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Language as Communication vs. Language as Art: J.R.R. Tolkien and early 20th-century radical linguistic experimentation

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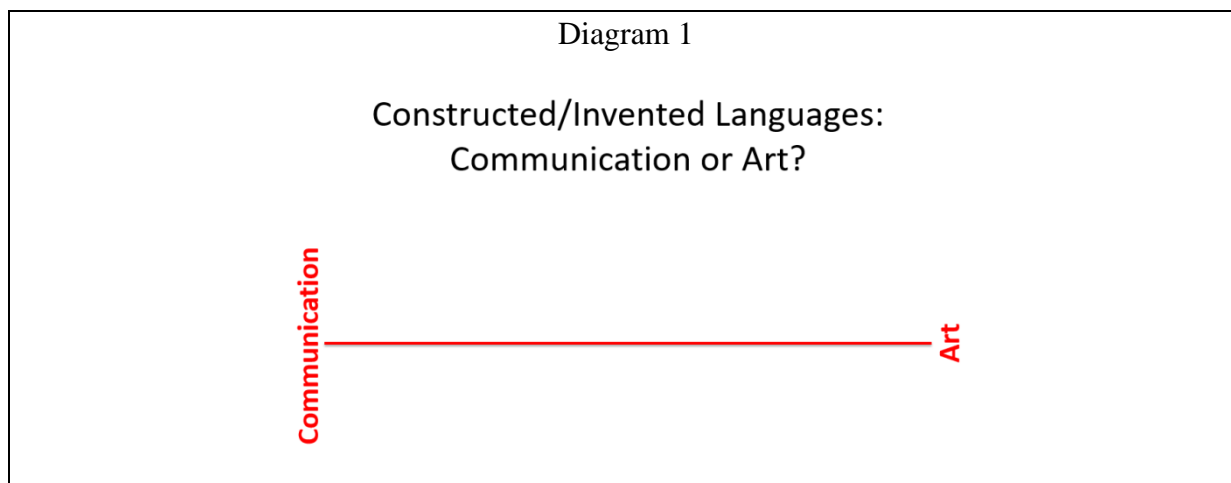
Among much hitherto unpublished material found in the recent critical edition of J.R.R. Tolkien's 1931 essay 'A Secret Vice',¹ including previously omitted passages, drafts, and an entirely new essay, the editors have transcribed several loose pages and slips of paper with Tolkien's scattered notes, often in telegraphic or unfinished sentences. This is where Tolkien mentions two surprising contemporary literary figures: James Joyce and Gertrude Stein. Joyce is not mentioned by name, but Tolkien has scribbled the name of one of the characters from what later became *Finnegans Wake*: Anna Livia Plurabelle (SV, p. 91).² This is not the only time Tolkien is known to have noted this name: it also appears transcribed in his 'Qenya Alphabet' (later known as 'tengwar' letters) in a document also dated 1931, now edited and published as a facsimile in *Parma Eldalamberon* 20 (Tolkien, 2012, pp. 87-9). But, for this editor at least, seeing the name of Gertrude Stein mentioned in Tolkien's notes was initially a shock.

And, yet, it shouldn't have been. The first few decades of the 20th century were a fertile time for experimenting with language both for utilitarian reasons and as an artistic expression. This was a time when amateur linguists, as well as consortia of professionals, made numerous attempts to put together an International Auxiliary Language (IAL), which would facilitate communication between different people in a world that suddenly seemed incredibly small and in need of a tool that would bypass the 'curse of Babel'. This was also the time when Modernism and other avant-garde literary movements would attempt to 'break' language, take it apart, and rebuild it, in order to express disenchantment with modernity or come to terms with the chaos and turmoil of the Great War. Tolkien's views on the relationship between language as communication vs. language as art were expressed in 'A Secret Vice', originally published in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (Tolkien, 1983, pp. 198-223). What the recent critical edition offers is access to new primary material by Tolkien which situate his views within the context of: a) the turn-of-the-20th-century vogue for International Auxiliary Languages; and b) Modernism and other avant-garde literary movements of the early 20th century (including Joyce and Stein). That the minutes reporting Tolkien's talk to the Johnson Society at Pembroke College – likewise recently discovered and reproduced in the new edition of 'A Secret Vice' – also make mention of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce (see SV, p. xxxiii), is indicative of the particular cultural moment in which Tolkien's talk was delivered. What follows, therefore, is an attempt to offer some explanation as to why Tolkien's 'A Secret Vice' and its attendant notes make reference both to IALs, such as Esperanto and Novial, and to Joyce and Stein, and how Tolkien engages with both but chooses his own (middle) way to navigate and solve similar practical and aesthetic linguistic questions.

¹ Tolkien, J.R.R. (2016) *A Secret Vice: Tolkien on Invented Languages*, edited by Dimitra Fimi and Andrew Higgins. London: HarperCollins. Abbreviated as SV hereafter.

² Joyce started writing *Finnegans Wake* roughly a year after the publication of *Ulysses* (1923) and during its long gestation he called it *Work in Progress*. Already from 1924, fragments from *Work in Progress* appeared in different publications. The section known as *Anna Livia Plurabelle* had already been published four times by the time Tolkien delivered "A Secret Vice": 1) in the periodical *Navire D'Argent* (October 1925); 2) in the avant-garde journal *transition* (November 1927); 3) as a separate booklet by Crosby Gage in New York in 1928; and 4) also as a booklet by Faber and Faber in London in 1930.

‘A Secret Vice’ is very much a reflective essay, which gives the impression of an impromptu train of thought, beginning with establishing a link with the audience (it was, after all, written as a talk to be delivered orally), then venturing into biographical reminiscences of Tolkien’s engagement with constructed languages during childhood, and later making quite significant claims about invented languages as an artistic mode, akin to poetry. However, the essay, together with its newly published attendant notes and drafts, can also be read as a thoughtfully devised piece of writing which constructs a continuum of linguistic invention, with language as communication on the one extreme, and language as art on the other (see Diagram 1).



If one looks back, the history of language invention has always oscillated between two similar poles. On the one hand, language construction has focused on a *utilitarian* purpose: the creation of a language that would express human thought accurately, or would allow international communication. On the other hand, inventing languages has often been driven by questions about the origins of language, coupled with a desire to (re)capture *perfection* on an aesthetic, metaphysical, or spiritual level: create a language for poetry, restore a primeval, divine-given language, or recover a long-lost sense of ‘fitness’ between the sound of words and their meaning. Tolkien’s continuum, therefore, reflects a long tradition which we need to take into account before appreciating the intellectual climate in which he delivered ‘A Secret Vice’.

The Earlier Tradition (I): Primordial, Philosophical and Auxiliary Languages

Every culture seems to have its own myth of the origins of language (see Borst, 1957–63) but in Judeo-Christian tradition the legend goes back to the beginning of the world and the idea of the *lingua adamica*. In the Old Testament, God gives language to Adam via which he names and comprehends every thing in the universe. This perfect primeval language survived the Flood with Noah’s progeny, but was later lost to the world with the *confusio linguarum*, the confusion of tongues that ensued when people defied God and attempted to erect the Tower of Babel, aiming to reach the heavens (*Genesis*, 11). As Marina Yaguello points out, the myth of Babel can be considered as a second Fall, but at the same time it constitutes an aetiology (it explains how the divinely-given language of Adam gave way to the multitude of languages of the world) and a promise: ‘it paves the way for thoughts of utopia: what has

once been shall be again' (Yaguello, 1991, p. 12). Indeed, the New Testament presents glimpses of a recovery of sorts of the language of Adam with the Apostles' *xenoglossia* (miraculously speaking a foreign language) during the Pentecost (Acts, 2); and the incidents of *glossolalia* (communicating directly with God while speaking in unintelligible tongues) in the early Church as described in St. Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians, 13–14). The recovery or rediscovery of the language of Adam, the primeval 'perfect' language lost via the sin of Babel, became an important pursuit of medieval scholars. Occasionally Hebrew, Egyptian or Chinese were put forward as the 'original' language. An alternative approach was to claim that the *lingua adamica* was the key to all knowledge and could only be reclaimed via mystical means, such as the esotericism of the Jewish Kabbalah or various neo-Platonic schools of thought (see Eco, 1995).³

Following the Middle Ages, the intellectual endeavours of scholars and philosophers gradually moved away from the attempt to *recover* a hypothetical original 'perfect' language and towards a systematic effort to *create* it. The challenge of constructing a universal *philosophical* language occupied many brilliant minds of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Up until the Renaissance, Greek *koinē* and Latin had served as common languages of theology and scholarship, and thus fulfilled the practical need for communication among peoples with different native tongues. But the Enlightenment brought a new focus on philosophy, science (especially mathematics), and a desire for a language that would express the new scientific 'truths' as clearly and perfectly as mathematical notation (see Okrent, 2009, pp. 29–37). The underlying idea was that language was imprecise, unsystematic and disorganized and therefore hindered clarity of thought. If a universal language could be constructed, based on a rational classification of concepts and their relationships, it would provide philosophers 'with the ideal instrument for reflecting on the world' (Yaguello, 1991, p. 36).

The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophical languages were truly ambitious. They were what later scholarship has termed *a priori* languages, not based on any existing native languages but literally starting from a *tabula rasa* and attempting to construct a language from scratch based on a logical and mathematical description of the universe. Words and sentences were to be formed in a similar manner to how mathematic equations were produced. It is not surprising that such radical undertakings were taking place during the era of revolutions, political as well as scientific ones. Smith divides the attempts for such philosophical languages into two categories: those that aimed at a universal *written* language (pasigraphy) made out of symbols that could be understood by speakers of all tongues; and those even more ambitious projects which would start devising a spoken language from

³ Even cases of deliberate language invention during that period were often associated with religious discourse. For example, the German writer, composer and philosopher Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), Benedictine Abbess of Rupertsberg, claimed that a language that has come to be known as *Lingua Ignota* (Unknown Language) was revealed to her by divine inspiration. However, recent scholarship has argued convincingly that *Lingua Ignota* does not display the usual characteristics of recorded cases of religious glossolalia (which have no linguistic structure, such as morphemes and syntax). It is not a complete language either (e.g. there are no verbs or pronouns) but is written down carefully, with a great degree of organization in terms of categories of meaning, as well as some derivational morphology, and is, therefore, a deliberate creation (see Higley, 2007, pp. 35–50; Okrent, 2009, pp. 11–12).

scratch, word by word, and in which ‘the structure of a word reflected the place of the notion it represented in an elaborate classification of the world of things and ideas’ (Smith, 2011, p. 23).

