Subtle Speech and Use of Pronouns in Tolkien's novels and Old English Poetry

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Recommended Citation

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Cover Page Footnote

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> *Elves began it, of course, waking trees up and teaching them to speak and learning their tree-talk. They always wished to talk to everything, the old Elves did.* [1]

Verbal communication is typical of humans as well as of Elves. Although human interactions involve a combination of body language and facial expressions in addition to words, even the analysis of purely verbal exchanges reveals their remarkable complexity in following patterns and rules that dictate the content and the tone of a conversation and provide strategies to avoid conflict. These 'conversational principles' can also be applied to the analysis of fictional works such as Old English poetry, as Tom Shippey has shown. For instance, the Cooperation Principle establishes the quality and quantity of the information given so that it is appropriate in content and not redundant or scanty, while the Politeness Principle suggests the avoidance of topics that can come across as rude to mitigate the impact on the listener.[2] Shippey notes that failure to fulfil these rules may be intentional, since witholding or providing irrelevant or redundant information may add further indirect messages. These subtle allusions, the implicatures, can be easily interpreted by listeners but, not being explicitly stated, do not breach any politeness rule.[3] Skilful use of words can change the tone or meaning of a sentence.

In Old English poetry, verbal skill is as important as valour, "the hero has to prove he is a talented speaker in order to be acknowledged", and words and deeds are given equal importance.[4] Beowulf must unlock his "word-hoard" in order to navigate the complex reality of Anglo-Saxon society.[5] The power of language to appease or create conflicts is fully expressed in the refined linguistic technique of Old English poetry.

Such refinement and precision in the use of language are also found in Tolkien's works[6] and in particular in his rendering of dialogues, where the theory of implicatures is fully applied, making it possible to identify subtle meanings even in what remains unsaid. The same sentence can acquire different connotations, as Tolkien himself shows at the beginning of *The Hobbit*, when Gandalf lists all the possible implications of as innocent an expression as "good morning". This attention to detail is also visible in Tolkien's use of pronouns. For instance, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the second person singular pronoun "thou" has the same connotations as in Middle English and is consistently used to express either intimacy or contempt.[7]

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[1] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lords of the Rings* (Reprint, London, HarperCollins, 2001), bk.4, ch.4.

[2] T. Shippey, "Principles of Conversation in Beowulfian Speech," in *Techniques of Description: Spoken and Written Discourse. A Festschrift for Malcolm Coulthard,* ed. J.M. Sinclair, M. Hoey, G. Fox (London: Routledge, 1993), 110-11.

[3] Shippey, "Principles of Conversation", 110-11. "The politeness principle is a necessary completion of the Cooperation Principle which takes social and psychological factors into account - more than just language"; Leech, G. *The Principles of Pragmatics*. (Longman, 1983), 80

[4] E. Louviot, *Direct Speech in Beowulf and Other Old English Narrative Poems*. (Boydell & Brewer, 2016), 65, 67-8; Shippey, "Principles of Conversation", 125; R.E. Bjork, "Speech as Gift in Beowulf", *Speculum* 69 (1994): 996-7.

[5] "[Beowulf] word-hord onleac" [unlocked his store of words], *Beowulf*, l. 259. All quotations of *Beowulf* are from: *Beowulf,* in: *Electronic Beowulf* 4.0 (online version). 4th Edition. Ed. K. Kiernan, 2015. https://ebeowulf.uky.edu/ebeo4.0/CD/main.html; Bott, B.W. "Fighting Words: The Language of Power, The Power of Language in Beowulf." Unpubl.PhD thesis, (Univ. of Colorado, 2003), 22-24.

[6] "The writing of *The Lord of the Rings* is laborious, because I have been doing it as well as I know how, and considering every word". *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. H. Carpenter, C. Tolkien (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), Letter 35.

[7] J. R. R Tolkien, *The Peoples of Middle-earth. The History of Middle-earth*, Vol.12. Ed. C. Tolkien. (London, HarperCollins, 2015), 43, 68; T. Honegger,"The Westron Turned into Modern English: The Translator and Tolkien's Web of Languages," in *Translating Tolkien,* Cormarë Series 6, ed. T. Honegger (Zurich and Berne: Walking Tree Publishers, 2004), 7-8;

This paper will show a similar kind of precision in Tolkien's use of first person pronouns, and point to Old English poetry as his source of inspiration.[8] First person pronouns, whether "I" or "we", can reveal a character's inner feelings, his real intentions or motivations and can make the difference between self-assertion and cooperation, unity and separation.[9] I will compare the use of first person pronouns of some characters in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* with Old English poems such as *Beowulf, Genesis B* and the elegies *The Wanderer*, *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife's Lament.* Tolkien's characters are not simply either good or evil.[10] Some are particularly complex, like Gollum, Saruman or Denethor, or evolve over the course of the story like Boromir or Thorin. These characters are particularly interesting in the way they alternate selfishness, greed and arrogance with sociability and altruism, and in the way these inner motivations are reflected in their speech.

Old English Pronouns

In Old English there are three types of first person pronouns, singular, plural and dual. The first person singular pronoun, "ic/me", expresses the speaker's motivation, from self-assertion to intimate confession. The first person plural pronoun, "we/us", defines the speaker as a member of a group, either in contrast to others or to express concern or cooperation.[11] The dual pronoun of Indo-European origin, "wit/unc" [we/us two], still existed in Old English but its use was waning except in poetry. It defines a special sort of relationship between two people, true or faked. Its connotation in Modern English is sometimes rendered using "we", which in some cases seems inaccurate.[12] In the following examples all these connotations will come into focus and their use in different texts will be compared.

"I" and "We:" Beowulf and Boromir

Beowulf and Boromir are both proud young warriors who come to a foreign court, the Danish Heorot and Rivendell respectively. They must introduce themselves as friendly representatives of a foreign people and at the same time as valiant and mighty warriors. Their introducing speeches begin with the use of "we", including their people or their retainers, to end up in "I" sentences asserting their prowess and courage. Both their character and their use of first person pronouns evolve throughout the story.

