



Policing the scientific lexicon: The new colonialism?

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Several recent authors have called for the revision of the common and scientific names associated with taxa, as well as scientific terms, that may be construed as offensive (e.g., Hammer & Thiele, 2021; Cheng *et al.*, 2023) or inappropriate (e.g., Gillman & Wright, 2020; Guedes *et al.*, 2023). These proposals have been met with resistance, for example by Palma & Heath (2021—indigenous names), Mosyakin (2022—botany), Slabin (2023—philosophy of science) and all 26 commissioners of the International Commission for Zoological Nomenclature (Ceríaco *et al.*, 2023).

Here, writing from the perspective of a scientist who has spent most of his career working in Sri Lanka, a biodiverse developing country, I contend that undoing the perceived harm that inappropriate names and terms can cause people who belong to oppressed communities in the developed world (the West) may harm the greater part of the global scientific community whose native language is not English.

Cheng *et al.* (2023) seek to redress social problems in the English-speaking world (henceforth, the Anglosphere) and especially North America, by imposing terminological and nomenclatural reforms also on the rest of the world. These reforms would carry the unintended consequence of compelling taxonomists in biodiverse countries—especially developing countries—to direct their attention away from the enormous task of describing Earth’s vanishing biodiversity in order to deal with the challenge of revising biological nomenclature and terminology to address issues that have little meaning outside the Anglosphere—particularly the US context. I contend that the US would do better to *solve* its social and political problems rather than renaming them, and especially, rather than exporting them.

Inclusive Terminology

Cheng *et al.* (2023) called for reforms in scientific terminology to make the disciplines of ecology and evolutionary biology more inclusive for marginalized communities. Arguing that much of Western science is rooted in colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy, which power structures continue to permeate contemporary scientific culture, they called for terminological revisions that would redress the ongoing marginalization of Black, Indigenous, and people of color; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, and asexual communities; and disabled communities, among others.

One of their authors trained in the USA recalled: ‘how tired I was as an undergrad hearing how invasive species from other countries decimate pristine US ecosystems. It reminds me of when people tell me or other people of color to “go back to where we came from”’. They decried ‘exclusionary terms that describe species, such as ‘invasive’ and ‘alien’’. Also deemed worthy of censure was ‘citizen science’ (because ‘citizen’ can frame science in terms of national belonging).

Alien invasive. As Cheng *et al.* (2023) acknowledge, English is the dominant language in scientific work. While native speakers of English are privileged in understanding the subtleties of the language, non-native speakers would struggle to appreciate why a species that is invasive and alien can no longer be called an invasive alien species and must find itself an euphemism.

The word *alien* has a long history of meaning ‘foreign’ or belonging to or originating in another place. However, stemming presumably from the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, the application of this term to foreign nationals by the US Government, especially in the combination *illegal alien*, has led to it being perceived as pejorative in North America. Elsewhere, *alien* and its derivatives, such as *alienation*, continue to be used (though not in reference to people) without causing offence. It is worth remembering that while *native*, an antonym of *alien*, is now widely and innocuously used in conservation biology, it was during the colonial era widely applied as a pejorative to non-white people by British colonists. That meaning now persists only in humor, as in “The natives are friendly” or “Going native”, without protest in former colonies. Meanwhile, *Caucasian* (racial code for white-skinned), another misnomer beloved of the US government, shows little sign of disappearing (40,000 hits on Google Scholar in 2022). The world may have learned to move on, but has the US?

Cheng *et al.*’s (2023) objection to *invasive* is founded on an even weaker premise: it is problematic for the author not because the word itself has pejorative associations but because it evokes negative sentiments. But this word occurs not just in ecology but also in medicine, as in ‘invasive carcinoma’ (200,000 hits on Google Scholar) and ‘invasive [surgical] procedure’ (292,000 hits). If it is as hurtful as Cheng *et al.* (2023) claim, should it be expunged in medicine too? Further, are these negative sentiments not evoked when these authors encounter derivations such as *invasion* and

invader? It is, after all, impossible to read a newspaper nowadays without encountering them.

