Neo-Tolkienianism & Aesthetics

What is it about language that makes it so attractive? Just on a material level alone, language is much like all other natural expressions. It is a complex and sophisticated system of phonetics and grammar, expressed through the simplest of manners. It is complexity expressed as simplicity, which seems to me the exact definition of what beauty is. The seamlessness of the imperfection of languages can take your breath away. As it still takes mine…

My glossopoeic career, so far as I can remember, began with Tolkien. Even without a glimmer of linguistic talent at the age of eleven, the beauty and elegance of the Elvish languages entranced me. I had no idea what grammar or phonetics were at the time, but I remember just enjoying reading and practising the language. In fact, they had such a profound impact on me, I am now writing this. To this day, the main inspiration that pushed my little boat into the waters of glossopoeic creation is, and will always remain, J.R.R. Tolkien.

However, I never quite realised the breadth of his contribution to the art, not just his languages, but also to the overall theory of the craft. I never really fully comprehended it until I read *A Secret Vice*. Inside that wonderful compilation of Dimitra Fimi's and Andrew Higgins', is a revelation of what it is to construct languages. The revelation of what Tolkien theorises and talks about in his lecture had a profound impact on my personal glossopoeic style, but I've noticed that it has, by and large, been ignored by the rest of the community.

I first noticed this lack of Tolkienianism when I went to my first Language Creation Conference in 2015. Having been primarily influenced by who is rightfully regarded as the father of glossopoetics, I found it extraordinary that there was no mention of him at all! It could be of course that his influence is so well-known that it is not necessary, that his work is now such a truism of the community that it is needless to allude to. Yet, I found that, despite his work being widely received, his actual philosophy didn't seem to be. This lacking has led to two issues, which I have identified, with the current, mainstream movement of language construction.

Before I go any further, I wish to highlight that this is not meant to be taken as offence. It is not to pour scorn and judgement on the quality of anyone else's language creations. It is clear, as an art and

craft, that our community is full of glossopoeists with their own distinctive élan. I, you, and everyone make differently, and it would be wrong of me to make this a critique of individuals, and that is what I hope I have avoided doing. The point is not to promote conformity either, but to provoke a new, alternative artistic movement within glossopoeia itself. It is not meant to be contrarian, although it might well be polemic. Neither is this me imposing a "proper" way in which to construct language. I have no intention of turning the LCS into an exclusive platform of Neo-Tolkienianism because not only would that be an insult to other glossopoeists but to Tolkien himself. My desire is to inspire a style of language construction based on the ideas of Tolkien adapted for modern times *within* the existing community. That we might have two or three competing schools of language construction! My hope is to be influential enough for this to be the case.

With that out of the way, I want to first identify the two main issues within the language construction community today. Firstly, there is an overemphasis on the role of linguistics within the art. As I have already identified in *Glossopoeia & The Glossopoeists*, the difference between linguistics and glossopoeia, I believe, is an important distinction since they are both different ways of approaching language. What I mean by an overemphasis on the linguistic side of language is not that it is too scientific as a practice, but that we focus solely on the material aspects of the language instead of exploring other parts. In other words, looking at language construction from a purely linguistic perspective denies us the opportunity to understand things about the nature of language from a more spiritual and artistic point of view. For instance, the exploration of unlinguistic concepts such as mysticism and symbolism. Glossopoeia has a lot more to offer us as insight from a philosophical and spiritual angle that we are missing out on.

The second issue is that there is an inattention to the aesthetics of language. This is not to say that there are no beautiful languages being constructed today, or that anyone should be the supreme judge of what is beautiful or not, but that modern language construction, so grounded in linguistics, has not paid sufficient attention to aesthetics. What makes a language beautiful and naturalistic? How do we avoid creating minimalist and "kitchen sink" languages which abandon the core magic of what a language is? These are the fundamental questions which must be explored and

answered, and I believe that aesthetics, along with a developed approach to them, may well be the solution.

