# RECREATING LANGUAGE – THE ART OF EXPRESSING A SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

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**ABSTRACT**: *THE PRESENT ARTICLE SUMMARIZES SOME OF THE MAIN LANGUAGE CHARACTERISTICS USED BY MALCOLM BRADBURY IN HIS NOVEL RATES OF EXCHANGE. THE MAIN AIM OF THE ARTICLE IS TO DEMONSTRATE THE AUTHOR'S SUCCESS IN USING THE LANGUAGE SOLELY TO PRESENT AND INVENT A SYSTEM, INSPIRED FROM THE COMMUNIST ONE. HIS SYSTEM IS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF THE FOREIGN TRAVELLER WHO CANNOT ADAPT TO THE RULES WHICH HE CANNOT UNDERSTAND. THE PAPER IS ORGANIZED INTO FOUR DISTINCT SUBCHAPTERS EACH OF THEM DESCRIBING BRADBURY'S PERSPECTIVE OVER THE COMMUNIST REGIME: THE STATUS OF THE REGIME, THE INVENTED LANGUAGE, THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SLAKAN AND ENGLISH AND THE FINAL CONCLUSIONS. FURTHERMORE, THE ARTICLE PRESENTS NOT ONLY THE SYSTEM BUT ALSO THE SOCIETY, THROUGH ITS MAIN CHARACTERS. THESE CHARACTERS ARE PRESENTED BOTH AS PART OF THE SYSTEM, BUT ALSO AS INDIVIDUALS TRYING TO ADAPT TO THESE CHANGING RULES.*

***KEY WORDS**: SLAKAN LANGUAGE, PROTOTYPICAL SOCIETY, IRONY AND SARCASM, LINGUISTICALLY DEFINED CHARACTERS*

## 1. COMMUNIST REGIMES: BEFORE AND AFTER THE FALL OF THE IRON CURTAIN

Malcolm Bradbury takes the exchange concept to another level. He makes exchange an art form both at a theoretical level, and at a practical one. This exchange becomes the new currency for him. He exchanges ideas both in language and characters through his fiction. When speaking about a different level of exchange; Bradbury can be considered a creator of a 'new' language. He does this in *Rates of Exchange;* and continues in *Why come to Slaka*? two fictional settings in which he creates a language, a country and a political system. In both novels, even if the latter is more of a guide book, language and fiction become currencies of the same concept: existence. They recognise - and then deny it! Just as Katya's manuscript could not exit the borders of her country, Bradbury's exchange of ideology can only be understood by those who create and live according to it. This is clear as Bradbury continues his fascination of east European communist regimes by recreating a harsh regimen and placing the action inside it, shortly before the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Bradbury's interest is not solely focused towards communist regimes, but with the causes and the effects of their failings. There is always this dialogue between anti-communist perspectives and post-communist realities. Bradbury uses the communist period as a

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metaphor for modern times, without actually trying to understand the people who were living through it or the process of adaptation and change to a new society. He creates societies and characters, inspired by real examples, without fully comprehending their situation.

Slaka is a prototype of a typical communist country; a composite of the characteristics for all East European states living under communism. Even though the novel is written before the actual moments that marked the existence of these states, the future is entirely predictable. Bradbury at least had the opportunity to see these movements that led to the fall of communism so he could know about the period before and after their demise.

This is how communism ends, but what comes after is still going through a process of adaptation and change after more than 20 years. There have been many other political revolutions, but not major systemic ones. There are probably only a few who mourn the passing of communism and it was through revolution people found their strength to overcome unhappiness. Bradbury marks this point of view very well in *Rates of Exchange* and *Dr. Criminale* when he emphasizes the idea that besides the political forces that rule a country, the lack or the plenitude of goods is still a factor to be considered. The first thing that a foreigner coming to Budapest after the fall of the regime notices is the abundance of new products, inaccessible before such as McDonald's, hamburgers, jeans, and BMW cars.

## 2. LANGUAGE – THE RATE OF EXCHANGE OF THE COMMUNIST SOCIETY

Bradbury tries to offer a definition of communist regimes by summing up their characteristics before and after the fall of a regime. *Rate of Exchange* and *Why come to Slaka?* are two of Bradbury's novels depicting communist reality at a time when these regimes were in their final years. When writing them, Bradbury had no idea the end was about to come, but probably, for somebody who had had the chance to experience both communist and American societies, the end was probably not so difficult to anticipate. What makes us say this with any certainty comes from the amount of stereotyping he uses to describe the communist way of life.

