

Eponyms as and of fish names

Fish and other organisms in general can be named after persons (but see Box 1). Such organism names are called ‘eponyms’ (but see Box 2). Eponyms are common as scientific names of organisms.

The etymology of each original scientific name is recorded in FishBase from the original publication for new genera and species. However, the etymology was not retrospectively recorded for names extracted from FAO catalogues and large ichthyofaunas, where this information is often absent. Rather, we started a collaboration, in 2022, with the EtyFish project of Christopher Scharpf (etyfish.org) which, as a January 2025, remains to be completed. For the common names, the etymology was recorded opportunistically. In both cases, there was no particular flag indicating if names were eponyms but sometimes in remarks.

The eponym documentation received an enormous boost through the monumental ‘*Eponym Dictionary of Fishes*’ by Beolens *et al.* (2023), reviewed in Pauly (2024), from which this account is adapted. This book, also available as a PDF, is part of an excellent series that covers other groups of vertebrates.

The ‘*Eponym Dictionary of Fishes*’ provides <6,500 accounts for the persons whose name is part of a name of a fish formally described before this book was completed (except for >100 that are redirections, see below). Fish name parts may be genus and subgenus nouns, specific and infraspecific epithets, and common names. Accounts contain a short biographical sketch of which the first line gives the person full name, nationality, years of birth and death, and main occupation. This basic information is presented on FishBase webpages with a link to the book publisher’s page (the book content is not online as of Jan. 2025).

Box 1. Not always person’s names.

Formally, eponyms are based on person’s names only.

However, the book took also into account other names, e.g., of a place or a ship, that were themselves named after a person: “So, we have included any names where we think confusion might arise, but we do not promise to have been completely comprehensive in that respect” Beolens *et al.* (2023, p. vii).

Also, Beolens *et al.* (2023, p. vii-xii) wrote: “The final list includes a few where the same species has been named after two people. The names include some which sound like people’s names but in fact are not, plus indigenous peoples, fictional characters, Biblical references and references to mythology. Additionally, there are entries for a very few names of people whom we have been unable to identify!”

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In the book, the full sketches contain more information, e.g., the reason why a fish species or genus was named after the person. Obviously, these bibliographies are longer for some persons than others, given the character of their contribution to ichthyology. Although we integrated them in the FishBase database, the full sketches will remain available from the book only for the time being.

This book will be invaluable to anyone studying the history of ichthyology. Thus, the FishBase team will strive to update at least the minimum amount of information on the person behind eponyms that will appear since this book was published.

This book will also be useful for the various discussions now developing on the appropriateness of eponymous names in biology, which occur at two levels: one concerning standardized common names; the other Linnaean scientific names. Thus, concerning the former, the authors welcome the initiative whose motto is “Bird Names for Birds”, which will lead to eponymous common names of birds, in the U.S., being given new common names reflecting traits to these birds (e.g., coloration or habits), which will replace the name of various slaveholders, like ‘Lewis’ woodpecker’, or genocidal killers of Native Americans, like ‘Scott’s Oriole.’ A similar fate occurred to the journal *Copeia*, now called *Ichthyology & Herpetology*, given that E.D. Cope held racist and misogynistic views which were extreme even for his time and social milieu.

Replacing eponyms that are part of Linnaean scientific names is an altogether different challenge (see Ohl 2018). This is true even if one is disgusted by the name of the beetle *Anophthalmus hitleri*, which, as a blind, cave-dwelling animal, was not responsible for the name that that was inflicted on it. Some scientists argue that this name should be maintained to ensure nomenclatural stability, along with other eponyms celebrating other reprehensible characters, or names which are derogatory. Perhaps a better reason than nomenclatural stability is that, by maintaining horrible Linnaean eponyms, we are reminded that systemic racism, sexism, war mongering, and other ills that we still cannot seem to be able overcome can and do infect science, and have frequently done so. This book, and the other in its series, will contribute to reminding us, via their eponyms, that we ought to deal with these issues now, as they affect real people, not blind beetles in 1937 in a Slovenian cave.

