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Tolkien, Manuscripts, and Dialect¹

Study of languages, names, and dialects may have been the greatest motivating factor in Tolkien's scholarship and his fiction: he found in every name (and even in every word) a story to unearth. Clear connections appear between the scholarly vector that connects his investigations into the *Gawain*-poet (his location and language), the *Ancrene Riwe*, and locating the linguistic variants in *The Reeve's Tale*, for instance, with the creation of the various speech patterns in *The Lord of the Rings*. Beyond the obvious examples of the Elvish languages Tolkien created, the Westron-Hobbiton dialect that Sam uses, variants among the orcs, and the heightened speech of humans for formal occasions represent ways of writing down how the characters' speech echoes their origins, location, class, and intentions. The way they speak expresses their sense of identity and affiliation, situationally as well as in class or race. It also expresses the vagaries and inexactness of writing living speech and recording it in manuscripts. The process of locating and recording speech comes perhaps from Tolkien's own sense of family, place, and connection to history and historical documents, but it adds enormous depth to his world. The *Red Book of Westmarch* (based partly on the fifteenth-century Welsh *Red Book of Hergest*), *The Yearbook of Tuckborough*, and *The Tale of Years* (these latter two perhaps based on the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*) show Tolkien's fictionalization of medieval book culture. While his Elvish languages have drawn both scholarly and popular interest, aspects of everyday speech remain for examination. The creation of speech in fiction—for any writer, but perhaps especially for Tolkien—shows an enduring interest in how to move from heard to recorded language to the dramatization of interactions punctuated by variants in spoken, that is, idiolectic, language.

Manuscript study can yield information about material culture and even some—with careful circumspection—about spoken culture. In the case of early literature, manuscripts provide the only information we have about language variants and can often show them pretty distinctly by spelling. At least in England, the dialect *regions* remain nearly what they were for the Anglo-Saxons. Tolkien used what he gained from manuscript records of dialects to enhance the world of Middle-earth with dramatically notable variants in speech and record keeping.

An interesting beginning comes in the Old English word *mæpelode*: translators typically render it, for the sake of ease and flow, simply as “spoke,” but more exactly it means something like “spoke formally” or even “gave a speech.” Manuscripts can also record the words *sprecan* and *cwæpan* for “to speak,” so the distinction deserves some attention. *Beowulf* includes little if any chit-chat: speakers may boast, give a speech, or tell a story—characters may raise a cup in conviviality, but raising a voice requires purpose and some level of solemnity. The *Ancrene Rule* serves a sacred purpose—instruction for novice anchoresses—and, even though the speaker

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allows himself poetic flights, the speech remains formal and serious. Much of the speech in *SGGK* follows courtly manners, but notes of surprise break the formality now and then.

Our most significant text for Tolkien's comments on Middle English, "Chaucer as Philologist: The Reeve's Tale" (1931) (available online, copyright West Virginia University Press), urges that, though we know his language only through the lens of the scribes, who weren't his contemporaries, Chaucer uses genuine dialect both correctly and consistently:

He [Chaucer] showed considerable skill and judgment in what he did: skill in presenting the dialect with fair accuracy but without piling up oddities; judgment in choosing for his purpose northern clerks, at Cambridge, close to East Anglia (whence he brought his Reeve). Indeed, in an East Anglian reeve, regaling Southern (and largely London) folk, on the road in Kent, with imitations of northern talk, which was imported southward by the attraction of the Universities. . . (quoted from online text).

While normally in Chaucer's time only "those who knew it natively" used dialect, we must note that Chaucer used it not *for* Northerners, but for his London audience. If he errs at all, he does so not in northernisms, but in retaining southernisms that would not appear in northern dialects. His northernisms include long *ā* (the *ah* sound) rather than the southern rounded sound as in *awe*, as in *swa* and *ga* for *so* and *go*, and in the use of *slyk* for "such," which appeared only in England north of the Tees (from Middlesbrough north toward Durham, a stretch of no more than about twenty miles), directing us more particularly to the home of John and Allan.

As Tom Shippey remarks, Tolkien's essay is "fascinating in detail, and still completely convincing in its demonstration that Chaucer was trying to make a joke by close, careful imitation of the dialect of Durham: but it's a joke about *language*" (*Roots and Branches*, 207-8, my italics). Tolkien's vast linguistic knowledge nearly pinpoints the students' origin and provides evidence for how to think about the literary construction of dialects.