In any event, the online translation services that non-native speakers of English rely on will, given that ‘invasive alien species’ yields 52,000 hits on Google Scholar, long continue to translate these terms into English literally, notwithstanding the euphemisms Cheng *et al.* (2023) propose to replace them with.

Sneaky. Cheng *et al.* (2023) argue that the term ‘sneaky mating strategy’ is liable to ‘normalize problematic male sexual behavior’. Behaviors in animals are often and usefully denoted, at least in shorthand, by terms originally applied to humans: e.g., cannibal (Fouilloux, 2019), groom (Freymann, 2023), and homosexual (Bagemihl, 1999). The term ‘sneaky mating’, frequently encountered in the ethological literature, is little different. The criticism that it normalizes sneaky (i.e., sly or furtive) sexual behavior invokes the Naturalistic Fallacy—the fact that a behavior occurs in nature does not make it good or right. In grass mites of the genus *Pediculopsis*, for example, ‘the young become sexually mature and mate before they are born, ensuring brother-sister mating’ (Berry, 1977)—but does this normalize incest in humans? Likewise, coercive mating (to which the shorthand ‘rape’ has been widely applied in ethology) is common in animals such as scorpionflies (Soszyńska-Maj *et al.*, 2022), but this does not normalize coercive mating in humans.

Citizen science. Cooper *et al.* (2021) argue that because its participants are overwhelmingly white adults, above median income, with a college degree, citizen science is typically not truly an egalitarian variant of science, open and available to all members of society, particularly those underrepresented in the scientific enterprise. They acknowledge, however, that the problem with this term is largely American, where ‘many people contest the term because they perceive it to exclude, or even convey hostility toward, those without citizenship status within a given nation’.

While the perceptions of Cooper *et al.* (2021) may indeed apply to America, *citizen science* is a term now widely and innocuously established worldwide (~20 million Google hits). The term is used in almost 1000 Clarivate-indexed papers—in the title in 25 of them—in which at least one author is based in India and, hence, unlikely to be white. Additionally, citizen-science platforms such as iNaturalist connect not just ‘white adults’ but people of all ages and colors across the world: 200,000 active users and more than 140 million observations (www.inaturalist.org/stats). To those of us non-Americans who consider ourselves citizen scientists, the word *citizen* denotes lay, non-specialist status, not our state of naturalization or nativity in the United States.

The names of species. Cheng *et al.* (2023) recommend that scientific terminology be reconsidered in the light of the etymologies of terms: whether their origins celebrate dominant narratives or oppressive norms, commemorate violence, or perpetuate prejudicial stereotypes. They urge scientists to consider how members of marginalized communities might have different or negative experiences with a term, irrespective of the intentions of those using the term. They also applaud ongoing initiatives to revise species’ common names that are ‘offensive, derogatory, exclusionary, and/or dehumanizing’.

There can be no doubt that a substantial proportion of species names are inappropriate. As in the case of the spongy moth (*Lymantria dispar*), the common name of which previously included a derogatory descriptor applied to the Romani people, offensive common names, of course, ought to be changed. Indeed, in many cases they change almost without conscious attention. *Pethia nigrofasciata*, a freshwater fish endemic to Sri Lanka and popular among ornamental-fish hobbyists, for example, used to have a common name that referenced the now universally decried N-word. Despite an absence of overt demands, it came instead to be called the Black Ruby Barb. By the yardstick of Cheng *et al.* (2023), however, even that name is potentially offensive given that black references pigmentation and hence race, and rubies symbolize wealth and hence class divisions. If one digs deep enough into etymologies, there are few adjectives in any language that lack potentially objectionable connotations.

