

TOLKIEN AND COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

Some insights from the earliest works on Elvish languages

Francesco DEDÈ

ABSTRACT • It is a well-known fact that J.R.R. Tolkien's training as a philologist had a very strong impact on his work as a creator of languages. This paper aims to identify the influence of Tolkien's academic background in the field of linguistic studies on the creation of his Elvish languages. Taking into account Tolkien's earliest works on Qenya (the first of the Elvish languages to be conceived) and based on our knowledge of Tolkien's readings in linguistics and philology, the paper analyses some peculiar uses by Tolkien in describing the language and traces them back to their likely sources. The aim of the paper is twofold: on the one side, it hopes to show that this kind of source criticism can lead us to a better understanding of Tolkien's conception of his Elvish tongues. On the other side, the systematic comparison between Tolkien's writings on his constructed languages and the scholarly sources that constituted his linguistic background may represent a step towards acknowledging Tolkien's place in the history of linguistic thought.

KEYWORDS • Conlangs; Tolkien; Comparative Historical Linguistics; History of Linguistic Thought; Elvish Languages.

1. Introduction

Tolkien's work as a language creator – or as a *conlanger*, if this term may be applied to him somewhat anachronistically – is widely known not only by specialists but also by the general public, due to the ever-increasing popularity of his books and, above all, the film and television adaptations inspired by them.¹ Instead, the exact nature of this work, its extent, and the infinite care Tolkien put into it are much less known to non-specialists, since the majority of people who are interested in Tolkien's work usually limit themselves to reading his narratives.²

¹ It should be emphasised that the use of Tolkien's invented languages in these adaptations often deviates from the original sources and constitutes a veritable creation of the authors who wrote the dialogues and all other texts in these languages, thus giving rise to language varieties that could (and should) rightly be called *Neo-Quenya*, *Neo-Sindarin*, etc. (on this topic, see the remarks of Hostetter 2006: 240-243). Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that without these adaptations, the purely linguistic details of Tolkien's work would hardly have been able to leave the inner circle of specialists and arouse the interest of a wide audience.

² Nowadays, non-specialists seeking verified information on the linguistic aspects of Tolkien's work can benefit from the presence of numerous encyclopaedic publications – especially but not exclusively in English – that also take such topics into account. It is impossible to provide even a summary list of such publications here, but it is worth mentioning at least the indispensable *Companion* by Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond (Scull, Hammond 2017). As far as online sources are concerned, most of them are

Nevertheless, the rigorous study of Tolkien's invented languages, which is nowadays officially referred to as *Tolkienian linguistics*, has definitely established itself as a legitimate area of interest among Tolkien scholars, following a path that has been well described by Carl F. Hostetter in a fundamental paper, where this field of study is in the first place "defined broadly as the study of the languages invented by J.R.R. Tolkien" (Hostetter 2007: 1). Subsequently, Hostetter defines the scope and purpose of Tolkienian linguistics more precisely: "The purpose of Tolkienian linguistics, proper, as a scholarly endeavour is, or at any rate in my mind should be, to understand and describe Tolkien's languages, and his writings in and about those languages, in *their own terms* and *as they actually are*" (Hostetter 2007: 24).

In this paper, I am going to focus on a very specific topic related to Tolkienian linguistics that is the influence of Tolkien's academic formation on his activity of language creation and, more specifically, on the creation of the Elvish languages. Although this topic has recently received some attention,³ it remains largely unexplored due to its highly technical nature. However, it is not unsafe to assume that trying to understand how Tolkien's training as a philologist and linguist shaped the way he constructed his own invented languages might not only increase our knowledge of those languages, but also help to better delineate Tolkien's position within the history of linguistic thought.

2. Scope of the paper and methodological issues

When engaging in the analysis of an Author's linguistic thought based on their linguistic writings, one must first carefully consider what the Author themselves have explicitly stated on the subject. In Tolkien's case, there are many passages from his letters, some quoted very often, other less well known, that directly address this topic. For instance, in a famous letter to Robert Murray (*Letter 142*) Tolkien writes that he is "in no ordinary sense a 'linguist'". This might sound strange, given the extraordinary linguistic knowledge Tolkien demonstrated in all his (not only academic) writings. What Tolkien means here is not that he lacks knowledge of linguistic facts or experience in analysing them; the emphasis here is on the word *ordinary*, meaning that Tolkien did not list himself among those scholars who at that time were usually labelled academically as 'linguists' or 'comparative philologists'. This is due to the fact that he could not claim to have an extensive and philologically grounded knowledge of *many* branches of the Indo-European language family and that he was not engaged in the kind of scientific research Indo-Europeanists were carrying on at the time. Indeed, Tolkien's statement about him not being a linguist in an 'ordinary sense' is found in a context where he admits that he has not been able to learn Slavic languages satisfactorily:

Slavonic languages are for me almost in the same category. I have had a go at many tongues in my time, but I am in no ordinary sense a 'linguist'; and the time I once spent on trying to learn Serbian

definitely unreliable, even though they tend to present their content as safe and verified. Among the few exceptions is *Tolkien Gateway*, which usually provides good information and, above all, cites its sources correctly. Finally, many journals devoted to Tolkien (among them, we may mention at least *Tolkien Studies* and *Journal of Tolkien Research*) regularly publish reviews and updated lists of the major publications on the topic. All in all, the quality of scholarly publications on Tolkien has definitely improved over the years: on this topic, see the historical account by Hostetter (2007).

