

# Sindarin Stress — A Muta cum Liquida Rule?

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In Appendix E Tolkien described Sindarin (and Quenya) stress as follows:

In words of two syllables it falls in practically all cases on the first syllable. In longer words it falls on the last syllable but one, where that contains a long vowel, a diphthong, or a vowel followed by two (or more) consonants. Where the last syllable but one contains (as often) a short vowel followed by only one (or no) consonant, the stress falls on the syllable before it, the third from the end. (LotR:1116)

This is also the most basic rule for Latin stress. Usually this is described in the following terms:

If a syllable contains a long vowel (L *Rōmānus*, Q *Elentāri*) or ends in a consonant (L *sacerdōs*, S *Pelargir*) it is called heavy, otherwise it is called light. Tolkien says for the second case that the syllable's vowel is "followed by two (or more) consonants" since the maximal onset principle would dictate that a single consonant would count towards the following syllable (meaning that e. g. in S *Dene-thor*, the second syllable would be light. This example also shows that what counts is the spoken word: while <ph, th, ch> are written with two letters, they each represent a single consonant, /f, θ, x/ in IPA). With those terms one can define the stress placement as follows:

- In words with one or two syllables, the stress always falls on the first one (L *pūer*, S *rhūn*)
- In words with at least three syllables, the stress falls
  - on the second-to-last syllable (the penultimate) if it is heavy (L *sacerdōs*, S *Pelargir*),
  - on the third-to-last syllable (the antepenultimate) otherwise (L *fēmina*, S *Denethor*).

As the given examples illustrate, I use a variant orthography for the purpose of discussing stress here: Long vowels *ī, ŷ, ē...* are universally written with macrons and the main stress is indicated by the acute *é, á, ū...* Where necessary, syllable brakes are marked by a middle dot ; and secondary stress is marked by a grave *ò, ì ÿ...*

## 1 Proposal

This is not however the complete rule for Latin stress placement. Among other exceptions, there is a rule traditionally referred to by the name of *muta cum liquida*:

there are also so-called ambivalent syllables when either a short vowel is followed by two consonants the first of which is some *muta* [= the stops *p, t, k, b, d, g*] or the *semivocalis* *f* and the second a liquid [= *l, r*], or ... (Aelius Donatus, *Ars grammatica*, Liber II, p. 369)

In the terms above this rule means that the combinations are not split across syllable boundaries, but form the onset of the following syllable together, meaning that e. g. *ín-te·grō, té-ne·brae* are stressed on the antipenultimate. The reason why this is possible is, that words and therefore syllables can start with those combinations, for the combinations *gr-*, *br-* e. g. *grex, brevis*. This is not an absolute rule in Latin, consider for example the following verse:

*et pri|mo simi|lis volu|cri, mox |vera vo|lucris* (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 13:607)

Here *volucris* is once divided according to the *muta cum liquida* exception and once as *voluc-ris* with a heavy second syllable. However the scanning according to *muta cum liquida* seems to be the rule rather than the exception, at least in Classical time.

In the poetry from the Lord of the Rings there are (at least) two places where a Sindarin name appears to be stressed not according to the simple rule from Appendix E:

*Séek for |the swórd |thát was |bróken*  
*In Ím|ladris |it dwélls* (LotR:246)

The metric feet in this poem are quite irregular, but every line contains three raises, which in the second one can be only achieved if *Ímladris* is stressed on the first and third syllable, not on the second as the rule from Appendix E would predict.

**Addendum:** Even though all other lines in the poem have three raises, the line in question might very well be the odd one out and be stressed ‘*in Ímlád|ris it dwélls*’ with out taking away from its poetic quality, and that would in fact be my preferred reading, since I am going to argue that a *muta cum liquida* rule in Sindarin is rather doubtful. However this verse is a commonly presented piece of evidence in support of this rule, so let us assume for the sake of the argument that it is indeed stressed as *Ímladris* and see where that takes us, as I do not think we can rule out that Tolkien imagined the verse being stressed in this way either.

*Of mígh|ty kíngs |in Nárgo|thrònd*  
*And Gón|dolìn, |who nów |beyónd* (LotR:316)

Here every line is made up of four iambic feet, making it necessary to stress *Nárgothònd* like *Imladris* above.

Based on those examples, some have proposed that, similarly to Latin, Sindarin might have a *muta cum liquida* exception, making the stress in *Nárgo-thrònd* and *Ímla-drìs* regular. On first glance this sounds like a fairly reasonable explanation. Like Latin, Sindarin permits complex onsets, and *thr-*, *gr-* are among them. First to get an overview of the scope of such a rule, let’s list all the possible complex onsets.

