

Glossopoeia & The Glossopoeists

What does it mean to be a glossopoeist? What does it actually *mean* to create a language and *why* would we do it? What is it that we are actually doing when we design grammars, refine phonologies and forge lexicons? What is it that we actually do and how can we elevate our craft to something further? These might seem like pointless questions with even more pointless answers. You have every right to say to me, “why can’t we just go on with our peculiar hobby in peace without having to turn it into anything serious?” You might well be right, and if so, I should be ignored! However, I sincerely believe, these questions and their answers are indispensable if we are to progress any further with our artistic movement. If we truly wish to optimise our full potential, we must fully understand it and its impact.

This need to define what glossopoeia is has come from its recent burst in popularity. Modern popular culture has brought, along with extensive, expanded universes, a peaked interest in the idea of constructed languages and with that a definite rise in people trying their hand at weaving together a tongue of their own. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that with the elaboration of the worlds where epic films are set, such as James Cameron’s *Avatar* or *Game of Thrones*, we find language construction at its very heart. A language brings realism to literature and film that is enchanting in quite the literal sense. The general genre of High Fantasy and Science Fiction would now seem so lacking if there were no Elvish and Valyrian or Klingon and Na’vi. The reason for this, I believe, is directly related to two things: the true nature of language and what it actually means to create a language. Comprehending glossopoeia, I believe, is the path to consolidating this power even further. In disciplining and theorising glossopoeia, I also strongly believe we would enhance the experience of the individual glossopoeist. As it is an artistic endeavour, it is a personal and intimate action that requires self-knowledge and spirituality. It cannot be disconnected from these things. It is these two ideas I wish to try and expand on in order to understand fully our art, and also to suggest a method based on this to elevate it.

In defining glossopoeia, it is prudent to discard what it certainly isn’t. Glossopoeia is not a branch or field of linguistics. A linguist is a social scientist who studies and investigates the deep complexities

of the linguistic mysteries that still evade our understanding. Linguists are concerned with the dissection of language and making sense of its functionality, like a biologist with nature or a physicist with the cosmos. The linguist deals with facts, logic and reality, writes grammar and theorises to find the truth about the phenomenon of language. This is not to say of course, that a linguist has no appreciation for beauty. Indeed, an understanding of linguistics is what gives you that appreciation. Like understanding those underlying subtleties of a musical composition through musical theory, which note is which and how it combines with others to produce a euphonic result, one must only appreciate language further through the science of linguistics. Linguists are not passionless or apathetic; they act through their love of language.

Yet, it would be wrong to conflate the science of linguistics with the art of glossopoeia. Glossopoeia is not scientific. It does not deal with investigation in an objective, calculated sense. Although we must have significant linguistic knowledge to appreciate the paints we have on our easels, we are not content to sit and admire them, but we see the combinations and patterns of things which could be. Austronesian alignments combined with Semitic roots, consonant mutation before a click, phonology of only front vowels, all these are real parts developed in natural languages, but can only be combined in the mind of the glossopoeist. A glossopoeist guides these seemingly disjointed ideas, through the organic course of linguistic development, into a seamless piece of artwork. That is what gives it it's realism. This is why when there feels to be too much or too little of the objective bounds of language, where the science has been disregarded, an "ugly" language is produced. The natural balance has been upset by either lack of knowledge or experience. The best example of this is the "kitchen sink" language, where the budding glossopoeist, overwhelmed by all the wonderful new colours before them, attempts to smear them all over the canvass.

This captures accurately, I think, the elevated nature of our craft. We as glossopoeists use the objective measurements of material language as symbols and metaphor. Glossopoeia, therefore, can offer us another way for understanding the deep, interpretative essences of language which linguistics misses out on in its (rightful) commitment to science. There are concepts about language which exist but are ignored and disparaged by the wider linguistic because they are unscientific. As glossopoeists however, we are free to explore these possibilities and find out more about the mystical

elements of languages which may be immaterial, but by no means less real. A glossopoeist is free for example to pursue phonetic and grammatical symbolism, to relate phonemes with meaning and morphology with motifs. This is why it is vital to separate the two out. A good linguist makes a good glossopoeist and a good glossopoeist must be competent with linguistics. However, they should be regarded, even savoured, as different disciplines.

