

## IRIT MEIR: AN OBITUARY

“It is about who we are when we are not rehearsing to be who we are.”  
Don DeLillo, *The Body Artist*

Irit Meir was born in Jerusalem, Israel on August 18, 1957. Her interests and experiences were multi-faceted, but there was a coherent core that radiated throughout her life. Two of Irit’s central traits interacted so intimately that they were sometimes indistinguishable from each other: the scientific pursuit of knowledge about the nature of human language, and a profound, instinctive, and empathic engagement with other human beings.

After completing her MA in English Linguistics Summa Cum Laude at Hebrew University in the late 1980s, Irit spent a few years in the United States with husband Ronny, enjoying their three small daughters. Although she excelled in her studies, spoke several languages, and came from a prominent academic family, Irit didn’t immediately find burning interest in a field of study that would justify devoting a career to academic pursuits. That is, until she bumped into sign language. It was a book she came across, *What the Hands Reveal about the Brain* by Poizner, Klima, and Bellugi, that changed everything. Her first step in what was to become a rich career was to enroll in an American Sign Language course in Los Angeles.

Irit and I had previously taken a semantics course together as MA students at Hebrew University, where I had given a student presentation about sign language. Years later now – this was around 1990 -- newly fascinated with the importance of sign language to the understanding of language generally, and ready to return to Israel with her family, Irit wrote to me, then a junior faculty member at the University of Haifa. She asked if I needed a research assistant. I promptly applied for and received my first research grant ever; Irit joined me as an RA, soon going on to complete a PhD at Hebrew University, teaching first at Oranim Teachers’ College, and then landing a faculty position at the University of Haifa. All the while she contributed significantly to the development of the Sign Language Research Lab, on both scientific and human levels, which were never separate for Irit.

On the scientific level, Irit confronted central properties of sign languages that illuminate the interaction between the nature of language and the effect (or non-effect) of modality –

such as the use of space, iconicity and its interaction with metaphor, and principles behind the ordering of words within propositions. She endeavored to explain these phenomena rather than simply to name them.

In her doctoral work on verb agreement in Israeli Sign Language, Irit noticed that the direction of movement of the hands, and the part of the hand that faced the target, were separable but interacted with one another. She showed that the phenomenon of verb agreement is neither strictly syntactic nor strictly semantic, but is best understood as an interaction of the two: The hands move from source to goal, but they typically face the syntactic object, which could be either source or goal. Adopting the model of lexical conceptual structure proposed by Ray Jackendoff for spoken language, Irit argued that, though the instantiation of verb agreement has modality-specific properties, it can be captured neatly within general theory, and is therefore understood as an explicitly linguistic phenomenon.

Sign languages exploit iconicity more than spoken languages do; that is a platitude in our field. But Irit realized that iconicity is a complex phenomenon, and that, like other aspects of language, it is subject to constraints. She turned to metaphor, a device exploited extensively by both spoken and signed languages. Unlike typical spoken words, basic signs are inherently made up of iconic components which themselves are often understood metaphorically. Irit investigated the interaction of metaphor and iconicity in sign language, asking whether signs were subject to metaphorical extension in the same way as spoken words. She discovered that signs can be metaphorically extended, but not in the same way as spoken words, and identified the interaction between two kinds of mapping, positing a double mapping constraint.

Many signs consist of iconic mapping between the source domain of meaning and the linguistic form that represents it, as Sarah Taub had illustrated. Irit demonstrated that this mapping must be preserved when a sign is mapped again through extension to a metaphorical domain. The linguistic form of the sign EAT in many sign languages maps the concept to the form, which entails grasping some thing with the hand and moving it to the mouth. But this mapping does not incorporate consumption, and it is consumption within

the meaning of EAT that is commonly exploited in metaphorical extension in spoken languages. So, metaphorical extension corresponding to \*‘The rust ate the key’ is impossible in Israeli Sign Language (ISL). However, in ISL, the sign NIBBLE does iconically map the notion of consumption by a scratching motion of the active hand’s fingers on the static arm. So it is perfectly fine to extend the sign metaphorically in an ISL expression corresponding to ‘The acid nibbled at the key’, in which the mapped form can be mapped to the extended meaning without violating iconicity. Here, double mapping is structure preserving and therefore acceptable. In this original and sophisticated work, which also touches on metaphor in spoken language, Irit attributed the blocking of metaphorical extension to iconicity, but not to modality.

Irit was an active member of research groups that investigated language emergence by observing young sign languages in Israel, perhaps the best known of which in this context is Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL), which she investigated together with Mark Aronoff, Carol Padden, and myself. In the language emergence context, Irit and I also studied Israeli Sign Language, a young sign language that arose under different social and linguistic circumstances, and Kafr Qasem Sign Language (KQSL), the indigenous sign language of a town in central Israel. Irit was the driving force behind one of the most original contributions to this research: the study of the origins of word order, a central device for structuring the sentences of language. She compiled data from three young sign languages, ISL, ABSL, and KQSL, and from the silent gestures of speakers of three languages, Hebrew (SVO), a local spoken Arabic dialect (SVO), and Turkish (SOV). All participants responded to the same video clips which elicited sentences with subjects, objects, and verbs without other context, making this the most comprehensive and coherent such study to date.