The question of what can actually start a word in Sindarin is obscured somewhat by the presence of consonant mutation. In their unmutated form, for example, no Sindarin word begins with *chw-*, but under mutation this can occur: *gwath* ‘shadow’ → *a chwath* ‘and a shadow’ (PE17:41). In this case one could argue that *a chwath* actually represents a single unit /ax.waθ/ where *chw-* doesn’t actually start a word. Similar arguments can be made for most types of mutation, but in case of grammatical lenition the wordhood of the mutated element is clearer:

- *bast* → *penim vast* ‘we have no bread’ (PE17:144)
- *daer* → *Athrad Dhaer* ‘great ford’ (WJ:338)

No attested Sindarin word shows the cluster *mv* or *ddh*, so these must both be two separate words.

With this sorted out, here is a list of all the attested complex onsets in Sindarin, including those produced by lenition (len.):

- *pl/pr, tr, cr/cl* (*plad, trann, claur*) – those are irrelevant for this rule, since *p, t, c* can never appear medially (where they became *b, d, g*).
- *br/bl, dr, gl/gr* (*brass/Celebrant, draug/nedruil, glad/aglar*)
- *fl, thr, thl* (*flad/N Alflon, Thranduil/athra-, lhaw* → len. *thlaw/Gwathló*) – *Thranduil* seems to be a special reduction starting in *thr-*, the base word for spring is *tharan*. However a lenition of *rh-*, e. g. *rhûn*, → len. *thrûn* would be an option as well (for the lenition and nasal mutation of *rh-, lh-* see PE17:147)
- *vr, dhr*, (*brand* → len. *vrand/silivren, draug* → len. *dhraug/Caradhras*)

When applying the *muta cum liuida* rule Latin usually pays attention to morpheme boundaries, counting *gr-* in *inte-gro* as a complex onset, but *-br-* in the compound *ab-rumpo* as divided between the syllables. Since *Nargothrond* and *Imladris* are both compounds (of *narag-ost-rond* and *imlad-riss/rist* respectively), we will assume that this does not apply to the Sindarin version of the rule, otherwise we would lose the reason for why we proposed the rule in the first place.

## 2 Counter-evidence

### 2.1 Sindarin Poetry

However I believe there is considerable evidence against this view. Firstly, the examples above are from English rather than Sindarin poetry. In Tolkien’s Sindarin poetry one can find two relevant examples:

*A Él|berèth |Gilthó|nièl*  
*silív|ren pén|na mí|rièl* (LotR:238)

This poem appears to be written in a iambic tetrameter, which would dictate that *silívren* is stressed on the penultimate as Appendix E explains, not as *síli-vrèn* as the *muta cum liuida* rule predicts.

*ánnon e|dhéllen, |édro hi |ámmen*  
*fénnas no|góthrim, |lásto beth |lámmen (LotR:307)*

Here each half-line seems to contain a dactylic followed by a trochaic foot, dictating a stress *nogóthrim*, where *muta cum liquida* would predict *nógo-thrì*.

This shows that at least all Sindarin poetry can be explained by the rules in Appendix E and indeed in the two cases, where *muta cum liquida* could apply, it is absent. The first example (and the rest of *A Elbereth Gilthoniel*) also show the rules of secondary stress in Sindarin, namely that counting from the main stress in both directions syllables alternate between being unstressed or having secondary stress.

**Addendum:** User *Parmandil* on the *Vinyë Lambengolmor* Discord server has brought to my attention, that there is actually a case where Tolkien explicitly discusses the stress of a word relevant to this matter:

In this case evidently the three names were made to have similar shapes:  
↳ [brevis - macron & accent - brevis]: *carAdhras, celEbdil, fanUIdhol*. (PE17:36)

As discussed above, *dhr-*, the lenition of *dr-*, is one of the complex onsets that can start a word in Sindarin. Despite this *Carádhras* is stressed on its second to last syllable, which is explicitly marked as heavy by the *macron* in schematic structure.

## 2.2 English Poetry is Unreliable

Since the rule was derived from observations about Sindarin words in English poetry, it might prove useful to look for more examples there as well. A very useful source for this are the *Lays of Beleriand*, since they contain huge amounts of poetry mostly in two forms:

- *alliterative verse*: Here words from each half-line must alliterate, that is the first consonant of their stressed syllables must be the same (Here marked with underlining).
- *octosyllabic rhyming couplets*: Here lines are composed of iambic or trochaic tetrameters and two consecutive lines usually rhyme. For two words to rhyme, usually the first syllable of the rhyme must be stressed.