The fact of the matter is these stereotypes of Communism are the essence of his humour throughout the novel. From the very beginning of the novel we can relate to the professor coming from the West who finds it difficult to adapt or understand, even for short periods, the processes inherent in a communist society. On the other hand, the virtues of a socialist state are so well implemented, there is little opportunity for those to impress with their experiences from the West.

Apart from the perspective of the two opposing societies, what creates an impression of authenticity in the novel are the examples of communism as orthodoxy, such as, the existence of listeners – people who are everywhere, who scan you and without whom the structure cannot exist. The novel can also be seen under the shadow of an espionage novel, as everything revolves around Petworth's briefcase, where besides his lectures and academic writings, the reader can learn about his character. This briefcase is subject to officials' scrutiny both on entering and departing Slaka. Furthermore, everybody wants something from Petworth when he returns from the UK: the British Council woman wants a short description of the academic environment in Slaka, the British ambassador asks for reports on military matters and Pliptov wants him to carry the manuscript of Katya's book. Not every one of these listeners are employed by the state to do this, yet they do it and they are referred to as listeners and not simply as spies. Except for the listeners, the system is also governed by a bureaucracy involving a lot of people, time, resources and at times, money.

The ever-present bureaucracy is linguistically developed by Bradbury, by the use of abbreviation and capitalized names for institutions and places: MUG (for department stores), WICWOK (for foreign currency stores), HOGPo (for the state security system/ the secret police),

COSMOPLOT (for the police offices). Despite the names of institutions, there is no reference at all in the novel to descriptions of the city except for the mentioning of 'characters' in a historical sense: *Comrade* Marx, *Comrade* Lenin, *Comrade* Brezhnev, *Comrade* Grigoric, our great liberator, and *Comrade* Wanko, president of the praesidium of the party'[2].

Even where the system is not undergoing any kind of change or the fall of the regime is not eminent, there are still elements that suggest that this is about to happen, or that the existence of these people will have to be marked one way or another. The point is, not even the author is aware of this possibility, because as we have already mentioned, the novel was written before reality hit these states, but even so, there are signals that suggest changes. Again, these signals are represented by language. Regardless of the fact his language is created and invented - the spelling in 'the Slakan language' can at times be guessed. And this is where the source of much of the humour lies. But Bradbury also goes beyond this by presenting the people's dissatisfaction and amusement in the way the spelling of certain Slakan words change overnight. And this also happens in the case of words that represent the ideas of institutions or official newspapers. But as an innocent, Petworth is not actually a man of history, and so he does not recognize or acknowledge them.

On the other hand, there is certain awareness in the main character; that he is a part of a wider story; and that everything around him is part of a pre-written plot. This explains one reason for the little we know about him in the novel. But the main character is not the only one who notices this. The other characters also provide arguments in favour of this idea, as they toy with the main character's name. Up to a point, Petworth is the great linguist everyone has been expecting, who gave Slaka the honour of coming and giving lectures about new linguistic dynamics and theories from the West. In this, even under communism, Slaka is open to everything that is new. However during the course of the novel his name goes through a number of transformations and misinterpretations becoming in turns *Petwit, Petwurt, Pitvit, Petwet, Pumwum, Petworthi, Patwat*, and the most ironic, *Pervert*. As we see again, Bradbury's language proves to be the novel's *tour de force*. These pronunciations demonstrate the minimal effort taken by foreigners to understand and include a person's name in theirs. Even the accurate spelling of, *Petworth*, is taken to represent a pet, an idea that imparts few opinions, obedient to the rules established by its owner and not worth the effort of explaining why some things should be done in a certain way. The last example, *Pervert*, is not only comic and ironic, but also represents one side of his character which cannot be shown as he has some sort of pent-up sexuality. To make things worse, this man has absolutely no personal style or identity and as Bradbury uses the intertextuality to remind us of another of his characters, the sociologist Petworth, from the University of Watermouth in *The History Man*. The only small personal characteristic this character has is his position in the British Council, which differentiates him from the rest of the other similar characters, even if this institution is not actually represented in Slaka it becomes 'a sterile sign, a meaningless meaning'[3].