I believe that the construction of language for the purposes of universal communication should be discarded as not glossopoeic. Of course, it comes under the banner of language construction because that is the only word to describe the finished product, yet for very important reasons, they cannot be defined as living languages. Volapük, Ido, Novial and Interlingua were all made to be tools for a specific goal, that is to be neutral and auxiliary language. They have deliberately restrictive and squeezed grammars and lexicons to achieve their universality and simplicity. They are also historically void, with no life or culture. They have no soul. Tolkien himself comments on this very fact, that these international languages are *“dead, far deader than ancient unused languages.”*³ This, of course, is the point of these languages, but paradoxically the reason for their failure. The distinct advantage of an auxiliary language is that it pertains to no culture or nation, that it is entirely neutral and that it remains lifeless so it may be employed as a tool rather than a piece of artwork. But also, this seems to be the reason for their failure. Since they are made to be fabricated imitations of language rather than as languages themselves, they are unappealing and awkward to use. Much like speakers of Modern Standard Arabic will tell you, it feels uncomfortable to use because it misses its naturalness. The very obvious exception to this trend, and the reason why it is the only candidate as an alternative to English, is Esperanto. As an Esperantist myself, in both the linguistic and political sense, I feel the difference. Esperanto has achieved something remarkable in that it has achieved along with its regularity and simplicity, a natural elegance. It is enjoyable to speak, write and read and has an extensive literature. Over its 130-year history, Esperanto has conceived culture and literature only attainable by natural

³ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, 180 To ‘Mr Thompson’*

languages. The breath of life stirs within it because, rather than aiming to be the language of no people, it aimed to be the language of Humanity which has given it its distinct edge.

So rather than language built commercially on a production line, glossopoeia is much more self-expression than designing something with a goal in mind. Other than being a something made in a factory or a devised code for communicating in secret with friends, the glossopoeic goal doesn't appear to anything to do with sharing. Language as art is not the same as language as tool. Glossopoeia is language as an artistic expression and not one built for functionality. For instance, one does not use a piece of music or a painting but enjoys it as the representation of another's creative spirit. A manufactured invention has telicity, whereas art doesn't; a true language is never-ending. It seems to me to be true that an auxiliary language is a fabricated language rather than an actual language itself. It is a shadow of one. Glossopoeists, creators of language as art, should concern themselves with creating languages and not fabrications. After all, an author does not fabricate a novel.

What glossopoeia is for an individual glossopoeist is the same as any art-form is to any type of artist: an act of self-expression. As all writers and artists understand, their painted pictures or written prose are not the results of a conscious effort at all, but a semi-conscious one. This means simply that instead of calculating and schematising their work, they let themselves actualise it onto the page. Glossopoeists must do the same. True creativity, a beautiful thing to witness, is the action of this self-actualisation. Glossopoeia is where the language you create is a reflection of you. It is an individualistic experience discovered by the glossopoeist themselves, rather than an imposition of a certain style. Glossopoeia has an excitement and a pleasure about it which does not come from fabricating a language for a particular purpose. For the glossopoeist, glossopoeia is an act of need, rather than of intention.

When a glossopoeist creates a language, what does that actually mean? What, in other words, does it entail create a language? Why does a language make popular literature more real? Giving the Dothraki a fully formed language, with grammar, phonology and rules, made that people truer than just having been created without one. George R.R. Martin took the trouble to mention that the

Dothraki have language, whereas he could have just let them be nomadic savages. The Na'vi were given language by the wonderful Dr Paul Frommer, whereas James Cameron could have just left them to speak a random spluttering of incomprehensible sounds. This is all-important for understanding the true impact of language construction. Tolkien comments again and again, that the creation of his people and his world came from the creation of his languages.

