

Constructed Languages and Mythopoeia in Tolkien and Le Guin: An Analysis of Discourse

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ABSTRACT

In fantasy literature, language often functions as a bridge between imagination and cultural memory. When fantasy writers construct languages or coin new words, they not only shape fictional communication but also the philosophical foundations of their narrative worlds. This article examines the constructed languages of J.R.R. Tolkien and Ursula K. Le Guin through a discourse-based approach. This analysis demonstrates that created languages provide substantially more than background detail for fantasy worlds; they provide the basis for those worlds' myths and cultures. Tolkien's linguistic imagination provided Quenya and Sindarin as the media through which the entire history of Middle-earth would be formed. For Le Guin, however, language is a source of cognitive and epistemic power: in the Earthsea cycle, to know the "true" name of a thing is to know, and therefore possess authority over, that thing's fundamental essence. Therefore, by directly comparing the two authors, this article contributes to the developing field of cross-disciplinary research in linguistics and literary studies and illustrates how constructed languages serve as mechanisms for generating mythic meanings.

Keywords: created languages, mythopoeia, linguistic world-building, discourse analysis, epistemic power, literary linguistic.

1. Introduction

At its highest level, language provides for far more than advancing a plot. In fact, the greatest examples of fantasy writing create histories, bring cultures to life, and imbue fictional worlds with a mythic weight that transcends any one particular story. Of course, few authors have demonstrated such a profound understanding of this phenomenon as J.R.R. Tolkien and Ursula K. Le

Guin. Furthermore, both authors have developed their fictional worlds through language rather than simply surrounding their stories with it.

In addition to understanding this conceptually, Tolkien approached language as an organic extension of his identity. As a scholar in philology, Tolkien studied how languages develop, split, and carry the collective memory of the people who speak them. Unlike many authors

who began building their fictional worlds before deciding to include languages, Tolkien's mythology evolved alongside the development of his invented languages. According to Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* was “primarily linguistic in inspiration,” and was written specifically to provide a historical context for the invented Elvish languages (Tolkien, 1981) of which Quenya and Sindarin were two. These languages are not embellishments added to Middle-earth — they constitute the framework of Middle-earth itself.

Similarly, Le Guin's relationship to language is extensive yet fundamentally philosophical. Throughout her *Earthsea* series, Le Guin develops an entire magical paradigm on the assumption that everything in the world has a “true name” spoken in the Old Speech. Furthermore, according to Le Guin, knowing the true name of something also reveals its basic nature. In her work titled, *The Language of the Night*, Le Guin argues that words and reality are closely intertwined, where language is not merely descriptive but instrumental in shaping reality (Le Guin, 1979). Therefore, throughout *Earthsea*, language serves simultaneously as knowledge, as identity, and as an exercise in moral accountability.

These two authors share a commonality, though it is expressed differently. Both authors believe that language is not merely a means of transmitting myths but constitutes the very act of myth creation. Tolkien referred to this method of creating new worlds as “sub-creation.” Sub-creation refers to the creation of secondary worlds that exhibit sufficient internal consistency to generate what Tolkien referred to as *Secondary Belief*, that is, the willingness to suspend disbelief due to the authenticity of the secondary world (Tolkien, 1964). Similarly, while Le Guin uses a different path toward achieving this coherence — not through the cumulative historical development of a language but through the structural ethics that support language — her *Earthsea* series generates the same sense of coherence.

1.1 Literature review

Research into constructed languages has increased significantly over the last twenty years. Scholars from linguistics, literary theory, and cultural studies have investigated how invented languages influence world-building and narrative form. However, despite the growing body of scholarly literature examining constructed languages, there remains little research on the distinctly discursive dimensions of constructed languages, that is, their roles as systems for producing mythic meaning.

