DIALOGUE
*The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*

# The Gentle Tongue: How Language Affected the World of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*

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## ABSTRACT

Although new episodes of the program ceased to be recorded in 2004, the *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* show is still recalled by many today as an iconic childhood staple—the right show to watch if you are a young child or a parent looking for something wholesome to view on television. This is as Fred Rogers, the creator of the program, wished, but what exactly were the goals behind the *Mister Rogers'* program? What were the shaping forces that inspired Rogers' theory for children's educational television? These are questions explored in "The Gentle Tongue: How Language Affected the World of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*."

Research for this article is compiled from Rogers' book on parenting philosophies, dialogue excerpts from the television program, and published interviews with Rogers. Comparative information has also been provided by research from humor development, childhood imagination development, and popular television studies. Thoughtful exploration of this data can explain how and why Fred Rogers was inspired to create a program that demonstrated love and care towards television's youngest viewers. Although *Mister Rogers* may be leaving the airwaves, its effects can still be seen in today's modern television programming.

## KEY WORDS

Adult, Child, Television, Language, Make-Believe, Play, Responsibility, Care, Puppets, Humor

In his earliest years as a working adult, Fred Rogers was a floor manager for NBC studios in New York City. One of the programs on which he worked was *The Gabby Hayes Show,* which starred a cowboy who had good rapport with children. Rogers asked the old cowhand, "Mr. Hayes, what do you think about when you look in the camera and know that there are thousands of people looking at you?" Hayes responded, "Freddy, I think of one little buckaroo."1 Later, when he began his own television program, Rogers channeled that idea from Hayes. In his book for parents, Rogers states: "That's what I've been doing ever since on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*—imagining that I'm talking with one 'television friend.'"[2]

In today's world of cartoons and comedy entertainment for kids, this sensitive approach is unique. It leads one to want to better understand Rogers' purpose behind the program, to dive deeper into the philosophy of the show. What better way to research a program than to explore the words used on it—i.e. the dialogue? This researcher is led to ask the following questions: What was the dialogue that Rogers used to communicate with his "television friend?" Did his words vary among its intended audiences? Would young viewers be addressed in a different way from adult audiences? What were some possible reasons behind the language choices that Rogers made? What examples might demonstrate Rogers' background and focus for the *MRN* television show?

To answer these questions, I viewed twenty-five episodes of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (abbreviated *MRN).* These episodes were randomly selected to include shows spanning the broadcast history of *Mister Rogers Neighborhood*, so the evolution of his word choices could be examined over its multi-decade recording period. I also investigated other sources, including essays and articles about language, children's television and Fred Rogers; a parenting book by Rogers; a collection of reminiscences about *MRN*; a reflective book on Rogers' faith; and books about television literacy and child development. After analyzing these sources, it became evident that Rogers had in mind specific roles for each character to play. The careful direction that each character takes with his or her words indicates that there is some greater purpose—or, philosophy—driving the composition of Rogers' seemingly simple programming for the young viewer.

Proof for this can be seen immediately after viewing any of Rogers' *MRN* programs. Rogers draws a definite line, via words, between the responsibilities of adults and those of juveniles. It is as though he creates a definite role for each age category. Throughout the show, adults and adult-role puppets play responsible parts. The grown-ups perform adult tasks like fixing broken machines or buying items at the grocery store. Occasionally, Rogers refers to something being an "adult job," like using a wrench to repair the faucet. While children are welcome to observe these adult actions on the show, Rogers explains that there are things that are not safe for young viewers to do. A major part of adult work, as demonstrated by Rogers, is to take time to care for people. Adults use words to inform, comfort, and discover facts.

Juvenile characters, on the other hand, hold different responsibilities. Children and child-like puppets of the program use words to demonstrate dependency. Young characters are never disparaged for their youth: instead, they learn from their adult counterparts. Young characters receive help and instructions. They learn how to do practical things—like make a sandwich. Young characters on *MRN* are encouraged to explore and expand their horizons in a safe way and they are applauded for their efforts.[3] Child characters of the program, as a result of the *MRN* environment, use their words to learn, to explain, and to ask for help.

Sometimes, the characters of children and adults trade places. Typically, an adult character only acts in a childish way if humor is being added. But child-like speakers on the *MRN* show can also assume adult

[1] Kimmel and Collins The Wonder of It All 18, quoting an interview of Rogers with Karen Herman. See also Rogers and Head 9.

[2] Rogers and Head 9.

[3] See MRN episode 1546, 8:32. When Nicki, (age six and a half) is brought to Rogers' studio, the boy plays a piece on the piano and speaks candidly about music and how much work practicing is. "Everybody has to practice, before they can learn something," Niki says. "And it's okay, even when you make mistakes," Rogers replies.

"responsible" roles: for example, occasionally, a young character offers comfort or ideas to an adult. This occurs especially in the world of Make-Believe, where the majority of juvenile-adult interaction happens. A clear example of the division between adult and child word choice comes from *MRN* episode 1528, when Rogers gives a clear example of the "taking care of you" role played by adults. In this show, the people of Make-Believe start to dig a hole for a new pool. Everything is going well until Daniel Striped Tiger (puppet) starts chatting with Lady Aberlin (human adult). The dialogue begins at 15:18:

Lady Aberlin: Hi Daniel

Daniel: Oh, hi, Lady Aberlin

LA: It's almost time. Are you ready?

