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An Examination of the Elven Tongues

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1 Introduction

As many Tolkien enthusiasts know, the world of Middle-earth was first conceived as the result of Tolkien’s enthusiasm for linguistic invention. As he wrote in 1967 (in a suggested correction to an article about him),

“The imaginary histories grew out of Tolkien’s predilection for inventing languages. He discovered, as others have who carry out such inventions to any degree of completion, that a language requires a suitable habitation, and a history in which it can develop” [Letters, #294].

Certainly, one of the most distinctive features of Tolkien’s works is the extensive use of complex and consistent languages, of which the most visible and best developed are the Elvish languages. Almost all of the exotic place-names in *The Lord of the Rings* are Elvish in origin, as (of course) are the names of the Elves, the Númenoreans of Gondor, and even some weapons. A large number of Tolkien’s readers — many more than he expected — have studied the Elvish languages and their alphabets, and have employed them for a variety of personal uses.

Unfortunately, no explicit description of the vocabularies, phonologies, and grammars for the Elvish languages seen in *The Lord of the Rings* has ever been published, leaving Tolkien’s readers with the task of reconstructing them by inference on the basis of the material available, much as professional linguists reconstruct ancient languages. This makes it difficult for the non-specialist to employ the Elvish languages effectively. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that the only widely available book on the subject for a general audience, Ruth Noel’s *The Languages of Tolkien’s Middle-earth* (Houghton Mifflin, 1974 and 1980) is generally regarded with proper scorn by Tolkien language enthusiasts

(sometimes known by the Quenya word *lambengolmor*), not only because it is outdated — it predates the publication of the twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* — but because it is filled with misleading and incorrect information. This article, then, is intended as a *very* rudimentary introduction to Tolkien’s Elvish languages. It does not attempt to ‘teach Elvish’ or provide a detailed treatment of their structures. Instead, we hope to give a general feel for the ‘features’ of the languages for Tolkien fans who have not yet investigated the subject to any great extent, and direct them to other resources for further study. Those in a hurry may simply wish to skip to Section 8, *Further Reading* for references to other sources.

2 Why Study Elvish?

If you are reading this article, you probably don’t need anyone to tell you why the study of Elvish is of interest — one might as well ask why people memorize Hobbit genealogies (or, for that matter, baseball statistics or any other ‘useless’ information). But beyond purely ‘academic’ interest, here are some of the applications to which people have put their knowledge of this lore.

- Small communications among fellow fans. Tolkien himself would sometimes write the Quenya word *Namárië* (usually translated as ‘farewell’) at the bottom of letters. In the *Father Christmas Letters*, one letter to his children from Polar Bear included the ‘Arctic’ phrase *Mára mesta an ni véla tye ento, ya rato nea* (Goodbye till I see you next and I hope it will be soon), closely resembling an early version of Quenya. Many Tolkien fans will similarly inscribe the Sindarin greeting *Suilad* or the Quenya closing *Namárië* in letters, or quote Frodo’s Quenya greeting to Gildor when meeting new Tolkien friends.
- Decoration. This is more appropriate to Tolkien’s invented alphabets, the Cirth and the Tengwar (which will not be discussed in

this article), than to the languages themselves. Nevertheless, using Tolkien’s alphabets or Roman (English) lettering, some people may inscribe the Sindarin for “Speak, friend, and enter” over their front door (or on their refrigerators), or invent new inscriptions in Sindarin or Quenya for similar purposes.

- Creative Writing. While there is not enough ‘known’ about the Elvish languages to permit anyone to write extensive works¹, several people have composed short works of Quenya poetry (usually accompanied by some annotation) simply for art’s sake.
- Role-playing Games. Tolkien passed away in 1973, less than two years before the first publication of *Dungeons and Dragons* (it is amusing to speculate on what the consequences might have been if such games had been popular in Tolkien’s lifetime). Participants in such games — referees and players alike — often wish to give Elvish names to characters, weapons, or places. Although some may question whether the use of such names in an environment other than Tolkien’s world — the history of which is so closely tied to those languages — is really appropriate, Tolkien himself was willing to supply one reader with several names for bulls in Sindarin (such as *Tarmund*, ‘Noble bull’) for her herd [Letters, #345], so such uses may not be unreasonable after all.

Similarly, it is common for people to assume pseudonyms in Elvish languages for Internet forums and the like. These are sometimes based on the real-world etymology of the individual’s name, such as *Meldon* for David (meaning ‘beloved one’), based on the Quenya adjective *melda* (‘beloved’).

- Motion Pictures. Early articles in the popular press covering Peter Jackson’s films glibly

¹Of course, you can *write* anything you like; but even *lambengolmor* will not necessarily understand what you have written.

dismissed Elvish as a “gobbledygook” of foreign sounds requiring subtitles, but Jackson knew that audience acceptance of his vision of Middle-earth as a real place would require (in part) that ‘real’ Elvish language must be portrayed, beyond the passages that are found in the books². To this end, Elvish scholars David Salo and Bill Welden were employed to translate dialogue into Sindarin and Quenya (much of which necessarily required invention and speculation on their part) and assist in proper pronunciation of these dialogues as well as the other Elvish names that are spoken in the films. As it has turned out, these Elvish ‘fabrications’ have drawn much attention, and interest in Tolkien’s Elvish creations surged greatly with the success of the first film.

