Excerpts from *Rates of Exchange*, a novel by Malcolm Bradbury.

The main character, Dr. Petworth, is a linguist working for the British Council.
He travels to the Eastern European city of Slaka.

Now perhaps it should be explained that this Dr Petworth who sits with tingling buttocks on the apron at Slaka is, though a linguist, not that kind of linguist who knows many languages. He is competent in some tongues, but mostly dead ones: Old and Middle English, Middle High German, and, if pressed, a little Old Norse, a passable Old Icelandic. But otherwise he possesses no more than that conventional, minimal polyglotism that has, for centuries, taken the English, stammering and nodding, baffled and curious, speaking their own tongue very loudly and slowly in the belief that if spoken like this it will be everywhere understood, into every corner of the world. So Petworth possesses the words for coffee and tea in some thirteen different languages, those for beer and wine in some eleven or twelve, those for please and thank you in some nine or ten. He knows, for examination purposes, a lot of different Eskimo words for snow. Tourist words like museum and cathedral, travel words like customs and check-in, succour words like meal and lavatory, he can usually pick up anywhere with great facility. He knows his Norse from his Igbo; he has as many words of Hopi as he has of Greek. But it is all example and illustration; when it actually comes to learning and speaking to others the language they use and construct life through, Petworth has, to be frank, just as much trouble as the rest of us.

But this is not all. Petworth also possesses a rich international *sub*-language – he would call it an idiolect – composed of many fascinating terms, like *idiolect* and *sociolect*, *langue* and *parole*, *signifier* and *signified*, *Chomsky* and *Saussure*, *Barthes* and *Derrida*, not the sort of words you say to everybody, but which put him immediately in touch with the vast community of those of his own sub-group, profession or calling in all parts of the world – if, that is, he can find anyone who speaks enough English to lead him to them. Petworth may not be a master of languages, but he does know what language in its *Ding an Sich*, its languageness, actually is. He knows all about how we, as language-speaking animals, language speak. If you ask him about analogic and digital communication, the code of semes, or the post-vocalic /r/, he can tell you, would be delighted to do so. He is an expert on real, imaginary and symbolic exchanges among skinbound organisms working on the linguistic interface, which is what linguists call you and me. In his own mind, he knows whether the mind is, or is not, a *tabula rasa* before language enters it, though he will not be divulging his answer directly in this book. You may not worry about such things, but there are people who do.

Indeed Petworth is a valued commercial traveller in an essential commodity, a loyal worker in the service of the one British export that, despite the falling fishing stocks and the rising oil price, the strikes and the recessions, still booms in the markets of the world. The ideal British product, needing no workers and no work, no assembly lines and no assembly, no spare parts and very little servicing, it is used for the most intimate and the most public purposes everywhere. We call it the English language, everyone wants it, and in its teaching Petworth is an acknowledged expert. His books on TEFL and TESOP and TENPP, on ESP and EAP, are jostled for in bookshops from Tromsø to Tierra del Fuego. And this is why he is here, the acrid taste of a sweet in his mouth, a pain in his spine, his bag of lectures tucked under the seat in front, sitting waiting at Slaka airport.

He meets his local guide.

I believe you speak very well our language.' 'No, not at all,' says Petworth. 'And yet you are linguist?' says Lubijova, 'Well, I do it this time, you next, so listen how to say it. Vidki fran'tiska, da, ei sch'veppii, froliki, slibob.' 'Ah, da,' says the red-checked waitress. 'There, it is not so complicate,' says Lubijova, 'All you must know is the nouns end in "i," or sometimes two or three, but with many exceptions. We have one spoken language and one book language. Really there are only three cases, but sometimes seven. Mostly it is inflected, but also sometimes not. It is different from country to town, also from region to region, because of our confused history. Vocabulary is a little bit Latin, a little bit German, a little bit Finn. So really it is quite simple, I think you will speak it very well, soon.'

A new law mandates changing every 'i' vowel to 'u'!

'They make a small linguistic revolution here,' says the bald German, leaning forward, 'They change a little all the grammatiks. This alzo is vy they are nicht schnell.' 'Ah,' says Petworth, reading the new menu, 'Pumpu, verstu, irtu, kaf'ufuu.' 'Slubab,' says the waiter. 'Now the old words are to be no more used,' says the bald German. Petworth looks around. At the next table a man reads the red-masted party newspaper, P'rtyuu Pupulatuuu, which has the headline Untensu Actuvu. 'I see,' he says. 'It is a very important political matter,' says the bald man, 'Even Wanko may be replaced.' The important political matter evidently delays things greatly; it is not until just before nine o'clock, the hour at which Petworth should be meeting Marisja Lubijova in the lobby, that his breakfast arrives.

'There's been a change in the language?' asks Petworth. 'Some radical elements have pressured our government to make certain changes,' says Lubijova, 'They ask for a linguistic liberalization, but I do not think it is very important."