The poem *Beowulf* begins with the hero travelling to Denmark where Grendel, a blood-thirsty monster, is haunting the hall of king Hrothgar. Beowulf's intention is to gain fame by slaying the monster. On his arrival on the Danish shore, Beowulf introduces himself and his group of retainers to the coastguard blocking their passage using "we": "*We* synt gumcynnes Geata leode ond Higelaces heorðgeneatas" [*We* are of the progeny of the Geatish people and Hygelac's hearth-companions].[13] With remarkable diplomacy, he mitigates the guard's threats and aggression by confiding in his help, addressing him in the name of his companions: "Wes þú *ús* lárena gód" [be a good guide to *us*].[14] Finally he uses "I", but only to offer assistance: "*Ic* þæs Hróðgár mæg þurh rúmne sefan raéd gelaéran" [I can give counsel to Hrothgar on this matter, from a spacious spirit]. If

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[8] See for instance Shippey, T. *The Road to Middle-Earth*. (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 389-90

[9] Bott, "Fighting Words", 48.

[10] "It is not much good complaining that all the people on one side are against those on the other. Not that I have made even this issue quite so simple: there are Saruman, and Denethor, and Boromir." Tolkien, *Letters*, Letter 154

[11] "When formulating a small request one will tend to use language that stresses in-group membership and social similarity (as in the inclusive 'we' of 'Let's have another cookie then'). Brown, P. and S. C. Levinson. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage.* 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 57

[12] J.R. Hall, "Duality and the Dual Pronoun in *Genesis B"*. *Papers on Language and Literature; Edwardsville, Ill.* 17 (1981): 139- 140; K.R. Sikora, "Git vs Ge: The Importance of the Dual Pronoun in Beowulf". *The Oswald Review* 17 (2015): 2, 6-7; Bott, "Fighting Words"*,* 48-50.

[13] *Beowulf*, ll. 260-1

[14] *Beowulf*, l. 269

this last expression hides some pride and self-assurance, these are mitigated by his skilful introduction.[15] The same pattern is found in many of young Beowulf 's speeches, which open with "we" to include his people or retainers, and then proceed with "I" to recount his exploits, often in a boastful way.[16]

Later, when he is introduced to king Hrothgar, Beowulf has to prove his valour and worth. Unlike his already mentioned introduction to the guards, where he uses the pronoun "we" extensively, he begins directly by using "I": "Wæs þu, Hroðgar, hal. *Ic* eom Higelaces / mæg ond magoðegn [Hail Hrothgar. *I* am Higelac's kinsman and retainer)[17]. He does not hesitate to narrate his heroic deeds with a profusion of "I,"[18] boasting of his ability to fight and kill enemies and monsters single-handedly:

> "ða *ic* of searwum cwom,
> fah from feondum,   þær *ic* fife geband,
> yðde eotena cyn   ond on yðum slo
> niceras nihtes, "

> [when *I* returned from battle, stained with the blood of foes, where *I* bound
> five, destroyed ogre kin, and amid the waves slew sea-monsters by night][19]

Such displays of strength and courage with the use of "I" recur in Beowulf's early speeches at the Danish court.[20]

However, the tone of Beowulf's speeches evolves throughout the poem: the use of "I" subtly changes, and takes on different connotations. Beowulf grows from a reckless young warrior into a responsible leader who establishes an alliance with King Hrothgar, and on return to his land becomes a wise and just king himself.[21] The end of the poem mirrors its beginning, with old king Beowulf recklessly deciding to fight single-handedly a dragon ravaging his land. The fight is lethal for both king and monster. Sensing the approach of his end, Beowulf's use of the pronoun "I" in his final speeches takes on a nostalgic and elegiac tone, as he turns to death and God; his boasting is over:

> "*Ic* eom on mode from /þæt *ic* wið þone guðflogan gylp ofersitte."
> [*I* am bold in spirit so that *I* forbear from boast against the war-flier]. [22]

Towards the end of the poem *Beowulf*, dialogues and mead-hall scenes give way to monologues. Some scholars have interpreted this change in the language, in particular the loss of social exchanges and dialogues, as an indicator of the loss of a stable social network reflecting the end of Beowulf's reign with his death.[23] Beowulf's evolution is marked by a parallel change in his use of first person pronouns.

Like Beowulf, Boromir must introduce himself to a foreign court but at the same time he must give an accurate assessment of his worth. At first he addresses Elrond's council binding himself to his people using an inclusive "we:" "For few, I deem, know of *our* deeds;" "If *we* should

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15   *Beowulf,* ll 277-8; Bjork, "Speech as Gift", 1010-11; Bott, "Fighting Words", 33-6. See also *Beowulf,* ll. 342-347
16   *Beowulf,* ll. 958-979; ll.1652-1676; ll.1818-1839
17   *Beowulf*, ll.407-408a
18   In his speech of about 50 lines, the pronoun "I (me)" appears 20 times: *Beowulf,* ll. 407-455
19   *Beowulf,* ll. 419b-22a
20   Some instances of Beowulf's boasting: "Soð ic talige þæt ic merestrengo maran ahte, earfeþo on yþum, ðonne ænig oþer man." [Truly I think that I had more strength, more resistance on the waves than any other man.] *Beowulf,* ll. 532-34; "Ic gefremman sceal eorlic ellen, oþðe endedæg / on þisse meoduhealle minne gebidan." [I will perform an heroic act, or else I shall meet my end-day in this hall] *ibid*, ll. 636-8; "No ic me an herewæsmun hnagran talige, guþgeweorca, þonne Grendel hine." [never do I suppose myself weaker in war-skills, works of war, than Grendel himself.], *ibid,* ll. 677-8.
21   B.A. Shaw,"The Speeches in Beowulf. A Structural Study,"*Chaucer Review* 13 (1978): 90-91
22   *Beowulf*, ll. 2527-2528. The "war-flyer" is the dragon which will cause Beowulf's death.
23   *Beowulf*, ll 2426-2537; Bjork, "Speech as Gift", 999.

