

Q. In a recent newspaper column, journalist David Brooks, whose language is usually impeccable, wrote: “The current situation is ambivalent.” Is his usage correct?

A. Almost, but not quite. The problem is that Mr. Brooks has used a subject (“situation”) that can refer only to persons, for only persons can have mixed feelings. *Ambiguous* situations can lead to *ambivalence* in a person who must deal with them. The adjective *ambiguous* indicates that some *thing* (not a person) has more than one meaning.

Readers have complained that the trouble with dictionaries is that you cannot find the word you want to look up unless you know how to spell it. The problem revealed here is that sometimes even after you have located the word in the dictionary, the dictionary may define the word without explaining its limitations.

For example, the adjective *suspect* can have a human or nonhuman object, but it cannot have a nonhuman subject. So when a local official recently said, “I am suspect of any group that permits placing sexual predators in someone’s proximity,” he chose the wrong word, for he should have said, “I am suspicious of” or “I suspect” (something).

Another impossible subject-object combination occurred in the presidential campaign when a McCain supporter said, “President Bush has snubbed the firm stand against torture taken by the man he favors as his successor.” Here, the problem is that the verb *snub* must have a cognitive object. One can snub persons, not things.

Is there a difference between an *amiable* gathering and an *amicable* gathering? Not a great deal, and you might select either of these adjectives as a synonym if your reference is to persons. But if you are referring to a person’s disposition, *amiable* would be a better choice. Besides being a friend, an “amiable” person describes one with a pleasant and affable personality. Both *amiable* and *amicable* apply only to persons, not things; but *amicable* is narrower in scope, meaning only “friendly.”

The local newspaper recently announced that traveling to Mexico dur-

ing the swine flu pandemic makes a person “more risky.” Not so. Only an act or a situation can be more or less “risky.” The traveler may be more *at risk* because conditions are “more risky.” Things are considered “risky”; persons are “at risk.” (Unless, of course, you mean “risky to other persons.”) Another journalist was in error when he wrote, “Teens are less risky today than they were in the past.” (Not “less risky,” but “less likely to take risks.”)

Two adjectives that are often misused are *credible* and *credulous*, both seen more often in the negative. Only persons can be *incredulous*. “Incredible occurrences may make a person incredulous.” Situations may be described as *incredible*, though that adjective is also used metaphorically to describe persons who are “incredible.” The adjectives also differ in their noun forms: “People suffer from *incredulity*, perhaps caused by the *incredibility* of certain occurrences.”

A newspaper headline announced, “Rising Costs Soar Prices,” accurately conveying the correct information but inaccurately using an intransitive verb instead of a transitive verb. The verb *soar* is intransitive, so it cannot take an object. (Prices can soar, but they cannot “soar” anything.) The verb *rise* is also an intransitive verb, the transitive form being *raise*. Another intransitive verb, *lie*, is being ousted by its transitive form *lay*. In today’s (still incorrect) usage, you can *lay down* as well as *lay something down*.

Unlike these errors, some language errors belong in “the wrong word department,” the mistakes people make extemporaneously during discussion or debate. During the long presidential campaign, one participant acknowledged that “It will take time to restore order and chaos ... in Iraq.” (Instead of the word *and* he meant to say *from*.) President George W. Bush promised, “I am mindful not only of preserving executive powers for myself but also for my

predecessors” (*successors*). And: “We cannot let terrorists and rogue nations hold this nation hostile” (*hostage*).

When a news reporter commented, “Since Dick Gephardt lost his bid for the White House, his singular mission has been to elect Democrats to the House,” he probably meant to say “single.” That adjective means “one,” but *singular* means “rare or deviating from the usual.” And, no doubt intending to compliment President Obama, another news reporter chose the wrong word when he said, “President Obama willfully kept the tone calm.” A better adjective would have been *deliberately*, for *willfully* implies obstinacy.

Errors in language like that are often one-time blunders, but Yogi Berra was famous for his malapropisms, a noun named for Mrs. Malaprop, a character in Richard Sheridan’s 1775 play “The Rivals,” who tried to impress others by using long words, often with ludicrous results. Among her blunders was her description of her daughter as “a progeny of learning,” and a gynecologist as a “groinologist.” Like Mrs. Malaprop, Yogi Berra is credited with a long list of blunders, including “If you can’t imitate him, don’t copy him,” and “The other team could make trouble for us if they win.” His malapropisms (both real and apocryphal) are so good they deserve a column to themselves.

Malapropisms can occur even in court decisions. Here is one:

Plaintiff requested that a physician employed by the Navy perform a vasectomy on him. Such request was refused on the ground that it was “unofficial Navy policy” not to perform vasectomies on Naval personnel. However, it was strongly encouraged that Plaintiff’s spouse undergo a tubal ligation. *Smith v. U.S.*, 599 F. Supp. 606, 607 (1984). **TFL**

Gertrude Block, lecturer emerita at the University of Florida College of Law, can be reached at block@law.ufl.edu or by snail-mail: Gertrude Block, Lecturer Emerita, Emerson Hall, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.