³ Some of the most important recent contributions on this subject include the relevant sections in Tom Shippey's *The Road to Middle-Earth* (Shippey 2012) and Raymond Edwards' biography of Tolkien (Edwards 2014), Dimitra Fimi and Andrew Higgins' introduction to their new edition of Tolkien's seminal essay *A secret vice* (Fimi, Higgins 2016) and Christopher Gilson's article on Tolkien's 'diachronic perspective' in the process of language invention (Gilson 2020). Some interesting insight on the topic are also found in Diego Poli's article on linguistic invention in Tolkien (Poli 2021).

and Russian have left me with no practical results, only a strong impression of the structure and word-aesthetic. (*Letter 142 to Robert Murray*)

However, the fact that Tolkien did not perceive himself as a linguist *stricto sensu* does not imply that he did not know or share the theoretical and methodological framework of contemporary historical linguistics. On the contrary, anyone who is familiar with Indo-European linguistics will immediately recognise that Tolkien's linguistic treatment of his invented languages is deeply rooted in that framework. Therefore, it is perfectly legitimate to investigate Tolkien's writings on his conlangs in the light of the topics, methods, and results of the late nineteenth/early twentieth-century Indo-European comparative historical linguistics.⁴

Another issue that must be taken into account is Tolkien's attitude towards the possibility of finding the sources of his activity as a creator of languages and what these sources could tell us about the process of language creation itself. In this respect, Tolkien seems very clear in stating that the whole operation is pointless, as he wrote in the draft of a very long and detailed letter prepared as a reply to a certain Mr. Rang (who eventually received only a much shorter version of it):

This lead to the matter of 'external' history: the actual way in which I came to light on or choose certain sequences of sound to use as names, *before* they were given a place inside the story. I think, as I said, this is unimportant: the labour involved in my setting out what I know and remember of the process, or in the guess-work of others, would be far greater than the worth of the results. [...] It would be entirely delusory to refer to the sources of the sound-combinations to discover any meanings overt or hidden. I remember much of this process – the influence of memory of names or words already known, or of 'echoes' in the linguistic memory, and few have been unconscious. (*Letter 297 [draft] to Mr. Rang*)

Interestingly, Tolkien does not deny that many words of his constructed languages were actually inspired by external sources, and he adds that in most cases he is fully aware of what these sources were and how they influenced him in creating those words.⁵ What he actually denies is the fact that there are deep or hidden meanings to be uncovered by tracing words from his invented languages back to their source of inspiration, and this is something on which all scholars can easily agree. However, advances in source studies applied to Tolkien have shown that there are many good reasons to investigate what works could have had an influence on his writings⁶ and I totally agree with what Jason Fisher has pointed out in this respect: "Tolkien did indeed borrow from others — he has admitted as much himself — and consequently, his works may be compared to these sources. They *should* be, in fact" (Fisher 2011b: 32).

⁴ Of course, there is also plenty of positive evidence of Tolkien's deep knowledge of contemporary historical linguistics to be found in his academic activity. This evidence consists both of the presence of many books about linguistic topics in his personal library (for which see Cilli 2019), but also of Tolkien's personal interest in some specific linguistic issues, which can be inferred for instance by the titles of the lectures and classes he taught. While in most cases the titles concern specific texts (such as the *Beowulf*, the *Volsunga Saga* etc.), at other times Tolkien focuses on the linguistic, mainly phonological side of various Germanic languages (cf. the classes named *Outlines of Old English Phonology*) and, in rarer but significant cases, even on more specific linguistic issues, as in the 1929 class on "The Common Germanic Consonant-Changes" and in the 1940 class on "Grimm's Law" (the data about Tolkien's teaching activity are taken from Cilli 2019: 357-368).

⁵ Later in the same letter, Tolkien writes that "actual congruences (of form + sense) occur in unrelated languages, and it is impossible in constructing imaginary languages from a limited number of component sounds to avoid such resemblances (if one tries – I do not)".

⁶ On this topic, see the very important book edited by Jason Fisher (2011a) which takes stock of source criticism applied to Tolkien's works. On the more general and theoretical aspects, see in particular the essays by Shippey (2011) and Fisher himself (2011b).

