

**Escape from Noldor:  
The Widespread Influence of Elvish**

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## Introduction

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There are many different motivations for creating a language, and today it is generally agreed that they can be catalogued by the context in which they are used. Languages created for the purposes of gleaning information from a predefined hypothesis are known as engineered languages, and those written specifically for communication between people of different nations, and as a supplement to their native tongue, are auxiliary languages. However, Tolkien's experiments in language creation were driven by passion and used as part of the creation of fictional, or secondary worlds. As such, Tolkien's constructed languages fall under a third category known as artistic languages, or *artlangs*. Artlangs can be further subcategorised into three groups; those created for literature such as Orwell's Newspeak as found in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, those which are supported by secondary worlds such as the languages found in the Tolkien's fictional lands of Arda, and those which simply exist for their own sake (Stockwell, 2006:6). Tolkien's languages are also frequently referred to in their own exclusive group known as *Tolklangs*<sup>†</sup>. In reference to his literature, Tolkien once said that he wanted to "create a world in which a form of language agreeable to [his] personal aesthetic might seem real" (Tolkien, 1981:205). Here we see him acknowledge the notion of an artistic language, and by his own admission making no attempt to convince his audience that his languages are anything other than personal experiments in phonetic beauty.

During his lifetime, Tolkien created a number of languages, all of which predicated on his personal and professional studies of real-world languages. A majority of these were associated with the fictional races from his publications such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, but the two languages which Tolkien frequently revised, thus giving the most elaborate lexica were those of Elvish origin. These languages are known as *Quenya* and *Sindarin*.

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<sup>†</sup> This abbreviation was first used by Susanne Vejdemo at Omentielva Minya; the first international conference of Tolkien's languages held in Stockholm in 2005

The means by which Tolkien created Quenya and Sindarin, and the aforementioned revisions he found necessary will be the initial focus of this essay, as will a further discussion of the environment created for these languages. The latter will concentrate on the posthumous success of Tolkien's works; the recognition of which leading Ross Smith, in his aptly titled paper "Timeless Tolkien", to refer to his work being "equally popular in the swinging sixties as in the neo-conservative nineties" (Smith, 2005:19). To this end, specific consideration is also given to the attention that Tolkien's work has received as a result of Peter Jackson's films, and the influence that these have consequently had on the scholars of the present day.

## Evolutionary Elvish

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One of the most notable considerations of Tolkien's languages is that they follow a consistency of evolution, and both Quenya and Sindarin had undergone significant lexical shifts, resulting in the final state of both languages being marginally distinguishable from the initial template. An example of early (below left) and late (below right) Quenya is shown below.

*"i•waneth na•dalwint gloss an  
Idrilôni cailthi a•mabwid glen irtha  
ôni cailthi mabir gleni nan•hirilion  
nôbi •i•mab 'len suila ontha "*

*" Yéni ve lintë yuldar avánier  
mi oromardi lisse-miruvóreva  
Andúnë pella, Vardo tellumar  
nu luini yassen tintilar i eleni  
ómaryo airetári-lírinen "*

On the surface, both would seem equally unintelligible to those unfamiliar with Finnish phonology, which forms the common influence of the two dialects. However, a quick analysis of the two scripts highlights the differences. Whilst Finnish remained an influence through the evolution of Quenya, Tolkien did not incorporate the rule concerning consonant clusters at the end of words until the later revisions; neither did he permit the use of /j/ or /y/ (another noticeable aspect of Finnish) until the later stages. It would

appear that Tolkien was concerned that the influence of Finnish might be too obvious in his early languages, and thus revised some of the phonotactic rules to obscure this influence. Then having familiarised himself more fluently with Greek (another influence of Quenya), and gained confidence in the art of morphology, he then reinstated the aforementioned Finnish rules, safe in the knowledge that they would then be suitably incorporated into his languages. Furthermore, by allowing his languages to evolve in a timeframe which paralleled his linguistic knowledge, Tolkien would have gleaned an insight into how he should proceed with approaching the same paradigm for his fiction. Christopher Tolkien, the youngest of J.R.R. Tolkien's sons, confirmed what he knew of the process of his father's work stating that he was "more interested in the process of change than... displaying the structure and use of languages" (Tolkien, 1987:378). Therefore, in recognition of the fact that he was "free to change the [linguistic history], as he was free to change the story of the world in which they took place", he produced languages which he deemed phonetically beautiful, and again, according to his son "did so abundantly" (Tolkien, 1987:341-342).