By ingeniously isolating different factors, such as whether the object of an action was human or inanimate, and whether the sign language respondents were literate or nonliterate, she was able to identify the interaction between the effect of being human and the ordering of a verb and its arguments at the outset of language emergence. The most illuminating responses were those of nonliterate signers of the three emerging sign languages. In this group, when the subject is human and the object is inanimate, humans

come first, and the order is SOV, akin to responses of other groups and to findings of other studies. However, the 'humans first' principle is most clearly revealed when both the subject and the object are human. In these cases, the order varies equally between SOV and OSV (the latter very rare in established languages), with no significant effect for other orders in which the verb either comes first or separates subject and object. Suggesting that it is the biological principle of species recognition that is at play, this work concludes that "[T]he salience of humans to each other, which lies behind the 'human first' rule, is driven by much deeper forces than language or cognition."

'Humans first' was a defining principle throughout Irit's life, strikingly salient in her own interactions with people. As a strong academic, Irit barreled ahead with research, teaching, supervising students, conferences, chairing the Hebrew Department, and creating an MA program in sign language linguistics in the Communication Sciences Department. All the while, she established and maintained close personal contact with members of all the deaf communities she worked with – the large Jewish deaf community, and also deaf people in the Al-Sayyid village and in the town of Kafr Qasem. Out of commitment to the people that made up these communities, and allegiance to her quiet inner drive to affirm what is right, Irit made deeply meaningful social, educational and personal contributions – although she wouldn't call them that. She was just going through life being herself.

Irit was the moving force behind our book in Hebrew, written for the general public, about the linguistic structure of Israeli Sign Language and about the history of the deaf community in Israel. The book is the only one of its kind in Israel and is much in demand. A second edition is soon to be published, with the addition of Irit's article from a Hebrew journal, 'The Right to a Native Language'. Irit compiled an invaluable video archive of personal life stories of members of the Israeli deaf community from all generations. She also created an online video dictionary of Algerian Jewish Sign Language, a village sign language that originated in what was once the Jewish quarter in the city of Ghardaia, Algeria, and was brought to Israel when the Jewish population fled Algeria en masse in the 1960s. The dictionary preserves the memory of the language that arose there, which is now known only by a small number of older people from that community.

All the knowledge and skills that Irit acquired along the way were recruited for work together with her colleagues in the deaf community. Her degree in special education, which she had picked up between higher university degrees before ever bumping into sign language, meant that Irit could fathom the intricacies and confounds of the education system, and work together with deaf teachers in promoting sign language in deaf education.

Alongside her sign language research, Irit was a scholar of Modern Hebrew, and served on a committee for linguistic terminology in the national Academy of the Hebrew Language. This experience gave her the tools that would be needed in her role as Academic Head of a newly established committee for creating new ISL vocabulary for school subjects.

Over the years, our lab conducted a series of symposia for the general public about sign language, different deaf communities in Israel, artistic use of sign language, and other topics, and Irit was instrumental in all of them. Most of these dealt with Israeli Sign Language, the main sign language in Israel, a young sign language formed under circumstances that resemble creolization and is used today by about 10,000 people. But our research probed village sign languages in smaller communities as well, and I would like to tell of the most recent symposium, which was about one of these. It was the only such gathering to take place outside the University of Haifa, a symposium that Irit organized single-handedly, and that has special resonance on different levels. It was over a year ago now, and I remember that Irit was feeling the effects of medical treatments, tiring easily -- but that didn't stop her.

The impetus was a dynamite young deaf woman (Meyad Sarsour) who is intent on perpetuating the memory of the indigenous sign language of the Arab town of Kafr Qasem, now used by only about 20 people (of the 100 deaf people in the town, the rest of whom use ISL). We've been doing research on KQSL, and Meyad has collected historical information and metadata about the participants in our research. She really wanted a community-wide event, so Irit produced one, with Meyad's help. There were five talks, three of them by deaf researchers presented in sign language -- all interpreted into two sign languages (ISL and KQSL), and with earphones into two spoken languages (Hebrew and Arabic). The symposium took place in the town's community center, made available by the

mayor, who attended the event with other dignitaries. The place, which holds about 200 people, was packed with hearing and deaf people, Arabs and Jews -- people sat in the aisles. The town newspaper took lots of pictures. Irit arranged a plaque for each deaf participant in our research with their name. The event was a smash.

Somehow, up to the day before she died, Irit graciously received friends and colleagues at home, over tea and cookies served by her loving family. She made a point of transferring material and information we would need to continue all the projects in which she was involved. We all knew the end was near – so how could she, and how could we, do science-as-usual under these circumstances? Irit made it absolutely natural.

Irit Meir understood complexity and made it simple. She identified interactions between different forces within language, and between language and humanness, and advanced our understanding of all language through her work. In her engagement with people, she was guided by an instinctive ability to empathize with and to support them, with humility and resolve in equal measure.

Wendy Sandler

