
Linguistic Foolery

Lámatyávë:

If you have no idea what that word means, read this article.

By Darth Fingon

Chances are, when somebody mentions Morgoth's Ring and, in particular, *Laws and Customs Among the Eldar*, most people's thoughts will automatically turn to the rules we all know and hate love about marriage, child-rearing, and the personal lives of Elves. But within that text are three or so pages devoted to naming. And within those three pages is a concept that I personally consider to be the most important when it comes to creating names for your characters. The concept is called *lámatyávë*.

Lámatyávë is described therein as the 'individual pleasure in the sounds and forms of words' (1). Literally, it means 'sound taste', from *lama* (sound) and *tyávë* (taste). Yes: the idea of a person's linguistic preference is so important to the Noldor that they have a specific word for it. It is treated as very serious business.

What this means, then, for those of us who need to name new Elves, is that paying close attention to how words sound together is an integral part of the process when it comes to creating those names. I stated in an earlier article ([Not Just the Son of That Guy: creating effective names for original characters](#)) that sound is more important than meaning. I'll state it again here, and back up that assertion with a statistic I made up just now. If you give an original character a name comprising two random words that make no sense together but sound great, the vast majority of readers will neither notice nor care. But if you give your original character a name with a very relevant meaning which, unfortunately, sounds like it might be a dirty word in Black Speech, everyone will notice and care. Take Fingon, for example. Despite the revelation that it means 'hair shout' (2), everyone still thinks that this is a fine name.

Teleporno, on the other hand, is a perfect example of how a perfectly good meaning can end up being the butt of many, many snide remarks.

The ideal outcome in creating a character name is to find a balance between sound and meaning. The tricky part is that most writers, when naming an original character, have a meaning already in mind and try to find the Elvish words to fit it. I receive a lot of emails asking for help with Elvish names, and almost all of those emails say something along the lines of 'I need a name that means _____'. Sometimes a literal translation into the language of choice works. Usually it doesn't. I have this theory that Tolkien specifically made all the good Sindarin words incompatible in order to thwart fanfiction writers trying to invent original characters.

Here is where your own *lámatyávë* comes into play. You will need to compromise in order to create a name that both sounds good and has a decent meaning, and it will take some work. While working on your name, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Most important of all: does it sound silly? Stupid? Weird? Awkward? Say the name out loud. Sometimes it looks fine in pixels but proves to be a disaster when spoken.
2. Is it too long? Four syllables is the standard maximum for names in both Sindarin and Quenya. Sindarin names are frequently shorter: two or three syllables.
3. Is it hard to pronounce in any way? Any unwieldy clusters of letters? You don't want anything that takes a few tries to get it right.
4. Does it sound alright when pronounced in all possible ways? You have no control over how readers will say names in their heads, so make sure yours is good from all angles.
5. Does it sound too close to anything that might lead to a potentially annoying or embarrassing association? (*cough* Teleporno)

A 'yes' answer to any of those questions above should be taken to mean 'try again'. Often changing one word element will be enough. Instead of 'skilled soldier' (Maendog, which will sound like either Mine Dog or Main Dog depending on how readers pronounce it, and both options are equally goofy), try something a little more poetic like 'skilled heart' (Maengur: not bad, but not great), 'skilled flame' (Maellach: also not bad, though may have unwanted associations with Maalox or Morlocks) or even 'skilled brother' (Maendor: not terribly original in either meaning nor sound, but to me seems the most authentic and the best fit with other Tolkien names).

In the end, always go with what sounds right to you. It's your story, and therefore your lámatyávë (and that of your character) that matters. If the name that sounds best happens to mean 'hair shout', run with it. I make up names by sound all the time and nobody's called me out on my BS (yet). Sometimes it's better to go with a nonsensical Hair Shout than a well intended Silver Tree.

Works Cited

1. *Morgoth's Ring*, 215.
2. *Peoples of Middle-earth*, 345.