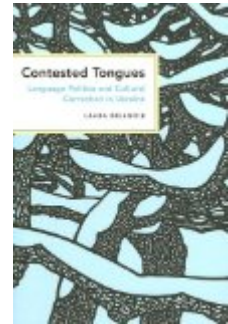


Laada Bilaniuk. *Contested Tongues: Language Politics and Cultural Correction in Ukraine*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. Tables, map. 256 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-7279-4.

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On the Importance of (Almost) Speaking Like a Ukrainian

“*Surzhyk*” refers to something that is mixed, impure, a blend, usually referring to speaking a hybrid of Russian and Ukrainian, borrowed from a designation for low-grade mixed flour. “Such mixtures were marginalized, reviled, and derided, for they were considered emblematic of backwardness and limited education” (p. 17). This “mixed language” is the central problem for analysis in *Contested Tongues*. Despite the stigma, this is the way many Ukrainians speak, mixing standard variants of Russian and Ukrainian. Laada Bilaniuk presents a most lucid and engaging ethnography of speaking to explain how language ideologies and language politics work in Ukraine in the context of mixed-language practices.

As she states, her “goal is to bring to light how ideological processes on many levels lead to the construction, maintenance, or blurring of named language units (‘Ukrainian’ and ‘Russian’) and how language is implicated in negotiations of social power” (p. 24). The concept of negotiation may be seen as overused, but it is critical to understanding the work of linguistic ideologies in everyday practices of speaking. There are no objective linguistic criteria for what is a distinct language, but Bilaniuk shows how people naturalize linguistic distinctions into clearly demarcated groups. A standard or official language is never fixed, and its status as such must be continually reasserted and defended against any and all challenges. Speaking “like a Ukrainian,” or more accurately, being perceived to speak like a Ukrainian

could get one shot in the mid-1930s, when bourgeois nationalism was a capital crime. In the post-Soviet Republic, it was nearly a requirement for public office. The irony that runs through the book is that, as everywhere in the world, few people in Ukraine speak standard Ukrainian, and people who adhered to a purist ideology in their speaking were sometimes rejected as using a language that “was sterile and artificial” (p. 39). The mixed forms called *surzhyk* are so negatively stigmatized that some politicians refrain from attempting to speak any Ukrainian, speaking only Russian in public, and plead that they are learning to speak Ukrainian properly but still not confident with it. Most often, judgment that an individual or a group (i.e., a village) spoke good Ukrainian was part of a belief that those people were legitimately and authentically Ukrainian. Language and speaking indexes ethnic identity, political loyalty, and even moral suitability.

However, even standard Ukrainian comes with problematic associations, because for so long, under the tsar and during the Soviet era, Ukrainian language was associated with being rural, provincial, uneducated, and uncultured. In more technical terms, speaking Ukrainian usually connoted being a stupid hick for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Russian was, and continues to be, associated with urban life, higher education, and refined culture. It is a language of strength and prestige. Thus, Bilaniuk traces the development of *surzhyk* as a form of accommodation of Ukrainian speak-

ers to prestige forms by introducing Russian words or phonology into their speech. This was particularly common in urban areas. In everyday terms, the incorporation of Russian into Ukrainian was a way of making a peasant way of speaking more urbane. After Stalinist purges and genocidal policies of starvation, it was also an important way of signaling political correctness, or at least make a show of being Soviet. Post-Soviet Ukraine made Ukrainian an official language, and the 1996 constitution made Ukrainian the sole state language. This was vociferously opposed for many reasons, including arguments that Russian is a more “developed” language.

Recent politics and the Orange Revolution, however, have more clearly marked Russian and Russophones as politically suspect. This meant that in some situations, Russophones were better off speaking accented English instead of Russian-accented Ukrainian. Speaking Russian connotes anti-Ukrainian sentiments, but speaking Russian-accented Ukrainian is stigmatized as another form of *surzhyk*, and so Russophone elites in Ukraine are speaking English more and more in public life.

Bilaniuk’s subtle ethnographic presentation explains how *surzhyk* is universally stigmatized. In many everyday contexts, it provides the “unmarked” forms, a plain and unassuming way of speaking with which many people are at ease. In a multilingual society, it also provides resources for humor and play as well as serves as a product of playfulness in speaking (as code switching usually

is). This complex set of conflicting practices and attitudes are presented most clearly in four life histories laid out in the second chapter.

I enjoyed this ethnography very much. I recommend it to anyone working in Russian studies, post-Communist politics or cultural studies, and linguistic anthropology generally. Bilaniuk presents sophisticated insights from linguistic anthropology in a clear and accessible manner that makes her book good for teaching to second- or third-year undergraduates. The analysis and ethnography, however, are sophisticated enough for graduate student courses. I find that it is one of those rare books that the more you bring to it, the more you can take away; anyone will feel smarter for having read it. As a linguistic anthropologist working among indigenous Siberians, I was struck by the parallels of the Ukrainian experience with that of Koryak speakers. Despite the huge differences in demographic scale and what seem to be radically different political structures (independent country vs. an *okrug*[administrative district] in Russia), Bilaniuk’s concluding sentence sums up my analysis of Koryak language politics very well: “The definition of languages is always intertwined with political, economic, and social interests, continually re-created in everyone’s words” (p. 193). The beauty of *Contested Tongues* is the elegant manner in which those connections are analytically untwined while also preserving the integrity of Ukrainians lives as lived.

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