

LANGUAGE, MYTH, AND WORLD-MAKING IN J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S
SELECTED WORKS**A. SUMAIYA SHAHEEDHA**

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ABSTRACT

J. R. R. Tolkien occupies an important place in modern fantasy because of his rare command of language, myth, and literary form. As a poet, philologist, and scholar of medieval language and literature, he created a fictional world in which language performs more than a decorative role. In his major works, including *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and *Tree and Leaf*, language becomes one of the foundations of world-making. Middle-earth is filled with invented languages, distinctive dialects, archaic diction, songs, legends, riddles, and place-names that carry historical and cultural meaning. Tolkien's invented languages, especially Quenya, Sindarin, and Khuzdul, give identity and depth to the peoples who speak them. They also create a sense of history, memory, beauty, secrecy, and cultural inheritance. This paper studies the linguistic forms in Tolkien's selected works and examines their literary functions. It argues that language in Tolkien creates cultural distinction, emotional intensity, historical continuity, and artistic coherence. The study also discusses Tolkien's philological imagination, Elvish languages, Dwarvish secrecy, Westron, archaic expression, poetry, song, folklore, proverbs, riddles, and place-names. Tolkien's fiction shows that language can generate a world, preserve memory, and give mythic authority to narrative.

KEYWORDS: Tolkien, language, philology, fantasy, Middle-earth, mythology, literary function.

Received: 02-June-2026

Accepted: 02-July-2026

Published: 14- July-2026

1. INTRODUCTION

J. R. R. Tolkien holds a distinguished place in twentieth-century literature because of the scale of his imagination and the scholarly discipline behind it. He was a poet, novelist, and philologist. His professional work in medieval language and literature gave his fiction an unusual linguistic richness. His literary world extends across *The Hobbit* (1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55), *The Silmarillion* (1977), *Unfinished Tales* (1980), and *The Children of Húrin* (2007). Across these works, he created a secondary world with its own peoples, landscapes, histories, chronicles, legends, and languages. The strength of Tolkien's fiction lies greatly in the place he gives to language. Middle-earth is not simply a world where stories are told in invented tongues. It is a world that grows out of a philological imagination. For Tolkien, language comes before myth. His invented languages are not random sounds added to make the fiction exotic. They have grammar, sound patterns, vocabulary, and historical relationships. These languages require speakers. The speakers require history, culture, migration, memory, and place. In this way, Tolkien's fiction joins language and myth-making in a deeply organic manner. This paper studies the major linguistic forms in Tolkien's selected works and examines their literary functions. It gives attention to invented languages, dialectal variation, archaic diction, poetic speech, place-names, proverbs, folktales, and riddles. These forms give Middle-earth cultural distinction, historical depth, emotional force, and artistic unity. Language in Tolkien serves as a means of world-making, characterization, memory, and mythic authority.

2. LANGUAGE AS THE BASIS OF TOLKIEN'S SUB-CREATION

Tolkien's imagination rests upon the primacy of language. He did not create Middle-earth first and then add languages to it. He created languages and then built histories, peoples, and legends around them. This order is one of the most important features of his art. His philological interests did not remain outside his fiction. They entered the very structure of the fictional world. Humphrey Carpenter records Tolkien's belief that a language needs a people to speak it. This idea explains the close connection between language and race in Tolkien's fiction. A language carries history, temperament, social habit, memory, and beauty. It is never treated as a neutral instrument. Each speech tradition in Middle-earth reveals the inner life of a community. It tells us how that community understands time, land, inheritance, and identity. Tolkien's idea of "sub-creation" also helps us understand his linguistic method. In *Tree and Leaf*, he describes the creative writer as a "little maker" who creates a secondary world with its own inner consistency. Tolkien's sub-created world gains authority because its languages feel historically rooted. They do not seem to have been invented merely for the convenience of the story. They appear to belong to ancient peoples and long memories. Language, myth, and world therefore belong together in Tolkien. Middle-earth has depth because its languages have depth. Its peoples feel real because they speak in ways that reflect their history. Its landscapes feel ancient because their names carry traces of older tongues. Tolkien's fiction becomes convincing because language gives it structure, memory, and cultural life.