A cursory glance at IUCN’s Red List of Threatened Species for Sri Lanka yields a host of common names which have been used in pejorative or discriminatory contexts in English: e.g., Asian, blue-eyed, clam, cockroach, duffer, dwarf, emigrant, emperor (reminiscent of empire), Eurasian (pejorative for mixed-race), fairy, leatherback, migrant, Mormon, pansy, parasite, pigmy, redneck, sudda (literally, ‘whitey’, a racial pejorative), tiger (as in Tamil Tiger terrorists), tramp, transvestite, unicorn, and weaver (associated with a social caste). While species’ common names may be relatively easy to revise (because they arise purely from usage, they are not regulated in biological nomenclature), such words embedded in Latinized scientific names are, as the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature now stands, impossible to expunge (Ceriaco *et al.*, 2023). The Code simply recommends that “Authors should exercise reasonable care and consideration in forming new names to ensure that they are chosen with their subsequent users in mind and that, as far as possible, they are appropriate, compact, euphonious, memorable, and do not cause offence.”

Scientific names. Hammer & Thiele (2021) called for the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature to be amended to allow for the rejection of culturally offensive and inappropriate scientific names. They cite, for example, a proposal by Smith & Figueiredo (2021) to ‘permanently and retroactively eliminate epithets with the root *caf[e]r-* or *caff[e]r-* from the nomenclature of algae, fungi and plants’. Knapp *et al.* (2020) note that the species epithet “*caffra*” is derived from a derogatory term for black Africans that has been considered extremely offensive since the mid-20th century and is now illegal to use in South Africa. They argue that ‘Rejecting such names that are in common use would be a useful step in the de-colonisation of taxonomy more broadly.’ In that case, should the 323 plant species names that carry the prefix *nigro-* and the 135 that carry the prefix *rhodes-* (the reviled Cecil Rhodes: see Mosyakin, 2022) be similarly rejected? Should Nigeria, Niger and Montenegro be required to change their names? After all, it is undeniable that they evoke the N-word.

It is noteworthy that the species epithet *caffra* is arguably a derivative of the ethnic slur, which itself is derived from the Arabic *kaffir*, meaning infidel. This term is by no means universally pejorative. Sri Lanka, for example, has an ethnic

community who self-identify as Kaffirs despite having a different local-language name: they are derived from African slaves brought to the island by the Portuguese in the 16th and 17th centuries. Their folk dance, the kaffrinha, has been celebrated for its synthesis of Portuguese, African and Asian traditions (de Silva Jayasuriya, 2020). While the descriptor kaffir has been applied to numerous plant products of African origin, it is by no means confined to Africa. Kaffir lime (*Citrus hystrix*), for example, is native to Asia. Its local name in Sri Lanka, ‘kapiiri dehi’ has long been in use and may be semantically linked to the Anglicized ‘kaffir’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). It is also worth remembering that Kaffer/Käffer are surnames in current use. Thus, while kaffir is particularly offensive in the South African context, it may not be so in other contexts. Similarly, offence may arise when a so-called colored person is addressed as ‘boy’ by a white person in the American or South African contexts, but this does not justify eliminating this word from, for example, pediatrics.

The fauna and flora of most formerly colonized nations are replete with taxon names which some might find objectionable. For example, taxon names that reference color (*nigro-*, *alba-*), ethnicity (*Dravidia*), and venerated deities (*Rama*, *Matsya*, *Shiva*, *Ishvara*). Expunging innumerable such names from biological nomenclature is clearly impractical, as Ceriaco *et al.* (2023) point out: it will result in nomenclatural chaos. Besides, who will judge what is and what is not appropriate?

Gillman & Wright (2020) call for indigenous names to replace established scientific taxon names. While Palma & Heath (2021) present a robust case against this proposal, it is important also to note that taxonomy has hitherto been largely a Western enterprise, and that Latin is the language of biological nomenclature: as such, most taxon names are composed of Latin descriptors. Even assuming that these could be set aside and replaced by indigenous names, the exercise is fraught with difficulty, not least in accurate transliteration. The 26-letter Latin alphabet is simply too restricted phonetically, as is clear from myriad potentially offensive historical transliterations such as *ceylonensis* [from Saheelan, a Persian name for the island: Imam, 1990], *maderaspatensis* [from Madrasan], and *bombayensis* [from Mumbai]. People in these countries know that these epithets are semantically flawed, but I have encountered no one who says their feelings are hurt by these historical errors. Pethiyagoda (2007: 56), for example, lists 17 names of plant genera based on Sinhala (a language of Sri Lanka) names, the transliterations of which are grotesquely unrecognizable—e.g., the Hindu god Ishvara transliterated as *Ixora*.

