



Science and Romance: Philology's Marginalization under the Trend of Structural Linguistics in the 20th Century—The Case of J. R. R. Tolkien

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Abstract— *J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*, made his unique concept of language as the cornerstone of his academic thought and literary creation. He created an immortal epic legend, brought readers a sense of reality and created an awesome mythological system for Britain. However, he was often criticized for his lack of academic contributions. Combining the development and reasons of linguistics in the 20th century, this paper discusses Tolkien's linguistic aesthetics, making a brief analysis of their academic significance, and demonstrates Tolkien's efforts to save philology under the backdrop of structuralism.*



Keywords— *J. R. R. Tolkien; linguistic aesthetics; historical and comparative linguistics; philology; structural linguistics*

I. INTRODUCTION

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892 – 1973), a professor of philology at University of Leeds and Oxford University successively, mainly researched and taught English and Germanic philology, including the history of English, Old and Middle English philology, introductory Germanic philology and so on (Tolkien, 2013). As a world-famous fantasy literature writer, people know Tolkien mostly because of his *The Lord of the Rings* (1954 – 1955) which was consistently voted as one of the greatest books of the 20th century by the English-reading world. However, because of the dual identity as philology and author, Tolkien was adamant that science and roman were compatible. Precisely because of this, after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien was censured for using too much linguistic knowledge by the mainstream literary field, and was criticized for paying too much attention to the literariness of language by mainstream linguistics school.

Due to the late introduction of Western linguistics into China, Chinese scholars accept modern linguistics as a thoroughly scientific discipline which is based on the theory

of Saussure and Chomsky. As for comparative linguistics or philology, which developed before structuralist linguistics in modern times, foreign linguistics textbooks in China almost unanimously agree that structuralist theory pioneered modern linguistics, so the attention on philology in China is not high enough. Hence, Tolkien studies in China are mainly in literature and Chinese translation. As for Tolkien's linguistic ideas and academic career in the trend of structural linguistics in the 20th century, there is not even too much attention in China. Except for those who are interested in his dedicated usage of language, J. R. R. Tolkien is an almost unknown linguist to most Chinese probably.

II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF LINGUISTICS IN THE 20TH CENTURY: FROM PHILOLOGY TO STRUCTURALISM

Philology is the study of the history of language. When the emphasis is on the comparison of the historical states of different languages, it is also called comparative philology or comparative linguistics. In the 19th century, comparative

and historical linguistics occupied a dominant position in Western linguistic schools together. The previous relative research of philology can be traced back to the comparison between European languages and non-European languages in the late 18th century and the early 19th century. The preliminary task of philologists includes recovering and establishing the documents themselves, determining the orthography, grammar, and lexicon of their language, and reconstructing their history and context, then interpreting the texts and the entire culture that underlies them (Aronoff, 2002).

In 1786, William Jones (1746 - 1794) found the historical kinship among Sanskrit, Latin, Greek and Germanic, which thereout began the study of modern linguistics and marked a new era in linguistic history. In the 19th century, German scholar Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767 - 1835) pointed out that language is a creative ability in the human brain, pushing the speaker to create unlimited linguistic performances with limited linguistic means (Liu Runqing, 1995). In addition, Humboldt also proposed sound symbolism, a form of linguistic iconicity mentioned the resemblance between sound and meaning. Based on the influence of Germany in humanities, language education in Britain also accepted the achievements from Germany; being a student at Oxford University in the early 20th century, Tolkien was no exception to inherited German philology and was influenced by Humboldt. In the late 19th century, Neogrammarians emerged at the University of Leipzig in Germany. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1913) 's linguistic ideas were greatly influenced by W. D. Whitney (1827 – 1894) who conducted linguistic study basically in the tradition of Neogrammarians. Hence, there is no doubt that the rise and prosperity of philology created advantages for the subsequent emergence and development of structuralism and descriptive linguistics in the 20th century (Liu, 1995).

However, the First World War saw a fundamental change in the methods and contents of modern language study in Britain. Take Cambridge University, for example. Philology was a compulsory aspect of the Modern and Medieval Languages Tripos (the final honours examination for a degree of Bachelor of Arts at Cambridge University) in 1884, by 1917 it had been reduced to be an optional part (Derer, 2022). The continual wars in Europe produced the following three factors that led to the reform of linguistics in Britain.

