



So How *Do* You Pronounce “Thrain” Anyway?

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Abstract:

*Sparked by a question about how Thorin’s father’s name is pronounced, Corey Olsen (The Tolkien Professor) discussed the issue in a July 6, 2014 podcast episode.¹ I wanted to go further and delve both into the possible rationales for pronouncing “Thrain” in multiple ways and how the Mythgard community did indeed pronounce the name themselves. This paper discusses the pronunciation issue from a first principles perspective, based on the evidence culled from the relevant texts, including *The Hobbit*, *The History of the Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The History of Middle-earth*, and basic linguistic analysis. I then present the results of a poll of Tolkien enthusiasts promoted through social media.*

There has been a lot of discussion of the names of Thorin's father and cousin, Thrain and Dain, especially since Professor Olsen's recent podcast on the subject. After the podcast, and listening to the Professor's arguments, I wanted to know how Mythgard students pronounce these names. The results of the survey are shown below, but first a bit of background.

¹ <http://www.tolkienprofessor.com/audio/ritd/ritdBonusPronunciationGuide.mp3>



Vowels and Diphthongs

In first grade we learned about vowels in English: Long vowels such as the *a* in *fate*, and short vowels, such as the *a* in *fat*. Similarly for the rest of the vowels *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*. Then when we learned French or Spanish in later grades it was a shock to discover that their vowels were different. French *a* was pronounced like short *o*: the *o* in *hot* and the *a* in *father*. The vowel *i* was pronounced not like the *i* in *kite* or the *i* in *kit*, but like a long *e* as in *machine*. These are very approximately the vowel sounds of Middle English and Latin. So why do our modern vowels not sound the same as the Middle English vowels? The explanation lies in the strange tale of The Great Vowel Shift, which occurred in English in the mid-second millennium. Read the Wikipedia article² or the more daunting article about The Phonological History of English Vowels³. Intrepid students might also want to listen to the outstanding set of courses on Linguistics by Professor John McWhorter offered by The Great Courses (née The Teaching Company)⁴. Tolkien gives his preferred pronunciation of his vowels in the Appendix E of *The Lord of the Rings*:

“For vowels the letters *i*, *e*, *a*, *o*, *u* are used, and (in Sindarin only) *y*. As far as can be determined the sounds represented by these letters (other than *y*) were of normal kind, though doubtless many local varieties escape detection. That is, the sounds were approximately those represented by *i*, *e*, *a*, *o*, *u* in English *machine*, *were*, *father*, *for*, *brute*, irrespective of quantity.”

Finally, instead of the standard first-grade English maxim “when two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking” that we learned at an early age (e.g., *hear*), many vowel combinations are diphthongs (“two adjacent vowel sounds occurring within the same syllable” [Wikipedia]). In fact, many “vowels” that we know, for example the long *a* in *fate*, are not vowels at all, but diphthongs. Say the word *fate* slowly and notice how your tongue moves during the *a* sound. It starts at a place that roughly corresponds to the long *e* sound in French (*père*), close to the short *e* in English *bed*, then glides to the English long *e* sound (*feet*). The long *a* vowel sound in English is really the diphthong “*ei*” (spelled “[eɪ]” in the International Phonetic Alphabet or IPA). Similarly, the long *i* in *kite* is actually a diphthong, too. Again say the word *kite* slowly and pay attention to your tongue as the *i* sound progresses from a sound like the *a* in *father* (or the *o* in *pot*) to the long *e* sound like the *i* in *machine* (or the *e* in *tree*). The long *i* sound is really the diphthong “*ai*” (spelled “[aɪ]” in IPA). Tolkien's instructions for diphthongs are also given in Appendix E:

“In Sindarin the diphthongs are written *ae*, *ai*, *ei*, *oe*, *ui*, and *au*. Other combinations are not diphthongal. The writing of final *au* as *aw* is in accordance with English custom, but is actually not uncommon in Fëanorian spellings. All these diphthongs were ‘falling’

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Vowel_Shift

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phonological_history_of_English_vowels

⁴ <http://www.thegreatcourses.com/professors/john-mcwhorter/>

diphthongs, that is stressed on the first element, and composed of the simple vowels run together. Thus *ai*, *ei*, *oi*, *ui* are intended to be pronounced respectively as the vowels in English *rye* (not *ray*), *grey*, *boy*, *ruin*; and *au* (*aw*) as in *loud*, *how* and not as in *laud*, *haw*. There is nothing in English closely corresponding to *ae*, *oe*, *eu*; *ae* and *oe* may be pronounced as *ai*, *oi*.”