3 Two Histories

Unlike the historical languages of our world, Tolkien’s languages each bear two histories: the ‘internal’ or Middle-earth history that describes how the Sindarin, Telerin, Avarin, Vanyarin, and Quenya languages evolved from the common proto-Elvish spoken by the Elves who first awakened at Cuiviénen; and the ‘external’ or real-world history that describes how the Quenya and Gnomish languages devised by Tolkien in 1915–1917 changed over the decades, as Tolkien’s linguistic and aesthetic tastes changed, leading to the Quenya and Sindarin languages seen in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. People who ‘do Elvish’ need to be aware of both histories when attempting to understand how the languages work.

3.1 Internal History: The Sundered Tongues

As told in *The Silmarillion*, the Elves were once a single people in the period following their awaken-

²Oddly, many of Tolkien’s actual Elvish passages are not portrayed in the film.

ing at Cuiviénen, and spoke a single tongue, sometimes called Common Elvish or Proto-Quendian. But as the Great Journey to the West began, the Elves were divided into several groups, and their languages began to diverge. In the words of Pengolodh,

Thus, swifter or slower, yet ever inescapably, the far-sundered kindreds of the Quendi were sundered also in speech: the Avari from the Eldar; and the Teleri from the other Eldar; and the Sindar, who abode in Middle-earth, from the Teleri that came at last unto Aman; and the Exiles of the Noldor from those that remained in the land of the Valar. [*The History of Middle-earth* XII, Dangweth Pengolodh]

When the rebellious Noldor returned to Middle-earth, they learned the speech of the Sindar and it became their tongue of daily use. Indeed, Thingol forbade the speaking of the Noldorin tongue, Quenya, in his realm. Thus, Sindarin (with some dialectic variation) became the tongue of all the Elves of Beleriand. Quenya, itself somewhat changed from the Quenya of Valinor, became a kind of ‘Elven Latin’ or ceremonial tongue, known to all learned people, but used by only a few in daily speech by the end of the Third Age, in which period most of our information was recorded.

Thus, in *The Lord of the Rings*, two very distinct branches of the Elvish language are seen: Sindarin, the language in which are given most of the proper names such as Minas Tirith or Orcrest; and Quenya, the language of Galadriel’s lament in Lothlórien, and in which Frodo greeted Gildor. It is important to distinguish between the two languages. For example, someone recently closed an article with “Namárië, mellyn”; but *Namárië*, seen in Galadriel’s lament, is Quenya, while *mellyn*, the plural of *mellon*, is Sindarin (‘friend’, perhaps the best-known word in any Elven tongue). We will later see how the sound systems of the two languages are quite different, and, for the most part, not hard to identify.

We see some hints of the relationship between the two languages in some words like Quenya *lasse*, Sindarin *lass*, ‘leaf’, or in words that

diverged from Common Elvish more, such as Quenya *alda* ('tree') versus Sindarin *galadh* (with *dh* representing the voiced *th* sound as in "these"). These two words both resulted from a primitive *galadā*.

It may be noted here that Ruth Noel's book, while mentioning the existence of a common proto-language, seems to say that Sindarin can somehow be *derived from* Quenya. This simplistic idea makes it impossible to account for the initial sounds of pairs like Q/S *nár/naur* ('flame') on one hand, but Q *númen* versus S *dûn*, both meaning 'west', on the other (the latter words both derive from a primitive root, *ndū*). The result is a series of impossible-to-apply 'rules' contrasting the two languages.

3.2 External History: Qenya and Gnomish

In a letter to W. H. Auden [*Letters*, #163], Tolkien described how his youthful encounters with languages shaped the development of his own languages.

... the discovery ... of a Finnish Grammar ... was like discovering a complete wine-cellar filled with bottles of an amazing wine of a kind and flavour never tasted before. It quite intoxicated me; and I gave up the attempt to invent an 'unrecorded' Germanic language, and my 'own language' — or series of invented languages — became heavily Finnicized in phonetic pattern and structure.

That is of course a long time past now. Linguistic taste changes like everything else ... Latin and the British type of Celtic have it now ...

This earliest version of Tolkien's language, called Qenya (not yet spelled "Quenya"), had become quite elaborate by 1915 (when Tolkien was about 23), and he wrote down an extensive vocabulary and grammar, the Qenya Lexicon (*Qenyaqetsa*), in notebooks dated 1915–1917 (published in the journal *Parma Eldalamberon* #12, 1998; see Section 8, *Further Reading*). The Finnish character

of Qenya and its successors may be glimpsed by noting how 'familiar' (to a Tolkien fan, anyway) seem some of the names in the Finnish *Kalevala*: Ilmarinen, Aino, Untamo, Melatar, or even specific words like *tie*, meaning 'road'.

It is evident that Qenya was the language closest to Tolkien's heart. He wrote poems in it over the years (of which the best known is Galadriel's lament in Lothlórien), and its vocabulary and grammar appear to be the most developed. Over the years, the Finnish character of the language was softened, and the resemblance to Latin increased. In a letter to Naomi Mitchison [*Letters*, #144], he wrote:

The archaic language of lore is meant to be a kind of "Elven-latin", and by transcribing it into a spelling closely resembling that of Latin ..., the similarity to Latin has been increased ocularly. Actually it might be said to be composed on a Latin basis with two other (main) ingredients that happen to give me "phonaesthetic" pleasure: Finnish and Greek. It is however less consonantal than any of the three.

In the original conception of the mythology, Qenya was the language of the elves of Valinor, but *not* the language of the rebellious Noldor, as Quenya is in *The Silmarillion*. The language of the Noldor, or Gnomes, was very different.