Added to that is the problem of *which* indigenous language to choose. What might work for Gillman & Wright in New Zealand, which has only a single extant indigenous language (te reo Māori), may not work so well elsewhere. Sri Lanka, for example, has two languages, together with a third aboriginal dialect. India has dozens. A further layer of complexity is added when taxa—including almost all marine taxa—transgress political or linguistic borders. Applying the proposal of Gillman & Wright (2020) beyond special cases like New Zealand would be too politically inflammatory to contemplate.

Authors of scientific names. At the next level are the authors of scientific names, especially those of former centuries, whom Cheng *et al.* (2023) may have had in mind when they stated that ‘Much of Western science is rooted in colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy’. Few among them are without sin, starting with the great Carl Linnaeus himself. In the 10th edition of *Systema naturae* (1758), the founder-work in zoological nomenclature, for example, Linnaeus divided *Homo sapiens* into six taxa (‘varieties’), four of which had geographical associations: Americanus (red, choleric, straight), Europaeus (white, sanguine, muscular), Asiaticus (sallow, melancholic, stiff), and Africanus (black, phlegmatic, lazy). By any of the yardsticks by which racism is measured today, these characterizations would make Linnaeus a racist. Does this mean that his works should be cancelled? Or that the wildflower genus *Linnaea* should be suppressed?

The question of whether taxa named by authors suspected of unethical behavior should be renamed continues to vex science. Pethiyagoda (2021) highlighted 15 taxonomic papers published since 2018, involving a total of more than 3500 specimens belonging to some 80 species, all illegally collected and smuggled out of Sri Lanka. Should these publications be retracted? Should the new taxa described be invalidated? Perhaps they should, but the principal consequence of such actions would be the destabilization of biological nomenclature.

Names we inherit from history are often problematic but like history itself, they are not easily or productively erased. Even Indians and Sri Lankans who are aware of the origins of the Alphonso mango, named after the barbaric Portuguese colonizer Afonso de Albuquerque, relish this fruit without protest. Meanwhile, Singaporeans celebrate the name of Stamford Raffles, the city-state’s founder, through numerous place names and even what is arguably its best-known hotel. Yet Raffles not only segregated the city by race, but was also associated with slavery (Wright, 1960; Pearson, 1969; Alatas, 2020). Even in post-handover Hong Kong, despite fierce Chinese nationalism, colonial place names such as Queen Victoria Street, Oxford Road and Baker Street have been retained. The conquered seem not as anxious as their conquerors to erase the odious heritage of colonialism.

Should we choose to mine the scientific lexicon layer by layer in search of words and connotations that are offensive or exclusionary, the list would be endless and, because language evolves, transient. The word *gay*, for example, went from meaning joyful to meaning homosexual, and even then, evolved in usage first as a euphemism, then a pejoration, and finally a celebration: it illustrates how words and meanings evolve rapidly through time.

Eponyms. Guedes *et al.* (2023) argue that ‘naming species in honour of [people] is unjustifiable’ and call for all eponyms to be ‘removed’ from biological taxonomy ‘as many of those honoured are strongly associated with the social ills and negative legacy of imperialism, racism and slavery’. They maintain that such ‘name revisions would not alter scientific history, as the historical name would remain as a synonym [correctly, not a synonym but a ‘suppressed name’] and the identity of the individuals who initially described the species would remain unaltered.’