Whilst it was Tolkien's intention to base his stories around a world in which he could utilise his linguistic background, it was not simple enough to interject phrases from his invented languages into the narrative without some means of context. In order to create a plausible linguistic history pertaining to cultural evolution, it was necessary for Tolkien to reflect suitable diversity in his languages. This he achieves through the wide range of grammatical structures delivered by the characters in his stories, ranging from the archaisms of the nobility (below left, Tolkien, 1991:511), to the working-class colloquialisms of the Orcs (below right, Tolkien, 1991:440). His inspiration for this diversity no doubt coming from the stereotypes of his own experiences whilst serving in the trenches of the First World War.

*“ Behold! I go forth and it seems like  
to be my last riding ”*

*“ Make ‘em both run! Just use the  
whip as a reminder... I shan't forget.  
Payment is only put off. Leg it! ”*

Furthermore, when considering the development of Tolkien's languages, the chronology of linguistic events can be viewed from two different perspectives; those developed outside the context of the narrative, and those occurring within the fictional environment itself. Such events are described as *internal* and *external* respectively. Both will now be discussed in the context of establishing a relationship between the two, and the means by which Tolkien attempts to emulate an evolution of his languages, comparable to that of a real-world environment.

## **Middle-earth Evolution: An Elves Perspective**

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The earliest traceable roots of the Elvish language are found in the eleventh published volume of Christopher Tolkien's collection of his father's works, *The History of Middle-earth*. Here we read of the first of the Elven races awakening to immediately create words from which they could speak and sing (Tolkien, 1994). This then became the proto-language known as *Primitive Quendian*; the parent language from which all Elvish tongues were derived.

Prior to the existence of the Elves, a group of primordial Spirits known as the Ainur were created, of which, fourteen were sent to the newly created world of Arda (home to the better-known continent of Middle-earth). This group, known as the Valar, were sent to oversee the remainder of the creation, and it was one of their members, Oromë, who found the Elves and invited them on a journey to return with him to Valinor, the home of his kind.

Those who remained behind choosing not to follow Oromë did so as a result of the intervention of Melkor placing doubt in the minds of the Elves regarding the intentions of the Valar. Melkor was a fallen member of the Ainur and better known as Morgoth (the name he later took), who was responsible for the evil that befell the lands of Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings*. These Elves became the Avari, or “the Unwilling”<sup>†</sup>, and occupied the forests and

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<sup>†</sup> As translated from the aforementioned ancestral language of the Elves, Primitive Quendian.

caves in the East of Middle-earth. Over the years that followed, they spread their population, and the resulting languages became collectively known as the *Avarin* tongues.

Those that embarked on the journey became known as the Elves of the Eldar, and it was during this time that the Elvish tongues started to evolve. The first of its kind was *Eldarin*, which then became the parent language for Sindarin and Quenya, among others. The subsequent languages came into being when some of the Elves chose to prematurely disband before reaching Valinor and reside in the lands which their journey passed through. Those who settled in the Misty Mountains continued to develop Eldarin, to later become *Nandorin*, whilst those who reached the lands of Beleriand created the aforementioned Sindarin. Towards the end of their journey, some of the remaining Elves were left behind in the lands of Eriador, who then developed the language of *Telerin*, however those Elves that completed the journey were then given the opportunity of establishing a language alongside the Valar; the result of which being the aforementioned Quenya.

