
Linguistic Foolery

Sindarin vs Quenya: RELEVANCE FIGHT!

By Darth Fingon

Where Tolkien's two major Elvish languages are concerned, there's a lot of confusion regarding which one is used when for naming original characters and including random words and snippets of dialogue. This is a Back to Basics Linguistic Foolery article for people who have no interest in listening to me blathering about obscure stuff like how the letter D in primitive Elvish roots might present itself in later Vanyarin dialects. Instead of that, let's pit Sindarin against Quenya in an ultimate battle showdown to see which is more useful in the average fanfiction story. And let's begin with a very quick reference guide:

If you write Second or Third Age Elf fiction, **always choose Sindarin**.
If you write pre-Second Age Elf fiction, **it's probably better to choose Sindarin**.

Okay, that's a little absolute. Let's examine these scenarios in greater detail, starting with a brief overview of the two languages.

Quenya is the language spoken by the Noldor and Vanyar in Aman. While the Noldor did bring their language back to Middle-earth with them at the start of the First Age, it was not adopted by the locals. Instead, the Noldor preferred to learn Sindarin. When Thingol learned of the kinslaying at Alqualondë, he passed a ban on Quenya, but only in his own realm. Quenya became forbidden in Doriath; not so elsewhere. Thingol's ban would not have affected the language the Noldor used among themselves in their own homes. We have examples of Quenya being used in Gondolin in the later First Age: Aredhel gave Maeglin the Quenya name Lómion, and Eärendil is likewise a Quenya name. After the First Age, though, it does not appear that Quenya was used as anything other than a ceremonial or poetic language anywhere in Middle-earth. Sindarin took over as the language of daily use.

Sindarin, through various evolutions and dialects, has been the primary Elvish language of Middle-earth since before the First Age. It is the language Tolkien used almost exclusively for naming characters and places in Middle-earth. The vast majority of the names given in *The Silmarillion* are Sindarin names, which makes Sindarin the better choice in most cases even when writing *Silmarillion* fiction. If in doubt about which language to use, choose Sindarin. It has a much higher probability of being appropriate.

Even if you know very little to nothing about Elvish languages, it's not difficult to differentiate between the two at sight by looking for a few important clues. Quenya words and names are far more likely to end in a vowel: compare *Q Findekáno*, *Ondolindë*, *Endórë* to *S Fingon*, *Gondolin*, *Endor*. A Sindarin word will never end in ë. If the letters B, D or G occur in (Noldorin) Quenya, they will always be part of a cluster (MB, RD, NG, etc.) and never at the beginning or ending of a word, but they can stand anywhere on their own in Sindarin. Quenya uses K, Q, and X; Sindarin does not. Sindarin uses CH, DH, LH, RH, and TH; (Noldorin) Quenya uses none of these. Sindarin uses both acute and circumflex accents, while Quenya uses only acute. However, acute accents will show up far more frequently in Quenya than in Sindarin.

Typically Quenya words: *Helkaraxë, Valinórë, Turukáno, Quendi, Nyellë*
Typically Sindarin words: *Elrond, Gurthang, Edhel, Rhîw, Acharn*

So assuming that Sindarin is the default to be used in all other cases, when and where would Quenya names, words, or dialogue be appropriate? Primarily, characters would be speaking Quenya in Valinor during the First Age and prior. An Elf born in Valinor would be named in Quenya, and likewise so would places in Valinor. Sindarin would be unknown here until the end of the First Age and the migration of Elves from Middle-earth.

Throughout the First Age, as Noldorin society became more and more integrated with that of the Sindar of Beleriand, and as those Elves that had been born in Valinor were killed, the use of Quenya as an everyday spoken language waned. By the Second Age, its function had shifted to that of a language of ceremony, lore, and poetry for those of Noldorin or Númenórean descent; proclamations were still spoken in Quenya (as evidenced in numerous places in LotR) even if it no longer held any relevance in day-to-day life. After the First Age, Quenya dialogue would be appropriate in a ceremonial context concerning Noldorin and Númenórean characters.

The continuation of Quenya naming, for people and places alike, is more limited. From the Second Age on, Elves of Middle-earth no longer use Quenya names for themselves or their lands. Where Quenya names were used, though, was in Númenor. While the language was not spoken there on a daily basis, the Númenórean royals used Quenya, rather than Sindarin, names, until the breaking of ties with the Elves. Thereafter, only the Faithful continued the Quenya naming tradition, and through them, Quenya names survived well into Third Age Gondor. The names of all of Arnor's and Gondor's kings (and the first few of Gondor's stewards) are Quenya, including Aragorn's chosen name, Elessar Telcontar, and that of his son, Eldarion.

With all of that in mind, when would Quenya be used to name a city or an original character in your story? If the city is in Valinor or Númenor, it would be named in Quenya. The character would be named in Quenya if he or she was born in Valinor to Vanyarin or Noldorin parents, or is a queen, prince, or princess of Númenórean descent. Other inhabitants of Númenor might be named in Quenya, though Sindarin (and, of course, Adûnaic) names also appear. The probability of a Quenya name here would have varied across time period, geographical location, and social status. Gondolin is another place where children could have been named in Quenya, though, given that its population comprised both Noldorin and Sindarin Elves, Sindarin names would have been found here as well. Quenya may have been used in other Noldorin realms, but there is unfortunately little data to support a claim either way. Of the few known first-generation Noldorin descendants to be born in Middle-earth in the First Age, Eärendil was named in Quenya, Maeglin in both languages (and Gil-galad, too, if you consider all possible names), and Finduilas in Sindarin.

All other Elves of Beleriand, and the Edain, too, would have Sindarin names, and their lands, rivers, and strongholds are named in Sindarin. Less is known specifically about Elves in the Second Age, but their cities (Mithlond, Ost-in-Edhil) have Sindarin names. Sindarin would be the language to use when naming any Elf of Middle-earth in the Second Age and beyond.

The TL;DR version of all that waffle? Quenya is limited in its usefulness to a few specific situations. Looking through all of Tolkien's writing, the vast majority of names that appear are Sindarin. Even in the First Age. Even in Valinor, where Sindarin did not exist. But we can write

this off on the assumption that *The Silmarillion*, as a history, was 'written' by a Sindarin speaker who rendered all the names into the common language of the day. This is why, if you're not sure which language is the one to use and you want to be safe, you should choose Sindarin. Tolkien did.

NEXT MONTH: Sindarin is a Quenya Word, and other ways to make fanfiction Elvish way more confusing.