What captures my attention and attracts me to Tolkien is the way he talks about natural languages. Tolkien was not a linguist in the sense that we would understand in the modern context; he was a philologist, the difference being in the approach to language. While the linguist descends on a language with a dissecting knife and sifts through its sinew to discover its functionality, the philologist examines the aesthetic and poetic application of a language. In other words, it is appreciation of language beyond the material. The lamentable divorce between the science of linguistics and literature was opposed by Tolkien[6].

Tolkien came at natural languages aesthetically rather than a functionally. He did not pick one for its practicality regarding communication but by the lure of its beauty.

> *"It was like discovering a complete wine-cellar filled with bottles of an amazing wine of a kind and flavour never tasted before. It quite intoxicated me."*[7]

The idea of flavours and tastes is so fundamental to the Tolkienian perspective on the nature of language itself. That linguistic concepts can derive pleasure and enjoyment either through learning it or constructing it is crucial. The language is savoured and experienced rather than just learnt and analysed is unique. The way Tolkien talks about language is romantic and loving and even, albeit very slightly, sybarite, though never perverted. This passion that Tolkien exhibits connects with me on a deep level.

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The importance of aesthetics when it comes to language and its impact on glossopoeia is very much neglected by the linguistic and scientific study of the language. But what are aesthetics? And how can we apply such a supposedly subjective measure to our artwork? And what do aesthetics help tell us about the nature of language?

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[6] *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, 7 To the Electors of the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professorship of Anglo-Saxon, University of Oxford*
[7] Tolkien describing his first encounter with Finnish in *Letters*.

These questions are answerable in the context of Tolkien's own language construction and his wider theory pertaining to language, indeed, aesthetics are their foundation.

What aesthetics can tell us about natural languages is quite fascinating. It is clear what Tolkien was trying to get at in his analysis of language, is that aesthetics were just as important to a language as its grammar, phonology and vocabulary. Moreover, that the aesthetics are a driving force within the language. In considering the aesthetics an equal component to the other three part of language mentioned, it differentiates the field of philology quite considerably from linguistics. For instance, the biology of an animal is driven by its need for survival and to enhance its practicality in guaranteeing the best chance for further reproduction, the diversity of species can be accounted for in the diversity of habitats and situations in which an animal finds itself. This could well be the same for languages. But isn't communication the raison d'être for language? That to communicate ideas and desires, opinions and descriptions to one another, the ultimate goal of using language? And if so, easing and facilitating language development would be central motivator for linguistic change throughout time.

However, if we examine the diversity of language, this doesn't seem to be the case. If it were true that language merely adapted to make itself easier to pronounce and put across ideas, it would be the case that all languages are heading towards a simpler, and indeed, similar form. This, of course, is not the case. In contrast to biology, language is not produced through an arbitrary process of beatings and battering - despite their speakers certainly being subjected to it. Instead, language comes about through collective human creativity. Through what Tolkien termed an individual's *"inherent linguistic predilections"*, a language speaking community unconsciously collaborates through their own personal aesthetic tastes to choose a particular feel and flavour of a language over another. For example, why, when they split apart from Old Spanish, did Portuguese opt for greater nasalisation while Castilian did not? Could it be that choice to adopt stronger nasal vowels was, as well as driven by sound change phenomena, was also an election Portuguese as a people? Is the reason why Vulgar Latin a result of natural processes internal in language, or was Latin also less aesthetically pleasing to speak than Italian? In this sense, language ceases to be a merely communicative tool, but actually an artistic creation.