The Elves that completed the journey came from two separate areas of Middle-earth, each pertaining to their respective roots. As a result, Quenya became divided between these Elvish factions, to create *Vanyarin Quenya* and *Noldorin Quenya*; the languages of the Vanyar and Noldor Elves respectively. Vanyarin<sup>†</sup> was the tongue developed closest to the existing language of the Valar, and as such became the most conservative dialect of Quenya, incorporating a number of loan words from the Valar, and whilst Noldorin diverged from Vanyarin, the languages remained “virtually identical... and [the] differences were of minor importance” (Gilson, 2003:70). Vanyarin remained an exclusive dialect of Valinor whilst Noldorin, later referred to as *Exilic Quenya*<sup>‡</sup>, became the general Quenyan dialect which then spread throughout Middle-earth, and is the lexicon used throughout the time period set by *The Lord of the Rings*.

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<sup>†</sup> Vanyarin Quenya and Noldorin Quenya are more frequently referred to as simply *Vanyarin* and *Noldorin*.

<sup>‡</sup> Exilic Quenya got its name as it was the language which developed as a result of the Noldor which left Valinor by following their exiled leader

In a letter to Houghton Mifflin, shortly after their publishing of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien stated that he would have written the narrative entirely in Elvish (Tolkien, 1981: 219), but being bound by the publishers it would have not escaped their attention that an overzealous addition of his lexica would undoubtedly become detrimental to its potential success. So despite the opportunity Tolkien was given to unveil his linguistic works on a global scale, he still had to incorporate the concept of a native language into his stories if he was to make the background of his experimental languages plausible. Due to the limited period of time spanning *The Lord of the Rings*, we see little evidence of linguistic evolution, and again, given the limited amount of Elvish text in his narrative, it is very difficult to approach an analysis of this context from his stories alone. We must therefore utilise the unpublished works from sources such as the aforementioned *History of Middle-earth*, and those since provided by other scholarly groups to uncover the means by which Tolkien made this possible.

## **The Cellar Door to the Finnish Wines**

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During his lifetime Tolkien familiarised himself with a number of languages, both ancient and modern, but it was the aesthetics of Finnish and Welsh that he found to be the most appealing. Consequently the phonologies of each made the biggest impact on the development of Elvish. In a letter to the Anglo-American poet, W.H. Auden, Tolkien wrote of his discovery of Finnish being comparable to “discovering a complete wine-cellar filled with bottles of an amazing wine of a kind and flavour never tasted before”, the likes of which “intoxicated” him (Tolkien, 1981:163) Given his subsequent attention to the language, it is understandable that Tolkien would use terminology that would suggest a metaphorical addiction to the Finnish language.

Furthermore, as that Tolkien saw his study of linguistics and subsequent language creation to be a “private enterprise undertaken to give pleasure... by giving expression to [his] personal linguistic ‘aesthetic’ or taste” (Tolkien,

1981:380), his focus was primarily on the phonaesthetic aspects of the spoken word, and as such Finnish provided an excellent basis for his Elvish languages. He ignored the later influence of glottal and plosive elements inherited from Swedish loan words, and utilised the breathy, half-aspirated phonemes of Old Finnish, or what he believed to be the more beautiful aspects of the Finnish phonology; this conveniently matching the persona of the Elves that would later use the same language in his stories. The influence of Finnish was more obvious in Tolkien's early linguistic works due to superficial borrowing, but these anomalies were later diluted by the time the Qenya (the name given to primitive Quenya) had evolved into Quenya (Salo, 2013), at which point he had engaged far more with the phonetic structure of Finnish; the result of which being a far more unique vocabulary (below).

*“ Ai! laurië lantar lassi súrinen,  
yéni únótimë ve rámar aldaron!  
Yéni ve lintë yuldar avánier  
mi oromardi lissë-miruvóreva  
Andúnë pella, Vardo tellumar  
nu luini yassen tintilar i eleni  
ómaryo airtári-lírinen.*

*Sí man i yulma nin enquantuva?*

*An sí Tintallë Varda Oiolossëo  
ve fanyar máryat Elentári ortanë  
ar ilyë tier undulávë lumbulë  
ar sindanóriello caita mornë  
i falmalinnar imbë met,  
ar hísië untúpa Calaciryo míri oialë.  
Sí vanwa ná, Rómello vanwa, Valimar!*

*Namárië! Nai hiruvalyë Valimar!  
Nai elyë hiruva! Namárië! ”*



As seen from this example, and reading from a semantically ignorant perspective, we find that Tolkien found pleasure in using an equal balance of consonants (56%) and vowels (44%), and implementing this rule, we also notice a very sparse use of initial consonant clusters<sup>†</sup>. Both of these are reminiscent in Finnish phonology, as is the predilection to ending words with a vowel.

