



Sound, Meaning and Music in Tolkien's Elvish Languages and in Le Guin's Invented Language Kesh



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Introduction

- Our project examines sound-meaning connections ('sound symbolism') in two constructed languages ('conlangs')
 - J.R.R. Tolkien's Elvish language *Sindarin* (from *The Lord of the Rings*; Fig. 1)
 - Ursula K. Le Guin's post-apocalyptic *Kesh* (from *Always Coming Home*) (Fig. 2)
- Sound symbolism drives Tolkien's conlanging to a great extent (see for example Tolkien, Fimi & Higgins 2019; Farrugia 2019).
- Our project investigates the extent to which sound symbolism is present in Kesh
 - Not investigated before.
- Sound symbolism is present in many languages (Hinton, Nichols & Ohala 1995; Blasi et al. 2016; Jao 2020, Winter & Perlman 2021, Winter et al. 2022, inter al.)
- Sound symbolism is also relevant in poetry, advertising and branding, among others.

Methods

- Connection of Sindarin and Kesh to their associated fictional worlds, and to Tolkien's/Le Guin's conlanging views and goals.
- Comparison of seminal and recent articles on sound symbolism across languages.
- Identification of possible types of sound-symbolism in Kesh:
 - Size sound symbolism (Winter & Perlman 2021 and refs. therein)
 - [i] sounds associated with smallness
 - [o], [u] sounds associated with large sizes
 - 'R' sounds association with roughness (Winter et al. 2022)
 - 'Light' (sonorant) sounds ('l', 'n', ...) linked to musicality

Fig. 1

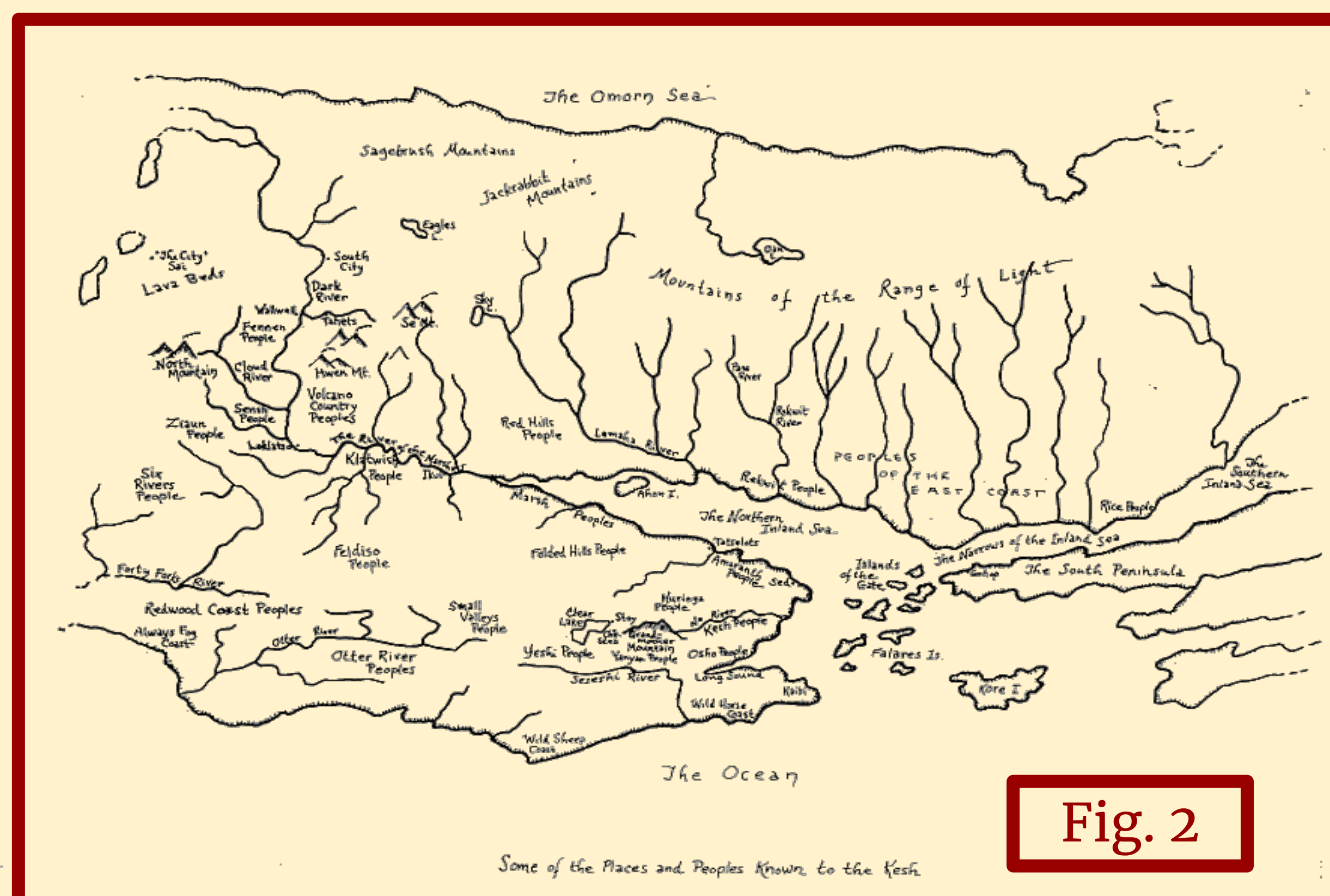


Fig. 2

Findings

- Partial size sound connection: [i] = smallness, [u] = largeness:
 - *Inye* 'small, brief' *Búrebúre* 'a great many'
- This also applies to animal terms.
 - *Bit* 'fox' *Bú* 'great horned owl'
 - *Míp* 'mouse' *Gunyú* 'wild boar'
- Also observed in how extent and duration are conveyed in verbs:
 - *yinye* 'small, limited in space/brief, limited in time; for a while'
 - *yediftu* 'small, limited in space/long, time-consuming, or unlimited in time'
 - *yeshoud* 'large or long in size/brief, limited in time-for a while'
 - *yehoum* 'large or long in size/long, for a long time, endless' (Le Guin 2019:687)

Next steps

- Investigation of additional sound symbolism in Kesh:
 - Sibilant ('s'-like sounds), rhotics ('r'-like sounds)
- Examination of possible sound-meaning connections between the **hinge** and [j], [w] sounds.
 - Central yin-yang-like metaphor in *Always Coming Home*.
 - Two-armed spiral circling out from a single center (Fig. 3)
 - [j], [w] are approximants, straddling the border between consonants and vowels in languages.
 - They appear to be over-represented in Kesh hinge-related words.
- Examination of musicality in both Kesh and Sindarin.

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Fig. 3