First, the role of philology receded due to anti-German sentiment. The study of historical and comparative linguistics according to a “German model” made some argue that Cambridge University proposed Modern and

Medieval Languages Tripos would be “unpatriotic” (Derer, 2022).

Second, the change of Britain's role in global politics asked for the adjustment of the Modern and Medieval Languages Tripos in the educational field. After the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, “the Empire on which the Sun never sets” faced the inevitable sunset. The ongoing war engendered the British a profound re-assessment of their international status and cosmopolitan connectedness. As matters of national security, it is essential for the British to adjust to the Modern and Medieval Languages Tripos because of their necessity to learn more about foreign peoples, cultures and histories. These insights then allowed for a new sort of modern education to emerge which perceived philology was an impediment to the aim of modern language study (Derer, 2022).

Third, mechanized warfare warned people about the importance of scientization, industrialization and mechanization. This can also be considered as one of the reasons that linguistic research changed from literariness to rational science. Also, there were some voices complaining that the educated British did not do a good performance on the battlefield.

Therefore, as the Western entered the mid-20th century, the golden time of philology, or comparative and historical linguistics, gone with the increasing emphasis on structural linguistics. Saussure indicated that philology did not establish real scientific research for linguistics because it did not specify the nature of its research object (Liu Runqing, 1995). Other criticism of philologists also indicated that they had a strong attachment to the written language, thus they failed to draw a clear distinction between literature and linguistics. Furthermore, in the late 20th century, A. N. Chomsky (1928 -)'s Transformational-Generative Grammar further reinforced Saussure's theory, which made linguistics completely scientific.

III. J. R. R. TOLKIEN: A PHILOLOGICAL DEFENDER IN THE STRUCTURALIST TREND

J. R. R. Tolkien made up imaginary languages since he could write, then explored his own linguistic aesthetic in language-composition since his undergraduate period and never stopped in his remaining years. From his linguistic perspective, science and romance are not two divergent interests, even two opposite poles, but integrally related. Hence, more than once he explained himself as a professional philologist by nature and trade, or more prone to an old-fashioned one, who was primarily interested in linguistic aesthetics rather than the functional language. Based on etymology, sound symbolism and ancient semantic unity, Tolkien showed great passion for linguistic

aesthetics. He often used the term linguistic aesthetics to refer to the fickleness of the relationship between sounds and words, as well as to lexical meaning and people's emotional response to them. By creating a variety of constructed languages, Tolkien explored the abstract and complex issue of language aesthetics, especially the interrelationship between the sounds and meanings of words.

For Tolkien, names, stories and languages supplement each other. Words based on linguistic theories can serve as the foundation of stories that embody linguistic aesthetics, thus promoting the spread of a language. Tolkien found that Greek mythology depends far more on the marvellous aesthetic of its language and so of its nomenclature of persons and places, rather than the story content; by contrast, Esperanto is not widely spoken because of lack of its own legends. What is more, the mythology of the ancient Britons was never written down; and most of the tales of the Anglo-Saxons were lost with the Norman Conquest, even *Beowulf* despite being written in Old English. Out of anxiety about the spread of English, Tolkien began writing stories to comprise a "mythology for England" during World War I. He focused on the original and reborn old English vocabulary as a foundation and connection for a grand and complete mythological world. For instance, Ent, Orc, Hobbits, etc., all come from old English. Therefore, it is obvious to find that the main inspiration behind the creation of Middle Earth, including its history, geography and people, had always been a linguistic one.

Tolkien's idea on vocabulary was also influenced and supported by Owen Barfield (1898 – 1997)'s theory of ancient semantic unity. "Ancient semantic unity" is the core substance of Owen Barfield's linguistic philosophy work *Poetic Diction* (1928), referring that languages are derivatives from an ancient unity in which reality, words, and meaning were one but the same thing. Ancient or primitive people did not distinguish among these three realms because they experience a profound participation in reality as meaning or vice versa (Maddalena, 2012). However, with the developing anthropic consciousness about surrounding phenomena, the fragmentation of vocabulary then leads to further perceptual fragmentation; circularly, more and more new words are produced. Hence, vocabulary are indices and instruments of anthropic developing consciousness (Flieger, 2002). When it comes to vocabulary, Tolkien's conlangs also obey the rule of one-to-one correspondence among phonology, words and semantics, which can be supported by his "phonetic fitness" or Humboldt's sound symbolism. Based on the preferences in the individual for certain phonetic elements or combinations, phonetic fitness is naturally most evident in private invented languages, since it is one of their main

objects, recognized or unconscious, to give effect to these likings. An old-fashioned philologist like Tolkien will be aware of "possible kinship" (Tolkien, 2013) both in the word's phonology and sense, then point out the etymological history, and settle down the changeable semantics.

