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Is It Honey Bee or Honeybee? Bumble Bee or Bumblebee? Who Decides the Common Names of Bees?

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Is It Honey Bee or Honeybee? Bumble Bee or Bumblebee? Who Decides the Common Names of Bees?

William D. J. Kirk

Anyone writing in English about bees will immediately encounter the question of whether to spell the common names as one word or two. Is it "honey bee" or "honeybee"? Is it "bumble bee" or "bumblebee"? It is easy to be confused because both spellings are frequently encountered. *Bee World* and *Journal of Apicultural Research*, like many other entomological journals, have clear rules for the common names of bees. It is "honey bee" not "honeybee," and "bumble bee" not "bumblebee." This follows the common names specified by the Entomological Society of America (2021a) in their database of over 2,000 common names of insects and related organisms. The list is well established and has grown considerably since it was first published in 1908. Names are reviewed by the Committee on the Common Names of Insects and voted on by the Governing Board (Entomological Society of America, 2021b). The common names follow a rule that was explained by Snodgrass (1956) in the preface to *Anatomy of the Honey Bee*:

> First, it must be explained why the name of the bee appears in the title as two words, though "honeybee" is the customary form in the literature of apiculture. Regardless of dictionaries, we have in entomology a rule for insect common names that can be followed. It says: If the insect is what its name implies, write the two words separately; otherwise run them together. Thus we have such names as *house fly, blow fly* and *robber fly* contrasted with *dragonfly, caddicefly* and *butterfly*, because the latter are not flies, just as an *aphislion* is not a lion and a *silverfish* is not a fish. The honey bee is an insect and is pre-eminently a bee; "honeybee" is equivalent to "Johnsmith."

The rule is clear and logical and based on insect taxonomy. Consistent naming ensures clear communication, avoids confusion and aids online literature searches, but one cannot help suspecting that the entomologists' enthusiasm for classifying insects has spilled over into organising insect common names. Although the above statement by Snodgrass is often quoted to explain the rule, the rule itself dates back to at least 1922 (Berenbaum, 2018) and so is now at least 100 years old.

The problem with the rule is that many insect common names are also used widely by non-entomologists. Since the rule is an entomologists' rule and not a rule of English grammar, entomological usage and general usage may well diverge over time, which would defeat the object of consistent naming. The entomologists' principle that joining two words shows that the second word is not literally true is not widely accepted or understood, and so is often ignored. Should the rule be extended to other apicultural terms with variable spelling? For example, there is often confusion over "beebread" or "bee bread," "beehive" or "bee hive" and "beekeeper" or "bee keeper." Outside entomology, there are many examples where such rules are not applied, for example in birds (hummingbird not humming bird), fish (catfish not cat fish), mammals (reindeer not rein deer) and everyday objects (teapot not tea pot).

Honey bee and bumble bee are examples of compound words. These are words made up of two or more other words and they can be written in open form (with a space), in solid form (no space) or with a hyphen (McArthur et al., 2018). Compound names in solid form are useful because they can specify things more precisely. The name hummingbird signifies a particular type of bird (family Trochilidae), whereas a humming bird could be any bird that hums. The solid form is much used in German. For example, the German word for honey bee is *Honigbiene*, which is formed from *Honig* (honey) and *Biene* (bee). The logic that joining two words together shows that the second word is not literally true does not apply in German. In English, compound words that are frequently used as a pair of words with a particular meaning may change over time from the open form (two separate words) to the hyphenated form to the closed form (one word), particularly where single-syllable words are involved, because the solid form endorses and reinforces compound status (McArthur et al., 2018).

The entomologists' rule for insect common names has had 100 years to take effect. Is general usage moving towards two words for honey bees and bumble bees, thus conforming to the entomologists' rule, or is it moving in the opposite direction towards one word? The usage of words can be investigated quantitatively with Google Books Ngram Viewer (Google Books, 2021; Michel et al., 2011), which displays graphs of the percentage of times a word or phrase has occurred in a corpus of millions of books over a range of years. The graphs reveal whether a word or phrase has become relatively more frequent and allows comparison of usage between words or phrases. Comparison of the one-word and two-word forms, including both the singular and the plural, in the "English (2019)" corpus shows that "honey bee" was more frequent than "honeybee" until about 1920, but since then "honeybee" has been consistently more frequent (Figure 1). Comparison of the two percentage occurrences shows that since the year 2000, "honeybee" has accounted for 58–64% of usage of either form, but the preference for the one-word form does not appear to be increasing. Further analysis using the "British English (2019)" corpus and "American English (2019)" corpus shows that "honeybee" is used more frequently than "honey bee" in both British English and American English. "Bumblebee" has been more frequent than "bumble bee" since about 1890 and the gap has widened rapidly since about 1990 (Figure 2). It now accounts for about 82% of usage of either form, although the preference for "bumblebee"