Just as the Finnish language strongly influenced Qenya, the (wholly unrelated) Welsh language, which fascinated Tolkien even as a child, became the linguistic-aesthetic inspiration for Tolkien's second Elvish language, the language of the Noldor, or *Gnomish*. Contemporary with the Qenya Lexicon was the Gnomish Lexicon (*i-Lam na-Ngoldathon*, published in *Parma Eldalamberon* #11, 1995). Gnomish never lost its 'Welsh' character; the language we recognize as Sindarin bears much resemblance to the Gnomish of the Lexicon, though it is almost entirely different in detail. Again, we can see resemblances between Gnomish (and Sindarin) and Welsh by considering some words and names found in the Welsh *Mabinogion*: Govannon, Annwn, or Dol Pebin; or words like *morwyn*, 'maid' or *llaw* (which, if

it were Sindarin, would be spelled *lhaw*), ‘hands’. In the later phases of Tolkien’s work, the word “Gnomish” was abandoned in favor of “Noldorin”.

Gnomish and Quenya underwent many changes for over twenty years, and the relationship between the languages, and the other Elvish dialects of Beleriand, grew more complex. By the time work on *The Lord of the Rings* began, the Noldorin and Quenya languages had reached forms fairly close to what we recognize as Sindarin and Quenya. At that time, Tolkien wrote down two important works that appeared in Volume V of *The History of Middle-earth: the Lhammas*, which described the now quite complicated relationships among the various Elvish dialects as they were then conceived, and the far less formal *Etymologies*, a list of many Common Elvish word roots, listing the Quenya, Noldorin, and other Elvish words derived from them. While many of the particulars in the *Etymologies* were discarded in the course of writing *The Lord of the Rings* (and subsequently), it remains the single most important source document for Elvish scholarship to date.

It was not until quite late in the writing of *The Lord of the Rings* that the roles of Quenya and Sindarin as the respective languages of the Noldor and Sindar emerged. In fact, the word “Sindarin” did not appear until the writing of the Appendices. Once *The Lord of the Rings* saw print, Tolkien felt bound by the linguistic information (both implicit and explicit) contained therein. There were some minor revisions and corrections pertaining to Elvish matters over the years (such as changing a noun inflection in Frodo’s greeting to Gildor), but *The Lord of the Rings* is considered to represent the definitively ‘real’ Elvish of the Third Age.

4 The Sounds of Elvish

As the foregoing discussion makes clear, many aspects of the Elvish languages are unclear even to scholars; inferences must be drawn from materials that are necessarily incomplete and unsystematic. Indeed, Tolkien changed his mind often, and the available materials are sometimes downright

contradictory.

Nevertheless, one area that is quite well understood is that of phonology: the sounds associated with the Elvish dialects. Appendix E of *The Lord of the Rings*, describing the alphabets, provides very complete descriptions of the sounds used by the Noldor and Sindar. As this is intended as an introduction, not an encyclopedic treatment, we will illustrate the phonological characteristics of Sindarin and Quenya by presenting a collection of elementary ‘rules’ by which one can usually distinguish between Sindarin and Quenya. Of course, there will be many exceptions.

In this discussion, the abbreviation CE refers to Common Elvish, the common ancestor of Quenya and Sindarin.

- Final vowels in CE disappeared in Sindarin. If you see a word with more than one syllable ending in a vowel, it is probably Quenya, although Sindarin verbs like *daró* will often end in vowels.

Conversely, if an Elvish word ends with a letter other than a vowel, or the letters *n*, *r*, *l*, or *s*, it is almost certain to be Sindarin.

- The CE sounds *t*, *p*, and *k* were normally softened, or *lenited*, in Sindarin when they occurred in the middle of words, especially between vowels. Their sounds became *d*, *b*, and *g*, respectively. If you see a word with the unlenited forms in such a position, it is probably Quenya, and not Sindarin.
- On the other hand, CE included the *d*, *b*, and *g* sounds, and these were modified in Quenya. *d* regularly became *l* (although it remained when strengthened in combinations like *nd* and *ld*); *b* became *v* (as in Q *vala* versus S *balan*), and *g* disappeared entirely (except after *n*). Thus, if you see a word with these consonants appearing outside the combinations *ng*, *mb*, *nd*, *rd*, or *ld*, it is not Quenya.
- Some other consonantal sounds are unique to one or the other language. The Sindarin sound *dh* (a lenited form of earlier *d*) did not

occur in Quenya. The *qu* sound of Quenya is not found in Sindarin; it was based on a CE sound that became *p* in Sindarin³. The older sound *th* (as seen in English words like “*threat*”) was modified to Quenya *s*.

- The long vowels *á*, *é*, and *í* are uncommon in Sindarin, compared to Quenya; the diphthongs *oi*, *ie*, and *eu* only occur in Quenya. On the other hand, the diphthongs *ae* and *oe* are unique to Sindarin, as are the circumflexed vowels in accented monosyllables like *dûr*. The vowel *y* occurs only in Sindarin; the consonantal *y* only occurs in Quenya.

Of course, these rules will not solve all problems. For example, the word *elen* could be either Sindarin or Quenya based on its appearance; as it happens, it is the normal Quenya word for ‘star’, but is also a Sindarin word, “only used in histories or the works of the Loremasters, as a word to include all Elves (Eldar and Avari).” [*The History of Middle-earth XI, Quendi and Eldar*] ⁴

There are also a few things to remember about pronunciation. Neither language has a silent *e* at the end of words; Tolkien usually wrote final *e* as *ë* to emphasize its pronunciation as a separate syllable.