The former category was the result of a European fascination with Chinese writing, the symbols of which were (mistakenly) taken to represent not sounds, or words, but ideas, and thus were intelligible by speakers of other Asian languages.⁴ This approach yielded specimens of a ‘real character’, such as Francis Lodwick’s *Common Writing* (1647) which depended on a system of basic notions being represented by individual symbols, and derivative notions expressed by modifications of those symbols via additional diacritic marks (Smith, 2011, p. 21).⁵ Gottfried Leibniz’s *Dissertatio de Arte Combinatoria* (1665) also contained such a ‘pasigraphy’ that used numbers, attempting to construct a ‘true algebra of thought’ (Yaguello, 1991, p. 36). Leibniz was also fascinated by the perceived ‘perfection’ and universality of Chinese, and in his *Brevis Designatio* (1710) he mentions the view that Chinese is not a natural language at all but an artificial one, invented by a single creator, in order to facilitate communication between different peoples in Asia (see also Genette, 1995, p. 45).

Arika Okrent has devoted a lengthy discussion to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophical languages *par excellence* by focusing on the work of John Wilkins (*Philosophical Language*, 1668) and George Dalgarno (*Ars Signorum*, 1661), in an attempt to show why the story of their construction has been ‘a history of failure’ (2009, pp. 71–5). She explains that the initial idea of making ‘a math of language’ inevitably led its aspiring creators to attempt the impossible: ‘a hierarchy of the universe’:

1. To make a math for language, you need to know what the basic units of meaning are, and how we compute more complicated concepts out of them.
2. To figure both of these things out, you need an idea of how concepts break down into smaller concepts.
3. To break down the concepts, you need a satisfactory definition for those concepts; you have to know what things are.
4. In order to know what something is, you have to distinguish it from everything it is not.
5. Because you have to distinguish it from everything, you have to include everything in your system. So there you are, crafting your six-hundred-page table of the universe. (Okrent, 2009, p. 45)

And that’s exactly what Wilkins spent a lifetime doing. He literally composed a compendium of over 600 pages, classifying the universe into categories, assigned them unique letters and diphthongs, the combinations and modifications of which would express all derivative words and concepts. Dalgarno, on the other hand, tried to evade the attempt to classify everything in

⁴ See Okrent, 2009, p. 168–72 for a brief yet lucid explanation of how Chinese writing works and how it was misunderstood by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European philosophers.

⁵ Lodwick also invented a ‘Universal Alphabet’ which has many common elements with Tolkien’s *tengwar* (Allan, 1978, pp. 276–9; Fimi, 2008, pp. 112–13).

the universe by basing his 935 ‘radicals’ (basic concepts) on a mnemonic device and memorizing a poem that contained all of them! In the case of both projects, though, anyone attempting to speak or write the language would have to memorize enormous amounts of data (and each creator’s system on how to combine them) in order to locate a single word required, let alone construct complex and meaningful sentences.⁶ Needless to say, these philosophical languages (as well as those by numerous other contemporaries) were so complicated as to be unusable in practice.

But by the end of the eighteenth century the world was changing and so was the study of language and the social and cultural needs of European nations. The next phase in the history of invented languages saw creators moving away from the idea of a universal language and towards the aim of an *international* language that would be constructed *a posteriori*, using elements of existing natural languages. In the nineteenth century, the aim of these new international languages was to facilitate communication between different nation-states at a time when the world was seemingly becoming smaller. Public transport, mass media (newspapers, telegraph), and new technologies intensified commercial, scientific and cultural exchanges between countries. The new breed of invented languages had to be practical, usable and easy to learn. At the same time, the study of languages had also moved from the earlier philosophy of language (as we may call it today) to philology, Tolkien’s own academic specialism, with its focus on the Indo-European family of languages (see Yaguello, 1991, p. 45). It is not surprising, therefore, that the new generation of language inventors:

built upon the recognizable roots of European languages. They took a little Latin, a little Greek, spiced it up with some French and German and a splash of English. The resulting systems were much easier to learn than anything that had come before. You didn’t have to know the whole order of the universe to be able to guess that *nuov* meant ‘new’. (Okrent, 2009, p. 83)

These *a posteriori* languages were soon termed *auxiliary* to reflect their more utilitarian goals, therefore leading to the acronym IAL (International Auxiliary Languages), still widely used today. But they also did not escape an element of idealistic optimism: many of the creators of IALs were not moved by the needs of trade or exchange of scientific ideas, but the romantic desire to unite all peoples into an international community of shared humanistic values. Esperanto, the first invented language mentioned by Tolkien in ‘A Secret Vice’, was the most successful example of this altruistic desire. We shall return to it, and to Tolkien’s views about IALs, below.

The Earlier Tradition (II): Sound Symbolism

A concept that has often crossed paths with language invention, as well as with theories of the origins of language and a supposed ‘perfect’ (or at least ‘better’) original language, is sound symbolism. Sound symbolism refers to the idea that there is a direct relationship between the sounds making up a word and its meaning. The typology of sound symbolism includes:

⁶ See Okrent (2009, pp. 58-76) for a hilarious attempt to form a sentence in Wilkins’s language.

- a) ‘imitative sound symbolism’, onomatopoeic words representing physical sounds, such as ‘bang’, ‘buzz’, etc.;
 - b) ‘synesthetic sound symbolism’, in which certain vowels or consonants consistently represent qualities of objects, such as size, shape, etc. (e.g. the ‘ee’ sound in English – indicate by /i/ in the International Phonetic Alphabet – is often associated with smallness, as in ‘little’, ‘wee’, ‘teeny’); and
 - c) ‘conventional sound symbolism’, in which certain phonemes and clusters are associated with certain meanings (e.g. the initial ‘gl’ in words such as glitter, glisten, glow, etc.), the latter often being language-specific rather than universal and largely the product of convention
- (see Hinton et al, 1994, pp. 1–6).⁷

The first category is often referred to simply as ‘onomatopoeia’ while the third is sometimes called ‘clustering’. Of the three, the second category is often seen as the locus of sound symbolism proper, while the former and the latter are influenced by acoustics or semantics respectively (see Magnus, 2001, pp. 16–7). Sound symbolism is the most usual term for this spectrum of phenomena, though alternative terminology includes ‘phonetic symbolism’, ‘linguistic iconism’, ‘phonosemantics’, and in French and other continental scholarship ‘mimologique’/mimology (see Magnus, 2001, p. 190; Körtvélyessy, 2015, p. 147; Genette, 1995).

As with the history and evolution of language invention, the story of sound symbolism goes back to theological and mystical writings of ancient and medieval times, often associated with religious or spiritual understandings of the world. Magnus (1998) and Etzel (1983) have included in their respective discussions of sound symbolism examples of magico-religious sources that imbue letters with particular mystical meanings associated with divination or cosmology, including the Old Norse Runes, the Hebrew Kabbalah, the Japanese Shinto Kotodama, the *Upanishads* (written in Vedic Sanskrit), and the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas on the infancy of Jesus. Although these sources may seem to conflate *letters* with *sounds*⁸ they still offer an insight into ‘how human cultures have viewed their speech sounds’ (Magnus, 1998, p. 41) and what ‘inherent’ meanings they have assigned to them.

But the text that is still perceived as the foundation of any subsequent learned or scientific discussion of the phenomenon of sound symbolism in Western culture, from antiquity to the Renaissance, is Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus* (c. late-fourth century BC). In this work, Cratylus takes the view that a word’s meaning is determined by its sound.⁹ Against him speaks Hermogenes, who maintains that there is no relationship between word and sound. These two extreme views are often called the *naturalist* vs. *conventionalist* perspectives on sound and

⁷ Hinton et al also include ‘corporeal sound symbolism’ in their typology, associated with involuntary sounds such as coughing and hiccupping, although they accept that this type ‘lives around the edges of sound symbolism’ (1994, p. 2).

⁸ Letters are written symbols that do not necessarily display a one-to-one correspondence with the sounds of a language – e.g. in English the letters ‘c’ and ‘s’ can both be used to pronounce the same sound, /s/ (e.g. ‘c’ in ‘cereal’ and ‘s’ in ‘serious’).

