

# J.R.R.TOLKIEN'S FULL TENGWAR MODES FOR MODERN ENGLISH An Analysis

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## TENGWAR MODES

When speaking about **tengwar**, the writing characters created by the Elves, two kinds of modes may be distinguished: **tehta-modes**, where vowels are represented by **tehtar**, or diacritics above, below and sometimes inside the tengwar, and **full modes**, which have a separate tengwa, or character, for each vowel. The use of diacritics for non-vowel functions, such as indicating a preceding homorganic nasal or the doubling of consonants, or the "s-curly" attached to tengwar, does not serve as a distinction between tehta- and full modes.

Furthermore, when a tengwa mode is employed for a modern language – as opposed to its use for Elvish, Black Speech etc. – one must distinguish between **phonemic** modes, having ideally one tengwa or tehta for each phoneme of the language, and **orthographic** modes, which represent by each tengwa or tehta one **graph** (written symbol, or "letter") of the language, or possibly a **digraph** or **trigraph** (fixed combinations of letters, such as English *th* or *ch*).

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## TOLKIEN'S TENGWAR MODES

This paper proposes to analyse a limited subset of tengwa-texts, or **specimina**: those written by J.R.R.Tolkien's own hand in Modern English, as opposed to those in languages of Middle-earth or other Mannish languages, such as Old English or Latin (instances of which do exist), and employing a full mode. Even within these limits there exist several texts, listed below. Each is designated by a **name** for ready reference (thus one may speak of the "Mazarbul-mode" or the "Bombadil-II-mode") and its **DTS number**, from the Mellonath Daeron Index of Tengwar Specimina <<http://www.forodrim.org/daeron/mdtci.html>>. The dates attributed to specimina are in many cases only approximations based on the best educated guesses.

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## FULL TENGWAR MODE SPECIMINA

<b>Erebor</b> DTS 1 ~1937	Inscription on a jar in Erebor from <i>The Hobbit</i> . Some characters are obscured. Phonemic. AnnH p. 277; P ill. 17; AI ill. 133
<b>Brogan</b> DTS 10 ~1948	A greeting in a letter to Hugh Brogan. Orthographic. L no. 118
<b>Mazarbul</b> DTS 13 <=1953	The middle page from the Book of Mazarbul in <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> . Probably Ori's hand on a badly damaged leaf. Orthographic. P ill. 23
<b>Mazarbul-Final</b> DTS14 <=1953	The last line of the last inscribed page of the Book of Mazarbul, possibly by Ori. Orthographic. P ill. 23
<b>Steinborg</b> DTS 15 ????	The title for a drawing of Minas Tirith (called <i>Steinborg</i> by the Rohirrim) in <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> . The picture in AI also shows a crossed-out table of vowels with corresponding tengwar (shown below). Phonemic. P ill. 27; AI ill. 168
<b>Errantry</b> DTS 16 ~1931	A page of calligraphy with the beginning of the poem "Errantry" - its third version before being published in the <i>Oxford Magazine</i> . Phonemic. P ill. 48 – I
<b>Bombadil I</b> DTS 17 ~1931	A second specimen of calligraphy showing the beginning of the poem "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil". Phonemic. P ill. 48 – II

<b>Bombadil II</b> DTS 18 ~1931	The third calligraphic text on the same published page, containing a longer portion of the beginning of "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil". Phonemic. P ill. 48 – III
<b>Ilbereth</b> DTS 22 1937	A greeting by the Elvish scribe Ilbereth. The tengwar appear to be corrupt due to faulty reproduction of the thinnest strokes. Phonemic. FCL 1937
<b>Leithian</b> DTS 23 <=1931	Several lines of "The Lay of Leithian". Phonemic. LB ch. XIII
<b>Treebeard</b> DTS 24 1939	A commentary on a rejected version of the Treebeard episode in <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> . Phonemic. RS ch. XXII
<b>Moria</b> DTS 25 ~1940	Three drafts in the same mode for the inscription on the West Gate of Moria. Phonemic. RS ch. XXV
<b>Eagles</b> DTS 28 <1937	The title for a drawing of the coming of the eagles in <i>The Hobbit</i> . Phonemic. AI ill. 138
<b>Letter II</b> DTS 45 ~1951	The second draft of the King's letter to Samwise Gamgee in the Epilogue to <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> . Orthographic. AI ill. 199
<b>Letter I</b> DTS 48 ~1951	The first draft of the King's letter. Orthographic. SD ch. XI
<b>Letter III</b> DTS 49 ~1951	The third version of the King's letter. Orthographic. SD ch. XI
<b>Ring Draft</b> DTS53 <=1954	Draft version of the Ring-inscription. Phonemic.
<b>Lord</b> DTS54 <1955	Inscription of the title of <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> . Phonemic.
<b>Original Ring</b> DTS 60 ~1938	The original text of the Ring-inscription, difficult to read due to the extremely cursive nature of the tengwar. Phonemic. RS ch. XV

LB = *The Lays of Beleriand*  
RS = *The Return of the Shadow*  
SD = *Sauron Defeated*  
FCL = *The Father Christmas Letters*  
AnnH = *The Annotated Hobbit*  
P = *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien*  
AI = *Artist & Illustrator*

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### COMPARISON AMONG MODES

The full table of J.R.R. Tolkien's Full Tengwar Modes for Modern English <<http://www.geocities.com/otsoandor/FTMME.pdf>> shows the usage for each particular mode, including all tengwar employed, noting also the occurrence of underposed dot for schwa, superposed double dots for -y and tilde for -w, abbreviations with extended telcor for *the*, *of*, *of the*, *s*-curls and other peculiar uses.