fail at last; " By *our* valour the wild folk of the East are still restrained;" "*We* were defeated;" "But still *we* fight on." Then Boromir starts using "I", boasting of his valour and putting all the attention on himself: "*I* have come on an errand"; "*I* have journeyed all alone"; "But *I* do not seek allies in war"; "*I* come to ask for counsel"; "*I* took the journey upon myself".[24] This last statement reveals Boromir's ambition, especially when compared to the version of his brother Faramir: "I should have been chosen by my father and the elders but he [Boromir] put himself forward."[25] Boromir's pride is apparent in his description (a noble man, but "proud and stern of glance") and in his reluctance to follow the commands of others, for instance in his complaints about the company's decisions to cross Moria or Lorien: "*I* will not go"; "We are going against *my* wish"; "Against *my* will we passed". His tendency to impose his viewpoint on the group to which he allegedly belongs, whether his people's elders or the Fellowship, creates a separation by contrasting "I" against "we", with clear implications on who, according to him, is right.[26]

The first speech of Boromir is mirrored by his last one, when he tries to take the Ring from Frodo.[27] He begins friendly, using "we", including Frodo and Minas Tirith in his concern. He soon turns from the need for defence to thoughts of power: "The fearless, the ruthless, these alone will achieve victory." A monologue ensues with only "I", while he thinks of himself wielding the Ring, his greed for power unleashed: "What could not a warrior do in this hour, a great leader? What could not Aragorn do? Or if he refuses, *why not Boromir*? The Ring would give *me* power of Command. How *I* would drive the hosts of Mordor, and all men would flock to *my* banner!'" In this daydreaming he isolates himself from the world around him ("Almost he seemed to have forgotten Frodo") and he breaks the oaths of honour and loyalty to his king, desiring all the power for himself. Finally he openly voices his desire for the Ring by exclaiming: "It might have been *mine*. It should be *mine*. Give it to *me*!" All concerns for his people are forgotten in the light of his inexhaustible greed.

Boromir is in stark contrast to his brother Faramir, whom the reader meets further on in the story. In the same situation, facing Frodo and the temptation to take the Ring, Faramir's reaction is the opposite of his brother's: "*I* would not take this thing, if it lay by the highway. Not were Minas Tirith falling in ruin and *I* alone could save her, so, using the weapon of the Dark Lord for her good and *my* glory. No. *I* do not wish for such triumphs". Faramir's use of the pronoun 'I' mirrors Boromir's but has a totally different connotation, it is a kind of 'inverted boast' emphasising what he would *not* do with the Ring. In fact Faramir's sentences tend to be in the negative form when it comes to power and glory: "*I* do *not* love the bright sword for its sharpness, *nor* the arrow for its swiftness, *nor* the warrior for his glory".[28] The figure of Faramir is used by Tolkien to criticise warfare, pointless heroism and the wish for glory[29] and to contrast the pride of Boromir with his brother's modesty, wisdom and mercy.[30]

However, in the end Boromir is redeemed, dying protecting the Hobbits like an Anglo-Saxon hero.[31] In the end he is sincere: "*I* tried to take the Ring from Frodo, *I* am sorry. *I* have paid."[32] His boasting is gone, the "I" takes on an elegiac tone similar to Beowulf's, expressing sorrow and regret. His last thoughts are for his companions and his people. Boromir's evolution and his use of first person pronouns is similar to Beowulf's.

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[24] *Lord of the Rings*, bk.2, ch.2; my italics.

[25] *Lord of the Rings*, bk.4, ch.5

[26] *Lord of the Rings,* bk.2, ch. 2, ch.4 and ch.6. Beebout, K. ""Few Have Gained Such a Victory:" A Defense of Boromir in *The Lord of the Rings*," *J.Tolkien Research,* 6 (2,7, 2018), 3

[27] *Lord of the Rings,* bk.2, ch.10

[28] *Lord of the Rings,* bk.4, ch.5

[29] Reinhard, B. "Tolkien's Lost Knights." *Mythlore* 39, No.1, Art. 9 (2020), 181

[30] "[Faramir] had been accustomed to giving way and not giving his own opinions air, while retaining a power of command among men, such as a man may obtain who is evidently personally courageous and decisive, but also modest, fair-minded and scrupulously just, and very merciful." Tolkien, *Letters*, Letter 244

[31] "Boromir, unlike Saruman, repents his evil act and is "redeemed" and, like Byrhtnoth, dies fighting for a greater cause". L.Forest-Hill, "Boromir, Byrhtnoth, and Bayard: Finding a Language for Grief in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*." *Tolkien Studies* 5 (2008): 77.

[32] *Lord of the Rings*, bk.3, ch.1.

"I" and "We:" Thorin Oakenshield

In *The Hobbit*, Thorin Oakenshield undergoes a similar evolution to Boromir, falling victim to pride and greed but eventually redeeming himself, with similar changes in his use of first person pronouns.

Similarly to Beowulf and Boromir, Thorin begins by using "we" to include his people: "*We* are met to discuss our plans", "*We* saw the dragon", "*We* have never forgotten", "*We* must find revenge".[33] Using the plural pronoun, he includes his companions in their hopeless plan to regain their kingdom against a dragon: "*We* knew it would be a desperate venture"; "Perhaps all of *us* may never return".[34] Tolkien shows respect for the dwarves' courage despite their somewhat ridicolous features. The Northern heroic spirit is expressed in their braving danger without hope.[35]

Thorin is introduced as a "very haughty" and "an enormously important dwarf". Like Boromir, he shows a good deal of arrogance, for instance in questioning Gandalf's advice: "*I* don't see that this will help us much," "*I* remember the Mountain well enough", "*I* know where Mirkwood is".[36] He boasts his ability to do without advice using a series of "I".

In spite of his pride, Thorin is capable of genuine heroism and leadership. He is always the first one to take risks ("'Who'll cross first?' asked Bilbo. '*I* shall,' said Thorin") and he cares about his companions, for instance taking action to save them from the dragon's attack ("We cannot leave them")[37]. In the style of Old English heroic poetry and similarly to Boromir, he tends to throw direct challenges to newcomers[38] ("Who are you, that come as if in war to the gates of Thorin") or insults and accusations of theft ("But how came you by the heirloom of my house-if there is need to ask such a question of *thieves*?).[39]

On approaching his kingdom, his pride and greed grow. When his heirloom is involved, Thorin shifts to an unbroken succession of "I" in his speech, apparently forgetting his people: "*I* am Thorin son of Thrain son of Thror King under the Mountain! *I* return!"; "*I* am his heir"; "*My* palace".[40] Like Boromir, his greed is unleashed by an object,[41] in his case the Arkenstone, with a similar, final raging outbreak: "That stone was my father's, and is *mine*". In his fury he does not hesitate to threaten war against peoples who would normally be his allies. He has a counterpoint in the Elven king, who in contrast to Thorin is ready to forgo any quarrels as long as peace is maintained: "Long will I tarry, ere I begin this war for gold. [...] Let us hope still for something that will bring reconciliation".[42] This contrast further enhances the reader's perception of Thorin's folly.