Daniel: Well, I thought, maybe I'd work on my boat. It really needs help.

LA: But Daniel, you offered to help us dig out the hole, remember?

Daniel: Yes, I remember.

LA: Is something bothering you, Daniel?

Daniel: I guess so.

LA: We could talk about it, if you'd like.

Daniel: Everybody's all excited about digging this hole, Lady Aberlin, but I'm not.

LA: That's okay, Daniel. Work doesn't always have to be fun and exciting. Sometimes, its just plain hard and tiresome and that's that.

Daniel: Do you think its going to be fun?

LA: Well, it's going to be very different for me, so I think I'm going to like it a lot.

Daniel: Well, I'll do it. But I think it's just going to be hard - and what was the other word you said?

LA: Tiresome.

Daniel: Hard and tiresome. And dark.

LA: Oh. Oh, well, it can get dark, down in the hole. But that's why we're going to be wearing these hats with flashlights on them, see?

Daniel: Oh. Then it won't be all dark down there in the hole.

LA: No – not if we use our flashlights.

Daniel: Oh!

LA: Here's yours.

Daniel: And will you keep your light on?

LA: As soon as it gets the least bit dark.

Daniel: Oh good!

Here, Lady Aberlin takes an adult role in Make-Believe. She first informs Daniel that it is time to help dig the pool. Daniel, as a child puppet, hints that he is not comfortable with the idea. Lady Aberlin starts to ask questions to discover why Daniel is worried. Daniel explains his fears about the dark. Lady Aberlin then becomes a comforter, demonstrating the flashlights and offering to stay close by so that Daniel will not be frightened. This is typical of the role-playing word usage Rogers demonstrates in *MRN*: Adults take care of children.

However, at times in the *MRN* show, there are no child-figures present. This happens usually in the reality segments, during events like field trips. In these sections, Rogers emulates the role of a child, asking questions and seeking information or asking for help. The adult models genuine child-like behavior. In one episode, Rogers visits the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute (*MRN* episode 1482). Bay Judson is the tour guide who shows Rogers the different paintings. Here's Rogers' childlike dialogue, starting at 5:45:

Rogers: Ah—let's go over to this one! This looks familiar, Bay.

Bay: That's a portrait, Fred, of Homer St. Goddens …

Rogers: Is this his mother, back here?

Bay: That's his mother, and she's reading out loud to him. He had to sit for a real long time for that portrait and she was trying to keep him amused.

Rogers: Oh, you mean the painter would have been out here, actually painting both of them like that?

Bay: For hours and hours. And he just had to sit, still as a statue.

Rogers: He looks a little bored, doesn't he?

Bay: I think he wants to go outside and play with his friends.

In the museum, Rogers is demonstrating language that requests information. He asks to see a particular painting; he learns about how the painting was made and why the mother is in the picture. Rogers explains his thoughts about the boy in the painting—the boy looks "bored." The language Rogers uses relates in a very understandable way to a child who has waited to get his or her picture taken.

Finally, there is the occasional moment when a young character comforts or cares for the needs of an adult. Roles are reversed and the caregiver becomes the recipient of care. Here is the dialogue from *MRN* show 1529. In this particular excerpt, the pool project that the neighbors are working on has been cancelled, since a water main broke during the digging. Plumbers are summoned and the price of fixing the Neighborhood pipes is steep. Lady Aberlin and Neighbor Aber visit the School at Someplace Else to see if the students have some ideas for solutions to the situation. The excerpt begins at 20:11:

Lady Aberlin: We're here to try to be helpful to (King Friday).

Neighbor Aber: Yes, we've come to ask your advice.

Daniel: Oh - you want our advice?

LA: Yes, we do. And Uncle Friday does, too.

Daniel: Oh.

Prince Tuesday: What for?

LA: Well, as you know, we had to turn off the water when the main pipes broke.

Daniel: And there isn't any water to drink or shower in, or anything!

LA: That's right.

NA: And the reason we need your advice is that we must find some money to get new pipes. Otherwise, we won't have any water– ever!

Prince: Have you thought of using straws? You could put a whole lot of straws together for the pipes.

Ana: I think straws might break after a little while, Tuesday . . .

Daniel: How much money do we need for the pipes?

LA: Three thousand.

All the children: Three thousand!

LA: Yes, I know that's a lot!

Daniel: Well, how much money do we have for the swimming pool?

LA: Three thousand.

Daniel: Well?

Ana: See what Daniel means?

Prince: Give up the swimming pool money to get new pipes?

NA: That would be a way to do it.

LA: It certainly would!

Ana: But we wouldn't have any swimming pool!

Daniel: Well, Ana, it wouldn't be any good without water in it, anyway.

All of the students in the class are children (puppets), but the children ask the adults (humans) for information. The adults ask for help. The children listen to the problem, then make suggestions. Although Ana Platypus and Prince Tuesday are reluctant to give up the pool, Daniel remarks sensibly, "It wouldn't be any good without water in it, anyway." Here the children and adults have reversed their roles. While children are usually the ones who need answers and comfort, here they are the providers of those emotional staples. The adults learn from the children's feedback.