Throughout the book the reader finds a Petworth who has only one expertise: teaching and delivering lectures. This is the only aspect of his character Bradbury does not mock. Otherwise, in the rest of his life, he is depicted as naïve and an ingénue: he is attracted by the sexual offers made by the Slakan women, without understanding anything of their motives or the political intrigues that characterize a Communist country. Petworth is at the crossroads of his life's experience to date, as he is neither young nor socially innocent. This is what makes him a non-history man, in comparison to Howard Kirk in *The History Man.* Thus, there is both the narrator and the characters that consider Petworth to be just another of life's

[2] Malcolm Bradbury, *Rates of Exchange*, (London: Picador, 1986), 88
[3] Malcolm Bradbury, *Rates of Exchange*, (London: Picador, 1986), 54.

passengers[4]. For Bradbury, the fate of his character is just a part of the wider fate befalling the entire age undergoing a process of dehumanization. That is why the games he is playing with language do not come as a big surprise since the linguistic surface is just another component that needs to be re-evaluated. As a consequence, Bradbury also decides to play with his character's identity. Again this game does not appear exclusively in his name but in his profession as well. Petworth is placed in between the linguistic 'battle' of the period[5].

Apart from the use of language as a way of presenting opposition through the eyes of an 'identity-less' character, Bradbury uses all forms of language, ranging from language function to a form of computer 'speech'. The type of language in the narrative of the novel varies because of Bradbury's interest in the language of non-native speakers. Again attraction can be traced back to the author's personal interest in analysing and mocking the way English is spoken in Eastern Europe. This came from his considerable experience of being British Council lecturer in these countries. The link here is the way the language in the novel can be described as particular to ESL guidebook lecture talk, body language, orthography and typography (see, for example, the computer speech identified at the beginning of each chapter, e.g. *1-ARR, 2-RECEP, 3-ACCOM, 4–MINKULT., 5-CD/GB, 6 – LECT, 7- OPER., 8 – TOUR., 9 –NATKULT.*). This multiplicity of language highlights the ambiguity of speech and can be linked to the mispronunciations and misunderstandings. This is how Bradbury frames the comic potential of language which defines the basis of this novel: Bradbury takes the potential of language to the upper limit of ambiguity adding humour and comedy to great effect. Furthermore, the text is more of a monologue, mixed with a mangled syntax of Eastern European origins. On the other hand, this can be seen as a lesson Bradbury is trying to teach the readers a lesson on how we all seek to find meaning in everything we hear or see.

One of Bradbury's main aims in this novel is to give language a currency, just like a coin. In order to get that smile or groan from the reader, Bradbury makes use of the sharpness and force language can acquire if the context is relevant and powerful enough. Language is the instrument Bradbury uses to show the gaps between the West and East of Europe, drawing from his real life travelling experience to create a mythical land of Slaka. This country gathers together elements of communist regimes which at times can resemble the situation in countries such as Bulgaria, Poland or even Romania. These perspectives depend on the reader.

The plot is not what impresses the reader; rather, it is the funny and burlesque moment that keeps it going. In the summer of 1981, Professor Angus Petworth is sent to Slaka, a communist country in Eastern Europe. Here he meets various people, who are meant to take care of him, one of them being his interpreter and local guide Marisja Lubijova and the other, the so-called novelist, Katya Princip who, unlike her name suggests, has no principles and shares her bed and shower with Petworth even though this type of behaviour is unacceptable to the regime.

As we can concur from the above ideas, there is a clear connection, in terms of language between the names of the characters and the parts they play in the plot - intentionally implying the opposite meaning. This is why the name of the main character, Angus Petworth, suggests a fear and anxiety towards liberty and independence; yet in reality

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[4] *He may be a speech without a subject, a verb without a noun, certainly not a character in the world historical sense; but he has a story to tell, and now he is telling it. And telling it, he becomes himself an order, a sentence that grows into a paragraph and then a page, a page and then a plot, a direction incorporating due beginning, middle and end.* (Malcolm Bradbury, *Rates of Exchange*, London: Picador, 1986, 212)

[5] *Petworth also possesses a rich international sub-language – he would call it an idiolect – composed of many fascinating terms, like idiolect and sociolect, language 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.* (Malcolm Bradbury, *Rates of Exchange*, London: Picador, 1986, 35)

Petworth us of a pet, a companion who has no identity, is unreliable, and the only thing you can do is take care of him. And this is what Marisja Lubijova does all the time. Similarly, her name makes us think of the idea of love, the altruistic person who loves doing things for others, possibly derived from the Russian word: любовник (lover) or любить (to love). Moreover, Marisja is without doubt a secret agent, even if her position implies something else, and transforms her relationship with Petworth into one of the drastic mother – naïve son relationships[6]. As we have already mentioned, Katya Princip is everything except principled. She manipulates Petworth, causes him problems and raises the risk of danger in his dull life. Plitplov's name conjures up the natural sounds produced by small birds singing or fish struggling to survive on land. He is in fact a communist spy, who knows all about Petworth's life both in Slaka and England, whose existence is motivated by a will to fight against a doomed system.

