PART I

# Introduction

# 1

# Late modern language, interaction and schooling

Outside education, research on classrooms is often seen as rather dull:

> it takes a tremendous effort of will and imagination to stop seeing only the things that are conventionally 'there' to be seen . . . [I]t is like pulling teeth to get [researchers] to see or write anything beyond what 'everyone' knows. (Becker 1971:10, cited in Delamont and Atkinson 1995:1)

Delamont and Atkinson go further:

> Becker's diagnosis is still a valid one in 1994 . . . [T]his is because the researchers have failed to read widely enough, have consequently lacked vision and imagination, and have thus failed to make any substantial contribution to sociology. (1995:1–2)

These are controversial claims, and this book does not offer an assessment of whether they are fair or not. But it does argue that if you get students to wear radio-microphones, if you adopt the methods of ethnographic and interactional sociolinguistics and readjust some of the working assumptions of descriptive analysis (accepting, *contra* Delamont and Atkinson, that part of the 'blame' lies with the feeder disciplines), then classroom proceedings take on a very different character. Instead of recapitulating what everyone outside thinks they know, you move closer to what a lot of teachers and students actually experience, and classrooms emerge as sites where day-in-day-out, participants struggle to reconcile themselves to each other, to their futures, to political edicts and to the movements of history, where vernacular aesthetics often provide as much of the momentum as the transmission of knowledge, where the curriculum cohabits with popular music and media culture, where students make hay with the most unrewarding subjects, and where

participants wrestle with the meaning of class stratification, their efforts inflected with social ambivalence (and sexual desire). Or at least these are the issues in the classroom studies that comprise most of this book.

Intimating both the rather grandiose and the fairly local, the book's title, *Language in Late Modernity: Interaction in an Urban School*, is intended to reflect the scope of these headline claims, and it contains four key elements – late modernity, urban schooling, language and interaction. This introduction explains my approach to these terms and my understanding of the connections between them. I begin with a macroscopic account of late modernity and urban schooling (Chapter 1.1), and then move to an overview of the emergence of 'post-structuralism' as a general perspective in the humanities and social sciences (Chapter 1.2). After that, I introduce my main methodological affiliation, interactional sociolinguistics, and point to its relevance to late modern thinking and experience (Chapter 1.3). Chapter 1.4 provides a sketch of the book's substantive content, also pointing to some of the central sociolinguistic concepts, and the chapter closes with an account emphasising the crucial role that radio-microphones have played in my data-collection (Chapter 1.5).

## 1.1 Late modernity and urban schooling[1]

It is very difficult putting precise dates on the emergence of 'late' – or 'high' or 'post' – modernity, and this is made harder by the fact that late modernity can be associated both with the major changes in the real world linked to globalisation, and with a slow, uneven but nevertheless very consequential reworking of basic assumptions in the humanities and social sciences, often characterised as post-structuralism. Nevertheless, both kinds of shift – real-world and philosophical – are important in this book, and to first get an idea of the radical changes in schooling that form a backdrop to much of the data that I shall analyse, it is worth looking back at education in the period leading up to the mid to late 1980s, before 'globalisation' gained widespread currency as a term in everyday and academic discourse.

As an illustration of the discourses and political arrangements that up until then had been central to education policy in England, it is useful to briefly consider the 'Swann Report', the last major

government report on one of the defining characteristics of the urban educational landscape in Britain, linguistic and ethnic diversity. When *Education for All: The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups* was published in 1985, power in educational policy making was distributed very differently from how it is today. Central government had no direct powers over the curriculum, and curriculum decision-making lay in the hands of teachers and individual schools, who were usually provided with guidance by their local education authorities (LEAs) (DES 1985:221, 334). For the most part, control over education spending was delegated from central government to LEAs,[2] and LEA services came under the auspices of local government. Accountability to the local electorate made education policy development a matter of local persuasion and dispute, and one of the Swann Report's central objectives was to generate a view of ethnic pluralism with which central and local government, teaching unions, minority communities, other interested parties and the general public could all concur.