## MULTI-GENERATIONAL APPEAL AND THE LANGUAGE OF ROGERS

At times, the clear divide between "child" and "adult" language is blurred by Rogers' word selections. Of the twenty-five episodes explored for this paper, the use of humor by Rogers (who wrote the majority of the programs[4]) is never the main emphasis of the show[5]. Most of the spoken work is direct, with no jokes between young and adult dialogue. But unexpected dialogue sometimes can entertain the adults who would watch the program with children, especially when an adult actor behaved like a child—in a not-so-serious way. To highlight that dialogue, a few episodes must be mentioned. In one early show, an adult actor tries to install a punch clock for his adult puppet friend. The puppet takes a (purportedly) juvenile view of the clock. Here's the excerpt, from episode 4, starting at 16:01: (Note: the puppet, Grandpierre likes to speak in French.)

> Grandpierre: What does it mean? *Qu'ès que savetier* punch?
>
> Handyman Negri: Uh, a punch, Grandpierre, a punch—you know like that! (he swings his fist) *Compère*? . . . This is a punch clock.
>
> Grandpierre: An' you punch the clock?
>
> HN: That's right—you punch the clock when you come in, and you punch the clock when you go out.
>
> Grandpierre: Oh, *très bien*! . . . Let me try it! (He gives it a solid whack and knocks it sideways.) . . .
>
> HN: Oh, Grandpierre! You'll break it like that! No, no, no no– *piano*! Uh, *piano*. Easy!
>
> Grandpierre: Oh—easy! Oh, *très bien*! . . . (he practices punching the clock, still knocking it over with relish.)
>
> HN: Just a minute–I want to be sure it's still working—yes, it's still working.
>
> Grandpierre: *Très bien*. And you will be there, each time when I'm punching the clock—to pick it up?
>
> HN: No, Grandpierre, I will *not* be there each time. I am going to place it right here on the Eiffel Tower, and then you can punch it whenever you leave and whenever you come home.
>
> Grandpierre: Ah, *bon*. And I will pick it up.
>
> HN: Yes, and you will pick it up yourself.

A child would love to punch things. Probably, the majority of adults would appreciate Grandpeirre's attitude to the punch clock. Note how Grandpierre requests information, in the vein of juvenile dialogue. Negri plays the adult, giving an explanation first of what a punch is and then of how the punch clock works. Young viewers enjoy the scenario because of the physical comedy and the misunderstanding. Older viewers

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[4] See Owen.

[5] Rogers admits, later in life, to using a "punch line" for the final episode of the last week-long sequence of programs. Owen's article refers to end of the final series of MRN shows that Rogers filmed before his retirement. Rogers discusses his final series, stating "I can't tell you the punch line of it all because it's just too wonderful . . . "

enjoy the suggestion that punch clocks can be despised[6].

A paradox can also be found when an adult puppet is sincere in its adult behavior but also presents irony to the viewer. For example, Negri again plays the adult when, in episode 1526, he stops by puppet Lady Elaine's Museum Go Round, to give her the annual tax report. This report, he tells Elaine, demonstrates how the kingdom has used tax money for the past year. Lady Elaine hears the word *taxes* and at 19:13 says: "Well, you'll probably want more money. Well I don't have any more—I'm cleaned out!" Now, Lady Elaine is playing the grumpy adult because she just spent all her money on paint and forgot to get brushes. She is also playing the part of a child: she is explaining why she doesn't want to hear about taxes. She is "cleaned out." Again, the line between the adult character and juvenile role is blurred by an adult acting as a child. A child viewer would probably take the whole dialogue seriously; the adult viewer would appreciate the slang and the unwillingness to pay more taxes.

What happens if the adult characters don't use any childlike language yet still invoke humor? Sometimes, Rogers liked to create a gentle parody of popular culture. Adult viewers would probably pick up on it—while the satire of the situation would sail over a young viewer's head. For example, look at episode 1475, the *Windstorm in Bubbleland Opera*. The completely adult-spoken dialogue exemplifies Rogers' mild satire at 1:35:

News Anchor: "Hello, I'm Robert Redgate, bringing you this O'clock edition of

Bubblewitness News: all the news that's fit to speak, all the news that's fit to hear, all the news to bring you cheer right here, in Bubbleland."

(Anchorman Redgate sings the latest news. His notices include the following song.)

There's never, never, never, never, never
Any trouble here in Bubbleland, Bubbleland, Bubbleland,
There's never, never, never, never anything but joy,
Right here in Bubbleland, Bubbleland, Bubbleland!
Our bubbles make us happy, they are with us night and day.
We know that they are so important
They must never blow away.
Of course, they never would.

(Then the song repeats with slight modifications . . . )

(Then follows an announcement of the very good news.)