Contrary to what one might expect from an author of the 80's, Malcolm Bradbury's voice is more than present in this novel. We can even say his voice is actually a very confident one in an era when most novelists tended to be invisible. His voice can even be seen from the metaphor of the title. He references the real exchange of currency, something which used to be common in Europe before the introduction of the euro, to a time when every traveller had to adopt a national currency and become a temporary member of a different country. On the other hand, this rate of exchange, whose price the reader is invited to discover while reading, also involves figurative exchanges – cultural, diplomatic, political, linguistic, and even sexual. His voice is mostly 'audible' within the first 60 pages of the book, especially when setting the scene and describing Slaka. He does this in order to raise the reader's interest and also to establish his expectations.

Bradbury not only uses language as a currency, but he also continues something he started in some of his other novels, that of mocking non-native speakers of English. This time he lets himself do it to a very large extent since he is both the creator of the Slakan language and also the Slakan nonsense dialogue in English. He assumes the language legitimacy by telling the reader Slaka is a Slavonic country still using the Cyrillic alphabet. This is how these dialogues become nonsense in English and instigate the reader's amusement whilst maintaining the novel's fluidity. Another aspect which keeps the reader in suspense is the originality and the comedy inducing laughter. The reader's interest in this novel is created by the combination of bad English and a communist system with lots of rules a foreigner cannot understand or apply.

## 3. CHARACTERISTICS OF SLAKAN LANGUAGE AND SLAKAN ENGLISH

This imaginary linguistics exercise can be seen in this novel from two perspectives: the creation of a new language, the Slakan one inserted into English and in combination with the poor English spoken by most of the characters in the book. More than 70% of the novel consists of monologues performed by the Slakan characters, purposely written by Bradbury in EFL English. Most of the speeches are hilarious, at least in the beginning, but by the second half, they concentrate on the life philosophies of Katya Princip and then Marisja Lubijova. The plot itself finds Petworth, the linguist, in the middle of this revolutionary change in the Slakan language. Even as an expert in phonemes and vowel shift, Petworth

[6] *'Did you remember to call your wife?' 'She wasn't there' says Petworth. 'So, I suppose I must make a new arrangement,' says Lubijova, 'You go, I will do it. And did you get your passport?' 'I have asked for it last night' says Petworth, 'It wasn't ready,' Lubijova looks at him crossly: 'Oh, Petwurt, can't you do just one thing? Now you are not a person, is that what you want? Do you like it that you don't exist? That I can't take you to the Mun'stratuu?' 'I'll go and ask for it now,' says Petworth. 'Go upstairs now, bring your coat,' says Lubijova.* (Malcolm Bradbury, *Rates of Exchange*, London: Picador, 1986, 119).

cannot understand a word until he leaves the country. The only things he can barely recognize are the signs written on the streets and at different institutions. And even as a specialist in linguistics and phonetics, this does not help him to integrate in the Slakan world of change and paradigm shifts. As is to be expected, Bradbury mocks this change: even after the public mood for change in Slaka and the students' rebellions in the public square, we find out at the end of the novel the only substantive change was turning the letter 'i' into 'u', the party newspaper form *P'rtyii Populatiii* to *P'rtyuu Populatuuu* and the Slakan word for thank you changes from *slibob* to *slubob*.

The text of the novel is a combination of English and Slakan language, represented both as separate words and as complete sentences. Furthermore, the use of English is divided into two parts: correct English, as used by the narrator and at times by the main character (as he does not speak too much in the novel), and ESL English, spoken by the rest of the novel's characters. Bradbury identifies three classes of ESL mistakes: word order, prepositions and tenses. Thus over the course of the text, we find it necessary to further analyze and establish criteria for understanding the formation of this Slakan language. As we have already noted in this paper, this language is pure invention so we need to try to trace back the cognitive mechanisms that were used to form the basis of this language. The criterion decided is a phonological one, in terms of pronunciation. Considering therefore pronunciation as the main criterion by which the Slakan language was created, we can establish two different classes of words. The first category comprises words formed according to a foreigner's pronunciation in English. An example is the way a foreigner hears Romanian, Bulgarian or Czech when coming here because he does not understand a word. All of the words in this category are invented; their roots can be traced back to either a Slavonic language, or a Latin one, just like Romanian. The second category comprises words formed through the perspective of an English person who hears his language pronounced by a foreigner with words of English origin.