Taken for granted that we can legitimately ask ourselves to what extent Tolkien's academic formation in Comparative Philology influenced the creation of his invented languages, the next question is how and where to look for this influence. Ideally, such an analysis should be carried out taking into account the whole corpus of Tolkien writings about the Elvish languages, comparing the various stages of their development to look for common traits and differences in the way Tolkien describes their features and diachronic changes. Moreover, Tolkien's writings on the Elvish languages should also be closely compared with his scholarly works. As this definitely does not fall within the scope of a single paper, here I will limit myself to two closely related works belonging to the first Conceptual Phase of the development of the Elvish languages,⁷ the *Qenyaqetsa* (henceforth QQ) and the *Qenya Lexicon* (henceforth QL). These texts are the earliest works relating to the Elvish language called *Qenya* or *Eldarissa* (which will become the *Quenya* of later Conceptual Phases) and consist in an outline of the historical phonology of this language (together with a very brief sketch of its origin and history) and a dictionary.⁸ QQ and QL were published in 1998 on the fanzine *Parma Eldalambéron* by Ch. Gilson, C.F. Hostetter, P.H. Wynne and A. Smith.⁹ Based on internal evidence, the editors date the composition of this works roughly from 1915 to 1920.

The choice to focus on works belonging to the first Conceptual Phase has been made not only because this phase is the starting point of the creation of the Elvish languages, but also because it is safe to assume that at the beginning of this process Tolkien had been more influenced by his sources, not only in the domain of word creation (cf. the well-known case of *Earendel* taken from Anglo-Saxon), but also on the more technical level of the linguistic concepts involved in the description of the language.

3. Tolkien's linguistic background

Since we normally have no information on the teachings Tolkien received orally during his formation as a student (both at school and university), the primary means we have of outlining his knowledge in the field of linguistic studies is to see which relevant books he read. Fortunately, the recent publication of Oronzo Cilli's monograph *Tolkien's Library. An Annotated Checklist* (Cilli 2019) makes it much easier to access this kind of information. For the purposes of this paper, I relied extensively on the data collected by Cilli, double-checking where necessary the references to the most relevant works cited therein, especially the *Chronology* by Scull and Hammond (2017) and Tolkien's reviews of scholarly works which appeared in volumes 4-6 of the journal *The Year's Work in English Studies* (Tolkien 1924, 1926, 1927).¹⁰

⁷ Tolkien worked on his Elvish languages from the early 1910s until the end of his life. The so-called Conceptual Phases represent chronological stages in the development of the Elvish languages, as attested by Tolkien's writings, in which Tolkien's conception of their history and grammar is (relatively) unified. For an outline of the four CPs of the Elvish languages see Kloczko 2015: 18-19. The first Conceptual Phase is the stage which is contemporary to the narratives of the *Book of Lost Tales*, published by Christopher Tolkien as the first two volumes of the *History of Middle Earth*.

⁸ Tolkien's original plan was to also write a section about the morphology of Qenya, which was never completed.

⁹ For my analysis I used the third and last revision of the texts, which was made in 2011.

¹⁰ Another fundamental source for this kind of analysis are Tolkien's reviews of scholarly works which appeared in volumes 4-6 of the journal *The Year's Work in English Studies* (Tolkien 1924, 1926, 1927). However, since the composition of the QQ and the QL precedes the first series of reviews, these valuable documents fall out of the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is my pleasure to acknowledge that I was able to access these documents thanks to the courtesy of Edouard Kloczko, whom I warmly thank.

Based on these sources, I tried to sketch out a list of the relevant works that could represent the core of Tolkien's knowledge in the field of linguistics — and particularly comparative-historical linguistics — at the time he was composing QQ and QL.¹¹ As Fisher (2011b: 36-37) recalls, there are three tiers of Tolkien's sources: the first is made up by works “which Tolkien acknowledged himself”, the second “comprises those [sources] Tolkien is known to have read, owned, enjoyed, or commented on”, and the third tier is that of “possible sources”, that is “works that are never explicitly mentioned by Tolkien but which are no more than one step away from an explicit statement”. Given the private nature of the texts about the Elvish languages, it comes to no surprise that Tolkien does not explicitly mention any linguistic works, so we have no sources of the first (and best) tier. Since this paper is the first step in my analysis of the influence of Tolkien's linguistic background on the making of the Elvish languages, I chose not to speculate too much on possible sources, so no sources of the third tier are included either.

As for the second-tier sources, I divided them into two groups:¹² the first group includes works which Tolkien surely possessed or had access to at the time he was working on the QQ and the QL, while the second comprises works that we are sure Tolkien owned or read, but we do not know whether he had owned or read them before completing the QQ and QL.¹³

Among the sources of the first group there are many works by Henry Sweet on the various stages of the English language: the *Second Middle English Primer* (Sweet 1886), the *Second Anglo-Saxon reader* (Sweet 1887), the *History of English sounds from the earliest period* (Sweet 1888), the *Short historical English grammar* (Sweet 1892), the *Primer of historical English grammar* (Sweet 1902), the *Student's Dictionary of Anglo-Saxon*, the *Anglo-Saxon Reader* (Sweet 1908). There are also some works by Joseph Wright, who was Tolkien's professor of comparative philology at Oxford and a key figure in his academic formation¹⁴: the *Primer of the Gothic Language* (Wright 1899a), the *Middle High-German Primer* (Wright 1899b),¹⁵ the *English Dialect Grammar* (Wright 1905), the *Grammar of the Gothic Language* (Wright 1910), and the *Comparative Grammar of the Greek Language* (Wright 1912). Lastly, this group includes the third volume of A. Fick's *Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der indogermanischen Sprachen* (Fick 1874), C.N.E. Eliot's *Finnish Grammar* (Eliot 1890), two volumes of the *Grundriss der germanischen Philologie* edited by H. Paul (Paul 1891, 1893), S. Feist's *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der gotischen Sprache* (Feist 1909), and J. Morris-Jones' *Welsh Grammar* (Morris-Jones 1913).