Tolkien's world has been the subject of the most research in this area. Tom Shippey, widely regarded as the leading scholar on Tolkien's creative processes, asserts that Tolkien's fictions were shaped by his career as a philologist. According to Shippey, Middle-earth was not a world Tolkien invented and then wrote about; rather, it arose from his long-term exploration of the histories and structural features of actual languages. Carl F. Hostetter provided the technical component to support Shippey's arguments, demonstrating that Tolkien developed full phonological systems, grammar, and etymology for his constructed languages with the same level of rigor that historians use to document the changes of Latin into the Romance languages (Hostetter, 2017). While both studies have immense value and both concentrate on the structural aspects of Tolkien's creations, neither has paid significant attention to how these structures functioned narratively and culturally (that is, what roles they played within the larger mythology).

Another line of scholarly inquiry has explored the connections between Tolkien's constructed languages and his broader mythopoetic goals. Specifically, Dimitra Fimi's “Tolkien, Race and Cultural History” demonstrates how constructed languages enabled Tolkien to develop layered cultural meanings in Middle-earth, thereby allowing readers to understand Middle-earth as a living mythology rather than simply as a background (Fimi, 2010). However, Fimi does not explore the discursively based elements of mythopoietic language as thoroughly as she

could, an omission that this article aims to address. On the other hand, much of the literature on Le Guin focuses on ecological issues, gender, and identity. Furthermore, while language is obviously critical to her *Earthsea* series, it has received relatively little concentrated scholarly attention. An important exception is Sandra J. Lindow, who examined naming in *Earthsea*. She established a relationship between true names and personal development, further demonstrating that Le Guin's linguistic philosophies influence both the characters and the thematic content in *Earthsea* (Lindow, 1990). Broader still, scholars have observed that Le Guin views language as non-neutral, that is, not a transparent medium of communication but a mechanism that creates reality itself.

Finally, Mark J.P. Wolf's "Building Imaginary Worlds" offers a useful theoretical foundation for both authors. Wolf defines world-building as creating a world with genuine complexity and internal consistency, and further identifies language as perhaps the most effective tool a world-builder can employ (Wolf, 2012). When a fictional world is linguistically rich, that is, it contains dialects, changing place names over time, and name-giving practices that reflect social relationships, it develops greater authenticity; it no longer appears to be an invention but rather a discovery.

1.2 Research questions

To date, despite the rich body of literature on constructed languages, researchers have generally treated them either as philologically interesting structures whose primary function is to advance narratives or as secondary world-building elements whose function should be analyzed independently of their broader mythic functions. Therefore, this paper seeks to fill this gap. Specifically, it attempts to answer the following three related questions:

1. How do constructed languages facilitate myth-making in the fictional worlds of Tolkien and Le Guin?
2. How do constructed languages establish cultural identities and cosmologies?

3. How may we analyze constructed languages as discourse, that is, how may we conceptualize them as systems that determine the relationships among languages within narrative worlds?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is supported by three theoretical foundations: Tolkien's concept of *Mythopoeia*; Discourse Theory as applied to narrative fiction; and the theory of linguistic world-building found within Fantasy Studies. Together, these theories provide the analytical vocabulary required to investigate how invented languages generate, rather than describe, mythic meaning.

Tolkien's concept of *Mythopoeia* refers to the authorial act of creating a secondary world with sufficient internal logic and coherence to support secondary belief. A sub-creator (Tolkien's term for fantasy writers), in order to achieve this goal, must construct not just events, but also the cultural, historical, and language-based architectures that render these events inevitable. The existence of language is essential to achieving this architectural quality. Without it, a secondary world cannot establish tradition, nomenclature, or cultural memory, resulting in a mere backdrop or setting rather than an actual world.

The second theoretical framework that supports *Mythopoeia* is Discourse Theory. Within contemporary linguistic studies, discourses refer to systems that generate meaning, categorize knowledge, and determine social realities. In literary studies of fiction, when characters engage with constructed languages, use ancient names, or perform rituals in sacred languages, they engage with symbolic systems that represent hierarchical relationships, historical continuities, and cultural values. Thus, all decisions regarding language in narratives are simultaneously decisions regarding discourse.

