

Reuven Tsur

Playing by Ear and the Tip of the Tongue

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Reuven Tsur created cognitive poetics, and from 1977 on his perspectives greatly shaped the field. His chosen problems explain many of the classical questions within aesthetics. English cognitive stylistics, however, which more strictly follow the cognitive discoveries of Lakoff & Johnson, look more limited by comparison. Specifically Tsur's poetry analyses are both enlightening and finished with a certain feeling for the poem. His criticism always pays attention to artistic qualities before dry theory, and this focus is something that strengthens his credibility.

His new book *Playing by Ear and the Tip of the Tongue* (2012) continues in many ways his *What Makes Sound Patterns expressive?* (1992), with parts of the older book even being repeated in service of those who haven't read it. The somewhat peculiar title refers to what Tsur labels the TOT (Tip of the Tongue) phenomenon – when you have a word on the tip of your tongue but cannot quite get hold of it. Almost all parts of the word are at hand but one detail is missing. His point is how words consist of many parts, phonetically and semantically, that to some extent act separately. A word is a stable configuration out of long time memory consisting of a great many distinctive features, anyone of them potentially changed or manipulated. This is used within poetic language.

Speech sounds as well consist of clusters of qualities in combination – for example a sound might be opened or closed. Different combinations give rise to various meanings. This is a main theme of the book – no linguistic phenomenon is unambiguous because they all consist of combinations of a great many small characteristics. As the preface says, this book explores how poetic language attempts to escape the tyranny of conceptual and phonetic categories.

The specific poetic effect originates from disturbances in cognitive processes, Tsur says. Speech sounds are in actuality complex, but uncomplicated when listened to and categorised. Still, certain devices of poetic language delay categorisation in order to facilitate precategorial information. In that way, poetry creates meanings which are both unexpected and optimal. Normally categorisation takes place at lightning speed, but the poetic language possesses

tricks to delay it and provoke emotion. The good reader perceives phonetics as well as semantics in a text, something that will take some time. And affects need time to incubate, growing emotions that will be indispensable elements in the experience of that poem.

Precategorical information

Reuven Tsur has developed gestalt psychology so it can be relevant for versification studies. He is one in the great tradition from Arnheim, Cooper & Meyer and Barbara Herrnstein Smith. His findings are just as important for free verse as for the metred verse that he himself mostly prefers. You might say that poetic forms consist of gestalts – according to the standards of gestalt psychology.

More than that, Tsur also postulates a background mumble, that is not categorised but full of undetermined meanings originating out of the context – this context might be semantic as well as acoustic. This background murmur is said to be ‘thing-free’, or ‘shapefree’, and lacking gestalt. A precategorical meaning production should precede the gestalt. The book aims at explaining the relations between precategorical information and its semantic and phonetic circumstances.

Tsur’s theory emanates from an era before the break through of brain research, which is why you should be careful with the results. Later psychologists have discussed so called cognitive schemas applying patterns or gestalts to all information that could be perceived. The stability of such schemas has also been subject of debate: are they stable structures of the long term memory or more of momentary constructions?

My experiences from versification studies and verse history speak for the stability of such cognitive schemas. When a form pattern is established it will prevail in its culture. An example is the tactus or metre, that arised within the Germanic languages at the threshold of the Modern Age. Tactus is still a strong force in the mind – but nowadays perhaps more a pattern for poets to oppose.

There are patterns of form and patterns of culture or meaning. Those who mean that cognitive schemas are more temporary constructions seem to refer to cultural patterns and their semantic meanings. This begs the question: are form schemas more stable than the categories of culture? This is to be further investigated.

An important idea in gestalt psychology is the figure-ground scheme. Tsur’s conception of a murmur below the gestalts is analogous to it, and he gives

extensive room for discussing examples of this model. However, the figure-ground scheme shows up to be rather unstable when applied to poetry. Tsur argues that it operates more like in music – sometimes ‘ground’ is missing or ‘ground’ turns out to be ‘figure’. But perhaps this scheme is not relevant for music and poetry?

Tsur imagines gestalts floating upon uncategorised information that nevertheless slips into consciousness. I agree that perceptions are premodal, but does that really mean they lack gestalt? My experiences from versification studies say that the settling of form patterns in a first step is premodal, and that details are added later on when the pattern has found its modality. With such a model, perceptions that are not patterned just disappear. Roman Jakobson, however, claimed the existence of subliminal signification. This is where he comes close to Tsur’s idea of uncategorised ‘thing-free’ sounds. But maybe the background mumble also possesses some kind of form? Also, as Tsur correctly points out, phonemes are coded according to the acoustic context. A speech sound is pronounced (and coded) depending on the surrounding sounds and their meanings. The background murmur seems to function in a similar way. Then is it really lacking gestalt?

The poetic text is spatial as well as temporal. In his *Poetic Rhythm*, Tsur shows how the gestalt’s second limit contributes to reshape the gestalt, by so called back-structuring. Only when the gestalt is closed you know its form for sure – it is, so to say, structured or understood backwards. This is one of several devices that spatialise the text giving it a quality of balance by suspending the flow of time. In other words, this quality adds to the concentration and charged signification of poetry.