Box 2. As fish names or of fish names?

The titles of this chapter and of this box are meant to point at the dual nature of eponyms. The suffix onym indicates that it should be a name (like synonym, antonym, homonym, etc.). But a name of what?

There is no agreement about the ontological nature of what an eponym designates in various online English dictionaries:

Cambridge (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/eponym>):

- “The name of an object or activity that is also the name of the person who first produced the object or did the activity”

Merriam-Webster (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/eponym>):

- 1: “The person for whom something (as a disease) is or is believed to be named”
- 2: “A name (as of a drug or a disease) based on or derived from the name of a person, Oxford and Cambridge”

Oxford (https://www.oed.com/dictionary/eponym_n?tab=meaning_and_use#5358773):

- 1.a. “One who gives, or is supposed to give, his or her name to a people, place, or institution”

In the Cambridge’s definition and the Merriam-Webster’s second definition, ‘eponym’ refers to the item that is named. At the opposite, in the Merriam-Webster’s first definition and Oxford’s one, ‘eponym’ refers to the person whose name is used for the item.

Box 2. As fish names or of fish names? (cont'd)

See the table for all meanings at <https://www.oed.com/search/advanced/Meanings?q=eponym>, which includes one meaning equivalent to ‘synonym’

As noticed in the Wikipedia article about this word, in the current language, “The term eponym functions in multiple related ways, all based on an explicit relationship between two named things” (https://www.oed.com/dictionary/eponym_n?tab=meaning_and_use#5358773):

- Eponym may refer to a person [...] for which someone or something is, or is believed to be, named.
- Eponym may also refer to someone or something named after, or believed to be named after, a person [...].”

In other words, “A person, place, or thing named after a particular person share an eponymous relationship”.

In French dictionaries, only the definition referring to a person is considered as valid. The other is recognized as a wrong usage of the word (in French: “*abus de langage*”). Other languages were not investigated.

As most of the data are extracted from the book by Beolens *et al.* (2023), FishBase follows the meaning that they indicate: “Vernacular names of animals often contain a person’s name (such names are called ‘eponyms’)” (p. vi), which is reinforced when applied to scientific names in following paragraphs.

Further remark: Saying that “an eponym is the person for whom something is named” is an ontological shift because an eponym should be a name, not a person (suffix -onym!). In our common languages, we often use this shortcut to simplify the discussions. However, in more scientific communication, one must differentiate concepts/items and names of concepts/items, as Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) demonstrated with his “signifiant” (the name) and the “signifié” (the concept). Something we well know in taxonomy where taxa and their names must be treated separately, which is often forgotten (Bourgoin et al, 2021). When the following locution is used “A is a synonym of B”, it may mean two different things, (i) that the name A is a synonym of the name B (e.g., 2 different combinations of the same original name), where the word ‘synonym’ is correctly used, or (ii) that the species named A is the same as the species named B (with A and B two names derived from two different original names), where ‘synonym’ should be replaced by another word or locution (like homotypic and heterotypic).

References

- Bourgoin T, Bailly N, Zaragueta R, Vignes-Lebbe R (2021). Complete formalization of taxa with their names, contents and descriptions improves taxonomic databases and access to the taxonomic knowledge they support. *Systematics and Biodiversity* 19(7): 738-746.
- Saussure F de (1916) *Cours de linguistique générale*. Edit. 1995. Payot, Paris, 520 p.

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Preparation of the dataset

The PDF was converted in MS-Word, and the text structured using the available regular expressions (wildcards in MS-Word terminology). After transfer in the MS-Access database, the dataset was structured in two tables, 1) EPONYMS, that contains the eponyms, both common and scientific names flagged as such respectively, and 2) EPONYMPERSONS, that contains the full sketches of the persons whose name is used in eponyms and the first sentences manually adapted when need be, and related information. One sketch may be linked to several eponyms, and the former table is linked to the latter via the person's name (via eponymPerson_FK).