Also, always keep in mind that Tolkien used *c* to represent the sound *k*, mainly to improve the appearance of the Elvish languages, and it should always be so pronounced: “Keleborn”, not “Seleborn”, and “Kirith Ungol” (which is how Christopher Tolkien, wishing to avoid mispronunciation, spelled it on the map in *The Lord of the Rings*), not “Sirith Ungol”. Also, a final *f* in Sindarin is pronounced (as in Welsh) as *v*.

Exercise 1 Identify the following words as Sindarin or Quenya: Calacirya; Galadriel; Tániquetil; Morimaitë; Calenardhon; Balrog; Gandalf.

³If this sounds strange, compare words like Greek *pēnta* (or Welsh *pump*) and Latin *quinque*, all meaning ‘five’.

⁴Just to confuse matters, it also meant ‘star’ in a few archaic Sindarin compounds like *elenath*

With this survey of elementary Elvish phonology under our belts, we now look at a few of the salient features of Quenya and Sindarin.

5 Quenya: ‘Elven-Latin’

We speakers of English have a relatively easy task when learning the formalities of our grammar⁵. Nouns only come in a few varieties (singular, plural, and the possessive form of each), and the only present-tense conjugation for regular verbs is the addition of an *s* (sometimes pronounced *z*) after the third-person singular. Our pronouns are only a bit more complex, since they include an *objective case* (e.g., “me” instead of “I” in certain contexts). Only our system of verb tenses, with helping verbs to produce complex tenses like “he might have been about to read the book”, exhibits significant grammatical complexity, comparatively speaking. Yet even there, the *form* of a regular verb only changes in the past tense and in the present participle (i.e., “I bake, I baked, I am baking.”).

By comparison, Quenya (like Latin and Finnish) is a more *inflected* language, in which an assortment of grammatical particles (like the plural marker *s* in English) and occasional phonetic changes mark the uses of nouns, adjectives and verbs.

To illustrate this, let us consider a regular Quenya noun, *parma*, meaning ‘book’; with the definite article, *i parma*, ‘the book’. We can not only form a regular plural, *parmar*⁶, but also a *dual* plural, *parmat*, meaning ‘a pair of books’. Quenya nouns can also be marked with a possessive (or, more properly, *genitive case*). So, if the Quenya word for ‘name’ is *essë*, then ‘name of (a) book’ would be *parmo essë*; ‘names of books’ would be *parmaron essi*⁷. Such noun vari-

⁵Setting aside, for the moment, our many irregular verbs and nouns.

⁶A mistake made by many casual readers is to use the plural form instead of the singular, or vice-versa; as, “Gandalf is a Maiar,” instead of the correct “Gandalf is a Maia.” Now you know better.

⁷Nouns ending in *e* or a consonant are regularly pluralized with a final *i*.

ations indicating grammatic function are called *cases*; the inflection of a noun for these cases is called *declension* — the bane of Latin students for centuries. Fortunately, compared to Latin and Finnish (which has no fewer than fifteen noun cases), the Quenya case system is relatively simple. There are, for example, no grammatical genders in Quenya.

To continue our example, we might want to talk about a word (*quetta*) out of the book. For this we need another case, called *ablative*, so that we can say *quetta i parmallo*, ‘a word from the book’. There are several other noun cases, and differing forms of the plural as well.

Furthermore, nouns may have possessives embedded into them. To build on our example, I can refer to thy book as *parmalya*, my book as *parmanya* and our book (exclusively thine and mine) as *parmalva*. Such nouns can have a case ending added, so that ‘from my book’ would be *parmanyallo*. Thus, if *ómentië* is the Quenya word for ‘meeting’ and ‘time’ is *lúmë*, then we can now analyze what is surely the most famous example of Quenya noun declension, *lúmenna ómentielvo*. Here, we meet the *allative* case ending *-nna* to give us ‘at/upon the time⁸.’ ‘Our meeting’ is *ómentielva*, so the genitive *-o* inflection gives us the well-known translation, ‘on the hour of our meeting’.

Exercise 2 If *anna* is the Quenya word for ‘a gift’, and *málo* means ‘a friend’, how might you tag a holiday present as ‘a gift from a friend’?

The first part of Frodo’s greeting demonstrates a simple sentence with a subject followed by a present-tense verb: *elen síla*, ‘(a) star is shining.’ If several stars were shining, one would say *eleni sílar*. In this example, a one-syllable primitive root, *SIL* (the root for *silmaril*), is used as a verb by adding *-a* and also lengthening the vowel; with longer verbs (e.g., *lanta*, ‘fall’), no vowel lengthening occurs. If we wish to say that a star will shine, we can say *elen siluva*; the *-uva* suffix indicates the future tense.

⁸The final *a* is, in Frodo’s actual greeting to Gildor, omitted simply as a contraction with the following vowel.

The past tense is a little fuzzier. Different verbs seem to form the past tense in different ways, depending on their original derivation. For example, *máta*, ‘eat’, is said to form the past tense, *mante*, ‘ate’, by “medial nasal-infixion”, the insertion of the sound *n*. More common is the addition of *në*, as in *vánë*, ‘passed away’. Finally, there is a *perfect* tense, the form of the past tense denoting a completed action, as in *avánië*, ‘has passed away.’ It is formed by prefixing the root with its (first) vowel, and adding *ië*. There are several published examples of this.