3. INVENTED LANGUAGES AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

One of Tolkien's greatest achievements is his construction of invented languages for the peoples of Middle-earth. Elves, Dwarves, Men, Hobbits, Orcs, and other groups differ from one another through more than appearance or narrative role. Their speech reveals their character and history. Language becomes one of the chief means by which Tolkien creates cultural identity. The speech of the Elves suggests refinement, antiquity, beauty, and ceremonial dignity. Their words often sound musical and formal. The language associated with the Dwarves suggests secrecy, endurance, and ancestral pride. Hobbit speech carries warmth, humour, domestic ease, and practical intelligence. The Black Speech of Sauron's servants carries harshness, violence, and coercive power. These differences create a linguistic map of Middle-earth. Such variety gives Tolkien's world a sense of cultural plurality. Middle-earth feels alive because speech changes across people, region, class, history, and moral atmosphere. Tolkien also gives variation within the Common Speech, or Westron. Hobbits speak differently from Men. The speech of Gondor differs from the speech of the Shire. These differences make the world socially textured and historically layered. Language

in Tolkien is therefore a form of characterization. A people's manner of speaking reveals their values. The Elves remember. The Dwarves guard. The Hobbits preserve the homely and ordinary. The Orcs distort and degrade. The variety of speech deepens the moral and cultural structure of the fiction.

4. QUENYA AND SINDARIN: THE ELVISH LANGUAGES

Quenya and Sindarin stand at the heart of Tolkien's linguistic achievement. These two Elvish languages have developed grammar, vocabulary, sound patterns, and historical relation. Their importance is not technical alone. They carry the beauty, memory, and dignity of the Elves. Quenya bears the influence of Finnish and functions as a high and ancient Elvish language. In Middle-earth, it occupies a position similar to Latin in medieval Europe. It belongs to ceremony, lore, poetry, lament, and elevated speech. Quenya carries sacred and historical force. When it appears in the narrative, it brings with it a sense of age, dignity, and inherited wisdom. Sindarin, influenced by Welsh, serves as the more widely used Elvish language in Middle-earth. Its sound and structure give it a different character from Quenya. The relation between Quenya and Sindarin creates the impression of linguistic change across time. Tolkien does not present Elvish as one fixed language. He gives it a history. Languages in Middle-earth shift, separate, develop, and carry traces of migration and cultural memory. The literary functions of Quenya and Sindarin are many. They give names to persons, places, and objects. These names carry tone, beauty, and historical meaning. Elvish speech also appears during moments of memory, reverence, grief, or desire. It often marks contact with an older and more graceful order of being. Elvish language gives Tolkien's fiction a feeling of antiquity and solemn beauty. The tale of Beren and Lúthien shows the relation between language, legend, and emotional memory. The Lay of Lúthien belongs to the ancient history of Middle-earth, yet it enters later lives. When Aragorn sees Arwen and calls her "Tinúviel," the old story becomes present again. A name carries legend into living experience. Tolkien uses language to let the past speak inside the present.

5. KHUZDUL AND THE DWARVISH TRADITION

Khuzdul, the language of the Dwarves, carries a different kind of force. Tolkien shaped it with the influence of Semitic linguistic structures, especially Hebrew. It has a compact, guarded, and ancestral quality. It reflects the inwardness of Dwarvish culture, its pride in inheritance, and its concern for secrecy. The Dwarves treat their language as a treasure. They keep it carefully and use it chiefly among themselves. This secrecy gives Khuzdul dignity. It strengthens the sense of community among the Dwarves. Their language is not public property. It belongs to their inner life as a people. Tolkien adds further depth by connecting Khuzdul with Aulë, who is said to have taught the Dwarves their tongue. This gives the language sacred value within the fiction. Khuzdul is both Tolkien's invented language and, inside the story, a divine inheritance. This double status makes it more than a linguistic experiment. The Dwarves also conceal their true names. This practice reveals their cultural reserve and ancestral discipline. Their speech habits show a people who value memory, lineage, craft, and guarded identity. Tolkien also gives them signs and gestures suited to underground labour. This detail widens the range of communication in Middle-earth and gives Dwarvish life greater credibility. Khuzdul therefore functions as a language of secrecy, endurance, and inherited dignity. It makes the Dwarves distinct from the Elves, Hobbits, and Men. Through it, Tolkien gives them a mode of existence rooted in memory and guarded tradition.