⁹ Hence the term ‘Cratylism’ which is often used as an alternative to sound symbolism and the rest of the terms given above.

meaning (see Magnus, 2013, pp. 192–3; Morgan, 1995, p. xxiii). Finally, Socrates argues against both of these diametrically opposed views, taking a position somewhere in between: he agrees with Cratylus that language has the capacity of sound symbolism, but he is also conscious that this principle ‘does not preside over the constitution of the lexicon’ (Genette, 1995, p. 26). As Morgan has aptly summarized it, while Cratylus believes that language should be, can be, and is mimetic, Socrates claims that language should be, sometimes can be, but is not always mimetic (1999, p. xxv). Genette has termed Socrates’ view ‘secondary Cratyism’ or ‘secondary mimologism’ and makes the point that Socrates’ position is linked with the underlying desire to ‘correct’ natural languages and therefore re-establish a hypothetical ‘perfect’ sound symbolism that may once have existed (1995, pp. 26–7; see also Magnus, 2013, p. 194).¹⁰

As implied above, the question of sound symbolism has at times become interlinked with the pursuit of the ‘perfect’ Adamic language, or the creation of a universal philosophical language. Leibniz, whose ‘pasigraphy’ and fascination with Chinese has been mentioned above, also commented on sound symbolism. He produced a comprehensive critique of John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), in which Locke argued that if sound symbolism existed ‘there would be but one language amongst all Men’ (1975, p. 405). Leibniz, in his *New Essays on Human Understanding* (1765), claimed that, although there is no perfect correspondences between sound and meaning, their relationship is not arbitrary either: ‘Languages do have a natural origin in the harmony between the sounds and the effect impressed on the soul by the spectacle of things’ (1981, p. 291). Around the same time, Charles de Brosses published his *Traité de la Formation Mécanique des Langues* (1765) in which he hypothesized that the ‘original’ language of humankind – out of which all contemporary languages arose – was ‘organic, physical and necessary’ and was based on sound symbolic principles (see Genette, 1995, pp. 65–90; Eco, 1995, pp. 92–3; Magnus, 2013, p. 195).

As we saw above, nineteenth century proved to be a ‘turning point’ in the history of linguistics, with the advent of comparative philology, and a similar ‘turning point’ was also reached in ideas about sound symbolism. The ‘discovery’ of a common source for many European and Asian languages, which became known as the Indo-European language, shattered many previous arguments in favour of a direct relation between meaning and sound. Earlier scholars had observed that often similar sounds were used for similar notions over a great number of languages, and that was offered as proof for the existence of sound symbolism. However, their data was extremely Euro-centric, and when philology demonstrated that these languages originated in a common source, then their use of similar sounds was attributed to their kinship, rather than any universal association of certain sounds with certain meanings (see Genette, 1999, pp. 180–1). Some philologists, such as Franz Bopp, chose to leave aside the question of sound symbolism altogether (see Genette, 1995, p.

¹⁰ Genette’s brilliant study of sound symbolism (he prefers the term ‘mimologism’) and his fascinating and nuanced reading of *Cratylus*, does not place Hermogenes’ position as the diametrically opposite of Cratylus’ ‘absolute’ and Socrates’ ‘secondary’ mimologism, but in the middle of a table, on the opposite sides of which he places Leibniz (‘secondary conventionalism’) and Saussure (‘absolute conventionalism’). See Genette, 1999, p. 51.

383), but other scholars in the field continued to be fascinated by sound symbolism and to contribute insightful ideas to the study of this phenomenon. In 1836 Wilhelm von Humboldt distinguished three types of relationships between sound and meaning in language (1836, pp. 73-4) which correspond to the typology by Hinton et al given above.

Meanwhile, sound symbolism was gradually becoming entangled with speculation about the origin of human language more generally (not only the often mystical pursuit of the ‘Adamic’ language, but a more scientific approach to the question). Indeed, apart from the ‘paradigm shift’ of philology and the Indo-European hypothesis, the nineteenth-century study of language was also affected by developments in geology and the realization that the earth was millions of years old, rather than around 6,000 years, as the traditional interpretation of the Bible would maintain (see Daniel 1962: 43). Given that human presence was also now established as having a much longer history, ancient recorded languages could no longer be perceived as being very close to the beginnings of human language – they were clearly already the product of many thousands of years of development. Consequently, a number of theories were put forward speculating on how ‘primitive’ human language had originated, a number of which depended on sound symbolic notions. Friedrich Max Müller, for example, despite his rejection of the theory that human language arose via imitation of natural sounds and onomatopoeia (he notoriously nicknamed this the ‘bow-wow’ theory), seems to have supported the notion that the human mind once possessed the instinctual faculty of ‘giving articulate expression to the rational conceptions of his mind’, a faculty that became extinct once the task of giving every concept a ‘phonetic expression’ was fulfilled (1862, pp. 384–5).

In the early twentieth century, Saussure’s famous pronouncement ‘the sign is arbitrary’ became extremely influential. Harkening back to Locke, Saussure’s thesis was another example of the ‘conventionalist overgeneralization’ which became a central orthodoxy in modern linguistics, although it is relatively less known that Saussure was also interested in sound symbolism, albeit as a private pastime (see Morgan, 1995, p. xxv).¹¹ Nevertheless, the discussion about sound symbolism continued in the twentieth century, but the focus now shifted to empirical methods of investigating this phenomenon (this echoes the parallel move from nineteenth-century philology to the more ‘scientific’ modern field of linguistics).

In the Introduction to the new edition ‘A Secret Vice’, the editors have traced the influence on Tolkien’s thought of a) contemporary empirical sound symbolism studies such as those by Leonard Bloomfield and Edward Sapir; b) the developing ideas about sound symbolism in the work of Otto Jespersen, which Tolkien knew well; and c) Tolkien’s direct response to Bloomfield’s later dismissal of *Lautsymbolik* (German for ‘sound symbolism’) in a 1927 book review (see SV, pp. liii-vi). I have also examined elsewhere Tolkien’s notion of ‘phonetic fitness’ as it is explored in the original edition of ‘A Secret Vice’ (see Fimi, 2008, pp. 78, 88-9), but the recent ‘extended’ edition offers the hitherto unpublished ‘Essay on

¹¹ Morgan refers to Saussure’s ‘many notebooks with eponymic analyses of Vedic and Homeric verses and inscriptions, discovering the names of ancient gods and heroes mysteriously concealed in letters and sounds’ (p. xxv). It is also worth mentioning that Saussure’s brother, René de Saussure, published works on Esperanto and later proposed his own invented language (Esperanto II) and became involved in the International Auxiliary Language Association (Yaguella, 1991, p. 53; see also Forster, 1982).

Phonetic Symbolism’, in which Tolkien states quite clearly his position: ‘Personally... I believe there is such a thing as ‘phonetic symbolism’... I think it exists and existed, and was once stronger...’ (SV, p. 68). In this, Tolkien seems to be supporting the idea that sound symbolism was an important shaping force at the birth of language, later overshadowed by overfamiliarity and the historical development of each language. We have, therefore, here, a narrative of fragmentation and loss. Just like Müller, Tolkien seems to have believed that the initial centrality of sound symbolism in natural languages eventually diminished as the association of sounds and meanings became habitual. What is more, Tolkien sees in sound symbolism an element of *art*, or *invention*, in the development of the actual natural languages we all speak – or at least at their early stages:

this ‘symbolism’ played a part in the invention and making current of linguistic material – it is clear that this sort of ‘artistry’ (as we may call it) soon evaporates, and the notion or value dominates. (SV, p. 66)

This idea of sound symbolism as ‘artistry’ in natural and invented languages is one to which we shall return.

‘A Secret Vice’: Tolkien and the early 20th-century continuum of linguistic invention and experimentation

Tolkien begins ‘A Secret Vice’ by mentioning the best-known IAL, Esperanto, with which he was very familiar and which his audience, the Johnson Society at Pembroke College, would also be at least aware of. Ronald Buchanan McCallum, a Fellow at their College and previous speaker at the Johnson Society (he actually joined Pembroke in the same year as Tolkien and later became a ‘minor’ Inkling¹²) was involved in the Oxford University Esperanto Club for which he served as Senior Treasurer, and was a speaker during its first public meeting on Tuesday 24th February 1931 on the topic ‘Need there be a Language Problem?’ (Esperanto Club, Exeter College Archives). In addition to that, Oxford was the location for the Annual World Congress of Esperanto, held between the 2nd and 9th of August 1930, an event Tolkien alludes to at the opening of ‘A Secret Vice’ (SV, p. 4).

Tolkien’s knowledge of Esperanto is well known among Tolkien scholars: from his teenage ‘Book of the Foxrook’, to his comments in ‘A Secret Vice’ and his subsequent involvement with the British Esperanto Association in 1932-33, all the way to his seemingly disparaging comments about Esperanto in a 1956 letter (see Smith and Wynne, 2000; Cilli, 2014; SV, pp. xliv- xlix). But Esperanto was only one of around 145 projects for an IAL at the turn of the 20th century (Yaguello 1991, p. 53). Other notable IALs included Volapük, Ido, and Novial, which Tolkien also mentioned in his 1956 letter (Tolkien, 1981, p. 231). Tolkien had a clear understanding of the practical aims of Esperanto – that is, its aspiration to be a tool for international communication. However, his praise of Esperanto in a letter to the British Esperantist in 1932 was mostly based on its *aesthetic* qualities: its ‘individuality’, ‘euphony’, ‘coherence and beauty’, elements that Tolkien attributed to the ‘genius of the original author’ (quoted in Smith and Wynne, 2000, p. 35). In the newly published ‘Essay on Phonetic

¹² Cite article on MacCallum?

Symbolism' Tolkien praises further the coherence of Esperanto, ranking it among languages with 'clean and homogenous individuality' and noting that this element 'gives Esperanto a value exceeding that of other and technically better cultured (simpler) competitors' (SV, p. 71).

This focus on aesthetics, especially when comparing Esperanto with other 'competitors', is highly significant. In an alternative opening of 'A Secret Vice'¹³ Tolkien drafted, he actually referred to the creator of Esperanto as an *artist*:

Anyway I think that Esperanto per se has much to be said for it – it is likeable. Largely because it was in the main the creation or artifact of *one man* (not a philologist but *something of an artist*.)

'A human language bereft of the inconveniences of one too many successive *cooks*.'

