

# ⌘The Language of the Elves⌘

(originally appeared on [Literal Exposure.com](http://literalexposure.com), July 11, 2011 -- <http://literalexposure.com/2011/07/11/the-language-of-the-elves-by-rie-sheridan-rose-author-of-the-luckless-prince/>)

One of the myriad lessons I learned from Professor Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* was that elves spoke their own language when they didn't want the humans/halflings to understand them. And it sounded cool. So, when I set out to write the elves in *The Luckless Prince* with a serious eye toward eventual publication, I wanted my elves to have their own language too.

Only one problem, I was not a linguist. When J.R.R. Tolkien created his multi-level elven languages, he had studied linguistics for decades. He knew the composition and construction of language, and used that knowledge as the base of his new ones. I thought that making up some weirdly spelled words that sounded kinda cool was enough.

I remember well the first time I got the idea to add in the elven words. I was visiting a friend for the summer, and making yet another pass at revision. This would have been sometime in the late 1980's. During this first attempt at language creation, my method was simple. I glanced around my borrowed bedroom, found an object, and rearranged the letters in its name until I had a new word I liked. So, "bookcase" might become "casobek", the elven word for journey-bread.

This made perfect sense to me at the time, and I considered that I had written a language. Until I found an elective to take when I was back in school for my Asian Studies degree that sounded like it might be interesting: The Languages of Science Fiction. You can still find our old webpage cached on Google, because I looked it up: <http://www2.truman.edu/~mshapiro/sfhome.html>. Unfortunately, since this class was in the late 1990's, many of the links are dead on this website – but it still gives you clues what to look for when you want to learn to construct a language.

This class opened my eyes to just how much work should go into the formation of an imaginary language.

I learned the basic concepts of grammar would probably still apply to a new language. You would still need nouns to name people, places, and things (though I chose to use simple alternate English names for my places). You would still need verbs for actions, and adjectives/adverbs to describe those nouns and verbs. So, I began rethinking my language.

I describe the language as “twittering” and “bird-like” throughout the story, so I made the decision to leave out certain English letters in my Elven alphabet because they are too sharp and hard a sound. You will find no words starting in C, G, or K for example – this was a conscious decision. The only words beginning with T are really the Th or the Tw sound, which are less sharp. There are more vowels than anything else, because they have a tendency to soft, more liquid sounds in general.

I decided that the elves, being a proud people with a bit of snobbery, would have a third case for humans, so my verbs and personal pronouns come in male, female, and human. I created other rules for past tense and future – though I simplified to only past, present, and future. (I decided elves don’t really need past imperfect tenses...do we?)

After I had this framework to build on, I could start creating the actual words of my language. This time, it wasn’t merely looking around a room and rearranging letters, it was a consistent, logical, rule-based system. And it was a blast!