

THE JERRY SPRINGER SHOW TAKES ON THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

Cathleen O'Brien

The recent phenomenon of panel talk shows in our culture would seem to provide for occurrence of the Cooperative Principle (CP) (Grice). The shows use the format of hosting a panel of guests who is asked questions by the host. My observations of *The Jerry Springer Show* however, seem to challenge the Cooperative Principle.

Grice's Cooperative Principle states that the purpose or direction of the conversation "may be fixed from the start (e.g. by an initial proposal of a question for discussion)" (p. 307) which indeed is the case on the show. The show is given a specific title, today's being: *Update: Teens with Older Lovers*, and the questions Jerry asks lead toward why the young girl is interested in the older man and why the older man is sleeping with teenage girls.

In the few episodes of this show that I have viewed, I have found that Jerry's guests do not observe the four maxims of the CP. The following are ways three of the four maxims were not observed in today's show. The maxim of Quantity states, "Do not make your contribution more informative than is required...since it is liable to raise side issues" (p. 308). One of today's guests introduced into the conversation that the older man had children by women other than the teenager he is currently involved with. The maxim of Quality states, "Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence" (p. 308). This is an excerpt from the show:

woman: "You're cheating on her now."

older man: "With who?"

woman: "I don't know."

The last maxim--which I noticed was not observed throughout this or any of the shows I have viewed--is the maxim of Manner which says simply, "Be orderly" (p. 308). Time and again his guests talk over one another and at least once per show a guest throws something at another guest, picks a fight, or hits another guest. Also, women pulling other women's hair seems to be very popular. All of these detract from any semblance of order in the conversation.

If these maxims were followed, they would "in general yield results in accordance with the Cooperative Principle" (p. 308). But since the Cooperative Principle is not being observed, we cannot assume the presence of a conversational implicature (p. 314) thus a "maximally effective exchange of information" (p. 308) does not occur on *the Jerry Springer Show*. Grice says that following the CP is "reasonable" (p. 309) for us to do and that "it would involve a good deal of effort to make a radical departure from the habit" (p. 309). Could there be a connection between the type of guests Jerry Springer hosts and their effectiveness of communication? If he is interested in guests who seem to be somehow *different*, could it be that their pathologic nature inhibits them from following the CP?

REFERENCES

- Grice, H. P. 1968, 1975. Logic and Conversation in *The Way of Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
The Jerry Springer Show. April 30, 1998. Update: Teens with Older Lovers.