Relating to the theory of language which I discussed, I think I can best reveal what the real significance is through the creation of language, and why it does bring realism. Taking it as true, that a linguistic community is equal to that of a people, *when one creates a language, one simultaneously creates a people*. What I mean is that the reason why a language given to the Elves, Na'vi and Dothraki makes them more real, is because language is an inseparable element to being a people. You can create culture, history, religion and politics, but to truly bring them to life, the *essential* ingredient is language. This is related to what we see in our world. A Georgian is not Georgian because he has a flag with a red cross on it and eats *khinkali*. They are Georgian because they speak Georgian. The language comes first and becomes the most sacred element of a person's spirit. This is the same with peoples in constructed worlds, that the language must come first in order to give them reality and personification.

A way of consolidating this truth in the natural sphere of languages is the creation of a standard grammar. Despite the scorn that prescriptivism is met with by modern linguists, rejecting the idea in its entirety and even rejecting its practicality as well. There are advantages for having a standardised way of speaking and writing. In fact, we glossopoeists would have nothing if we hadn't already first created a standard set of rules to go by. For glossopoeia, this is all done extremely well as we produce large detailed grammars and wordlists which might rival any linguistic department. The next consolidation is that natural languages have extensive historical development. Many glossopoeists have done this, tracing out the historical development of their own languages with etymologies and sound change patterns which are beautifully in line with the "modern" variation of the language. They also derive daughter languages and track the development of their peoples and across time and space. Lastly, and most importantly, well-developed natural languages have an extensive corpus of literature. This last point is, I believe, the way in which we can push our craft to

something more refined and detailed. In order to do this, I propose adding to the list of glossopoetics which we already possess, another tool to the box: glossopoeic philology.

Philology is the study of language through time from a literary perspective. It is the marriage of both the interpretive study of literature with the scientific study of language, rather than the common divorce found in the Anglophonic tradition of both. Philology is historical linguistics which takes into account not merely the scientific study of the evolution of that language, but valuing also the important interpretive and aesthetic beauty of ancient languages and their developments through time. Tolkien was, of course, a much-famed philologist and argued strongly for the unification of both language and literature in the same department⁴, because he believed that you couldn't divorce a language from its myth and nor a myth from its language⁵; the two are necessarily inclusive. The reason for this is that a language's true self can only be discoverable through its use. One may have a completed grammar and lexicon of thousands of words, but that, as we have already analysed with the case of the auxiliary languages, is not sufficient enough to give that language life. In order to give our languages essence and to make them alive, we glossopoeists must create literature through them.

We have all created languages in the material sense that we have given them a working grammar and lexicon. We even have peoples who speak those languages and have long internal historical developments where we apply linguistic laws to our own fictions to watch their natural course of change. But how do we actually make these languages living? How do we avoid creating deader than dead languages? What makes ancient languages still spark with the fire of life? The answer to this lies within the creation of literature, prose and poetry in our constructed languages.

To compose is to express a people who speak or spoke the language, even if their biological presence is no longer, they are still real. The Ancient Greeks are no longer among us, but the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* still remain. The ancient Hindu poet Vyasa died over six millennia ago along with Sanskrit, and yet the *Mahabharata* still whispers the echoes of the lives of the people who once used it as a lingua franca. This sense of realism makes true what I repeated: *that*

⁴ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, 7 To the Electors of the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professorship of Anglo-Saxon, University of Oxford*

⁵ *A Secret Vice*, page 24

human society and language are indivisible and integral parts of each other. And so what the glossopoeist is tasked with through their creative talents is not just to design an aesthetically pleasing language but with also bringing their own languages to life.

The importance of glossopoeic philology lies in creating original material in the language. We must write naturally and authentically in our constructed languages and produce original pieces of prose and poetry in order for that true essence to come alive. Translation, though an effective exercise for developing lexicons and practising grammar, fails to achieve the same impact that glossopoeic philology accomplishes. Although many great works of literature have been translated and that way have become parts of our national literature, the only true quintessence of the Kalevala, Beowulf and the Tanakh can only be fully absorbed through reading them in the Finnish, the Old English and the Hebrew. Because despite all this painstaking desire for accuracy in meaning, the real significance is only really accessible to those who study the language and appreciate the deeper elegance of the grammar and semantics. The most important piece of literature that should be considered would be the writing of a national epic. Contributing to the common myth among any people, an epic poem or story written in the language of that people will give them a strong foundation for future development. *So write! Write a Kalevala or a Ramayana! Write to bring your languages to life!*