

The Two Phonetic Values of *ll* in Elvish Sindarin in *The Lord of the Rings*

by Carl F. Hostetter

In his late-1969 essay *The Rivers and Beacon-hills of Gondor*, in a discussion of Sindarin number names, Tolkien wrote (VT42:27):

The forms *canthui*, *enchui*, *tolthui* are those of the southern Sindarin dialect adopted by the Noldor. In the Northern dialect (which perished in the course of the war against Morgoth) *nt*, *nc*, *mp* had remained unchanged. In the Southern dialects *nt*, *ñk*, *mp* remained when standing finally—or more probably the spirant was re-stopped in this position; for similarly final *lth* > *lt*, though *rth* remained finally. Medially however *nth* (*nþ*), *nch* (*ñx*), *mf* (*mp* with bilabial *f*), and *lth* (*lþ*) became long voiceless *n*, *ñ*, *m*, *l*, though the old spelling was mostly retained (beside *nh*, *ñh*, *mh*, *lh*), and among those to whom Sindarin became a language of lore, as the men of Gondor who were or claimed to be of Númenórean race, the spirant was reintroduced from the spelling. In true Sindarin of the Elves or Elf-friends of the early ages the final form was often introduced medially. In the transcription of Elvish Sindarin in *The Lord of the Rings* *ll* is used in the manner of modern Welsh for the medial voiceless *l*; as in *mallorn* < *malhorn* < *malþorn* < *malt* ‘gold’ and *orn* ‘tree’.

As I wrote in an editorial note against this passage (VT42:32 n.70):

This surprising statement regarding the pronunciation of S. *ll* stands in stark contrast to Tolkien’s earlier comment in Appendix E to *The Lord of the Rings* (LR:1089) that “consonants written twice, as *tt*, *ll*, *ss*, *nn* represent long, ‘double’ consonants.”

Some have taken Tolkien’s two statements regarding the pronunciation of *ll* as contradictory,¹ apparently based on an interpretation of Tolkien’s words in the late essay as indicating that he had changed his mind subsequent to writing App. E and decided that all instances of Sindarin *ll* instead represent voiceless *l* (in the IPA, /ɬ/ or /L/). For example, in a post to the TolKLang mailing list (40.40), David Salo provides a long list of words from various sources having *ll* (for the most part not Sindarin but Noldorin words, and chiefly from the *Etymologies*, not *The Lord of the Rings*, and presented without differentiation as to language or source), and then writes: “In order for all those words with *ll* to be pronounced as /L/ we would really have to postulate an additional synchronic phonological rule, simply /ll/ -> /L/ / V_V”, deciding that Tolkien’s statement regarding the pronunciation of *ll* in *mallorn* represents “a case of revision, possibly an abortive one (like the failed “ros” revision) [cf. XII:371]”.

But with a bit of thought and care it can readily be seen that Tolkien’s later statement is in fact *not* a general description of the phonetic value of all cases of Sindarin *ll*; and further that, therefore, the two statements are in fact not contradictory. Instead, Tolkien’s earlier statement provides a description of the frequent and thus general case within *The Lord of the Rings* where *ll* represents the phonetic sequence /ll/, i.e. a long or double *l*; while his later statement pertains only to the exceptional case where *ll* is used to represent long voiceless /ɬ/, in the specific and limited cases where, as in *mallorn*, *ll* = /ɬ/ arose from original *-*lt*-.

(It is rather as though it were regarded as contradictory to say that English *s* is pronounced /s/, but then to note that the plural marker *-es* is pronounced /ɪz/.) To see this, we need only examine in detail what Tolkien actually wrote, noting precisely the context and both what is said and what is not said.

In the essay passage, Tolkien begins with a discussion illustrating the development in Sindarin of, specifically, original voiceless stops following resonants (sc., **nt*, **nk*, **mp*, and **lt*) and the dialectal variations exhibited by the development of these combinations. He is not making any statement regarding any other development, such as of voiced stops following resonants (e.g., **ld*) or any other combination. Regarding one such development, that of **lt*, Tolkien provides the example of *tolthui* ‘8th’ as the form of the ordinal in the “southern Sindarin dialect adopted by the Noldor”, showing that in the southern, Noldorin dialect, medial **-lt-* regularly yielded a phonetic sequence spelt as *lth*, presumably representing /lθ/ originally. Tolkien then describes the subsequent phonetic development of this medial *-lth-*: “Medially ... *lth* (lþ) became long voiceless ... l [i.e., /ʎ/], though the old spelling [i.e., *lth* (lþ)] was mostly retained (beside ... *lh*)”. Here, Tolkien specifically states only that both the older, etymological spelling *lth* (lþ) and the newer, more phonetic spelling *lh* were used to represent long voiceless /ʎ/ arising from earlier medial *-lth-* (/lθ/) < **-lt-*. And it is in the context of this particular development that Tolkien goes on to remark that “In the transcription of Elvish Sindarin in *The Lord of the Rings* ll is used in the manner of modern Welsh for the medial voiceless l [i.e., /ʎ/]; as in *mallorn* < *malhorn* < *malþorn* < *malt* ‘gold’ and *orn* ‘tree’”. Tolkien is here stating only that he used ll in *The Lord of the Rings*, in the specific circumstance of words like *mallorn* in Elvish Sindarin, in the same manner that he used medial *lh* and the etymological spelling *lth* (lþ) elsewhere: to represent /ʎ/ < *-lth-* (/lθ/) < **-lt-*.² Tolkien is not saying that ll was pronounced /ʎ/ when representing developments from other combinations or environments.