At present I think we should be likely to get an inhumane language without any cooks at all – their place being taken by *nutrition experts and dehydrators*. (SV, p. 5, underlines in the original, italics added)

What I would like to propose, is that Tolkien may have had a specific group of linguists in mind when he contrasted the 'cook' who made Esperanto (Ludwick Zamenhof, an amateur linguist) with the 'nutrition experts and dehydrators' who created 'inhumane' languages. It is important to note that the most successful IALs by that time had been proposed by amateurs and enthusiasts, rather than professional linguists. The creator of *Volapük* (1879) was Johann Martin Schleyer, a Roman Catholic priest in Litzelstetten, who studied languages in his free time and viewed his invented language as a potential instrument for international unity and harmony, appositely expressed by his motto 'For one humanity, one language!' (see Smith, 2011, p. 26). *Volapük* proved to be very successful initially, with an estimated 1–2 million speakers by 1888 (ibid. p. 29)¹⁴. Ludwik Lazarus Zamenhof, the creator of Esperanto, was also an amateur linguist. He grew up in Poland, in a community that spoke many different competing languages, and learnt several languages in his youth. When he published his IAL in 1887 he used the pseudonym 'Doktoro Esperanto' (Doctor Hopeful), which eventually gave his language its name. His 'hope' was that his language would unite humanity and would bring in a new era of international tolerance and respect. Esperanto acquired a strong following and continues to be spoken by around one million people today (Smith, 2011, p. 38), including people who speak Esperanto as a first language (see Okrent, 2009). The success of both IALs led to many imitators and 'improvers'. Many other IALs were created by ex-Volapükists when Volapük declined, including *Spokil*, *Spelin*, *Dil*, *Balta*, *Veltparl*, *Dilpok*, *Langue bleue* (*Bolak*) (Smith, 2011, pp. 30–1). Similarly, *Ido*, appositely meaning

¹³ In the original edition of "A Secret Vice" in *The Monsters and the Critics*, Christopher Tolkien hypothesized that this alternate opening is either 'a draft for the opening passage of this essay or (more probably) a draft for its rewriting' (see Tolkien, 1983, p. 291), the latter possibility presumably connected with a possible second delivery of the talk many years later. The editors of the new, 'extended', critical edition of "A Secret Vice" has shown that it a contemporary, alternative ending (see SV, pp3-4, 38).

¹⁴ For an introduction to *Volapük* (history, structure and future) see Smith 2011, pp. 26–31.

‘Offspring’ in *Esperanto*, and proposed by Louis de Beaufront and Louis Couturat (1907), was ostensibly Esperanto with minor amendments (Smith, 2011, p. 39).

But the Great War (1914–18) certainly delivered a devastating blow to such idealistic projects as IALs and their aspirations to unite people. The late 1920s and early 1930s was to be the last peak of the IAL movement. Interestingly, it was only at that point that professional linguists, such as Otto Jespersen, Edward Sapir and Leonard Bloomfield, became involved and attempted to bring a research agenda to the IAL matter. In 1924, Alice Vanderbilt Morris founded the International Auxiliary Language Association (IALA) to promote discussion about competing invented languages and encourage research on the best form and best uses of an IAL (see Okrent, 2009, p. 209). It was Vanderbilt Morris who invited prestigious linguists and language inventors to join, including Edward Sapir, who became a member and by 1925 had produced a ‘Memorandum of the Problem of an International Auxiliary Language’ which was signed by other notable linguists, including Leonard Bloomfield (Sapir, 1925). Sapir’s ‘Memorandum’ outlined a number of principles for an IAL: easy pronunciation based on a minimum number of vowels and consonants (only the ones present in most languages of the world); logical structure and absence of irregularities; words with unambiguous meaning that are easily translatable; analytic (rather than inflectional) grammar; etc (see Swiggers, 2008, pp. 244–63). Jespersen agreed with many of these principles, which he later applied to his own IAL, *Novial* (*nov-* ‘new’ + IAL) and outlined in a 1929 article:

- a) pre-existing international roots (i.e. creation of an *a posteriori* IAL)
- b) a phonetic system which should be as simple as possible, in order not to hinder non-European nations
- c) the Roman alphabet (based on the fact that it is the best-known one worldwide)
- d) spelling that is simplified and as easy as possible
- e) grammatical material from existing languages and no grammatical irregularities whatsoever
- f) tenses that are formed by short auxiliaries – apart from the past tense that would be denoted by a different ending to the present (see Jespersen, 1929)

In 1930 a meeting of the IALA, convened by Jespersen, took place in Geneva and drew plans for detailed research into a ‘definitive form of international language’ which was to be led by Sapir (see Swiggers, 2008, pp. 288). The meeting was reported in the 2nd International Conference of Linguistics in Geneva in August 1931 via a formal statement (ibid., 2008, pp. 248, 287).

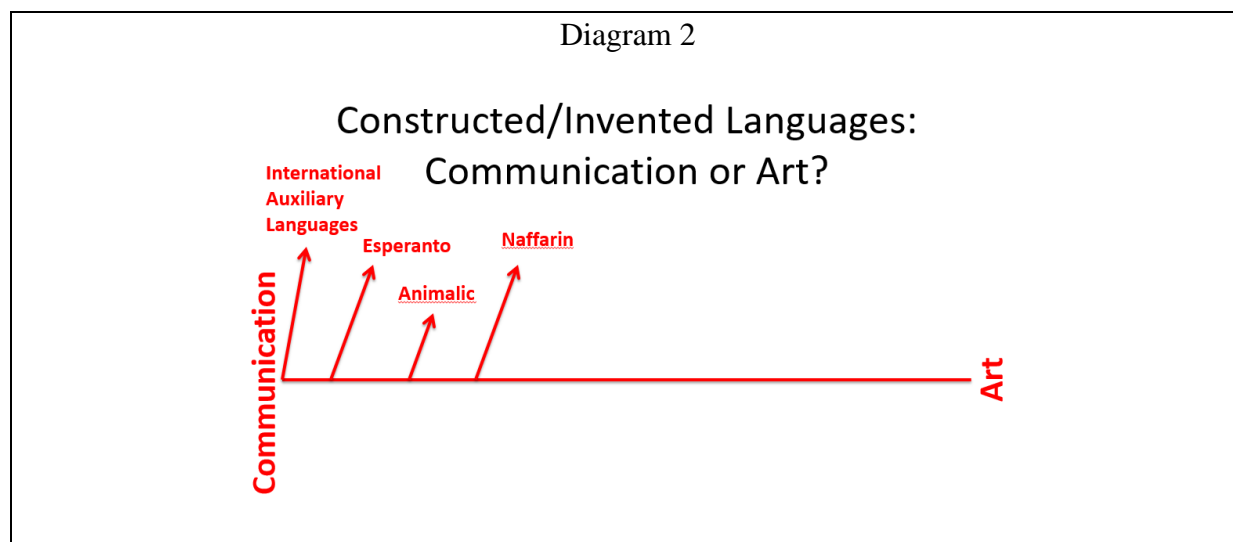
Tolkien knew the work and research of Sapir, Jespersen and Bloomfield very well. All three linguists were roughly of his generation – though all three were more senior to him in terms of experience and academic career. Tolkien refers to them a handful of times in his published corpus, mostly in his three review pieces on ‘Philology: General Works’, which he wrote for the *Year’s Work in English Studies*, volumes 4–6 (1925–7)¹⁵. Given the involvement of all

¹⁵ Tolkien also refers to Bloomfield in *Finn and Hengest: The Fragment and the Episode*, published in 1982, but based on Tolkien’s lectures in the early 1930s (see Tolkien, 1982, p. 101). For Tolkien’s critique of Bloomfield on “phonetic symbolism” see SV, pp. lv–lvi.

three (Bloomfield to a lesser extent) in the IALA and its attempt for a research-driven IAL, which was reported in a very prestigious conference in his field only three months before Tolkien delivered ‘A Secret Vice’, I would suggest that Tolkien’s reference to ‘nutrition experts and dehydrators’ alludes to such collaborative efforts for an IAL by professional linguists, which he clearly perceives as sterile, soulless, and manufactured. Later on in his essay, Tolkien refers rather derogatorily to ‘base considerations of the ‘practical’, the easiest for the ‘modern mind’, or for the million’, preferring instead language invention based on ‘a question of taste, a satisfaction of a personal pleasure, a private sense of fitness’ (SV, p. 7). He, therefore, rejects very specifically the focus on ease and practicality with the ‘hoi polloi’ in mind, the very principles presented by Sapir and Jespersen. Note also that Tolkien refers to the inventor of Esperanto, who was an amateur linguist and created a language with its fair share of irregularities and idiomatic uses, as an ‘artist’ or ‘cook’, as opposed to ‘nutrition experts and dehydrators’, terms apposite for ‘professional’ linguists who – in his view – had no consideration for aesthetics in IALs, but focused on their utilitarian nature. The following year, in a letter to the *British Esperantist*, he called Jespersen’s Novial:

ingenious, and easier than Esperanto, but hideous – ‘factory product’ is written all over it, or rather, ‘made of spare parts’ – and it has no gleam of the individuality, coherence and beauty, which appear in the great natural idioms, and which do appear to a considerable degree (probably as high a degree as is possible in an artificial idiom) in Esperanto... (quoted in Smith and Wynne, 2000, p. 36).¹⁶

This chimes with Tolkien’s newly published notes in the recent edition of ‘A Secret Vice’ in which he calls Novial ‘dreary’ and ‘mass-produced’ (SV, p. 87).



As proposed above, in ‘A Secret Vice’ and its accompanying documents, Tolkien seems to be constructing a continuum, placing samples of language invention alongside a spectrum, with language as communication on the one extreme, and language as art on the other (see

¹⁶ In the letter Tolkien does not name Novial in full but rather uses the term “N***”, possibly showing reluctance to criticize a fellow philologist and eminent scholar whose books Tolkien had praised in his reviews (see Smith and Wynne, 2000, p. 37).

