

IN MEMORIAM

NESSA WOLFSON

Nessa Wolfson died on May 19, 1990, after a long battle with cancer. We are deeply saddened by her passing and will long remember the depth and breadth of her knowledge, her extraordinary presence, and her bravery in the face of a devastating illness. We treasure her memory, and her scholarly and professional contributions will continue to guide us in our work.

Nessa became interested in sociolinguistics and language learning when she and her husband lived in New York and, as a volunteer, she taught English to immigrants. This was just the beginning of a lifetime of scholarship, research, and professional service. Nessa joined the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education in 1976 and became a member of the Graduate Group in Linguistics. At the Graduate School of Education, she founded and directed its programs in Educational Linguistics, TESOL, and Intercultural Communication. She was chair of the school's Language in Education division from 1983 to 1989.

Beginning in 1979, she organized and co-chaired the annual colloquium on sociolinguistics at the TESOL Convention, collaborating over the years with Elliot Judd, Leslie Beebe, and Miriam Eisenstein. Not only has this been the longest lived colloquium – over 10 years running and still going strong – it has been consistently the most crowded of colloquia, with standing room only much of the time. Earlier this year, she was the keynote speaker at the colloquium on Sociolinguistics in Africa.

In addition to her numerous scholarly and professional articles and conference papers, she authored and edited five books on sociolinguistics, including *CHP: The Conversational Historical Present in American English Narrative*, based on her dissertation research; *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition* (co-edited with Elliot Judd); and *Language of Inequality: A Reader in Sociolinguistics* (co-edited with Joan Manes). Her two most recent books are *Perspectives: Sociolinguistics and TESOL* and *Multilingualism*, a collection of her students' seminar papers that she edited for Ablex publishers.

Through her research on speech acts, Nessa brought out what we needed to know about the patterns of language in society and about the patterns of society in language. Her work revealed how power was reflected in language and how language could be used to gain power. For Nessa, every social situation promised rich research opportunities. She encouraged us to use the world as a laboratory for studying social interaction and language. We will never be able to participate in or overhear a conversation without wondering: What did they really mean by that? Was that just an invitation? What

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an odd way of phrasing that compliment. What could have motivated the speaker to say that? She taught us by her own example to look beneath the surface, to be thorough in our research and scrupulous in our scholarship.

Nessa was an original thinker, who was always challenging conventional wisdom, and was most pleased when her students did the same. Those who expressed interest in the kind of work she did were taken under her wing. Nessa nurtured them, generously shared her ideas, and inspired them. She instilled in her students the confidence that they could indeed write a publishable paper or present at a conference. The encouragement she gave fledgling researchers has produced a group of students who will carry on her work in speech act analysis and who will be a presence at conferences in the future.

As a scholar, Nessa understood the past, respected it, and took from it, but always in order to move forward. She had recently begun work on a new project – an ethnographic study of two Philadelphia schools with large populations of language minority children. This was a new direction in her research and she was brimming with enthusiasm about making a difference in and touching the lives of disadvantaged children. Her concern for finding ways of applying her knowledge and research expertise to solving pressing social problems in education will live on through the many students she inspired to enter the field of language education for minority students.

In spite of the pain she suffered, Nessa never stopped. She was always completing one project and embarking on another, and she kept on working until hours before her death. Her work with students and colleagues has ceased, but this eloquent voice has not been silenced. Her remarkable courage and vitality and her standard of excellence will endure through those she touched. Knowing from her work on compliments that giving a compliment on a superior's work is taboo, we may simply say "Thank you," Nessa, for touching us with the spark of your enthusiasm and guiding us to contribute to the field that you loved.

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