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I don't know when you last went punting on the Avon River, but whenever it was, I'd be surprised if you spent much time wondering about the name the *Avon River*.

*Avon* is a Celtic word meaning 'river', going back to the days before the forerunner of English was spoken in England; you can see the Welsh cognate in *Afon Dyfrdwy* 'the river Dee'. The *Avon River* is thus something of a tautology, historically speaking. It means 'the river river'.

This is certainly not the only example where we have a loan word and an English word which means the same, side by side. Consider *Lake Rotoiti*. *Rotoiti* means 'small lake' so *Lake Rotoiti* means 'lake small lake'. *Mount Maunganui* is similar: *Maunganui* means 'big mountain' so *Mount Maunganui* means 'mountain big mountain'.

The phenomenon is so common that Wikipedia has pages of examples, including the *Hatchie River* in the southern US, *Yallock Creek* in Victoria, *Laguna Lake* in California or the Philippines, *Lake Michigan* ('big lake lake'), *Knockhill* in the Scottish lowlands,



# Doubly unnecessary

## Language Matters

*Penhill* in Yorkshire or Somerset, *Kodiak Island* in Alaska, the *La Brea Tar Pits* ('the the tar tar pits') in California, and so on.

We have other ways of creating tautological names. For those who remember the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks between the US and the USSR in the 1970s, the label *SALT talks* will also be familiar, although that really means 'Strategic Arms Limitation Talks talks'.

On a similar pattern think of *ATM machine*, *Covid virus*, *GPS system*, *PIN number* and *RAT test*.

More overt examples include a *free gift* (aren't gifts free by definition?) an *oak tree* (isn't every oak a tree?), to *join together* (if you join things, aren't they automatically together?), to *enter into* (doesn't enter imply into?), an *unconfirmed rumour* (if it's confirmed, it is surely no longer just a rumour?) where the duplication is not hidden by another

language or the use of a single letter abbreviation.

This material is not really a surprise, I suppose. To quote Yogi Berra, "It's déjà vu all over again".

Double negatives, like *He didn't do nothing*, and double comparatives, like *It's a more bigger question*, have been argued to be tautological, but that is a matter of perspective: for speakers who use these constructions the repetition may be obligatory, and when it is obligatory it makes more sense to talk about redundancy than tautology.

Various people have calculated that language is approximately 50% redundant. This is a useful feature, because it means that we can understand spoken language against background noise, understand a written text that includes spelling mistakes, and cope with language errors or just confused grammar when we meet it. You probably understand this without vowels, but the vowels make it easier to process.

The difference in speech between *why choose* and *white shoes* is signalled by minute differences in the [t] sound, which allows us to hear where words begin and end. In *I washed the car yesterday* the *yesterday* does away with the need for *-ed* on *washed*, but the suffix helps us keep the information straight. Saying things twice is not necessarily bad, but too much of it can be a problem.

As a postscript, note that while it may be the *Avon River* in Christchurch, in Stratford it is the *River Avon*. The British usage is conservative; American usage is like the New Zealand usage.

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## THE IRISH TIMES

### A new wave of infections

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

Anecdotal evidence that Covid-19 is once again spreading widely in the community is confirmed by clear increases in all the key indicators. The proportion of positive PCR tests has increased from 12.5% to 19% over the past fortnight. The number of people in hospital with Covid has risen from 167 at the end of May to 289 last Wednesday, while the numbers in ICU have increased from 18 to 27 in the same period.

The latest wave is not unexpected; specialists have warned that infection rates will ebb and flow, reflecting shifting immunity levels, social mixing trends and the spread of new variants. Each of those factors are almost certainly at play in

## Viewpoint

Ireland. Thanks to mass vaccination and infection-acquired immunity, the current wave should be manageable for the most part. It would take a serious shift in the behaviour of the disease, such as the emergence of a vaccine-resistant or more virulent strain, to reopen discussion about public health restrictions.

But the rise in infections is an important reminder that Covid remains a significant threat and will be for quite some time.

And it is essential that its spread be contained, because while the disease will be little more than an inconvenience for many, for others – including those with compromised immune systems – testing positive remains a frightening prospect.