds and forms of words”. The concept serves as an in-universe reflection of Tolkien's own love for phonoaesthetics and accounts not only for the choice of Elvish children’s names, but also for the predilection for linguistic invention and change. In *The Shibboleth,* it appears to be the case of collective lámatyávë: the consonant shift is widely accepted by the Elves in Valinor and later in the exile. However, this development meets serious opposition among the language masters, most notably, from Fëanor himself.

The linguistic argument against this change suggested a potential damage and confusion that the merging of the two sounds might cause. Had Fëanor pressed his point in purely linguistic terms, he might have prevailed, but the consonant debate soon became embroiled in the genealogical and political strife between Fëanor and his half-brother Fingolfin. The title of Míriel, Fëanor’s mother who was tired of her immortality and longed to “die”, happened to contain the debated consonant: *Þerindë* (meaning “needlewoman”). Thus, for Fëanor, the phonetic shift became synonymous with the betrayal and lack of respect for the house of Finwë. He frames his frustrations in linguistic terms, insisting that the þ consonant “was the true pronunciation for all who cared or fully understood their language”. Yet, this purist attitude was underscored by the snobbism of another kind. Fëanor ostentatiously kept calling himself “Son of the Þerinde” and showed much arrogance in explaining the matter to his sons: “Take no heed! We speak as is right, and as King Finwë himself did before he was led astray. We are his heirs by right and the elder house. Let them sa-si, if they can speak no better.”

In spite of Fëanor’s efforts, the change did take place and was irreversible. Let us look at the role of Galadriel in this debate – it will be significant for us when we return to her and Gimli at the end of this essay. She was there in Valinor at the time of the shift and the linguistic confrontation around it. A different branch of the Noldor genealogical tree, she grew up in the house of Finarfin where þ was still used. Yet, Galadriel embraced the change specifically because Fëanor was opposed to it. She did so even though she “knew well the history of their tongue and all the reasons of the loremasters”. Consider this situation for a moment. Picture young Galadriel in Valinor, studying conscientiously the history of the language and diving deep into linguistic argumentation. Then, ages later, in her *Namárië*, she uses s rather than þ – thus the fractality I mentioned earlier manifests itself. In a single linguistic choice, there is the whole history of the strife and division among the Elves.

Let us also consider this: much emphasis is laid upon the knowledge of the history of the language. It is reiterated in the text that follows *The Shibboleth*, “The names of Finwë's descendants”. There is a comment there that the Noldor in exile who spoke Sindarin did not fully understand its relation to Quenya, which resulted in the loss

of linguistic precision. There is a hint of accusation in this account: “None of them understood or were yet interested in the linguistic history.” Apparently, there were changes that did not contribute to purity or beauty. It follows, therefore, that linguistic beauty is not entirely the product of lámatyávë. On the contrary, it is the result of a long and painstaking study of words.

Here a major conflict of linguistic interests presents itself: the love of invention that springs from imagination and lámatyávë is opposed to the knowledge of linguistic history and a deeper understanding of the general style. In her essay on the iconicity in Tolkien’s invented languages, Joanna Podhorodecka asks the important question: “Is *lámatyávë* a linguistic heresy?” She then attempts to prove that it is not a heresy by searching for universals behind the sound symbolism. The essence of Tolkien’s linguistic sensibility (and whether it can be considered a “heresy” or a “secret vice”) has been questioned by Verlyn Flieger, Ross Smith and other scholars. Flieger’s *Splintered Light* studies the correlation of Tolkien’s worldview with that of Owen Barfield, whose *Poetic Diction* produced a significant impact on Tolkien’s approach to the philosophy of language. In his book, Barfield put forward the idea of a movement from the initial poetic unity of meanings through continuous fragmentation towards intellectual abstraction and argued that the function of poetry is to reveal lost linguistic realities, not invent new ones. The concept of change is the core of his philosophy, whether it is change in the language or “a felt change of consciousness” induced by true poetry.

