TOLKIEN'S HISTORY IN WRITING SYSTEMS

Having graduated from Oxford University in 1915 focusing on English philology and Old Norse, Professor John Ronald Reuel Tolkien began working for the Oxford English Dictionary. It was here that he took a keen interest in the writing systems of a number of languages, to later become the appointed Reader of English Language at the University of Leeds, giving courses in Old English, Gothic, Old Icelandic and Medieval Welsh. Prior to this post he became well-versed in a number of languages, including Finnish, Greek, Italian, Old Norse, Spanish and Welsh as well as Middle and Old English; this in addition to the tongues of Latin, French and German taught by his mother in his academic infancy. He later returned to Oxford in 1925 to become a Professor of Anglo-Saxon studies, and in 1945, a Professor of English Language and Literature.

Along with his professional career as a philologist, Tolkien's passion for constructed languages often took priority, leaving his academic contributions comparatively light. He saw the euphony and aesthetics of language through his study of sound symbolism, and it was this that led him to invent the languages that today we collectively recognise as Elvish. However, those that he created were not only adopted by Elves, but also by Dwarves, Orcs, Men and all other inhabitants of his fictional world of *Arda*, home to the legendary Middle-earth that takes its recognition from the renowned *The Lord of the Rings*. It was through these books that Tolkien made his languages known. Contrary to what some may understand, his initial works were written as an afterthought to his languages, and served primarily as a catalyst to publish his linguistic works.

The first set of lettering written by Tolkien, the letters of *Rúmil* (known as the Rúmilian alphabet) was discovered in its earliest form in one of his many diaries. Despite his prior phonetic influences of Welsh and Finnish, the orthographic aspects resemble a combination of Hebrew, Greek and Pitman's shorthand, although the Tengwar and Sarati scripts that followed appear to resemble Tibetan and other Brāhmī-derived scripts. He also created a number of Rune-based alphabets, collectively known as the Cirth; these being clearly modelled on Anglo-Saxon and Nordic Runes.

On the assumption that it would offer a more plausible history for his languages, Tolkien modified his orthographies in the way we have seen the Latin alphabet change to suit the course of our own linguistic progression. The same evolution of both written and spoken word was also used to establish the antiquities of his published works; the details of which will be covered in the following sections.

Combining the imagination of a creative linguist and the knowledge of both ancient and modern diction, Tolkien has made a notable impact on fantasy literature. Considering the continued global influence, his works are irrefutably timeless, and continue to be a keen focus for literary studies, both in terms of education and inspiration.

THE ORIGINS OF TOLKIENS WRITING SYSTEMS

Looking back to the seventeenth century, we find self-taught Dutch scholar Francis Lodwick making attempts to simplify the concept of literal representation. The proposed system received its credit not from the symbols he chose to represent the lettering, but the way in which the symbols expressed their relationship to that which they represented. His logic was predicated on there being sufficient symbols that could be derived from a methodical combination of a limited set of pre-determined concepts; something of which Tolkien saw as a potential basis for his own systems.

By using a combination of straight lines and curves, Tolkien showed that sufficient phonetic combinations to formulate a language could be expressed. To illustrate how this process identifies a need in language acquisition we need only look at the English (Latin) alphabet. Whilst we understand that there are sounds represented by twenty-six symbols, we do not intrinsically know how to pronounce them purely from the shapes of the symbols. John Wilkins, a philosopher from the same period as Lodwick, noticed the issue associated with the conceptualisation of letters and sounds, which led to his attempt to categorise all known word associations by means of an analytical writing system. To illustrate his inspiration let us take the word "dog". This word will inevitably bring the image of the four-legged domesticated animal to mind, however this can only be as a result of you previously being told of the

concept this word represents. There is nothing represented by the shape of the letters, or the way in which they are combined that would otherwise depict this image. Tolkien saw this paradigm, albeit on a phonetic level, in the same light as Wilkins, and established his own system for use in his Elvish orthographies. Again in absence of prior knowledge, one would not know that the sound represented by the letter /p/ would be that produced from an utterance of air, pressurised in the mouth and resulting in a short expulsion released by the lips.

Tolkien's stories establish a race of Elves (or *Quendi*) that originate through detailed history and culture, as well as a number of languages and writing systems. Although the first language pre-dated the written word, the Rúmilian alphabet was in place soon after to establish a uniform method of documenting information. In the same way that the writing systems conceived by Lodwick and Wilkins had to cater for people from cultures of varying intellect and literary competence, Tolkien presupposed the same given his anticipation for modifications being made to the orthographies to suit the literary needs of other races inhabiting Middle-earth.

A majority of the linguistic development was carried out by the High Elves (or *Noldor*), of which Rúmil was the appointed Loremaster. The lettering used for his first alphabet is collectively known as the aforementioned Sarati, and was commonly used for writing early versions of *Quenya* – the Elvish language used by the Noldor. The system had a limited set of rules for scribes to follow, which were welcomed by the Elves as it meant all spoken dialects could adopt the Rúmilian alphabet and modify it as they saw necessary.

During his time at Leeds University, Tolkien also created the *Valmaric* script which is described among literary enthusiasts as a midpoint between the Sarati and the later Tengwar systems. Along with the Rúmilian alphabet, Tolkien used both systems to write English and *Qenya* (an earlier dialect of the aforementioned Quenya). Based on the initial structure of the Sarati, the Valmaric lettering paved the way forward for the Tengwar system, but have no discernable links to Middle-earth and as such, no documented association with Elvish. Consequently this system will not be given any further discussion, however those interested in pursuing the script further should note that additional resources can be found in the editions of the *Parma Eldalamberon* (the journal of the *Elvish Linguistic Fellowship*).