In the second group of sources we find J. Grimm's *Geschichte der deutschen sprache* (Grimm 1848), E. Sievers' *Grundzüge der Phonetik* (Sievers 1885), *Abriss der Angelsächsischen Grammatik* (Sievers 1895), *Old English Grammar* (Sievers 1903), H. Sweet's *First steps in Anglo-Saxon* (Sweet 1897) and *Anglo-Saxon Primer* (Sweet 1905), the first

¹¹ I considered only explicitly linguistic works, such as grammars, dictionaries, etc. Of course, there is always the possibility that remarks of a linguistic nature ‘hidden’ in works of a different kind had a profound influence on Tolkien's linguistic thought, but it is safe to assume that such cases, if they exist, represent a very small part of Tolkien's linguistic background.

¹² Many of the works mentioned have had more than one edition: in these cases, the edition cited is the one Tolkien possessed or is more likely to have read.

¹³ Since the discussion of why each individual work was assigned to the first or second group would require too much space, I refer the reader to the relevant entries in Cilli's work.

¹⁴ On the details of the relationship between Tolkien and Wright see, among others, the relevant passages in Edwards (2014).

¹⁵ Cilli (2019: 319) lists the first three editions of this book (1888, 1899, 1917) as known to Tolkien. Puzzlingly enough, all these editions are marked by Cilli as having been loaned by Tolkien from the Exeter College Library in 1912 (from 25 October to 5 December). Since it is impossible for the 1917 third edition to have been loaned in 1912, it is possible that this is a misprint. Therefore, I assume that Tolkien loaned the most recent edition of the book available at the time, namely the 1899 second edition.

volume of the *Laut- und Formenlehre der altgermanischen Dialekte* edited by Ferdinand Dieter (Dieter *et al.* 1898), H. Hirt's *Der Indogermanische Ablaut* (Hirt 1900), *Handbuch der Griechischen Laut- und Formenlehre* (Hirt 1912), O. Jespersen's *Phonetische Grundfragen* (Jespersen 1904), K. Brugmann's *Kurze vergleichende Grammatik der indogermanischen Sprachen* (Brugmann 1904), H. Paul's *Mittelhochdeutsche Grammatik* (Paul 1904), and the two volumes of H. Pedersen's *Vergleichende Grammatik der keltischen Sprachen* (Pedersen 1909, 1913).

Of course, this is a short list, and it is almost certain that by the time he was inventing the first Elvish languages he had read many more books, including on linguistic topics. Nevertheless, it is safer to start conducting our analysis on the firmer ground of what we know for sure that Tolkien read, and then, eventually, to proceed with more speculative hypotheses (as it will be shown below).

4. Examples of Tolkien's treatment of various linguistic issues

To exemplify the particular kind of source criticism outlined above, I will now examine some instances of Tolkien's peculiar uses in describing Qenya in QQ and QL and trace them back to their likely sources.

4.1. The use of <ȳ> and <w̄>

Throughout QQ and QL Tolkien often employs the graphemes <ȳ> and <w̄> with a superscript dot. The value of these graphemes is not explicitly stated in the text, but they are closely related with the glides [j] and [w], which Tolkien writes sometimes as <y> and <w> and sometimes as <ȳ̄> and <w̄̄> (the latter being already at the time the most common spelling in Indo-European linguistics).¹⁶ The interpretation of these signs is made even more difficult by the fact that the QQ manuscript is missing a few pages, which were most likely those where the sounds represented by <ȳ> and <w̄> were introduced.¹⁷

From other passages of QQ, it is clear that <ȳ> and <w̄> represent different sounds than <ȳ̄> and <w̄̄>: for instance, in QQ: 13-14 we find statements such as “y becomes ȳ > iy before ǣ” and “Medial w̄ gave μ except (1) before ũ where it vanished”. The difference between them is most likely that <ȳ> and <w̄> represent closer and harsher sounds than the glides, most probably a voiceless kind of glides, or maybe even fricatives. Possible internal evidence of this lies in the fact that in the same passage where it is stated that <y> becomes <ȳ̄>¹⁸ before ǣ, it is also stated that “w becomes v before ǫ” (assuming for <v> the usual value of labiodental fricative). Another clue to the fact that <ȳ> and <w̄> could represent fricative-like sounds is that in QL: 65 the entry NAŸA ‘hurt, grieve’ bears the comment “probably DAHŸA-”, where the digraph HŸ probably represents the palatal fricative [ç].

