



### **Being obsessive-compulsive about terminology and nomenclature is not a vice, but a virtue**

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At first glance, discussions among linguists seem utterly absurd to those without linguistic training. Scientific debates on the Chinese languages are a good example. For decades, linguists have been arguing over how many Chinese languages exist. Should Chinese characters be classified as ideographs or pictographs, and are they phonetic or rather syllabic in nature (DeFrancis 1984)? Reading linguistic treatises is reminiscent of reading any specialized scientific article—they are difficult to understand if one is not among the experts. It is only natural that non-experts ask sooner or later whether all of these linguistic discussions are of any practical use, and how much money, often derived from taxes, is spent on them. Of course these discussions are of practical use and money is well spent.

For instance, assume a European or an American has just begun studying a Chinese language. Most likely, he (or she) will realize that one cannot say studying “Chinese”. A more specific description is required, such as “Mandarin”. This descriptor will most likely confuse the student’s peers, as they probably do not know that Cantonese is as different from Mandarin as French is from Spanish, or English from Dutch (and, to be fair, many Chinese may not know the vast differences between the Romance or Germanic languages, either). At the same time, the student’s Chinese friends and colleagues know what is meant with “Mandarin”. Consequently, whereas communication among one group of people has been made more difficult, communication among another group of people has been simplified.

The student then begins the arduous memorization process for the large number of Chinese characters and, before he realizes it, becomes a member of the linguistic discussion mentioned earlier. He may feel that there is a logical connection among the characters that, once figured out, would make memorization more efficient—but he cannot quite pinpoint the connection and will continue to rely on memorization. He will then have to choose among dictionaries that use different character sorting criteria and will wonder why dictionaries are not organized in some other, better way. Of course, one task of linguists is indeed to achieve a better, systematic and precise description of a given language, such as Mandarin. Even the still imperfect dictionaries sort characters into classes and groups that are inherently logical on a small scale. A student may recognize parts of a new character from already known characters, and the learning progress accelerates. One must conclude that classification and grouping seems to be a very useful endeavor for learning and communicating, even if it is not quite perfect and albeit discussions on improvements continue.

In the life sciences, similar processes are at work. The terminology of subspecialty fields compares somewhat to languages or at least dialects. There are specialized vocabularies composed of scientific terms, specialized rules of engagement, such as writing style and types of oral presentations, and numerous misunderstandings when members of two or more fields suddenly interface—“interdisciplinary” can indeed mean the need for interpreters. Even the evolution of language can be observed within subspecialty fields: the

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