Redgate beams at the camera:

> "The National Bubble Chemical Company has today announced its newest, environmentally safe, propellant product: Spray Sweater - the ultimate protection for your precious bubbles. Until today, we've always had to knit or to buy old-fashioned, regular sweaters to protect our bubbles. But now, Spray Sweater makes it easy for everyone. All you have to do is put those spray sweaters around your favorite bubbles and they'll be safe. Spray Sweater: the absolute ultimate in bubble protection.
>
> Betty: It's a fraud! It's a fraud! There's nothing in this can but just plain air! There's no

[6] Southam gives a more complete discussion on how young children enjoy physical comedy while more mature viewers understand wordplay.

> way that a sweater could ever come from there! It's a fraud–I tell you, it's a fraud!
>
> Redgate: What's going on?
>
> Betty: The chemical folk pulled the wool over you! Let me show you - you see? You see?
>
> Redgate: This is highly irregular!
>
> Betty: Oh–I'm the, um, manager of Betty's Better Sweater Company. I have a right to check the competition.
>
> Redgate: Heh—ladies and gentlemen, we'll have an in-depth report about sweaters on Bubblewitness News tomorrow. But now for the weather! Here's Friendly Frank, your weather porpoise, the porpoise with a purpose!

This dialogue is tongue in cheek. There is information: "never any trouble," "environmentally safe propellant product," "fraud" and "competition." But what is the viewer learning from this dialogue? On one level, the viewer sees a news program and Spray Sweater, the top story. Then the viewer sees that Betty, of Betty's Better Sweaters, is upset by the competition to her hand-knit products.

But there is the double-speak which is also going on. The mature viewer is alerted by the "all the news that's fit to speak," opening, having only good and very good news—only in the land of Make-Believe could that occur! The advertisement for Spray Sweater is a bit like an infomercial, but the adult viewer would understand the promotion, since the National Bubble Chemical Company is a major sponsor for Bubblewitness News. However, how many viewers would catch Betty's comment, "I have a right to check the competition?" Again, only in Make-Believe could a manufacturer interrupt a live news broadcast to air her grievances about a competitor's product. Children might pick up the physical cues that Betty gives when she makes thumbs up and thumbs down motions towards her sweater and the Spray Sweater can. But mature viewers probably will pick up much more.

This presents the viewer with a great divide. Would the target-age, *MRN*-viewing child understand the thought behind the complex humor Rogers presented? Probably not. But this is why the *Mister Rogers* program appeals to the entire family and has had a lasting impact on children's television programming—as witnessed by the dialogue used in the *Bubbleland* opera, there is no real age limit to the viewership[7]. The wit of each quote depends on what McGhee refers to as "expectancy violations."[8] In the tax scenario, Lady Elaine surprises the viewer with slang. The anchor of Bubblevision News tells good news and very good news. Grandpierre socks the punch clock until it breaks. Southam suggests that, for this type of humor, the audience would need to have more advanced comprehension than the projected 2-4 year-old audience member.

This, then, is the great divide of the *MRN* program: while most word usage on the show can be understood by young viewers, there is some which only applies to more mature viewers. From the observations completed for this article, the majority of the dialogue used is applicable to both children and adults, but when one of the adult characters crosses the line and starts behaving in a childish way (i.e., using childish language where it is not expected), the show appeals to its more mentally-developed viewer and not to the young child. Therefore, the *MRN* show is able to reach beyond the preschool age bracket, and this is why it became a staple for family television time.

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[7] Daniel McGinn's article, "Guilt Free TV," goes so far as to discuss one mother who installed a television in the kitchen, so the children could learn from a variety of PBS shows while eating. "They learn so much," says the mother, whose children were ages 2 and 7 at the time of the article's writing. Since McGinn's article was published in 2002, it is assumed that Rogers' program (which began more than 30 years before) created momentum for multi-generationally appealing PBS programming.

[8] See McGhee 125.

## PURPOSE BEHIND THE ROGERS PROGRAM

What motivated the language choices that Rogers made for his program? Research provides the following suggestions. Close to the time that Rogers received his undergraduate degree from Rollins College, he saw television for the first time and was disgusted by characters who threw pies at one another[9]. The violence and senseless slapstick inspired Rogers to strive to create wholesome, nurturing programming for children, where young viewers wouldn't be bombarded with potentially traumatic images and actions. He began working with NBC studios. By the mid-1960s, Rogers was starting work on his own American program, *Misterrogers' Neighborhood*. The title of the show was later changed to *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, "out of a concern for viewers who were learning to read," Rogers notes[10]. (He was worried that spelling his name and title as one word without proper capitalization, spacing and spelling would confuse fledgling readers.) To emphasize his goals when creating programming for children, Rogers writes:

> The roots of a child's ability to cope and thrive, regardless of circumstance, lie in that child's having had at least a small, safe place … in which, in the companionship of a loving person, that child could discover that he or she was lovable and capable of loving in return. If a child finds this during the first years of life, he or she *can* grow up to be a competent, healthy person . . .[11]

In discussing television and its role in helping a child prepare for life, Rogers also says: "those of us who make television programs . . . have a responsibility to do our work with the greatest of care." Why was Rogers compelled to create characters that were responsible—and characters that needed responsibility in order to thrive? For the purposes of this research, three primary concepts are outlined as being the basic propellants for the Rogers character/language roles. They are as follows:

Theological: Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister. His specific instruction, when he was ordained, was "to minister to children and their families through television."[12] While Rogers did not use many direct references to theology, there was an undercurrent of spiritual thought that seemed to support the goals of the program.