No linguist will ever tell you what is a "beautiful" and what is an "ugly" language. I do not believe that this is merely to withhold judgement. Could it be the case that after thousands of years to develop, that aesthetic predilection for individuals, working together in their communities, making their choices, driving the shape of language, has been sufficient time to now be the case that all languages are "un-ugly"? That there are no more ugly languages because we've already evolved away from them? How early could this have been done? Perhaps it was one of the first decisions we ever made. *An example of Black Speech doesn't exist in the real world, for instance.*

In his essay *A Secret Vice*, Tolkien uses the distinction between communication and aesthetics as his chief differentiator between languages which have been constructed as codes and those as which have true life to them. His examples of *"nursery-languages"*, Animalic and Nevbosh lacked the essence of being part of a higher stage of language construction because there was:

> *"[In Nevbosh] no real breaking away from 'English' or the native traditional language. Its notions - their associations with certain words, even their inherited accidental confusions; their range and limits - are preserved"*[8] and that Nevbosh as a code *"remained unfreed of the communicative aspect of a language."*[9]

To Tolkien, the pleasure which is derived from the articulation of a sound matched with its semantic notion was more of driver for language than that of mere communication. That also, languages had their own distinct flavour and tastes is very important. That there was a "Greekness" to Greek or a "Welshness" to Welsh which gave each language its own distinct savour and twang[10], and this was brought about through the aesthetic quality of the word-form.

The aesthetic analysis of a language also tells us more about the nature of languages as a whole. With an individual's personal predilection, one can access and enjoy literature composed in ancient languages. The appreciation of aesthetics gives us the accessibility, although dimly, to what native speakers at the time had, that we can also derive pleasure from them:

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[8] *A Secret Vice*, page 13
[9] *A Secret Vice*, page 18
[10] *In Essay On Phonetic Symbolism, A Secret Vice* page 71

"Thus, even seen darkly through the distorting glass of our ignorance of the details of Greek pronunciation, our appreciation of the splendour of Homeric Greek in word-form is possibly keener, or more conscious of, that it was to a Greek, much else of other elements of poetry though we may miss."[11]

Tolkien believed that we all possess an individual linguistic predilection which determined, however weakly or strongly, our personal taste towards certain languages. That certain languages would produce to the individual a sense of pleasure and others wouldn't. As examples, Tolkien's cites his experience with French and Greek:

"French has given to me less of this pleasure than any other language with which I have sufficient acquaintance for this judgement. The fluidity of Greek, punctuated by hardness, and with its surface glitter, captivated me…"[12]

This predilection or personal taste for language is something Tolkien believed to be inherent to every individual, that each human being has his own *"personal linguistic potential"*[13] or even instinct. In A Secret Vice, he defines this as having two parts to it, one coming from the individual personal exposures that defined his taste for music, art, etc. which would have developed as a child. The other part which is common to a certain group of human beings, or potential a universal constraint on the taste which evolves from language. This last consideration might be why languages have only developed in the way they have.

It is this individual predilection identified by Tolkien which I believe to be an inalienable glossopoetic tool. Tolkien utilised it consciously to develop and shape his Elvish languages within the bounds of both their unique aesthetics as languages and the overall feel of his taste. When one reads and studies the Elvish languages, they have their own aesthetic nature to them which is contained within the bounds of a very naturalistic and organic feel, and also, there is the underlying experience of Tolkien himself. It is to this that we as glossopoeists must aspire in order to refine our languages.

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[11] A Secret Vice page 16
[12] Tolkien's 1955 Lecture *English and Welsh* to be found in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* page 191
[13] Page 190

Aesthetics is not about saying which language is "ugly" and which "beautiful". This would, of course, be wrong subjective judgement, although it is perfectly acceptable to avoid learning or paying attention to a language because it does not tickle your predilection. As well as with music and art, tastes change over time. However, this not what is meant by aesthetics. Aesthetics is rather the application of your personal, individual predilection, trained and cultured over time by experiences with natural languages, to your own glossopoeic endeavours. This sets glossopoeists apart from, say polyglots, who also use this predilection solely for the enjoyment of other languages and who have a well-formed and sophisticated palate for doing so. The glossopoeist, however, harnesses it with their own creativity.

