

Tolkien: Esperanto, Sindarin and Welsh

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Resumo

La majstroverko de Tolkien estas sendube *La Mastro de la Ringoj*, en kiu la aŭtoro rakontas fantastan epopeon de lando, kiun li nomas *Meza Tero*. Por ĉi tiu mondo, li kreis almenaŭ dek kvar lingvojn, unu por ĉiuj popoloj, kiuj enloĝas ĝin. La du plej bone konataj estas *Quenya* kaj *Sindarin*, kiuj estas la lingvoj, kiujn parolis la Elfoj. Dum sia tuta vivo, Tolkien interesiĝis pri lingvoj, aparte mezepokaj ĝermanaj lingvoj, sed li ankaŭ multe amis la kimran lingvon, kaj multe admiris la finnan. Unu el la ĉefaj kialoj de tiuj admiro kaj amo de tiuj lingvoj estis la fakto, ke ĉiuj posedis literaturon, kiun li konsideris eposa kaj epopea, kaj li esprimis bedaŭron, ke la moderna angla ne havis tian literaturon. Junaĝe, li promesis verki epopeojn por dediĉi al la angla kaj la angla nacio. Kiam li unue renkontis Esperanton, li plene subtenis ĝiajn idealojn, sed, pro la fakto, ke la lingvo estis tro juna por posedi eposan literaturon, li iom post iom forlasis la movadon. Uzante sian konon de la finna lingvo, lia unua provo de lingvokreado estis la pra-*Quenya*, en kiu li verkis poezion. Li poste kreis *Sindarin*-on, bazita sur la kimra lingvo. Li verkis la epopeon *La Mastro de la Ringo*, por doni al siaj lingvaj kreaĵoj kvazaŭan historian fundamenton. *Sindarin* kaj *Quenya* pluevoluis kaj estas nun parolataj de komunumoj tra la tuta mondo.

Introduction

In September of 2022, a new television series appeared on the small screen, called *Rings of Power*, a story based on the stories from the book *The Silmarillion*¹, which told the tale of *Middle Earth*, the fantastical world, before the events of the three books *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien took place. Tolkien's books are still very influential today, not only in the media of fantasy literature and film, but also in the world of *conlangs* or constructed languages.

In the world that Tolkien had created, we find the inhabitants of the various lands speaking at least fourteen different languages, a few of which have been well documented and even exist outside of the covers of the books in the real world (Noel 1980). Between 2001 and 2003, the New Zealand film director *Peter Jackson* transposed the three books of *The Lord of The Rings* onto the Global Big Screen, and what was interesting for us, was the fact that we heard actors

¹ Published posthumously by Tolkien's son, Christopher Tolkien in 1977.

speak *Quenya* ['kʷweɲa] and *Sindarin* [sm'da:ɾɪn] for the first time, the two main languages of the Elves, which Tolkien created from his imagination for the inhabitants of that fictitious land.

J.R.R. Tolkien and His Languages

Tolkien was born on the 3rd of January 1892 in *Bloemfontein* in The Orange Free State, which was later annexed by the British Empire into the country of South Africa. Although we consider him English, as his parents were both originally from England, his forebearers came from Eastern Prussia, which is where his surname *Tolkien* originates. After his father died from rheumatic fever when he was a child, his mother brought him to King's Heath, a suburb of the large English industrial city of Birmingham, which lay in a region nicknamed *The Black Country*, so called because of the smoke spewing out of industrial factory chimneys everywhere, and covering everything in a black layer of soot. It is often thought that this vista fired Tolkien's imagination, when he created the foreboding landscape of *Mordor*² in *Middle Earth* (Solopova 2009).