6. WESTRON, DIALECT, AND SOCIAL LIFE

Alongside the ancient and invented tongues, Tolkien gives importance to Westron, the Common Speech. Westron allows communication across different peoples. Yet Tolkien does not make it flat or uniform. Even within the Common Speech, there are differences of dialect, idiom, tone, and social register. Hobbit speech is one of the finest examples. It carries domestic ease, humour, simplicity, and good sense. The Hobbits speak in a way that suits the Shire. Their language reflects gardening, food, comfort, family, and

local habit. Their speech roots them in a particular social world. Men, especially those from Gondor or Rohan, often speak in a more formal or elevated manner. Their language reflects political inheritance, public duty, and historical memory. The speech of Rohan carries an old heroic flavour, while Gondor's speech often suggests nobility, burden, and decline. These differences make Middle-earth feel like a society rather than a collection of characters. Communities take form through speech as much as through clothing, custom, or landscape. Tolkien's philological imagination therefore extends beyond invented grammar. It enters the representation of social life. Westron also allows Tolkien to show the relation between the ordinary and the heroic. Hobbits begin with plain speech and everyday habits. Yet they enter a world of ancient names, songs, and high language. This contrast gives the narrative much of its emotional power. The small and homely world of the Shire meets the large and tragic world of legend.

7. ARCHAIC DICTION AND HISTORICAL DEPTH

Tolkien's use of archaic diction gives his fiction a sense of age and formal dignity. Words such as "hath," "doth," and older sentence patterns appear in moments of gravity, ceremony, prophecy, or ancient presence. Such diction places the events of Middle-earth within a remote but living past. Tolkien's knowledge of Old English, Norse literature, and medieval texts informs this aspect of his style. He knew the emotional and historical force of older forms of English. He used them carefully. Archaic diction in his fiction is not scattered everywhere. It appears when the narrative requires solemnity, distance, or inherited authority. The Ents provide a striking example. Their speech is slow, deliberate, and weighty. It suits their age and their closeness to the ancient life of the world. They do not speak quickly because they do not live quickly. Their language reflects their being. Tolkien gives them temporal depth through their speech. Archaic diction also helps distinguish cultures and moments. It can make a speech sound ceremonial, a prophecy sound ancient, or a memory sound sacred. It gives Tolkien's prose a mythic atmosphere without removing it from emotional life. The oldness of the language makes the world feel inherited rather than newly invented.

8. PLACE-NAMES AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF MEANING

Tolkien's mastery of language is clearly seen in his place-names. The geography of Middle-earth gains much of its force from names that carry sound, history, and cultural meaning. Tolkien's landscapes are not blank settings. They are named spaces filled with memory. His place-names come from different linguistic sources, including Modern English, Old English, Middle English poetic diction, and Elvish languages. He chooses names in a way that reflects the character and history of a place. A single location may have more than one name because different peoples have known it in different ways. Rivendell and Imladris, Moria and Khazad-dûm, are examples of this layered naming. Each name belongs to a different linguistic and cultural tradition. The same place changes meaning depending on who names it. This gives Middle-earth historical complexity. Places are not merely seen. They are remembered, translated, and inherited. This practice gives Tolkien's world realism. In actual history, places often carry more than one name because different peoples, languages, and political powers have passed through them. Tolkien uses this principle with great care. Geography in his fiction is tied to language. Land and name belong together. Place-names also create atmosphere. The Shire sounds homely. Mordor sounds harsh and threatening. Lothlórien sounds beautiful and distant. Minas Tirith carries grandeur and defence. The name itself prepares the reader for the place. Tolkien's naming practice is therefore both linguistic and literary.

9. POETRY AND SONG AS MEMORY

Poetry and song occupy an important place in Tolkien's works. They serve as carriers of memory, emotion, and communal identity. Middle-earth contains songs of journey, lament, praise, loss, warning, celebration, and heroic remembrance. These songs preserve what ordinary prose cannot always carry with the same force. Songs connect Tolkien's fiction with oral tradition. They pass from one generation to another and keep the past alive. A Hobbit song, a Dwarvish chant, an Elvish lament, or a song of Rohan reveals the emotional colour of a people. Each has a different rhythm and tone. Through song, Tolkien

gives cultures expressive depth. In *The Silmarillion*, the world is created through the Music of the Ainur. This gives song a cosmic dignity. Music belongs to creation, order, and divine pattern. Later songs in the *legendarium* echo this principle on a smaller scale. They preserve memory, honour sacrifice, and interpret present events in relation to older stories. The Lay of Beren and Lúthien, the songs of the Lonely Mountain, and the laments for Gandalf all show how lyric utterance binds emotion to cultural memory. When characters sing, they do more than express feeling. They place their feeling inside a tradition. Their grief, hope, or courage becomes part of a larger story. Poetry also intensifies the epic quality of Tolkien's fiction. At moments of battle, loss, or solemn choice, song lifts the action into a wider moral and historical frame. It gives feeling a memorable form and allows the reader to sense the depth of time behind the present action.