Eventually Thorin comes to his senses and, like Boromir, is redeemed and dies fighting against the enemy, forgetting every quarrel: "To *me*! To *me*! Elves and Men! To *me*! O *my* kinsfolk!" The first person pronoun acquires a sense of responsibility and leadership. Later, on his dying bed, Thorin's "I" takes on an intimate and elegiac tone as he recognises the futility of earthly riches: "*I* leave now all gold and silver and go where it is of little worth". The tone of this speech is reminiscent of an Old English elegy in its contemplation of the transience of the world: "Swā þes

[33] Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit: or there and back again*. Reprint, (HarperCollins, 2001), ch.1

[34] *The Hobbit*, ch.12 and ch.1

[35] Tolkien writes about the "theory of courage", the "creed of unyielding will" of the Northern heroic tradition, the "absolute resistance, perfect because without hope". Tolkien, JRR, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. Ed. C. Tolkien. Reprint (HarperCollins, 2006), 21. However his view on heroism was ambivalent: see further and note 54

[36] *The Hobbit*, ch.1; for Thorin's character, see also Tolkien, J.R.R., and Tolkien, C. "The Quest for Erebor". In *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth (*London, Allen and Unwin, 1980), Part 3, III. Riga, F.P., Thum, M., Kollmann, J. "From Children's Book to Epic Prequel: Peter Jackson's Transformation of Tolkien's The Hobbit," *Mythlore,* 32 (2, 8, 2014), 115

[37] *The Hobbit*, ch.8, 12

[38] See next section on "Face Threatening acts" and "Flyting"

[39] *The Hobbit*, ch.15, 17

[40] *The Hobbit*, ch 10, 3, 13

[41] Riga et al., "From Children's Book to Epic Prequel", 115

[42] *The Hobbit*, ch. 17

middangeard / ealra dōgra gehwām drēoseð ond fealleþ" [So this middle-earth each and every day declines and falls]. In his farewell to Bilbo, Thorin asks for forgiveness, with an "I" expressing sincere sorrow and regret: " *I* wish to part in friendship from you"; "*I* would take back my words and deeds".[43] Like Beowulf, Thorin abandons all pride in his last words. Like Boromir, his evolution in the novel alternates leadership and greed, generosity and pride, fall and redemption. These different phases are accompanied by shifts in the use of first person pronouns.

Flyting: Beowulf and Boromir

"Flyting", or "verbal duel", is a typical feature of Anglo-Saxon and Norse poetry. In this ritualised duel, the speaker offers a Face Threatening Act[44] to which the opponent responds accordingly. A verbal combat ensues where words are skilfully used instead of weapons. Tom Shippey analyses these exchanges in the light of the conversational principles, introducing Brown and Levinson's concept of "face", which is the need to keep up a certain image of oneself.[45] Ideally, in a verbal exchange both parties involved profit from mantaining the other's face, and the recipient's response is intended to deflect or minimise threats according to the Politeness Principle. However, during a "flyting" the threat is not minimised and the opponent responds in kind. Shippey therefore proposes a new rule governing these exchanges, the Conflictive Principle,[46] where open challenges or insults give rise to a verbal duel in which the participants try to outdo each other. Rather than a real altercation, "flyting" has been interpreted as a ritualised fight in which a newcomer is put to test before being accepted into the group, in a "typical political procedure of the Anglo-Saxon court."[47]

When Beowulf arrives at Hrothgar's hall, Unferth, one of the king's retainers, challenges him with offensive allusions and a direct question:

"Eart *þú sé* Béowulf, *sé* þe wið Brecan wunn / on sídne saé ymb sund flite?"
[Are you *the* Beowulf, who struggled against Breca, who competed at
swimming in the open sea?'].[48]

Unferth refers to a swimming race between young Beowulf and his friend Breca and doubts their wisdom in risking their life in a futile challenge driven only by pride. Moreover, Unferth points out that Beowulf lost the race to his friend: "He þe æt sunde oferflat, hæfde mare mægen," [he overcame you at sea, had more might],[49] thus challenging his valour in a typical Face Threatening Act. Following Shippey's Conflictive Principle, Beowulf responds accordingly, first by boasting of his heroic deeds and then by throwing heavy accusations at his opponent.[50] His fight with water-monsters, already related to Hrothgar, takes on titanic proportions: "No ic on niht gefrægn under heofones hwealf heardran feohtan, ne on egstreamum earmran mannon." [I never heard at night under heaven's vault of a harder fight, nor on the water-ways of a man in worse hardships].[51] At the

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43 The Hobbit, ch. 18; *The Wanderer*, ed. and transl. E. Treharne. In *Old and Middle English c.890-c.1450: An Anthology*, 54-61. 3rd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), l. 62-3

44 "A speaker may decide deliberately to threaten a person' s self-image by issuing a Face Threatening Act. This may lead to direct confrontation, or confrontation may be avoided by a Face-Saving Act." S. Horobin, *Chaucer' s Language*. (2nd ed.New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 157-8; Shippey, "Principles of Conversation",112.

45 Brown and Levinson define "face" as " the want to be unimpeded and the want to be approved." Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, 58

46 Conflictive Principle: "In all verbal exchanges, ensure that one's own worth is stated and acknowledged. If it is acknowledged by hearer, be prepared to acknowledge hearer's worth. If not, respond with an appropriate degree of reciprocal non-acknowledgement;" Shippey, "Principles of Conversation", 121.

47 C.J. Clover, "The Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode." *Speculum*, 55 (1980): 446; Sikora, "Dual Pronoun in Beowulf", 10; Shippey, "Principles of Conversation", 117-118

48 *Beowulf*, ll. 506-507

49 *Beowulf*, ll. 516-517

50 *Beowulf*, ll. 530-606; Shippey, "Principles of Conversation", 117

51 *Beowulf*, ll. 575-7

same time he accuses Unferth of cowardice (ll.580-585), of his brothers' death (ll.586-587), and of his incapability to get rid of Grendel (ll.589-94), this last being a problem to which Beowulf claims he will finally put an end (ll.600-602). Beowulf's behaviour in a "flyting" follows the classical form of an Anglo-Saxon verbal duel, as exposed in Shippey's Conflictive Principle.

