



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Language and the History of Thought by Nancy Struever

The Search for the Perfect Language by Umberto Eco

Crosley Shelvador

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ing unbounded upstep must arbitrarily stipulate constraints that conspire to exclude two successive upsteps not separated by downstep. In fact, all existing register models that provide for upstep, including an earlier proposal of my own (Clements 1983), predict that upstep and downstep should be symmetrical and thus vastly overgenerate upsteps in all these respects. A drastic solution to these problems would be to banish upstep from phonology altogether, at the cost of losing generalizations such as that observed here by Hyman; but even if we do that, the problem of asymmetry will arise again in the phonetics, since current models of pitch assignment provide no formal basis for excluding upstep rules paralleling downstep rules. The recent discovery of apparent right-to-left (regressive) upstep in Yoruba (Laniran 1992) is yet a new element in the puzzle. What may be lacking is a theoretical role for the familiar observation that intonational systems favor downtrends over uptrends, for phonetic reasons that continue to be debated; the frameworks proposed in this book make no reference to this overriding generalization.

Of course, it is much easier to point out such problems than to solve them, and for this reason tonal analysis is one of the most challenging areas of phonological theory at the present time. *The phonology of tone*, by its very diversity of approaches, offers an extremely stimulating set of readings which no tonologist can afford to ignore. I regret to add that there are many misprints, especially in the more data-oriented chapters, though none that seriously impede understanding.

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Language and the history of thought. Ed. by NANCY STRUEVER. (Library of the history of ideas, 13.) Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1995. Pp. xii, 257.

The search for the perfect language. By UMBERTO ECO. (The making of Europe.) Oxford: Blackwell, Pp. xii, 385.

Reviewed by CROSLY SHELVADOR, *Peconic County Community College*

Herodotus and Thucydides used to be called the fathers of history, and though this judgment may be parochial, their works still stand as shining examples of

the two often conflicting goals of any historian: to help us understand important events that still affect us, as Thucydides did for Athenians in his history of the Peloponnesian war, and to recount wondrous happenings in an entertaining way, as Herodotus did. The two books under review are similarly opposed. *Language and the history of thought*, the Thucydides of the two, is volume 13 in the Library of the history of ideas, described on the dustcover as 'A series of volumes on major themes of intellectual history drawing on influential articles published in the *Journal of the history of ideas* since its inception in 1940.' We are told in the first sentence of the short introduction to *Language and the history of thought* that Hans Aarsleff selected the articles, and most of the introduction (by the editor, Nancy Struever) is devoted to an account of why someone familiar with Aarsleff's work would expect him to select these particular essays. The seventeen essays appear to have been lifted physically from the pages of the journal, typos and all, with those originally published before 1970 set in a very small typeface.

The essays are arranged chronologically according to the historical period that they cover, and the first half of the book contains several gems. In 'The secularization of language in the seventeenth century' (16–26), MARGRETA DE GRAZIA not only gives us a superb introduction to the seventeenth-century discussion of language in which modern linguistics has its roots but also elucidates the breakdown in world view that led to this discussion, through which the connection that was formerly assumed to exist between human and divine language was severed in what she calls 'the deverbalization of God's language' (16). This breakdown paved the way for the scientific study of language and more importantly for all of modern science. SIDONIE CLAUSS, in 'John Wilkins' essay toward a real character: Its place in the seventeenth-century episteme' (27–49), does a fine job of placing this best known work of its kind in the intellectual context of its own time. Three essays on the theory of signs in the eighteenth century, by VICTOR ANTHONY RUDOWSKI, JULES PAUL SIEGEL, and LIA FORMIGARI, will be of interest to the vast majority of linguists who think of Saussure as having invented the idea of the arbitrary sign and to those few linguists who would like to understand the history of sign language (the fascinating question here, which these essays only hint at, is to what extent modern European sign languages were consciously created and to what extent they just grew like Topsy). I would also single out what might at first seem to be little more than a curiosity: 'Hieroglyphs, real characters, and the idea of natural language in English seventeenth-century thought', by THOMAS SINGER (61–82), lays out very clearly how seventeenth-century thinkers conceived of hieroglyphics, how it affected their ideas about language, and how both conceptions broke down in the face of Locke's psychologism, upon which all modern theories of language rest.