Tolkien had already learned to read by the age of 4, and was able to write quite fluently not long afterwards. His favourite lessons were those about languages, and he was always delighted by his mother's lessons in elementary Latin (Carpenter 1978). In 1900, he became a pupil at Birmingham's *King Edward School*, and by the time he left, he was fluent in Latin and Greek. However, it was while he was at this school that he discovered Mediæval languages, and on his own accord, he taught himself Anglo-Saxon, Middle English, and also Gothic and Norse. He would, in fact, later become a professor in Mediæval Languages (Solopova 2009). While he was studying Classical Languages at Oxford University, at which he was a student from 1911, and then later at Exeter University, his interest in Germanic Languages overtook his interest in Latin or Greek. And during this time as a student, he somehow stumbled upon the Finnish language, and while he never successfully mastered the language, he had learned enough in order to read parts of the Finnish Epic *Kalevala*. He was in awe of this Epic tale and he sorely wished that something similar existed in the English language. As a result, he made it fully known that he fully intended to create literature in the same vein [as *Kalevala*] and write epic legends, and then dedicate them to England (Letters, 131). It is said, that Tolkien's encounter with Finnish spurred him to start creating his own languages, since by 1915, he had already drafted a language, influenced by Finnish, which we can consider an early version of *Quenya*, and in which he had been able to compose lines of poetry (Carpenter 1978). In 1920, he had been offered the post of Reader in English at the University of Leeds in Yorkshire, in the North of England, and by 1924, he had become a professor at that same University. Despite his Readership in English, his main interests still lay in general linguistics and philology (Solopova 2009).

² *Mordor* is the territory where the antagonist of the novels, *Sauron*, an evil sorcerer, resides. The landscape is blighted with volcanoes and lethal rivers of lava and noxious gases.

Tolkien and Welsh

Tolkien first encountered the Welsh language when he was 8 years old. At that time, he was living in a house behind the railway station at King's Heath. Trains, whose wagons were loaded with coal trundled past his bedroom window, which looked over the rails, whose destination plates bore exotic Welsh names (Tolkien 2020 edition; Phelpstead 2011). Those placenames encouraged him to dig out books on the Mediæval Welsh Language during his time at Oxford University, and having visited Wales many years after his graduation, he fell further in love with the language, as well as with the myths and legends of that tiny Principality. When he started planning his Masterwork, it is said that he used the myths of Wales as basis for the myths and legends he would forge for his literary creation (Phelpstead 2011). Furthermore, when he came to plan his second Elven language, *Sindarin*, Welsh would, in fact, be its template.

Tolkien and Esperanto

The first edition of *The Lord of the Rings* in Esperanto was published in 1995, translated by the masterful William Auld. What was remarkable, was that in this and subsequent editions, the editor had added an article, that appeared as a foreword, which Tolkien had written in May 1932 for *The British Esperantist*, in which Tolkien wholeheartedly gave his support for Esperanto, encouraging all readers to also support the language and learn it. This of course gives us the impression that Tolkien, without reservation supported the ideals of Esperanto, based on his own principles and interest in language creation and philology, and in 1932, this was indeed true. However, his fervour for Esperanto damped somewhat in later years, and he took no further action in the movement, a fact that Esperantists are wont to forget, who prefer to remember the halcyon days of his full patronage. We have to ask ourselves, why Tolkien had lost interest in Esperanto, despite the fact that he was a fellow creator of languages, and we should remember that he did not intend his languages for international use. For Tolkien, a language can only be considered living, if it has a collection of myths and legends to support it. As mentioned above, the Finnish Epic *Kalevala* had made a deep impression on him, as had the *Eddas* of Norse and Icelandic literature, *Beowulf* from Anglo-Saxon literature, and the legends of the Celts, such as the Welsh *Mabinogi*. For Tolkien, Esperanto had neither legends, nor myths to back it up, at least not in the 1930's: the language was just too young to support such traditions (Solopova 2009: Tolkien 2020 edition). Tolkien loved to create languages, certainly, but he didn't believe that his creations would contain a soul, until they had myths and legends written in them. And so, the desire to breathe life into his linguistic creations gave him the drive to devise lands, peoples to inhabit them and tales for their people to tell in them. This is what Esperanto was missing for him. Linguistically, the language otherwise had no faults, as far as he was concerned.

As I have stated, the power of Tolkien's mythology is still alive. In addition to the small screen series, *The Rings of Power*, in November of 2022, 50 years after the death of Tolkien, a new book appeared recounting hitherto untold tales from *The Silmarillion* and other works in *The Middle Earth* series, called *The Fall of Núminor*, adding to the already immense amount of *Middle Earth* literature.

