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Language as Mediation in Tolkien's Mythology

(modified for New Voices panel)

In his detailed accounts concerning Middle-earth and its inhabitants throughout various Ages of existence, Tolkien made his desire to write a mythology for England a reality. Although his work has delighted readers of all ages for decades, to dismiss Tolkien as a mere writer of children's fantasy or escapist science fiction would be to do him a great disservice. Tolkien was, above all, a philologist; his great love and obsession with language is obvious in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and especially *The Silmarillion*. Tolkien was also a product of his time; he was a lover and a teacher of ancient languages in a time of rapid industrialization and urbanization, and this unique position he occupied, as well as his desire to somehow reconcile the two extremes, also found its way into his own fiction. To that end, Middle-earth is primarily a world of mediation between the old and the new, between history and modernity, and Tolkien uses language as the foundational mediating device.

Tolkien himself believed that myths are not by definition lies (Smith 13). In her book examining Tolkien's mythology, Anne Petty defines *myth* as "the transmission of cumulative knowledge, experience, and universal truths constant in our human existence, through the consistent symbologies known to folklore" (10). According to such a

definition, the position that myth occupies is itself a medial position that paradoxically seeks to convey truth through fiction. Such a statement also seems to suggest that in seeking to write a mythology for England, Tolkien could not simply make-up stories for England, but rather he would have to have built his fictional world on the precepts of truth and of fact, on pre-existing ideas and assumptions.

To this end, Tolkien relied upon the works that he himself studied to provide the backdrop to his own work. As a philologist and a professor of Anglo-Saxon, Tolkien had intimate knowledge of the languages of Middle English, Old English (also called Anglo-Saxon), Old Norse (also called Old Icelandic), Welsh, and Finnish along with the folklore conveyed through and in those languages. This knowledge serves to provide the narrative background for the tales of Middle-earth. Ruth Noel, author of *The Languages of Tolkien's Middle-earth*, points out that the term "*Middle-earth*" is an ancient designation for Europe or the known world of Europeans (4). So even in the conception of the physical space where Tolkien sets his stories, he stays true to notions and beliefs conveyed in pre-existing folklore. Thus, his creation is not simply a place of his own imagining but also a setting that coincides with pre-existing folkloristic settings. Furthermore, the designation *Middle-earth* not only implies a notion of centrality that coincides with Old World beliefs, but it also implies a position of in-between-ness and merging, of mediation.

If myth is truly grounded in the conveyance of universal truth, Tolkien's mythology must have a source or sources based in pre-existing knowledge. Instead of simply making up stories himself, Tolkien must have relied on pre-existing stories and folktales on which to base his mythology. Jane Chance, author of *Tolkien's Art*, draws a

parallel between Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* and the *Kalevala*, a Finnish national epic of mythology; both are collections of national tales of loss and recovery (185). Eärendil the Mariner, a prominent figure in *The Silmarillion*, is modeled after Earendel in the Old English epic *Crist*, and through this comparison, allusions to Old Testament mythology are also made (Chance 195). Similarly, the division between Light Elves and Dark Elves in *The Silmarillion* is a borrowing from Norse mythology's Icelandic *Prose Edda* and its source, the *Elder Edda* (Flieger 83).

Tolkien also assumes the position of mediator as he takes on the role of translator, rather than author, of his books. In the beginning of the prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien puts forth the idea that Bilbo himself composed *The Hobbit* (1), and in Appendix F he states that "the language represented in this history by English was the *Westron* or 'Common Speech' of the West-lands of Middle-earth in the Third Age" (1101). Such a statement implies that the story presented is merely a translation of an older tongue no longer understood; therefore, it must be conveyed through a medium that present day readers can comprehend. This is the first method of mediation between the secondary world of myth and the primary world of reality. Tolkien's "translation" seeks to bridge the distance between old tradition and new reality, and he uses modern English to do so.

If Tolkien becomes a mediator through his role as translator, then it seems that hobbits also must occupy a designation as mediators themselves through their act of recording events. Just as Bilbo is the original author and recorder of *The Hobbit*, so also are the events conveyed in *The Lord of the Rings* recorded by hobbits in their own language, which is *Westron*, and readers have access to the secondary world only through

the “translations” Tolkien makes. Ruth Noel points out that in order “to indicate both similarities and contrasts of other languages with Westron, once [modern] English is established in Westron’s place the other languages have to evince the relationship to the English ear” (7). In order to indicate these relationships between languages, Tolkien uses various foreign languages to represent these differences. For example, the Old Elvish language called Quenya is represented through Finnish, indicating distance between Westron and Quenya, hobbits and elves. In contrast, the language of Rohan is represented in Old English, implying a closer relationship to the hobbit’s Westron speech and thus a cultural relationship between hobbit and Rohirrim that is attested in Appendix F of *The Lord of the Rings* (1104).