Lastly, linguistic world-building (as defined by Wolf & others) examines how constructed languages create believable narrative environments. This study may be stated quite simply: if a fictional world has a language system sufficiently complex (including multiple dialects, historical development, and culturally specific

naming practices), then it will appear more real (more a discovery than an invention) than one lacking such complexities. As Wolf notes, many imaginary worlds seem realistic because their language systems lend credibility to the worlds created in narrative environments (Wolf, 2012). When combined, these three theoretical

frameworks enable this study to transition from examining the structural characteristics of Tolkien's and Le Guin's constructed languages to analyzing what these structures accomplish, that is, how they generate story, culture, and mythic meaning. Table 1 clearly summarizes the theoretical foundations of this study.

Table 1: Theoretical Frameworks and Their Application

Framework	Origin	Core Claim	Applied to Tolkien	Applied to Le Guin
Mythopoeia	Tolkien (1964)	Secondary worlds require linguistic architecture to support belief	Quenya / Sindarin as the foundations of Middle-earth mythology	Old Speech as the metaphysical fabric of Earthsea
Discourse Theory	Foucault / Linguistics	Language constructs social reality, not merely reflects it	Elvish as a system encoding cultural hierarchy and memory	True names as a system of epistemological power
Linguistic World-Building	Wolf (2012)	Linguistic complexity creates narrative authenticity	Dialectal variation between Elvish tongues signals cultural depth	The two-name system (use-name vs. true name) signals social structure

3. Research Aims, Methods, and Material

A comparative qualitative research design using Discourse Analysis and Literary Criticism forms the core methodology. Close reading of primary texts provides the analytical core for this study. This methodology is designed to address the specific questions posed in this research. Because the research questions focus on how language creates mythic culture, encodes identity, and grants authority to narrative within fictional worlds, quantitative approaches (such as structuralism) will not provide the answers they require. What is needed here, instead, is a more interpretative methodology that responds to both narrative context and symbolic function. The primary corpus consists of four texts: Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*; Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *The Tombs of Atuan*. These four works were selected because

they contain the most significant examples of language use by each author. Elvish in *The Lord of the Rings* appears in ceremony, poetry, and prayer — all of which are precisely the contexts where language performs its most culturally loaded functions. *The Silmarillion* supplies the cosmological and linguistic backstory without which much of Tolkien's mythology would be opaque. *A Wizard of Earthsea* establishes Le Guin's theory of language at its most elemental. At the same time, *The Tombs of Atuan* develops the darker implications of that theory around power, oppression, and liberation. All readings are organized around four related analytical themes identified below. While these thematic areas are distinct enough that analyzing a single passage can provide insight into one or two of them, it was intentional to allow for some overlap.

Table 2: Analytical Framework: Four Thematic Lenses

Theme	Definition	Tolkien Example	Le Guin Example
Linguistic Symbolism	How created languages reflect cultural history and memory	Archaic Quenya encodes Elvish civilization's deep past	The Old Speech reflects the primordial structure of reality
Language & Cultural Identity	How specific linguistic systems define cultural belonging	Rohirric signals a Germanic-inflected warrior culture	True names mark individual essence and social role
Language & Mythic Cosmology	How language influences the metaphysical structure of the world	The music of the Ainur in <i>The Silmarillion</i> creates the world itself	The Old Speech is the fabric of creation; misuse disrupts the Balance
Language & Power	How language grants authority and structures relationships	Quenya confers prestige in ceremonial contexts	Knowing a true name grants direct power over the named entity

Results and Discussion

4.1 Invented Languages and Mythic Cosmology in Tolkien

In terms of how Tolkien created worlds for his works, he reversed the method used by many writers. Most authors create a fictional world first, then develop a language for that world. Tolkien, on the other hand, created the languages of his fictional world of Middle-earth first, then built a world large enough to hold them. Tolkien told his publishers that *The Lord of the Rings* was “essentially linguistic in inspiration”, a claim not mere hyperbole or artistic flair. Tolkien's statement accurately reflected his approach to developing a world through the creation of language. The stories of Middle-earth did not come before the languages; rather, they emerged from the languages, as culture develops from the conditions necessary for its existence.