Another way to think of it is the difference between an uncultured and cultured palate in the food industry. An uncultured with taste skilfully prepared food and enjoy it as much as it is without considering the marriage of flavours that the expert chef has no doubt attempted to achieve. The cultured palate, however, does notice these differences and can identify perhaps the freshness from a squirt of lemon or the gentle, earthy taste of a sprig of thyme. The inexperienced chef might throw in all sorts of flavours into a dish, resulting in an unpleasantly overpowering flavour. The glossopoeist in this regard is much like the chef and the palate much like the individual linguistic predilection.

Why I think aesthetics are so important for glossopoeia is because much of the minimalist or experimental pursuits seem to me to defeat the point of language being art. The naturalistic constraints of a language cannot either be underapplied or overapplied if that organic balance is be maintained. To create a language with two grammatical cases, 8 phonemes and solely agglutinative morphology of many same-sounding suffixes, produces an unappealing result. As well as a language with seventy-six cases, twenty-six tenses and a big mix of clicks and ejectives with implosives and goodness knows what else. It is not that either of these as languages couldn't *work*, but they would be a lot more relevant to glossopoeia if significant time was spent also refining and culturing the language through aesthetic attention. The same goes for experimental languages. Ingenious those having a philosophical or allegorical language maybe, it is unpleasant without proper attention to aesthetics.

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One of Tolkien's insights into the art of language invention was his belief in the pleasure derived from the word-form, and that that word-form had a symbolic relationship to its meaning. As we have already looked at, Tolkien believed aesthetics to be an important perspective for looking at language rather than purely functional, practical perspective of communication. Central to this was what Tolkien termed a *"sense of fitness"*[14] between the phonetic realisation of a word and the notion of the word itself. He believed that there were some word-forms which suited their meaning better than others, and that in some way, these choices had some universality when languages elect choices for their lexicon. For instance, Tolkien points out the semantical similarity between English *cut* and Finnish *kaktaise* which are completely unrelated etymologically yet have a similar sign-meaning relationship[15].

The *"refinement of the word-form"*[16] is what Tolkien describes as an important difference between the stage of a code and an actual language. What does this mean though? Could we not find a concept and put any set of phonemes together and there you go, a word? We could do this, of course, we could. But if we had two options for the concept of "beauty", for instance, *grashdra* and *masadavál*, which one would you pick? Tolkien exemplifies this in his essay on Phonetic Symbolism, *"<u>SEK</u> is 'more suitable' to express 'cut' than, say MU, MUL etc."*[17], and rightly points out this choice is *"more convincingly negative"*, that it is easier to cast <u>MUL</u> aside than pick <u>SEK</u>. Does this in any way prove wrong the Saussurian pronouncement that "sign is arbitrary"? Well, yes and no. We can still believe that the word-form related to its notion is significant without having to make a claim for an objective meaning relating to signifier and signed. We could argue that there exists a collective subjective preference relating to languages, which is a deep, basic instinct for certain meaning and the sounds, and that influences our very rudimentary election between languages. This could be the basis of the individual linguistic predilection previously discussed.

For the glossopoeist, however, the refinement of the word-form is a critical consideration. That there exists a sense of pleasure

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[14] *A Secret Vice,* page 15
[15] *In Essay On Phonetic Symbolism, A Secret Vice* page 65
[16] *A Secret Vice*, page 17
[17] Page 65

between the way in which the word is pronounced and its related meaning is something which we should consider when language-making. It elevates a language above code, that rather than being mere word-matching with a jumble of sounds put together randomly, there is consideration and expression. For example, my favourite Greek word *θάλασσα* "sea" is not just aesthetically pleasing to me in a material way, but the geminated alveolar fricative with the dental initial, and the wonderful neutrality of the lateral, generates for me a feeling of intense satisfaction; the word itself fits with the flow of the sea. This of course plays into my own individual predilection for language taste, yours might be a different word in Greek or a different language altogether. But the essential idea here is that attention must be placed with the word and its meaning to make it artistic and pleasurable. Taking time to find this sense of fitness with a word will elevate the craft beyond something arbitrary.

