



ENGL 350: Tolkien and Language

Professor Russell A. Potter

Tolkien once confessed that his entire created world, the “Middle Earth” of which we are all so fond, was the result of having to create some people to speak the languages he’d invented. Or, more accurately, to enable those languages to evolve – for language changes over time, even for those, such as the Eldar, who are imagined as immortal. As a child who early on indulged in the “secret vice” of inventing languages, Tolkien followed this pursuit in his scholarship as well, studying the history of Germanic languages, particularly English, and in 1925 was elected to the prestigious Rawlinson and Bosworth professorship in Anglo-Saxon at Oxford. And yet, once there, his scholarship gradually took second place to tinkering with his imagined languages, and the people he’d invented to speak them. When *The Lord of the Rings* was published to international acclaim in the 1950’s, more than one of his Oxford colleagues was heard to whisper, “So *that’s* what he’d been up to all those years!”

In this class, we’ll look at the influences that shaped Tolkien’s language passion, and at several of the languages which – though he knew them much less perfectly than Anglo-Saxon – greatly influenced the speech of his sub-creations. We’ll also look at how each of his languages – primarily Elvish, but not neglecting the others – evolved over the arc of his writings. We’ll also acquaint ourselves with aspects of these tongues – the Fëanorian characters, the runes of the Dwarves, and grammar and syntax that drives them. Lastly, we’ll muck about a bit ourselves in the realm of created speech, and look at other languages, such as Klingon, that have evolved to the point where they actually have a life – and a dictionary – of their own.

Course Schedule

(subject to change)

WEEK ONE: Introduction to course. Readings: J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, Appendices E and F.

WEEK TWO: Languages that influenced Tolkien's creation: Irish, Welsh, Finnish, Icelandic; Anglo-Saxon and the Rohirrim. Reading: Solopova, *Languages, Myths, and History* Chapters 1-4 (pp. 1-43).

WEEK THREE: The process of creation. J.R.R. Tolkien, "Letter 131"; "A Secret Vice" (online); Solopova, Chapter 7 (pp. 75-90).

WEEK FOUR: The evolution of invented language: Gilson and Wynne, "The Evolution of Elven Grammar" (.pdf); J.R.R. Tolkien, transliteration of *Namarië!* from *The Road Goes Ever On* (.pdf)

WEEK FIVE: Tolkien's minor languages: Khuzdul, Westron, The Black Speech, and others.

WEEK SIX: The future of invented speech, from Tolkien to Klingon. Review. Paper due.