Educational: The *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* program included field trips to the crayon factory, discussions about plumbing and recipes for making simple foods, to name a few activities that were filmed. Rogers seemed to have a specific focus on learning because it helped children become more understanding individuals.

Social: the *MRN* program was filmed over the course of four decades. Although he maintained a static time frame for the "real" neighborhood and the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, Rogers helped young viewers deal with current events.

Evidence for each of these three concepts is bountiful, both in the television programs and in the literature written about and by Rogers. By combining all three concepts, it is possible to piece together purpose influencing the style or format of thought behind the characters Rogers brought to life. The characters' language/word usage is symbolic of these ideas that founded and sustained Rogers' legacy of nurturing children's programming.

To lay some groundwork for the theological perspective of Rogers' language on the *MRN* show, it

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[9] See Kimmel and Collins i, Hollingsworth xx and 124. (As Hollingsworth notes, this pie-throwing act might have struck an internal sore spot with Rogers, who was bullied as a child.)

[10] Rogers and Head 163.

[11] See Rogers and Head 11-12.

[12] Kimmel and Collins 13.

should be stated that he was a 1962 graduate of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary[13]. His commission, to minister to "children and their families through television," was something Rogers took seriously. Ministering took place outside of the pulpit, as Rogers demonstrated through his program. Look at the *MRN* program 1484, in which two characters in the neighborhood of Make-Believe lose a football game. The losers are quite disappointed. But there is an element of comfort (or ministering), that King Friday is able to extend to the losers. The dialogue begins at 18:02:

> King Friday: But you players seemed sad . . .
>
> Bob Dog: Oh, yes—we, we were.
>
> Lynn Swann: We lost our game today, King Friday.
>
> King Friday: Oh, uh, did you do your best, Mr. Swann?
>
> Lynn Swann: I think we did. Don't you, Bob Dog?
>
> Bob Dog: Yeah, I guess so.
>
> King Friday: Well, then, you won. All you need to do is your best and you've won, in my book.

Considering the fact that Lynn Swann was a real-life professional football star when the episode show was taped, Bob Dog's disappointment at their loss is doubly painful. When King Friday hears that both of the players did their best, he comforts the losers, ministering to the needs of his people. Friday is also demonstrating the adult role that the *MRN* program models constantly: the adult comforts (or ministers to) those around him.

Rogers directly mentions theological topics infrequently. Only once during the twenty-five shows watched for this program does Rogers talk about God. When Rogers addresses religion, he does so sensitively. In episode 5, Rogers sings the lullaby titled "Good Night, God." The lyrics begin at 25:47 and are as follows:

Good night God, and thank you for this very lovely day.
Thank you too, for helping us at work, and at our play,
Thank you for our families, for each and every friend,
Forgive us, please, for anything, we've done, that might offend.
Keep us safe and faithful God, tell us what to do.
Good night, God,
And thank you God, for letting us love you.

The song is a simple statement of care. Rogers is careful to note that, "We have a song, in our house, not everybody sings this song, but we do—just before we go to sleep; called "Good Night God." Even if some of the viewers' families do not sing this particular lullaby, Rogers wants to let his viewers know that each person is loved and that he or she can love in return. Words like "thank you," "faithful," "forgive," "friend" and "letting" are important to the message of the song, as they make the listener think that someone is concerned about the viewer's welfare.

Years after singing *Good Night, God,* Rogers was interviewed by Amy Hollingsworth, who worked for eight years with the *700 Club,* which promoted Christian television. Hollingsworth had several meetings with

[13] Rogers and Head 163.

Rogers and explored the ways in which his Christian faith impacted his television work.[14] As a part of their final in-person interview, Hollingsworth asked Rogers, "If you had *one final broadcast*, *one final opportunity* to address your television neighbors, and you could tell them the single most important lesson of your life, what would you say?" (Emphasis added by Hollingsworth.)

Rogers responds:

> Well, I would want [those] who were listening somehow to know that they had unique value, that there isn't anybody in the whole world exactly like them and that there never has been and there never will be.
>
> And that they are loved by the Person who created them, in a unique way.
>
> If they could know that and really know it and have that behind their eyes, they could look with those eyes on their neighbor and realize, "My neighbor has unique value too; there's never been anybody in the whole world like my neighbor and there never will be." If they could value that person—if they could love that person—in ways that we know that the Eternal loves us, then I would be very grateful.[15]

Clearly, Rogers' goal of ministering to children and their families through the television waves was not diminished by his long tenure on the air. His language stands out in the interview: he uses words like "unique value," "love" and an emphasis on the care that people show each other—because they are loved by a "Person." Subtly, Rogers is maintaining his goal of ministering. He is still helping individuals know that they are acceptable and lovable as they are. Even though his commission came years before the interview, he still serves as a minister to his audience.