In Rivendell, Boromir throws a similar challenge at Aragorn: "And who are *you*, and what have *you* to do with Minas Tirith?" This direct question sounds particularly rude since Boromir, unlike Unferth, is only a guest in Elrond's hall. However, when Minas Tirith is concerned, Boromir feels the need to state his authority over it against someone he sees as an intruder. One might read the "you" he utters as a "thou" full of contempt.[52] Aragorn's response is entirely different from Beowulf's: "Little do I resemble the figures of Elendil and Isildur." He mitigates the threat by not putting himself forward, but including his people in his deeds by using "we" many times. He proves to be a fine diplomat in the way he endorses a dubious image of himself even by showing insecurity, thus nullifying Boromir's threat: "Who can tell? But *we* will put it to the test one day."[53] By avoiding a direct response and the pronoun "I", and with a prevalent use of an inclusive "we," Aragorn follows the Politeness Principle by mitigating the Face Threatening Act and resolving the conflict to everybody's advantage.

Tolkien's attitude to the conventions of the Anglo-Saxon heroic code was one of admiration and criticism at the same time.[54] In his fiction, he 'rewrites' themes inspired by Old English heroic poetry, offering an alternative solution which rejects pointless self-sacrifice or recklessness,[55] and he uses contrasting characters, like Faramir, Aragorn or the Elven King, to express his own viewpoint.[56] In the case of the "flyting" just described, Tolkien offers his own solution on how to solve conflicts in a typical Anglo-Saxon verbal duel. His ideal of heroism is embodied in characters like Aragorn, brave but unassuming and never uselessly aggressive, in contrast to the proud and boastful Boromir.[57] The potential for language to either create or avoid conflict is fully exploited by both the *Beowulf* poet and Tolkien. In particular, the skilful use of first person pronouns allows for the building or deflating of tension during interactions, while also defining the personality of each character.

The "I" of pride and defiance: Satan and Denethor

The pronoun "I" can be used to express self-assertion and to elevate oneself in contrast to others. A case in point of such use is the Old English poem *Genesis B,* which consists of some lines (ll.235-851) inserted into a longer poem, *Genesis A*, dealing with the first book of the Bible. *Genesis B* is thought to be an altogether different poem, derived from an Old Saxon Bible,[58] which gives a vivid description of the Fall of the Angels and of Man. In this poem, Satan is powerfully portrayed as an overly proud hero who defies God and whose poignant speeches of defiance to heaven are characterised by an extreme emphasis on the pronoun "I." The exaggerated use of the first person pronoun betrays his inner motivation, defiance, pride, greed for power: *Ic* mæg wesan god swa he" [I can be a god just like him].[59] From an Anglo-Saxon viewpoint, disloyalty towards one's lord is the worst crime, perfectly fitted to the wicked Satan.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien depicts a similar example of reckless pride in the person of

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[52] J. R. R Tolkien, *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, 68

[53] *Lord of the Rings*, bk.2, ch.2; Shippey, *Road*, 123

[54] Bowman, M.R. "Refining the Gold: Tolkien, The Battle of Maldon, and the Northern Theory of Courage". *Tolkien Studies* 7 (2010), 92; see also note 35

[55] Bowman, "Refining the Gold", 106. For instance, Gandalf's fight on the bridge at Kahazad-Dhum is the opposite of *The Battle of Maldon*: Gandalf prevents the enemy to pass and encourages his companions to flee; *ibid*, 95, 99

[56] See for instance Tolkien, *Letters*, Letter 244; see Note 30

[57] Reinhard, "Tolkien's Lost Knights", 181-182, 184-185

[58] C. Williamson, T. A. Shippey, *The Complete Old English Poems*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 35.

[59] *Genesis B*. Old English text from http://faculty.virginia.edu/OldEnglish/aspr/; Translation from http://www.gutenberg.org/files/618/618-h/618-h.htm#genesisb, l. 283. Satan's speeches: ll. 278-291, ll 365-385, feature the pronoun "ic/me" 13 and 12 times respectively, so almost in every line.

Denethor, the Steward of Gondor, a proud and distant old man. Like Satan, his speech is mostly in the first person singular, and he openly opposes Gandalf: "You found Boromir less apt to your hand, did you not? But *I* who was his father say that he would have brought it to *me*."[60] His pride in contrasting Gandalf's advice reminds of other characters such as Boromir and Thorin.

Rather than behaving like a king with his people's welfare in mind, Denethor gives the impression of waging a private war between himself and the Dark Lord: "He will not come save only to triumph over *me* when all is won".[61] This extremely self-centred attitude is accompanied by a good degree of arrogance: "You are wise, maybe, Mithrandir, yet with all your subtleties you have not all wisdom. [...] *I* have in this matter more lore and wisdom than you deem." Tolkien himself notes how Denethor often addresses Gandalf using the pronoun "thou" with a contemptuous connotation.[62] Driven by this sense of superiority, Denethor engages in a sort of "flyting" with Gandalf, who, differently from Aragorn, rises to the challenge: "it seemed as if their glances were like blades from eye to eye, flickering as they fenced,"[63] and eventually prevails over Denethor, if only temporarily.

Denethor's pride leads him to believe that he is able to control the Palantir on his own, thus allowing Sauron to get the better of him and manoeuvre him into despair. Because of his pride he presumes to rise above the rules of society by breaking his oath of allegiance to the rightful king: "the rule of Gondor, my lord, is *mine*." This open challenge reminds of his son Boromir's and of Thorin's similar outbreaks when their greed is unleashed. Denethor's rebellion to his king is underlined by the pronoun "I": "*I* will not bow to such a one, last of a ragged house". A similar expression, "we will not bow", is used by Satan and his demon when they dare to defy God: "*wit* him noldon on heofonrice / hnigan mid heafdum" [in Heaven, *we two* did not wish to *bow* our heads to him].[64] At the same time Denethor recites these same rules of society which he openly defies: "fealty with love, valour with honour, oath-breaking with vengeance."[65] His deep commitment to the rule of his people constantly clashes with his selfish pride and makes him such a complex and interesting personality. Both Anglo-Saxon poets and Tolkien use the first person pronoun "I" to convey a sense of arrogance and to emphasise pride and defiance in their characters.

