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Lýg and Leuca:
“Elven-Latin,” Archaic Languages, and the
Philology of Britain

NELSON GOERING

The relationship of Tolkien’s invented Elvish languages, most prominently Quenya and Sindarin, to various primary world tongues was a subject Tolkien himself brought up in various letters, notes, and at least one public lecture. This essay¹ is an examination of one particular type of equation that Tolkien described in an oft-quoted passage from a letter to the Houghton Mifflin Co. in 1955:

The “Sindarin,” a Grey-elven language, is in fact constructed deliberately to resemble Welsh phonologically and to have a relation to High-elven [=Quenya] similar to that existing between British (properly so-called, sc. the Celtic languages spoken in this island at the time of the Roman Invasion) and Latin. . . . (*Letters* 219n)

This statement is quite revealing about how Tolkien conceived of Sindarin and Quenya, at least during one important period of his life, and sheds some interesting light on the specific ways Tolkien’s professional philological background was closely bound up to his creative linguistics.

Tolkien’s assertion that the relationship between Latin and British somehow closely resembles that of Quenya and Sindarin catches the interest in part because it does not seem particularly true at first glance. To a philologist or linguist, the first assumption would be that Tolkien was implying that the historical-linguistic relationship between Quenya and Sindarin had some sort of special similarity to that between Latin and British. This reading works in some ways, but fails in certain important respects. There is a very general similarity, in that each set of languages represents two daughter tongues descended from an unrecorded parent language (Common Eldarin in the fictional case, Proto-Indo-European in the historical one), and some of the linguistic changes that Sindarin underwent do in fact resemble those of Welsh. But the other half of the equation works less well under this assumption, since Quenya and Latin are not especially similar in the details of the sound and grammar changes that they underwent while developing from their respective linguistic ancestors. In fact, in a set of *Comparative Tables*, probably dating from the mid-1930s, Tolkien identified Telerin, rather than Quenya, as his language “of an approximately *Latin* type” (*Quenya Phonology* 6–7, 22).

Before turning to the main question of what precisely Tolkien did mean with these comparisons, Tolkien's use of the term "British" in Letter #165 calls for a brief comment. Sindarin, as is well known, has a number of similarities to Welsh in its medieval and modern forms, most famously in the initial consonant mutations, but also in its general phonological structure, and in the use of "i-mutation" (or i-umlaut) in forming the plurals of nouns² (see Phelpstead 46–50; but also Doughan 6–8). However, while these linguistic features are characteristic of later Welsh, they are emphatically *not* characteristics of "the Celtic languages spoken in this island at the time of the Roman Invasion [i.e., the early British spoken in the period following AD 43]." These striking phonological and grammatical properties of Welsh probably did not develop until sometime after the *departure* of the Romans in 410 AD (Watkins 11). So why did Tolkien insist on comparing Sindarin to this early "British," if he in fact meant later Welsh? It seems we should understand Tolkien's reference to the Roman invasion as a clarification of his use of "British" to refer the Brythonic Celtic languages *descended* from those spoken under Roman rule, as opposed to the Goidelic Celtic languages (which in Roman times were spoken only in Ireland). This use of "British" would include not only Welsh but also Cornish and Breton, which not only sprang from the same source, but underwent some of the same phonological and grammatical changes as Welsh—and Sindarin (see Phelpstead xv and Hooker 1–2).

In the remainder of this essay, we will consider three different cultural or philological considerations that Tolkien may have had in mind by using the relationship of Latin and British as an analogy for Quenya and Sindarin. First, on a cultural level, the social roles of Latin and Welsh in the Middle Ages bear a close resemblance to how Quenya and Sindarin were each employed in Middle-earth. Turning from culture back to philology, comments Tolkien made in "English and Welsh" show how Sindarin and Quenya may be analogous to Welsh and Latin, not in the details of historical changes, but as examples of languages of certain "types." Lastly, we will look at how this analogy plays out in the realm of word correspondences, an area of language very important to Tolkien.

Cultural Roles

Aside from the letter to Houghton Mifflin, Tolkien quite regularly draws on Latin as a cultural analogue of Quenya, despite the lack of a precise phonological matchup between the two languages. The phrase "Elven-latin" even makes its way into the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*, where either Quenya or Latin would be well described as being "no longer a birth-tongue, but . . . still used for ceremony, and for high matters of lore and song" (*RK*, Appendix F.I, 406). Tolkien also

chose to use a spelling system for Quenya much like that of Latin, with the result that, as he explained to Naomi Mitchison, “the similarity to Latin has been increased ocularly” (orthography thus compensating, to some extent, for a degree of phonological difference) (*Letters* 176; cf. *RK*, Appendix E, I, 391).

