What's in a Name? Expand your Vocabulary by Looking at the World around You

1. Mushrooms

When walking through a field or forest, have you ever wondered what the names are for the flowers, trees, or animals that you see? We tend to remember the things we see around us when we identify them by name; we forget what we see when we can't put a name to it. This happens especially with birds, insects, and flowers: you see an unusual specimen and want to recall it later, but you forget it quickly because you can't name it. This happened to me last summer. During a mid-summer outing, I came across several interesting mushrooms, and determined to find out their names, so that I could identify them and recognize them the next time. Fortunately I had a camera with me, and so I was able to capture pictures that would help me in finding the names of the mushrooms. The result not only expanded my knowledge of the natural world, it also reinforced my grasp of Greek and Latin vocabulary. A little reading revealed that names are given to mushrooms for various and good reasons. Here's a sampling of what I learned.

Amanita flavoconia – Yellow Patches

Appearing in this photo in the so-called button stage, the *Amanita flavoconia* is a very common but pretty mushroom. Notice that the mushroom is identified by two words: the first points to the general ranking (*genus*) of mushrooms that share several features; the second word identifies the *species* with a more peculiar feature. In the case of the *Amanita flavoconia* the first word, *amanitai*, is a classical Greek word for "mushrooms"; it became the general name for this grouping of mushrooms. The name *flavoconia* refers to the yellow sprinkles upon the skin of the cap of this particular species. *Flavoconia* comes from two words, *flavus*, which means "gold-coloured", and *conia*, which is derived from the Greek word for dust or powder. The sprinkles you see on the surface are actually the remnants of a thin veil that covered the mushroom when it arose from the ground. By means of the term *flavoconia*, then, observers distinguish this mushroom from very many others of its kind. The common English name for this poisonous mushroom is "Yellow Patches". You can find it in conifer forests throughout eastern North America.

Amanita brunnescens – Brown Amanita

This mushroom belongs to the same general grouping as “Yellow Patches”, but it’s colour is quite different. That colour is reflected in the word *brunneus*, a late-Latin word that means “brown”. The suffix -*scens* means “becoming, turning”, so that *brunnescens* means “turning or becoming brown”. As this mushroom ages, its colour turns to a faded, pale brown. This is not the only mushroom of which the cap changes colour; many other mushrooms are described by an epithet that ends in –*scens* to indicate that a characteristic feature becomes evident over time.

Ganoderma tsugae – Varnish Shelf

The word *Ganoderma* in the name of this mushroom is made up of two Greek words: *ganos* and *derma*. The former means “brightness; sheen; luster”, while the latter means “skin”. Though faded and tough when older, the flesh of this mushroom appears glossy and bright when young.

Sometimes a mushroom’s name points to the tree which it favours for its host. In the case of the one pictured, the word *tsuga* (originally a Japanese word for Hemlock) refers to the Hemlock tree on which this mushroom is often found. In fact, one way to distinguish this mushroom from another one that looks very much like it is to identify the tree on which it grows. The very similar-looking *Ganoderma*

lucidum (the “clear glossy-skinned” mushroom) grows on deciduous trees, such as oaks, unlike the mushroom in the picture. Observation of the immediate setting of a mushroom helps you to identify it, for each kind prefers certain woody materials for its nourishment.

Lactarius lignyotus – Smoky Milky

One group of mushrooms is distinguished by a white liquid that exudes when the cap or the gills underneath them are broken. This milky substance or latex is referred to by the Latin term *lactarius*, which means “milky; milk-white”. Observing the colour and texture of the juice that flows from these mushrooms helps one to identify them more accurately. The second, species name for this fungus is *lignyotus*, an adjective derived from the Greek word for “smoky”. Appearing first with a deep velvety sheen, these mushrooms of the Canadian variety grow in conifer woods.

Ramaria botrytis – Clustered Coral

Ramaria comes from the Latin noun *ramus*, meaning “branch”, and it refers to the branch-like shape of this group of fungi. Some people compare their appearance to that of the cauliflower. The common English description of it as ‘coral’ also expresses the unique appearance of this kind. *Botrytis*, from the Greek word for grape or bunch of grapes, refers – I think - to the cells that bear the spores of this

particular fungus; apparently the reproductive cells of this mushroom look like a bunch of grapes. Thus this species is defined by features that can best be confirmed through microscopic examination. This mushroom can be found commonly on the floor of mixed-wood forests.

Even from this brief introduction to the naming of mushrooms it is clear that appreciation for the meaning of the scientific Greek and Latin names serves to identify and recognize them. As we saw, the names for the *genus* and *species* may describe one or more of the following macro- or micro-scopic characteristics: visual appearance, changing colour or texture, association with a preferred host, reaction to physical analysis, and the appearance or behaviour of the spores. The next time you go out in the woods, think of the rich classical vocabulary that is lying at your feet and awaiting your discovery!

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