The dual pronoun: "Wit" and Saruman

The dual pronoun "wit" [we two; "unc", us two] can have many connotations in Old English poetry. It can mark an exclusive bond between two persons, for instance lovers: "*uncer* giedd geador" [the song of *us two* together].[66] Similarly, in another elegiac poem a woman expresses yearning for her lover far away, binding herself to him through the use of a dual pronoun: "ful oft *wit* bēotedan /þæt *unc* ne ġedǣlde nemne dēað āna / ōwiht elles". [Very often *we two* vowed that nothing would part *us two* except death alone.][67] The intimacy created by the pronoun "we two" is in sharp contrast with the reality of the lovers' separation, resulting in a dramatic effect. The same use of "we" is found in *The Lord of the Rings*, for instance in the lovesong where the Ents express their hope of being reunited with their beloved ones: "*Together we* will take the road that leads into the West, and far away will find a land where *both* our hearts may rest."[68] The repeated use of words such as "together" and "both" underlines the special and exclusive bond between a couple. Similarly Faramir creates a special bond with Éowyn when, in Minas Tirith, they must wait together for the

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[60] *Lord of the Rings*, bk.5, ch.4

[61] *Lord of the Rings*, bk.5, ch.4; Evans, J. "Pride". In *J.R.R.Tolkien Encyclopedia.* Ed.M. Drout. (Routledge, 2007), 544

[62] *Lord of the Rings*, bk.5, ch.4; Tolkien, *The Peoples of Middle-earth,* 68

[63] *Lord of the Rings*, bk.5, ch.4.

[64] *Lord of the Rings,* bk.5, ch.7; *Genesis B,* ll.741-44

[65] *Lord of the Rings,* bk.5, ch.1

[66] *Wulf and Eadwacer*, ed. and transl. E. Treharne, l. 19a

[67] *The Wife's lament*, ed. and trans. Treharne, ll. 21b-23a

[68] *Lord of the Rings*, bk.3, ch.4

outcome of the war: " *You and I, we* must endure with patience the hours of waiting."[69] The "we" that the Ents and Faramir use would most likely be rendered with a dual pronoun "wit" in Old English.

In a political alliance, the dual pronoun can cement the bond between the two parties involved, and indeed "wit" is used by Beowulf when confirming his promise of alliance and reciprocal help to Hrothgar: "Geþenc nú, [...] hwæt *wit* géo spraécon" [Now think... what *we two* discussed before]. Stressing an exclusive relation can be a means to enhance cooperation. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn and Éomer state their special friendship and also the alliance of their kingdoms with an exclusive "we two": "Thus *we two* meet again, though all the hosts of Mordor lay between *us* [two]."[70] The use of a dual pronoun expresses the special nature of their relationship and the "again" further binds them through the memory of shared experiences.

The couple can be bound by common fate, like Beowulf and the dragon before their fight: "*unc* sceal / weorðan æt wealle swá *unc* wyrd getéoð" [*to us (two)* it must happen at the wall as Fate allots *us*]. The two opponents, man and beast, share the same insecurity about the outcome of the fight. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo uses an intimate "you and I" to remind Sam of their common predicament: "*You and I*, Sam, are still stuck in the worst places of the story."[71] Even without the pronoun "we" Tolkien manages to convey the idea of "we two," a special bond between the two Hobbits who, like Beowulf and the dragon, find themselves sharing the same lot.

The binding property of the dual pronoun can paradoxically be applied to two opponents in a fight to express "united in strife", like Satan predicting his enmity towards Adam: "þæt sceolde *unc* Adame yfele gewurðan" [that *we two*, Adam and I, should come to strife].[72] Beowulf uses a dual pronoun before fighting Grendel: "ac *wit* on niht sculon secge ofersittan" [but *we two* shall abandon the sword at night], thus putting himself on the same level as his opponent while anticipating a bare-handed fight. A similar anticipation of enmity is expressed by Théoden when parting from Grima: "But then, if ever *we* [*two*] meet again, I shall not be merciful".[73] In this case, the implicature of "we two" is that their close relationship has turned into distrust and hatred. Tolkien also uses this challenging "we two" less seriously, maybe to make light of it. In a makeshift courteous contest between Éomer and Gimli, they use the dual pronoun to seal their special pact: "There are certain rash words concerning the Lady in the Golden Wood that lie still between *us* [two]."[74] Their pending disagreement creates an exclusive relationship, marked by the pronoun "we [two]", which can potentially result in conflict if unresolved.

The exclusive bond established with the dual pronoun "we two" can also be used to obtain something. In *Beowulf*, queen Wealtheow performs a speech, which can be interpreted through the lens of the Cooperative Principle, where everything she says has a weight but the unspoken implicatures are even more significant. Wealtheow wants to ensure the throne for her two young children against her nephew and the newcomer Beowulf. Her perfectly polite and apparently commonplace speech hides her plea for king Hrothgar to protect their children, and she creates a special bond with him through the use of the dual pronoun, she "joins herself verbally with her husband" by defining their children as "*uncran* eaferan" [the children of *us two*].[75] Similarly, in *Genesis B,* Eve, deceived by Satan, tries to convince Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. To induce him into doing what she has been made to believe would please God, she addresses Adam emphasising their special bond and common predicament by using the dual pronoun: "*Unc* is his hyldo þearf" [*We two* need his grace].[76] The same strategy is used by the devil, who convinces Eve by charming her with his skilled eloquence. By the use of the dual pronoun "wit", he binds himself to Eve in an impression of friendship and trust, inducing her into cooperation, allegedly for Adam's good: "swa

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69 *Lord of the Rings,* bk.5, ch.8
70 *Beowulf*, ll.1474-76; *Lord of the Rings*, bk.5, ch.6
71 *Beowulf*, ll. 2525-7; *Lord of the Rings*, bk.4, ch.8
72 *Genesis B*, l. 386; Hall, "The Dual Pronoun in *Genesis B",* 140
73 *Lord of the Rings*, bk.3, ch.6.
74 *Lord of the Rings,* bk.3, ch.6.
75 *Beowulf*, l. 1185; Sikora, "Dual Pronoun in Beowulf", 16; Shippey, "Principles of Conversation", 113-114
76 *Genesis B*, l.664; Hall, "The Dual Pronoun in *Genesis B",* 143

wit him *bu* tu / an sped sprecað." [as *we two* tell him for his good].[77] With the pronoun "wit" the demon creates a false alliance with Eve to achieve his goal of deceiving Adam.