> *"[This pleasure] is simpler, deeper-rooted and yet more immediate than the enjoyment of literature. Though it may be allied to some elements in the appreciation of verse, it does not need any poets, other than the nameless artists who composed the language. It can be strongly felt in the simple contemplation of a vocabulary…"[18]*

The question of phonetic symbolism also goes further than the word-form and fitness, but that actual meaning is conveyed through some sounds cross-linguistically. Not that there are words which objectively convey a certain idea like the word *industrialisation* is the only way to express "industrialisation" and that *diwydiannu* or *sanoatlashtirish* (Welsh and Uzbek respectively) are incorrect. Rather what is meant is that there may be very basic meaning which are carried off by certain sounds. Tolkien observes that *"diminutive suffixes, are especially associated with vowel i, ī (pretty for pratty, teeny for tiny)."[19]* That the most basic of sounds match with a certain concept is something the glossopoeist must consider when creating a language with a distinct flavour. This attention to the importance of phonetic symbolism is already evident: Klingon, Dothraki and Elvish are all examples of languages created either to sound harsh or elegant, and although we state that this is just to make the language

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[18] *English and Welsh, The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* page 190
[19] Page 65

sound like another natural language to match the conceived people, what we are also doing is recognising the reality of phonetic symbolism.

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An artistic movement is one which has its roots grounded in a certain philosophy or with a certain goal in mind. Already we see this in music, art and literature as the composers, artists and authors either identify themselves or are identified with a certain style or school. Glossopoeia as far as a form of art has gone, has significantly lacked this and glossopoeists generally go unidentified. There are advantages to this, of course, namely the tremendous amount of inclusivity which is shown around the community. This inclusivity has promoted a great deal of diversity within the art and has enabled creativity and ideas to flourish without any need for a set rulebook. However, one of the reasons why I believe glossopoeia needs to begin defining a "higher" culture, is because of its growth in popularity. Over the years since the release of HBO's Game of Thrones, the idea of language construction has gained more and more interest. We have had a documentary, interviews and books published about the insides of our craft and it is now obvious to me that I am no longer greeted with the same, mystified gaze I used to when I said I was a "conlanger". Granted I have managed to gain a little of this back by saying "glossopoeist" but the idea of language creation being something abnormal or strange is now gone.

Yet, it is not just my own personal, selfish lament of no longer being the intriguing one at parties that makes me believe we need to define artistic movements within glossopoeia. Despite the loss of the stigma of abnormality or, dare I say, weirdness, there has been no accompanied growth in respect. I don't say this in a pretentious way but as a commentary. Glossopoeia, especially framed as "conlanging", is regarded as a quirk or hobby, and not with the seriousness that I believe it deserves. My aim here is not just to define and promote an artistic movement, but also to make our art recognised as such. The modern glossopoeia, as I have already stated, is very much dominated by a linguistic and pragmatic approach. This more material and scientific school is what I think most glossopoeists nowadays pertain to. What my attempt here though is to promote a new school of glossopoeia with the revitalisation and "reawareness" of Tolkien's personal glossopoetics

and applying to a wider style and philosophy. We have already looked at what Tolkienian glossopoetics are, but let us now try and define them in the context of something more suited to the current glossopoeic context.

To be a Neo-Tolkienian in practice would be to fully involve the individual spirit in one's language construction. It is about the experience of the glossopoeist, their own originality to create, through their own linguistic palate. But in the modern context, I think this could be pushed further than Tolkien's address solely to the idea of the word-form. The word-form, how the word looks and feels on the page and tongue is, of course, a primary aspect to the pleasure of a language, but it seems to me that this pleasure is derived from all aspects of a language. This means that a Neo-Tolkienian pays attention to aesthetics to the entirely of the language. The creation of a beautiful sound system and organic phonotactics is mirrored in the construction of a fluid orthography and grammar. Even the romanisation of a language should be well-functioning and well-defined to give off the essence of pleasure when presenting the language.