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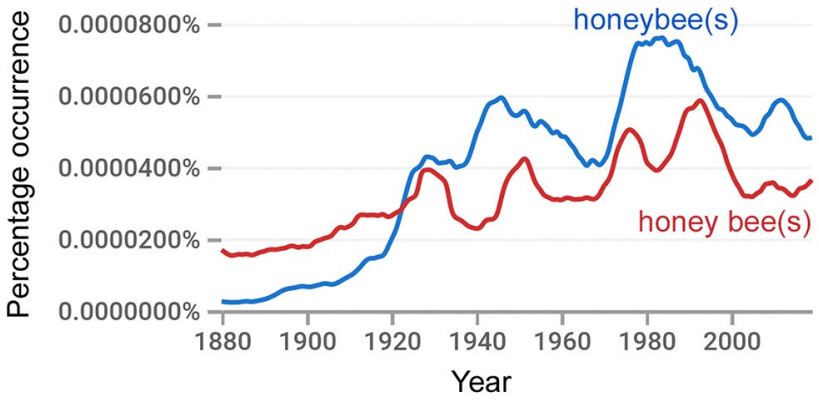

Figure 1. The percentage occurrence of "honeybee" or "honeybees" and "honey bee" or "honey bees" in books published in English in any country from 1880 to 2019, according to the "English (2019)" corpus of millions of books in Google Books Ngram Viewer (Google Books, 2021).

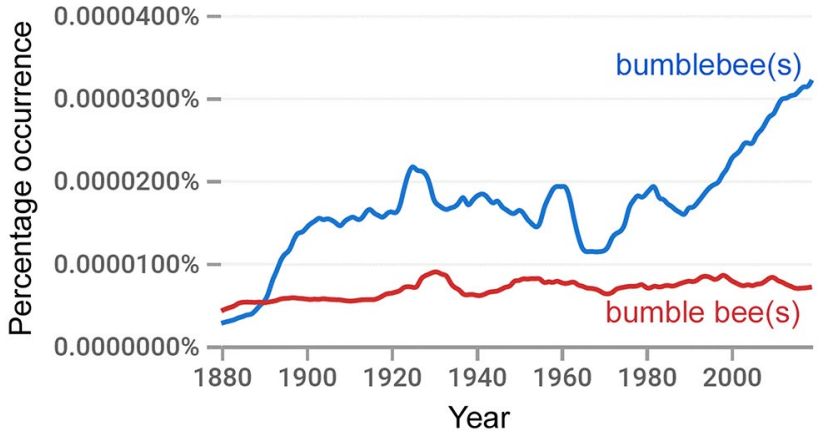

Figure 2. The percentage occurrence of "bumblebee" or "bumblebees" and "bumble bee" or "bumble bees" in books published in English in any country from 1880 to 2019, according to the "English (2019)" corpus of millions of books in Google Books Ngram Viewer (Google Books, 2021).

is much more marked in British English (90%) than American English (79%). This recent increasing trend occurs in both British English and American English, although "bumblebee" was much slower to overtake "bumble bee" in British English than in American English (in 1970 rather than 1890). The change from the open form to the closed form for words in common usage does not follow strict rules (McArthur et al., 2018), but the relatively greater use of "bumblebee" as one word compared with "honeybee" may be because "bumble" is a much less familiar word than "honey" and so does not stand well on its own.

Are biologists, at least, following the rule? BIOSIS Previews is an expansive index to Life Sciences research literature (Clarivate, 2021). A search of publications from 2015-2020 shows that of those mentioning honey bees, 42% used "honeybee" rather than "honey bee," and of those mentioning bumble bees, 64% used "bumblebee" rather than "bumble bee." The biological research literature shows a little more conformity to the rule because the one-word form is used slightly less often than in the more general literature covered by Google Books Ngram Viewer, but the percentages show that the rule is not widely followed by biologists.

There is clear evidence for a divergence in general usage compared with entomological usage for honey bee, but even more so for bumble bee. Even some recent entomological texts have preferred the use of one word instead of two (Benton, 2006; Goulson, 1984; Seeley, 2010), and "bumblebee" is used consistently by the Bumblebee Conservation Trust (2021). Entomologists may be fighting a losing battle here. There is a risk that before long the entomological literature will be out of step with wider usage and come to appear rather pedantic. Perhaps the decline of "bumble bee" in favour of "bumblebee" and, to some extent, "honey bee" in favour of "honeybee" should be seen not as a defeat for the entomologists' rule but as a symptom of the growing public interest in and knowledge of bees. The common names are being decided by popular usage rather than specialist usage. It may be time for entomologists to reconsider the common names for bees.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares that he has no conflict of interests.

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