The last six essays cover several nineteenth-century authors who had no influence on the ideological course of linguistic thought. These authors include Louis de Bonald, 'a thinker usually discussed as an ultra publicist and more recently as a corporatist proto-sociologist' (185); two English scholars, Robert Chambers and William Whewell, whose debate on the origin of language is

symptomatic of the conflict between religion and science during the great flowering of geology that prefigured Darwin; and Noah Webster (the nationalistic basis of his pursuit of a recognizably American language rather than any purely linguistic aspects of his work). These last essays also cover the linguistic ideas of such literary figures as Coleridge, Nietzsche, and Hopkins, none of whom played any role in the development of linguistics.

Umberto Eco's *The search for a perfect language* is a different sort of animal entirely. E may be the world's most famous academic, largely on the strength of his novels, which have become global bestsellers and at least one of which has been turned into a movie. Although the work under review lies closer to E's academic specialization of semiotics, it is not highly technical but rather is a semipopular exposition of some of the same ground that is covered by the Struever collection. It is one of a large number of volumes in a series, *The making of Europe*, that is a collaboration among five publishers, from France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, and Spain. The book traces the history of the European search for a perfect language. This search was not particularly European nor arguably very important in the history of Europe, as E admits in the first two sentences of his introduction, so one may wonder what beyond E's celebrity led to its publication in this series. And one might wonder further what sort of general reader might be interested in this rather esoteric topic. But esoteric is the key term here. E's book should be read as history in the sense of Herodotus: a collection of tales of wondrous things, all true. The seventeen chapters are arranged historically, beginning with Adam and ending with our own time. Most deal with a single person or idea. The chapter titles range from 'The Kabbalistic pansemioticism' through 'Magic language' and 'Polygraphies' to 'Philosophic language from the Enlightenment to today', with entire chapters in between on the better known figures like Raymond Lull and John Wilkins. For someone who is completely ignorant of this tradition, E's tour will be enlightening. There is certainly nothing else of its kind around. However, to really enjoy this book, one should not look for great ideas but rather for curiosities and mysteries like Rosicrucian linguistics and Jacob Böhme's sensual speech, or Leibniz's mathematical analysis of the I Ching, based on a nonstandard and presumably erroneous ordering of the hexagrams. Occasionally, E even admits, for example in his discussion of pseudo-Hebrew magical terminology, that 'little of it has any bearing on the search for a perfect language', but it is fun.

The twentieth-century thinker on language who receives the most citations in this book is Jorge Luis Borges, whose self-admitted second-hand knowledge of Wilkins's classification inspired one of the great literary masterpieces of our time. A lover of Borges will appreciate this book and might even be inspired to go beyond Borges and actually read some of the primary sources (though that would certainly not be in the spirit of the master). Some of these works are not hard to come by. Wilkins's major book, for example, *An essay toward a real character and a philosophical language* (1668), is available as volume 119 in the Scholar Press series English linguistics 1500–1800. But, curiously, E's book has no list of primary references, though it does have an extensive bibliography of twentieth-century scholarly works.

This edition is an English translation from the Italian original, and it contains a number of translation infelicities such as *unedited* (Italian *inedito*) instead of *unpublished*, *in front of* for *facing* before an abstract noun ('in front of an expression system') and even a misgendered pronoun—*his* instead of *her*—where Italian does not show the gender of the possessor but English must.

There are also some odd lapses of scholarship in the book. For example, E says the following of Greek koine: 'This was the language of Polybius, Strabo, Plutarch, and Aristotle; it was the language taught in the schools of grammar. Gradually it became the official language of the entire area of the Mediterranean bounded by Alexander's conquests' (11). Every one of these sentences is a stretch: Aristotle's language stood at the boundary of Attic and later Common Greek, but no one would call it koine. The grammar schools flourished during the period when koine was spoken, but one of their major purposes was to support the language of Homer and the Attic dialect of the classical authors against the inroads of the increasingly divergent common speech of their students; yes, koine was the language spoken in the grammar schools, but it was not the language taught. And koine was a kind of standard in a way similar to that in which English is standard in our world: it is widely used but has no official regulatory body attached to it—an advantage over earlier rivals like French that may well have contributed to its wider use. The idea that koine could have been an 'official' language is based on a misunderstanding of the sociolinguistic and political situation in the Hellenistic world. There were no governing bodies sufficiently powerful to make any language official. In other areas of linguistic scholarship, to give one example, the name of the nostraticist Shevoroshkin is misspelled as Ševorškin in the same paragraph in which Dolgopolskij is spelled Dolgoposkiji and Nostratic is written as Nostratics three times.

