“The Phonology and Syntax of Tolkien’s Middle-Earth”
Undergraduate Level
English Major
Dr. Bridget Drinka
J.R.R. Tolkien was a strong believer in “linguistic aesthetics”, that is “the relationship among sounds of words, their meaning, and our emotional responses to them” (Smith 1). In other words, Tolkien believed that the meaning of a word was attained through the sounds it emitted. For example, a word with a rounded <o> sound often depicts things that are circular. Tolkien’s invented languages contain this aestheticism in his works. But phonology is not the sole means of achieving this aestheticism; syntax is valuable to Tolkien’s Middle-earth as well. The order of words may gradually change, and is seen amongst different races. Tolkien seemingly assigns sounds to the races of Middle-earth and these sounds are exemplified through their names and the songs that they sing. In this paper, I will explore how not only phonetics but also syntax plays a role in achieving a certain “sound” to each race. I will juxtapose the races and determine how each race has its own unique sound in words and structure. Because most non-English in Lord of the Rings is found in songs and names, I will focus upon these two aspects in my analysis.

Focusing on poetic structure, I will look at the structure of song and look into unifying factors between structure and sound. Tolkien was aware of poetic structure and uses it to some extent in his words, but according to Steve Walker, “first and foremost (Tolkien is) a philologist, and his fiction is founded in philology” (115).

I. Dwarves: Although the Dwarves are not the most fond of art and sound, their names carry connotations of their preference for building. It is supposed that Tolkien got the names of the Dwarves from Norse mythology. Consider this selection from “The Catalog of Dwarves” (The “Voluspa” from The Elder Eddas of Saemund Sigfusson and the Younger Eddas of Snorre Sturleson):

Veig and Gandalf Vindalf Thrain
Thekk and Thorin Thror, Vit, and Lit
Nar and Regin, Nyrath and Rathsvith
Now is reckoned, the roster of dwarves.
In this passage, we see six different characters' names that appear in Middle-earth; five dwarves and one wizard: Thrain, Thorin, Thror, Fili, Kili, and Gandalf, respectively. Setting Gandalf aside, the names that Tolkien chose from the “Voluspa” carry phonological likeness to each Dwarf’s corresponding kin. For example, the names in the bloodline of Thror all begin with “th” (<θ>): his son, Thrain, and his grandson, Thorin. Fili and Kili, who have rhyming names, are biological brothers. Each family’s name has a unique phonological quality. The dwarf names that the author chose for character in Middle-earth are some of the shortest names listed in the “Voluspa”; they are all six letters or less, the longest names we see for dwarves being Thorin, Bomber, and Dwalin. This selection of names emphasizes the shortness of the dwarves’ language. Their names also favor stress on the first-syllable, a fact which also indicates the dwarves' blunt means of communication. The words the dwarves choose to use further reflects their terseness, as one of their songs would suggest:

Far over the misty mountains cold  
To dungeons deep and caverns old  
We must away ere break of day  
To seek the pale enchanted gold (1-4, Hobbit 14).

The entire song, ten stanzas with four lines each, does not contain a single word longer than two syllables. Most lines have seven or eight words. Because this song is written in iambic tetrameter, the meter only allows four feet, that is, four stressed and unstressed syllables per line, allowing each line to have eight syllables. Although the shortness of the words is in the Common tongue, it reflects the dwarves’ inclination to speaking succinctly. Although Latinate words such as “dungeons” and “enchanted” later appear in the song, the dwarves’ words in Common speech have Germanic propensities. Germanic language is consistent through Middle-earth, regardless
of races. It is sensible that the dwarves choose simple speech because language and art are not their interest; the dwarves are more “engrossed in their crafts” (*LOTR* 1053).

