

Understanding Tolkien's English Vocabulary in The Hobbit

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ABSTRACT

J.R.R. Tolkien uses English vocabulary that is archaic and consists of regional dialects in his books like *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. This study aims to find out whether or not students who study the English language can understand the English vocabulary used in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and to identify which words that are least understood by the students. This study utilizes quantitative methodology and questionnaire is used as the instrument to collect data. Thirty (30) samples were collected among students of English Language Studies (ELS) programmes and students of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programmes. The analyzed data will tell whether or not the students can understand the vocabulary and show which of the words that students find difficulty in understanding.

Keywords: Tolkien, English Vocabulary, The Hobbit

INTRODUCTION

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien is the author of two epic fantasy books which are *The Hobbit* (or *There and Back Again*) first published in 1937 and *The Lord of The Rings* originally published in three volumes with *The fellowship of the Ring* published in 1954, *The Two Towers* also published in 1954 and *The Return of the King* published in 1955 (Noad et al., 2020).

The Hobbit (1937) is a story set in middle earth which is inhabited by mythical creatures like elves, dwarves, trolls and dragons. The main character of the story is a hobbit from Hobbiton named Bilbo Baggins who was chosen to be part of an expedition, albeit reluctantly and with some persuasion from a wizard called Gandalf, to reclaim the treasure of the dwarves from Smaug the dragon. It is in this expedition that Bilbo stumbles upon and becomes the 'owner' the ring which will become the central focus of the sequel book called *The Lord of the Rings* (published in three volumes from 1954 to 1955).

As the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University from 1925 to 1945 and Merton Professor of English Language and Literature from 1945 to 1959, Tolkien is an authority in the field of Old English. His extraordinary knowledge of language such as Gothic, Anglo-Saxon and Welsh leads to his attempt to invent a language which would make its way into his works of fiction (Mitchell, 1996). In addition to this, Tolkien's stint as a lexicographer on Oxford English Dictionary which was described as the most instructive two years of his life should have had some perceptible impact on his writing of fiction too (Greene, 1996).

As we can see, Old English has a significant presence in Tolkien's works of fiction due to his experience and academic background. Thus, it could be hypothesized that this would pose some difficulty to modern readers and even to the students of the English language to understand certain words, phrases and sentences in these works, and in the context of this study *The Hobbit*, without having some awareness of Old English.

Therefore, this study would attempt at fulfilling the following objectives:

1. To find out whether or not students who study the English language can understand the English vocabulary used in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*.
2. To identify which words that are most and least understood by the students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned earlier, Tolkien's stint as a lexicographer has a strong influence on his writing of fiction. According to Greene (1996), there is strong evidence that Tolkien's fiction drew on his experience specifically as a lexicographer or at least in addition to his medieval scholarship. One such evidence is found in *The Hobbit* that is in the naming the dragon, Smaug.

The influence of Tolkien's experience as a lexicographer is very much seen in his fictions as Greene finds in *The Hobbit*, Tolkien foregrounds the lexicographer's concern with the semantic possibilities of words and phrases for example in Bilbo's initial conversation with Gandalf that shows Bilbo using the same phrase "good morning" as both a greeting and a farewell. Gandalf calls attention to the difference, not only of broad denotation (or basic meaning) but also of connotation (or subtle suggestion), between Bilbo's uses.

In addition, Greene says, "also clearly to be seen in *The Hobbit* is a self-conscious concern with styles of language, the effect created by particular syntactic structures, grammatical constructions, and a restricted lexicon. This parallels the OED's practice of identifying typical usages according to geographical occurrence, register, or style. In *The Hobbit* Tolkien repeatedly contrasts the verbal styles of the dwarves with Bilbo's, and even distinguishes among the dwarves by verbal style and register of language" (e.g. Thorin's high-flown speech versus Gloin's pragmatic, business-like speech).

Other examples given by Greene include Tolkien's choice of lexicon and accent to characterize the trolls in order to set them very quickly in a tradition of literary and dramatic villains with "words like blighter, blinking, and blimey place the trolls in their social hierarchy by register, and orthographic renditions of pronunciations ("Ere, 'oo are you?", "yer", "et", "tomorrer", "'ell", and "a-thinkin") place them by accent." Meanwhile, "Gollum is characterized through grotesque physical description, but even more so through his language. Perhaps the most telling of his verbal peculiarities, however, is his use of the first person plural (we, us) to refer to himself but the third person neuter singular (it) to refer to Bilbo: it suggests Gollum's self-absorption and thorough identification with his Ring, as well as his objectifying of the hobbit as a potential meal."