Verbs of any tense can be conjugated (sort of) by the addition of suffixes similar to those used to form possessives. For example, Elendil’s words repeated by Aragorn, *Et Eärello Endoreнна utúlien*, ‘Out of the Great Sea to Middle-earth I am come.’ The basic verb stem, ‘come’ *TUL-* forms the perfect tense, *utúlië*; then the first-person suffix *-n* is added. A pronoun can also be added as the object of the verb, as in Aragorn’s exclamation, *utúvienes*, ‘I have found it’, in which the perfect verb *utúvië* is marked with an extended first-person suffix to give *utúvienne*, ‘I have found’ and finally a third-person suffix *-s* is added to complete the word.

Exercise 3 The normal word-order for Quenya is Subject-verb-object, as in English. If the root for ‘see, watch’ is *TIR-* (as in *palantír*), how do you say ‘I am watching the stars’?

Exercise 4 The Quenya word for ‘sun’ is *anar*; the root for ‘light’ is *KAL-*, and the word for ‘path’ is *tië*. Gelmir told Tuor, *Anar caluva tielyanna*. What did he say?

Hopefully, this look at some of the things that go on in Quenya has not been too frightening! It does demonstrate the highly inflected character of the language. Fortunately, as we will see later, there are many good documents — both in print and on the Web — by people who have spent a lot of time figuring these things out, and summarizing them neatly. As it turns out, because Tolkien wrote many annotated examples of

Quenya prose and poetry, and essays dealing primarily with its structure, Quenya is actually more well documented than Sindarin. This is surprising to many people, for whom the word “Elvish” usually suggests the Sindarin language, which is so visible in *The Lord of the Rings* in the names of people and places, and of course in the inscription on the West-gate of Moria. With this in mind, we now turn our attention to the language of the Grey Elves.

6 Sindarin: Shifting Sounds

As we learned earlier, Tolkien modeled Sindarin in some ways after the Welsh language. One of the unusual things about Welsh is that plurals are often formed by the change of internal vowels. This is the result of old plurals ending in *-i*. Even though that ending was dropped, it affected the pronunciations of the other vowels in the word. A very similar phenomenon occurs in Sindarin, although the details are a bit different. Even casual readers of *The Lord of the Rings* probably recognize the resulting plural formations: *adan*, ‘man’ (as in *dúnadan*), plural *edain*⁹; *certh*, ‘rune’, plural *cirth*; *orod*, ‘mountain’, plural *eryd* (*ered* in older names); and of course *orch*, plural *yrch*. This phenomenon is very consistent, and there are many examples.

Exercise 5 What are the plural forms of: *galadh*; *amon*; *mellon*; *edhel*? Do you recognize what they mean?

Sindarin also had a *class plural*, *-ath*, seen in such words as *periannath*, ‘(the race of) halflings’ and *elenath*, ‘the host of the stars’. Note that these are genuine plurals, and the adjectives that modify them are pluralized normally, as in *Pinnath Gelin*, the ‘green ridges’ of Gondor. There are also other ‘irregular’ plurals formed by adding suffixes¹⁰, as in *Drû/Drúin* but these are uncommon.

⁹This should properly be pronounced to rhyme with English “dine,” not “dane”.

¹⁰as there are in Welsh, e.g., *ebol-yon*, ‘colts’

Not only vowels, but consonants shifted in Sindarin. Earlier, we saw how consonants changed from primitive Elvish in certain contexts. This softening, or *lenition*¹¹, of consonants could occur at the beginning of words in certain contexts, including the formation of compounds. The exact rules are uncertain¹², and it seems that Tolkien changed his mind about them frequently, judging from manuscript corrections and different versions of names from different times. The most common context for lenition is when a word is used in close compounds. So, we see *elvellyn*, ‘elf-friends’ from *el+mellyn*; *Perhael*, ‘Half-wise, Sam-wise’ from *per+sael*; *fanuidhol*, ‘cloudyhead’, from *fanui+dol*, and so on. Lenition also occurs at the beginnings of singular nouns following the definite article *i* (e.g., *i Varanduiniant*, ‘the Brandywine bridge’). Finally, lenition occurs when the noun is the direct object of the verb. For example, when the hosts of the West praise Frodo and Sam, they say *Daur a Berhael, Conin en Annûn! Eglerio!*, “Noble and Halfwise (i.e. Frodo and Sam), Princes¹³ of the West, glorify (them)!”. Here, the words *taur* and *perhael* are implicitly the direct objects of the verb *eglerio*, and so their initial consonants are lenited.

Exercise 6 The adjective *celebrin* means ‘silvery’; *tal* is ‘foot’. What is the result of combining them into a close compound?

Exercise 7 The Sindarin word for ‘word’ is *peth* (from the same word as Quenya *quetta*). Why does it appear as *beth* in Gandalf’s spell, *Fennas nogothrim, lasto beth lammen* (“Gateway of Dwarf-folk, hear my tongue’s word”)?

Sindarin also has a *nasal mutation* which occurs after certain words ending in *-n* or *-m*. The consonant sound changes, and, in many cases, the triggering letter disappears; it is implicit in the

¹¹It is notable that this word appears nowhere in Ruth Noel’s book, and she does not appear to recognize it in many cases.

¹²In Welsh, lenition occurs under very complex rules, such as “a feminine singular after an article.” Sindarin appears simpler.