The fourth underlying principles for Tolkienianism are defined most helpfully in the introduction to *A Secret Vice*[20]:

a) *"the creation of word-forms that sound aesthetically pleasing;*
b) *a sense of 'fitness' between symbol (the word-form and its sound) and sense (it's meaning);*
c) *the construction of an elaborate and ingenious grammar; and*
d) *the composition of a fictional historical background for an*
e) *invented language, including a sense of its (hypothetical change in time."*

More of these ideas are already put into practice, from the original influence of Tolkienian glossopoetics on our art. We already construct elaborate and ingenious grammars and compose historical sound changes. However, the aesthetics are the part of Tolkien's glossopoetics which I think needs to be pushed out and reconsidered into the modern context.

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[20] To be found on page xvi

In terms of grammatical aesthetics, appreciation should be focused on the way a language arranges its morphology. A morpheme should work seamlessly with another without anything too jarring or unnatural in its application. Consistency – although not regularity – should be a principal aim when devising a grammar. Do not, for instance, have the accusative expressed as prefix and the dative as an infix unless there be a reason. You could have irregular verbs governed by a separate conjugation paradigm, but don't make them completely arbitrary to one another. Even in grammatical concepts, avoid the kitchen sink scenario in which you pour in all the moods you can find into your mixing bowl and then find whisking them together an impossibility. Go with your natural instincts and flow with your own creativity. You will know if something feels too clunky and unrefined. You may create something deeply complex and sophisticated, but it *must* be expressed through simplicity to maintain an aesthetic.

The consistency rule is also important for the designing of lexicon. For instance, finding a word which fits with its sense of meaning in its individual case, but it would be silly and uneuphonic to create one word which is *galap'anawu* and another *meldir*. They don't match at all. Therefore, it is important to have consistency in the phonotactics of a language which will also give your language a distinct flavour. A further note on phonology and pronunciation: pronounce the language in a natural way, and not in a coerced, monotonal manner in which long vowels are doubled and geminates are geminated again. Speak as if it is entirely natural language and allow for the stress to find itself and for the pronunciation to flow effortlessly. In this way, you allow your language to find its own stress or pitch or tonal patterns, rather than being imposed from above; document and describe, rather than dictate and prescribe.

In the creation of an ugly language for an ugly people, the same principles of aesthetics apply. Despite its shivery, unpleasant feel, Black Speech maintains its consistency, using harsher sounds to produce a distasteful flavour. I imagine [x, χ, k, g, z, ʃ] or voiced consonants with lots of clusters and complex codas achieve it. Again here, aesthetics is important. Tolkien utilised the same aesthetic focus to help him design Black Speech to be unbeautiful and foul and reflective of the evil of Sauron. This is something I personally have found difficult to reproduce because it is not in my nature to create harsh languages, and I struggle to see the world in the same way; this, of course, influences my creative process.

The guiding principles of Neo-Tolkienianism are organicism and naturalism. That, in combining elements and obeying masterfully the natural linguistic laws of sound change, morphology and syntax, the glossopoeist can express their true creativity. The idea of the organicism is important since you are producing a piece of artwork which is to be enjoyed by you and other glossopoeists. It is meant to feel and look pleasurable! Therefore, stick to naturalism and produce something which has notions of a natural language, and yet is special since it runs with the element of you as well. This can be applied to the designing of a language for any race of people. Instead of just Elves or Fairies, it can be adapted for an alien species on a different planet. We should pay attention to this as part of our glossopoetics, not just to make our languages more naturalistic or realistic – more like languages – which I think is the basic idea for aesthetics, but also to make our language an expression of ourselves. If through our developed linguistic palate, we can develop a language along these lines and make it an act of self-actualisation with care and consideration, we can produce something incredible to behold, and totally unique, pertaining to our souls.

The objectives of the Neo-Tolkienian approach to glossopoeia are thus:

(1) the refinement of the individual's linguistic predilection;
(2) free exploration the non-scientific nature of language;
(3) to bring aesthetics to the forefront of our craft;
(4) to enhance our own spiritual experience of individual creation; and
(5) to mature and elevate our craft as a respected art-form.