Fisher (2013-2014) on the other hand looks at "Tolkien's manipulation of Old English language, in particular, to create another level of significance and meaning behind the personal names of key characters" (in particular in the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*) for example the personal name of the key character "Frodo that originates from the Old English (OE) *frōd* meaning wise, prudent." Another example is the character Smeagol who is later also identified as Gollum. The name Sméagol refers to "the most inquisitive and curious minded' member of a 'family of high repute...stern and wise in old lore', a people akin to hobbits. The root of Sméagol comes from the verb of Germanic origin *smūgan*, 'to creep or penetrate gradually'. From this derived the OE verb *smēagan* meaning to 'scrutinize, investigate'. The -ol ending is an OE adjectival declension, therefore giving Sméagol's name the literal translation of

‘inquisitive’. Another derivation comes from OE smēag meaning ‘sagacious’, which was often used in OE to describe a worm. However, the Anglo-Saxon word worm had a broader semantic field and was ‘applied to various kinds of animal that creep or crawl, including reptiles and caterpillars’ and also for ‘a serpent, snake, dragon’, which is prominent in heroic poetry. This is particularly significant when considering the Old Norse (ON) cognate of smēag is smaug, which is the past tense of the verb smjúga, ‘to creep through an opening’, which Tolkien has used for the name of his dragon in *The Hobbit*.”

METHODOLOGY

This section discusses the methodology used, respondents and sample size, research instrument, data collection and data analysis procedures.

Research Methodology

The researchers utilize quantitative methodology in order to get the type of primary data needed i.e. quantitative data. Only simple statistics are required in the forms of frequencies and percentages.

Respondents and Sample Size

The respondents of this research are tertiary level students who major English Language Studies (ELS) and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). Purposive sampling is used in order to select the samples. The sample size is 30 (n=30) and it is made up of ELS and TESL students at an institute of higher learning in Malaysia.

Research Instrument

In order to collect the data, a questionnaire is developed and it consists of 2 sections. The first section requires the respondents to provide demographic information while the second section focuses on getting information concerning the respondents’ familiarity with the story *The Hobbit* and their understanding of the vocabulary used in it. A list of vocabulary taken from chapter one until chapter four of the story is chosen to be tested on the respondents. This list of vocabulary is taken from <https://www.vocabulary.com/lists/349519> (updated September 11, 2018). A total of 30 words are included in this list.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire is prepared in Google Form format. When the questionnaire is ready, the Google Form link is sent to the identified respondents via WhatsApp application. The completed questionnaire (Google Form) is then submitted to the researcher. In total, 30 questionnaire forms have been completed and submitted to the researcher.

Data Analysis Procedure

The responses for the questionnaire are compiled, arranged and tabulated automatically in the Google Form application. The tabulated data are then analyzed in order to look for the patterns in the responses.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

To discuss the results of the research, the data are arranged and presented in three sections so that logical conclusions can be drawn effectively and the research questions can be addressed effectively.

Respondents' Familiarity with the Story The Hobbit

Table 1 indicates that only a small percentage of the respondents (12.9%) have read the book The Hobbit by JRR Tolkien while a significant majority of the respondents (87.1%) have not.

Table 1. Number of Respondents Who Have Read The Hobbit (n=30)

Answer	Percentage (%)
Yes	12.9
No	87.1

Table 2 meanwhile indicates how many of the respondents have watched the movie adaptation of The Hobbit (which was divided into a series of three films) by the director Peter Jackson. If compared to reading the book, more respondents indicate that they have watched the movie adaption (48.4%) although a big percentage of the respondents (51.6%) say that they have not watched the movie adaptation of The Hobbit

Table 2. Number of Respondents Who Have Watched the Movie Adaptation of The Hobbit by Peter Jackson (n=30)

Answer	Percentage (%)
Yes	48.4
No	51.6

Respondents' Familiarity with Words Taken from the Story The Hobbit

Table 3 shows what are the words from the book The Hobbit (selected words from chapters 1 to 4) that the respondents claim that they are familiar with. The three words that record the highest percentages or the words that the respondents claim they are very familiar with are 'fierce' (83.9%), 'expedition' (74.2%) and 'wretched' (74.2%). All in all, there are 13 words that record more than 50% of the respondents saying that they are familiar with the words.

