Q: "Lately I have heard many media figures talking about 'the suspension of disbelief.' But I recall learning that the literary device was the 'suspension of belief' (meaning that the reader should suspend his own beliefs to follow the story). Are the terms contradictory? And which is the correct quotation?"

A: California reader Benjamin Shatz is right that the phrase describes a literary device whose source was an essay by poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge argued that readers of poetry must suspend their disbelief (in the supernatural) to allow imagination to overcome reality so that "poetic faith" can take over.

In this context, suspending belief (in reality) is like suspending disbelief (in fantasy) so that the apparently contradictory statements are actually alike. And it's interesting that Coleridge's comment made in his 1819 essay, "Biographia Litteraria," is now being quoted again 90 years later.

Often when phrases are re-quoted after a long absence, they are used incorrectly. That has happened with the phrase "the ugly American" (quoted from the 1958 book of that name by William Lederer and Eugene Burdick that became a best-seller). Most of the many people who quote that phrase apparently haven't read the book, for they overwhelmingly use it to refer to boorish Americans who in their bumbling attempts at living among foreigners, discredit all Americans. In fact, in the book, the "ugly" American is a hero, who by his efforts wins the respect and love of the people in the foreign country where he lives.

Q: Syracuse attorney Milton J. Crystal also questions a quotation he has been seeing. He writes, "More frequently than ever, I find writers using the term 'ivory tower' when it seems to me that they should be using 'ivy-covered tower.' Am I wrong or do these two terms have different meanings?"

A: This time the quotation is right. The phrase "ivory-covered tower" has a long heritage, its origin being biblical. It was first stated in the Song of Solomon (7:4): "Your neck is like an ivory tower."

In its modern sense of an unworldly dreamer, the term first appeared in an early 19th-century French poem that contrasted the socially engaged author Victor Hugo with the less worldly poet Alfred de Vigny. In England, the twin towers of Oxford University's All Souls College, its only purely research tower, epitomized the idea of academic purity and separation from worldly concerns and desires.

But over the years, the term has suffered from pejoration because of the conflicting implications of the term "ivory-towered scientist." One is the image of a noble researcher, isolated from the temptations of self-interest and corruption. The other is the image of an academic researcher so deeply involved in abstract studies that he or she has lost touch with the outside practical world. The pejoration or amelioration of language is an ongoing process in all living languages.

One example of the process of amelioration is the word *nice*, which, in Chaucer's time, meant "silly." The word came from the Latin combination of *ne* ("not") and *scire* ("to know"), and in Middle English, people who were "unknowing" were both ignorant and foolish. Through the centuries, the meaning of *nice* has improved so that now it is flattering to be considered nice, that is "polite, considerate, and generally pleasant." Along with its increase in approval rating, *nice* is now applied to things ("a nice vacation") as well as to persons.

On the other hand, the word *silly* has taken the opposite route—downward—to reach its present pejorative meaning, "foolish." In Old English, *silly* (spelled *saelig*) meant "blessed" or "saintly," Jesus having been called "that harmless silly babe." The adjective *silly* also described holy men, who were both blessed and unworldly. But the "unworldly" characteristic of *silly* implied that silly persons could easily be duped, and Shakespeare called his rustic characters, who were weak and defenseless, "silly." From there, *silly* took on its current meaning.

Q: New York State Journal assistant editor Joan Fucillo writes, "My mother and her friends spend a certain amount of time discussing their various ailments. If one is under the weather, another might ask, 'Are you doctoring?' The meaning of that question is not the customary one, but, 'Are you seeing a doctor about this?'

A: Fucillo added, "I've been seen doctoring many a pot of jarred tomato sauce with extra garlic and basil, but this was a new one on me." (It was also new to me.) This new meaning of *doctoring* seems to represent an expansion of the term (beyond its previously narrower sense of "behaving like a doctor" by applying remedies) to an additional meaning, "going to consult a doctor."

The broadening and narrowing of words goes on in all living languages, along with pejoration and amelioration. The meaning of the word *doctor* has narrowed through the years. Any learned person was once called *doctor*; now that title indicates only persons who hold specific degrees. The adjective *gay* used to mean "merry, exuberant, or colorful"; now it is rarely used with those meanings, being narrowed to denote a sexual designation.

On the other hand, consider the broadening of the small word *hot*, which once described only temperature and now indicates any attractive object, idea, person, or animal. An adjective that once was its opposite—*cool*—has also broadened in meaning, to become a synonym of *hot* in some contexts. When *cool* can mean *hot*, nothing about language should surprise you. **TFL**

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