Quenya and Sindarin

Quenya and *Sindarin* are two languages from the race of Elves in the *Middle Earth* legendarium, and in Tolkien's mind, they are related languages. Tolkien created language families, which he attributed to each race of people in his books, spanning from *The First Age* to *The Third Age*, which is the Age in which the events in *Lord of the Rings* take place (Sibley 2022). *Quenya* was the ancient language of the Elves, which was called *High Elven*, and is comparable to the status that Latin held in Mediaeval Europe. *Sindarin*, which the general Elven population called the Grey Elves speaks, evolved from *Quenya*. Tolkien created a lexical relationship between *Quenya* and *Sindarin*, however syntactically and morphologically, the two languages are quite distinct, as Tolkien based *Quenya* on Finnish, and *Sindarin* on Welsh, a Western Celtic language of the British Isles (Adams 2011). Of course, Tolkien created other languages for his fantasy world, and we can make educated guesses at the origins of some of those languages, from the characteristics of the names that Tolkien gave to the people, who speak those languages: for example, the characteristics of the names of the *Men of Westeron* are similar to Anglo-Saxon names. And we can see characteristics in other tribes of *Middle Earth* similar to names in Gothic and Norse, languages which had influenced and enchanted Tolkien during his life, and which all have an array of Epic literature.

As far as *Sindarin* is concerned, Tolkien never created a fully functional language, but he created enough in order to write poetry, spells and casual conversations between various characters in the books. He never developed the grammar at any great depth, and the lexicon was just sufficient for his intended purposes. But there was enough material for interested parties to take the bare bones of the language and develop it further (Jallings 2017; Salo 2004). The further development of the language allowed it to grow and expand beyond its initial purposes into a fully fledged language. In comparing Welsh with *Sindarin*, I am basing most of my comparisons on the Classical Tolkien language, although I will point to references in the developed language, where appropriate.

Welsh Phonology

Traditionally, the Welsh alphabet only has 26 letters, including digraphs to represent discrete morphemes. There are also trigraphs in Welsh, but these do not form part of the alphabet. The accent is usually on the penultimate syllable of a word, unless there is a diacritic sign on a vowel to indicate a variant accent (Thomas 1996; King 1996).

	=	/b/	<ll>	=	/l/
<c>	=	/k/	<m>	=	/m/
<ch>	=	/χ/	<n>	=	/n/
<d>	=	/d/	<p>	=	/p/
<dd>	=	/ð/	<ph>	=	/f/
<f>	=	/v/	<r>	=	/r/
<ff>	=	/f/	<rh>	=	/r̥/
<g>	=	/g/	<s>	=	/s/
<ng>	=	/ŋ/	<t>	=	/t/
<h>	=	/h/	<th>	=	/θ/

<l> = /l/

The phonemes, represented by distinct graphemes that are not part of the alphabet are:

<mh> = /m̥/ <si> = /ʃ/
<nh> = /n̥/ <tsi> = /tʃ/
<ngh> = /ŋ̊/

There are also some letters, adopted from English and used in Welsh in some words, which are traditionally not part of the alphabet:

<j³> = /dʒ/ <z> = /z/

Welsh Dialects

The situation with vowels in Welsh is a little more complicated, as there are currently two principal dialects of Welsh: North Welsh and South Welsh, each with its own standard phonology, which can differ significantly from the variant of the other region. In addition, one grapheme can sometimes represent a long or a short vowel, without any orthographic indication as to which should be pronounced. However, there are some orthographic rules, as to whether a long or short vowel should be pronounced. Where there is a variation in these rules, there is usually a diacritic sign above the vowel to indicate this. In addition, some vowel variants can have 3 different length: short, medium or long. This is not often shown in the orthography.

Common vowels to both main dialects:

<a>	[a]; [a:]	<î>	[i:]
<â>	[a:]	<o>	[ɔ]; [o]; [o:]
<e>	[ɛ]; [e]; [e:]	<ô>	[o:]
<ê>	[e:]	<w>	[ɔ]/[ʊ]; [u]; [u:]
<i>	[ɪ]; [i]; [i:]	<ŵ>	[u:]

Variations between the two main dialects:

North Wales:	<u>	[ɪ]; [i:]	<û>	[i:]
	<y>	[ɪ]; [i:]; [ə:] ⁴	<ÿ>	[i:]

South Wales:	<u>	[ɪ]; [i]; [i:]	<û>	[i:]
	<y>	[ɪ]; [i]; [i:]; [ə:]	<ÿ>	[i:]

Diphthongs:

	Northern Pronunciation	Southern Pronunciation
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³In some modern grammars and textbooks, the letter “j” is now considered part of the Modern Welsh Alphabet.