Table 3. Vocabulary from the Hobbit (Chapters 1-4) According to Respondents They Are Familiar with (n=30)

No.	Vocabulary	Percentage
1	Fierce	83.9
2	Expedition	74.2
3	Wretched	74.2
4	Fluster	67.7
5	Devour	64.5
6	Ingenious	61.3
7	Mince	61.3
8	Solemn	61.3
9	Rummage	58.1
10	Bewildered	58.1
11	Replenish	54.8
12	Scarce	54.8
13	Haughty	51.6

On the other hand, Table 4 shows the words that the respondents say they are not familiar with. The top three words according to the respondents that they are not familiar with are 'defray' (87.1%), 'purloin' (74.2%) and 'depredation' (71.0%). In total, there are 17 words that record more than 50% of the respondents say that they are not familiar with the words.

Table 4. Vocabulary from the Hobbit (Chapters 1-4) According to Respondents They Are Not Familiar with
(n=30)

No.	Vocabulary	Percentage
1	Defray	87.1
2	Purloin	74.2
3	Depredation	71.0
4	Palpitate	64.5
5	Cleave	64.5
6	Flummox	64.5
7	Throng	64.5
8	Outlandish	61.3
9	Reverence	61.3
10	Shirk	58.1
11	Repose	58.1
12	Hoard	54.8
13	Audacious	54.8
14	Ire	51.6
15	Plunder	51.6
16	Venerable	51.6
17	Prudent	51.6

Respondents' Understanding of the meaning of Words taken from the Story The Hobbit

Table 5 clarifies whether or not the respondents really understand the meaning of the words. The percentage of respondents being able to provide the correct meaning of the words is very low. Only 2 words that record 30% > of the respondents giving the correct answer to the meaning of the words: 'fierce' (33.3%) and 'devour' (30%). Meanwhile words that record less than 10% of the respondents giving the correct meaning the words are 'wretched', 'depredation' and 'purloin' with 6.7% each as well as 'palpitate' and 'defray' with 3.3% each.

Table 5. Respondents Who Manage to Provide Correct Meaning of Words (n=30)

No	Vocabulary	Number of Respondents Who Stated the Meaning of Word (and percentage)	Number of Students with Correct Meaning (and percentage)
1	Fierce	20 (66.7%)	10 (33.3%)
2	Devour	12 (40%)	9 (30%)
3	Expedition	18 (60%)	8 (26.7)
4	Replenish	12 (40%)	8 (26.7%)
5	Audacious	9 (30%)	7 (23.3)
6	Fluster	19 (63.3%)	6 (20%)
7	Rummage	11 (36.7%)	6 (20%)
8	Prudent	9 (30%)	6 (20%)
9	Venerable	8 (26.7%)	6 (20%)
10	Bewildered	15 (50%)	5 (16.7%)
11	Mince	12 (40%)	5 (16.7%)
12	Scarce	11 (36.7%)	5 (16.7%)
13	Throng	11 (36.7%)	5 (16.7%)
14	Plunder	8 (26.7%)	5 (16.7%)
15	Reverence	7 (23.3%)	5 (16.7%)
16	Ingenious	13 (43.3%)	4 (13.3%)
17	Haughty	13 (43.3%)	4 (13.3%)
18	Ire	9 (30%)	4 (13.3%)
19	Repose	8 (26.7%)	4 (13.3%)

20	Outlandish	6 (20%)	4 (13.3%)
21	Solemn	11 (36.7%)	3 (10%)
22	Shirk	7 (23.3%)	3 (10%)
23	Hoard	7 (23.3%)	3 (10%)
24	Flummox	7 (23.3%)	3 (10%)
25	Cleave	6 (20%)	3 (10%)
26	Wretched	14 (46.7%)	2 (6.7%)
27	Depredation	9 (30%)	2 (6.7%)
28	Purloin	5 (16.7%)	2 (6.7%)
29	Palpitate	6 (20%)	1 (3.3%)
30	Defray	2 (6.7%)	1 (3.3%)

CONCLUSION

From the data analyzed we can summarize that the respondents are familiar with 13 out of 30 words listed (or 43.3%). While they are not familiar with 17 words from the list (or 56.7%).

The words that the respondents manage to provide correct meaning to:

1. Word with the highest number of correct answers: 'fierce' (10 or 33.3%)
2. Words with the lowest number of correct answers: 'palpitate' (1) and 'defray' (1) (or 3.3% each)

As a conclusion, the respondents find that they are not familiar with the vocabulary in this book even though they are the students of the English language. Even for those who claim that they are familiar with the words, they do not have the total grasp of the meaning of the words.

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