Diagram 1 above). The projected IAL of Jespersen, Sapir, et al, as well as Jespersen's Novial, are clearly sitting at the extreme left of this continuum. Ease of communication and usability are their main focus. Conversely, Esperanto – though primarily designed for communication – should, in Tolkien's view, be sitting somewhat on their right, due to its 'beauty' and 'euphony' (see Diagram 2). Significantly, the first examples of language invention Tolkien mentions in 'A Secret Vice' gradually move towards the right side of this spectrum. He first references *Animalic*, a nursery or code-language Tolkien learnt as a child, which substituted common words for the names of animals, birds and fish, so that 'dog nightingale woodpecker forty' meant 'you are an ass' (SV, p. 9). However crude, and despite its focus on practicality, *Animalic* already had elements of play or fun embedded in it – as shown in the example above. Tolkien refers to it as exhibiting the quality of 'using the linguistic faculty... purely for amusement and pleasure' (SV, p. 10). Tolkien continues with *Nevbosh*, the 'New Nonsense', a language which Tolkien co-created with his cousin, Marjorie Incledon, when Tolkien was around 14-15 years old, and which was influenced by English, French and Latin. Again, despite the fact that it 'remained a usable business', 'unfreed from the purely communicative aspect of language' (SV, pp. 12, 18), *Nevbosh* was also suitable for producing poetry of sorts – 'doggerel song' at the very least (SV, p. 12) – and demonstrated a nascent appetite for phonetic invention and sound symbolic principles: 'lint' meant 'quick clever nimble' because the sound of that word seemed to 'fit' its intended meaning (SV, p. 15). Here, we start having an emphasis on linguistic aesthetics, something espoused and developed further in Tolkien's first solely-invented language, *Naffarin*, which was influenced by Latin and Spanish and was an expression of his own 'personal taste' (SV, p. 20) (see Diagram 2). Sadly, Tolkien does not give much information about *Naffarin*, but it is significant that the only extract in the language he offers is a poem. As we shall see below, Tolkien considered the ability to write poetry in invented languages as one of their 'highest' functions.

If the single-minded pursuit of inventing a language for *communication* purposes sits on the one end of the spectrum, then the work of Stein, Joyce and other avant-garde practitioners of the same period (and their almost equivalent single-minded pursuit of language as *art*) sit at the diametrically opposite end. Nevertheless, some of those practitioners also took an active interest in IALs, or saw themselves as creators of similar languages. Joyce's linguistic experimentation has often been discussed as an attempt at a 'universal language'. Indeed, Joyce himself expressed his wish to create 'a language which is above all languages, a language to which all will do service' (cited in Zweig, 1943, p. 275). *Finnegans Wake* in particular is deliberately polyglot: John Bishop (1986) has identified Joyce's playful use of over forty languages and dialects. In addition, it includes a plethora of neologisms based on punning, onomatopoeia, portmanteau techniques, and manipulating homonyms and etymologies, as well as creative and often humorous distortion of grammar (for an overview see Watt 2011, pp. 169–73). Joyce was particularly fascinated by the 'problem of Babel' and *Finnegans Wake* contains a number of references and allusions to IALs such as Esperanto, Volapuk, Ido, Idiom Neutral and Basic English (see Shaw Sailer, 1999; Schotter, 2010, pp. 90–4). He was also interested in linguistic theories of his time about the origins of language, and was particularly attracted to the idea that human speech originated in gestures, especially

after attending lectures by Marcel Jousse and (like Tolkien) reading the work of Sir Richard Paget (Milesi, 2008, p. 474). Joyce was familiar with the work of the earlier philosopher Giambattista Vico who argued for the Cratyllic origin of hieroglyphics and other ancient writing systems (Schotter, 2010, p. 95)¹⁷ and he was equally well-versed in the writings of important nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philologists and linguists Tolkien knew, including Max Müller and Otto Jespersen (see essays in Van Hulle, 2002).

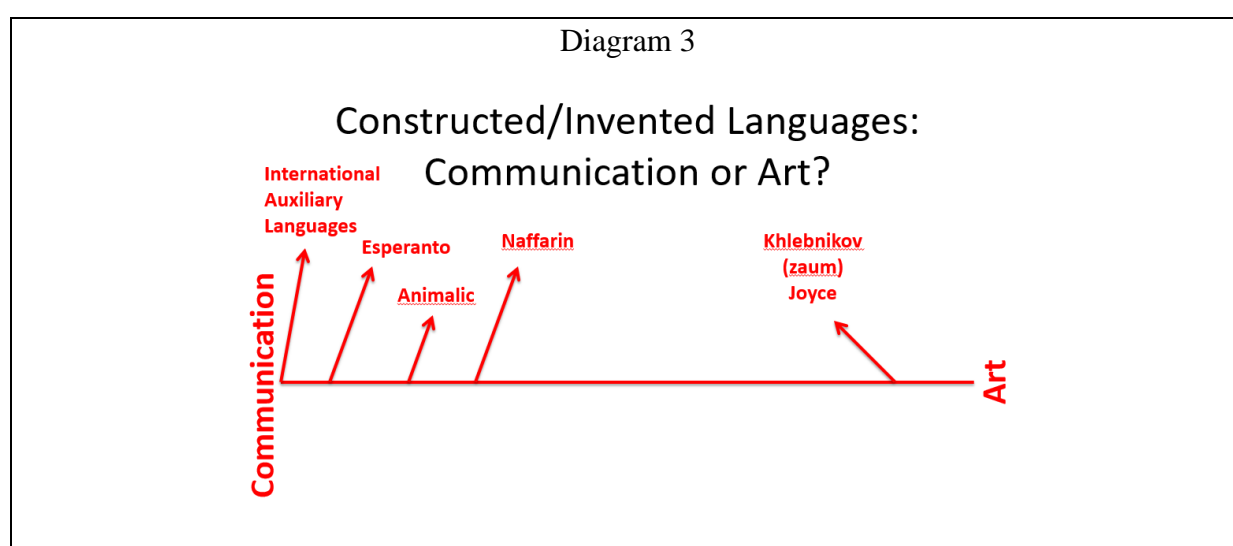
Joyce's linguistic interests and experimentation fit well with the intellectual climate of the zenith of IAL projects (before their eventual decline by the Second World War), as well as the continuous interest of linguists in sound symbolism (despite the domination of Saussure's *l'arbitraire du signe*). As the English language was becoming increasingly dominant as an international *lingua franca*, and projects that aimed at a 'simplified or deliberately pidginized English' (Yaguello, 1991, p. 54) were being proposed (e.g. C.K. Ogden's *Basic English* and Sir Richard Paget's 'improved' English, both put forward in 1930), Eugene Jolas was not far off the mark when, commenting on the Modernist ideal of a 'new' language, he remarked that: 'The English language, because of its universality, seems particularly fitted for a re-birth along the lines envisaged by Mr. Joyce' (cited in Shaw Sailer, 1999, p. 859). Indeed, Joyce's multilingualism and manipulation of everyday English in *Finnegans Wake* was also described by another contemporary critic writing in Jolas's avant-garde periodical *transition* as not so much a 'new literary Esperanto [sic]' as 'a flexible language that might be an esperanto of the subconscious' (McAlmon cited in Schotter, 2010, p. 92).

Something similar – at least at the level of aspiration – was also part of the project of the Russian Futurists' *zaum*, a neologism which has been variously translated as 'trans-mental', 'transrational', 'trans-sense', 'metalogical', or 'nonsense' language. Paul Schmidt's translation as 'beyondsense' may be the most successful one (Janecek, 1996, p. 1). Zaum poets effected dislocations upon normal Russian mainly in terms of phonetics (letters in unusual combinations), morphology (roots, prefixes, suffixes, etc. in unusual combinations) and syntax (grammatical relationships between words that are incorrect, altered, or garbled) in order to create a new poetic language in which meaning would be deliberately indeterminate and indefinite (Janecek, 1996, pp. 4–5). Despite this modernist emphasis on the undefined and undefinable (even by the author) nature of this type of language, some practitioners of zaum seemed also to be interested in other characteristics that are more akin to IALs. One of the main zaum poets, Velimir Khlebnikov, actually wanted to create a 'universal language' that would be more efficient and functional than current language and would serve as the 'language of the future', just like Esperanto or other IALs aspired to be. Indeed, Khlebnikov was aware of Esperanto and – like Tolkien – was generally favourably disposed towards it for its structure, lightness and beauty, but found its range of sounds and synonyms limited (see

¹⁷ Like many linguists and thinkers within the tradition of the pursuit for a 'perfect' language, some Modernists were equally fascinated by ancient writing systems: Ezra Pound by Chinese ideograms and James Joyce by hieroglyphs. In his newly edited "Essay on Phonetic Symbolism" Tolkien comments: "Old writers (and some moderns) use to deal in the mystic value of 'letters'" (SV, p. 70), and it is very tempting to hypothesize that Tolkien is acknowledging here, on the one hand, the long tradition of assigning mystical meanings to letters (see also above), but also, on the other hand, Joyce's and Pound's attraction to hieroglyphics and Chinese ideograms respectively as examples of "modern" writers.

Curtin, 2014, p. 132). Khlebnikov's own universal language would be internally consistent and sound-symbolic, and, to this end, he even compiled a list of Russian phonemes and their correlations with specific meanings, according to his observations (Janecek, 1996, p. 137; Magnus, 2013, p. 203). In his 1919 essay 'Artists of the World!' he called graphic artists to create a new universal *written* language (bringing to mind the attempts at pasigraphies in the eighteenth century) that would end hostilities and unite the world (sharing humanist aims with Volapük and Esperanto), and in which the letters would represent the inherent iconic (or symbolic) meaning of sounds (Janecek, 1996, p. 138–9; Curtin, 2014, p. 132).

Based on this relation of Joyce's idiolect and Khlebnikov's 'language of the future' with IALs, one may be justified, therefore, to place both Joycean English and Khlebnikov's particular brand of *zaum* on Tolkien's continuum not at the extreme end of 'language as art', but a little to the left, a little closer to a sense of communication (see Diagram 3).



But in his (rather disjointed) notes among the 'Secret Vice' material, Tolkien has the following to say about Joyce:

Anna Livia Plurabelle.
Stream of consciousness.

