Getting back on track

Dear Carolus,

May I apologize beforehand that I write you in such a profane language, but English is the language in which scientists are supposed to write these days. Not that English is in any way particularly apt for scientific description and argument, rather less so. Despite being one of the richest languages in respect of sheer number of words, it is surprisingly deficient in descriptive terms. Describing a few new species of scarabs right now, I am searching for words that do not exist and wish I could write in French or my mother tongue, German. Well, English became the language of science merely by accident, because it was the language of the most successful winning party of the last global war (we have had a couple of them so far). But this is not why I write this letter today.

The reason why I bother you is that, finally, I can tell you great news. In zoology we might soon be as advanced as you were exactly a quarter of a millennium ago. When you wrote your *Systema Naturae*, at least in the later editions, you compiled all names of known organisms in one work. Everybody could access the complete catalogue of the known animal and plant kingdom and even the minerals in one place. Since then, we have made enormous progress in zoology and botany having described and named probably one and a half million more species. As a result, we lost track.

Although all zoologists, botanists and microbiologists have followed your binominal system of naming species, we no longer know how many species are described and which names are already used. Admittedly we have catalogues and lists available, but all of them are incomplete and full of errors. You may ask: Is there no central authority recording and regulating all these names? Yes, there is for the regulating part. Dealing with an ever increasing flood of new names, over a century ago the zoological community decided that some general rules were necessary to deal with naming and names. Actually it was you who first introduced rules for naming genera and species over 150 years earlier; I mean your *Fundamenta Botanica*, later expanded as *Critica Botanica*. Again, you were ahead. With thousands of your successors naming species anywhere in the world according to your binominal system but following their own little idiosyncrasies, the need for a general, globally acceptable set of rules became inevitable. The International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature was founded in 1895 and is still in existence. It consists of 20–30 commissioners from all over the world. Your compatriot, Doctor Sven Kullander, the ichthyologist from the Museum
in Stockholm, is a member. The Commission elaborated the *International Code of Zoological Nomenclature* which has currently reached its fourth edition. It is a huge, complicated semi-legal book that does not attract readership. Don’t worry; we are currently working on a more easily accessible fifth edition that might pave the way to what you had achieved in your time: a register of all animal names.

![Image of a book with text](image.png)

**In Fundamenta Botanica (1736) Linnaeus laid out his rules for naming plants for the first time; later he expanded them in Critica Botanica (1737).**

Although we have rules for how to name animals and plants and in zoology even a Commission responsible for those rules, we do not know all these names. If I talk to normal people (I mean non-scientists) about how many animal species have been described and how many more are waiting to be discovered, very often I am confronted with astonishment and disbelief that there is no central register for animal species. What would a library of over a million volumes be if it had no central catalogue of its holdings? This is our current situation. The botanists even voted against a central register for plant names at
the International Botanical Congress in St. Louis \(^5\) (there are scientific congresses in America now). No author has voted against library catalogues though.

The International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature plans to propose registration for all zoological names \(^6\) as a voluntary exercise. The technical framework of the registry is currently developed and will be available to the scientific community in 2009. It looks promising so far. Editors of several journals have expressed interest in registering any new names their journals publish. Authors might find a central registry useful and register their new names if their editors do not. You introduced binominal nomenclature. It was not mandatory in your time, but since it was an ingenious and useful concept it gained acceptance rapidly. Useful concepts often gain acceptance if not forced upon people. I am confident that the ‘Republica Zoologica’ will join forces and work on an authoritative register of all animal names. The new ‘Systema Naturae’ will be magnitudes larger than yours was. My apologies, I do not intend to disdain your achievements; nothing was further from my mind. You wrote more books than even the most prolific living scientist. You developed the common language of binominal nomenclature. Not many people can claim having developed a communication system that is still in common use after 250 years. You did. We can only work on making your tested and proven communication system more efficient, and this is what we are trying to do. I shall inform you about further developments. I trust that you approve of our efforts. If you have doubts, please do not hesitate to write me in clear words. Coming from you, I expect these words to be in Latin, and they will be very welcome.

Your devoted servant

Franciscus Scabiosus
alias Frank-Thorsten Krell, FRES, doct. rer. nat. Univ. Tubing.
Soc. plur. soc. sci. Americ., Germ., etc. etc. etc.

The dung rolling beetle Scarabeus sacer L. (Scarabeidae) was the sacred Scarab of the Egyptians
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Notes:


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