UMBERTO ECO. *The search for the perfect language* (The Making of Europe series). Oxford: Blackwell. 1995. xii + 385 pp. Cloth (0–631–17465–6) £20.00. (English translation by James Fentress of *Ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea*, 1993).

Reviewed by DAVID CRYSTAL

Perhaps because I am the author of an encyclopedia which has devoted some space to the phenomenon of artificial languages, I receive more than my fair share of correspondence from a coterie of language eccentrics and enthusiasts who, having retired, feel that they should devote their remaining years to establishing linguistic peace on earth through the creation of a new language. Two or three such proposals arrive every year, with such names as Utoki, Parlare, Unilingua, and Worldspell – some of them extensive treatments of over a hundred pages, some a single-page outline of a future project. Their motives are various – religious, political, pragmatic, environmental, economic – but they are all variants of a single methodology, and display the same problems: a massive Indo-European (usually Latin) bias, and an array of idiosyncratic symbols and arbitrary lexical categorizations which present the intended users with an impossible memory load. One has to admire the single-mindedness and industry, and to bemoan the immense waste of time and energy. If only these writers had known something of the long history of failed attempts at inventing a 'perfect language', and thought a little about why such efforts are inevitably failures. I have often wished for an accessible book to recommend which would go into the relevant historiography, and now we have one.

Umberto Eco's book is a historical exposition of the way people have reacted to the story of the confusion of tongues by trying to construct a redeeming common language. It restricts itself to the situation in Europe (for a myth about the confusion of tongues can be found in every culture) and to the most influential projects out of the many hundreds which have been recorded. Eco deals, moreover, only with those projects which recognize 'true and proper languages' (p. 2), by which he means four things: (1) languages which have been proposed as original or mystically perfect (e.g.

Hebrew, Egyptian), (2) reconstructed languages, fanciful or otherwise (e.g. Indo-European), (3) artificial languages, such as the philosophical languages of the 17th and 18th centuries, and the international auxiliary language proposals of the 19th century (e.g. Esperanto), and (4) secret and magical languages. He deliberately excludes such domains as the spontaneous idiosyncratic creations of people who are insane, in a trance, or in a special religious state, and fictitious languages from literature (such as Newspeak). He also excludes (though these are very different in kind) such situationally restricted areas of language use as pidgins, lingua francas, and the special languages of science and mathematics.

Eco sees his book as an exercise in the history of ideas. He begins at the beginning, with the Biblical myth of Babel and its various interpretations, and gives an account of the kabbalistic tradition, highly influential in the Middle Ages, which manipulated letters and numbers to discern hidden messages. He devotes separate chapters to the early systematic projects of Dante and Lull, then expounds Kircher's explorations into hieroglyphics and polygraphies, the magic languages of John Dee and others, and the sophisticated cipher languages of the 17th century. The search for a philosophical and scientific universal language involves a consideration of Bacon, Comenius, Descartes, Mersenne, Dalgarno, Wilkins, Lodwick, Leibniz, and the Encyclopedists, amongst others. Each of the main contributions is summarized and its procedures illustrated, often in considerable detail. The last chapter (other than a conclusion) is a short review on international auxiliary languages and their present-day political possibilities.

The longest chapter is on the history of the monogenetic hypothesis – that all languages descended from a unique mother tongue, whether this be Classical Hebrew or some contemporary national language, such as Dutch, German, or French. The names of several of the authors involved, such as Goropius Becanus, are familiar to students of linguistics from many an introductory textbook, but Eco provides us with a much fuller account of the views and procedures of these practitioners. The way their proposals influenced the climate of ideas which led to the emergence of Indo-European comparative philology becomes very clear: there was an awful lot of monogenetic thinking before Sir William Jones.

The book, Eco states, is 'the story of a dream and of a series of failures' (p. 19). So why is this story worth telling, and – more to the present point – why is it worth reviewing in a journal of sociolinguistics? Eco gives us several answers. There is obviously an intrinsic interest in following so persistent a theme through the history of European culture. He points out that the search for a perfect language has always been invoked as a solution to religious or political strife (p. 19), or as a means of overcoming difficulties in commercial exchange. And even though each proposal was a failure, there were often beneficial consequences: Eco plausibly argues that many valued contemporary theoretical perspectives can trace their origins to the

preoccupations of the perfect-language enthusiasts – he cites, in particular natural science taxonomy, artificial intelligence, formal languages, and comparative linguistics. He also suggests that, by examining the defects of perfect-language proposals, we can learn more about the way natural languages work. And later in the book he argues that it can pay us not to keep repeating the mistakes of the past. He puts it rather well: 'The study of the deeds of our ancestors is thus more than an antiquarian pastime, it is an immunological precaution' (p. 316). I would apply this not only to my amateur correspondents but also to the serious proposals for new taxonomies in such domains as Internet indexing and hypertext creation, which boldly and naively seem to be going where many have gone before.

Eco identifies some unexpected points of connection with contemporary linguistic thinking. Fabre d'Olivet, writing in support of an original Hebrew in 1815, and still inspiring latter-day kabbalists, evidently prompted reflections on the matter by Benjamin Lee Whorf (p. 113). A chapter on the use of images as a means of producing a perfect language ends with an excursus on communicative possibilities with aliens, and a study by another well-known name, Tom Sebeok (p. 176). I was struck by the startling similarity between Wilkins' diagram of locative prepositions (p. 264) and the semantic tables of some modern grammars (such as that found in Quirk grammar). The 'laconic' grammars of the Enlightenment (by no means just Port Royal) are seen as precursors of generative grammar (p. 302). The ideas of Wilkins and Leibniz are seen to prefigure the notion of hypertext (pp.259, 279).

Even sociolinguistics can find a place within this frame of reference, in the observation of the abbé Pluché in 1751 that the multiplication of languages at Babel was a socially providential event. Although peoples were at first troubled by the discovery that they no longer understood each other, eventually it became the basis of their identity: ' . . . the confusion of tongues has fortified that sentiment of attachment upon which love of country is based' (p. 339). A notion of undesirable confusion has been replaced by one of desirable diversification: the unity between a people and their language is a gift due to the Babelic event. This leads Eco to end his book with a highly relevant contemporary sociolinguistic question: 'Is it possible to reconcile the need for a common language and the need to defend linguistic heritages?' (p. 345).

Unfortunately, the book does not go very far in the direction of an answer. Eco gives us little more than some brief reflections on the nature of translation, and alludes to the political issues surrounding artificial languages – for example, the intriguing prospect that an artificial language could rule, at least in Europe, if all states banded together in opposition to the universal use of any one language. But sociolinguists would not find this discussion very revealing, for it ignores too many issues. In particular, Eco's self-imposed limitation to Europe means he does not take into account the forces acting upon Europe from elsewhere, such as the effect of the rapidly emerging role of global English. I have the impression that, after wading through hun-

dreds of perfect-language projects, and getting to grips with a welter of bizarre and ponderous conceptual frameworks, expressed in different languages, Eco's eyes were beginning to glaze over, at this point. I don't blame him. He has already done our subject a service by presenting such a clear exposition and balanced synthesis of ideas on an arcane, neglected, but perennially intriguing topic. And by providing me with a convenient bibliographic source to recommend to my unlooked-for correspondents, I know I shall be regularly indebted to him.