A mere pattern visualized (without interpretation) – even from a point of view of normalities of visible word disjointed or artificial or 'monstrous'. Not possible with 'meaning'.

'Random thought' – is satanic and anarchic. (SV, p. 91)

He had something very similar to say about Gertrude Stein:

Art word [sic] should mean something intelligible, but should have a sound form. Correspondence between the two. The meaning not necessarily 'profound' – but more deeply felt. The sound does it. (SV, p. 101)

What Tolkien seems to be taking issue with here, are the ways in which Joyce and Stein play with the *sounds* of language, and ignored *meaning* (to a greater or lesser extent).¹⁸ And yet, none of the two go as far as inventing a new language – they rather manipulate modern English to suit their purposes – and those purposes are slightly different. For Joyce, as implied above, the purpose seems to have been an ‘escape’ from the English language which he saw as another tool of domination over the Irish, erasing cultural differences. He wrote: ‘I cannot express myself in English without enclosing myself in a tradition’ (cited in Zweig, 1943, p. 275).¹⁹ At the same time, he wanted to inject English with a large dose of cosmopolitanism – varying from foreign words to neologisms – in an attempt to express the multi-lingual, ‘globalised’ world of his time and the dangers of nationalism, which he saw as directly responsible for the Great War (see *SV*, p. lxiii). For Stein, the purpose seems to have been a ‘recovery’ of language, to borrow a Tolkienian term.

Stein’s poetry foregrounded the sound, rhythm and music of language, rather than its meaning (Shaughnessy, 2007, p. 44). Her notorious line ‘a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose’, which appeared in several of her works, plays with repetition and musicality on many different levels. There is a sense that this is a fragment of an ever-repeated sequence that never ends but loops into itself – in *Lectures in America* Stein said that she made it ‘into a ring’ (1936, p. 231) – but also the continuous repetition of the same word ultimately divorces sense and meaning and imbues the word with a freshness and newness that it has lost. When interrogated by a student about that line she famously answered:

Now listen. Can’t you see that *when the language was new* – as it was with Chaucer and Homer – *the poet could use the name of a thing and the thing was really there?* He could say ‘O moon,’ ‘O sea,’ ‘O love,’ and the moon and the sea and love were really there. And can’t you see that after hundreds of years had gone by and thousands of poems had been written, he could call on those words and find that they were just *worn out literary words?* The *excitingness of pure being* had withdrawn from them: they were just rather *stale* literary words. Now *the poet* has to work in the excitingness of pure being: he *has to get back that intensity into the language*. We all know that it’s hard to write poetry in a late age; and we know that you have to put some strangeness, something unexpected, into the structure of the sentence in order to *bring back the vitality to the noun*. Now *it’s not enough to be bizarre*; the strangeness in the sentence structure has to come from the poetic gift, too. That’s why it’s double hard to be a poet in a late age. Now you all have seen hundreds of poems about roses and you know in your bones that the rose is not there... Now I don’t want to put too

¹⁸ In this interpretation I disagree with Margaret Hiley who has argued that Tolkien’s criticises Joyce because ‘Joyce is not radical enough’ and does not ‘liberate words from meaning’ by creating an entirely new language (2015, p. 118). As we shall see below, in my view it is the tight link between *new* sounds and a definite meaning (whether the reader understands it or not, and whether profound or trivial) that Tolkien is striving for in his invented languages.

¹⁹ Tolkien wrote something similar in 1955, highlighting the centrality of his invented languages in his legendarium: ‘I should have preferred to write in “Elvish”’ (1981, p. 218). By then he had developed his elaborate ‘theory of translation’, which offered the conceit that Tolkien was only the translator of *The Lord of the Rings* into modern English from the original language Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam wrote it in, and from the other samples of languages it includes (see Fimi, 2008, 189-94).

much emphasis on that line, because it's just one line in a longer poem. But I notice that *you all know it; you make fun of it, but you know it*. Now listen! I'm no fool. I know that in daily life we don't go around saying 'is a... is a ... is a...'. Yes, I'm no fool; but I think that *in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years*. (Stein, 1947, pp. v-vi, emphasis added)

Compare Stein's words with this extract from Tolkien's 'On Fairy-Stories':

Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a re-gaining – *regaining of a clear view*. I do not say 'see things as they are' and involve myself with the philosophers, though I might venture to say '*seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them*' – as things apart from ourselves. We need, in any case, to *clean our windows*, so that the things seen clearly may be freed *from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity* – of possessiveness... (Tolkien, 2008, p. 67)

Tolkien here, of course, refers to the re-enchantment of (our perception of) the primary world that fairy-stories (and fantasy) can restore to us, rather than the recovery of a primeval – and now lost – quality of language. But language is in the centre of Tolkien's argument. In 'On Fairy-Stories' he comments on the power of language to affect our perception of the world and shape our imagination:

But how powerful, how stimulating to the very faculty that produced it, was the *invention* of the adjective... The mind that thought of light, heavy, grey, yellow, still, swift, also conceived of magic that would make heavy things light and able to fly, turn grey lead into yellow gold, and the still rock into a swift water. If it could do the one, it could do the other; it inevitably did both. (Tolkien, 2008, p. 41, emphasis added)

This ability of the human mind to create an imagined world out of language is, for Tolkien, crucial to the genre of fantasy and its function of 'recovery'. It is not accidental that the very conclusion of 'A Secret Vice' focuses on the 'invention of the free adjective' and the image of the 'green sun', both anticipating ideas developed later in 'On Fairy-Stories' (SV, p. 106; Tolkien, 2008, pp. 41, 61).

Stein's use of repetition can be described as a conscious technique to re-enchant language, to allow one of the most basic qualities of language, the 'rhythm and melody of words' (Scheunemann, 2000, p. 102), to dominate over meaning and to let the word be born afresh. Instead of inventing new words, Stein aspired to restore everyday words to their 'original' effectiveness and 'excitingness'. Her reversal of the customary subordination of sound to meaning allowed for the composition of poetry based on the musicality of words, rather than any conventional use of words to 'mean something'.

But this emphasis on the 'triteness' of everyday language, and the need to restore its original 'freshness' was also the aim of one of the (contemporary) *zaum* poets: Alexei Kruchenykh wanted a poetic language that would be able to express the intensity of human emotions beyond rationality or logic. He also talked about the 'death' of words because language

remains static and ‘frozen’ and words lose their freshness and artistic potential, therefore creating the need for inventing new words. In his 1913 manifesto, the ‘Declaration of the Word as Such’, he writes:

WORDS DIE, THE WORLD IS ETERNALLY YOUNG. The artist has seen the world in a new way and, like Adam, proceeds to give things his own names. The lily is beautiful, but the word ‘lily’ [*liliya*] has been soiled and ‘raped’. Therefore, I call the lily, ‘euy’ – the original purity is reestablished. (cited in Janecek, 1996, p. 79)

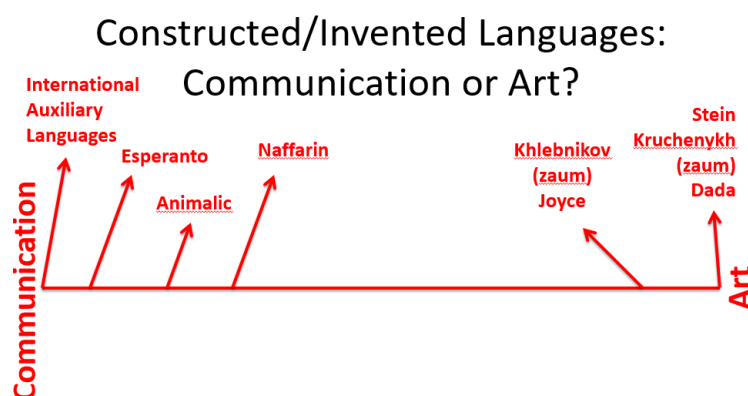
Apart from the semi-mystical power that Kruchenykh attributes to the poet in this extract, and the significant mention of the Adamic language, Janecek notes that the invented word for ‘lily’ Kruchenykh creates is symbolic both in terms of its articulation and graphic representation. When pronouncing this invented word (three separate vowels) the vocal cavity moves along the shape of the lily, while ‘the middle Cyrillic letter Y has a graphic shape closely approximating the shape of the flower itself’ (Janecek, 1996, p. 79). Kruchenykh also talks about vowels as particularly important in the creation of a ‘universal language’ which will be understood on the level of emotion rather than objective meaning (see Janecek, 1996, pp. 79–86).

Closer to Russian zaum, as well as sharing some characteristics with the Esperanto movement, were the Dada poets. Dada was the deliberate choice of a word with a multiplicity of meaning in different languages (e.g. ‘yes, yes’ in Russian, ‘hobby horse’ in French, ‘father’ in English, ‘goodbye’ in German, etc.) pointing to the Dadaists’ desire to dramatize the chaotic multi-lingual modern world and respond to it. Their invention of the ‘simultaneous poem’, which included lines in different languages recited at the same time, was an apt representation of a ‘miniature Babel’ and the Dadaists’ ‘transnational poetics’ (Curtin, 2014, p. 121). Curtin argues that both Dadaists and inventors of IALs like Zamenhof were motivated by the same observation and agenda: the worrying association of natural languages with national ideology, imperialism, and – ultimately – war and hostility, and their desire to create a new type of language that would unite, rather than divide, and would fulfil the fantasy of ‘a return to a prelapsarian world (pre-Babel, as it were)’ (2014, p. 108). Dada poets such as Hugo Ball and Tristan Tzara had chosen to flee the First World War by self-exile in neutral Zurich, where they carried out their language experiments in the Cabaret Voltaire. One of the ways of meeting their agenda for a transnational language and identity was to focus on sound (specifically phonemes) as a universal language. Hugo Ball’s *verse ohne worte* (‘poetry without words’), also termed *lautgedicht* (‘sound poem’), rejected recognizable words and instead used phonemic elements common in all languages, coupled with a mystical belief in the potential of ‘pure’ sound to restore hidden or forgotten meanings of language (McCaffery, 2001, p. 170; Curtin, 2014, 123). Ball seems also to have believed that sounds carried inherent meanings (not necessarily fixed but potentially variable) which listeners would be able to grasp intuitively (Curtin, 2014, 123–4).