⁴<y>: as an individual word, it represents the definite article “the”. Although phonologically traditional grammars render the pronunciation as [ə:], most speakers of Welsh pronounce it as [ɛ:].

<ae>	[a·i]; [ai]; [əi]; [ɛi]	[ai]; [əi]; [ɛi]
<ai>	[ai]	[ai]
<ay>	[əi]; [ɛi]	[əi]; [ɛi]
<au>	[a·i]; [ai]	[ai]
<aw>	[a·u]; [au]	[au]
<ei>	[ɛi]	[ɛi]
<eu>	[əi]; [ɛi]	[əi]; [ɛi]
<ew>	[e·u]; [ɛu]	[ɛu]
<ey>	[əi]; [ɛi]	[əi]; [ɛi]
<oe>	[o·i]; [oi]	[oi]
<oi>	[o·i]; [oi]	[oi]
<ou>	[o·i]	[oi]
<oy>	[oi]	[oi]
<uw>	[iu]	[iu]
<wy>	[o·i]; [œi]/[o·i]; [oi]	[oi]/[oi]
<yw>	[iu]	[iu]
<ia>	[ja]	
<ie>	[je]	
<wi>	[wi:]	
<wo>	[wɔ]	

The Pronunciation of *Sindarin*

One feature that was missing from the Esperanto translation of *The Lord of the Rings* was the Appendices, which appeared in later editions of the third book, *The Return of the King*. The appendices are important for us: they have more information regarding the languages we encounter in the books and their pronunciation⁵. I can only surmise that the reason the Esperanto appendices did not appear was because they were not present in the first editions of *The Lord of the Rings*, and that Tolkien only added them to later editions on the request of the readers of these first editions, and that William Auld had used the earlier editions for his own translation. However, the pronunciation guide in the appendix is quite basic, and modern users of the language have had to develop a clearer model of pronunciation in books, such as *Neo-Sindarin* (Jallings 2017; Salo 2004). In the book *A Gateway to Sindarin*, the author gives us details of the phonological changes that have taken place from the early version of the language, as spoken in *Middle Earth*, to its use as a “Modern” language. However that study is quite extensive and I will focus only on the phonological description that Tolkien has provided, and I will refer to detailed clarification, where appropriate from the book *A Fan’s Guide to Neo-Sindarin* (Jallings 2017). It should be borne in mind that Tolkien intended *Sindarin* to be written with the *Tengwar* alphabet, an alphabet that he devised for many of the languages to be written in, including *Sindarin* and *Quenya*.

⁵ *The Return of the King*: Appendix E: Writing and Spelling; Appendix F: The Languages and Peoples of the Third Age.

Consonants:

I will give examples of consonants that are the same or similar to those in Welsh:

<c>	/k/.
<ch>	/χ/. Tolkien will note that the digraph <ch> is the same sound in Welsh.
<dh>	/ð/. Written as <dd> in Welsh.
<f>	/f/ and at the end of words /v/. The Welsh <f> = /v/, which often disappears at the end of a word in spoken Welsh.
<lh>	/l/. Written as <ll> in Welsh.
<ng>/<ñ>	/ŋg/ and at the end of words /ŋ/.
<ph>	/f/. To indicate the /f/ phoneme at the end of words.
<rh>	/r/. Written the same in Welsh.
<s>	/s/. Sometimes, <s> is used to represent /z/, as in the word <i>sw</i> /zu:/ (zoo).
<th>	/θ/ Written the same as in Welsh.

In addition, *Sindarin* has the following consonants, which are not found in Welsh, or only found as allophones:

<mh>/<ŵ>	/m̥/.
<hw>	/w/. Influenced by Anglo-saxon.

Vowels:

As in Welsh, *Sindarin* has long and short vowels. Long vowels are indicated with a diacritic circumflex accent, which is how long vowels are indicated in Welsh. However, there also exist vowels of half-length, which also exist in some North Wales dialects, which are indicated by means of an acute accent (Jallings 2017; Tolkien 2020 edition).

