The language situation in Ukraine has been a subject of some recent publications. Pavlenko (2006) examines the functioning of Russian as a lingua franca in Ukraine in the broad comparative context of the post-Soviet space, while Csernicsko (2005) concentrates on a particular local community: the Hungarian-speaking minority as well as Hungarian language contacts. The new book about the coexistence of Ukrainian and Russian by Laada Bilaniuk is also a valuable contribution to the field of sociolinguistics.

The book successfully analyzes the sociolinguistic phenomenon of contested tongues and language transgression in the larger context of language politics and linguistic correction.

The book consists of six chapters and an appendix with a list of Ukrainian and Russian words that helps the reader to estimate the level of mutual intelligibility of the two languages.

The first chapter, ‘Language paradoxes and ideology of correction’ provides a useful summary of theoretical investigations regarding ideology, iconization and power in the construction of languages. The author also discusses the processes of cultural and linguistic correction in Soviet and in independent Ukraine. During the Soviet era, a myth was created about one Soviet nation comprised of many peoples. According to this myth, national languages were expected to die out. The author stresses that Soviet domination was unique in ‘its policies of linguistic interference through which the orthography, morphology, and gram-
mar of other languages were to be gradually transformed so that they became more similar to Russian’ (p. 16). This process was especially visible regarding mutually intelligible languages. Contrary to this policy, in independent Ukraine the process of correction is taking unique form. It presupposes the purification from this influence, on the one hand, as well as from non-prestige social and regional varieties of Ukrainian, on the other hand.

The second chapter, ‘Lives of languages: individual motivations, practices, and symbolic power in changing social order’ considers issues of individual linguistic choices. The author provides four biographical narratives based on taped interviews that were collected in Ukraine in 2002. Every story represents a micro-sociolinguistic personal world and describes the language environment, in which people were raised, their beliefs, and the challenges they faced in their language choices. These rich and complex first-hand stories exemplify the considerable dissociation of Ukrainian from its low connotation as a provincial and second-rate language. Dr Bilaniuk claims that many of these motivations and choices can be seen as an ‘effort to correct perceived linguistic and social inadequacies or anomalies’ (p. 41). One of the key elements of this chapter is the linguistic story of former foreign minister Borys Tarasyuk, whose experience illustrates the interconnection between governmental institutional structures and personal linguistic choice.

The third chapter, ‘Language at the threshold: a history of ideological categories and correction’ places language issues in the broad context of Ukrainian history. The author examines pre-Soviet restrictions of Ukrainian language, the short-lived process of Ukrainization in 1920s, and the subsequent policies of Russification and language engineering in the late Soviet period. One of the subchapters discusses language status during independence. The author stresses the contradiction inherent in the current language situation; during her field work in Ukraine, she observed a significant movement toward more widespread usage of Ukrainian, on the one hand, as well as a situation in which Ukrainian still suffered the limitations of a minority language, pure status and low institutionalization in many regions, on the other hand.

The fourth chapter, ‘Surzhyk: a history of linguistic transgression’ is the most comprehensive and full analysis of the sociolinguistic nature of the impure Ukrainian-Russian language variation called ‘surzhyk.’ First, the author provides an introduction of the history of purism and mixed languages in Ukraine, in which she combines theoretical analysis with interesting examples from Ukrainian literature. Second, Dr Bilaniuk discusses a typology of surzhyk, its categories, and the forces leading to language mixing. Third, the author explains the low status of this stigmatized Ukrainian-Russian language, which represents a language disease in society. The term ‘linguistic transgression’ reflects the true nature of this language variation.
The fifth chapter, ‘Correction, criticism and the struggle over status’ considers the ideology of purism and correction toward the usage of this impure linguistic variant. This chapter demonstrates that such linguistic transgression is not limited only to colloquial discourse. The author analyses some very popular icons of pop-culture (musicians, writers, humorists) to illustrate how modern authors and performers try to use surzhyk as a ‘symbol of post-Soviet chaos’.

The sixth chapter, ‘Concealing tensions and mediating pluralisms’ analyses the ambiguity of language practices in many public spheres (media, politics, advertising, television) and provides several good examples of the coexistence of the Ukrainian, Russian and even English languages in the linguistic landscape of the country. The epilogue, titled ‘The language of Ukraine’s orange revolution’, which represents the language preferences of political camps during the last presidential election, is a very important addition to the book.

This book is a well-written, coherent, and well-structured work. Along with its very comprehensive analysis of contested tongues which try to find a niche of their own in Ukrainian space, at least two more aspects makes it really valuable reading. First, the book is based on field work carried at over a considerable period of time: 1991–1992, 1994–95, 2000, and 2002 in Ukraine. Second, it is crucial that the book has been written by an author whose linguistic background and knowledge of the Ukrainian language allows her to comprehend the deep internal changes in the country and to observe the dynamics of the situation.

‘Contested tongues’ is fascinating reading not only for sociolinguists but also for scholars, researchers and others, generally interested in Ukraine.

References