Another interesting observation concerns the spelling of words form the first category. The majority of words invented by Bradbury in the first category have an apostrophe in the middle of the word or very close to the end. This apostrophe probably denotes the accent of the word, as the reader has to take a pause when reading these words. On the other hand, the accent can also suggest the existence of double *ii*-s in some of the words.

It is the first category of words that is the most prolific and fascinating one, to explore as we can find references to basically all of the Eastern European countries Bradbury himself at one time or other visited. The words in the second category have clear references to English, as their meaning can be easily traced back to English and the only difference occurs in how they are spelt or pronounced by a foreigner. The words in the first category refer to words of Slavonic or Latin origin, pronounced by Slakans and heard in English: *tulsto'ii* (blood), *rot'vitti* (peach brandy), *sch'veppii* (soft drink), *vloska* (Slakan currency), *bitii* (Slakan currency), *camb'yii* (exchange desk), *litti* (tabaco kiosks), *bin'zini* (fuel), *invat* / *otvat* (exist / entrance), *kassa* (cashdesk), *domo* (cathedral). Basically, the meaning of these words is expressed both by the form and the context in which they appear. So, even if the reader does not specialize in these languages, Bradbury makes sure the context is sufficiently relevant for them to understand them. In the second category, we have words of English origin pronounced by non-native speakers and used in everyday Slakan, such as *p'rtyii* (party), *gal'erri* (art gallery), *busop* (bus stop), *barr'ii* (bar), *tacksi* (taxi), *prohibito* (forbid), *congresso* (unite), *sausidge* (sausage), *sheese* (cheese), *eggi* (eggs).

A third category of invented Slakan words have a hilarious onomatopoeic dimension, as Bradbury uses sounds from nature for well-known words. For example, from *Why come to Slaka?* we find out that in Slakan, the clock is called *tictoc*, the duck is *crak'aki*, the name for

jeans is *levii*, a pop group is called a *poppi'gruppi,* a shower is *sprey'sprey*, the tank is *bombom* and the dance is *bongo'bongo*.

In terms of grammar, the only peculiarities that can be identified are the ones of Slakans speaking English. It is true the main character only has to deal with those who are supposed to speak English such as his official guide, airport staff, writers and academics from the upper ranks of this country. Some of the biggest mistakes in language acquisition that can be seen in the speeches of these non-native speakers mostly involve wrong word order, the lack of auxiliary verbs in questions, wrong forms of past tense or the incorrect use of perfect tenses, mistakes and confusions in terms of aspect and indirect questions and the lack of prepositions. As we have already noted, these grammar mistakes do not interfere with the understanding or the meaning. We also have to take into account that these mistakes Bradbury repeatedly refers to as examples of his own experience as a language teacher. On the other hand, these language mistakes can be seen from a native speaker's perspective of the language acquisition of Eastern Europeans peoples as mistakes which can be traced back to the structure of their native language.

## 4. FINAL REMARKS

Creating a new country and a new language gives Malcolm Bradbury another opportunity to explore the power of language. He also creates an anti-hero, not a man of history, as expected, but a linguist caught between the bureaucracy and absurdities of a Communist country. Reading between the lines, this can be any one of the ex -Eastern bloc countries, speaking a language related to Slav and Latin. The change and eventual exchange are the key words of the novel. In his short stay in Slaka, the main character is introduced to a world in which nothing is sure; he is led by an interpreter who is always bad-tempered; he cannot understand the changes in language that the country is undergoing. Even if he showed a keen interest in phonetics and language, Slakan remains a mystery to him until the end of the novel.

The language invented by Bradbury transforms this book into a masterpiece. Through language and the characters' discourse the reader is introduced to a regime full of bizarreness and duplicity. Bradbury simultaneously mocks the regime, ESL speakers and history. He creates a new language by combining the syntax, the phonetics and vocabulary from Slavonic and Latin languages. He might, on the other hand, fail to see the frailties of his own language through the eyes and pronunciation of foreigners? The novel *Rates of Exchange* brings a new perspective to what fiction can offer to its readers. We find here different dimensions, linked by an invented language: culture, society and history. And this interaction forms the basis for the irony and sarcasm.

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