Though it may seem equally surprising that Tolkien may have even been aware of the Dada poets, whose politics of ‘transnationalism’ were very alien to his own, we should recall that such radical artistic expressions were very much part of the cultural and intellectual milieu in

which he was immersed in early 20th-century Oxford. We now know for certain, from his notes and drafts in the new edition of ‘A Secret Vice’, that he had at least thought about and considered Stein’s work, but the Dada poets also crop up in C.S. Lewis’s dairies, notes and letters during the same period, offering strong evidence that Tolkien would have at least known *of* them. In his own copy of his 1933 allegorical novel *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, in the part where his main character encounters the ‘gibberish’ literature of the ‘lunatic twenties’, C.S. Lewis added a handwritten note: ‘Try the works of Gertrude Stein or Joyce’s Anna Livia Pluribella [*sic*] or the surrealists, Dadaists etc.’ (2014, p. 44). Significantly, C.S. Lewis here brings up the two authors Tolkien also mentions in his ‘Secret Vice’ notes (and who are also mentioned in the Johnson Society minutes of Tolkien’s talk), and also repeats (and misspells) the name Anna Livia Plurabella from *Finnegans Wake*, which clearly made such an impression on Tolkien (see above).²⁰ At the same time, Stein was invited to Oxford for a lecture in 1926, an event organized by Edith Sitwell and promoted by Harold Acton (Dydo 2003, pp. 77–132). During that talk, Stein was challenged by an Oxford don, and she rebuked him with a witty response. This incident was recorded both in Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (Toklas was Stein’s lifelong partner) and in C.S. Lewis’ diary (see Stein 1966, pp. 253–4; Lewis 1991, p. 413). Lewis’ diary reveals that the don was actually Lord David Cecil, then Fellow and Lecturer in Modern History at Wadham College. Lewis did not attend the lecture himself – the incident was narrated to him by Neville Coghill who had been present. Both Lord Cecil and Coghill were members of the Inklings, alongside Lewis and Tolkien.²¹

Diagram 4



²⁰ C.S. Lewis is much more focused on the *political* divide between the kind of writing he is practicing, and the modernist and avant-garde experiments of his time. In a 1935 letter, Lewis refers derogatorily to T.S. Eliot and his ‘natural friends and allies, the Steins, the Pounds and *hoc genus omne*, the Parisian riff -raff of denationalized Irishmen and Americans who have perhaps given Western Europe her death wound’ (2004, p. 164). One can easily see that Tolkien’s politics would also have clashed with the choices of the Dada poets, for example, who remained neutral during WWI and continued practicing their art (see above), but his brief comments on Joyce and Stein are focused on their art, rather than on their politics.

²¹ Other links also exist: a paper on Gertrude Stein was presented by Ralph Withington Church to the Johnson Society on 17 June 1928 (only two days before Tolkien attended the Society’s Annual Dinner as a guest, and three years before he delivered ‘A Secret Vice’ to the same audience). Also, the Bodleian Library subscribed to Eugene Jolas’ avant-garde periodical *transition* (personal communication), in which both Joyce and Stein were published numerous times.

Stein, Kruchenykh and the Dada poets, with their emphasis on sound over meaning, would then be placed on the extreme right side of the continuum (see Diagram 4). Tolkien most definitely recognized the potential of sound. In his scribbled notes on Joyce (see above), sound seems to dominate his comments. But he insists on a coherent ‘meaning’ and he uses his own poem, ‘Errantry’, as an example.

‘Errantry’ is a poem with a complex history, but its origin lies in the same period during which Tolkien composed and delivered ‘A Secret Vice’. It was first published in *The Oxford Magazine* in 1933, but Christopher Tolkien notes that his father read it to the original ‘Inklings’ (the student club, the name of which was later transferred to C.S. Lewis, Tolkien and their circle) in ‘the early 1930s’ (Tolkien, 2002, p. 85). Its mention in the ‘Secret Vice’ manuscripts confirms that the poem was already in existence in 1931. ‘Errantry’ eventually evolved into two separate versions – one very close to the original poem, later published in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (1962) and one much changed in terms of content and tone which became Bilbo’s song at Rivendell, beginning with the verse ‘Eärendil was a mariner’, as it appears in *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 2004, p. 233-6).²² I am giving below the opening verses of the two main versions for comparison:

Opening of ‘Errantry’ as published in *The Oxford Magazine* in 1933:

There was a merry passenger
A messenger, a mariner;
He built a gilded gondola
To wander in, and had in her
A load of yellow oranges
And porridge for his provender;
He perfumed her with marjoram
And cardamom and lavender.

Opening of Bilbo’s song in Rivendell as it appears in *The Lord of the Rings*:

Eärendil was a mariner
that tarried in Arvernien;
he built a boat of timber felled
in Nimbethil to journey in;
her sails he wove of silver fair,
of silver were her lanterns made,
her prow he fashioned like a swan,
and light upon her banners laid.

Though one can hardly call ‘Errantry’ a modernist experiment, akin to Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, for example, or Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, or the work of the Dada or Zaum poets, Tolkien does concede to the subordination of meaning to sound:

Here the ‘meaning’ while coherent & having a little slender life of its own... is *so clearly subordinate to sound*, that one necessarily pays chief attention to the latter. (SV, p. 92, emphasis added)

Many years later Tolkien described the same poem as a ‘piece of verbal acrobatics and metrical high-jinks’ (Tolkien, 2002, p. 85).²³ Indeed, ‘Errantry’ has become the subject of a number of scholarly studies, which have also highlighted the emphasis on the sounds, rather

²² For a full comparative study of all versions and their variations see Tolkien, 2004, pp. 84–109. It is worth mentioning that the reference to the poem in Tolkien’s ‘Secret Vice’ notes appears as ‘Merry messenger’, pointing to a variation in the opening lines of the poem in some early drafts, as opposed to its appearance in *The Oxford Magazine* (see SV, pp. 91, 92, 111).

²³ He adds that the poem was ‘intended for recitation with great variations of speed. It needs a reciter or chanter capable of producing the words with great clarity, but in places with great rapidity’ (Tolkien, 2002, p. 85).

than the content of the poem. John Holmes comments on its three-syllable rhymes, which are ‘so rare that in English poetry they cease to be ornamental or structural as other rhymes can be, and begin to draw the listener’s attention to the complexity of rhyme for its own sake’ (2013, p. 31). Similarly, Corey Olsen argues that the ‘barrage of rhyming word sounds’ in the poem ‘strike one far more quickly and forcibly than the poem’s plot substance’ (2014, p. 180). Olsen also emphasizes the rather trivial and light-hearted subject matter of ‘Errantry’, which boils down to comedy and a ‘ridiculous anti-climax’ (ibid., p. 182). On the contrary, as the poem continued to develop towards the version Bilbo sings at Rivendell, the tone changed from ‘silliness’ to that of an elevated quest narrative, and instead of an ‘elfin sprite’ we now get Eärendil the mariner, whose divine light Sam encounters at one of the darkest moments in Mordor (see ibid., pp. 182-6). Indeed, the poem seems to have moved from sound over meaning in its earliest version (and therefore appositely used by Tolkien as an example in his ‘Secret Vice’ notes) to meaning over sound, eventually.

However, after mentioning ‘Errantry’, Tolkien goes on to offer another solution to the artistic question of the relationship between sound and meaning in poetry: his own invented languages. He writes:

We can pass to ‘pure sound’ only by writing ‘articulate sounds’ in measure – but sounds which have no ‘meaning’. The music is their ‘voice’ – like a little tune on a whistle without accompaniment of voice or other instrument, some would say... It needs an ear and training to appreciate it. And even here the best results are achieved, because so tastes coherence and character in the sounds and their combinations achieved, by making a ‘language’ in which the sounds do ‘mean’ something (though only perhaps to the author). (SV, p. 92)

Tolkien seems to be contrasting here radical sound experiments such as those by Stein and the Dada poets (‘articulate sounds’, ‘sounds which have no “meaning”’, ‘the music is their “voice”’) with the individual ‘character’ and ‘coherence’ of his own invented languages: their grounding in a mythological history of their speakers, their logical and systematic development of diction, grammar and syntax, but also their modelling upon some of Tolkien’s favourite languages in terms of phonology (e.g. Finnish, Welsh, etc.) which gives them a certain individual ‘taste’ or ‘flavour’. Tolkien’s own invented languages were also designed to be sound symbolic, their main source of ‘pleasure’ being ‘the contemplation of the relation between sound and notion’ (SV, p. 16). That element makes them, in many ways, akin to the artistic words of the zaum or the Dada poets. The difference is, once more, that in Tolkien’s case there *is* a definite, coherent meaning, which the author intends (indeed *knows*), even if the reader does not.²⁴ That is why Tolkien compares the pleasure of inventing languages such as his own with the pleasure of encountering dead natural languages, such as Homeric Greek, Old English, or Gothic. He claims that dead languages retain the ‘freshness of perception of the word-form’ (ibid.) but they certainly convey (or at least *conveyed*) a coherent meaning (ibid., p. 34). This ‘freshness’ in the relation between sound and meaning is

²⁴ Though the conceit is that the reader *may* be able to *sense* the meaning due to the sound-symbolic qualities Tolkien’s invented languages display (see Shippey, 2005, p. 130; Fimi, 2008, pp. 76-92).