<a> = [a];	<á> = [aː];	<â> = [aː]
<æ> ⁶ = [ɛ]		
<e> = [ɛ]	<é> = [ɛː]	<ê> = [ɛː]
<i> = [i]	<í> = [iː]	<î> = [iː]
<o> = [ɔ]	<ó> = [ɔː]	<ô> = [ɔː]
<œ> = [œ] ⁷		
<u> = [u]	<ú> = [uː]	<û> = [uː]
<y> = [y]	<ý> = [yː]	<ÿ> = [yː]

Diphthongs:

<ai> = [aɪ]	<ae> = [aɛ]/[ɛ]	<au> = [aü]	<aw> = [au]
<ei> = [ɛɪ]	<oe> = [ɔɛ]	<ui> = [uɪ]	

⁶ Not used by Tolkien, but created by the modern users of *Neo-Sindarin*.

⁷ Be aware of the difference between <œ> and <oe>. The first is a ligature and both are pronounced differently.

Accent:

In words of two syllables, the accent falls on the first syllable, which differs from the Welsh. In words of more than two syllables, the accent falls on the penultimate syllable, if that syllable has a long vowel. If this is short, then the accent will fall on the third syllable from the last.

Remarks:

It is clear that there are indeed phonological similarities between the two languages, and the influence of Welsh on *Sindarin* is evident. There are indeed many phonemes that are similar, or identical between Welsh and *Sindarin*, especially in regards to medium-length vowels with verbs in *Sindarin* and the variety of Welsh in North Wales. Varieties of Welsh in South Wales do not have medium length vowels. It is likely that Tolkien was more familiar with the varieties of Welsh in North Wales, as he used to vacation at *Trwyn Llanbedog* on the coast of *Cardigan Bay*⁸, in North Wales (Phelpstead 2011). Although there are a few vowels in *Sindarin* that are not found in Welsh, they, nonetheless, can be found in other related Brythonic Celtic languages⁹, of which Tolkien had at least a rudimentary knowledge. As for the consonants, Tolkien made use of two consonants, that are considered typically Welsh, and are not found in other Celtic languages: /h/ and /r/.

The System of Mutation:

One of the characteristics of all Celtic languages is that many consonants at the beginning of words change, or “mutate” due to morphological and syntactic relationships between words. Tolkien also created a system of mutations to show syntactic relationships within *Sindarin*. *Sindarin* has more paradigms of mutations than Welsh or even any other of the Celtic languages.

In Welsh, there are three types of mutations: Lenition (Soft) Mutation¹⁰, Nasal Mutation and Aspirate Mutation¹¹. There are strict grammatical rules and conditions, as to what causes which mutation. There are a certain number of letters in each paradigm that can undergo mutation.

Chart of Mutations in Welsh:

Lenition (Soft)			Nasal			Aspirate		
t	>	d	t	>	nh	t	>	th
c	>	g	c	>	ngh	c	>	ch
p	>	b	p	>	mh	p	>	ph
d	>	dd	d	>	n			

⁸ *Cardigan Bay* runs from *Pembrokeshire* in the South West of Wales to *Gwynedd* in the North West of Wales.

⁹ The Brythonic family of Celtic Languages includes Welsh, Cornish and Breton.

¹⁰ Common to all the Celtic languages.

¹¹ The Aspirate Mutation is the English term. In Welsh, the mutations are Soft (or lenition): Meddal; Aspirate: Llaes; Nasal: Trwynol.

g	>	-		g	>	ng				
b	>	f		b	>	m				
m	>	f								
ll	>	l								
rh	>	r								

Reasons for Lenition:

Certain prepositions
 Certain conjunctions
 Some adverbial phrases
 Adjectival complements
 singular nouns
 after definite article❖
 Expressing Questions
 Expressing negation♦
 To indicate the direct object
 Expressing possessing “his”
 After the numeral “dau/dwy” (2)
 Prefixes

- ❖ But not with nouns beginning with “ll” or “rh”.
- ♦ All other nouns not beginning with the consonants t/c/p.