“The Elvish languages were an attempt to express in its purest form the linguistic ideals of the author's mind.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix F, “On Translation”

“In the beginning Ilúvatar made the Ainur of his thought; and they made a great Music before him.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, “Ainulindalë”

Even at the level of cosmogony, then, Middle-earth does not precede its languages; it is sung, spoken, and named into being. This is precisely why Tolkien's claim of linguistic inspiration should be read literally rather than metaphorically.

Quenya and Sindarin were two of the most fully developed of Tolkien's invented languages, illustrating this concept with great consistency. Quenya was designed to represent the characteristics of an archaic, formally preserved language, such as Latin in Roman Catholicism. Quenya was intended to represent the Elvish prayers, laments, and formal oaths.

“Quenya was in origin one of the oldest of the tongues of the Elves... It was used in Valinor and was the High Speech of the West, the language of lore, and the language of the High Elves.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix E, “Writing and Spelling”

Sindarin, on the other hand, was a living, evolving language that developed in response to migration and interaction with other cultures. Sindarin exhibited dialectical variations common among languages that have developed geographically and chronologically.

“Now the Quendi, the first-born of Ilúvatar, had many tongues from the beginning; for they had a great gift of tongues, and the languages of the Elves changed from age to age, and were not the same from people to people.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, “Of the Coming of the Elves”

While the difference may seem minor, it reflects a major phenomenon Tolkien studied during his career as a philologist: how Latin evolved into the high register of European Christianity, and how various vernacular languages diverged from it and evolved.

Tom Shippey makes a compelling case for how Tolkien's linguistics directly correlate with the cultural aspects of his fictional world. Shippey argues that the linguistic diversity of Middle-earth represents cultural diversity to the point that Tolkien essentially mapped the former onto the latter (Shippey, 2003). When characters speak in Quenya at times of great solemnity, or when Elvish names contain centuries-old griefs, these actions reflect not ornamentation; rather, they demonstrate the storage of cultural memory, a form of meaning found in language that is impossible to find elsewhere. Nowhere is this moral weighting of language clearer than in its inversion:

“In the Black Speech of Mordor... One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Book I, Ch. 2, “The Shadow of the Past”

The Black Speech is not simply a different tongue from Elvish; it is cosmologically opposed to it. Linguistic diversity in Middle-earth is therefore inseparable from moral and cultural diversity.

This role is particularly evident in *The Silmarillion*. Not only does language provide

cultural information, but it also provides cosmological information. Names in Tolkien's mythology do not merely identify pre-existent objects; instead, they acknowledge and sometimes assist in the creation of those objects.

“Then Ilúvatar spoke to the Ainur, and he said: ‘Of the theme that I have declared to you, I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music. And since I have kindled you with the Flame Imperishable, ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will. But I will sit and hearken, and be glad that through you great beauty has been wakened into song.’”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, “Ainulindalë”

“Therefore Ilúvatar gave to their vision Being, and set it amid the Void, and the Secret Fire was sent to burn at the heart of the World; and it was called Eä.”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, “Quenta Silmarillion,” Ch. 1, “Of the Beginning of Days”

The world is not merely described by the word “Eä” (Elvish for “It is”, or “Let it be”); it is called into being by it. This is the clearest possible textual evidence that, in Tolkien's cosmology, naming participates directly in creation rather than following after it.

The Elvish songs and documents of *The Silmarillion* add historical layers and cultural depths to Middle-earth, unlike anything previously seen in fantasy literature (Fimi, 2010). Names themselves have been influenced by linguistic history; thus, a careful reader can trace the archaeology of civilizations solely from how names evolve.

Language conveys cultural information, even through sound, in Tolkien's works. Many people who read the Elvish prayer to Elbereth in *The Lord of the Rings* will not know any single word; however, they will be able to feel it. The phonetic texture of Quenya, including its rich vowels and flowing consonants, conveys age, reverence, and a kind of sorrowful beauty that cannot be achieved through narrative context alone.

“Ai! laurie lantar lassi súrinen,

yéni únótimë ve rámar aldaron,
yéni ve lintë yuldar avánier
mi oromardi lissë-mirubóreva...”