**II. Hobbits:** Another race whose speech emulates their characteristics is the hobbits. There does not seem to be a consistency that a specific sound fits into the hobbits’ linguistic characterization but their syntax and diction definitely reveal their unique language. A prime example of hobbit-speech is Sam Gamgee. In Lothlorien, he states “the less said, the sooner I’ll drop off, if you take my meaning” (335). Adding the hedge “if you take my meaning” makes Sam look as if he is looking for comprehension with his words, and being a hobbit surrounded by a group of other races, he may not be sure how well his speech will be received. He never says “if you take my meaning” when he is in the Shire. Perhaps he is not sure if his Shire-lexicon, which is quite different from other races, will be understood. Furthermore, the phrase makes Sam, and hobbits in general, look like they have casual speech—that formality is not their priority in speaking. Another informality that hobbits use is contractions. In Book I of *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo says “can’t we get a couple of ponies in the village, or even one for the baggage? I don’t suppose we could hire them” (174). What is also unique about hobbits is their simple sentence structure: often, hobbits speak with the subject first and verb second, as a simple English sentence is structured, such as when Bilbo says “I ask them to forget it and forgive me” (243). This differs from a sentence Eowyn (a woman of Rohan) says while battling the Nazgul: “For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him” (823). The subject and the predicate are sandwiched between a participial phrase and an adverbial clause, which gives the sentence a more complex, and more archaic, feeling when one reads it silently or aloud. Hobbit-speech is modern compared to other races’ constructions. I believe that hobbit-speech represents the language of a modern English speaker, while the race of Men resembles English’s linguistic past, as explained later.
The song style of the hobbits also imitates their lifestyle. Usually, a hobbit-song is written in a ballad form with rhyming couplets, and the content is comedic. One of the most light-hearted hobbit-songs is “The Bath Song”, noted as being one of Bilbo’s favorites:

Sing hey! For the bath at close of day
That washes the weary mud away!
A loon is he that will not sing:
O! Water hot is a noble thing! (1-4, 99).

This song, like most songs in Middle-earth, is written in iambic tetrameter, which gives the verse a sing-song quality. Also, the “hey”, and “O!” (“O!” is repeated several times in this song) makes the song not so serious and reflects the blithe lifestyles that the hobbits live, free from war and the pestilence of the East. The hobbits’ lighthearted songs may show their status in Middle-earth as being not so important. Sauron was not even aware of the existence of hobbits (58). The hobbits’ provincial speech and light-hearted song indicated that they may be toward the bottom of an unspoken social ladder.

An exception to hobbit-speech is Bilbo Baggins; in the songs he writes, he imitates other races’ language. The “dwarf-song” he composed fit’s the rhyme and lexicon of other songs we see in Middle-earth:

Farewell we call to hearth and hall!
Though wind may blow and rain may fall,
We must away ere break of day
Far over wood and mountain tall (1-4, 104).

The shortness of words and poetic devices are the same as the dwarves’ songs. The line with the shortest amount of words is line thirteen, “we must away! We must away!” It should be noted that the style of dwarf and hobbit songs are similar; both have the same metrical patterns (iambic tetrameter) and both use Germanic lexicon. The difference in Bilbo’s songs from “The Bath Song” is the lyricism. Instead of singing about baths, food, or other comforts hobbits sing about, Bilbo writes a song about traveling. Hobbits are not the type of creatures who enjoy going on
adventures, whereas dwarves travel to find treasure. Although not explicitly mentioned in the text, I suppose that Bilbo is aware of the dwarves’ choice of short words and uses their style for his composition. It is not merely the rhyme scheme (aaba, with the rhyme for the third line occurring halfway through that line, splitting it in half, like a caesura) that Bilbo emulates, but also word choice. Another race Bilbo imitates is the Elves, and he does that with the composition of his song of Earendil:

Earendil was a mariner
That tarried in Arvenien
He built a boat of timber felled
In Nimbrethil of journey in;
Her sails were wove of silver fair,
Of silver were her lanterns made,
Her prow was fashioned like a swan,
And light upon her banners laid (1-8, 227).

The rhyme scheme and meter of the Elves is not as easily decipherable as other races. The Elves carry a deeper appreciation for art than the dwarves, and their song compositions are more complicated. Bilbo, living with the Elves, is well aware of this and he writes one of the most complex songs we see in Middle-earth. Every other line rhymes, which differs from the usual couplet rhyme scheme, but his meter is in iambic tetrameter, which is usually how songs are written, regardless of race. But there is a very interesting detail that Bilbo puts into his Elven-song: the stress of Elven names are very specific and Bilbo makes sure that the stress of Elven names can fit into his meter. For example, the first line of this song talks of Earendil. His name has a stress at the second syllable, and in iambic tetrameter, that is where the stress would fall. The second line, the stress in Avernien falls into the second syllable, where the stress should go. Bilbo magnifies the stress in Elven names, he may even exaggerate them. Bilbo knows the languages of Middle-earth and when he composes songs, he keeps the language of the emulated race in mind.