Reasons for Nasal: Reasons for Aspirate:

After preposition “yn” (in)
 Expressing possession “my”
 After certain numerals
 expressing “years”
 After certain prepositions
 After certain conjunctions
 Expressing possession
 “her” Feminine
 Expressing negation with
 the consonants t/c/p.
 After the numerals “tri” and
 “chwech” (3 & 6)
 Certain prefixes

The System of Mutation in Sindarin

Tolkien had a good understanding of the mutation system of the Celtic languages, not just the Welsh system, but also the Cornish and even the Irish Gaelic systems, as there are obvious influences of those similar, but different systems in *Sindarin* (Adams 2011). Tolkien used several types of mutation in *Sindarin*, such as Lenition, as in Welsh, as well as Nasal and also Mixed mutations¹², Long Mixed, which are considered part of the Mixed category, and also Liquid Mutations and Stop Mutations¹³. Many of the syntactic rules for the phonological changes are identical with the Welsh system, but then, a number of mutation paradigms are not found in Welsh, but can be found in some of the other Celtic Languages, such as Irish. (Adams 2011). Below is a simplified chart, which shows how the consonants in *Sindarin* can mutate. The name Tolkien gave for the system of Mutations in *Sindarin* is “*Prestanneth*”, which in itself sounds like a *bona fide* Welsh word¹⁴.

		LM	NM	SM				LM	NM
	>	V	B	M		<LH>	>	THL	‘L

¹²Both Cornish and Breton have a category of Mixed Mutations, which is absent in Welsh.

¹³ This Mutation Category seems to have been influenced by Scottish and Irish Gaelic.

¹⁴ The Welsh word for Mutation is “*Treigladd*”.

<C>	>	G	CH			<M>	>	V	M
<D>	>	DH	N	ND		<P>	>	B	PH
<G>	>	‘	NG	G		<R>	>	R	RH
<H>	>	CH	H			<RH>	>	THR	‘R
<HW>	>	CHW ¹⁵	‘W	HW		<S>	>	H	S ¹⁶
<L>	>	L	LH			<T>	>	D	TH

(LM = Lenition Mutation; NM = Nasal Mutation; SM = Stop Mutation)

Many of the rules that govern mutations in Welsh are the same for Sindarin:

To indicate the direct object of a phrase.

Adjectival complement.

After certain adverbs.

After certain prepositions.

Prefixes.

Concluding Remarks:

It should be pointed out that despite phonological and syntactical similarities, there are no lexical similarities between Welsh and *Sindarin*. However, there is one morphological feature that is common to Welsh and *Sindarin*, which involves the formation of plural nouns: there are many ways in which a plural noun can be formed in Welsh and *Sindarin*, one of the most common being the use of vowel shift within a word, often referred to as an *umlaut*, for example:

Welsh:

ci, cŵn [ki], [ku:n] (dog, dogs),

alarch, elyrch [‘alarχ], [‘elirχ] (swan, swans)

brennin, brenhinoedd [‘brɛnnɪn], [brɛ‘n̥inoð] (king, kings).

***Sindarin*:**

hû, hui – dog, dogs

alph, eilph – swan, swans

aran, erain – king, kings

¹⁵ Influenced by Cornish.

¹⁶ Influenced by Irish Gaelic.

In *Sindarin*, however, the pluralisation of many nouns causes a Nasal Mutation, while in Welsh, there is only a Soft Mutation in the singular after a definite article for feminine nouns. However, we do see a mutation in other Brythonic languages in the pluralisation of nouns¹⁷.

It's clear that Tolkien used elements not just from Welsh, but also from other Celtic languages in order to create *Sindarin* and today, there are groups of people that learn and speak, not just *Sindarin*, but also *Quenya*. As Tolkien never intended his creation to be spoken outside of his books, he did not develop an extensive lexicon, so it was up to the devotees of the modern devotees of the language to develop the language further and invent new words to add to the language. Today, the distinction between the pure language of Tolkien and the new version of the language is defined by the terms *Sindarin*, to represent the classical language and *Neo-Sindarin* to denote the evolved language.



The Inscription on the One Ring in the Black Speech, written in the Tengwar Alphabet

One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.

¹⁷ In Breton: “ar paotr brav” (Welsh: y bachgen braf): the nice boy, mutates in the plural: “ar baotred vrav” (Welsh: y bechgyn braf): the nice boys. Note: in Welsh, the adjective “brav” (nice”) is invariable and does not mutate after singular feminine nouns: “y ferch brav”: the nice girl. This is an infrequent exception .

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