



## The “Mihi itch”—a brief history

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### Abstract

The origin and history of the phrases *mihi itch* and its predecessor *Mihisucht* are reviewed.

**Key words:** *mihi itch*, *Mihisucht*, splitters, taxonomy, history

*“I trust no one will detect symptoms of my being tormented by that morbid thirst for naming new species which makes so many modern works in entomology, rather magazines of undigested and insulated facts than harmonious histories of nature.”*

—William S. Macleay

### Introduction

I do not suppose that the famous invertebrate zoologist William Sharp Macleay, in making the quote above (Macleay 1838: 2), could have foreseen that this “morbid thirst for naming new species” would take on more concise and colorful phraseology in two languages a few decades later. But it apparently did.

In a recent article on taxonomic inflation by Alain Dubois, he used the term *nomenclatural mihilism* for “Unwarranted descriptions of new taxa, purported to differ only very slightly from already established taxa, with the clear purpose of trying to ‘immortalize’ their authors” (Dubois 2008: 859). The use of the term (attributed to Bruun, 1950) caused one of my synapses to wake up and to fire for a millisecond or two. Where had I heard that before? Some of Dubois’s article pertained to the perceived problem of unwarranted names being proposed only to immortalize the name of the author proposing them. *Mihilism*? Hmmm ... Ah ha! Of course! He was talking about the *mihi itch*!

The term *mihi itch* has been with us in the jargon of taxonomy (most particularly in entomology) for quite some time and, for purposes of proper decorum, is mostly limited to personal conversations, lectures, or private correspondence. But its use occurs often enough that most listeners and recipients are quite clear as to what the connotations for it are. They are negative and it is a term usually cast towards those who have a combination of disregard for quality over quantity when describing new taxa and a demonstrably high ego. That ego and *mihi* are related is no coincidence since *mihi* is the dative of the Latin *ego*<sup>1</sup>. This ego (= in this case, authorship) problem, in whatever name or phrase it takes, has been discussed many times over the years with

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1. Another term used possibly more commonly than “*mihi*” in the context of a suffix used to denote new taxa is the Latin “*nobis*” (often abbreviated as “nob.”), which is the plural form (= “to us”) of “*mihi*” (= “to me”) but may well have been added by some authors who thought that it meant “new”. In any case, a derogatory phrase used with regard to a corresponding “*nobis*” affliction of a group of over-zealous taxonomists has not yet been found in the published literature.