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Book II, Ch. 8, “Farewell to Lórien” (Galadriel’s lament, “*Namarië*”)

This was exactly what Tolkien was trying to accomplish. Tolkien discussed at length what he called the aesthetic value of language and developed Quenya in part because of an auditory desire he had felt since discovering Finnish as a young man. The sounds of Elvish are not arbitrary; they are meant to express something regardless of their semantic value. *Namarië*, one of the best-documented and most widely cited Elvish passages in Tolkien scholarship, is exemplary of this effect: readers who cannot translate a single line nonetheless register its elegy for a fading age.

4.2 Language, Naming, and Power in Le Guin

While Tolkien’s imaginative linguistics is archaeological, concerned with how culture is built and preserved over time, Le Guin’s is ontological. Le Guin asks not how language records what exists, but how language creates existence. In Le Guin’s *Earthsea* series, every being and object in the world has a true name given in Old Speech. That true name is not a label. Rather, it is an expression of that being or object’s fundamental nature, and knowing that name grants you actual power over that being or object.

“As a man’s real name is his life, and the secret of that name is his very identity, so the Old Speech is the life of things themselves... the Old Speech, the language of the Making, was once spoken by all things and beings.”

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ch. 3, “The School for Wizards”

This is perhaps the single most important statement of Le Guin’s linguistic philosophy for the purposes of this study: the Old Speech is not a code laid over reality, but the very medium of

the Making, and to speak it truly is to touch the fundamental nature of things.

Le Guin explicitly articulates this idea in her book, *The Language of the Night*: “the power of words derives from the fact that the true name of an entity is its very essence” (Le Guin, 1979, p. 76). What she describes here is not magic; it is philosophy, specifically, the view that language and reality are not random and unrelated; that words do not merely point at things from the outside but are fundamentally connected to what those things are. In our ordinary lives, we assign labels to things and change them without consequences. However, in *Earthsea*, names tell us what something is; therefore, if someone knows your name, they have knowledge that cannot be erased.

The implications of the story are enormous. In *Earthsea*, authority is based on the collection of “true” names. Magical abilities in this universe exemplify epistemological development. As wizards develop their magical skills, they develop their ability to understand how things work in the world. They also develop their ability to call upon the “true names” of everything around them: wind, water, stone, plants, animals, etc. The education process of a young wizard is essentially a lengthy apprenticeship in the Old Speech. During this time, she learns to identify the “true names” of all these items and understands what is unique about each in its place within the natural order of the world. This apprenticeship is embodied in the figure of Ged, whose entire arc traces the movement from a use-name given at birth to the true name that discloses his power:

“It is said that the mage Ged, who in his day was the greatest Archmage of Earthsea, was not born great. He was born a plain villager, a child of the Bronze Age; his name was Duny.”

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ch. 1, “Warriors in the Mist”

What Le Guin has created in terms of the ethics of language is perhaps one of the most compelling elements of her creation. In the world she created, the responsibility to use language correctly is not just a matter of prudence but a

moral obligation. By knowing the “true name” of an item, one gains control over that item. Therefore, when using words, there should be thoughtfulness and consideration used to avoid causing damage.

“But you must not change one thing, one pebble, one grain of sand, until you know what good and evil will follow on that act. The world is in balance, in Equilibrium. A wizard's power of Changing and of Summoning can shake the balance of the world. It is dangerous, that power.”

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ch. 3 (Ogion's lesson on naming)

As a result of careless speech, one could upset what Le Guin refers to as “the Balance”, an ecological balance necessary to keep the world healthy. The cosmological stakes of this ethic are made explicit in the novel's own epigraph:

“Only in silence the word,
only in dark the light,
only in dying life:
bright the hawk's flight
on the empty sky.”

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ch. 5, “The Loosing of the Shadow” (epigraph)

Words, like light and life, are here defined only in relation to their opposites; this is the philosophical ground on which the Balance rests. When Ged oversteps this ethic, calling up a power beyond his understanding, the consequence is immediate and disfiguring:

“He knew now that his own power, uncontrolled, had let that shadow through. He had tried to do a thing beyond his strength, and had let in a horror that followed him... He did not know what he had done.”

