A band of efficient schoolmasters is kept up at much less expense than a body of police or soldiery.
(Nineteenth-century MP, quoted in Leith, 1983, p.167)

Introduction

The 1980s in Britain were years of crisis. The post-war consensus which had largely been adhered to by the major political parties and public opinion came under severe attack. Institutions and practices that previously seemed safe from challenge were now subject to ruthless ideological and political assault. The provisions of the welfare state, the free health service and the state education system were all faced with fundamental alteration by perhaps the most radical and confident Tory government of the century. Across many fields the onslaught took place and it was accompanied by a marked shift in political discourse. The ground shifted so fast that at times it appeared bewildering: competition, efficiency, profit and individualism became buzz-words in the revision and reversal of values, opinions and practices which has occurred in the ideology of the new Toryism. Given that this was the historical context in Britain in the 1980s, the aim in this chapter will be to see whether the general drift of our argument can fit this period of cultural and political crisis. The argument has been, in short, that language becomes a crucial focus of tension and debate at critical historical moments, serving as the site upon which political positions are contested. This chapter then will attempt to demonstrate that the argument in this book does fit the 1980s in Britain as the English language was again placed on the agenda for right-wing ideologists.
One of the notable features of the new form of Toryism was its apparent willingness to blame the 1960s for all that was wrong in contemporary Britain. The ‘permissive society’, if we are to believe the ideologists of the new right, was responsible for everything from the rising crime rates under Thatcherism to slack morals in public life, declining standards of politeness among the young, bolshie union bosses and much more besides. Not least in the litany of offences that the evil decade visited upon us was the alleged decline of standards in education, with the level of literacy a favoured topic. Despite the fact that more people were educated, and to a higher level, than ever before, there was still a widespread populist belief (which was given ideological force by the views of certain educationalists and politicians) that the British population was in grave danger of becoming illiterate. There appeared to be a terrible threat that the English language and its users were menaced by teachers and educationalists who no longer believed in standards and deliberately undermined ‘good English’. Therefore this chapter will attempt to examine the views of the new right educationalists in order to demonstrate the continuity of their thinking with the sort of pre- and proscriptive attitudes that have been outlined in this text. The aim will be to show how the language again became the vehicle for a crusade for specific types of contemporary values and to examine the political implications of those values in the sphere of linguistic education.

**Mellifluous rhetoric: the language trap**

A good example of new right educationalists’ thinking about language is given in John Honey’s pamphlet *The Language Trap: Race, Class and the ‘Standard Language’ Issue in British Schools*, published by the right-wing pressure group the National Council for Educational Standards as one of a series of ‘Kay-Shuttleworth Papers on Education’. Examples of Kay-Shuttleworth’s educational thinking and aims can be found in Chapter 1. Honey’s pamphlet opens with a paragraph on ‘Threatened Standards in English’ which begins: ‘In the past two decades there has been increasing concern on both sides of the Atlantic, over the standards of written and spoken English by the products of our school system’ (Honey, 1983, p.1). He then cites complaints from employers along with mistakes on insurance forms and advertising cards in shop windows as evidence of such a decline in linguistic standards. They are, he asserts, ‘a sad commentary’ on the level of achievement of our educational provision. This argument is interesting from a rhetorical point of view in that it deploys a familiar tactic of contemporary reactionary thought by