A similar deceiving strategy is used by Saruman in *The Lord of the Rings*. The white wizard is as proud and eager for power as Denethor, but his strategy lies in flattering people with his enchanting voice to induce them to do something for him, using a "we" which is in fact a "we two". For instance, he tries to seduce Gandalf into an alliance against both Sauron and the Elves: "The time of the Elves is over, but *our* time is at hand: the world of Men, which *we* must rule. But *we* must have power, power to order all things as *we* will, for that good which only the Wise [*we two*] can see"; "I said *we,* for *we* it may be, *if you will join with me*".[78] With the repetition of the pronoun "we" Saruman seeks to establish a special bond with Gandalf, based on their shared nature as wizards and expressing the sense of "we two". Even in his defeat in front of the Rohirrim, Saruman still tries to use words as a weapon of defence. He addresses himself directly to selected individuals in key positions, such as king Théoden, whom he tries to charm into a false alliance for his own benefit: "I say, Théoden King: shall *we* have peace and friendship, *you and I*? It is *ours* to command".[79] Like the demon in *Genesis B*, Saruman stresses an exclusive relationship with the king by using "we two", in contrast to all the others. He then even tries again with Gandalf, joining him as wizards in their obvious superiority:" Are *we* not *both* members of a high and ancient order, most excellent in Middle-earth?"[80] The art of the *Genesis B* devil and of Saruman is to use verbal skills, such as the dual pronoun, to create a false alliance with their listeners only to deceive them. Tolkien makes use of first person pronouns in a very similar way to the Old English poets, exploiting the nuances suggested by the use of "I", "we" and, surprisingly, the dual pronoun "wit".

"I" and "Wit": Sméagol/Gollum

In the *Lord of the Rings*, the most remarkable alternation between the pronouns "I" and "we", which can be interpreted as a dual pronoun "we two", is produced by Sméagol/Gollum. The evil of the Ring has permanently corrupted Sméagol's mind resulting in the dissociation of his personality, which appears split in two parts: Sméagol retains some of his old, "human" characteristics while Gollum is a "lost subject", in Nagy's words.[81] The manner of speech of the two alter-egos is marked by a different use of first person pronouns and indicates which part of this complex character is speaking.

Gollum, the 'evil' side, has lost his individuality because of the destructive action of the Ring, for which he has formed a total dependency. Gollum typically uses the plural pronoun 'we' as in an exclusive alliance with an invisible companion, his "precious": "Don't let *them* hurt *us*, precious"; "Curse them! *We* hates them".[82] This pattern shows an overall consistency also in *The Hobbit*: "What shall *we* do? Curse *them* and crush *them*!"[83] This "we" can be read as "we two", by which Gollum binds himself to the Ring in opposition to "them", a general term referring to the Hobbits or, more likely, the rest of the world. This alliance against a common enemy reminds of the rebellion of Satan and his demon against God in *Genesis B*: "*Unc* wearð god yrre / forþon *wit* him noldon on heofonrice / hnigan mid heafdum" [The wrath of God is *ours* because *we* did not wish to bow *our* heads to *him* in the heavenly realm]. Also in the case of the demons, the dual pronoun unites two allies in their joint struggle against an opponent.[84]

In addition to using an anomalous plural pronoun when referring to himself, Gollum always

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[77] *Genesis B*, ll. 574-575a
[78] *Lord of the Rings*, bk.2, ch.2
[79] *Lord of the Rings*, bk.3, ch.10
[80]*Lord of the Rings,* bk.3, ch.10.
[81] G. Nagy, "The "Lost" Subject of Middle-earth: The Constitution of the Subject in the Figure of Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings,*" *Tolkien Studies* 3 (2006): 67.
[82] *Lord of the Rings* bk.4, ch.1
[83] *The Hobbit,* ch.5
[84] *Lord of the Rings*, bk.5, ch.7; *Genesis B,* ll.741-44

addresses his interlocutor indirectly through the third person pronoun, as if speaking to an invisible companion: "Does it guess easy? It must have a competition with *us*, my preciouss!"[85] Gollum's speech is made even more uncanny by his referring to Bilbo with the neuter pronoun "it". Similarly, in *The Lord of the Rings* he addresses the Hobbits indirectly as "they": "Don't let them hurt *us*, precious! They won't hurt *us* will they, nice little hobbitses? [...] And *we're so lonely*, gollum. We'll be nice to them, very nice, if they'll be nice to *us*".[86] Gollum's isolation and loneliness are emphasised by the opposition between "us" and "them" and by the distorted manner of his speech.

As noted above, in Old English poetry the disruption of proper verbal exchanges is equivalent to the breakdown of social bonds and structure. In *Beowulf*, the first part of the poem is full of social exchanges, speeches and ceremonies, while the second part is marked by monologues that accompany the death of the king and the dissolution of his kingdom.[87] In a society governed by language, speech disfunction parallels social alienation and even marks the border of the human. Typically, monsters, like Grendel in *Beowulf,* live on the edge of society and do not speak: it is not possible to reason and negotiate with them, "to settle [feuds] with payment" ("féa þingian").[88] The peace-creating potential of language fails with monsters like Grendel, leaving no other solution than violence. In this sense, also Gollum can be seen as a "monster",[89] isolated from society and its rules (he is treacherous and does not hesitate to kill), characterised by an impaired verbal ability and incapable of understanding anything but force and commands. In his disfunctional speech, the use of "we" marks his 'monstrous' moments where even physically he is described as an animal: "Almost spider-like he looked now, crouched back on his bent limbs, with his protruding eyes".[90] Both in Old English poetry and in Tolkien, social and speech malfunctioning are connected.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Gollum's double personality is fully expressed in the alternation of Gollum and Sméagol, his 'evil' and 'good side', with their corresponding different ways of speaking. In particular, when Frodo addresses Sméagol with his name and shows him compassion, Gollum is "drawn back into normal"[91] and his own, forgotten self tends to emerge again. In such moments he speaks correctly, directly to the Hobbits, using "I" and his own name; these language features mark his moments of sincerity:

> "Sméagol will swear on the Precious; *We* promises, yes *I* promise! *I* will
> serve the master of the Precious."[92]

Nagy speaks of "subjectification" or "reconstitution," in contrast to the "deconstitution" of Gollum's self induced by the evil of the Ring. In these moments, Sméagol is eager to help and to be part of a group: "Nice sensible hobbits stay with Sméagol. Stay and hide with *me*!"[93] These rare moments of 'normality' are marked by Sméagol's use of the pronoun "I". Then he is also able to express his feelings, for instance when he recalls his imprisonment in the Dark Tower: "Leave *me* alone, gollum! You hurt *me*. O *my* poor hands, gollum! *I, we, I* don't want to come back. *I* can't find it. *I* am tired. *I, we* can't find it, gollum, gollum, no, nowhere."[94] The two sides of Gollum's personality, human and monster, follow each other in quick succession in his almost Freudian recollection of painful memories, marked by the alternation of first person pronouns.

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85 *The Hobbit,* ch.5
86 *Lord of the Rings*, bk.4, ch.1
87 Bjork, "Speech as Gift", 999.
88 *Beowulf*, l. 156b; this verse refers to Grendel and the impossibility to solve their feud other than by a fight
89 Marchetti, C. "Tolkien's Medieval Monsters: Grendel, Gollum and Boromir". in: *Lembas Extra: The World Tolkien Built,* ed. R. Vink. (Tolkien Genootschap Unquendor, 2019), 35
90 *Lord of the Rings*, bk.4, ch.8 ; Porck, T. "Medieval Animals in Middle-earth: JRR Tolkien and the Old English and Middle English Physiologus." In *Figurations animalières à travers les textes et l'image en Europe*, pp. 266-280. (Brill, 2021), 266, 278
91 J. Chance, *Tolkien, Self and Other: "This Queer Creature"* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016): 164; Nagy, "The "Lost" Subject", 61
92   *Lord of the Rings,* bk.4, ch.1
93 Nagy, "The "Lost" Subject", 64; *Lord of the Rings,* bk.4, ch.2
94 *Lord of the Rings,* bk.4, ch.1

Tolkien presents Sméagol as a profoundly sad character: "Poor, poor Sméagol, he went away long ago. They took his Precious, and he's lost now."[95] In these rare moments of awareness, sorrow and regret emerge, and Sméagol is "lost" and "tired", longing for love:

> " [...] they would have thought that they beheld an old weary hobbit, shrunken
> by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond friends and kin,
> and the fields and streams of youth, an old starved pitiable thing."[96]

This description of Sméagol watching the sleeping Hobbits has the tones of an Old English elegy such as *The Wanderer*, where the poet, exiled and far from his beloved ones, sadly recalls the past, intimately revealing himself with the pronoun "I": "Oft *ic* sceolde āna uhtna gehwylce / *mīne* ceare cwīþan [Often, at every dawn, *I* alone must lament my sorrows].[97] In such moments also Sméagol uses the pronoun "I" in his speech. The sorrow and nostalgia expressed in the Old English elegiac verses remind one of Gollum, the exile.

The pronouns used by Gollum/Sméagol are consistent and 'tell a story'. In *the Hobbit* only the 'monster' side of Gollum is described, while in the *The Lord of the Rings* his 'human' side, aroused by Frodo's kindness, gives rise to the Gollum/Sméagol contrast, with the corresponding alternation of "we/I" pronouns, conferring depth and complexity to this character.

Conclusion

Tolkien's use of first person pronouns is accurate, and, as in Old English poetry, confers additional nuance and depth to character descriptions. The principles of conversation can be applied in analysing how characters communicate feelings, deceive, provoke or resolve conflicts by strategically using "I" or "we".

Tolkien uses the first person pronouns in all ranges of connotations. The first person pronoun "I" marks pride, boastfulness, greed and self-assertion in Boromir, Denethor or Thorin. At the other end of the spectrum, the same pronoun reveals intimate feelings of nostalgia or regret, as in the last words of Boromir and Thorin. The plural pronoun "we" defines the characters as integrated members of a group. Interestingly, this pattern is opposite in Gollum. If characters like Boromir use "I" to express pride and rejection of social conventions, Sméagol uses "I" in the rare moments when he reveals his old, human self and tries to reach out to others. In contrast, the "we" with which Boromir asserts his belonging to a group is used by Gollum in his 'monstrous' moments to isolate himself from society. This last "we" used by Gollum can be interpreted as a dual pronoun "we two", which creates an exclusive bond between two people, often in contrast to a common enemy. The dual pronoun is used extensively by Saruman who skilfully exploits the subtleties of language to his advantage. In sum, Tolkien's characters are complex and their alternating moods or motivations are revealed by their speech and in particular by the precise use of pronouns.

The controversial characters analysed here are contrasted to others who better represent Tolkien's ideals and moral views: Boromir's pride is compared to the wisdom of Aragorn or Faramir, Thorins' greed and folly to the Elven King's desire for peace. These contrasting characters use the pronoun "I" with very different connotations. Tolkien reserves an inauspicious fate to those who are driven by pride, such as Boromir, Thorin, Denethor and Saruman, in contrast to the characters who better embody his ideals.[98] The contrast between the characters, their speech and their history are the means by which Tolkien comments and expresses his opinion on them.

Tolkien gives first person pronouns many different connotations, covering even the range of

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[95] *Lord of the Rings* bk.4, ch.1

[96] *Lord of the Rings* bk.4, ch.8. "For myself, I was probably most moved by [...] the scene when Frodo goes to sleep on Sam's breast, and the tragedy of Gollum who at that moment came within a hair of repentance – but for one rough word from Sam." Tolkien, *Letters*, Letter 96

[97] *The Wanderer*, ed. and trans. Treharne, ll. 8-9.

[98] Evans, "Pride", 543-544

subtle meanings offered by the Old English dual pronoun. The alternation of first person pronouns with different implications is similar to the skilful use of words in Anglo-Saxon literature, whose language and value system were Tolkien's great inspiration.

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