A similar observation can be made from the phrase “cellar door”, cited by Tolkien as being beautifully phonetic, and stating further that “most English-speaking people” would admit the same (Tolkien, 2006:190). He was clearly overlooking the ambiguity associated with this statement, forgetting that English is spoken in a range of dialects, each of which would produce an alternate pronunciation. Therefore, assuming that the phonetic beauty referred to was that of Tolkien’s own southern accent, not only do we notice the aforementioned Finnish rule of balanced consonants and vowels, but also the lenition and consonant gradation synonymous with Finnish. Given the word “cellar” ends with a closing syllable, the /d/ which follows becomes what is known as a *weak grade* (strong grades following an open syllable, typically ending with a vowel). Furthermore, by weakening the /d/ phoneme, it then becomes subject to the lenition, which diminishes the effect that a consonant has within a word. This paradigm is often associated Welsh phonology, whereby the /d/ moves further down the sonority hierarchy, but is also noticeable in Finnish phonology where the same consonant is, much like the other plosive phonemes in Finnish, half aspirated.

However, despite the influence that Welsh and Finnish lenition had on the Tolkien’s languages, given his earlier studies required the learning of mediaeval languages, it is likely that his introduction to lenition came from Old English, and the subsequent change to Middle English. Although the lenited mutations appeared diachronically between Old and Middle English, we can see the end result being a far more rounded language with the removal of mid-word plosives; examples of which include *betst*>*best* (best) and

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<sup>†</sup> Although no consonant clusters are evident in the given example, they were still permitted and their use noted in the current available Quenya scripts

blostma>blosma (blossom). Although mid-word plosives appear permissible in the Elvish languages, we notice from the previous example that nowhere do we find a consonant following a plosive phoneme. We also notice that plosives only appear after either an approximant or a nasal, such as /mp/ or /nd/ and of which constitute a majority of the permitted consonant clusters within Quenya and Sindarin. It would appear that whilst being strongly influenced by Finnish, Tolkien felt it necessary to introduce yet further restrictions on the level of sonority within his languages. In so doing, we notice a significant softening of the Elvish vocabulary in contrast to other languages.

Looking again at the example text, we notice the frequent use of the umlaut, shown as two dots (or *dieresis*) above the /e/ vowel. This Germanic influence alters the pronunciation of the phoneme by moving the point of articulation to the front of the mouth. An example of this can be heard in the initial syllables when pronouncing the words “elevator” and “evening”, and whilst increasingly uncommon in English, the dieresis is a common trait of the Welsh language, and is seen frequently in Tolkien’s development of Sindarin. The attention to the locality of articulation is also seen in Finnish, in which vowels articulated at the front of the mouth are never mixed with those articulated at the back of the mouth. This process is commonly known as *vowel harmony*. Whilst Tolkien did not strictly adhere to this rule, the addition of the dieresis served to soften the Elvish syllables, thus emulating a similar effect.

Another similar characteristic of Sindarin, again of Welsh descent, is the initial consonant mutation. Noticing the effect that the employment of this rule has on pronunciation, it is easy to see why Tolkien utilised the same for his own languages. An example of this is shown in Sindarin when the verb “caro” (do) is softened to a /g/ (*garo*) when preceded by a word ending with a closing syllable, such as “pen garo tulu” (please help) or “avo garo” (don’t do it). So whilst there is evidence of borrowing from the phonologies of both Finnish and Welsh in Tolkien’s languages, as well as Mediaeval English, it is nonetheless evident that he has shaped the syntax to suit his own personal aesthetic. It was never an intention of Tolkien for his audience to understand his languages on a semantic level, but more that the sounds could be shaped

in our minds and by so doing, would capture their beauty. However, whilst some may be content in their ignorance of the comprehension of Tolkien's languages, other felt the desire to look further beyond the stories.