What kind of view was this? Swann offered a vision of nested communities within the framework of the nation-state: Britain as a community of communities, engaged in the process of reconciling itself to the legacy of its imperial past. For the most part, the Report conceptualised its ethnic minorities as well-known, well-defined, settled, and stable, and it made light of any connections that they might seek to maintain with other parts of the world. It focused primarily on people of Caribbean and South Asian descent (DES 1985:649); it dismissed a European Directive on the teaching of minority languages on the grounds that these groups were British and here-to-stay; it described their thoughts of living in other countries as the "*myth* of an alternative" and the "*myth* of return" (DES 1985:20–21); and it was in local social services rather than in world markets that minority language proficiency was envisaged as being useful (DES 1985:409–410). Similarly, the Report's discussion of the mass media, TV and press looked no further than the British nation-state (DES 1985: 16ff. and 38–44).

The educational strategy that the Committee proposed consisted of three basic elements. First, any linguistic and cultural disadvantage that minorities were suffering should be overcome, e.g. through the teaching of English as a second language (ESL). Second, *all*

children, minority *and* majority, should be encouraged to respect the richness of minority cultures. Third, there should be no ethnic segregation within the public schooling system: ESL teaching should take place in the mainstream, instruction in minority languages should be open to all, bilingual support staff should help everyone (DES 1985: Chapter 7). The role of state schools was to eliminate segregation and disadvantage, and to ensure that everyone shared in whatever benefits minority students brought with them. Rather than cultivating any specialised cultural or linguistic resources that ethnic minorities might have, the Swann Report sought in effect to *nationalise* them ("Education for *All*").

The Swann Report, then, serves as a useful example of discourses and institutional arrangements in education prior to the period that I am calling 'late modernity'. But since 1985, the landscape that it was embedded in has been radically transformed by globalisation and neo-liberal market capitalism. For Swann, the nation-state was the supreme political entity, but since then, a major growth in the flow of people, finance, technologies and communications media that criss-cross national borders have made it increasingly hard for the nation-state to exercise effective authority within its traditional territory (Appadurai 1990; Abercrombie and Warde et al. 2000:15). Instead, it comes under increasing pressure to act as a hopeful host to transnational business, seeking to attract inward investment by offering a secure and stable environment, an abundance of skilled low-wage labour, and limited state regulation (Bauman 1998).

There have also been major changes in the nature of migrant labour. Particularly in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, Britain encouraged the inward flow and settlement of new peoples who were needed to work in the manufacturing, transport and health sectors where the recruitment of indigenous labour was proving difficult (Rose et al. 1969), and this led to the emergence of the relatively stable, vocal, working-class ethnic communities that Swann was primarily concerned with.[3] More recently in the 1990s, however, massive political upheavals, including the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 'Eastern Bloc', have produced a dramatic growth of unofficial immigration, both in Britain and across Europe and Asia (Papastergiadis 2000:48). In the UK, there has been a very large increase in people seeking asylum,[4] and there are also very substantial numbers without work and residence permits: "in practice, such people either

exist in limbo, outside state benefits and employment, or else are eventually granted some status due to the passage of time" (Fiddick 1999:13).[5] At the same time, global capitalism has altered the conditions for more established minority ethnic groups. For people who migrated during the 1950s, 60s and 70s, jobs in the UK might have been low paid, but initially anyway, they were reasonably secure, and the prohibitive costs of international travel encouraged them to build a congenial milieu in their local vicinities. In recent years, however, global market capitalism has changed this, so that "after transferring location, people are able to maintain instantaneous links with their point of origin through media and communications systems, strengthening the capacity of migrants to manage their own diasporic identities while resisting full assimilation into the new nation" (Marginson 1999:2).

In Swann's conception, 'minority' status was historically linked, either in actuality or in public perception, to forms of disadvantage that could be best remedied by their full participation in the nation-state. But as Cohen notes of members of diaspora in an age of global flows, "their language skills, familiarity with other cultures and contacts in other countries make many [of them] highly competitive in the international labour, service and capital markets" (1997:16–19), and he goes on to note that "[w]hat nineteenth-century nationalists wanted was a 'space' for each 'race', a territorialising of each social identity. What they have got instead is a chain of cosmopolitan cities and an increasing proliferation of subnational and transnational identities that cannot easily be contained in the nation-state system" (1997:175).