The word *hobbit*, in fact, seems to be derived from the Old English *holbytla*, meaning “hole-builder,” referring to hobbits’ underground dwellings. If such a relationship exists between English and Old English, then it seems to follow that such a relationship would also exist between the hobbit’s Westron speech and the language of Rohan. Thus, when one learns from Appendix F that “in ancient days [hobbits] seem always to have used the languages of Men near whom, or among whom, they lived” (1104), one can assume that at one point in history, the ancestors of hobbits and the ancestors of the Rohirrim lived in close proximity to one another, which they did – in the folklore both groups claim origins in the Anduin Valley before migrating, independently, to their present respective lands in the Shire and the gap of Rohan. Such a connection puts the hobbits in a position of mediation between the inhabitants of Rohan and their archaic language and the other races of Middle-earth who speak Westron, the *lingua franca* of Middle-earth; since the Rohirrim moved into the Gap of Rohan only 500 years

previous, it is fitting that their language would contain marked differences to the Westron speech that has been spoken in those areas since the First Age of Middle-earth.

The hobbits also provide a point of contact between the primary world and the secondary world through the process of calquing, in which words are formed using direct translations from another language. Philologist and Tolkien scholar Tom Shippey points out in *The Road to Middle-earth* that “the Shire is ‘calqued’ on England” (102); thus, Tolkien took the names of his surroundings and turned them into Shire names. This is why Nobottle in the hobbits’ Northfarthing is reminiscent of a Nobottle in Northamptonshire thirty-five miles from Oxford. Its meaning is the same as Newbury (a town in England twenty-five miles south of Oxford) and derives from the compounding of Old English *niowe*, meaning “new,” and *botl*, meaning “house” (103). Similarly, place names in the Shire derive from the Old English roots for present-day English place names.

Thus, historically “the Shire is like/unlike England, the hobbits like/unlike English people. Hobbits live in the Shire as the English live in England, but like the English they come from somewhere else [...]. Both groups have forgotten this fact” (Shippey, *Road to Middle-earth*, 102). Just as Shippey implies, the prologue of *The Lord of the Rings* describes the three-fold migration of the Stoors, Harfoots, and Fallohides into the Shire from the Anduin Valley area, and this migration is a reflection of the movement of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes into the British Isle.

In addition to the heroic epics of Northern European mythology, Tolkien also looked toward the fairy tales of Germany, France, Norway, England, and Denmark as a source for his own mythology. Comparative philology has already hypothesized a shared

source for the fairy tales of these countries (Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 12-15), and it would not be too presumptuous to assume that Tolkien was working backwards toward the source and that his mythology could be an attempt to provide a source story for these similar yet divergent tales. Such a belief only serves to illustrate that in his attempt at myth-making Tolkien sought not simply to create a story but rather to piece together the fragments of a pre-existing story. In this attempt as well Tolkien serves as a mediator, for his original story in *The Silmarillion* is used to bridge the discrepancies not only between these divergent fairy tales, but the similarities with the Old Testament creation story also seek to find a point of mediation between paganism and Christendom.

If the Shire exists in Middle-earth as a calqued England, then the history of the elves that Tolkien presents in *The Silmarillion* can be seen as a calqued creation story, and Tolkien's use of language is not confined merely to the concerns of translation.

(Flieger 38-39). In *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World*, Verlyn Flieger describes Owen Barfield's theory of "ancient semantic unity" and the idea that as cultures diverge, their languages and perceptions begin to fragment over time. Thus, cognate words can only convey a fragment of the perception presented in the original root/source word. Such a theory can also be applied to Tolkien's creation of the Elven languages in his mythology, which deliberately mirror the presumed migrations of the Indo-European peoples.