¹³This appears to be an irregular plural.

mutated consonant. The classic example of this is the phrase, *Ernil i-pheriannath*. Here, we meet (in disguise!) the plural article *in*; it just means ‘the’, but for plurals (rather like the Spanish article *los*). The result is to make the *p* sound into an *f* sound; Tolkien spells this as *ph* to make this mutation evident. Thus, while Pippin describes himself as a *perian*, ‘halfling’¹⁴ the collective plural for his race is *periannath* and ‘Prince of the Halflings’ is *Ernil i Pheriannath*.

There is much that can be said about Sindarin grammar, and, once again, this introduction cannot provide a complete treatment of the subject. However, we must mention one grammatical feature that is an important part of the names seen throughout *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. This is the use of adjectival ordering to modify nouns. Sindarin adjectives are normally placed *after* the nouns that they modify; lenition sometimes occurs when this happens. For example, *Parth Galen*, ‘green lawn’ (with a lenited form of *calen*, ‘green’). This adjectival position is also normally used to represent the genitive case (which we recall is similar to a possessive), as seen in *Ennyn Durin Aran Moria*, ‘Doors (of) Durin, Lord (of) Moria’. Note that in this case, consonant mutation does *not* take place. However, if an article occurs, nasal mutation occurs. So, we have Aragorn’s letter to Sam describing his titles as *aran Gondor ar Hir i Mbair Annui*, ‘king of Gondor and Lord of the Westlands’; no mutation takes place in *aran Gondor*, but a nasal mutation after the plural genitive article *i(n)* causes the normal plural *bair* to become *mbair*. There is also a singular article, *en*, that can be used only in this genitive context, as in Voronwë’s descriptions of the mountains of Echoriath as *ered e-mbar nín*, ‘(the) mountains (of) the home (of) mine’.

7 Some Examples

We now close with some examples of ‘doing Elvish’, by presenting some simple translations of

¹⁴the same word *per*, ‘half’, is seen in other words like *Per-hael* (Sam) and the half-elven *peredhil*.

names and short sentences. For our first example, we consider the name *Green Books*. In Quenya, we already know that *parma* means ‘book’; and we may remember the ‘green-elves’ or *laiquendi* from *The Silmarillion*. Although *Etymologies* indicates that the Quenya word was *laiqua* (under the root *LÁYAK*), in a later correspondence explaining the meaning of the name Legolas [*Letters*, #211], Tolkien gave the revised Quenya word *laica* for ‘green’. Pluralizing this adjective, we get *Laicë Parmar*, pronounced as “LIE-keh PAHR-mahr”¹⁵. For Sindarin, we look up *PAR-* and find that the Sindarin equivalent of *parma* is *parf* (with the regular dropping of the final vowel and the lenition of *m* to *v*), plural *perf*. In the same letter, Tolkien says that the more common Sindarin word for ‘green’ is *calen*, so we can translate *Green Books* confidently as *Perf Gelin*. Remember that the final *f* is pronounced as a *v*, so this would be pronounced, roughly, as “pairv GEHL-eeen”.

The construction of the Sindarin title for this article was problematic. The word *cent*, ‘examination’ (pronounced “kent”), was derived from the Quenya word *Kenta*, ‘enquiry’, which seems to be related to the verb stem *KEN-* ‘see, behold’. The Sindarin form is by analogy with the entry in *Etymologies* giving Quenya *qanta* and Noldorin *pant* as equivalent derivations from the root *KWAT-*, ‘full’. The last word, *hedhellem*, is the plural form of *edhel-lam*, ‘elf-tongue’: the Sindarin equivalent to Quenya *lambe* is *lam(m)* (consider, for example, the phrase *lasto beth lammen*). The conjunction *o*, ‘about, concerning’, and the addition of an initial *H-* to the following word is based on the entry in *Etymologies* for *OS-*. This entry was, at least partially, obsoleted by a different derivation of *ost*, ‘fortress’ in *Quendi and Eldar*, but no mention is made of any replacement for this useful preposition. Mature Sindarin, like Noldorin, does reduce an *s* found between vowels to *h*, so if *OS-* is valid, the initial *H* in *Hedhellem* is justified¹⁶. In any

¹⁵Thanks to Fredrik Ström of the Elfling mailing list for pointing this out.

¹⁶Some scholars would argue for *oh Edhellem*. It must also be mentioned that such a preposition would be partly homophonic with the preposition *o* meaning ‘from’ seen on the West-

case, a Quenya equivalent would be *Eldalambicenta* (using *c* to represent the *k* sound).

Earlier we mentioned the possibility of putting a Sindarin inscription on a refrigerator door. An easy possibility might be “Enter, friends, and eat!” We know the form of the first three words by analogy with the West-gate inscription: *minno mellyn a*. Note that if the word *mellyn* were lenited to *vellyn*, it would mean ‘Enter a friend’, which is not what we want to say¹⁷. For the command, ‘eat’, we recall that the root *MAT-* has this meaning; *Etymologies* gives *medi* as the Noldorin equivalent. This is consistent with Sindarin rules: the older *t* between vowels becomes *d* in Sindarin, and the infinitive verb ending *-i* causes the nearby vowel to change (as in the plural formations). But we know that the Sindarin imperative verb ending is *-o* (as seen on the West-gate, or Gandalf’s command to open, *edro!*), which does not cause a vowel shift, so the imperative form is *mado*, and our Refrigerator-gate inscription is the unexpectedly alliterative *Minno mellyn a mado*. We can make it more alliterative by throwing in the adverb *mae* ‘well’ (as in Glorfindel’s exclamation, *mae govanen*, ‘well met’), giving us *Minno mellyn a mae mado*, “Enter, friends, and eat well!”

