

Reflections:

Authority is not part of scientific name

Luiz Ricardo L. Simone

Museu de Zoologia da Universidade de São Paulo

lrsimone@usp.br; lrlsimone@gmail.com

OrcID: 0000-0002-1397-9823

Abstract

This paper is based on the philosophy that every scientist has a responsibility to save their colleagues' time. When a taxonomist describes a taxon, the focus should be on the taxon itself, rather than on the authority behind its name. Criticisms regarding the use of taxonomic authority names are presented, arguing that they should be reserved for studies specifically focused on taxonomy, as they are not part of the scientific name and its use is optional. The paper also discusses the limitations of using authority names, such as the recommendation to limit them to a maximum of three authors and to avoid long or hyphenated names. Various arguments and discussions are provided to support these claims.

Keywords: Taxonomy, Nomenclature, Authority, Artistic name, Scientific practice.

Introduction

“The name of the author does not form part of the name of a taxon and its citation is optional, although customary and often advisable.” This is Article 51.1 of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN). This same Article has the Recommendation 51A: “Citation of author and date – The original author and date of a name should be cited at least once in each work dealing with the taxon denoted by that name. This is especially important in distinguishing between homonyms and in identifying species-group names which are not in their original combinations. If the surname and forename(s) of an author are liable to be confused, these should be distinguished as in scientific bibliographies.”

This raises important points for consideration. Citing authorities is not obligatory; according to the ICZN, it is optional. However, the Code does suggest that it is advisable or recommended. The inclusion of authorship in taxonomic names has become optional because it holds significant

value primarily in studies focused on taxonomy. In other areas of biology, the taxon name itself is what truly matters. Taxonomy's primary role is to organize the biological world, enabling other biologists to conduct their research. It is well-known how challenging it can be to study groups with unclear taxonomic classifications.

One of the reasons for using authorship in taxonomic names is the existence of homonyms. However, the ICZN addresses this issue in detail in Chapter 12, which is entirely dedicated to homonymy. Articles 52 through 60 outline how to avoid homonyms in zoology and the procedures for eliminating them when they occur. These guidelines aim to ensure that every scientific name in taxonomic zoology is unique and universally refers to a single biological entity. From this perspective, citing the authority is unnecessary, as the name must be exclusive by definition. Any inadvertent homonym must be corrected as soon as possible, regardless of authorship attribution.

Once again, we return to taxonomic studies, where homonyms are identified and corrected using the guidelines outlined in Chapter 12 of the ICZN. In these studies, citing the authority is important to ensure that the correct homonym is being referenced. However, in other fields of study, where the ICZN guarantees the absence of homonymy, citing authorities appears unnecessary as the name is obligatorily unique.

Additionally, in scientific writing, the use of authors' names should be concise and direct, employed only when absolutely necessary and in the simplest form possible. In this regard, citing both the surname and forename(s) makes sense if multiple authors share the same surname within the same paper and time period. You can distinguish authors with the same surname by using forename abbreviations, but this is only necessary if they are contemporaneous. For example, if one author published in 1900 and another in 2000, there is no need to distinguish between them in the text. Interested readers can easily verify this in the references.

The authority of a taxon, which should merely serve as informative data, has actually gained an inflated status, surpassing its intended scientific function. The perceived obligation to link it with the scientific name has diverted considerable attention away from the true focus of biological study—the biological community. A substantial amount of time and effort is spent meeting these requirements, rather than concentrating on biological phenomena, which can now be easily verified online or by consulting the paper's references.

This shift can be clearly observed by examining the evolution of authority citation over recent decades. A notable example in mollusks is the use of "Sowerby." A few decades ago, species were simply attributed to "Sowerby" followed by a date. Over time, however, "Sowerby" became "Sowerby I," "Sowerby II," and "Sowerby III," as these were three successive relatives who described mollusks throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries (despite they never had those ordinals in their names). Eventually, the citation evolved to "G.B. Sowerby I," "II," and "III" to distinguish them from other Sowerby's who also contributed to biological publications. When only "Sowerby" was used, those rare individuals interested in identifying the specific author of a taxon would have to visit a library and consult resources like the Zoological Records. Despite this, science progressed regardless. In present times, is the time spent ensuring that the exact individual responsible for introducing a taxon is identified by their full surname and initials really worth it? Or has this focus on evaluating authors become an unnecessary obsession, beyond the mere purpose of conveying information?

As said above, the focus of the zoologist should be on biological phenomena. All attention and information should be directed toward these matters. Authority names and citations should be transparent, secondary, and subliminal, so as not to distract the reader from the subject at hand. However, this is not what is commonly observed. Authority names are increasingly emphasized, sometimes appearing as the first word(s) in a paragraph (e.g., "Smith (1850) said..."), rather than at the end in parentheses. In some cases, they are cited in full or with initials, even including excerpts from the title or journal (redundant information already present in the references). This raises the question: is this really informative? Or does this practice reflect a desire for self-promotion?

Returning to the necessity of authority citation for taxa, it is interesting to note that Article 51.1 of the ICZN advises this practice. However, most scientific journals do not allow these citations to be included in the References section. While citing authorities in the text may serve to boost a taxonomist's ego, their exclusion from the References section means that taxonomy papers are not counted in citation indexes. This has contributed to the low impact of taxonomic journals and the generally lower evaluation of taxonomists as scientists. There seems to be a contradiction in this equation, which may explain why taxonomic papers are rarely published in high-impact journals—except, of course, in fields like paleontology (e.g., dinosaurs). The hegemony of other biological areas is, then, assured.

One important consideration for researchers is to make the work of their colleagues easier. First and foremost, avoid using multiple authorities for a taxon. Several reputable journals have a rule limiting the number of authors for a new taxon to three. Three is a reasonable maximum for any paper (or section of a paper) describing a new taxon. Taxonomy is not a field that supports over-authored papers or honorary authorships, as, by tradition, "et al." is not used for authority citations. Additionally, authors should aim to provide a uniform, simple, and preferably short surname across all their papers. It is cumbersome, for example, to repeatedly cite "Bory de Saint-Vincent, 1827" when referring to *Chione pubera*. I strongly suggest that authors with hyphenated or compound surnames choose one of the components and avoid long, complex names. I personally made this change—my full name is Luiz Ricardo Lopes de Simone, but traditionally it would be written as Lopes-de-Simone. Recognizing the unnecessary effort involved in using such a long name, I standardized my surname to "Simone" since my early papers from the 1980s. Why can't everyone do the same? It's akin to an artist adopting an artistic or stage name, with the added advantage that references can still be checked if needed.

In summary, every scientist has a responsibility to both science and their colleagues: to save time by avoiding the use of lengthy, compound names and to prevent diverting attention from the true focus of the subject—the scientific phenomenon itself—rather than the authors working on it.

More in Malacopedia in http://www.moluscos.org/malacopedia_previous.html

Malacopedia is both, is a popular scientific journal, and a book, published in topics, in which more than 45 years of Malacology are published.