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ch. 6, “The Wizard's Isle”

However, unlike many other forms of communication, language is not simply an expression of power in Earthsea. Rather, it is a

form of communication with inherent responsibility to others.

In reference to Le Guin's approach to naming, Sandra Lindow writes that Le Guin presents “a view of the world in which language and reality are very close to each other,” in which one's knowledge of language influences both what one can accomplish and who one is (Lindow, 1990). The relationship between language and identity is further defined by the rituals of giving true names at important junctures throughout the Earthsea novels. All characters in the series have two names: a public name and a private true name that they share only with someone they trust completely.

“To be sure, the wizard who knows your name has an advantage over you; but the people you live among don't know your true name, and so cannot use it.”

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ch. 2

The public/true-name distinction, in other words, is a distinction of social and epistemic power: to withhold the true name is to withhold a fundamental vulnerability, while to share it is an act of trust with material consequences. Upon receiving their true name, a child becomes a member of society, with access to power, self-awareness, and personal responsibility. When Ged receives his true name in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, it signifies his entrance into a world in which knowledge of language and the responsibilities associated with it are intertwined.

The Tombs of Atuan continues this idea but with much more serious intent. For Tenar, the main character, her true name was taken from her and replaced with a ceremonial name that represents only what evil forces she will serve.

“She had been told that her name, Tenar, was a child's name and must be put away with childish things. From now on she had no name. She was Arha, the Eaten One.”

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Tombs of Atuan*, Ch. 2, “The Wall Around the Place”

She loses herself and her autonomy. She finds her true name again through Ged and the decisions she makes, thereby regaining her independence and individuality.

“You have a name,” Ged said. “I know it. Do you want me to say it?”

She was rigid, trembling, silent.

“Tenar,” he said, very gently.

...She began to weep.

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Tombs of Atuan*, Ch. 10, “The Anger of the Dark”

“I am Tenar,” she said. “I am Tenar, not Arha. I am not Arha any more.”

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Tombs of Atuan*, Ch. 11, “The Western Gate”

In *Tombs of Atuan*, language is not merely a representation of agency; it is agency. When a person knows their true name, they exist as an independent entity; when they do not, they cease to exist as such. The novel insists, further, that this restoration is not a private or momentary event but one with continuing, world-altering force:

“You were Arha, and you are Tenar. When Ged called you by your true name, the name you had as a child before they took it from you, it was like a stone thrown into still water: the ripples are still going outward.”

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Tombs of Atuan*, Ch. 12, “Voyage”

Table 3: Language Functions: Tolkien and Le Guin Compared

Dimension	Tolkien (Middle-earth)	Le Guin (Earthsea)
Philosophical Basis	Philological or historical: languages encode cultural memory across time	Ontological or anthropological: words are bound to the nature of things
Primary Languages	Quenya (High-Elven, ceremonial); Sindarin (vernacular, evolving)	Old Speech (primordial, universal); use-names (everyday, social)
Source of Authority	Prestige through historical connection to ancient cultures	Epistemological power through knowledge of true names
Identity Function	Cultural belonging encoded in linguistic heritage	One's true name constitutes personal identity
Moral Dimension	Language preserves collective memory and cultural responsibility	Language demands individual ethical restraint and accountability
Cosmological Role	Language participated in the creation of the world (Ainur's music)	Language is the fabric of the world; misuse disrupts the Balance
Central Text	<i>The Silmarillion</i> ; <i>The Lord of the Rings</i>	<i>A Wizard of Earthsea</i> ; <i>The Tombs of Atuan</i>

4.3 Language as Mythopoesis: Tolkien and Le Guin Compared

While Tolkien's linguistic imagination is rooted in the philological traditions of European mythology and languages (Norse, Welsh,

Finnish) and Le Guin's is based on cosmological and anthropological thought encompassing indigenous cultures from all over the world, both authors come to the same basic conclusion: that language is not simply a tool for describing reality, but is rather constitutive, that is, language creates the world it appears only to describe. Neither author views this as a philosophical problem to be solved. Rather, each incorporates it into the architectural framework of an invented world, allowing the narratives to consider its implications.