What then is the point? After all, most species—*e.g.*, all birds and butterflies—have unique common names already: there is no impediment to these being revised. But rather than engage in the actual work of doing so, in a flourish of generosity, Guedes *et al.* (2023) grant that ‘the task of renaming eponyms could be *given* [my emphasis] to taxonomists from the biogeographical region of the candidate species.’ Who are they to *give* this demanding and complex task so condescendingly to us who never asked for it? These authors seem oblivious of the Taxonomic Impediment (Engel *et al.*, 2021). ‘Post-colonial’ taxonomists have their hands full as it is, racing to describe their nations’ species before they become extinct, rather than being distracted by a time-wasting mission to investigate hundreds of thousands of eponyms and replace them just to assuage these authors’ new-found guilt.

Further, given that authorship is attached to biological taxon names, especially in botany, who would the authors of these revised names be: the original describer (who, after all, discovered the novelty) or the recent name-changer? What about eponyms created by native, in-country taxonomists and those which honor national heroes: should they be defenestrated too? Nor do the authors trouble to explain by whom species that transgress political and linguistic boundaries will be renamed. And now, it is to us taxonomists that they hand this poisoned chalice. They graciously opine that ‘researchers from former colonies’—that is, people like me—should do the heavy lifting.

Interestingly, even as Guedes *et al.* (2023) dictate major reforms in taxonomy and nomenclature, none of them, at least according to their ORCID records, appears to have lead-authored a taxonomic paper. In a sublime twist of irony, one of them (Webala) was recently a co-author of Monadjem *et al.* (2021), which describes *Pseudoromicia kityoi*, an eponym. These authors also claim that *Anophthalmus hitleri*, which honours the infamous Nazi leader, ‘has not been renamed by the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature because the name has not been deemed sufficiently offensive’. A search of the Commission’s own Bulletin shows that this statement is manifestly false: the Commission has never been petitioned to make such a ruling. Instead, the authors cite Berenbaum (2010), who makes no such assertion.

In the absurd logic of Guedes *et al.* (2023), we must now rename physical units such as the Ampere, Celsius, Fahrenheit, Hertz, Joule, Kelvin, Newton, Volt and Watt; well-known minerals such as Alexandrite and Dolomite; popular garden plants such as *Albizia*, *Banksia*, *Begonia*, *Bougainvillea*, *Camellia*, *Dahlia*, *Gardenia*, *Magnolia*, *Poinsettia* and *Wisteria*; medically important organisms such as *Escherichia*, *Klebsiella*, *Rickettsia* and *Salmonella*; medical eponyms such as Alzheimer’s, Asperger’s, Hodgkin’s, Parkinson’s, Rorschach and Heimlich; geographic features such as Mount Everest and the Mariana Trench; and words in common use such as sandwich, diesel and pasteurize. Lurking among the eponymous progenitors of these words would be people whose values were abhorrent by the yardstick of our time. Theodore ‘Teddy’ Roosevelt, for example, was an imperialist and a racist, and he slew hundreds of endangered African large mammals (Bradley, 2009). But it would be ridiculous to rename the teddy bear for these reasons.

Guedes *et al.* (2023) argue that “renaming currently valid eponyms would... be good for taxonomy and for conservation”. Really? Their proposed ‘reforms’ would leave taxonomy in chaos; and as for conservation, it is puerile to imagine that species heading toward extinction could be saved simply by being called by another name. It is one thing to signal virtue from the armchairs of Western universities; it is another to scrounge for resources to explore biodiversity, and to describe and conserve the biotic riches of post-colonial nations even as they vanish before our eyes.

Western Angst

Something that appears to have eluded the consciousness of the authors of the proposals I criticize here is their regional bias, as declared in their affiliations:

Work	Author Country (N)
Cheng <i>et al.</i> (2023)	12 USA, 3 Canada
Guedes <i>et al.</i> (2023)	7 EU, 1 UK, 1 Kenya, 1 Nigeria, 1 Israel
Hammer & Thiele (2021)	2 Australia
Smith & Figueiredo (2021)	2 South Africa
Gillman & Wright (2020)	2 New Zealand
Knapp <i>et al.</i> (2020)	2 UK, 1 EU

In the United States, ‘waves of anti-Black violence’ (in the words of Cheng *et al.*, 2023) are, perhaps, a commonplace, as are also the politics of identity. Given the brutal colonization of the New World by the European powers in the course of the past five centuries, and its history of slavery and oppression during almost the entirety of that time, I sympathize with the angst of Cheng *et al.* However, the reforms they advocate—principally the interpretation of semantic nuance in North American English—may find limited resonance in other parts of the world, especially the biodiversity-rich developing world which, perforce, must publish science in English, a foreign language.