## Posthumous prospects

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Scholarly interest in Tolkien's linguistic work has been evident since the early 1970's when Paula Marmor compiled the first issue of "Parma Eldalamberon" (more frequently referred to as Parma). This journal contained articles written by members of the Mythopoeic Society, who collectively studied the works of Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams. Initially published somewhat irregularly, Parma is still in circulation today and currently edited by Christopher Gilson; a frequent contributor to the studies of Tolkien linguistics. At the same time that Parma was first in active distribution to its members, Christopher Tolkien, having become his late father's literary executor, was preparing his unfinished stories, having moved to the south of France in the interest of avoiding the media exposure previously suffered by Tolkien. The first five issues of Parma then culminated in 1977 when Marmor and Gilson, collectively published *An Introduction to Elvish*. Their collaboration resulted in the knowledge of Tolkien's languages at the time being made available for public interest. Whilst some of the information presented was borne of factual sources, other information was speculative and consequently (and almost immediately) outdated following the publishing of *The Silmarillion*<sup>†</sup>; the first of Tolkien's posthumous works.

Whilst working on *The Silmarillion*, Christopher Tolkien appointed the assistance of a Canadian student, Guy Gavriel Kay, a friend of the family who later turned his literary skills to fantasy writing. Following the success of the first publication, they continued working together, correcting mistakes and grammar in the same way, to publish the book of *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth*. In addition to the re-written stories, Christopher

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<sup>†</sup> The first edition of *The Silmarillion* included appendixes which included pronunciation guides which then superseded the information previously published in the first five editions of *Parma Eldalamberon*

Tolkien continued his work to then compile the aforementioned volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*, which were published over twelve separate volumes between 1983 and 1996. Despite what the name suggests, these books are not a chronological list of fictitious events, but rather a compendium of published and unpublished material left in Christopher Tolkien's possession following his father's death. This information is presented and discussed in context to the development of the stories of which they became a part. Given that this archive consisted of "seventy boxes... stuffed with thousands of unpublished pages... stories, lectures, poems of 4000 or more", the majority of which being "in frightful disorder" (Rérolle, 2012), we can understand why the aforementioned publications became a task spanning more than twenty years of Christopher Tolkien's career.

Despite the initial setback caused by the release of *The Silmarillion*, Parma Eldalamberon continued to production, and in 1991 the team were granted the approval of Christopher Tolkien. The journals continued with the discussion of material mentioned in the volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*, the likes of which deemed too specialist for Christopher Tolkien's books. A further specialist journal, also benefitting by the wealth of Christopher Tolkien's material, began publishing in 1988. The "Vinyar Tengwar" originally a monthly newsletter promoting the Elvish Linguistic Fellowship (or E.L.F.), later began elaborating the work published in the Parma editions. Today, the two journals are edited by the same team at the Mythopoeic Society, and while Parma continues to focus on the specialist material, such as word-lists and speculative theory, the Vinyar Tengwar provides a more academic approach in the publishing of papers and translations, appealing to scholar and fan alike.

## **Neo-Elvish of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

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Overlooking the radio dramatisation of *The Lord of the Rings* that occurred shortly following the associated published work, and the two further animated attempts at re-telling the story, Tolkien's trilogy had never been subjected to media outside of the printed page. Yet in 1997, a self-taught film producer was

granted permission to create a cinematic adaptation of the narrative. Peter Jackson, who was first introduced to Tolkien's work through the aforementioned animation, released the three films between 2001 and 2003 which, during the same period, resulted in the sale of over 25 million copies of Tolkien's work. However, the financial success enjoyed by the Tolkien Estate as a result was not at the forefront of everyone's mind.

