

Excerpts from The Historical Roots of Redundant Synonyms

On a flight home from London on Sunday, I started reading *The Stories of English*, by David Crystal. Published in 2004, it's a well-received, and well-rounded, study of the history of the English language. Perhaps not an obvious choice for airplane reading, but perfect for me, since it marries, in the opening chapters, my interests in language and in early medieval Britain.

I took the opportunity to read what Crystal has to say about "doublets," which I also refer to as redundant synonyms. (I'd previously read David Mellinkoff's *Language of the Law* on this subject.) In panel 7.4, Crystal notes how during the thirteenth century French replaced Latin as the primary language of legal expression and how during the fifteenth century law French was gradually replaced by law English.

The problem was, how can tradition be respected yet precision maintained when there are three languages competing for attention? What words should be chosen when Latin, French, and English each provide a copious supply of relevant items? How does one choose between synonyms, or—even more difficult—between two words which seem to be synonymous, but which might just have enough differential meaning to allow someone one day to make an argument based on the difference?

The solution in many cases, was, don't choose; use both. In Middle English we see the rise of the legal lexical doublets which would become one of the stylistic hallmarks of that profession. Old English *goods* and Old French *chattels* resulted in Middle English legalese *goods and chattels*. The words were often paired to cover distinct nuances, thereby avoiding ambiguity; but sometimes the pairing seems to be no more than a more emphatic expressing of a single meaning; and sometimes it seems to be just a stylistic habit, perhaps fostered by its undoubted rhythmical appeal in oral performance. But whatever the reason, it became a major feature of legal style which continues to the present day.

Crystal provides examples of doublets, triplets, and even quadruplets. He notes that it wasn't long before the habit of doubling became extended to pairs of words regardless of their language of origin. (*Examples omitted because they are in your exercises.*)

Well, we no longer have to worry about a readership versed in Latin and Old French. On the other hand, English is now in flux in a different way, that it has become the lingua franca for business the world over.

Of course, one issue Crystal refers to remains relevant: sometimes it's advisable to use two words because the two words don't constitute synonyms but instead have overlapping meanings. That's the only legitimate use for doublets or triplets.

Glenn P. Gipson



Redundant Synonyms



A. Complete these common redundant synonyms (doublets and triplets) using the words in the box.

abet above attention battery clear conditions dangerous
delivered entering form hold means order
payable proper sealed testament void

Try your hand at these doublets ...

aid and

terms and

armed and

null and

fit and

ways and

have and

signed and

law and

free and

due and

assault and

over and

breaking and

will and

care and

... and triplets.

way,
shape, or

signed,
sealed, and

B. Now use some of the above expressions to complete the following sentences.
Good luck!!

1. If you spot any of these criminals that are wanted by the police, do not approach them; they should be considered _____.
2. Do you take this person to be your lawfully wedded husband/wife, to _____ from this day forward, for better or for worse...?
3. According to her last _____, your children are to receive a large amount of money in order to spend their year abroad travelling the world.
4. All other _____ of the original warranty apply.
5. We have a government that is determined to uphold _____ despite the actionable and barbarous attacks of the yellow vests.

6. Attempting to sell your products with our logo will render this contract _____.
7. Any expenses _____ that which is already budgeted for this project must be approved ahead of time by upper management.
8. The plan of action for all projects must identify the _____ of accomplishing all of the individual tasks.
9. In no _____ will I permit you to go on vacation with your friends if your grades are not acceptable (said the mother to her daughter).
10. All individuals who perform key functions in this laboratory must be _____ for their designated post; all replacement personnel must be approved in advance by management.
11. Pledged contributions for the charities that this company supports are _____ at the beginning of April each year.
12. The _____ that everyone gave to the Covid protocols is what has kept us all healthy and able to keep this company running smoothly during the crisis.
13. Anti-immigration policies _____ traffickers.
14. The making of the final payment on our mortgage has given us _____ ownership or our home.
15. The documents must be _____ by a certified French attorney, notary, or certified translator in order to begin your procedure for double nationality.

C. Now answer some questions from the article *Excerpts from the Historical Roots of Redundant Synonyms*.

1. What is another name for redundant synonyms? (one word)
2. List the three legal languages of the English world in the order that they appeared historically.
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
3. What is one of the stylistic characteristics of the legal profession? (three words)
4. The Old English word *goods* is synonymous with what Old French word? (one word)
5. English has become the _____ for business all over the world. (two words)

 Glenn P. Gipson 