Perhaps understandably given their North American bias, Cheng *et al.* (2023) see the language of science through the prism of American realities. They seek to redress the problems of marginalized communities within their own society and should be lauded for that. But it is in the Anglosphere—especially the USA—that the semantic problems they highlight need to be addressed, for example by urging the US Government to desist from applying the term *alien* to migrants and foreign nationals. Almost all the authors I criticize here seek to regulate language in order to control thought, evidently oblivious of the possibility that in seeking redress for their perceived victimhood, they stand to victimize others—the oppressed become the oppressors. Yet there exists a world in which science is framed not in terms of the grievances of groups but in terms of the flourishing of humanity. The concept of ‘suspect classification’ they implicitly apply to defining victimhood may be self-evident to Americans (Pollvogt, 2013), but it is alien to the rest of the world, especially the postcolonial world. Local problems do not demand global solutions.

Of course, it is true that North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, given their history as colonizers, slave

traders, slave owners, and exterminators of native peoples, have guilt about their past, as do white South Africans. The Anglosphere has much to feel guilty about. But all that is past. Today it welcomes migrants and refugees. It upholds the rule of law. It celebrates diversity, liberty, inclusiveness, tolerance and human rights. It promotes democracy and liberal values. And its taxpayers fork out billions of dollars in aid and cheap credit to the less fortunate world. The Anglosphere has become a force for good, and it is laudable that scientists such as Cheng *et al.* (2023) wish to make it better. But even as erstwhile colonizers wring their hands for wrongs past and seek to redress these to salve their guilt, they must take care not to harm those harmed already: the victims of the colonial enterprise.

Western guilt stemming from the expropriation of indigenous knowledge and genetic resources from erstwhile colonies led to the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). As well-intentioned as the CBD might have been, it had the unintended consequence of stifling taxonomic research in much of the developing world (Pethiyagoda, 2004; Prathapan *et al.*, 2018). We would do well to consider also the potential for unintended consequences of the English-centric terminological reforms proposed by the authors cited here.

I have in the course of my half-century career worked alongside colleagues from every continent. I have heard not just the exclusionary terms Cheng *et al.* (2023) mention but also potentially racist microaggressions praising my ‘Mediterranean tan’ and arguably backhanded, condescending compliments on my ‘Asian intelligence’ and surprise at my correct emphasis of the antepenultimate syllable in pronouncing *megalomaniacal*. And yes, white strangers have addressed me as ‘boy’, as in ‘Where are you boys from?’, which in my perception is unambiguously a racist aggression. Grounds for offence are everywhere, not least in the field of scientific publication (Liu *et al.*, 2023). But those of us who belong to ‘marginalized groups’ would do well to confront such aggressions when we encounter them, rather than seeking shelter and protection from them. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.

Cheng *et al.* (2023) call for terms that they perceive to be exclusionary to be expunged from scientific—and presumably everyday—usage because ‘such harmful terms can counter conservation education goals’. Of course, we have a duty to eliminate obviously hurtful and discriminatory words from the scientific lexicon. But we also have a duty to educate young people to be resilient to environments that may not always be to their liking, and to urge ‘marginalized groups’ to find dignity in themselves and to rise yet above those who seek to diminish them using words, however offensive. I suspect that people whose feelings are wounded when they encounter words such as ‘alien’, ‘invasive’ or ‘sneaky’ will find much else that gives offense in the world around them. They cannot possibly be shielded from every arrow. We must find it in ourselves to rise above our perceived tormentors, to not melt when the temperature rises, and to not become fragile victims of our identities. There is grandeur in overcoming victimhood.

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