10. PROVERBS, FOLKTALES, LEGENDS, AND RIDDLES

Tolkien enriches Middle-earth with proverbs, folktales, legends, and riddles. These forms reveal the inherited knowledge, humour, fear, belief, and wisdom of different peoples. They make the world feel old because its inhabitants already possess stories about their past. Folktales often move from hearsay into direct experience. Sam's knowledge of old stories gives him courage during the journey to Mordor. The stories of ancient heroes such as Beren are not dead tales. They help later characters understand their own struggles. In this way, Tolkien shows how folklore sustains moral imagination. In *The Hobbit*, tales of dragons, treasure, mountains, and danger prepare Bilbo for the world beyond the Shire. The adventure feels larger because it is connected with stories already told. Tolkien uses folklore to make Middle-earth credible. A living world must have its own inherited stories. The *Ainulindalë* in *The Silmarillion* functions as a creation legend. It gives Middle-earth a sacred origin and places later events inside a cosmic order. Such legends give the narrative metaphysical scale. They allow readers to see that even small events belong to a larger pattern of creation, rebellion, loss, and hope. Riddles also have literary importance. Bilbo's contest with Gollum in *The Hobbit* is one of the best-known examples. The riddle-game depends on shared oral tradition. It tests wit, memory, and verbal skill. It also carries danger because words become instruments of survival. Through this scene, Tolkien adapts an ancient narrative practice to modern fantasy with remarkable skill. Proverbs and short sayings add another layer of cultural life. They reveal practical wisdom, inherited warning, or communal humour. They make the peoples of Middle-earth sound as if they have lived for generations with their own habits of speech.

11. THE LITERARY FUNCTION OF TOLKIEN'S LINGUISTIC FORMS

The linguistic forms in Tolkien's fiction perform several related functions. They create cultural distinction among peoples. They give historical continuity to places and events. They intensify emotion through poetry and song. They provide memory, ritual, and mythic depth. They also make the world more believable because its languages and traditions possess internal consistency. Language also shapes character. Elvish speech carries grace, memory, and distance. Hobbit speech carries warmth and ordinary intelligence. Dwarvish speech carries reserve and ancestral pride. The harsh language of Orcs contributes to the dark atmosphere connected with them. Tolkien uses speech as one of his chief tools of characterization. Another major function is the union of philology and myth. Tolkien believed that language bears the memory of a people and that myth gives language its imaginative home. This belief explains the unusual coherence of Middle-earth. The languages have histories, and the histories require legends. The legends require peoples, lands, songs, and memories. The whole world grows from this relationship. Tolkien's linguistic art also gives modern fantasy a special dignity. Many fantasy worlds contain invented names, but Tolkien's names feel rooted. Many writers invent words, but Tolkien invents linguistic histories. His work shows that fantasy can have the depth of epic, myth, and philology. It can create a world where speech and culture belong together.

12. CONCLUSION

Tolkien's selected works offer one of the richest examples of linguistic imagination in modern literature. His invented languages, dialectal differences, archaic diction, poetic forms, place-names, proverbs, legends, and riddles all contribute to the power of Middle-earth. These linguistic forms give the fiction cultural range, historical gravity, emotional force, and artistic unity. Quenya and Sindarin give the Elves memory, beauty, and ceremonial depth. Khuzdul gives the Dwarves secrecy and ancestral dignity. Westron and its variations create social texture and communal difference. Archaic diction gives the narrative antiquity and solemnity. Poetry and song preserve emotion and memory. Legends, folktales, and riddles carry inherited wisdom and connect present action with older tradition. Tolkien's literary art depends upon language in the fullest sense. Language creates world, distinguishes peoples, stores memory, and shapes meaning. His fiction continues to endure because it comes from a profound understanding of the bond between speech and culture. Through this understanding, Tolkien gave modern fantasy a linguistic foundation of rare depth and permanence.

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