This article was prompted by seeing an article ending in the macaronic (i.e., mixing Sindarin and Quenya) *Namárië Mellyn*, intended to mean “Farewell, friends.” We can find the Quenya equivalent to *mellyn* by once again turning to *Etymologies*, and examining the entry *MEL-*. While we might expect the Quenya equivalent to use the same vowel, it turns out that there is an “irregular vocalism” in this word, so that the actual word is *málo* (plural *málor*). So we can simply say, *Namárië, málor*. For the sake of demonstration, we can decide that we want to say, ‘Farewell, my friends.’, in which case we add the usual possessive and get *Namárië, málonyar*. Finally, perhaps we want to be really ambitious and say ‘Farewell to my friends’. Here, we need a *dative case* ending (used typically when something is being given to

someone). We can find this in some of the online locations or printed journals; it is, in the plural, *-in*, so we finally get *Namárië málonyain*. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be a ready equivalent for *Namárië* in Sindarin, although some fans use the phrase *cuio mae*, “live well”, for this purpose.

8 Further Reading

Those wishing to study further have two kinds of sources available to them: ‘primary’ references — the works actually written by J.R.R. Tolkien; and ‘secondary’ materials — analyses and compilations created by others. In *The Lord of the Rings* itself, the most important section is Appendix E, which describes the sounds of the Elvish languages, and the Tengwar and Runic lettering systems. Appendix F also gives an outline of the various languages of Middle-earth, including Elvish, and describes how real-world languages like Old English and Norse are used to represent them in the novel. The Appendix on calendars has some interesting vocabulary and it may be instructive to compare the Sindarin and Quenya names with their Anglicized (Hobbitish) counterparts. The Appendix to *The Silmarillion* has a list of Elvish names used in that work, with some etymological information.

One valuable resource that is unfortunately out of print is the songbook for Donald Swann’s song cycle, *The Road Goes Ever On*. This 1967 volume contains a supplementary section by Tolkien giving word-for-word translations of *Namárië* and *A Elbereth Gilthoniel* (including nicely calligraphed Tengwar versions of both). While this volume has become difficult to obtain, it can sometimes be found for upwards of \$75 US from used book dealers and Web auction sites.

The History of Middle-earth comprises twelve volumes and may be difficult to acquire in its entirety for some. For the Elvish linguist, the most important volume is Volume V: *The Lost Road*. As mentioned earlier, this volume contains the *Etymologies*, a list of Elvish word-roots

gate of Moria.

¹⁷This analysis may be what misled Gandalf in interpreting *pedo mellon*.

and their Qenya and Noldorin derivatives dating from approximately the time at which work on *The Lord of the Rings* was begun. While much was changed (including the very names of Qenya and Noldorin respectively becoming Quenya and Sindarin), this is the most complete vocabulary and word-derivation resource for the Elvish languages. Other *The History of Middle-earth* volumes containing interesting material are *Sauron Defeated*, which in the Epilogue contains the longest published Sindarin prose selection in the form of a letter from King Elessar to Mayor Samwise Gamgee, and *The War of the Jewels*, which contains the essay, *Quendi and Eldar*, a detailed treatment of the etymologies of the various words (*quendi*, *edhel*, etc.) for the Eldar and other races of Middle-earth.

Additional material by Tolkien that is primarily of linguistic interest and did not find a place in *The History of Middle-earth* has been printed in recent years in the journals *Parma Eldalambéron*¹⁸, edited by Christopher Gilson, and *Vinyar Tengwar*, edited by Carl Hostetter. These journals appear sporadically. *Parma Eldalambéron* printed two special issues in the 1990s containing the Gnomish Lexicon and the Qenya Lexicon, from about 1915, and the latest issue (January 2002) contains information on the development of Gnomish through the 1920s as it became closer to what we know as Sindarin. Further information can be obtained from Mr. Gilson's web site¹⁹. *Vinyar Tengwar* has most recently printed essays by Tolkien expanding on the material in *Quendi and Eldar*, including an interesting discussion of the implications of "mind-speech" (or *ósanwe*) among the Valar and Eldar. Again, you can consult Mr. Hostetter's web site²⁰ for further information.

In the past, both journals have also presented original articles, Elvish poetry, analyses, letter columns, and so on. In more recent years, much

activity of this kind has begun to take place on web pages and Internet mailing lists. One very good place to start is Carl Hostetter's Resources for Tolkienian Linguistics²¹, which contains a far more complete listing of both primary and secondary sources. Among its links, the most popular is Helge Fauskanger's Ardalambion²². This site contains a wealth of word lists, and excellent summaries of what is known about the structures of Quenya and Sindarin (and other Tolkien languages as well), some of which were consulted at length to prepare this article. Mr. Fauskanger is preparing a series of lessons on Quenya that can be downloaded from his site. Another site that will be of considerable interest is Ryszard Derdzinski's Gwaith i-Phethdain²³ (Fellowship of the Wordsmiths), which contains a variety of useful materials and links, including extensive discussion of the Elvish dialogues heard in Peter Jackson's movies.

There are two mailing lists concerned with Elvish and Tolkien linguistics. The more active is the Elfling²⁴ mailing list, operated by Dorothea Salo; less active (but no less erudite) is the more heavily moderated Tolklang²⁵ list. Both cover a wide range of topics and their participants range from beginners to *lambengolmor* of many years' standing. Be sure to read the FAQ before posting to either list!

¹⁸For 'The book of the elven tongues'. It is probable that the correct word should be *Eldalambion*. The first issue appeared in 1971; much has been learned since then.