Finally, Tolkien also describes the purpose of accents in his names in Appendix E:

“Long vowels are usually marked with the ‘acute accent’, as in some varieties of Fëanorian script. In Sindarin long vowels in stressed monosyllables are marked with the circumflex, since they tended in such cases to be specially prolonged ; so in *dûn* compared with *Dúnadan*.”

Now we have all the background we need to understand the various arguments for the pronunciation of the name “Thrain.” Or do we?

More Evidence

Tolkien just said that *ai* was pronounced as in *rye*, so *Thrain* is obviously pronounced *Thrine*. QED. Right? Not so fast. Tolkien's directions above apply to words derived from Sindarin and Quenya, not for names derived from other languages. “Thrain” is not a Quenya or Sindarin name, but an Anglicization of the name “*Þráinn*” from the *Dvergatal* (list of dwarves) in the *Völuspá* (“Prophecy of the Seeress”)⁵, the first poem of the *Poetic Edda*, a collection of Old Norse poems. There are two items of note in this. First, the name *Thrain* is an Anglicization, not the original name itself. Many names in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are Anglicized and are pronounced using modern English pronunciation. For example, *Bilbo* is pronounced as it reads in modern English, with a short *i* and a long *o*. It is not pronounced *Beelbo*, as it would be under the Tolkien's Sindarin rules described above. Nor is *Samwise* pronounced *Sahmweeze*. English names and other Anglicized names are pronounced as normal English speakers would pronounce them. Tolkien never recorded his pronunciation of the name “Thrain” as far as I can tell, but he did pronounce the names of all the dwarves from *Thorin and Company*, which you can listen to in a very poor recording on the internet.⁶ There are some strange elements here:

1. *Dwalin* and *Balin* are pronounced such that the *a* is the *a* in *hat*, not *father*.
2. *Fili* and *Kili* are pronounced more like *Filly* and *Killy* than *Feely* and *Keely*
3. *Dori*, *Nori*, and *Ori* are all pronounced as you would expect, with the long *o* as in the word *or*, and the final *i* as in *machine*.
4. *Oin* and *Gloin* are pronounced *Oh'-in* and *Glow'-in* with two syllables. They are **not** pronounced to rhyme with *coin*.

⁵ <http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/V%C3%B6lusp%C3%A1>

⁶ <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/52256326/DwarfNames.mp3>

5. *Bifur* and *Bofur* are pronounced as *Biffer* and *Boffer*, rather than *Bee'-foor* (or *Beye'-foor*) and *Bo'-foor*
6. Surprisingly *Bombur* is pronounced with the *oor* sound for the last syllable, following Tolkien's rules in Appendix E of *The Lord of the Rings*. This is different from *Bifur* and *Bofur* where the last *ur* is pronounced *er* (with the schwa *e*). *Bombur* is *Bomboor*.
7. Elsewhere (not in this clip) *Thorin* is pronounced in the usual way.

What can one conclude from these? First, there is no consistency with respect to pronunciation rules, whether English or Sindarin. Balin and Bifur astonished me—Tolkien's pronunciation was so unexpected. It is unpredictable how he might have pronounced *Thrain*? The second item of note is that the language of the original name ("Þráinn") is Old Norse. The accented *á* in Old Norse is pronounced *ou* as in *loud*. (There is a lesson on Old Norse pronunciation on YouTube.⁷) This name would have been pronounced *Throu'-in* if I am hearing the Old Norse properly. Could this be a possible pronunciation? Finally, to confuse us more, Tolkien added accent marks to many of the dwarves' names when he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. Thus, from The Council of Elrond:

‘Balin will find no ring in Moria,’ said Gandalf. ‘Thrór gave it to Thráin his son, but not Thráin to Thorin. It was taken with torment from Thráin in the dungeons of Dol Guldur. I came too late.’

‘Ah, alas!’ cried Glóin. ‘When will the day come of our revenge?’