The situation of Sindarin as a living, colloquial language in Middle-earth alongside learned Quenya therefore bears considerable resemblance to the circumstances of the vernacular languages of Europe (including, of course, Welsh) alongside Medieval Latin in the Middle Ages. Tolkien extends this parallel in his descriptions of the *Tarquesta* variant of Quenya, which was a

‘taught’ spoken language, after its obsolescence as a native language among the Noldor in Beleriand. Its pronunciation was thus largely dependent on the spelling of *Parmarquesta* [the ‘classical’ book-language], but reflected the later speech-habits of the divergent diurnal tongues of the Eldar. (*Quenya Phonology* 68)

These comments could apply equally well to Medieval Latin, which maintained a standard written form closely based on Classical Latin but whose pronunciation varied from region to region, depending on the local language.

“Archaic” and “Middle” Languages

Beyond this important and well-known cultural dimension, it seems that Tolkien did mean to imply a philological dimension in comparing the two languages—though not necessarily in the realm of linguistic details and sound changes. We can get some sense of what Tolkien meant philologically in a 1964 letter that he wrote to W. R. Matthews:

The consistency of Quenya in itself and in its relation to Sindarin is achieved by supposing a common primitive Elvish sound system and deducing the Quenya forms from this by successive changes of a natural phonetic kind; while *the divergent branch, Sindarin*, which remained in Middle Earth and so *changed more*, is deduced by *different and greater changes*. Actually the changes worked on Sindarin very closely (and deliberately) resemble those which produced the modern and mediæval Welsh from ancient Celtic, so that in the result Sindarin has a marked Welsh style, and the relations between it and Quenya closely resemble those between Welsh and Latin. (*Words* 135; my emphasis)

As the emphasized lines suggest, it is more than simply the details of linguistic change that distinguish Sindarin and Quenya—it is also the overall degree to which the languages have developed from Common Eldarin. Sindarin has changed more, while Quenya remained, as Tolkien commented to Naomi Mitchison, an “archaic language of lore” (*Letters* 176, my emphasis).

Tolkien elaborates on the philological significance of these sorts of comments in his essay “English and Welsh,” where he offers an outline of the phases of development shared by (most) Indo-European languages. He identifies three stages, beginning with “archaic” or “old”:³ “If we say that classical Latin, substantially the form of that language just before the beginning of our present era, is still an example of the European archaic mode, we may call it an ‘old’ language” (*MC* 176). Tolkien does not say here precisely what linguistic properties he wishes to encompass with the terms “archaic mode” or “old” versus “middle,” but we can make some reasonable guesses based on his examples of languages in each category.⁴ In particular, he calls the ancient Germanic language Gothic an “old” speech, but classifies its later cousins, such as Old English, as “middle.”

Gothic, like Latin, had a relatively large number of grammatical suffixes. Some of these were archaic inflectional endings that were lost in later languages: the special verbal endings for the dual number or the passive voice are good examples. Gothic also transparently preserved most of the original Germanic patterns of word formation, many of which were obscured by sound changes in later languages like Old English. For instance, in Gothic one can add the suffix *-jan* to a noun like *dōm* “judgement” to form the verb *dōmjan* “judge, decide.” This neat picture is not so clear in later, “middle” languages. Old English still has the noun *dóm* “judgment,” but the corresponding verb is *dēman*. Two sound changes—umlaut of the vowel by the element **j*,⁵ and a later loss of the **j* altogether—have conspired to make what was once a simple instance of suffixation a matter of word-internal vowel alternations. As a result of these sorts of developments, Tolkien’s two examples of “middle” languages, Old Welsh and Old English, have a rather murkier structure than “old” languages like Gothic and Latin.

Whether or not Tolkien already had in mind this specific sense of “archaic” when he wrote to Naomi Mitchison, it is clear that Quenya is a prime example of an “old” language, as the term is used in “English and Welsh.” Even though the details are very different, in general it resembles Gothic and Latin in many of the ways just mentioned. Quenya has a rich system of inflections, many of which attach transparently to the base word without too much phonological messiness: e.g.,

the verb *hir-uva-lye* "thou wilt find," from Galadriel's lament "Namárië," is formed by adding the future tense suffix *-uva* and the 2nd person singular subject suffix *-lye* to the root *hir-* "find" (*Road Goes Ever On*, 67f.). Certain "archaic" categories, such as the dual number, are alive and well in Quenya.

