

‘The tongue is an eye.’

The solitary and enigmatic line that appears in Wallace Stevens’s poem “Adagia” may serve as both a description of and an invitation to this collection of essays, published in honour of Libuše Dušková on the occasion of her seventieth birthday. Language, to Stevens, is a means both of perceiving and communicating our vision of the world. To the scholars and writers who have contributed their words here, language enables them to interpret, uncover or shroud, to create and transform external and internal realities, to reflect upon themselves and the world at large, and to help others do the same. To the linguists, language is an essential attribute and cognitive instrument of human beings: its nature and workings are clues to how we understand the world.

Some users of the tongue create artefacts that last longer than bronze; others analyse the artefacts’ building blocks, explore their intrinsic properties and principles. Libuše Dušková, one of the latter, ‘lives’ on language. She is a linguist for whom any linguistic utterance is worthy of attention, yet she acknowledges a deep kinship with literature. As she has often pointed out, if we are to examine written language, a literary text is preferable to the undernourished language of newspapers. Journalists trade in clichés and stereotypes; good writers stretch language to its limits. Like literary figures, linguists can be identified by their style: Dušková is easily recognized by her fine-tuned work, with the subject logically and sensitively placed within the context of a broader vision. After reading her subtle analysis of a point of language, the very existence of which goes unnoticed by most of its users, her readers are struck by the exquisite complexity of language, and even amazed that we are able to speak at all.

Untiring in her quest for the truths of language, Libuše Dušková is also kind and understanding to those who use it, particularly her students and young colleagues. A devoted teacher, she is always ready to share the fruits of her scholarly pursuits with anyone willing to partake of them. Combining

indefatigable scholarship, a wonderfully dry sense of humour, and a rare consideration for others' needs, Libuše radiates a quiet nobility.

This collection of essays and studies is a tribute to her from a number of admirers: members of her department at the Faculty of Arts in Prague; of the Czech Modern Language Association, of which she has recently been the chairperson; and four other scholars in the field of English linguistics. One paper in particular deserves our mention: that of Professor Jan Fírbas, the last he completed before his death in January 2000. It stands as a testimony of his genuine affection and respect for Libuška Dušková, embodying the words of the Book of Proverbs (18: 21): "The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit."

December 2000

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