It should be noted that

- The Steinborg specimen is arguably not modern English, but Anglo-Saxon;
- The Ilbereth specimen – possibly an example of “Arctic” spelling – is not a genuine Middle-earth text, and furthermore printed quite indistinctly, so that it will hardly qualify for an analysis based on letter-shapes.

The Steinborg- and Ilbereth-texts are therefore excluded from the analysis.

It is interesting to remark that several tengwar always stand for the same phonemic or orthographic values throughout the chronology. These tengwar – all for consonants – are shown in the left-hand table below.

The case for vowels is less clear-cut; for instance, the pencilled and crossed-out table that accompanies the Steinborg text is shown below on the right. None of the published modes coincides with it.

Common Consonant Values				Rejected Vowels from Steinborg Drawing			
ƿ	t	ḅ	th[θ]	ƿ	l	a	o
ƿ	p	ḅ	r	ḅ	s	e	u
ḅ	ch[tʃ]	d	sh[ʃ]	ḅ	z	i	i
ḅ	k	ḅ	th[ð]	λ	h	o	u
ƿ	d	ḅ	v	2	w	u	u
ƿ	b	ḅ	n	2	w	ʌ	ʌ
ḅ	j[ɟʒ]	ḅ	m	λ	ʌ	ə	r
ḅ	g	ḅ	ng[n]				

There is considerable variation in the attribution of tengwar to vowels; thus, for instance, the tengwa ANNA has variously stood for *a*, *o* and the first vowel in *butter*. A character looking rather like a cursive lower-case *u* has also been used to designate this latter vowel-sound, but in some cases this could be considered a mere allograph of ANNA.

The phonemic modes differ in the representation of vowels – as noted above – and the semivowels *y* and *w*. For *y* the long carrier is used, sometimes with a dot, sometimes without (this carrier also serves for schwa in the Treebeard-mode); for *w* the modes use the tengwa that looks like a cursive 2 (short or extended); the Ring-mode uses RÔMEN, more frequently used for *r*. The aspirated sound in *which* (for those speakers that pronounce it differently from *witch*) is noted variously as inverted RÔMEN or HWESTA SINDARINWA. Use of the schwa-dot, the tehtar for following *y* and *w* and the abbreviations seems to be common; these graphs are lacking only in those texts where there is no need for them. The use of one or the other *s*-curl seems to be dictated partly by the form of the tengwa to which it is attached.

The orthographic modes are coincident to a large extent concerning consonants and vowels, the only notable differences being the use of RÔMEN sometimes for *r* and sometimes for *w*. The modes used for the three versions of the King's Letter are even more similar, differing only in the use of LAMBE with a tilde inside the bow for *ll* in one of them, the forms of the *s*-curls, abbreviations for *on* and *in* (*o* and *i* with the nasal tilde) and the peculiar form of RÔMEN, looking like an ÔRE with an added bow, in Letter III.

## CONCLUSION

Given these data, it would be idle to ask: "What mode would Tolkien be using today?", for we can be certain that he would maintain his well-known "contrasistency", and change modes according to what he judged to be more adequate at the moment of writing. What we may ask is: "What full tengwar mode for writing Modern English would Tolkien recognise, upon reading, as coherent, logically and historically fitting, and above all faithful to the spirit (if not to the letter – and this word is used advisedly!) of his sub-creation?". To this each can answer as she or he will; my own opinion is that we would be faithful to JRRR's most recent practice in employing a Treebeard-like mode (if writing phonemically) or a Letter-mode (if writing orthographically). The resulting **Phonemic / Orthographic** modes would be similar to those pictured below.

P O	P O	P O	P O
ᵽ t t	ᵇ f f	ᵎ w u	λ h h
ᵼ p p	ᵈ ʃ sh	ᵘ a áæ áa: o ɔoo	ʌ ʌ e ʌee
ᶆ ʃ ch	ᵇ ḏ th[ð]	ᵘ o áo: a	o u óu: w
ᶆ k k ʒck	ᵇ v v	ᶎ R r[R]	ɪ ə ii íi: i
ᵽ d d	ᵈ gh	ᵘ l l	ɹ y y
ᵼ b b	ᵎ n n	ᶎ ll	c e
ᶆ dʒ j	ᵇ m m	ᶎ s s	ʒ w
ᶆ g g	ᵇ ŋ ng	ᶎ c[s]	ʒ w
ᵇ θ th[θ]	ᵎ r r áe:r r	ᶎ z z	ʒ m
ö -y -y	o -ə -e	ᵽ <i>the the</i>	ᵼ <i>of the of the</i>
ᶎ -w -w	ᶎ <i>in on</i>	ᵼ <i>of of</i>	ᶎ ᶎ ᶎ ᶎ

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