**III. Elves:** The Elves’ language is very old; the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings* calls
modern Elven Sindarin and older “Higher” Elven Quenya (1101). Although the Elves in the narrative speak in Common language, and their songs are translated into the Common tongue, there do exist a few passages in the text that are Elven, namely this one recited in Rivendell’s halls:

A Elbereth Gilthoniel,  
Silivren penna miriel  
O menel aglar elenath!  
Na-chaered palan-diriel  
A galadhremmin ennorath,  
Fanuilos, le linnathon,  
Nef aear, si ner aearon! (1-7, 231).

Ross Smith analyzes a poem that Tolkien wrote independently from *The Lord of the Rings* in Quenya. The poem is titled “Oilima Markirya”, or “The Last Ark”:

Man kiluva kirya ninqe  
oilima ailinello lute,  
nive qimari ringa ambar  
ve mainwin quaine? (1-4, 7).

Smith points out the abundance of sonorants and vowels in “The Last Ark”: “that the majority of (words) end in a vowel...Additionally, in the rare cases that they should end in a consonant, only <n> and <*> are used. The entire poem comprises of thirty-six words, of which a mere seventeen end in a consonant” (7). In the Elven passage from *The Lord of the Rings*, the ending of words is not quite as consistent as in “The Last Ark”, but there is indeed a large use of sonorants and vowels in “A Elbereth Githoniel”. Out of twenty-three words in this song, fifteen ends with either a sonorant <l>, <*> or <n>, or a vowel—and the words that do not end with sonorants or vowels end with a voiceless fricative (<s>, <f>, or <θ>). With sonorants, voiceless fricatives, and vowels joined together, the Elven tongue seems to flow together in a melodious fashion, uninterrupted by affricates and stops. The words are also longer; the words with the most words is lines seven with five words. In songs, the Elves’ language seem to contrast to that of the contrast. The Elven-songs that are in English also share this consistency of more sonorants:
Her hair was long, her limbs were white,
And fair she was and free;
And in the wind she went as light
As leaf on linden-tree (9-12, LOTR 330).

The word endings in the Common tongue is less consistent than in the Elven tongue but I think here there is a focus on the beginning of the word: there is much alliteration in the common translation with <l> and with <w>, a glide. The syntax also seem more sinuous that that of the dwarves, who favor stops in some passages, “Cut the cloth and tread on the far!/ Pour the milk on the pantry floor!” (5-6, The Hobbit 13). One passage from The Lays of Beleriand provides an even clearer comparison. This is an Elf-poem that discusses one of the Elves’ most famous tales, the tale of Beren and Luthien:

As wild and wary as a faun
That sudden wakes at rustling dawn
And flits from shade to shade, and flees
The brightness of the sea, yet sees
All stealthy movements in the woods (655-659, 178).

This passage emphasizes the fricative aspect of the Elven language. The fricatives fit nicely in the description of nature, tapping into the reader’s senses. With the voiceless fricatives, one can sense the “rustling” and the “stealthy movements” because these very sounds are stealthy due to their lack of voice.

IV: Rohirrim: In the words of Legolas, the language of the Rohirrim “is like the land itself; rich and rolling in part, and else hard and stone as mountains” (LOTR 553). Aragorn follows Legolas’s statement with a song by the Rohirrim but translated into the Common tongue:

Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing?
Where is the helm and the hauberk, and the bright hair flowing?
Where is the hand on the harpstring, and the red fire glowing?
Where is the spring and the harvest and the tall corn growing? (1-4, 553).

The difference in Rohirrim poetry to all other Middle-earth races examined thus far is obvious merely by looking at the poetic structure. The lines do not have four feet (I counted six for most
lines), and each line seems to have its own participial phrase within itself (however, line one has
two independent clauses). The Rohirrim composer is aiming for each complete thought to be on
one line, rather than in a stanza. It is interesting to note that no Rohirrim songs are composed
with multiple stanzas. It is also worth mentioning that their verse is highly alliterative:

Arise, arise, Riders of Theoden!
Fell deeds awake: fire and slaughter!
Spear shall be shaken, shield shall be splintered,
A sword-day, a red-day, ere the sun rises!
Ride now, ride now, Ride to Gondor! (1-5, 820).

The alliterative meter of the Rohirrim matches that of Old English tradition. In English and Its
Closest Relatives, Orrin W. Robinson states that the third stress in an Old English poem
alliterates its preceding stresses (126). Every line (except, perhaps, line four) has this pattern:
line two’s third stress “fire”, alliterates “fell”, and line five’s alliteration is a repetition of the
word “ride”. This is one of many examples we see of Rohirrim language hearkening back to the
ancestry of English. The repetitive use of fricatives in this passage recalls another line in “The
Ride of the Rohirrim”: “Men clashed spear and shield” (818). For the Rides of Rohan, fricatives,
specifically [s], indicates battle and whenever the Rohirrim are fighting, or preparing to fight, we
see tight repetition of fricatives. This use of fricatives is also a sound symbolism. When spear
and shield clash, it makes a fricative-like sound. Tolkien wants us to hear the sound of battle
through words.