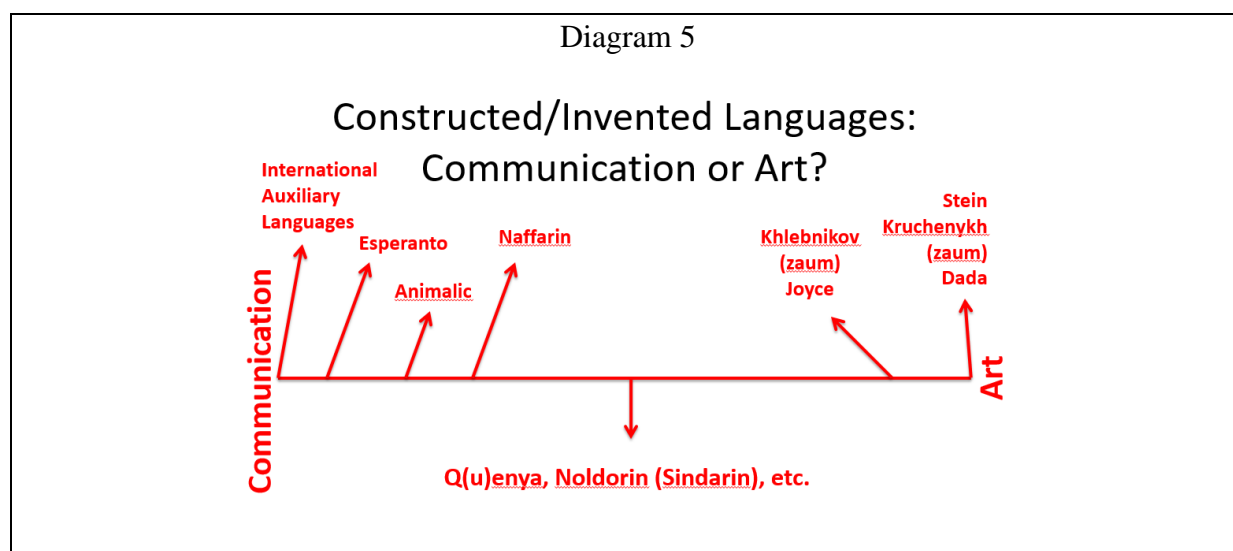
exactly what Tolkien's invented languages aim to capture. Is this that different a notion to Stein's 'excitingness' of words (see above), which was there, she claimed, when Homer and Chaucer wrote, but the modern poet needs to (re)capture, reclaim, 'get back'?

Language as Communication vs. Language as Art: Finding the Middle Way

'A Secret Vice' and its accompanying essay, notes, and drafts, give us glimpses of Tolkien's thought about his own invented languages, but also about his engagement with cultural and intellectual currents of his time. The central binary that seems to permeate Tolkien's reflections is language as communication vs. language as art. As shown above, the long tradition of language invention has always hesitated somewhere between the two sides of the same dichotomy: on the one hand mystical, 'ideal', or artistic languages, often attempting to reach sound-symbolic qualities (from Adam's language to zaum), and on the other practical, usable, utilitarian languages, which attempt to be easy and functional (from philosophical languages to IALs). Arguably, during the first decades of the 20th century this dichotomy appeared to have become sharper. The professional linguists who joined the IALA were promoting an ultra-utilitarian solution, an IAL which would be systematic, coherent, easy to learn, and capable of becoming a tool for international communication, but – at the same time – devoid of any individuality or aesthetic consideration. The modernist and avant-garde writers were pursuing language as art to the extremes of completely discarding semantics – or meaning, in the common sense of the word. However, as we saw above, there were also touching points and overlaps. The linguistic invention that emerged creatively from each of the Modernist and avant-garde poets and writers explored above had many common elements and qualities with the IAL movement. Both traditions of linguistic imagination can be divided into *a priori* (e.g. universal languages and some versions of zaum and Dada poetry) and *a posteriori* (e.g. Esperanto and Joyce's English). Both emphasise universality, and many examples from both traditions are predicated upon the ability of sound to convey meaning independent of semantics. They also share a humanistic agenda, aspiring to (or hoping for) world peace and co-operation among peoples. However, their ideological and political agendas are radically different. What divides IALs and Modernist experimentation (apart from the emphasis on language as communication vs. language as art) is restraint in language invention vs. excess in language experimentation; aspiration towards objectivity vs. celebration of subjectivity; and ultimately making up a new language vs. breaking up everyday language.

Crucially, Tolkien's own linguistic invention sits somewhere in the middle point of these two distinct approaches, and in his 'Secret Vice' papers he comments on both but chooses a third way. Tolkien acknowledges the (perceived) binary between language as communication vs. language as art, but his commentary constructs instead a continuum, on which different of his contemporary artistic and practical attempts at 'playing' with or manipulating language can be placed, and on which – eventually – he places his own solution to this question. In Tolkien's case, of course, the question is primarily artistic and aesthetic. He calls for a 'New Art' or a 'New Game' in a 'Secret Vice', and he points out clearly that language inventors are 'artists, and incomplete without an audience' (SV, p. 11). But, then, he seems to see the origins of human language more generally and fundamentally as *artistic* in nature, at least in

its earliest and more sound-symbolic stages. As we saw above, he considers sound symbolism as ‘artistry’ at the roots of language, indeed at its very genesis. He praises ‘those many unnamed geniuses who have invented the skilful bits of machinery in our traditional languages’ (SV, p. 26). He traces his own involvement with language invention since childhood, and talks about the ‘linguistic faculty’ as another way of creating a work of art, or at least something to amuse and entertain. This chimes with the views of many other commentators through the ages, from Thomas Hobbes, who in his outline of the ‘use of speech’ in *Leviathan* (1651) includes: ‘to please and delight ourselves and others by playing with our words, for pleasure or ornament, innocently’ (Hobbes, 2011, p. 55); to Michael Adams, who (long after Tolkien), alongside Chomsky’s term ‘linguistic competence’ (the innate human ability to learn a language) and Hymes’s ‘communicative competence’ (the innate ability to use language in human affairs), proposes the term ‘poetic competence’ for the ‘innate creative impulse in humans in the ways they create and use language’ (Adams, 2011, p. 9).



In Tolkien’s continuum of using language for artistic purposes (or at least to ‘play’ or create pleasure), therefore, many IALs (e.g. Novial) are not good enough because they are artless, while most avant-garde experimentation (e.g. Stein’s work or that of the Dada poets) is not good enough because it disposes of meaning. Tolkien’s middle road was to construct art-languages that can *still* communicate. In this respect, Tolkien’s linguistic invention sits squarely in the middle of this ‘continuum’ (see Diagram 5).

Qenya, Noldorin, and all the other languages Tolkien invented (or at least sketched) for his legendarium, are both artistic (made to produce ‘pleasure’, created to be beautiful, or at least symmetrical and coherent, with a specific ‘flavour’ or ‘character’) while at the same time they are utilitarian – of course only spoken by imaginary people in a fictional context, but still, within the invented world of the legendarium, they are a tool for communication. Even if the reader cannot understand these invented languages, the author certainly does. As per the quotation above, Tolkien insists on ‘making a “language” in which the sounds do “mean” something (though only perhaps to the author)’ (SV, p. 92). Many of these fictional languages are attributed to the Elves, who seem to be idealised linguists and practitioners of the

‘artistry’ of sound symbolism in their own, natural (in the fictional world of the legendarium) languages. The Noldor in particular are – as I have described them previously – ‘creators of ideal languages, capable of aesthetic beauty and sound symbolism’ (Fimi, 2008, p. 100). We are told that:

They [the Noldor] were changeful in speech, for they had great love of words, and *sought ever to find names more fit for all things that they knew or imagined*. (Tolkien, 1987, p. 223, emphasis added)

Significantly, the ultimate artistic pinnacle that invented languages can reach, in Tolkien’s view, is the ability to write *poetry* in them. He claims that poetry in invented languages, such as the extracts he presented to his audience when he delivered ‘A Secret Vice’, is able to ‘abstract certain of the pleasures of poetic composition’ (SV, p. 32). In his notes, he refers to poetry as a ‘divided art’ which combines two rather different qualities: ‘phonematic pleasure + semantic with their endless interactions’ (SV, p. 99). What invented languages can do is isolate the ‘phonematic pleasure’ from semantics and elevate it to a central component of poetic art. Poetry written in invented languages, Tolkien notes, can draw attention to the ‘beauty in word-form considered abstractly’ (SV, p. 23), independent of meaning (compare with Hugo Ball’s *lautgedicht* and Stein’s attempt to divorce sounds from meaning). And perhaps it can lead the reader/listener to understand the meaning of words just by intuitively understanding their sound symbolic quality (again, compare similar ideas with the zaum and Dada poets discussed above). The difference with Tolkien’s contemporary modernist and avant-garde practitioners is that in his Qenya or Noldorin poetry there *is* a definitive meaning (objective, not subjective and subconscious), even if trivial, or not that ‘profound’.²⁵

I do not think that we can blame the students of the Johnson Society, therefore, for bringing up Joyce and Stein after listening to Tolkien delivering ‘A Secret Vice’. The minute-taker, has noted:

After a discussion started by the President, in which the conversation drifted down such byways of language study as are formed by the eccentricities of James Joyce & Gertrude Stein, the meeting was declared informal, but continued until after midnight. (SV, p. xxxiii)

The Johnston Society students clearly saw some affinities between Tolkien’s invented languages and the ‘eccentricities’ of Joyce and Stein. At a time when such radical aesthetic ideas were current, alongside a more utilitarian turn for IALs, Tolkien’s ‘middle’ way must have seemed like an intriguing possible solution to the same artistic pursuit.

²⁵ He even conceded that the pleasure of sounds could lead the language inventor to compose poetry that is “over-pretty”, that is “phonetically and semantically sentimental – while their bare meaning is probably trivial” (SV, p. 27).

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