But what about the educational aspect of the MRN show? Although he was not officially a teacher, Rogers' programs constantly encourage children to learn. Following a visit from the singer Ella Jenkins, Rogers tells his television neighbor, "I like to learn things, don't you? And there's so much in this world we can learn, no matter how young or how old we are" (episode 1548, 8:11). More concrete evidence of Rogers' didactic purpose can be found in looking at how he planned a weeklong series of television episodes—for example, the "Bubbleland" opera. On Day 1 (episode 1471), Rogers brings an electric synthesizer to his living room and plays it. He demonstrates how the synthesizer could copy the sounds of other musical instruments. On Day 2, Rogers shows a video of people making machine-knit sweaters (episode 1472), and he visits Robert Trowe's workshop, where Trowe is repairing a knitting machine. On Day 3, Rogers takes his television neighbor on a visit to Brockett's Bakery, where he learns how to make a snack and a drink from bananas (episode 1473). Finally on Day 4, Rogers takes a field trip to a weather station, where he helps launch a weather balloon, looks at radar, and explores different ways of measuring the forces of nature (episode 1474). By the last episode (1475), it is time to perform the opera. Production of the opera includes synthesizer music, a sweater-based economy, a banana crate wall, and a windstorm.

A more graphic example of Rogers' didactic bent is the School at Someplace Else in the land of Make-Believe. The students are taught by Harriet Elizabeth Cow. Here's an example of the language that the school members use from episode 1481, when King Friday has Miss Paulificate telephone Harriet Cow to ask her to come to the castle. The dialogue starts at 16:36:

> Cow: Now then, what can I help you with, dear?"
>
> Paulificate: Oh, King Friday would like you to come over to the castle right away. He

[14] Hollingsworth xix, and back cover flyleaf.

[15] Hollingsworth 160-161.

has a wonderful idea… (Harriet Cow refuses to leave the school at first, Paulificate negotiates between King and Cow)

Paulificate: Well I could ask. Ah, Harriet, could I be the teacher's helper?

Cow: Well of course, dear! Come right over—you can teach about Telephones . . .

(in the school, Paulificate discusses telephone etiquette)

Daniel: So if somebody calls, and it's the wrong number, you say you're sorry?

Paulificate: That's right, Daniel.

Daniel: But why do you say you're sorry if it's not your fault?

Paulificate: Oh you know, I really don't know. Does anyone have an idea?

Tuesday: Maybe you're sorry for yourself because you had to answer the phone and you were playing!

Ana: Or maybe you are wishing that somebody special would call, and then it wasn't your friend, after all!

The teacher, Miss Cow, demonstrates her adult language by implying that she cannot leave the classroom because she is teaching and she does not have a "teacher's helper." Language that targets the education goal is the use of "why," "does anyone have an idea," and "that's right." Paulificate guides student awareness, helping them (and the viewer) become proficient in telephone etiquette.

Educational goals in the *MRN* program, although not as deliberately advertised as they are in other children's programs, are still evident. Rogers finds opportunities to make learning a part of daily life, something that viewers can absorb without having to consciously contemplate the effort of accepting the ideas presented.

A final facet of examination must come from examining the socially-aware information Rogers uses to address current events and emotional reactions to those events. While current events from the news are never specifically mentioned in the episodes viewed for this article, the earliest week of the *MRN* show that was viewed for this project wanders perilously close to the military conflict of the late 1960s. After that set of programs, Rogers' other episodes focus more on the feelings people might have, rather than the news that causes those feelings. This is not to say that Rogers completely ignored social events. For example, shortly after the assassination of Robert Kennedy in 1968, Rogers filmed the pilot for what would become the *Mister Rogers Talks to Parents* series. The original program was filmed and aired to help adults deal with the questions that children might have—following widespread television coverage of the assassination—"I plead for your protection and support of your child. There is just so much that children can take without it being overwhelming," Rogers states.[16] His reaction to this widely-publicized violence was to present parents and caregivers with some guidelines that could help explain and limit the graphic information that children were consuming. Later episodes of the parent-focused television series discuss child-care, superheroes, and other popular culture concepts. The goals of these special shows are to explain and prepare for the concerns or confusion children might have when faced with a real-life situation that is unfamiliar. While these shows incorporate the Make-Believe puppets, the goal is to reach parents and help them understand ways to help children, rather than to reach children directly. Rogers states:

[16] Galinsky 165.

> Helping children learn to separate fantasy from reality is a most important task of early childhood and one with which children need adult help. In my livingroom and in other places in our television neighborhood, real things happen and we show them and talk about them as realistically as we can. In the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, we can make up anything we like and pretend anything we like and feel safe about it because it is only pretend.[17]

In the *MRN* show, the "real thing" that happens in the black-and-white episodes (broadcast in 1968) is King Friday's martial law. Friday is upset that his scenery has been re-arranged. The King declares martial law in order to prevent Change. The neighborhood folk dress in helmets and place wire fencing around the castle. Betty Aberlin comes to visit Mister Rogers in his reality studio and they discuss the confusion in Make-Believe in episode 3, 8:23:

> Rogers: Have you been in touch with (King Friday?)
>
> Aberlin: No, not in a while.
>
> Rogers: Well, uh, he isn't the happiest Great-Uncle Friday that you've seen in a long time.
>
> Aberlin: Oh – what's wrong?'
>
> Rogers: Lady Elaine has been up to her tricks again, and she's moved the Eiffel Tower on the wrong side of the castle, and the tree has gone way from over here to the middle, and the clock is over there, and the fountain—well, it's just all mixed around.
>
> Aberlin: He must be really upset!
>
> Rogers: He's furious about it. And he has established border guards.
>
> Aberlin: In the Neighborhood of Make-Believe?
>
> Rogers: Edgar, poor thing—he has to walk, back and forth, and be sure that no one will come in.
>
> Aberlin: That sounds like a war!
>
> Rogers: It certainly does—but at least there isn't any shooting, yet.
>
> Aberlin: Well, do you think that I should take a make-believe gun or something?
>
> Rogers: Oh, I don't know that you'll need that. 'Course you could always use your finger, or, if you do that. (Makes a pretend gun.) But how about this? Would you like this cape?
>
> Aberlin: Oh, yes!
>
> Rogers: I just made it. Burlap bag and a safety pin.

[17] Rogers and Head 65.

Aberlin: That should keep me very safe, then.

Rogers: Sure.

Aberlin: Oh, I feel better already.

Rogers: I hope so. I hope you'll be brave and strong as you go off to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe.

Aberlin: I will, Mister Rogers. Good bye. (She marches off, singing "Be Brave, and Then Be Strong.")

Notice the charged language. "Border guards," "war," "shooting" and "gun" hint at the Vietnam conflict, which would have been discussed on other television programs of the time. Rogers gives Aberlin the cape to keep her feeling "safe." He tells her to "be brave and strong" on her way to the pretend conflict. By the end of the week, Daniel Striped Tiger launches a plan to send balloons with peaceful messages to the castle. Here is the dialogue from Episode 5, 21:39:

Edgar Cook: What is it? What is it? What are these things? What—oh, I must tell

King Friday, I must tell King Friday.

Friday: Fire the cannon! Fire the cannon! Fire the cannon—man your stations! Fire the cannon!

Negri: What is it, King Friday, Edgar?

Friday: Paratroopers!

Negri: Edgar–man the cannon—Edgar! Edgar!

Friday: Paratroopers!

Aberlin: No, no no—just read the bottoms of them before you start shooting!

Nergri: Read the bottom? Hold it–hold it Edgar! Hold it, King Friday!

Friday: What is your name, rank and serial number, Lady?

Aberlin: Oh, Great Uncle Friday, you know my name! It's Lady Aberlin! Just, just read the bottom of the signs, won't you?

Friday: Oh, of course.

Negri: Look at this, King Friday–

Friday: What is it?

Negri: These aren't paratroopers—they're messages of peace. Look at this! Tenderness!

Friday: Messages of peace?

Negri: Peaceful coexistence! Well, isn't that marvelous? They're peaceful messages, Sir.

Peaceful coexistence!

Friday: Stop all fighting. Stop all fighting.

Negri: Hold your fire—hold your fire.

Friday: Oh, my, this is such a surprise!

The language again suggests current events. "Paratroopers," "cannons" "messages of peace" and "peaceful coexistence"—what would a child notice? This is probably Rogers' answer to the blare of television news. To repeat the quote mentioned earlier, Rogers felt that "In the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, we can make up anything we like and pretend anything we like and feel safe about it because it is only pretend." This scheme of balloons and peaceful messages is certainly a sample of make-believe in action. As history has demonstrated, this is not the way the Vietnam conflict was resolved, but to a young viewer, this solution could make some sense. The danger is never too terrible to handle, (after all, the conflict was only over stopping the Changers!) and the resolution is simple, something that a child could understand and perform. A message of peace and tenderness might not solve a war, but it could make a child feel better because it would give him or her a sense of resolution—the feeling that somehow, the situation could be concluded happily.

This is Rogers' way of caring for the emotional needs of a child in response to frightening television. He demonstrates a situation where trouble could occur, then shows a method for coping with that struggle. It empowers viewers to take control of their feelings, even if the cannot completely control the events that have affected them. In a different program, Rogers becomes angry. The dialogue below opens in the middle of a phone call with deliveryman Mr. McFeeley, who could not come right over to Mister Rogers' place, in episode 1485, 4:01:

Rogers: Okay, nothing seems to be working out right today. All right, well, I'll see you a little later then. Thanks anyway. (He hangs up the phone and begins to sing:)

What do you do with the mad that you feel,
when you feel so mad you could bite?
When the whole wide world seems oh,
so wrong and nothing you do seems very right,
What do you do, do you punch a bag,
do you pound some clay or some dough?
Do you round up friends for a game of tag,
and see how fast you go? . . .

Rogers finds a giant tablet of paper and a box of crayons and draws vigorously. Rogers, through his song, suggests what to do with "the mad that you feel." Obviously, Rogers cannot control Mr. McFeeley or the other events that have added up to the sense behind "nothing seems to be working out right today." But Rogers reacts constructively: he wants viewers to work through their emotions in ways that are not dangerous to themselves or others. Besides demonstrating his own methods, Rogers explores the ways other people express their feelings. In his visit with the cellist Yo Yo Ma, Rogers asks (episode 1547, 16:17):

Rogers: Well when you play, I'm sure you have a lot of different feelings. And as you played as a child, did you ever play happy things, or sad things or angry things, just 'cause you wanted to?