Sindarin, however, would certainly be a "middle" language, like Old Welsh.⁶ In Sindarin, the number of inflections, particularly for nouns, had been very greatly reduced; the remnants of the dual number might be seen as an archaizing counterbalance to the elimination of an active case system (an area of grammatical development in which Sindarin is far more thorough-going than, say, Old English). Moreover, Sindarin shows a wide range of phonological changes clouding earlier, clearer grammatical structures: for example, the plural of the noun *amon* 'hill' (as in *Amon Hen*) is *emyn* (as in *Emyn Muil*), with the lost plural marker **-i* reflected only in the i-umlaut it caused in the other vowels.

A decade after writing "English and Welsh," in the letter to W. R. Matthews, Tolkien succinctly captured the difference in linguistic type between Quenya and Sindarin by saying he had invented two languages: "one that might be called classical and inflected, and the other north-western" (*Words* 135). Whether cast as archaic/middle, ancient/medieval, classical/north-western, or bright/twilight (Flieger 92ff.), the equivalences of Quenya≈Latin and Sindarin≈British seem to capture not only interesting cultural parallels but also important philological facts about the structural affinities of each language.

Word Correspondences

Etymological patterns of word correspondences provide one further important aspect in which the particular historical contacts between British and Latin make them a good analogy for Sindarin and Quenya. As Tolkien describes, British was not originally a language of the "northwestern" or "middle" type:

On the other hand, British forms of language had entered Britain in an archaic state; indeed, if we place their first arrival some centuries before the beginning of our era, in a mode far more archaic than that of the earliest Latin. The whole of its transformation, therefore, from a language of very ancient mode, an elaborately inflected and recognizable dialect of western Indo-European, to a middle and modern speech has gone on in this island. (*M&C* 176–77)

The Romans brought Latin to Britain while British was still in its "archaic" phase, and during the period of Roman dominion in Britain

British Celtic borrowed a great many words from Latin—perhaps around 800 words were initially borrowed, with some 600 of these still in use in modern Welsh (Jackson 76). Latin and the early British spoken in Britannia were structurally very similar, so these loanwords were adopted very faithfully into British and, along with the native British vocabulary, underwent all the massive sound changes that affected British in (roughly) the period 400–600 AD (Lewis and Pedersen 56).

As a consequence, Latin and Welsh words often stand in a before-and-after relationship: the Latin word shows the form more or less as it was borrowed into British, and the Welsh form shows how it turned out after undergoing the “Welshifying” changes.⁷ This relationship can be illustrated with a few word pairs:

MEANING	LATIN		WELSH
fountain	<i>fontāna</i>	>	<i>ffynnon</i>
state	<i>cīvitāt</i>	>	<i>ciwdod</i>
River Severn	<i>Sabrīna</i>	>	<i>Hafren</i>
Dover	<i>Dubris</i>	>	<i>dŵr</i> “water”

The last two are originally British place names that were preserved in Latinized forms in Roman texts and show the similarity of treatments of native British words and borrowed Latin words in Welsh.⁸

This type of correspondence provides an interesting case where the forms in the more archaic language relate regularly to the developments in the later language, although the later language is not a direct descendant of the first. Much the same could be said of Sindarin and Quenya. From Appendix E of *The Lord of the Rings*, the mention of Sindarin “*lyg* ‘snake,’ Q[uenya] *leuca*” provides a very similar sort of pair as the Welsh and Latin sets I have just quoted—not that such words were borrowed from Quenya into Old Sindarin, but the Quenya forms are more conservative (or less “divergent”) and often resemble the older forms of Sindarin words. This sort of relationship between Sindarin and Quenya words is also clearly illustrated in a number of familiar names from *The Silmarillion*, as the linguistically aware Noldor adapted their originally Quenya names into the Sindarin of Beleriand (*Peoples* 341f.): *Aikanáro* became Sindarin *Aegnor* (347), *Makalaure* became *Maglor* (352f.; also *Lost Road* 371, entry MAK-). Since the historical-linguistic changes of Sindarin are to some extent modelled on those of Welsh, the overall effect of the Sindarin-Quenya word pairs is similar, though not identical, to many Welsh-Latin word pairs. In the concrete realm of word correspondences, Tolkien’s description of the “relation” of the two languages seems very apt.

Conclusion

Aside from the well-known cultural parallels of Quenya and Latin and the linguistic similarities of Sindarin and Welsh, we have seen that Tolkien's reference to the "relation" between Sindarin and Quenya being modelled on that between Welsh and Latin is a shrewd comparison in several ways. Not only does it seem to encompass Tolkien's views on "archaic" and "middle" languages laid out in "English and Welsh," but it also reflects a very visible fact about the relations between Sindarin and Quenya words. To a man strongly taken by etymologies, who would rather "explore the implications of one word than try to sum up a period in a lecture, or pot a poet in a paragraph" (*M&C* 224), the particulars of word correspondences and Sindarin-Quenya cognate sets were surely at the forefront of his mind in much of his creative linguistics.