We can hardly talk about Tolkien and language without mentioning the construction of the Elvish languages plus the thought he put into Westron, the speech of Mordor (which Gandalf will not utter in Bag End), the language of the Dwarves, the orthography of Middle-earth, and even Gollum's solipsistic idiolect. Among Tolkien's scholarly works we also have the edition of *SGGK* with glossary and the 1953 essay on the poem, which includes reflection on *lewté*, *fayryze*, *couardise* and *couetyse*, and, of course, problems implied in *courtesy*. The 1940 essay "On Translating *Beowulf*" includes a warning against "colloquialism and false modernity" in translations (54—cf. Seamus Heaney's approach, for instance), and he reminds us of the deft structure and careful diction and rhythms of the Old English original. The posthumous publication (2014) of his own *Beowulf* translation highlights the teacher's care for students: it aims more at helping students read and understand the original than at the establishment of a complete and literary stand-alone work. The 1962 edition of *Ancrene Wisse* has a carefully annotated transcription of the original. The 1955 essay "English and Welsh" touts the value to English philologists of at least some knowledge of Cymraeg and some feeling for its heart. In the collection-work of the 1983/2006 *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* and the continuing issue of additional works from his unfinished papers, Tolkien's family and dedicated scholarly followers continue to make available more material on his understanding of his storytelling and the language study without which even the finished stories remain incomplete. As the language of the English Northwest Midlands fed Tolkien's sense of identity, so the language variations of Middle-earth spread and deepen the feeling we share of the *presence* of Middle-earth in written form.

In *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien shows more than he says about language and dialects, but the appended matter does have some interesting "scholarly" comments on languages. In the Prologue to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the narrator writes a little about the Hobbits' language after their contact with Elves and People, but claims no knowledge of what they spoke before

that time: “in the early days [when Hobbits lived “between The Misty Mountains and the Mountains of Lune, 3-4”] . . . Hobbits learned their letters and began to write after the fashion of the Dúnedain . . . [and] forgot whatever languages they had used before, and spoke ever after the Common Speech, the Westron. . . . Yet they kept a few words of their own, as well as their own names of months and days, and a great store of personal names” (4). After they had maintained The Shire for some time, the Hobbits “spoke less and less with the Elves, and grew afraid of them” (7): the languages must at that time have drifted further apart, too, though upon meeting Elves or people, Hobbits speak with them perfectly easily.

The Prologue appears to assemble the thoughts of at least two and probably three writers or copyists. Part 1 observes that “Hobbits are relatives of ours: far nearer to us than Elves, or even than Dwarves. Of old they spoke the language of Men, after their own fashion” (2), and it refers to Hobbits as *they* (1). That suggests a human narrator. Part 2, despite some degree of detachment, suggests a Hobbit narrator: discussing pipe-weed, the narrator says “Hobbits first put it into pipes. Not even the Wizards first thought of that before we did” (8-9). The writer then mentions a “Wizard that I knew” (Gandalf), suggesting that either Bilbo or one of the Hobbits of the Ring-saga composed this section—“even the Dúnedain . . . allow us this credit” (8) suggests a Hobbit especially fond of smoking. A sprinkling of Old-English-derived words, especially in Part 3—*thain*, *Michel*, *Shire-moot*, *Shirriff*, *haywards*, *farthing*, *mathom*—connects Hobbits’ language to that of the Rohirrim, as Meriadoc sought to do in his later years—the “Note on the Shire Records” at the end of the Prologue adds that point, apparently written by a later scribe who has manuscript records from long after the beginning of the Fourth Age. This final section includes also a manuscript history of the Red Book, listing some dates, locations of copies, and variants, including in one case even the copyist’s name: Findegil, King’s Writer, of Gondor. Despite the distinctive identifications, the “voice” of the Prologue maintains a nearly unity of style, purpose, and vocabulary except for the brief personal references and a little greater tone of formality in the final section; the whole of it suggests not only a common spoken language, but also a common dialect for writing, perhaps a “formal Westron” for writing freer of idiosyncrasies than everyday speech but remaining pretty constant over the course of the history of the Red Book covering a little less than two hundred years with recorders ranging from Bilbo to an official court copyist and whoever collected them into this “historical” essay/Prologue.