In Tolkien’s essay *English and Welsh*, we can see how separate phenomena come together to merge into a linguistic philosophy. In that essay, he speaks of the fitness of a word to a whole style and confesses that he “tried to invent a language that would embody the Greekness of Greek”. It appears to be the foundation of his entire linguistic endeavour. The Greekness of Greek is not just the immediate phonaesthetic beauty of Greek (or any other language for that matter). It is the entirety of the Greek language: its long journey through history and poetry, with all of its dramatic changes. This is what makes the history of Elvish languages so nuanced and sophisticated: the continuous awareness of the drama of change and its encapsulation in words that make these changes poignantly felt. And now we call to witness the third great language master of Middle-earth, the one who felt this drama deeply because he was a philosopher and a poet. Let us now listen to the words of Pengolodh, a loremaster of the Noldor from the lost city of Gondolin.

Pengolodh is a historian who chronicles the events of the First Age of Middle-earth and a thoughtful theoretician. In some of his in-depth observations, he comes close to what we would call cognitive science today. He also edited earlier works of Rúmil and wrote his own treatises on the language. The beautifully penned manuscript that can be found in *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, entitled “Dangweth Pengoloð”, presents a conversation between Pengolodh and Ælfwine the Mariner. The main object of Pengolodh’s philosophical inquiry is linguistic change. He speaks of the differences in the very nature of this change for mortal Men and immortal Elves. The language of the treatise is just as beautiful as the handwritten manuscript: poetic, richly metaphoric, elevated in style. In many ways, it resembles Barfield’s *Poetic Diction*, which is in itself an enchanting text in its melodiousness and poetic evocativeness. But the main point of interest for us now is the fact that Pengolodh, addressing Ælfwine, offers him a vision of *harmonious* change. This harmony lies in bridging the gap between lámatyáve and the fitness to the whole style:

> Wherefore, Ælfwine, I say to you: whereas the change that goes long unperceived, as the growth of a tree, was indeed slow of old in Aman ere the Rising of the Moon, and even in Middle-earth under the Sleep of Yavanna slower far than it is now among Men, yet among the Eldar this steadfastness was offset by the changes that come of will and design: many of which indeed differ little in

> outward seeming from those of unwitting growth. Thus the Eldar would alter the sounds of their speech at whiles to other sounds that seemed to them more pleasant, or were at the least unstaled. But this they would not do at haphazard. For the Eldar know their tongue, not word by word only, but as a whole: they know even as they speak not only of what sounds is that word woven which they are uttering, but of what sounds and sound-patterns is their whole speech at one time composed. (Tolkien, The Peoples of Middle-earth, p.398).

The ideas of making sounds more pleasant and the knowledge of the language "not word by word only, but as a whole" have already been discussed above, but let us now pay attention to the word "unstaled". Pengolodh glorifies the concept earlier in the treatise: "...when the union of the thought and the sound is fallen into old custom, and the two are no longer perceived apart, then already the word is dying and joyless, the sound awaiting some new thought, and the thought eager for some new-patterned raiment of sound". This is both Barfield's function of poetry and Tolkien's own "recovery" that fantasy can bring, as he famously wrote in his seminal essay "On Fairy-Stories". Thus, the vision of harmony that Pengolodh imparts to Ælfwine unites three ingredients: linguistic pleasure, linguistic knowledge and linguistic novelty that returns the lost joy.

The fourth element is not so apparent, although it is hidden in plain sight. In a way, it is opposed to Fëanor's excessive pride: it is Pengolodh's own humility and his readiness to include, rather than exclude. In other words, it is his willingness to share his linguistic wisdom, even with mortals. As in numerous situations in Tolkien's Legendarium, this conversation is performative: it establishes a fellowship, one of many fellowships between Elves and Men. Smaller fellowships, forged in the Legendarium, adamantly follow the pattern of the bigger ones, such as the fellowship between the Valar and the Elves, sealed with the transition of sacred knowledge. Inevitably, every fellowship has been part of the quest to preserve the memory of this knowledge and cope with the change, decay and mortality. Every linguist in Middle-earth, consciously or inadvertently, contributed to this quest.

Thus, we have listened to our linguist heroes, Rúmil, Fëanor and Pengolodh, the Lambengolmor who studied languages and their complicated histories. These three linguists – the talkative nerd, the proud purist and the poet-philosopher – were all dealing, each in his own way, with the question of what is good and bad about the linguistic change. The fourth linguist we have already mentioned, Galadriel, did not write a treatise on linguistics, if we do not count *Namárië* as such; yet, she manifested her profound understanding of the Elvish linguist's unspoken code of honour. This is the time for us to return to the episode with the gift of her golden hair.