Ma: Oh, sure. I mean, there would be times . . . if I was happy, I'd do something like this

> (plays a Bach dance) . . . One of my favorites was "The Swan" (he plays) . . . you could imagine the swan… and I loved to play
> That . . . This was obviously a very peaceful, tranquil mood.
>
> Rogers: Did you ever play when you were really angry?
>
> Ma: Sure. And there's one piece I know that I love to get into (he saws on the cello with temper.) It just goes on and on and on, and you're just digging in with all your strength, and . . . just got rid of a lot of frustrations.
>
> Rogers: That's how you feel, afterwards—relieved?
>
> Ma: Relieved. Absolutely relieved. And just, after having given all this burst of energy, it felt good.

Whether it happens in Make-Believe, to Rogers himself, or to a television neighbor on camera, Rogers demonstrates ways to cope. Rogers' theory respects these models for their healthy emotional release: "We . . . try to show models for coping with [anxiety] as well as models of trustworthy, caring, and available adults," he writes.[18] Through his language, and the lyrics of his songs, Rogers implements a system of emotional survival. He shows his viewers how to understand themselves, and from his position as the chief adult in the show, Rogers yet again fulfills the grown-up role of informing and comforting his audience in the mores of emotional responsibility.

The initial goal of this paper was to investigate the word usage of the *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* television program. As a result of this research, it is evident that both the language and the message of the *MRN* show were intended to make a positive impact. According to Rogers' pastoral commission, his job was to help "children and their families." But perhaps Rogers' influence reached further than that. As David Bianculli notes in "The Myth, the Man the Legend,"[19] " . . . *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* remains one of the first, best and safest programs through which preschoolers should be introduced to the medium of television." Bianculli reinforces this reasoning in a separate book: "Television is our most common language, our most popular pastime, our basic point of reference; it's also where most of our children are first exposed to allusion, satire, and other 'literary' concepts."[20] If television is truly the literacy medium of our modern society, then Bianculli is in tune with Rogers' *MRN* programming goals. Rogers wanted television to be a positive force in the lives of children. Using the *MRN* program to positively prepare children for other programs, as Bianculli suggests, is something of which Rogers would approve.

Has anything changed on the young people's television scene since Rogers was first exposed (and disgusted by) television? Evidence exists to say yes—as stated in a *Newsweek* article, written by David McGinn. His piece, "Guilt Free TV," includes a list of children's television programs and information about how television can be a helpful tool for parents to use in raising children. Although he admits that some parents have serious misgivings about children watching television, McGinn states, "Now that PBS, which invented the good-for-kids genre, has new competition from Nickelodeon and Disney, there are more quality choices for preschoolers than ever." While these shows are "stiff competition" to the *MRN* show, McGinn quotes Rogers as saying, "I'm just glad that more producers and purveyors of television have signed the pledge to protect childhood[.]" Notice how Rogers emphasizes that this new television programming "protect(s) childhood."

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[18] Rogers and Head 167.

[19] Collins and Kimmel, Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television and Fred Rogers 43.

[20] Bianculli 5.

This would indicate that Rogers believes that his original goal—to create and promote programming that nurtured childhood—was achieved.

This attitude towards wholesome childhood development is echoed by psychiatrists Dorothy and Jerome Singer, who discuss imagination and successful ways of helping children understand that they are loved and accepted: "There must be a key *person* in a child's life who inspires and sanctions play and accepts the child's inventions with respect and delight." [21] In their careful documentation of child's play, the Singers demonstrate that children must use their imaginations in order to grow—starting as young as infant "play" and interaction with caregivers: "Whatever babies may bring with them at birth will be molded and tempered by the behavior of those entrusted with their welfare . . . when children can play openly and freely, they become good learners, developing their cognitive skills through the stepping-stones of play."[22] Although the Singers' research was published in 1990, years after the start of the *MRN* program, it is plain that Rogers was following a similar philosophy. He allows children to use their imaginations in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe but Rogers also feeds the intellectual side by going on field trips and doing practical activities. Rogers and his program are something that parents can "trust with [a viewing child's] welfare," to paraphrase the Singers. As a role model for children, Rogers wanted to make sure that his show gave children a time to learn to trust and believe in something positive—a time when they could grow up straight and true inside.

To achieve this goal, Rogers notes, "I think play is an expression of our creativity; and creativity, I believe, is at the very root of our ability to learn, to cope, and to become whatever we may be."[23] Play, on the *MRN* show, while it could be demonstrated through physical actions and pictures, is also exemplified through the verbal interactions of the puppets, the actors, and the figure of Rogers himself. The *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* television program vocalizes methods of creativity, coping, and responsibility in order to help children gain life skills. Today, there are a number of children's television programs dedicated to developing those same skills, but they have been influenced no doubt, by the words of Mister Rogers.

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## REFERENCE CITATION:

**MLA:**

Danielson, Louisa. "The Gentle Tongue: How Language Affected the World of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* 2.1 (2015). Web and Print.

**APA:**

Danielson, L. (2015). The gentle tongue: How language affected the world of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy. 2*(1). http://journaldialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/L-Danielson.pdf