Thus, for example, Tolkien’s later statement has no bearing whatsoever on the phonetic value of ll in such Sindarin forms in *The Lord of the Rings* as *mellon* (presumably like N *mellon* derived < **mell-* or **meld-* < MEL-), *Edhellond* (< **edhel-lond*), *Elladan* (< **elda-atan*), or any other Sindarin word having ll not known or reasonably surmised to have arisen from *-lth-* (/lθ/) < **-lt-*;³ nor of ll in any Quenya word. These latter cases of ll represent by far the more numerous class, and thus are the natural subject of Tolkien’s general statement of pronunciation in App. E; to which his later statement in *The Rivers and Beacon-hills of Gondor* is simply an occasional exception. Thus we see that these two statements are not contradictory, but rather complementary; that the later statement does not represent revision but precision; and that ll in Elvish Sindarin words in *The Lord of the Rings* was used to represent both /ll/ and /ʎ/.⁴

Notes

1. And further presented me as finding them contradictory as well; see, e.g., Bradfield, “Sindarin -ll-”. I note that in fact I described the two statements only as contrastive (starkly, to be sure, as indeed they are), not contradictory.

2. It is noteworthy in this connection that the orthographic sequence *lth* frequently occurs in Noldorin words in the *Etymologies*, but *never* occurs in Sindarin words in *The Lord of the Rings*. It is unclear whether *lth* in these Noldorin forms necessarily reflects /lθ/ or, via a development parallel to that described by Tolkien for southern, Noldorin Sindarin, is perhaps an etymological spelling for /ʎ/. But it does seem clear that, had these Noldorin forms with *lth* been included as Elvish Sindarin forms in *The Lord of the Rings*, they would have been spelt with ll instead; for example, S **dolla-* rather than N *doltha-* (s.v. DUL-).

3. Also presumably *tollui*, the unqualifiedly Sindarin form given in the same essay (VT42:25). In *The Lord of the Rings*, in addition to *mallorn* only its plural *mellyrn* (LR:333), its cognate adj. *mallen* *‘golden’ (in the name *Cormallen*, LR:936), the apparent past participle *hollen* ‘closed’ (in *Fen Hollen* ‘The Closed Door’, LR:808, 1128), and the verb *nallon* ‘I cry’ (LR:712, R:72) seem likely candidates to have ll representing /ʎ/. The *Etymologies* gives N *malt* < **smaldā* and the derived adj. N *mallen* (s.v. SMAL- ‘yellow’), suggesting that ll in S.

mallen might likewise have arisen < *-ld-. However, N *mallen* is there also stated to have had an analogical form *malthen*, as though derived from the cognate noun *malt*, i.e. from **malt*-. (In this connection refer again to Tolkien's words in the essay: "In true Sindarin of the Elves or Elf-friends of the early ages the final form was often introduced medially".) Since S *mallorn* is here said to likewise be derived from *malt* 'gold', it seems possible that, even if S *mallen* *'golden' is, like N *mallen*, ultimately derived from a form with medial *-ld-, it may proximately be due to a similar analogical formation in -lth-, and thus have come to be pronounced with /ʃ/. Such an analogical pronunciation would no doubt be greatly encouraged by the influence of *mallorn*.

4. Julian Bradfield did, in fact, suggest in his TolKLang post that "one could suppose that ... in LotR the letters <ll> might represent either /L/ or /ll/", to be explained as "another instance of making the spelling look less foreign", but without reference to or accounting for the precise and contrastive phonological situations within Sindarin or Noldorin. Julian's suggestion though may indeed explain Tolkien's choice to represent /ʃ/ < -lth- (/lθ/) < *-lt- in Elvish Sindarin words in *The Lord of the Rings* with ll instead of, say, lh or (etymological) lth, just as Tolkien's choice to use d to represent /ð/ in Sindarin words in *The Lord of the Rings* (in addition, of course, to representing /d/), rather than dh, arose from his observation that "dh is not used in English and looks uncouth" (UT:267; cf. also the essay under discussion, VT42:20).

Bibliography

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<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/elfling/message/5592>.

See also the general *Tengwestië* Bibliography.

Change Log

- 2008-11-08 14:55:14: Formatting changes only: converted text to Gentium/Basic, deprecated all Gentium tags, converted combining diacritics to modifiers where possible

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