Anyway, the use of the dotted signs <ȳ> and <w̄> is rather foreign in the field of Indo-European historical linguistics but is significantly found in Morris-Jones' Welsh grammar,

¹⁶ But it is possible that Tolkien from the beginning assigned a different value to <y>/<w> and <ȳ̄>/<w̄̄>, see below §4.2.

¹⁷ See QQ: 11 fn. 67.

¹⁸ Where the value of the graphemes is unclear, I quote them as graphemes and write them in hooked brackets, implying that the change is a sound change relating not to the graphemes, but to the *sounds* represented by them.

where the sign <ÿ> is used to represent unambiguously the glide [j], since the sign <y> has many possible readings in Welsh orthography.¹⁹

It is noteworthy that Tolkien uses his source rather freely: first of all, he extends the use of the superscript dot to the grapheme <w>, which is not done by Morris-Jones (since the glide [w] is spelled in other ways in Welsh orthography and is usually not confused with <w> representing [u]). Moreover, Tolkien assigns a specific phonetic value to these two graphemes, which is different from the one found in his source. However, Tolkien's need to devise a way of spelling a voiceless variant of the glides is again clearly inspired, if not by Morris-Jones' own grammar, at least by the phonology of Welsh: due to the spirant mutation, word-initial glides can indeed become voiceless and possibly fricatives (spelled orthographically in Welsh texts as <hi>, <hy>, <hw>, <wh> etc., see Morris-Jones 1913: 28-29).

It must be noted that the use of the grapheme <ÿ> is not unique to Morris-Jones' grammar, but it is found in many other works on Welsh, as it comes from uses attested in Welsh manuscripts. However, in Welsh historical orthography this sign is used to represent not the palatal glide, but the non-syllabic vowel [j] in falling diphthongs (see e.g. Strachan 1909: 1²⁰), so we may be pretty sure that Morris-Jones' grammar is the direct source of Tolkien's use of <ÿ> and <ŵ>. It is interesting to note that, compared to his source, Tolkien 'innovates' in the direction of a more symmetrical, systematic, and phonetically accurate transcription convention, thus revealing a significant detail of his *modus operandi* in language description (and creation). Finally, it is worth noting that the use of <ÿ> and <ŵ> is limited to the first phase of the creation of Qenya and is later abandoned by Tolkien. It should also be remembered that many of the relevant sections of QQ where these sounds are discussed are either missing from the manuscript or struck out by Tolkien himself, a sign that he was constantly reworking his conceptions and maybe found his own treatment of the matter too complicated or cluttered to be retained.

4.2. The use of <ÿ> and <ŵ>

Even more puzzling than the use of <ÿ> and <ŵ>, and likewise abandoned in later writings, is Tolkien's use of the graphemes <ÿ> and <ŵ> in QQ and QL. As for the previously discussed signs, the passages where <ÿ> and <ŵ> are used were often struck out by Tolkien, and it is very difficult to grasp their phonetic value, though there is clear evidence that they represent different sounds compared both to <ÿ>/<ŵ> and to <ÿ>/<ŵ>. Since some relevant parts of the manuscript of QQ are missing and since Tolkien often sketches out very hastily the sound changes he is imagining for his Elvish languages, all I can do here is to make my best educated guess as to the value of <ÿ> and <ŵ>, which is that they represent some kind of 'reinforced voiced glides' compared to <ÿ>/<ŵ>, something in between the glides [j] and [w] and the correspondent (palatal and labiovelar) voiced fricatives, just as <y> and <w> represent not proper fricatives, but less spirant sounds.

The reasons for this guess lie mainly in a passage of QQ where Tolkien is dealing with the "voiceless spirants" and states that the palatal voiceless spirant <ÿ>²¹ "is voiced to ÿ, undergoing

¹⁹ Cf. Morris-Jones 1913: 27: "When y represents *j* it will be dotted as above in the quotations in this book". Morris-Jones uses the spelling <ÿ> also to distinguish the homophone words *y* 'his/her' and *ÿ* 'to' from the (also homophone) definite article *y*, but this purely 'lexical' use of the dot, which stems from uses attested in Welsh manuscripts, is limited to these words and the Author explicitly states that "there can be no confusion with *y* ≡ *j*, which never stands by itself" (Morris-Jones 1913: 15).

²⁰ Tolkien owned a copy of Strachan's *An Introduction to Early Welsh*, but it is dated '1926' by himself (cf. Cilli 2019: 276), so we cannot be sure that he had read the book when he was writing QQ and QL.