Modalities act in different ways. Tsur brings qualities from music and image into the art of poetry testing the results; furthermore, he is tracing the play between modalities. Sight appears to be the strongest and most differentiated of the senses, and visual gestalts are stable and differentiated in comparison. They are rapidly categorised, while acoustic gestalts typically are unique, undifferentiated and miss adequate descriptions – in other words they are signified by delayed categorization. Some modalities don’t have a working terminology but use descriptive terms from, primarily, visuality. That means that temporal lapses often are described in spatial terms. Sight possesses most descriptive expressions, after that comes hearing, but tactility seems to be woolly. Meanwhile, less differentiated senses borrow expressions from the more differentiated ones.

Here we have a good explanation for the synaesthesia of common everyday language. Sound is mostly described in spatial expressions such as ‘high-low’ and so on. But Tsur shows us how acoustic details are really understood.

A sound has three physical dimensions: rapid – slow, broad – narrow (both aiming at the vibrations of the sound wave) and thick – thin (aiming at the source of the sound). He also shows how the formants of a sound influence semantics. For example, the formants of a ‘g’ are situated where you also find metallic sounds – in that way the ‘g’ gets a metallic quality.

More than that, different affects have their typical pitches. The intonation of happiness is marked by big jumps with rounded tops. Anger jumps too, but the curves are somewhat lower and sharper in form. Tsur also repeats what we already know – small things cooperate with high frequency and big things with low frequency, and so on. While interpreting poetry, facts like these explain a great many ‘subliminal’ meanings. Words have very many more significations than those listed in the dictionary.

Brain halves

Tsur’s measurements at Haskins Laboratories around 1980 are of epoch-making importance. Today, however, they are thirty five years old and should be revised in the light of modern neurology. Brain research has developed rapidly, and new results are continuously knocking at the door. A poem can be listened to and looked at, and now neurology discusses the relationship between sight and hearing, and how those senses are supported in the brain. Among other things, it has been proposed that the sense of hearing has less room than that of sight, or that the temporality of hearing depends on sight qualities. Visuality is spatial, and the superiority of sight might add spatial properties to the poem in spite of its basic temporal lapse.

Around 1980 the general knowledge of the different functions of the brain halves was agreed upon – the left half contains for example language and logic, while the right half is responsible for arts and emotions. The measurements at Haskins show that poetry uses both halves – this is something that gives it a unique position in human cognition. This double position explains some aesthetic questions and at the same time creates new ones.

Sound might be coded in a speech mode (on the left side) as well as in a nonspeech mode (on the right). The speech mode is rapidly categorised – one hears something other than one really hears. In the nonspeech mode, however, one perceives the very sound, the qualities of the sound wave. Poetry allows us to take part with both modes, the coded meaning as well as the very sound – certainly a wonderful art form. In my studies of aesthetic rhythm, I have distinguished two dominating rhythmic movements, balance and direction.

Even these two seem to refer to different brain halves. Direction goes to the left together with sequence and time, but balance belongs to the right half with space and relations. These circumstances once more underline how poetic language works with time as well as space, something which partly explains the special character of poetic language.

Not least the interesting facts Tsur presents about abilities of the brain raises the question of the age of his reference literature – it is often fifty to sixty years old. It is like repeating my own intellectual history – I remember when I as a young student lost myself in Wellek & Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1949) or Ullmann's *Principles of Semantics* (1957), both of which are important for Tsur. But much has happened during these sixty years. Cognitive poetics has another theoretical base other than structuralism, and I am looking forward to the discussion of the connection between them. Poststructuralism is missing in Tsur's impressive reference list, and I would like to have it explained what motivated its absence. Tsur is a great theory builder, he creates theory and has no duty to prove every step he takes, but I need more background. What is the relation between structuralism and Lakoff & Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh*? And, how do I come from neurology and get to phenomenology?

Signification

Patiently, Tsur uncovers layer after layer in the poem's production of meaning. Every extra signification has its own technical explanation. For example, repetitions add extra meaning because of their similarities – repetitions create similarity – they mix and disturb the rational lapses of language. The reader is forced to abandon the rational principle of succession for the emotional principle of similarity, and the properties of the text collide in a confusion of sound and content.

After this book, interpreting a poem will be arduous, sweaty work. Tsur elucidates ways between sound and meaning, and these connections are complicated. Meaning production takes place according to several models. One of them is iconicity in a broad sense of sound symbolism and structure resemblance. Affects have their typical energy curves – the same curves that are seen in the poetic text. Brain mechanisms for religious mystery might enter the poem supplying its special signification; synaesthesia of all kinds colour the text. Speech sounds have many potentials for meaning – the one realised depends on the context.

In the old days one tried to explain the meaning production of the sound structure with the help of associations. These associations should be intersubjective. However, Tsur has proven his case that these so-called associations are based on (many subtle) facts, and this is something that means a change in paradigm for poetics. This book is one from a group where Tsur confirms such a new paradigm.

References

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