The actual use of dialects in *The Lord of the Rings* and in *The Hobbit* suggests differences sometimes racial and sometimes social or class-related. Frodo and Sam live in the same place, but their dialects differ, at least in usage if not in speech sounds (we can’t trust the movies to get those correctly). The *Tolkien Gateway* online identifies Sam’s speech as a “working-class rustic Midland accent,” the “standard for all other minor Hobbit characters”—to my less-than-expert ear it brings to mind Gloucestershire. The film series allowed for, and perhaps even required, that the Hobbits from different locations speak differently, and that the characters of other races might well have quite different versions of the Westron from one another’s. Hobbits converse with Wizards, Elves, people, Orcs, and even Ents, and all understand one another to the degree that a mutual language—not necessarily the first language for all of them—allows. Men talk with Wizards, Elves and Hobbits perfectly well, though Barliman Butterbur’s dialect differs from Aragorn’s, and Aragorn’s changes when he moves from moments that require his presence as the shadowy Strider versus the noble King of the West. The Orcs of Orthanc and those of Mordor or Mirkwood understand one another, but, similarly, their tones and phrases vary. They, too, apparently use Westron as their *lingua franca*, and they use it their own way. As far as we know, they record nothing of their thoughts or histories, having no manuscript culture, so what record

we get comes in those exchanges with members of manuscript culture—they will be brief and bellicose. The trolls in *The Hobbit* speak something that looks like Cockney (as do some of the provincial orcs)—even the troll’s wallet speaks the same dialect when Bilbo tries to snatch it! Pippin speaking with Denethor in Gondor uses a dialect that seems to the Steward perhaps too familiar, but Merry speaking to Theoden in Rohan seems not to have that problem: the difference probably comes from reception of dialects and how like they are.

I’ve been discussing dialects as manuscript issues—how Tolkien recorded what, in his imagination, he heard—but they also represent experiments in verisimilitude more typical of medieval language than modern. Our standardization tends to produce likeness if not sameness, unless the writer is dialect researcher or is aiming to distinguish characters by speech. Medieval writers, working before standards, wrote what they heard, so we can get a pretty good sense of dialectal variants. An easy and useful example appears in the differences between the West Saxon and Northumbrian manuscripts of “Cædmon’s Hymn.” They sound like this:

*Nu sculon herigean heofonrices Weard
Meotodes meahte and his modgepanc,
weorc Wuldor-Fæder, swa he wundra gehwæs
ece Drihten or onstealde
He ærest sceop ielda bearnum
Heofon to hrofe halig Scyppend
ða middangeard moncynnes Weard,
ece Drihten æfter teode
firum foldan Frea ælmihtig.*

Nū scylun hergan hefaenrīcaes Uard,
metudæs maecti end his mōdgidanc,
uerc Uuldurfadur, suē hē uundra gihwaes,
ēci dryctin ōr āstelidæ
hē ærist scōp aelda barnum
heben til hrōfe, hāleg scepēn.
Thā middungeard moncynnæs Uard,
eci Dryctin, æfter tīadæ
firum foldu, Frēa allmectig.

The dialectic differences come through to us in spelling and pronunciation because we have the manuscripts. We know less about Cædmon than we know about Sam Gamgee, but Bede tells us he was a herdsman, and so a rustic like Sam, but with less education and probably a smaller range of movement than Sam had even before the Ring adventure. For the Hobbits, too, dialect differences may have had to do with maps, with likely differences among the four Farthings and Buckland and perhaps especially those Hobbits in Bree. Perhaps even the different “breeds” (Prologue 3)—Harfoots, Stoors, Fallohides—may have exhibited differences in speech or lexicon: they tend to refer to Hobbits from other locations as “queer,” a word that for them means probably marginalized by them as not typical of Hobbit behaviors, customs, living quarters, and even character.

For the sake of Tolkienian example: two of most definitive instances of Hobbit dialect appear in the exchange between Sam and Ted Sandyman and between Sam and Gandalf in Chapter 2 of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. “Queer things you do hear these days, to be sure,” Sam says (43): both the syntax and the closing idiom bear notice. Ted will say “No thank ‘ee” for “no,

thank you” and “Oh, they’re both cracked,” suggesting that both Bilbo and Frodo are mad. When Gandalf snatches up Sam as he’s eavesdropping, Sam says, “Lor bless you, Mr. Gandalf, sir,” “there ain’t no eaves at Bag End, and that’s a fact,” and he uses the name *Gaffer* for his father: those instances suggest anachronism, a little about sound, but more about class—Ted as a miller’s son and Sam as gardener for Frodo, who comes from a wealthier family. The manuscript either doesn’t or can’t give us enough about phonemes to pinpoint dialects, but it does give us enough to perceive character and social relationships. The rest we must, or perhaps *may*, do for ourselves. Tolkien gives us no shortage of encouragement to listen, imagine, and enjoy.