²¹ It may be cursorily noted that the very use of the sign <^> in combination with <ÿ> to denote a voiceless palatal fricative is most probably dependent on Morris-Jones' Welsh grammar, and that even

between vowels same changes as \hat{y} (q.v.)” (QQ: 19-20). Of course, the passage referred to by Tolkien with the indication “q.v.” is missing, but it is clear enough that the sound represented by \hat{y} is a voiced one. Another piece of (indirect) evidence that could support my interpretation is that Tolkien, in a later stage of development of Qenya where he had already abandoned the use of both $\langle\hat{y}\rangle/\langle\hat{w}\rangle$ and $\langle\dot{y}\rangle/\langle\dot{w}\rangle$, still maintain the need to differentiate between ‘more spirantized’ and ‘less spirantized’ glides: in a passage of his *Early Qenya Grammar* (composed probably in 1923) he writes that “also \mathring{i} and \mathring{u} less spirantal in nature than j , w and closely related in origin to the vowels i , u ” (Tolkien 2003: 63). It may well be possible — albeit highly speculative — that what is here written simply as $\langle j \rangle$ and $\langle w \rangle$ could have been tentatively written $\langle\hat{y}\rangle$ and $\langle\hat{w}\rangle$ in the earlier phonology and that the spelling $\langle\mathring{i}\rangle/\langle\mathring{u}\rangle$ represented in QQ not the ‘full’ glides $[j]$ and $[w]$, but a ‘weaker’ version of them.

Regardless of the phonetic value of $\langle\hat{y}\rangle$ and $\langle\hat{w}\rangle$, it is clear that Tolkien derived the use of such graphemes from Celtic linguistics, since they are commonly used in Welsh orthography to denote the long counterparts of short vowels $\langle y \rangle$ and $\langle w \rangle$, while they are not employed in other branches of Indo-European linguistics. Once again Tolkien uses his sources in a creative way, taking those aspects that suited his phonoaesthetic taste and applying them to his constructed languages after his own fashion. In the case of the adaptation of the orthographic devices coming from the Welsh tradition, Tolkien is influenced by graphic factors (the diacritics used), graphemic factors (the value attached to those diacritics), and phonological factors (the distinction between more open and more closed glides) specific to a real language, but mixes them in an entirely original way.

4.3. The layout of Qenya consonants

Another interesting fact about QQ is related to Tolkien’s discussion of consonants. When presenting the consonants both of primitive Eldarin (the ancestor of all Elvish languages) and the so-called “Cor-Eldarin system” (a later development thereof), Tolkien ranges them in the five articulation points traditionally reconstructed for Proto-Indo-European, but in a ‘reverse’ order: labiovelar, velar, palatal, alveolar, bilabial (see QQ: 15-16).

Since in the vast majority of contemporary works relating to Indo-European linguistics and to the ancient Indo-European languages the consonants were usually ranged from bilabials to labiovelars, Tolkien’s choice (which he would later abandon in favour of the more common arrangement) appears to be meaningful with reference to his sources. Here, two main strands of sources can be identified.

The first strand is made up by the works by Henry Sweet (see above §3 for list of works by him which Tolkien read or could have read): both in the works devoted to general phonetics and in those relating to Anglo-Saxon and Middle English, Sweet usually ranges the consonants starting from the back of the mouth, so he is a likely candidate as a source for Tolkien’s use. However, it should be noted that Sweet presents the consonants in his own phonetic fashion and doesn’t range them in just five points of articulation, as his perspective is not limited to the sounds of Germanic (or even Indo-European) languages but aims at a general description of the sounds of human speech (see Sweet 1888: 6 for an example). So, even if Tolkien’s knowledge of Sweet’s books surely supported his choice of ranging the consonants from back to front, I think that they are not likely to be the primary source for this choice.

As uncommon the ranging of the consonant from labiovelars to bilabials may be, there are indeed some works where it is attested, and these constitute the second (and in my opinion foremost) strand of Tolkien’s sources on this particular issue. Quite unsurprisingly, these

here Tolkien extend this use to the voiced palatal fricative $[j]$, spelled $\langle\mathring{z}\rangle$ (whereas $\langle z \rangle$ represents the voiced velar fricative $[\gamma]$) in QQ.

sources are those of the ‘Celtic side’ of Tolkien’s academic background, namely Strachan’s *An Introduction to Early Welsh* and Pedersen’s *Vergleichende Grammatik der keltischen Sprachen*, who both range the ancient Indo-European stops starting from the back (see Strachan 1909: 2 and Pedersen 1909: 30).²² I think that this data show us that Tolkien’s study of Welsh had a profound influence on his process of language creation as a whole, not only on Goldogrin/Sindarin (Tolkien’s Elvish languages closely modelled on Welsh).

As a final remark, there may be another source for this particular use by Tolkien, a source not listed in Cilli’s catalogue and, to the best of my knowledge, nowhere mentioned as a source for Tolkien’s *glottopoeia*. Everyone knows that Tolkien studied Old Norse (on his own) already in high school,²³ but I could not find anywhere the indication of what was the text on which Tolkien studied. Searching among the texts Tolkien could have had access to at the time, I came to the conclusion that a possible source could be represented by Rev. George Bayldon’s *Elementary Grammar of the Old Norse or Icelandic Language*. Indeed, in Bayldon’s work, stops are ranged from back to front, that is from velars to bilabials, lacking of course labiovelars and palatals, not preserved as such in this language. Although this cannot represent a sufficient proof that Tolkien studied Old Norse on Bayldon’s grammar (or, at least, on Bayldon’s grammar only), the coincidence is striking. Therefore, I think it is worth mentioning this fact in the present and, perhaps, further discussions.