The scientific names of both genera and species were matched in the tables GENERA and SYNONYMS (a few missing names were added to FishBase during that process), and both were assigned their respective foreign key of the original names in these tables.

The same process was applied for common names and the table COMNAMES.

Tables and fields

Name of the tables: EPONYMS (linked to the tables GENERA, SYNONYMS and COMNAMES) and EPONYMPERSONS

EPONYMS

Fields:

eponymPerson_FK: foreign key to EPONYMPERSONS.

isSciNameEponym (Yes/No): if the eponym is a scientific name.

isComNameEponym (Yes/No): if the eponym is a common name.

gen_FK: foreign key to GENERA.

spe_FK: foreign key to SPECIES.

syn_FK: foreign key to SYNONYMS.

ref_FK: foreign key to REFRENS.

bib_FK: foreign key to BIBLIO.

sciName: the eponymous scientific name.

comName: the eponymous common name.

taxRank: the taxonomic rank of the taxon designated by the eponym.

EPONYMPERSONS (contains 6,455 unique person sketches and 4 duplicates)

Fields:

eponymPerson_ID: the unique ID of the person.

eponymPerson: Name of the person (but see the definition of nameType), upon which generic noun, the specific epithet, and/or the common name was based. Usually, the name is only the last name or the first name, but it includes initials or the last name respectively to disambiguate person name homonyms.

Examples:

‘Abadie’ is the last name of Captain George Howard Fanshawe Abadie, that was used in *Marcusenius abadii* Boulenger, 1901;

‘Abbott, W’, for Dr Walter Abbott, of which the last name was used for the genus *Citharichthys abbotti* Dawson, 1969, and ‘Abbott, WL’, last name was used for the species *Notacanthus abbotti* Fowler, 1934

‘Albert (King)’, for King Albert I, first name was used in *Synodontis alberti* Schilthuis, 1891, and ‘Albert (Parr)’ for Dr Albert Eide Parr, first name used in *Hydrolagus alberti* Bigelow & Schroeder, 1951.

mainEponymPerson: A number of entries in the book contain redirections to the account with the full sketch when alternative person names are used, e.g., different spelling of the name, with or without particle of nobility, the last or the first name, maiden and married last names, etc. These redirections must be included when querying the tables.

Example:

‘Petru Banarescu’, full name used for *Mesonoemacheilus petrubanarescui* Menon, 1984 is only redirected to the entry ‘Bănărescu’ where the full sketch is given.

nameType: beside direct person names (Box 2), there are indirect eponyms where the name is not directly taken from the person, e.g., from a boat name, a toponym, etc. that were named after the person (and thus are the true eponym). Choices: eponym, ship, toponym, other, TBK = to be checked.

Example:

‘Galathea’ is a name of a ship itself derived from the name Greek goddess of calm seas, one of the fifty Nereides (also spelled Galatea).

personSketch: the full textual sketch as in the book.

briefSketch: abridged sketch to the first sentence, or to the 255 first characters, whichever is the shortest. If the sketch is longer than 255 characters, it is ended by “[...]”, so only 249 characters are displayed. In some cases, this field was manually adapted when the first sentence was too short, or too long.

firstPage (numeric): the first page of the account.

pageRange (text); page range when the account is spread on more than one page. Often in one page only. These two fields on pages were used to create the BIBLIO records to be appended.

Remarks: internal remarks not shown on the web.

isDupl (Yes/No): if the sketch of is a duplicate.

GENERA, SYNONYMS and COMNAMES

Fields:

eponymPerson_FK: foreign key to EPONYMPERSONS.

Web

On the web, you can see the eponymic information by clicking on the Eponymy link in the ‘Info by Topic’ section of the ‘Search’ page, and in the name / classification section in the ‘Species Summary’ page.

References

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