¹⁹<http://www.eldalamberon.com/parma9.html>

²⁰<http://www.elvish.org/VT/>

²¹<http://www.elvish.org/resources.html>

²²<http://www.uib.no/People/hnohf/index.html>

²³<http://www.elvish.org/gwaith>

²⁴<http://www.terracom.net/~dorothea/elfling.html>

²⁵<http://www.dcs.ed.ac.uk/misc/local/TolkLang/>

A Word Lists

Herein are set forth all the Quenya and Sindarin words and phrases discussed in this article.

Quenya Word List

alda	tree
anar	sun
Anar caluva tielyanna	The sun will shine on your path
anna	gift
Anna málollo	A gift from a friend
avánië	Has passed away
Eldalambi-centa	An enquiry into Elvish tongues
Eldalambion	Of the elvish tongues
elen	star
elen síla	A star is shining
elen siluva	a star will shine
eleni sílar	stars are shining
essë	name
Et Eärello Endoreenna utúlien	From out of the great sea to Middle-earth I have come
i parma	the book
KAL-	Light
Kenta	Inquiry/examination
laica	green, bright
Laicë Parmar	Green Books
laiquendi	green-elves
lambe	language, tongue
lambengolmor	language loremasters
lanta	falls
lasse	leaf
lúmë	time, hour
lúmenna ómentielvo	upon the time
málo	friend
málollo	from a friend
málor	friends
mante	ate
máta	eats
melda	beloved
Meldon	David
Namárië	Farewell
Namárië málonyain	Farewell to my friends
Namárië, málonyar	Farewell, my friends
Namárië, málor	Farewell, friends
nár	fire, flame
númen	west
ómentië	meeting of ways
ómentielva	our meeting
ósanwe	mind-speech
palantír	far-seer

parma	book
parmalva	our book (thine and mine)
parmalya	thy book
parmanya	my book
parmanyallo	from my book
parmar	books
parmaron essi	names of books
parmat	a pair of books
parmo essë	a book's name
quendi	elves
quetta	word
quetta i parmallo	a word from the book
tië	path
TIR-	watch, see
Tíran i eleni	I am watching the stars
TUL-	come
utúlië	has come
utúvië	has found
utúvienye	I have found
utúvienyes	I have found it
vánë	passed away

Sindarin Word List

adan	man
amon	hill
aran Gondor	King of Gondor
aran Gondor ar Hír i Mbair Annui	king of Gondor and Lord of the Western Lands
bair	lands, dwellings
balan	vala
beth	words
calen	green, bright
celebrin	silvery
Celebrindal	silver-foot
cent	examination, inquiry
certh	rune
cirth	runes
cuio mae	live well
daro	stop!
Daur a Berhael, Conin en Annûn! Eglerio!	Noble and Halfwise, Princes of the West!
dûn	west
dúnadan	west-man
edain	men
edhel	elf
edhel-lam	elf-language
edhil	elves
edro!	open!
eglerio	glorify them!
el+mellyn	elf+friends

elenath	host of stars
elvellyn	elf-friends
emyn	hills
en	the (sing. gen.)
Ennyn Durin Aran Moria	Doors of Durin Lord of Moria
ered	mountains
ered e-mbar nín	mountains of my home
Ernil i Pheriannath	Prince of the Halflings
eryd	mountains
fanui+dol	cloudy+head
fanuidhol	cloudyhead
Fennas nogothrim, lasto beth lammen	Gateway of (the) dwarf-folk, hear my tongue's word
galadh	tree
gelaidh	trees
hedhellem	(concerning) elf-tongues
i	the
i Varanduiniant	the Baranduin (Brandywine) bridge
i(n)	the (plural)
lam(m)	language
lass	leaf
lasto	hear!
lasto beth lammen	hear my tongue's word
lhaw	ears
mado	eat!
mae	well
mae govannen	well met
mbair	dwellings (with nasal mutation)
medi	to eat
mellon	friend
mellyn	friends
Minno mellyn a mae mado	enter, friend, and eat well
naur	fire, flame
o	from, of, concerning
orch	orc
orod	mountain
ost	city, fortress
Ost-in-Edhil	fortress of the elves
parf	book
Parth Galen	Green lawn
pedo mellon	speak, friend
per	half
per+sael	half+wise
peredhil	half-elves
perf	books
Perf Gelin	Green Books
Perhael	Samwise, half-wise
perian	Halfling, hobbit
periannath	the race of halflings
peth	word
Pinnath Gelin	Green Ridges

Suilad Greetings
tal foot
Tarmund Royal Bull
taur High, lofty, noble
vellyn friends (with lenition)
yrch orcs

Answers to the Exercises

1 Quenya: Calaciryra (no *c* between vowels in Sindarin); Tániquetil (*qu* sound); Morimaitë (*t* between vowels). Sindarin: Galadriel (no initial *g* in Quenya); Calenardhon (*dh* sound); Balrog (initial *b*). Gandalf is not an Elvish name — like the Dwarves' names, it is Norse, representing the Northern mannish language of Dale — although it could pass for Sindarin in form.

2 *Anna málollo.*

3 Probably *Tíran i eleni.*

4 The sun will light (i.e. shine) upon (*-nna*) your (*-lya*) path.

5 *gelaidh* (trees); *emyn* (hills); *mellyn* (friends); *edhil* (elves, as in *Ost-in-Edhil*, the fortress of the Noldor of Eregion).

6 *Celebrindal*

7 Because it is the direct object of the verb *lasto*, 'hear'.