Latin diagnoses: A necessary evil

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Abstract The idea of allowing diagnoses in any language is disastrous and a step in the wrong direction. As the knowledge of Latin among botanists is diminishing, it is instead important to establish a multilingual Latin-dictionary on the Internet with examples of how to make diagnoses. Though the importance of the diagnosis sensu Linnaeus now is mostly covered by the type method, it is impossible to give it up as the important link between nomenclature and taxonomy (where the Linnaean description belongs entirely) and with taxonomy in the past.

Keywords historic link; Latin; precision

There have been numerous attempts to get rid of the Latin diagnosis, and sure enough there has been one launched this year as well (Figureido & al., 2010a,b). It is in my opinion one of the worst ever proposed. Though its proposers on one side claim that the diagnosis now has lost its original importance in nomenclature and is better regarded as part of the taxonomic impedimenta, on the other hand they want to maintain it as part of the Code (and of nomenclature), but allowing the text to be in any language. That would surely be to open the doors to the Babylonian confusion so well described by Chaloner (in Greuter & al., 1994: 165), and be of no service to botanical society.

The Latin diagnosis has served us well, and I see little reason to change the system. It is correct that its function has largely been taken over by the type method, though Linnaeus also used it as a bridge between nomenclature and taxonomy, to point out the essential characters that characterize the taxon (Jørgensen, 1998). That is certainly still needed, not least to prevent the formation of nomina nuda, and it cannot be substituted by a descripton which entirely belongs in the sphere of taxonomy. There is also a particular value in maintaining this tradition—it keeps us in contact with the past where much of botanical terminology was established. That dimension should not be underestimated. We have some obligation therefore to keep botanical Latin alive. Classical Latin is a dead language because nobody is using it!

But the continuous attacks on the Latin diagnosis demonstrate that an increasing number of botanists find the procedure cumbersome as so few master Latin. That problem is better solved by establishing a multilingual, user-friendly guide to botanical Latin on the Internet with examples of diagnoses, rather than getting rid of the tradition which secures reliable nomenclature.

LITERATURE CITED


