

## 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.



---

8. The plan of action for all projects must identify the \_\_\_\_\_ of accomplishing all of the individual tasks.

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.

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.

14. The making of the final payment on our mortgage has given us \_\_\_\_\_ ownership of 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.

1. What is another name for redundant synonyms? (one word)

1. 2. 3.

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 ❧