What Tolkien meant by these accents other than his comment “Long vowels are usually marked with the ‘acute accent’ ” is unknown. How would anyone pronounce *Thror* differently from *Thrór*? What does it mean in *Thráin*? There are many theories. It could be to mark out that the *ai* is not a diphthong, but as in *Oin* and *Gloin*, simply two letters next to one another both of which get pronounced separately. In this case the *i* next to the *a* would be short, pronounced as in the word *kin*. However, we are not talking about how *Thráin* is pronounced in *The Lord of the Rings*, we are talking about how *Thrain* is pronounced in *The Hobbit*. As Professor Olsen makes abundantly clear in his lectures,⁸ we need to take *The Hobbit* as a work on its own and judge it for what it is, by itself, not necessarily judge it based on hindsight after reading *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and other works. Tolkien had plenty of opportunity to modify *The Hobbit* and add the accent over the *a* in *Thrain* in the second and third editions. He took this opportunity to clean up a lot of other confusions, mistakes, and typographical errors. That he did not place the accent in *The Hobbit* tells me that he thought it was unnecessary complexity for a children's book, so he sacrificed accuracy for readability, and thus produced multiple generations of children, including the makers of the *Hobbit* films, who understandably pronounce *Thrain* as “*Thrane*.” Tolkien must have understood that would be the result of his inaction. At this

⁷ <http://youtu.be/ZOYCQZH7jqc?t=58s>

⁸ <http://www.tolkienprofessor.com/wp/lectures/the-hobbit/>

juncture, the evidence ends. No additional light is shone on the issue in Doug Anderson's *The Annotated Hobbit* or John Rateliff's *The History of the Hobbit*.

The Arguments

I created a survey based on each of the possibilities based on the analysis above. The survey looked like:

* How do you personally pronounce Thorin Oakenshield's father Thráin's name:

- 1. Thrane - like in "train"
- 2. Thrine - like in "brine"
- 3. Throu'-in - where the "ou" sounds the same as in "loud", and the "i" is short
- 4. Thray'-in - where the "ay" is the same as "stay", and the "i" is short
- 5. Thrah'-in - where the "ah" is the same as in "bra"
- 6. Throu'-een - where the "ou" sounds the same as in "loud"
- 7. Thray'-een - where the "ay" is the same as "stay"
- 8. Thrah'-een - where the "ah" is the same as in "bra"
- 9. Other

Here are the rationales for each possible choice:

1. **Thrane** – like in *train*. Rationale: Standard English pronunciation of a name that has obviously been Anglicized, just like all the other dwarf names taken from the *Völuspá*.
2. **Thrine** – like in *brine*. Rationale: The favorite of many who have read Appendix E and have seen Tolkien's dictum that *ai* is pronounced like the *i* in *kite*.
3. **Throu'-in** – where the *ou* sounds the same as in *loud*, and the *i* is short. Rationale: Tolkien keeps the Old Norse pronunciation of the *á*, and the name is two syllables.
4. **Thray'-in** – where the *ay* is the same as *stay*, and the *i* is short. Rationale: Standard English pronunciation of the name if we understand the *ai* is not a diphthong but two vowels pronounced separately.
5. **Thrah'-in** – where the *ah* is the same as in *blah*. Rationale: Similar to the previous entry, except using the *a* sound from *father* rather than from *fate*, which fits in better with Tolkien's pronunciation rules in Appendix E.
6. **Throu'-een** – where the *ou* sounds the same as in *loud*. Rationale: Two syllables, but the first vowel is as in Old Norse and the second vowel is long. (This is unlikely given Tolkien's other choices, but is here for completeness).
7. **Thray'-een** – where the *ay* is the same as *stay*. Rationale: two syllables, the first vowel modern English long *a*, the second Latinate long *i* (*ee*), which to be fair is used a lot in modern English as well.
8. **Thrah'-een** – where the *ah* is the same as in *blah*. Rationale: Still two syllables, but both vowels are Latinate and long. (This is unlikely given Tolkien's other choices, but is here for completeness).
9. **Other** – Rationale: Mythgard Students are creative, perhaps someone thought of another possible pronunciation.