Fragmentation in the Elven language begins with the invitation that the Valar extend to the elves to join them in their paradisiacal home of Valinor, the place of the light. Division occurs, as there are elves that wish to accept the invitation and those who prefer to stay in Middle-earth. The first division is made between Caliquendi, "light

elves,” and Moriquendi, “dark elves,” (a distinction that is also present in the Icelandic *Prose Edda*). The Caliquendi are the Tareldar in the language of the Valar, that is, the “high” eldar; the Moriquendi, however, do not refer to themselves as such (“dark elves”) but rather the Avari, “unwilling” or “refusers” (Flieger 78). Already then, a language differentiation can be seen. Moreover, it is a differentiation that exemplifies the notion that language development is shaped by both external and internal forces, demonstrated in the language differentiation referring to the Moriquendi/Avari identifiers.

Further differentiation takes place within the Caliquendi elves because those who choose to go to Valinor go in three separate groups at three separate times. The Vanyar, Fair Elves, are the first and most eager group to go; the Noldor, Deep Elves, are the second group; the Teleri, Last-comers, are the third group to depart. In fact, some of the Teleri hesitate so much that they never actually make it to Valinor; instead, they occupy both the island of Tol Eressea and Alqualondë, the coast along the Western shores of Middle-earth. They become great mariners, and they command the ships that return the elves to Valinor at the end of the Third Age, an event recorded in *The Lord of the Rings*. They are the Umanyar, the nonholy, neither light nor dark elves (Flieger 85), they occupy a neutral position midway between Caliquendi and Moriquendi, and both their neutrality and their role as transporters between Middle-earth and Valinor solidify their position as mediators.

As the Caliquendi migrate westward toward the light of Valinor, the fragmentation of peoples, perceptions, and languages follow. As the elves divide, their conflicting perceptions of one another and of the worlds they occupy differentiate their languages. As each subsequent group departs, their periodic isolation from each other

causes changes in the languages that are unique to each group. Similarly, as different peoples of the hypothetical Indo-European culture began migrating, the root language also began to fragment, and the result is a group of languages that are distinct yet share cognates that imply an “ancient semantic unity.” Thus, Tolkien’s use of linguistic theory truly does become the point of contact between the primary world of England and Europe and the secondary world of Middle-earth; he incorporates aspects of a theoretical reality and applies it to his mythology, grounding his sub-creation in an aspect of truth.

Even with the distinctions within the Caliquendi Elves, there still remain two primary forms of Elvish speech; Quenya is spoken in Valinor. It is High Elven or Old Elven, and it occupies a prestige position akin to Latin in the English language. It is also called Eldarin by the Valar. Sindarin is the Elven language of Middle-earth; the Sindar are the grey elves and, as their name suggests, they occupy the middle ground between Caliquendi and Moriquendi, light and dark. Since it is the Elven language spoken in Middle-earth, it is the primary Elven language that is spoken by the elves in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Not much account is given of the Vanyar in Tolkien’s mythology because they occupy Valinor while Tolkien is specifically concerned with tales concerning Middle-earth. He does, however, give detailed accounts of interaction between Noldor, Umanyar, and Moriquendi because these elves occupy the lands of Middle-earth. The Noldor, due to their growing pride and arrogance, are exiled from Valinor and return to Middle-earth.

After the Noldor return to Middle-earth after such a long separation, they discover that their language has diverged; they speak Quenya while the other elf groups

of Middle-earth speak Sindarin. Flieger describes the shift from Quenya to Sindarin as a diminution mirroring the transformation that occurs in the movement from light to dark. The movement from Quenya to Sindarin is also described as “[a] softening, mostly clearly perceptible in consonants. [...] medial *d* in Quenya *elda* is *dh* (with the value of a voiced English *th*) in Sindarin *eledh*. Initial *k* or *c* in Quenya *kal/cal* is hard *g* in Sindarin *gal*” (Flieger 94). Such a pattern of change is reminiscent of Grimm’s Law that traces the pattern of phonological change in divergent languages of Indo-European origin. Thus, Tolkien still manages to use language as a mediator between primary and secondary worlds. Attested changes that take place in the English language also must be accounted for in the languages of Middle-earth. Thus, language changes in Elvish are regular, just as language changes occurring in the primary world are also regular.

The Noldor themselves in Middle-earth occupy a position of in-between-ness and mediation as well, for they are immortal beings confined to live their eternal lives in the ordinary lands of Middle-earth rather than the paradisiacal eternity of Valinor. They are not allowed to return to Valinor until the end of the Third Age. The elves are doomed to a sort of purgatory, unable to die yet unable to pass into paradise.

