

POETIC CONVENTIONS AS COGNITIVE FOSSILS

by Reuven Tsur. Oxford University Press, New York, 2017. 304 pp., illus. Paper. ISBN: 978-0190634698.

Reviewed by Rob Harle.

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This book is an intellectual *tour de force*—detailed, complex and groundbreaking. In Tsur’s own words, “The whole book is about how poetic conventions are shaped and constrained by the natural capacities and constraints of the human brain and cognitive system” (p. 157). Tsur’s “cognitive poetics” is his theoretical methodology for investigating and analyzing this phenomenon. One of the most important aspects of this research is to show how conventional poetic styles are modified and created by our cognitive systems and not only migrate from one cultural period to another.

As the authors of the Preface state, “*Poetic Conventions as Cognitive Fossils* sets a high standard for the principles of scholarly learning—formidable yet available, humanistic in the best sense, and a fitting capstone to the career of an illustrious scholar” (p. ix). I could not agree more, although I have to question “yet available.” This text should be read by all students, if only as an example of how real in-depth research should be carried out. As I read this book it occurred to me, as brilliant as it is, and as accessibly well written as it is,

it will have a limited audience. It is not at all suitable for general readership—linguists, literary theorists and neuroscientists will all gain valuable insights from Tsur’s research. The “average” poet embroiled in the daily business of actually writing contemporary poetry will probably not gain all that much from the insights presented.

The book has 10 chapters, detailed below, prefaces, references, an excellent index and a companion website featuring sound files to enhance Tsur’s discussion.

1. Where Do Conventions Come From?
2. Some Implications of D’Andrade’s Assumptions
3. Poetic Conventions as Fossilized Cognitive Devices: The Case of Medieval and Renaissance Poetics
4. Frozen Formulae and Expressive Force: The Ballad “Edward”
5. Artistic Devices and Mystical Qualities in Hebrew Devotional Poems with Idit-Nov
6. Figurative Language and Sociocultural Background: Hebrew Poetry as a Test Case
7. The Translated Poem as an Aesthetic Object: How Conventions Constrain One Another in a Poem
8. More Is Up—Some of the Time
9. Some Remarks on the Nature of Trochees and Iambes and Their Relationship to Other Meters
10. Poetic Language and the Psychopathology of Everyday Life

Tsur discusses many different poetic forms and styles throughout the book and also includes such phenomena as slips of the tongue, tip of the tongue frustrations, jokes and accidental misquoting of text to support his arguments. His analysis of these “quirky” events is mostly from a Freudian perspective, which he tends to take as a given, although many of Freud’s concepts and approaches are highly questionable in the light of recent neurological research. To

be fair, though, Tsur does caution restraint in the application of psychological theories: “I also believe, however, that we should not take for granted what is explained by the application of a psychological theory and should scrutinize its implications in the light of research on poetic conventions” (p. 58).

I enjoyed chapter 7, “The Translated Poem as an Aesthetic Object,” very much, as it helped me understand a little more important questions I have pondered for some time. Translating poetry is a very different matter from, say, translating a technical manual. Tsur tackles this complex problem admirably, and I would suggest that all those who attempt to translate poetry would benefit from a close reading of his approach. He believes that “poetry translation [is] an art in its own right” (p. 157). I could not agree more, especially when the translation is from a source language with little similarity to the target language, such as English into Chinese—French or Italian into English is possibly a little easier but still not a straightforward matter. As Tsur notes, “The translator seeks an elegant solution to the problem of integrating the conflicting conventions into a target-language poem that has aesthetic merit in its own right” (p. 157).

These translation problems were made all the more clear to me recently when a scholar in Romania translated some of my poems into that language; she had to repeatedly check with me what my exact meaning was in certain lines—subtle and idiosyncratic English metaphors that I simply took for granted were not at all clear to her!

As Tsur repeatedly states, this book is devoted to the question of how cognitive processes shape and constrain cultural and literary forms, and I believe he does an extraordinary job in exploring this question from a multidisciplinary approach. Although as I mentioned above the book is not recommended for general readership, it will surely become a core reader in the disciplines of linguistics, literary theory and archaeology of languages. To