As Gimli said, he had already received his gift: he saw Galadriel and heard her gentle words. This is commonly treated as courtesy, implying that he would actually like a material gift but goes through the chivalrous denial first, as one does. I am not convinced that this is what Gimli is doing. Why not revisit their first meeting and hear which words Galadriel had said to him?

After the disaster in Moria, the Ring Company comes to Lothlórien and after a while, they are invited to climb the *talan* on which they are greeted by Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel – mostly by Celeborn since Galadriel remains silent unless there is something important to say. It seems like courteous conversation is delegated to her husband. However, when the story of the Balrog and the loss of Gandalf is told, Lord Celeborn becomes less courteous: he refers to Gandalf's actions as "folly" and speaks bitterly of the Dwarves who "had stirred up this evil in Moria again". The atmosphere becomes charged. And here Galadriel indirectly rebukes her husband, noting that

Gandalf's deeds were never needless, and then addresses Gimli. Here come those very gentle words that were Gimli's true gift:

> "'Dark is the water of Kheled-zâram, and cold are the springs of Kibil-nâla, and fair were the many-pillared halls of Khazad-dûm in Elder Days before the fall of mighty kings beneath the stone.' She looked upon Gimli, who sat glowering and sad, and she smiled."

Let us take one more step back and listen to Gimli himself, in the moment when he first looks upon the Misty Mountains and, stating that he needs no map, recounts the names of the peaks. On Gandalf's mentioning of Mirrormere, Gimli says the following:

> "'Dark is the water of Kheled-zâram,' said Gimli, 'and cold are the springs of Kibil-nâla. My heart trembles at the thought that I may see them soon.'"

Does Galadriel know that she repeats Gimli's own words, literally, or do they both quote an ancient Dwarvish text, a song perhaps? The latter seems likely: the highly poetic slant achieved by inverted parallel structures strongly suggests it. As we know from Appendix F to *The Lord of the Rings*, Dwarves were very secretive and protective about their language: "they tended it and guarded it as a treasure of the past. Few of other race have succeeded in learning it." And yet, here she is, an Elven Lady who quotes an ancient text and pronounces names in Dwarvish language with confidence and eloquence. Undoubtedly, behind these words there are years of Galadriel the linguist studying the language with conscientiousness and humility.

The felt change in Gimli is right there: "And the Dwarf, hearing the names given in his own ancient tongue, looked up and met her eyes; and it seemed to him that he looked suddenly into the heart of an enemy and saw there love and understanding." When he is pressured into receiving his material gift of three strands of hair, he pronounces he will keep it as a memory of these very words. The fellowship renewal is also here. But Gimli is probably unaware of the full linguistic picture since it involves the history of the Elves.

Galadriel seems to be settling old scores. Her marvellous golden hair is described in detail in *Unfinished Tales*, where we also find out that Fëanor was impressed by Galadriel's tresses and begged for one three times. He was refused, and "these two kinsfolk, the greatest of the Eldar of Valinor, were unfriends for ever." The greatest of the Eldar asks for one tress three times only to be denied, while Gimli the Dwarf asks for one strand and gets three. Interestingly, Gimli's plan for the gift is reminiscent of the Silmarils, since he is going to set it in "imperishable crystal", but the purpose is to be the symbol of the fellowship forged by Galadriel the linguist: "a pledge of good will between the Mountain and the Wood until the end of days." While Fëanor in his pride seeks to preserve both the linguistic purity and the sacred light of the Trees trapped in a crystal over which he has control, Galadriel practices the unity of linguistic pleasure, knowledge and renewal, sharing it with others. It is the act of "not just of communication but of communion" from Flieger's quotation given above. A linguistic communion that is a wonderful and heartfelt gift.

When Tolkien wrote in a letter that *The Lord of the Rings* for him is "largely an essay in 'linguistic aesthetic'", he was not joking. There are other linguists in the novel, apart from Galadriel, and they are ready to share their knowledge with linguistically minded readers. Tolkien was generous in sharing the joys and intricacies of his linguistic scholarship throughout the entire Legendarium, rich in polarities, controversies and dramas of linguistic histories. Has Pengolodh said the final word in the quest for understanding of linguistic change? Has the secret of linguistic beauty been pinned down by an Elvish quil, leaving nothing else to be said? It seems unlikely. If there is one thing we have all learnt from the poetry of Middle-earth, it is that roads go ever on.

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