4.3.1 Structural vs Ornamental

The greatest similarity between Tolkien and Le Guin lies in their shared understanding that language is structural rather than ornamental. If you were to remove the Elvish languages from Middle-earth, you would not just be removing the poetry; you would be losing the "historic" quality of Middle-earth. The "mythology" would cease to feel lived. Instead, it would resemble a "stage-set", believable from afar but empty up close.

"And it came to pass that Ilúvatar called together all the Ainur and declared to them a mighty theme, unfolding to them things greater and more wonderful than he had yet revealed; and the glory of its beginning and the splendour of its end amazed the Ainur, so that they bowed before Ilúvatar and were silent."

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, "Ainulindalë"

Silence precedes the world in this passage; speech creates it. Middle-earth, quite literally, cannot exist prior to the act of language. Likewise, if you were to remove the "true-names" from *Earthsea*, you would lose the moral or epistemological scaffold upon which *Earthsea* rests. In both instances, language is not "part of the world"; language is the prerequisite for the world to cohere.

4.3.2 Identity and Culture

In addition to believing in a strong correlation between language and culture (albeit expressed differently), both authors share another belief: a significant link between language and cultural identity. Tolkien expresses this idea through his

mythology, illustrating a correspondence between linguistic and cultural diversity.

"Eärendil was a mariner

that tarried in Arvernien;

he built a boat of timber felled

in Nimbrenthil to journey in..."

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Book II, Ch. 1, "Many Meetings" (Bilbo's song of Eärendil)

The song is not decoration; it is cultural transmission, carrying the cosmological backstory of the Elder Days into the present of the narrative. This similarity to real-world sociolinguistic studies shows that those who speak Elvish possess a particular cultural inheritance, whereas those who speak Rohirric possess a different one. Additionally, the grammatical and phonological structures within each language reflect the collective historical experience(s) of those who spoke them. Linguistic skill, moreover, is explicitly coded as cultural and moral distinction:

"For in the bearing of their language they were as kings... the Sindar had the fairer voices and were more skilled in all the crafts of song."

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Sindar"

Conversely, in Le Guin's *Earthsea* series, the connection between language and cultural identity is much more direct. When someone utters your "true-name," they are not simply labeling you; they are identifying who you are. Tolkien, too, gestures toward true naming, though on different terms: when Elwing calls out to Eärendil, the text specifies that she calls him not by his use-name but by his true name — "she named him with his true name" (Tolkien, 1977, "Of the Voyage of Eärendil") — a moment that shows Tolkien, like Le Guin, treating the true name as a distinct and weightier category of address, even though it is Le Guin who builds an entire epistemology around the distinction.

4.3.3 Authority in Language

However, there is a critical distinction in how each author conceives of authority tied to language. In Tolkien's mythology, authority generally accrues to individuals historically connected to the mythic past. Therefore, those who master ancient tongues are perceived as having a particular affinity for the deep history of Middle-earth. Moreover, such mastery confers upon them a level of wisdom and tradition that others may not have.

In contrast, in Le Guin's *Earthsea* series, authority derived from linguistic competence is often direct and carries a corresponding degree of moral burden.

"A mage can control only what is near him, what he can name exactly and wholly. And this is well, for a man can die of a word as of a sword."

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ch. 3

"It is a strange thing to hold a name in your hand, as if it were a stone, or a key."

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Tombs of Atuan*, Ch. 9, "The Ring of Erreth-Akbe"

Unlike Tolkien's focus on preserving the past, Le Guin focuses on determining how one ought to act in the present, using language to explore how knowledge, identity, and responsibility intersect in the act of naming; her ontological view of naming — a name held like a stone or a key — captures with great economy how immediate and tangible linguistic authority is in *Earthsea*, compared to the inherited prestige that accompanies it in Middle-earth.