Going back to “Where is the horse and the rider?” on page seven of this paper, there is a
copious amount of present participles ending in “-ing”. The participles also occur in a battle song
performed by Eomer:

Out of doubt, out of dark to the day’s rising,
I came singing in the sun, sword unsheathing,
To hope’s end I rode and to heart’s breaking:
Now, for wrath, now for ruin, and a red nightfall! (1-4, 829).

The participle, along with the subordinate clause, shows a thoroughness in the language of the
Rohirrim, and as stated before, they want a complete idea to be the length of one or two lines; because there are no stanza breaks in Rohirrim poetry, participles help show where ideas begin and end.

When it comes to the phonology of the Rohirrim, their names have the stress at the first syllable. The royal family members we see in *The Lord of the Rings* are name Eowyn, Eomer, and Theoden, all with the stress on the first syllable. The first vowel of their names is phonetically the same, <eo>, a diphthong. In the appendices, there are listed seventeen kings of Rohan. Out of these seventeen, nine of them have an <eo> as the first vowel of their name (1042). All the names have a stress on the first syllable. The phonetic likeness for the Rohirrim would be <eo> but it is noteworthy that <r> and <h> are also important phonemes to Roham: considering “Where is the Horse?”, we see <h> and <r> consistently appearing in the song. In connects with the Old English text *Beowulf*, where the characters and location’ names have <h> and <r>, such as “Hrothgar” or “Hrethel” and the vowel <eo> is also consistent, such as in the name “Ecgtheow” (217). Looking at the sounds of Rohan, and the name of Old English *Beowulf*, we see another connection to the Rohirrim and English’s past.

**V: Ents:** Like the Rohirrim, the Ents also hearken back to English’s lingual past but their language implies something completely different. The Ent we are the most acquainted with is Treebeard and he admits his loquaciousness without hesitation: “my name is growing all the time...so my name is like a story. Real names tell you the story of things they belong to in my language” (431). For the Ents, their names could stretch out to being an entire paragraph in their language. Even in the Common tongue, Treebeard’s name contains multiple words, “tree” and “beard”. They are short words, but this use of compounding words to express a single name is seen in the Common language. This verbosity is also reflected in the song (the text calls it a “chant”) in the Common speech:
In the willow-meads of Tasarinan I walked in the Spring,
Ah! The sight and the smell of the Spring of Natasarion!
And I said that was good...
And the years lie thicker than the leaves
In Taurelilomea (1-3, 17-18 435-436).

The length of these words reflects Treebeard’s motto “don’t be hasty” (429). In Ent-song, the length of the line is not in that there are many words, but that the words contain so many syllables. This slowness of the Ents is represented in the length of words they use. One particular line we see Treebeard reciting is “Taurelilomea-tumbarlemorna-Tumbalentaurea-Lomeanor” (434). These words, however, are not in the Entish language. What Tolkien explains in the appendices about Entish does resemble the passage written above “slow, sonorous, agglomerated, repetitive, indeed long-winded” (1104), but it is actually Elven. What was mentioned earlier about Elven was the favoring of sonorants and vowels. Perhaps this is why High-Elven (Quenya) is the language that the Ents “loved best” (1105). The appendices also gives us a translation of the Elven Treebeard recites, “Forestmanyshadowed-deepvalleyblack Deepvalleyforested Gloomyland” (1105). We see Treebeard running Elven words together, that is, taking Elven words and applying them to the rules of Entish.

Although Tolkien’s races vary in sounds and syntax, the lexicon remains consistently Germanic, which ties to Tolkien’s realm of study. When one analyzes the language of Middle-earth, one can see Tolkien’s inspiration is his studies. None of the races in Middle-earth, even the ethereal Elves, favor a Latinate vocabulary. The languages in Middle-earth may serve as an extension of Tolkien’s interest in England’s lingual past. The Rohirrim clearly represent Old English and the hobbits modern English, but the other races mentioned may play a part in symbolizing the history of English. The variation of Middle-earth’s languages may be a reflection of English’s diversity, in past and present.
Works Cited


