

WHAT'S IN A NAME - PART TWO

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In the previous offering I explained some basic facts about names, the science of taxonomy and how these are applied. Now we will look at some of the generic and specific names of some familiar fish and try to make them more meaningful.

The rules involved with naming animals declare that a genus name can be any arbitrary combination of letters which has not been previously used. Generally, though, generic names are meaningful. Their authors usually choose some distinctive characteristic of the one or more species in the genus and construct a name based on that character or he chooses a latinised word or he can latinise a person's name (its quite obvious who the author had in mind when he named the genus Axelrodia!!) Incidentally, if you consider the species Axelrodia rieseli (Gery), the ruby tetra, you can already say a few things about it based on what you learned in my last part. For example, Gery's name in brackets indicates that he described the species in another genus so it is highly unlikely that he himself described Axelrodia, someone else did the deed!!). A current tendency among Australian taxonomists is to use aboriginal words for generic names. Thus we have Bobilla, Lara and Maroa as valid names of insect genera.

These are a few peculiarities involving species names that might interest you. An "i" after a name is the masculine ending, meaning

"of" or "from", so wattami is Wattam's whatever. An "ae" in the specific name is the feminine ending meaning "of" or "from", so debrae is Debra's whatever. If you see "i^{ensis}" at the end of the word like "australiensis" or "braziliensis" this merely means from or of. It is always used with place names.

Let's have a look at some commonly encountered names and examine their meanings:

Acanthophtalmus - loaches, derived from 2 Greek names "acanth" meaning spine; "ophtalmus" meaning eye (ophtalmologist, for a familiar example) - "spiny eye" which perfectly describes the loaches.

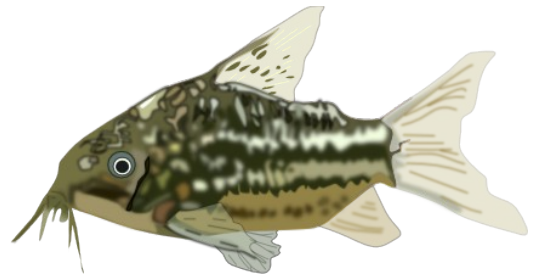
Acara - dwarf cichlids, derived from the Greek word "acares" which itself means small.

Aeneus - species name of the bronze catfish and derived from the Latin word meaning of bronze colour.

Aphyosemion - a large genus of Killifishes. From 2 Greek words "Aphyo" meaning to become white and "semion" a signal or flag. Perhaps, the first species described reminded the scientist of a faintly designed flag on a light background.

Bardodes - a genus of barb. Barb is from a Latin word, barbus, meaning barbel or whisker. The suffix "-odes" is encountered often and it means resembling, so Barbodes means resembling barb, in this case resembling the genus Barbus.

Brachydanio - a genus of danios to which the



popular zebrafish belongs. From at least one Greek word, "brachy" meaning few or short and "danio" of unknown origin.

Cichlasoma - genus of cichlids. From 2 Greek words one of which "Cichla" means a thrush-like bird or a fish. Perhaps, it is an allusion to the case the adults pay to the fry, much as a bird takes care of its babies "Soma" means like or same, so this must be an allusion of the care of the young by the parents to that shown in birds.

Corydoras - Greek again, 2 words, "cory" meaning a leathery sack and "dora" meaning a hide a leathery covering. And, of course, these catfishes do look like they are enclosed in a fit of a sack. Use your imagination!

Caudimaculatus - from 2 latin words "caudi" meaning tail and "maculatus" meaning spotted.

Melanistus - from 2 Greek words, "melan" meaning black and "istus" a superlative ending meaning most - so perhaps, the blackest Corydoras, at least as far as the author was concerned.

Metae - The "ae" ending means "or or from". From the Meta river.

Punctatus - a very commonly encountered Latin word meaning spotted or with punctures.

Reticulatus - another common Latin word meaning "made like a net", usually referring to a net-like pattern.

Undulatus - a very common Latin word referring to a "wave-like" pattern, usually of dark markings.



Cryptocoryne - One of our commonest aquarium plant genera. From 2 Greek words "Crypto" meaning hidden and "coryn" meaning a "club-shaped bud or shoot". This could refer to the tiny flower or perhaps the subterranean shoots.

Epiplatys - a generic name often used for some of the panchax killifish. From the Greek again, "Epi" meaning after or that which follows "platy" meaning flat or broad. With reference to the shape of the tail of the fish, no doubt.

Geophagus - a well-known genus of cichlids. From 2 Greek words "geo" meaning earth and "phagus" eating. Named with reference to its earth-moving habits.

Gyrinocheilus - genus of the Chinese algae-eater. From the Greek again, "gyrinus" a tadpole and "cnilas" a lip. An obvious reference to the shape of the fish resembling that of a tadpole and a reference to the circular mouth.

Haplochromis - a genus of mouth brooding cichlids. From Greek, "Haplo" meaning single and "cnromis" meaning the colours of the skin. Perhaps, the first described species was not very colourful.

Labeo - red-tailed shark genus. Greek "Labeo" one who has large lips.

Loricaria - our popular whiptail catfish genus. From 2 latin words "Lorcia" meaning clad in mail and "aria" a suffix to denote a connection. Obviously named with reference to the fishes scale pattern looking like a suit of mail.

Melanotaenia - genus of Australian rainbowfishes. From 2 Greek words "melan" meaning black and "tainia" meaning stupid!!

Nanostomus - an important group of fishes, the pencilfish. The name is from 2 Greek words "nano" meaning small and "stoma" meaning mouth.

Ophiocephalus - the snakeheads. This genus is comprised of 2 Greek words "ophis" meaning snake and "cephalus" meaning head.

Pelmatochromis - a genus of dwarf cichlid containing the popular species.

P. kribensis - From 2 Greek words "pelmato" sole of foot or a stalk and "chromis" meaning colour. I will leave it to you to decipher the relevant meaning.

Plecostomus - one of the most popular aquarium fish. Again the genus is from 2 Greek words "pleco" meaning to weave or to twist and "stomus" mouth. This probably refers to the barbels and lips which give this twisted appearance to the early describer of the genus. It may also refer to the fact that the mouth is so ventral on the fish.

Scatophagus - the "scat". From 2 Greek words which will render the fish unpleasant to you if you do not already know the meaning: "Scat" meaning dung and "phagus" meaning eater.

Synodontis - mostly upside down catfish. From Greek again, "syn" meaning together "odontis" teeth. An obvious reference to the structure of the teeth of the fish.

Trichogaster - the gourami genus. the name comes from 2 Greek words, "tricho" meaning hair and "gaster", the Greek word for stomach. This is possibly an allusion to the hair-like feelers or pelvic fins which appear to emerge from the stomach.

Xiphopnorus - Live-bearers including sword-tails. From the Greek again "Xiphus" a sword and "phoros" meaning bearing.

The above is just a sampling of generic names. I hope this series will make the sometimes unpronounceable names of the fish we keep more meaningful.

