

Reuven Tsur (1932–2021)

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Reuven Tsur (1932–2021) has left us after many years of being an inspiring presence. He was born in 1932 in Nagyvárad, Transylvania, and his native language was Hungarian. As a teenager he fled to Israel where he stayed in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. He had a BA in English and Hebrew Literature from the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and a PhD in English from the University of Sussex (1971). In his *A Perception-Oriented Theory of Metre* (1977), he developed a theory for Cognitive Poetics, where the form of a poem became the natural point of departure for understanding its meaning. He combined linguistics and gestalt psychology when he concentrated on perception - how the reader conceives the text, and “what our ears tell our mind”. From this starting point of rhythm and sound, he continued to study things like metaphor, sound symbolism, as well as altered states of consciousness. In addition to Hungarian, Hebrew and English, he mastered many modern languages, and he felt at home with poetry from the Middle Ages up to this day.

He was awarded the Israel Prize in literature in 2009, and an honorary doctorate from Osnabrück University in 2013. He worked as visiting professor at Columbia University, as well as the University of Lancaster. He was a research fellow at the University of Southampton and at Yale University, and he took part in the mysteries of speech research at the Haskins Laboratories, New Haven. He also translated volumes of poetry into Hebrew, and produced his Holocaust memoirs.

Tsur published more than 20 titles from 1964 onwards – some of which were in Hebrew. His numerous articles form a garden of interesting subjects. His measurements at Haskins Laboratories around 1980 are of epoch-making importance. Brain research was then in its infancy and Tsur presented his problems in Poetics to the laboratory, where he accounted for his findings in his *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?* (1992). This was the beginning of his thorough record of how different perceptual qualities work in poetic texts. He presented an exposition of his main ideas in *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics* (1992, 2nd exp. ed. 2008). Patiently, Tsur uncovers layer after layer in the poem’s production of meaning. For example, repetitions add extra meaning

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because they make the reader abandon the rational principle of succession for the emotional principle of similarity. Speech sounds offer many potentials for meaning; however, the one that is realised depends on the context.

In *Poetic Rhythm* (1998, 2nd exp. ed. 2012), he expands the classical problems in metrics one-by-one when he meets and transcends the generative school. Here he argues that no rules of metre have yet been devised that have not been violated by Milton and Shelley, who are usually regarded as exceptionally musical poets. He argues that the conflicting patterns of language and versification can be perceived at the same time. He then had a considerable toolbox when he investigated hypnotic and religious poetry in *On the Shore of Nothingness* (2003). In this work, a committed atheist, he wondered which devices can shape a mystic presence in a poem.

The charming *Poetic Conventions as Cognitive Fossils* (2017) explains how cultural goods determine a person's ways to perceive what they read. When Reuven Tsur left us, he had, in cooperation with Chen Gafni, just completed his last work, *Sound-Emotion Interaction in Poetry. Rhythm, Phonemes, Voice Quality*, which is soon to be published at John Benjamins Publishing Company. Here he continues his observations of the mutual structures of sound and emotion. With "sound", he refers to phoneme qualities, how pitch and length cooperate or not, and the signification power of very small pauses. Emotions have their typical energy curves – the same curves that are learnt in the acoustics of the poem.

The study of poems' sounds creates extra difficulties for empirical research. A perception-oriented theory keeps attentiveness towards personal perceptions – so what are the possibilities for stable observations? Literary critique does not ask for scientific objectivity, but, instead, for a deep comprehension of the text. However, versification studies run somewhere in between linguistic strength and literary understanding.

Tsur developed a very special method to cover both of these demands. He aimed at giving empirical evidence for a cognitive theory. Thereby, he used recordings where actors perform classical texts, and his investigations treat these interpretations where one can examine small details in length and tone of different phonemes. His articles were easy to identify from their many registration schemas. Thus, he obtained a stable body of material with all the objectivity that one may wish for. But there is no objective solution to the conflicts between speech and rule – there are only different performances that tell us about the actors' choices when handling the difficulties of verse.

He was employed at the famous Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics at Tel Aviv University. This was a marvellous environment for versification studies. At some time, three different theories of metrics were discussed here.

The founder Benjamin Hrushovsky had already written about free verse in 1954. This must have been a most inspiring department for a young scholar. However, he also felt at home in the English scholarly world from his PhD studies in Sussex and his many stays as a guest professor. Here, he started to explain why the Halle-Kayser theory of metrics cannot be sufficient. Little-by-little he expanded his thinking over form in poetry until he had founded a stable Cognitive Poetics. A new school was born.

Tsur was scholarly active up to his end. In his final years, he was assisted by Chen Gafni, who was an earlier student of his. Even when in bad health, he stayed in contact with international friends and colleagues with the help of skype and phone.

Myself, I have some salient memories of him. On my way to the metrics conference in Vechta 1999, I spent the time on the train with his *Poetic Rhythm*. At last I had found a scholarly text that saw the same possibilities in form and meaning as I did. When I arrived, I met with the writer himself along with his friendly irony and brilliancy as a lecturer. Ten years later, I invited him to a Scandinavian conference, where he met with young stars of the generative school. At last, there was a constructive discussion between Tsur's cognitive poetics and the generativists. Another good memory comes from Osnabrück 2013, where he received his honorary doctorate. How he stayed in the room of poetry studies, where he followed every young speaker with interest and then gently advised them.

Tsur's importance for Poetics cannot be exaggerated. He started a new era when he succeeded in combining empirical stability with interpretative understanding. His breadth and profundity seldom occurs in the world of scholarly studies. Happily enough, he was able to continue his work decade after decade, and now we have an enormous gift to take care of.

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