These cosmopolitan or 'global' cities serve as centres of finance, transport and communications, and as such, they are inhabited by populations that are both highly diverse and highly stratified. In London, ethnic diversity is particularly pronounced,[6] and wealth and income differentials are also sharper than anywhere else in the UK (Abercrombie, Warde et al. 2000:126). On the one hand, it is a home for cosmopolitan elites, professionals and business people, while on the other, there are large numbers of people working in low-skilled, low paid jobs, often in a substantial hidden economy (see also Hannerz 1996:129–131; Cohen 1997:167–169).

World cities of this kind are not merely 'nodes in networks' however. They are also places in themselves, settings for the

juxtaposition and mixing of different cultural traditions in a range of different and distinctive combinations. Ethnic and cultural difference are highly salient, and subculturally specific resources – food, dress, music, speech – can be aestheticised and/or commodified, used in artistic production or sold commercially to a wide range of different consumers and not just to tourists and the transnational elite. As a point where a plurality of different transnational and diaspora flows intersect, this is an environment that generates high levels of local meta-cultural learning and awareness (cf. Hannerz 1996:135–137; Portes 1997), and although there will be different combinations and processes in different locations, this produces a post-colonial experience "defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*" (Hall 1990:235–236).[7]

I shall point to the links between these developments and my own analyses at the end of this section, amplifying them in the chapters that follow, but before then, it is necessary to describe the transformation of schooling since 1985. In the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) three years after the publication of Swann, the Conservative Government embarked on a major programme of educational reform, bringing in a policy that introduced neo-liberal market economics to the structures of provision, combined with cultural authoritarianism in the curriculum.

One of the cornerstones of the new policy was the 'Local Management of Schools' (LMS), and it paved the way for a major shift of power away from LEAs to individual schools.[8] This was part of a move to introduce market principles to the education system, and rather than being able to call on LEAs to provide specialist support services free-of-charge, schools had to plan for special needs in their own budgets and to pay the LEA to provide them with specialist teachers. But at the same time as seeking to create a competitive 'internal market' among schools and LEAs within state education, government also centralised responsibility for the design and specification of the curriculum for 5 to 16 year olds. Individual teachers and schools were no longer the principal curriculum decision-makers, and the processes of persuasion and debate that the Swann Report had been tuned to were replaced by legislative coercion. A series of national working parties were set up for the 'core'

curriculum areas of English, Maths and Science, as well as for a range of other subjects, and by the mid 1990s, a legally binding National Curriculum for 80% or more of the school day had been established, together with a system of national tests for 7, 11 and 14 year olds. These tests meant that the performance of children at different schools could be compared, and their publication in league tables was initiated and justified on the grounds that this was essential 'consumer information' for another new element in education policy, 'parental choice'. Prior to the 1988 ERA, children in the public education system had been allocated to a particular school by their LEA, but parental choice now gave parents the right to choose which school their child went to, with state funding following the child. In this way, a complex combination of marketisation and central control was developed. In order to survive, schools needed to attract parents, and they could vary their spending priorities in order to increase their competitiveness. But at the same time, central government dictated curriculum input and standardised the measurement of output (see Henry et al. 1999:89; Bernstein 1999:252).

These processes had an inevitable effect on schools' attitudes to social, ethnic and linguistic diversity among pupils. The league tables on school performance published raw data, and made no allowance for major differences between schools in their student intake. In this context, pupils from homes where English speaking was limited were increasingly seen as a threat to a school's public performance profile, depressing its published test scores, undermining its appeal to parents, and ultimately endangering its funding base. Whereas the Swann Report had called for inclusiveness, with the new market principles it was no longer in a school's interest to welcome refugee children and other newcomers to England.