Christopher Tolkien saw how his father became devoured by popularity following the release of *The Lord of the Rings*, which arguably became detrimental to his career when he moved from his home and fellow peers in Oxford in favour of the quieter coastal town of Bournemouth. Fifty years later and for fear of similar repercussions, Christopher Tolkien opted for the same course of action when he took over where his father left off in preparing his unfinished works. More recently he has witnessed what he blames to be the marketing of Jackson's media "reducing the aesthetic and philosophical significance of Tolkien's work to nothing" (Rérolle, 2012). Further studies have been conducted into the repercussions of Jackson's work, and opinions have stretched from the demoralisation of the work stating that Jackson has "failed miserably" in neglecting to preserve the heroic aspects of the characters (Honegger, 2011:155), to the far more lenient opinion that the films have "revived the myth and legitimised the story for a new generation of moviegoers" (McKenna, 2003).

Whilst the prevailing opinion of his work remains open to interpretation, Jackson was determined from the outset that Tolkien's passion for languages had to be reflected in the films as faithfully as possible. As a result, the competition for the posts to assist Jackson in both the spoken and written aspects of Tolkien's language was fierce. The task of re-creating the writing systems was passed to Daniel Reeve, a freelance artist with a keen interest in both calligraphy and the works of Tolkien, while David Salo, a linguistic graduate of Wisconsin undertook the post of Jackson's language consultant. Salo, also having a keen admiration for Tolkien's work, was not only responsible for overseeing the spoken word, but also employed to write suitable lyrics for the soundtrack that accompanied the films.

Given that Jackson chose to deviate in his production of *The Lord of the Rings*, a gap was left in the Sindarin vocabulary required to fulfil this elaboration of the original script. As such, Salo was requested to write more material to allow for these changes, and given that Tolkien had not invented the necessary vocabulary to allow for this change in the script, Salo's task became one of evolving Sindarin further whilst pertaining to the phonetic and syntactical patterns already put in place by Tolkien. This then raises the further question of whether Jackson was right to request this of Salo, or whether he should have built his script around the surviving lexicon of Sindarin.

When a language is released into the public domain, the assumption is that it will undoubtedly change. Tolkien would have been aware of this from the moment he published *The Lord of the Rings*, so maybe Jackson was merely following protocol in moving with the times. Much like a number of other questions in the same vein, this again invites ambiguity and personal interpretation, and thus we can only conclude that there is no correct answer. However Salo shows a clear feeling of empathy towards the existing scholars of Elvish in defence of his alliance with Jackson (Salo, 2002);

*“...what are [viewers who know something about the languages] going to want to do when they hear the Elvish sentences? They're going to want to figure out what they mean, and why they mean what they mean... my intention was to create sentences which would be intelligible to the people who study the languages, the kind of thing which I would want to puzzle over.”*

So despite issuing a requirement to add to the existing Sindarin lexicon, it must be noted that Jackson employed the services of not only a linguist, but moreover ensured that he sourced a professional with a passion for the works of Tolkien. As Salo further comments “[the] verisimilitude could have been accomplished equally well by the insertion of nonsense words that just ‘sounded Elvish’ without any particular meaning” (Salo, 2002).

Ross Smith discusses the legitimacy of Tolkien's languages used by Jackson further in *Inside Language*, stating that "this is one of the few areas of the film which was resolved satisfactorily", while concluding that "no stone was left unturned in the quest for a convincing on-screen rendering of Tolkien's greatest obsession" (Smith, 2007:115). So whilst the narrative may have suffered at the hands of Jackson's work, the means by which he undertook the portrayal of his languages have met the approval of some.

Given that the ideology of cinematic media was still in its infancy during Tolkien's career, it is therefore unlikely that he had pondered the notion of his works being the source for a film trilogy. However, would the era in which Tolkien was born dictate his attitudes to success? Or would the premonition of his languages finding the recognition they have today overpower his decision? Since the launch of Jackson's work, more people are finding artlangs to be a source of both aesthetic pleasure and intellectual satisfaction, and do so without regard for its utility; something of which Tolkien condoned prior to the assuaging of his peers to publish his stories. So whilst the question of whether Tolkien would have bowed to the media pressure of the twenty-first century remains as conjecture, I find it very difficult to conclude that given the amount of attention that Tolkien's languages have been given in recent years, irrespective of contributing factor, and that children and adults alike continue to discover the fantastical Middle-earth through his books, that Tolkien remains a success for what he would consider the right reasons.

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