5. Conclusions

The main purpose of this paper was to show how a particular kind of source studies applied to Tolkien, namely the study of the influence of his academic background in the field of linguistics on the creation of his Elvish languages, could lead us to a better understanding of these languages and of Tolkien as a language creator, and I think that the data discussed here have proven that this kind of study is indeed valid and interesting. The comparison between the earliest writings on the Elvish languages and Tolkien’s linguistic sources showed us in detail the meticulousness of Tolkien in devising his constructed languages, his search for symmetry and systematicity in the process, as well as his creative and free approach to his sources, which lead him to take from them whatever linguistic features he found delightful to his phonoaesthetic taste and rearrange them in his own personal way. Of course, much work still needs to be done, and I hope this work will be a starting point for future studies.

REFERENCES

- Bayldon, G. (1870), *An Elementary Grammar of the Old Norse or Icelandic Language*, London-Edinburgh, Williams and Norgate.
- Brugmann, K. (1904), *Kurze vergleichende Grammatik der indogermanischen Sprachen*, Strassburg, Trübner.
- Cilli, O. (2019), *Tolkien’s Library: An Annotated Checklist*, Edinburgh, Luna Press Publishing.
- Dieter, F. et al. (1898), *Laut- und Formenlehre der altgermanischen Dialekte. Erster Halbband: Lautlehre des Urgermanischen, Gotischen, Altnordischen, Altenglischen, Altsächsischen und Althochdeutschen*, Leipzig, O. R. Reisland.
- Edwards, R. (2014), *Tolkien*, Ramsbury-Marlborough, Robert Hale.
- Eliot, C.N.E. (1890), *A Finnish Grammar*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

²² Note however that Strachan only has four points of articulation, since he does not list labiovelars, and Pedersen has the inverted order velars-labiovelars, since he interprets the PIE velars rather as uvulars.

²³ See Scull-Hammond 2016 I under the entry **Autumn term 1907**.

- Feist, S. (1909), *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der gotischen Sprache. Mit Einschluss des sog. Krimgotischen*, Halle, Niemeyer.
- Fick, A. (1874³), *Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der indogermanischen Sprachen. Dritter Band. Wortschatz der germanischen Spracheinheit mit einem Begleitwort von Adalbert Bezzenberger*. Dritte, umgearbeitete Auflage, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Fimi, D., Higgins, A. (2016), *Introduction*, in J.R.R. Tolkien, *A secret vice. Tolkien on invented languages*, edited by Dimitra Fimi and Andrew Higgins, London, HarperCollinsPublishers, pp. xi-lxv.
- Fisher, J. (2011a), *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources. Critical Essays*, edited by Jason Fisher, Jefferson (NC)-London, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- Fisher, J. (2011b), *Tolkien and Source Criticism: Remarkings and Remakings*, in J. Fisher (ed.), *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources. Critical Essays*, edited by Jason Fisher, Jefferson (NC)-London, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, pp. 29-44.
- Gilson, Ch. (2020), “He Constructed a Language L and Another LL”: *Diachronic Aspects of Tolkien’s Early Philology*, in *Tolkien Studies*, 17, pp. 75-116.
- Grimm, J. (1848), *Geschichte der deutschen sprache (Bände I-II)*, Leipzig, Weidmann.
- Hirt, H. (1900), *Der indogermanische Ablaut, vornehmlich in seinem Verhältnis zur Betonung*, Strassburg, Trübner.
- Hirt, H. (1912²), *Handbuch der Griechischen Laut- und Formenlehre. Eine Einführung in das sprachwissenschaftliche Studium des Griechischen*. Zweite, umgearbeitete Auflage, Heidelberg, Winter.
- Hostetter, C.F. (2006), “Elvish as She is Spoke”, in W.G. Hammond, C. Scull (eds.), *The Lord of the Rings 1954-2004. Scholarship in Honor of Richard E. Blackwater*, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, pp. 231-255.
- Hostetter, C.F. (2007), *Tolkienian Linguistics: The First Fifty Years*, in *Tolkien Studies*, 4, pp. 1-46.
- Jespersen, O. (1904), *Phonetische Grundfragen*, Leipzig-Berlin, Teubner.
- Kloczko, É. (2015), *Le haut-elfique pour les débutants*. Édition revue et augmentée par l’auteur, Paris, POCKET.
- Letters = Tolkien, J.R.R. (2013), *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien. A selection edited by Humphrey Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien*, Boston-New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Morris-Jones, J. (1913), *A Welsh Grammar, historical and comparative*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Paul, H. (1891), *Grundriss der germanischen Philologie. Herausgegeben von Hermann Paul. Erster Band. Begriff und Geschichte der germanischen Philologie. – Methodenlehre. – Schriftkunde. – Sprachgeschichte. – Mythologie*, Strassburg, Trübner.
- Paul, H. (1893), *Grundriss der germanischen Philologie. Herausgegeben von Hermann Paul. Zweiter Band. Erste Abteilung. Heldensage. – Literaturgeschichte. – Metrik*, Strassburg, Trübner.
- Paul, H. (1904⁶), *Mittelhochdeutsche Grammatik*, Halle, Niemeyer.
- Pedersen, H. (1909), *Vergleichende Grammatik der keltischen Sprachen. Erster Band. Einleitung und Lautlehre*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht.
- Pedersen, H. (1913), *Vergleichende Grammatik der keltischen Sprachen. Zweiter Band. Bedeutungslehre (Wortlehre)*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht.
- Poli, D. (2021), *L’invenzione linguistica in Tolkien*, in Giuseppe Scattolini (a cura di), *Barlumi di cose più alte, più profonde o più oscure della sua superficie. L’opera di Tolkien dalla critica accademica al legendarium*, Bari, L’Arco e la Corte, pp. 123-159.
- QL = J.R.R. Tolkien, *Qenya Lexicon*, in *Parma Eldalamberon*, 12 (2011³ [1998]), pp. 1-28.
- QQ = J.R.R. Tolkien, *Qenyaqetsa*, in *Parma Eldalamberon*, 12 (2011³ [1998]), pp. 29-112.
- Scull, C., Hammond, W.G. (2017²), *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion & Guide (I: Chronology, II-III: Reader’s Guide)*, London, HarperCollinsPublishers.
- Shippey, T. (2011), *Introduction: Why Source Criticism?*, in J. Fisher (ed.), *Tolkien and the Study of His Sources. Critical Essays*, Jefferson (NC)-London, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, pp. 7-16.
- Shippey, T. (2012²), *The Road to Middle-Earth*, Revised and expanded edition, London, HarperCollinsPublishers (Epub Edition).
- Sievers, E. (1885³), *Grundzüge der Phonetik zur Einführung in das Studium der Lautlehre der indogermanischen Sprachen*. Dritte, verbesserte Auflage, Leipzig, Breitkopf & Härtel.