These structural changes undermined the position articulated by Swann and they were accompanied by a number of major changes in the terms of debate. One of the factors widely judged to have helped the Conservatives win the 1987 general election was the so-called 'loony London effect', a perception that the Labour Party was dominated by London-based radicals who were committed to a dogmatic multi-culturalism and who were antipathetic to the traditional values of Englishness. In other words, (what others later came to call) the 'global city' was deemed a political liability, and in its place, the hearts and minds of 'Middle England' became the main

target of competition between the major political parties. At the same time, as the replacement of the phrase 'middle class' with 'Middle England' itself reflects, social class also became less and less of a reference point in public discourse.

This decline in the usability and salience of traditional notions of social class was partly the product of the economic restructuring attendant on globalisation.[9] But the retreat from class in public discourse also fitted with the ascendance of two newer ideologies. On the one hand, the traditional association of class with collective solidarity, worker identities and the critique of capitalism was ill-suited to the new emphasis on individualism, consumer culture, and the market. On the other, notions of long-standing class conflict and division were at odds with an increasingly influential strand of opinion which emphasised (high) national culture as a central unifying element in the new national curriculum (e.g. Tate 1996). In practical terms, this meant that when particular groups continued to underachieve at school, the blame was shifted away from political economy – in which everyone was implicated, including the government – to culture, which laid responsibility with the underachievers themselves. In this way, the relatively poor performance of working-class boys became a problem of masculinity, while the disaffection of working-class boys of Caribbean descent was put down to ethnicity. Whereas the Swann Report made an effort to address the ways in which school achievement was influenced by both class and ethnicity together (DES 1985:71–76), Gillborn and Gipps' review of research noted in 1996 that "data on social class is often absent from research ... [and] it is exceptional to find studies of achievement by ethnic minority pupils that give full attention to *both* these factors" (1996:16; Gillborn 1997:377–380; Gillborn and Mirza 2000).

In 1997, the Conservative Government finally lost power after seventeen years in which free-market economics had been extended progressively further into the public sector. They were replaced by a 'New Labour' party that came to office determined to tackle social exclusion and to eradicate the "long 'tail' of underachievement in Britain, and [the] relatively poor performance from lower ability students" (Barber 1997:10). For the most part, however, this was not a return to class analysis,[10] and free-market philosophies continued to dominate education policy. The state school system, it was said, had much to learn from private schools,[11] the 'discipline of the

market' still played a major part in the relationship between LEAs, schools and parents, and indeed schools and LEAs deemed 'failing' were privatised and taken over by educational and other management companies.

The technological dimensions of globalisation were given some recognition by the New Labour government, but at the same time, a National Literacy Strategy (NLS) was instituted first in primary and then in secondary schools, and in many ways this seemed to intensify their predecessors' rejection of the cultural dynamics of globalisation. The new digital communications systems embrace a plurality of expressive forms, values, interests and imaginings, and many commentators – including the Prime Minister (Blair 1999) – have suggested that this new power presents a considerable challenge to the traditional authority of parents and teachers (see e.g. Castells 1996:374–375; Sefton-Green 1998b:12; Holmes and Russell 1999). The NLS looked designed to reassert the kinds of authority that now felt threatened. The centre piece of the NLS was the 'Literacy Hour' – an hour a day that all primary schools in England were pressured to dedicate to reading and writing (DfEE 1998) – and this not only dictated what to teach but also how, prescribing a minute-by-minute programme in which whole class teaching – with pupils' eyes and ears tuned to the teacher – formed the main part (two thirds). In terms of content, the Literacy Hour assumed native English speaker knowledge of spoken language and cultural meaning. Pupils' attention was focused on the basics of print literacy and standard English grammar, and the multi-modality of integrated communications systems, consumer culture and the heteroglossia and multilingualism of the global city were overwhelmingly ignored.

Given the fact that face-to-face interaction is my principal point of entry into empirical analysis, this overview of 'late modernity and urban schooling' encompasses much more than I can actually cover in any detail in this book. Nevertheless,

a) it provides an essential background for understanding the field-site where I collected my data in 1997–98 – an inner London school experiencing high levels of mobility among its students, struggling with a national curriculum in the 'education market', more closely tuned in many ways to the discourse of Swann;