Just as the Noldor occupy a pivotal position between lands and languages, the similarities between the two major Elven tongues and two European tongues also serve as a meeting place between the primary and secondary worlds. Tolkien’s phonological model for Quenya is Finnish while his phonological model for Sindarin is Welsh (Flieger 87).

The first race of men speaks Westron, like the hobbits of the Shire; however, they also learned Sindarin from the Moriquendi, inhabiting Middle-earth in the First Age.

Since Sindarin shares a common root with Quenya, when the exiled Noldor returned to Middle-earth and encounter men, the groups could communicate with one another, and allegiances were formed. Though the men, called *Atani* or *Edain* in Quenya and Sindarin respectively, spoke their own language, which they called *Adunaic*, they learned and held the language of the elves in high regard; the leaders of men often spoke Sindarin and took Sindarin names. At the end of the First Age, the Edain were granted the island of Numenor (Westernesse) in the North, and became great merchants and mariners.

Through their trade routes and economic endeavors, Westron became the *lingua franca* of Middle-earth. However, there was a brief period of time in which the language of the Numenorian became a political issue, and some leaders refused to take Sindarin names, opting instead to be called names in their own language. Such rebellion is not unlike the English's attempts to reclaim their language in the fourteenth century. Though the elves never invaded Numenor, Sindarin was the language of prestige just as French was the language of the nobility during the time of the Norman Incursion on English soil.

Likewise, though direct parallels cannot be made between the Numenoreans and the English settlement of the American colonies, the Numenorian did eventually resettle in Arnor and Gondor after Numenor was flooded, thus perpetuating the development of Westron as the Common Speech of Middle-earth (Noel 9-11).

If Westron, being the *lingua franca* of Middle-earth, can be likened to modern English, then it might also follow that the language of the Numenoreans is comparable to a "world English" if such a language can be said to exist. Westron exists in many different dialects that perpetuate themselves throughout the terrain of Middle-earth. It is a language that is carefully nuanced through the differences in dialect that

“[differentiates] between the more urbane speech of the Took, Baggins, and Brandybuck hobbits and the rural dialect of the Cottons and the Gamgees” (Flieger 6). Moreover, Strider’s dialect is “plainer and more direct than the epic high speech and diction of Aragorn – a particularly nice touch, since they are the same man, and the change in language signals the shift from Ranger to King” (Flieger 7). Such evidence is used to show that language indicates cultural and cross-cultural relationships whether one speaks English or Westron, whether one inhabits England or Middle-earth.

Furthermore, besides simply using language as a connecting medium between worlds, Tolkien – as every writer should – uses language and dialect as methods of characterization. Thus the infatuated Eowyn speaks the intimate “thou” to Aragorn while he holds her at a distance with the formal “you.”

Perhaps nowhere is Tolkien’s use of idiom, dialect, and character-revealing language more apparent than in the portrayal of Gollum/Sméagol. As Flieger points out, his “childish whinings and mutterings mark him as regressive and infantile; his habitual use of the plural to refer to himself signals his divided character; his rare use of ‘I’ heralds the infrequent return of his hobbit humanity” (7). These qualities are obvious when examining the following passage from *The Lord of the Rings*:

‘We promises, yes, I promise!’ said Gollum. ‘I will serve the master of the Precious. Good master, good Sméagol, *gollum, gollum!*’ [...] At once Gollum got up and began prancing about, like a whipped cur whose master has patted it. From that moment a change, which lasted for some time, came over him. He spoke with less hissing and whining, and he spoke to his companions direct, not to his precious self. (604)

The italicized ‘*gollum, gollum!*’ indicates an onomatopoeic descriptor, signaling that the name “Gollum” is assumed from the sound of his hacking cough. The switch from the “we” to the “I” and the self-naming of “Sméagol” rather than “Gollum” indicates a change in character, at least for the time being.

These discussions on the languages of Middle-earth serve to exemplify the notion that one does not truly understand a text until one understands “the words not only as they are currently used but as they were used in the time in which they were composed. Only with this understanding is it possible to touch the mind of the author and of his first audience, to bridge the temporal distance [...] between that time and the present” (Flieger 5). When we come to understand Tolkien’s languages and the means through which he represents them, we come to a better understanding not only of his mythology but also of our own reality, both of which are not, according to the definition of myth, mutual exclusive.

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