

Title: From Dahrar to Déorwine: Sound Symbolism in the Constructed Languages of *The Lord of the Rings*

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Highlight Text:

The philologist JRR Tolkien, whose decades spent teaching real world languages at Oxford won him much less popular fame than the fictional languages and world he created in *The Lord of the Rings*, had a clear philosophy on language. He saw the proper “construction of sounds” as creating “word-music,” and certain other combinations as truly repugnant (Tolkien 218). Through an experimental analysis of four Tolkien-created languages, this investigation examined the way that readers interpreted invented words and also the means by which sound influences individual interpretations of language, part of the concept of sound symbolism.

Studied by both psychologists and linguists, sound symbolism examines phonemes (sounds), attempting to determine their meaning. In numerous studies, for example, participants have been shown pointed and rounded images and given two or more created words; individuals overwhelmingly match words like *takete* with the pointed image and those like *maluma* with the rounded (Holland 111). Despite copious studies, the mechanism through which this symbolism functions are still not fully agreed upon or understood.

Survey data was gathered from 73 Auburn University students, asking them to respond to ten words as *neutral*, *musical* or *harsh*, and explain “why” they found them that way. The *neutrals* were then disposed of, their connected “why” answers indicating that they had been treated as non-responses, and the results were tabulated (Table 1). The two languages based on real-world tongues, Rohirric and Dwarvish (Old English and Old Norse respectively) were

somewhat less decisively classified than the Tolkien-created Entish and Orcish. The results track, as expected, with the textual characters – Orcs, as “evil” beings, received a majority of *harsh* responses, while Entish, spoken by “good” beings and influenced by Elvish (the peak of “goodness” for Tolkien), was characterized as mostly *musical*.

The qualitative results gathered from responses to the “why” question were compiled and compared to a full corpus of the four languages as represented in *The Lord of the Rings*. Fricatives (sounds created with a narrowed mouth like [s] or [f]) were remarked as making words *harsh* and were therefore sought out across the corpus (Table 2). Entish, having no fricatives, stood out from the others based on this characteristic.

The reason that Entish seems, to an English speech community, to be melodic speaks to a larger linguistic issue. Reasons behind this *melodic* interpretation will be extrapolated in the final stages of investigative analysis to consider sound symbolism not only in fictional languages, but in and among living languages. Combining the experimental linguistic approach with a literary one, unprecedented in Tolkien scholarship, generated quantifiable data which have provided actual rather than theoretical reactions of a speech community with which to work.

#### Statement of Research Advisor:

Matthew's research seeks to explain in linguistic categories what Tolkien tried to do creatively, to establish a link between aural aesthetics and cultural identity. His research challenges us to think beyond the obvious, that Tolkien invented a ‘bad-sounding’ language for ‘bad’ people and a ‘good-sounding’ language for ‘good’ people, but instead Matthew asks how we as English-language readers are made to respond to alien cultures only on the basis of the attractiveness that their languages may or not appear to hold for us.

#### Works Cited

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<b>Language</b>	<b>m</b>	<b>h</b>
<b>Entish</b>	84.1%	15.9%
<b>Orcish</b>	1.5%	98.5%
<b>Rohirric</b>	70.6%	29.4%
<b>Dwarvish</b>	70.7%	29.3%

Table 1: Percentage for each selection from total dataset with *neutrals* removed.

	<b>Entish</b>	<b>Orcish</b>	<b>Dwarvish</b>	<b>Rohirric</b>	<b>D+R</b>
<i>Total tokens</i>	24	38	14	79	93
<i>Fricatives per word</i>	0	0.66	0.86	0.60	0.73

Table 2: Frequency of fricatives and back vowels in the corpus.