If there is any larger point to be drawn from this discussion, it is perhaps to emphasize how little division there was between the ideas and preoccupations of Tolkien the professional philologist, Tolkien the literary author, and Tolkien the language creator. His repeated reference to British and Latin as touchstones for his invented languages⁹ are perhaps best associated with his interest in the northwest of Europe, and in particular the island of Britain, as a "single philological province" (*M&C* 188). His interests clearly encompassed not only the Germanic English and Norse spoken in Britain but also the long development of British Celtic and the varied roles of Latin on the island (a daily speech of empire; a learned tongue of scholarship; a high language of liturgy). In creating his own languages, Tolkien took his cues from these objects of professional and amateur study, blending and supplementing the phonology, grammar, and cultural roles of a variety of historical languages into new and distinctive works of linguistic art.

NOTES

1. This essay is a reworking and expansion of ideas I gathered in an internet post on lotrplaza.com entitled "British & Latin ~ Sindarin & Quenya." The original thread can be found at: <http://www.lotrplaza.com/showthread.php?21690>
2. Or perhaps more accurately, Welsh and Sindarin share specific historical changes in their development, resulting in a number of commonalities in their later, recorded forms.
3. Tolkien's use of "old" in this essay is quite different from the traditional usage, which designates the earliest recorded form of a given language. The traditional sense has led to some peculiarities, such as "Old Frisian," "Middle English," and "Modern Irish" all being

terms for languages spoken around the year 1300 (see Bremmer 121; Stifter 10).

4. Additionally, this sort of classification is not original to Tolkien, and he seems to have drawn on, perhaps among others, Kenneth Jackson's categories of "ancient" and "mediaeval" languages. Jackson's book *Language and History in Early Britain* was published the year before "English and Welsh" was delivered, and it was certainly one of Tolkien's major sources for that lecture. Jackson describes the transition from an "ancient" to a "mediaeval" language thus: "the *ancient* language, with its final syllables, its case terminations, and the rest, gave place to what is really a *mediaeval* one" (Jackson 5). These features seem in keeping with what we can infer from Tolkien's examples. Both Jackson's and Tolkien's usages seem to have been prefigured to some extent by Indo-European philologists, especially with reference to the Celtic languages, but only in a very vague and casual way—compare certain comments in, e.g., Brugmann (27) and Meillet (11, 45), and see especially the more substantive discussion in Lewis (39–42), although this last was originally published in Welsh and therefore probably not known to most non-Celticists until its first German translation in 1989. There was certainly no theory or precise terminology in general use dividing Indo-European languages in into these sorts of developmental stages (cf. Morpurgo Davies). Jackson's contribution seems to have been to define "ancient" and "mediaeval" British in a technical sense within Celtic and emphasizes the linguistic importance of this division. Tolkien's innovation was, having taken up and slightly elaborated Jackson's framework, to apply it to the Germanic languages. As Tolkien acknowledges, he was going against a very firmly embedded tradition of the labels "old" and "middle" going back to Grimm in 1822 and Sweet in 1871 (v., note 1; cf 1891, 211 [§594]). Judging by recent discussions of "old" and "middle" languages in Germanic (e.g., Bremmer [119–25] and Lass), his proposal seems to have had little to no impact on Germanicists. However, Celticists seem to show a continued preoccupation with Jackson's ancient/medieval division in Celtic, although these specific terms are not always used (see for example Watkins [11–13] and the title of Kim McCone's influential monograph *Towards a Relative Chronology of Ancient and Medieval Celtic Sound Change*). I can also attest that a similar loose characterization of "ancient" and "medieval" languages is sometimes used among Indo-Europeanists, though only in the same loose or informal way as before Jackson and Tolkien.

5. Strictly speaking, the prehistoric form of this suffix would have been **ij* after a “heavy” stem like **dōm-*, according to an alternation known as Sievers’ Law, but I have glossed over this in the example since it makes no difference to the point at hand. See any reasonable Germanic grammar for more details (e.g., Campbell 164).
6. Though *not* like the British Celtic spoken under Roman rule, which was still of the “archaic” type (*M&C* 176); see below.
7. Many of these have already been mentioned, but they include: the “weakening” of intervocalic stops (Lewis and Pedersen 60ff.), i-umlaut/mutation (56), and various changes to long vowels and diphthongs (57ff.).
8. For the words on the table and further examples, see *M&C* (195); Parsons (125, 128); Jackson (78ff.).
9. Latin even, at times, taking precedence over Finnish in his own descriptions; compare his letter to Naomi Mitchison, where he says Quenya “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” (*Letters* 176).

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