### 2.2.1 *Thangorodrim* – The rule is not universal

The *muta cum liquida* rule – even in English poetry – is not universal, which can be best seen with the name *Thangorodrim*:

*Then Thalion was thrust / to Thàngoródrim, (8:92)*  
*of Thàngoródrim's / thunderous mountain. (33:714)*  
*of thunder-riven / Thàngoródrim. (37:867)*

In the alliterative poems it constantly participates in *th*-alliteration, implying the stress *Thàngoródrim*, but never in *g*-alliteration as the *muta cum liquida* rule would predict with *Thangóro-drim*.

from *Thàn|goród|rim's stó|ny crówn*. (212:1653)  
on *Thàn|goród|rim's thúnde|róus |tówers*. (227:2051)  
that *wéighs |on Thàn|goród|rim's fóot* (282:3528)

In the rhyming couplets *Thangorodrim* also always occurs as *Thàngoródrim*.

In total *Thangorodrim* occurs twelve times in the Lays, always with the stress *Thàngoródrim*. While the *muta cum liquida* rule in Latin is somewhat optional, a word that defies it with this regularity would be unlikely.

### 2.2.2 *Fingolfin, Balthranding* – The rule is not sufficient

Proposing a *muta cum liquida* rule is also not sufficient to explain similar aberrations in stress. To show this, let's consider a couple other names that should have their stress on the penultimate, whether one proposes a *muta cum liquida* rule or not:

*Fíngolfin's son; / Féanòr's children*, (96:49)  
*from defeat fending / Fíngolfin's son*, (98:125)  
*But Finweg cried / Fíngolfin's son* (136:1)  
*to bend whose bow, / Bálthranding named*, (117:773)

Here the alliteration implies the stress pattern *Fíngolfin, Balthranding*, the same that we observed in *Nárgothrònd, Ímladris*, but since *lf-*, *nd-* cannot start a word in Sindarin, the *muta cum liquida* rule does not cover it.

## 3 Conclusion

Those examples leave two possible conclusions:

1. There is a rather large class of words for which the stress rules from Appendix E are wrong, with syllables predicted to be heavy not attracting stress (*Fingolfin, Nargothrond...*). A subset of these aberrations might be explained with a *muta cum liquida* rule but there are also some words that consistently don't participate in this exception (*Thangorodrim*), so if it exists, it must be part of a complex system.
2. It is a systematic error to predict the stress of a Sindarin word by looking (just) at its occurrences in English poetry. The stress rules for Sindarin itself are as described in Appendix E, but in English poetry Sindarin words can appear with different stress patterns according to poetic license.

I think (2) is the much better explanation of what is going on in this examples, since it is both easier and adheres more closely to Tolkien's stated stress rules.

The case of *Fingolfin* provides more evidence for case (2); while it shows up in the alliterative verse as *Fíngolfin*, in the rhyming couplets it also occurs as *Fingólfín*.

*Fingólfín stóod: |his shíeld |he bóre* (284:3539)  
*Fingólfín líke |a shóo|ting líght* (285:3574)  
*Fingólfín's hígh |and hó|ly tómb*, (287:3630)

If one proposes that English does reflect the Sindarin stress patterns, that means Sindarin words would have variable stress patterns, another deviation from Appendix E. If on the other hand one assumes the irregular stress to be a result of their occurrence in English poetry, it becomes relatively easy to explain: The Sindarin stress *Fingólfín* fits well into iambic feet, so it can be left unchanged in the couplets, but in the alliterative verse the stress changes to *Fíngolfin*, perhaps because Tolkien felt like *F* was the more ‘distinctive’ consonant in the name which he wanted to participate in the alliteration patterns.

One interesting point to observe is that in all listed cases where the stress doesn’t line up with the system described in Appendix E, the stress is instead shifted to the first syllable of the word. English – like most Germanic languages – has some preference for word-initial stress, and while there is some debate on precisely how this rule works and especially for English there are large classes of exceptions to this rule, the result is that most speakers would find it acceptable to stress Elvish words on their first syllable. Thus it seems most likely to me that the effects on stress we see in the examples above are an effect of English rather than Sindarin.

## 4 Resources

- On Complex Syllable Onsets in Latin (Brill 2010).

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A *muta cum liquida* rule for Sindarin has been proposed in various places, e. g.

- <https://menegroth.github.io/stress-in-sindarin.html>
- <http://archives.conlang.info/gho/bhelgho/tree.html>
- <https://mildred-of-midgard.dreamwidth.org/158375.html>
- <https://forums.signumuniversity.org/index.php?threads/old-discussion-from-ep-133-the-4203/>