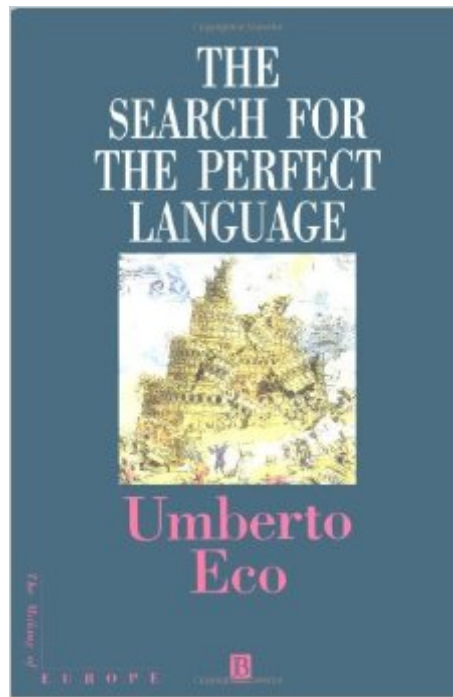


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The Search For The Perfect Language



Synopsis

The idea that there once existed a language which perfectly and unambiguously expressed the essence of all possible things and concepts has occupied the minds of philosophers, theologians, mystics and others for at least two millennia. This is an investigation into the history of that idea and of its profound influence on European thought, culture and history. From the early Dark Ages to the Renaissance it was widely believed that the language spoken in the Garden of Eden was just such a language, and that all current languages were its decadent descendants from the catastrophe of the Fall and at Babel. The recovery of that language would, for theologians, express the nature of divinity, for cabbalists allow access to hidden knowledge and power, and for philosophers reveal the nature of truth. Versions of these ideas remained current in the Enlightenment, and have recently received fresh impetus in attempts to create a natural language for artificial intelligence. The story that Umberto Eco tells ranges widely from the writings of Augustine, Dante, Descartes and Rousseau, arcane treatises on cabbalism and magic, to the history of the study of language and its origins. He demonstrates the intimate relation between language and identity and describes, for example, how and why the Irish, English, Germans and Swedes - one of whom presented God talking in Swedish to Adam, who replied in Danish, while the serpent tempted Eve in French - have variously claimed their language as closest to the original. He also shows how the late eighteenth-century discovery of a proto-language (Indo-European) for the Aryan peoples was perverted to support notions of racial superiority. To this subtle exposition of a history of extraordinary complexity, Umberto Eco links the associated history of the manner in which the sounds of language and concepts have been written and symbolized. Lucidly and wittily written, the book is, in sum, a tour de force of scholarly detection and cultural interpretation, providing a series of original perspectives on two thousand years of European History. The paperback edition of this book is not available through Blackwell outside of North America.

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Customer Reviews

This is an amazing book. My only complaint is that it is about a topic with no resolution - it is a catalogue of attempts that have all met with failure. But it is instructive that so many have tried to create the perfect language, and are still trying. Perhaps it is the hand of God from the moment of the tower of Babel that is blocking success. When I first started reading linguistics (triggered by an SF novel by Sam Delany called 'Babel 7') I soon learned that the origins of language were taboo. Linguists had decided the topic had been subject to so much questionable and unsuccessful research that they would concentrate their work elsewhere. But in this book Mr Eco explores these early searches for the pre-Adamic language that all human kind were supposed to have evolved with (provided evolution was allowed anyway). Of course Hebrew was THE candidate in the West, but even Chinese was considered by some. When this line of investigation petered out the philosophers tried to develop generic languages that could be understood by all people and to do this they had to think carefully about the logic of naming things and the logic of the grammar that connects ideas. The categories of knowledge and the development of encyclopedias were triggered by these endeavours. As I read this book, gradually I could see forming in the corners of my mind just what these people were doing, just what they were trying to create. And I suspect it could be successful if we were taught with it, grew up with it. But it is such a daunting task and always the expressiveness of natural language - what we have grown up with and what has grown with us as need has required - makes it seem a thankless task.

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