The Tolkien Professor

In his podcast of July 6, 2014, titled "Riddles in the Dark Bonus: Pronunciation Guide", The Tolkien Professor made the case that all names should be pronounced according to the guide in Appendix E, whether Elvish or not. He gave the example of *Smaug* with the *au* pronounced as the *ou* in *loud*, not the *aw* in *saw*. This is uncontroversial.⁹ However, The Professor Olsen omitted the evidence presented in Appendix F: On Translation, where Tolkien discusses how he "Englished" a number of the Hobbit names. While he discussed dwarves here, he does not specifically address dwarf names; however, it is abundantly clear that he did in fact "English" the dwarf names too, since he took them from the *Völuspá* when writing *The Hobbit*. Professor Olsen also ignores the obvious Anglicized names that are counter-examples to his earlier conclusion about all names following the Appendix E guidelines, and himself uses Anglicized pronunciations rather than saying *Beelbo Bahggeens*, *Peeppeen*, *Sahmweeze*, *Thoreen*, *Golloom*, and my absolute favorite example of misusing Appendix E, *Gahndalve*. He continues by discussing the names *Beowulf* and *Beorn* as names with vowel combinations that are essentially two syllables, both derived from Old English/Old Norse pronunciation. He indicates that the accent in *Thráin* should mean that the two vowels *a* and *i* should be pronounced separately, and that the *a* is long. He compares the *ai* vowels in the dwarf names in the figure at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* Appendix A with the obvious *oi* in *Óin* and *Glóin* and the certainty that they are pronounced in two syllables. Finally, the Professor Olsen concludes the name is pronounced *Thray'-in*. However, he does not make the case for the distinction of the *a* being pronounced as in *fate* rather than in *father*. Indeed, the modern English long *a* would by his argument from above (about using Appendix E for all names) be excluded, as that sound (which itself is the diphthong [aɪ]) would *never* be represented in a Tolkien language as just a single *a*. Professor Olsen's argument, if followed consistently, would lead to *Thrah'-in*, not *Thray'-in*. Also, it is an argument from *The Lord of the Rings*, not from *The Hobbit*.

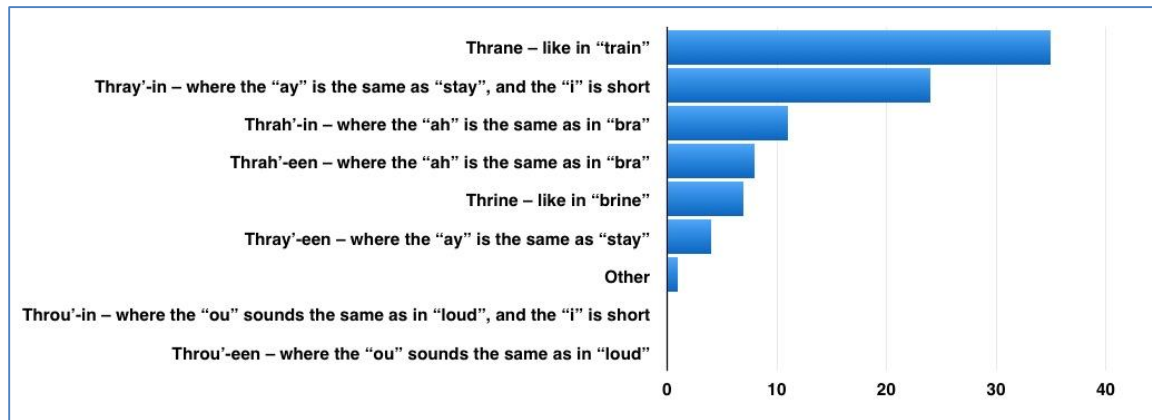
My Conclusion

My view, which you may already have seen above, is that when Tolkien appropriated *Thrain* from the *Völuspá* when writing *The Hobbit*, he Anglicized its pronunciation to either *Thrane*, or *Thray'-in* (if, as Professor Olsen mentioned, it was meant to be consistent with *Oin* and *Gloin*'s multiple syllables). However, when he rationalized the pronunciation of names when he was revising *The Lord of the Rings*, he possibly modified the pronunciation of *Thráin* from the above (*Thrane* or *Thray'-in*) to the more subtle *Thrah'-in*, which fit better in his invented language scheme. Unfortunately, none of us know, since his pronunciation of all the other names of the dwarves in *Thorin and Company* are so unexpected.

⁹ The *S* in *Smaug* is pronounced like the *s* in *see*, not the *sh* in *shell*, in case Peter Jackson is reading this paper.

Your Conclusions

After the Tolkien Professor released his Pronunciation Guide, I advertised a poll using social media, asking the question, "How do you personally pronounce Thorin Oakenshield's father Thráin's name?" I admit that adding the accent over the *a* is non-canonical when looking at *The Hobbit* on its own and thus may have skewed the result; nevertheless, the results are in from 90 responders. We have crowd-sourced the pronunciation of the name of Thorin's father, and it's "*Thrane*" by a fair margin:



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