My last point of contention is more delicate. It concerns E's apparent attitude towards Hebrew and Jewish thought in general. Throughout the book, E acknowledges the contribution of the Jewish tradition to his subject matter, but he treats this tradition as foreign, although almost all Jewish work on the search for a perfect language took place in Europe. Cabalism, the religious and intellectual tradition within which Jewish thinking on the perfection of language is situated, is a largely European phenomenon, but E treats it too as foreign. Indeed, not only Cabalism, but all of Judaism is treated as intrinsically non-European in much of this book. E describes Lull as having 'the aim of building an intellectual and religious bridge between the European West and the East' (71) and situates European Judaism firmly within this mythical non-European East. He writes 'Before the kabbala was REHABILITATED [emphasis mine] by humanist culture, Christianity knew little of it' (51). And: 'The rediscovery of the art of combination would have to wait for the REDISCOVERY [emphasis mine] of Hebrew, for Christian kabbalism. . . .' (72). These quotations are symptomatic of an attitude: until something is taken up by Christian culture, it is not Western or European, no matter that it may have flourished on European soil for centuries within the confines of Judaism or Islam.

E opens his book by remarking that the dream of a perfect language was not confined to Europe. But what is Europe? It is not a continent by any geographical stretch of the imagination, and though one might have hoped that the sense-

less destruction of the past millennium might have led its people to understand that it cannot be a cultural monolith either, such destruction continues to this day. Maybe we need another book in the series.

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Túl a Kecegárdán/Beyond Castle Garden. An American Hungarian dictionary of the Calumet region. Comp. by ANDREW VÁZSONYI. Ed. by MIKLÓS KONTRA. Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 1995. Pp. 242.

Reviewed by EDITH MORAVCSIK, *University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee*

In the course of a conversation, I can't say it right away because I can't think of it either in English or in Hungarian. . . The way I am, I don't know English and I am forgetting Hungarian.

This striking self-disclosure translates a remark by a seventy-some-year-old Hungarian woman who immigrated to the US at the age of 13 (203). It is part of 120 audiotapes of American-Hungarian language material collected by the renowned folklorist Linda Degh and her late husband, writer and journalist Andrew Vázsonyi, in the Calumet-Gary area of Illinois and Indiana between 1965 and 1975 and reported on in the book under review. The title *Beyond Castle Garden* (BCG) refers to the former station of the US Immigration Service in New York where immigrants were checked upon arrival during the second half of the nineteenth century. The name was kept among the immigrants even after the station was moved to Ellis Island in 1890 (105–6). The 140 Hungarian immigrants consulted by V are all dead by now, and most of their descendants speak no Hungarian; the tapes and notes and this book which is based on them are the only remaining sources to preserve this version of Anglicized Hungarian.

BCG consists of a preface and an introduction by the editor, a 100-page dictionary, three studies, three appendices, indices, and illustrations (documents, maps, and pictures). The preface and the introduction are in Hungarian and in English; the rest of the book is in Hungarian. Of the three studies, the first, written by Degh, is really a second introduction to the volume. It provides a lively and picturesque account of the language and culture of the Calumet-Gary-area Hungarians who immigrated between 1900 and 1928 and of V's field work experiences among them. It characterizes the sociocultural conditions from which the language materials stem and also includes a valuable settlement history of the East Chicago-Calumet-Gary area. The second piece, compiled by Degh and V, offers brief life histories and cultural and linguistic information on 62 of the informants. The third essay, by V, paints a vivid picture of boarding-house life among the Hungarian immigrants. (Its English original appeared in the *Journal of American folklore* [1978].) Of the three appendices, the last one is particularly interesting: it provides statements by informants about their own linguistic skills of the sort cited above. One of the indices lists the approximately 850 English source words and keys them to the dictionary entries.