- Sievers, E. (1895), *Abriss der Angelsächsischen Grammatik*, Halle, Niemeyer.
- Sievers, E. (1903³), *An Old English Grammar*. Translated and edited by Albert S. Cook. Third Edition, Boston et al., Ginn and Company.
- Strachan, J. (1909), *An Introduction to Early Welsh*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Sweet, H. (1886), *Second Middle English Primer, extracts from Chaucer, with grammar and glossary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Sweet, H. (1887), *A second Anglo-Saxon reader, archaic and dialectal*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Sweet, H. (1888), *History of English sounds from the earliest period, with full word-lists*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Sweet, H. (1891²), *First Middle English Primer. Extracts from the Ancren Riwle and Ormulum with Grammar and Glossary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Sweet, H. (1892), *A short historical English grammar*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Sweet, H. (1896), *The Student's Dictionary of Anglo-Saxon*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Sweet, H. (1897), *First steps in Anglo-Saxon*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Sweet, H. (1902²), *A Primer of historical English grammar*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Sweet, H. (1905), *An Anglo-Saxon Primer. With grammar, notes and glossary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Sweet, H. (1908⁸), *An Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse. With grammar, metre, notes and glossary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1924), *Philology: General Works*, in *The Year's Work in English Studies*, 4, pp. 20-37.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1926), *Philology: General Works*, in *The Year's Work in English Studies*, 5, pp. 26-65.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (1927), *Philology: General Works*, in *The Year's Work in English Studies*, 6, pp. 32-66.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. (2003), *Early Qenya Grammar*, in *Parma Eldalamberon*, 14, pp. 35-86.
- Tolkien Gateway = https://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Main_Page
- Wright, J. (1899a²), *A Primer of the Gothic Language, containing the Gospel of St. Mark, selections from the other Gospels, and the Second Epistle to Timothy, with grammar, notes, and glossary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Wright, J. (1899b²), *A Middle High-German Primer, with grammar, notes, and glossary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Wright, J. (1905), *The English Dialect Grammar, comprising the dialects of England, of the Shetland and Orkney Islands, and of those parts of Scotland, Ireland & Wales where English is habitually spoken*, Oxford et al., Henry Frowde.
- Wright, J. (1910), *Grammar of the Gothic Language, and the Gospel of St. Mark, selections from the other Gospels, and the Second Epistle to Timothy, with notes and glossary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Wright, J. (1912), *Comparative Grammar of the Greek Language*, London-New York-Toronto, Oxford University Press-Henry Frowde.

FRANCESCO DEDÈ • is Associate Professor of Historical and Theoretical Linguistics at the University of Milan “La Statale”. His research domains include Indo-European linguistics, Ancient Greek linguistics, word-formation processes (with a particular focus on nominal compounding), and history of Linguistics and linguistic thought.