4.3.4 Two Models of Linguistic Mythopoesis

Therefore, when taken collectively, Tolkien and Le Guin provide two separate yet analogous frameworks for linguistic mythopoesis. One is a retrospectively oriented approach grounded in philology (Tolkien). The other is a prospectively oriented approach grounded in ethics (Le Guin). Tolkien constructs mythology through layered histories, complex linguistic systems, and structural density. Le Guin uses language as an instrument for examining how knowledge, identity, and responsibility are intertwined in acts

of naming. While neither model fully encapsulates the potential of language in fantasy literature, together they illustrate the full scope of that possibility.

5. Implications for Language and Literature

The comparative study of Tolkien and Le Guin as linguistic mythopoeists has implications that extend beyond an examination of these two authors themselves. By considering constructed languages as manifestations of mythopoeic discourses, this paper provides an impetus for broader inquiries regarding how language and storytelling collaborate to create culturally meaningful content.

One of the first consequences of this comparative analysis is for multidisciplinary scholarship. As demonstrated by Tolkien's work, applying the methodologies of historical linguistics to creative invention results in a fictional world with the feel of authentic archaeological depth.

"Elvish tongues were not invented at random. The languages created were felt to be beautiful and expressive, fitted to the nature of the peoples who spoke them, their histories, and their environments."

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Appendix F, "On Translation"

Similarly, as exemplified by Le Guin's works, utilizing philosophical inquiry into the nature of language as a foundation for magical systems results in a world where the question of whether one knows enough to exercise knowledge responsibly becomes inextricable from speaking itself. Each body of work indicates that scholarly examinations of invented languages benefit greatly from transdisciplinary approaches. In other words, scholars analyzing invented languages can never ignore aspects of either the structural characteristics of the created languages themselves or their mythopoeic functions.

Tolkien's use of archaic Elvish as a symbol of wisdom, tradition, and social status can be seen as encoding a specific perspective on the relationship between cultural legacy and authority. Conversely, Le Guin's fiction presents

a different, yet perhaps even more stringent notion of the relationship between linguistic authority and moral responsibility. The ability to speak carries with it the responsibility to speak responsibly. By reading both authors' perspectives simultaneously, we can observe each author's position on the ideologies underpinning their work in ways that would not have been accessible if we had read them separately.

The two authors show us how rich the imaginative possibilities of using language as the central theme of a story can be. The creative uses of the linguistic inventions of Tolkien and Le Guin cannot be separated from the richness and fullness of the worlds that these languages inhabit. These authors provide models of imaginative storytelling in which the question "How do people talk around here?" is just as important, and potentially as powerful, as any other question about plot, characters, and themes.

6. Conclusions

As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, invented languages in the worlds of Tolkien and Le Guin do not exist to supplement the worlds created in the authors' stories. Instead, invented languages provide the creative frameworks in which all aspects of these worlds exist. Language provides the medium in which imagination operates within both Middle-earth and Earthsea.

Through my comparative analysis, I have identified three key findings. Firstly, invented languages serve as tools of cultural remembrance and historical continuation. Tolkien creates a sense of cultural history through the development and complexity of his Elvish

languages, while Le Guin ties her naming conventions to individual identity, knowledge, and responsibility. Secondly, in both Tolkien and Le Guin's works, language serves as a location of authority and power. Whether it be the prestige of speaking an older tongue in Middle-earth, or the power of having true names in Earthsea. Finally, at its core, both authors demonstrate that language is used to create mythopoeic meaning-making, that words are not mere representations of reality but rather help create reality.

In treating constructed languages as a form of mythopoeic discourse, this study illustrates that fantasy literature can be a unique and useful avenue for exploring how language functions as a cultural and symbolic system. To construct a language is not merely to enhance the sensory experience of a fictional world. Rather, it is to create a world in which culture, identity, and imagination are truly interdependent, where the distinction between the world of words and the world brought into existence by those words is fully dissolved.

"Speak every word as if it were the first word spoken in the world, and there will be no untrue words."

— Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ch. 3 (Roke motto)

This motto, fittingly, closes the argument of this paper as it closes the training of every wizard on Roke: it encapsulates Le Guin's entire philosophy of language and resonates powerfully with the paper's final claim — that in both Middle-earth and Earthsea, the distinction between the world of words and the world brought into existence by those words is fully dissolved.

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