CHAPTER TWO
Attitudes to Words

One of the best-known and most influential sociolinguists of the post-war period is Professor Basil Bernstein, of the Institute of Education at the University of London. Bernstein set out to discover why some children succeeded at school and others failed. His conclusion was that schools were geared to the habits and attitudes of what he decided, for reasons of convenience, to call the middle class, and that working-class children – another label of convenience – were consequently disadvantaged from the beginning of their school careers.

A formidable structure of influential linguistic theory has grown from this decision to divide society – or rather, British society – into these two cultural halves. The theory could be explained roughly as follows. ‘One of the aims of the middle-class family’, says Bernstein, ‘is to produce a child oriented to certain values but individually differentiated within them. The child is born into an environment where he is seen and responded to as an individual with his own rights, that is, he has specific social status.’ The parents watch the child carefully and encourage him to use words in a way which will express his feelings about the world around him, to become ‘sensitive to a particular form of indirect or mediate expression where the subtle arrangement of words and connexion between sentences conveys feeling’.

An emphasis is placed on the ‘verbalization of feeling’. ‘The language-use of the middle-class’, Bernstein believes, ‘is rich in personal, individual qualifications, and its form implies sets of advanced logical operations; volume and tone and other non-verbal means of expression, although important, take second place.’ The middle-class child at an early age becomes sensitive to a complex form of language use which determines the way in which he regards objects and which gives him a skill and con-
confidence in manipulating words. For him, school continues and enhances these attitudes.

Working-class language psychology, in Bernstein’s view, is quite different. It is based on a form of language which he calls ‘public’, in contra-distinction to middle-class language, which is ‘formal’. ‘If the words used are part of a language which contains a high proportion of short commands, simple statements and questions where the symbolism is descriptive, tangible, concrete, visual and of a low order of generality, where the emphasis is on the emotive rather than the logical implications, it will be called a public language.’

The working-class family has a more authoritarian structure and its aims and expectations are shorter-term. Preferences, goals and dissatisfactions follow a different pattern. ‘Present gratifications or present deprivations become absolute gratifications or absolute deprivations, for there exists no developed time continuum upon which present activity can be ranged. Relative to the middle classes, the postponement of present pleasure for future gratifications will be found difficult.’ This produces a constant clash between school and the working-class child. The school says, in effect, ‘Work hard now and you will have a much better life later on’, but the working-class child, like the working-class adult, is not prepared to wait. Any effort which does not yield immediate dividends is not worth making. And there is another important difference between the two. ‘The level of curiosity of the working-class child is relatively low, and as compared with the middle-class child, differently oriented, and this removes a powerful stimulus from the classroom. The working-class child has a preference for descriptive cognitive responses; his response is an immediate one and only vague extensions in time and space, and consequently his attention will be brief or difficult to sustain without punitive measures. Rather than pursuing the detailed implications and relations of an object or an idea, which at once create the problem of its structure and extensions, he is oriented towards the cursory examinations of a series of different items.’ He sees statements and facts in isolation and finds it difficult to fit them into a pattern.

An individual may have both a public language and a formal language at his disposal, or he may be limited to one, the public language. Whether he has one or two languages will depend on his social group. A middle-class person is likely to have the choice