One consequence of Barfield's ancient semantic unity is to formulate the historical linguistic part of a theory of creativity (Flieger, 2002), which can extend to Tolkien's passion for constructed language. An example can be shown in Elvish, a kind of constructed language belonging to the Elves in Tolkien's fantastic literature works. Based on Tolkien's linguistic taste, Elvish has two nearly completed branches, Quenya and Sindarin, and both two conlangs are deduced scientifically from a common origin with history and forms. Out of these languages are made nearly all the names of certain characters, which brings a cohesion, a consistency of linguistic style, and an illusion of historicity in Tolkien's legends (Tolkien, 2013). In short, Tolkien thought vocabulary, or name, comes first, being the root of the story or legend; then the legends will hold the vitality of languages. Also, Tolkien showed his comprehensive agreement with Barfield's theory in *The Hobbit's* Chapter 12 with a philological remark: "To say that Bilbo's breath was taken away is no description at all. There are no words left to express his staggerment[sic], since Men changed the language that they learned of elves in the days when all the world was wonderful." (Tolkien, 1937), reflecting linguistic philosophy which includes semantic unity and historical linguistic creativity in a mythological way.

When Tolkien retired from Oxford University in 1959, Saussure and Chomsky's theory was on the rise in Western linguistic schools. Over time, language has become more and more symbolic with the effort of structuralists and generativists. Probably, there was nobody who could shake the status of Saussure and Chomsky. It is difficult for Tolkien to reduce his passion for philology, change his research method and accept the theory that language is a system of signs. For Tolkien, if language is regarded as signs, it has neither beauty nor vitality. Tolkien explored linguistic aesthetics by pointing out the relationship between phonetics of the words and the meanings in his constructed languages. In line with this metalinguistic ideal, Tolkien also seemed to regard language as being rooted in, and inseparable from, the environment in which it develops. In this he may be said to be following a current that began with the American linguists Benjamin Whorf (1897 - 1941) and Edward Sapir (1884 - 1939) who were linguistic anthropologists living with indigenous communities (Smith, 2007).

Indeed, Tolkien sometimes worried that his ideas on linguistic aesthetics and phono-semantics, which were

intimately tied up with his passion for inventing languages, would not be taken seriously and might even cause derision. In his *A Secret Vice* (Tolkien, 2016), a paper on his hobby of creating invented languages, he referred to his own essay as “this absurd paper”, and among other pleas for understanding, entreated the reader to “be kindly”. Elsewhere, in an exchange of letter with the publisher, Tolkien expressed his concern about constructed languages that not all people would feel this as important as he did, because he thought he was cursed by an acute sensibility in such matters. Further on he even said: “It is, I feel, only too likely that I am deluded, lost in a web of vain imaginings of not much value to others.” He found it awkward to talk about these supposedly unconventional matters. His passion of philology was so immense that he was prepared to risk ridicule in order to communicate his enthusiasm to others (Smith, 2007).

IV. CONCLUSION

According to the search of phonetic symbolism and linguistic aesthetic, Tolkien found the era he lived praised highly an analytic and scientific mechanical research method brought by the industrialized involution. Furthermore, Tolkien noticed this method has a lot of disadvantages and the issues ignored by mainstream scholars. By analysing the relationship between sound, meaning and emotion, Tolkien revealed the effect of relationship between human and nature in language evolution process, and embodied the linguistic theory in his masterpieces. It is the usage of phonetic aesthetic that Tolkien implied the nature of various creatures in his mythological system.

Although Tolkien believed that science and romance could be considered together in the study of linguistics, and there are still some philologists who continue to work outside a structural linguistics frame, contemporary philologists are unable to contend with Saussure and Chomsky's structuralism. Due to the different views held by comparative linguistics and structural linguistics, the former favours literature and philosophy while the latter favours rational science.

Finally, philology, or comparative linguistics, was on the wane in the 20th century gradually, being replaced by structural linguistics. Tolkien transmitted his dream of language aesthetics through his fiction and his linguistic inventions. Although Tolkien was criticized by both literary and linguistic circles at the beginning of his work's publication, his masterpieces whip up a global phenomenon and bring an immeasurable value in the decades after.

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