

Travigne's *Animaux comestibles*: The Connoisseur's Guide to Zoological Taxonomy

Sergei Rzhechnyik

Abstract

This paper takes a fresh look at a long-forgotten system of animal classification. Its course of development is closely examined, and its fundamental concepts are explained. A brief biography of its revered creator is also presented.

Background

Scientific classification has its roots in the system of Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), who is often referred to as the father of modern plant and animal taxonomy (Gerszonowicz, 1985). His bizarre system of classification, first introduced in 1735 along with a method of binomial nomenclature, grouped plants into *classes*—which in turn were divided into *orders*, *genera* and *species*—based on the number and arrangement of their sexual organs. Despite the disturbing and controversial nature of his methods, Linnaeus's hierarchical classification, after much revision, has remained the standard for over 200 years¹.

The Linnaean system, however, neither

is nor was the only viable method of classification. For example, a recent trend in biology called *cladism* has been gaining in popularity recently. Whereas Linnaeus grouped species according to shared physical characteristics, cladism describes the evolutionary relationships between living things. Similarly, other systems of classification based on differing features have emerged throughout history, as a challenge to the conventional way of thinking. Despite their ingenuity, however, few of these systems have ever succeeded in gaining widespread acceptance, and most have subsequently been lost and forgotten. In this paper, the author would therefore like to reintroduce one such lost method, in the spirit of once again challenging the accepted status quo.

A Culinary Pioneer

Born in 1756 in the town of Levionnesur-mer, France, Louis Travigne was the son of a wealthy textile merchant. Though reported at times to have assisted his father in the mercantile

¹ It should be noted, however, that Linnaeus did not invent binomial nomenclature, for the use of such two-word names for species or kinds within a group occurs in many languages and in fact goes back to remote times. Linnaeus merely gave classification consistency and precision, both of which were sorely lacking among the naturalists of the mid-eighteenth century.

trade, thanks to his well-off status he was largely free to pursue his various hobbies and interests. The most well known of these was his passion for fine French cuisine: described in town records as being robust and of large girth, he was rumoured to have commonly eaten four to five meals a day (Records, 1781). He was equally renowned for his self-published written critiques of the eating establishments within his community, wherein he frequently bemoaned the quality of the local fare.

Few, if any, however, knew the full extent of Travigne's recreational activities. For in addition to his great love of food, Travigne was, in fact, an avid devotee to the scientific process. The reality was that, unbeknownst to his friends and neighbours, Travigne had at some point taken upon himself the unusual task of creating a unique and never-before-seen system of zoological classification. He based this, naturally, on what he knew best—the multitude of flavours to be found within the animal kingdom. Using a thorough process of testing and analysis, Travigne first composed a series of detailed descriptions comparing the minute differences in taste between various animals. He later constructed a rudimentary two-level system of classification based on his findings, eventually compiling his writings into a single document, which he tentatively titled *Animaux comestibles*.

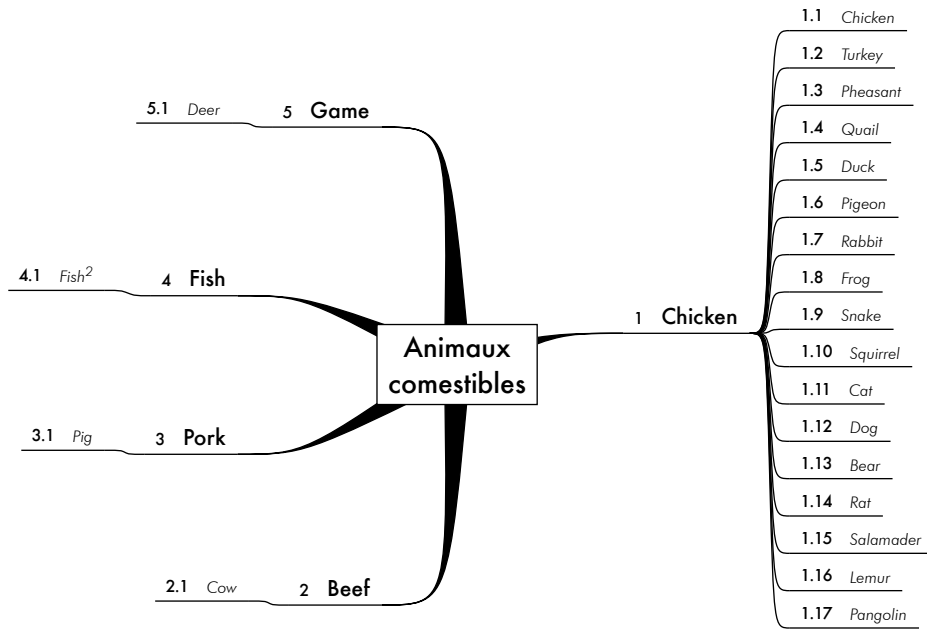
Not being a formal member of the scientific community, Travigne was likely unaware of the similar work already done by Linnaeus and his predecessors. And though scientific in

nature, his book was undoubtedly never meant to be an academic tome; rather, it was designed for practical use as a dining supplement, perhaps as a guide to selecting side dishes or wine. Nevertheless, his devotion to his recreational research and the meticulousness with which he carried it out make Travigne the archetype of the modern science-minded professional.

Method of Analysis

When analysing organisms, Travigne employed a strict, three-stage evaluation process. This process consisted of "l'essai de broche" (spit test), "l'essai de potage" (soup test), and "l'essai de pâté" (pâté test). The primary phase, the spit test, was the simplest procedure, as it involved merely skewering an animal lengthwise and roasting its flesh over an open fire. No additional flavouring or spices were used, with the only concession made being the removal of fur, feathers or scales. Once cooked to a satisfactory degree, Travigne would then peel off small sections of hot, juicy meat with his bare hands for immediate, on-the-spot taste testing. The second stage, the soup test, was somewhat more complicated. A 979 gram (2 *livre poids de marc*) sample was first chopped into finger-length pieces and browned in oil over high heat. It was then transferred to a large stock pot filled with approx. 2 500 ml (2.5 *litron*) of water, along with 1 medium-sized onion, 1 carrot and 1 leek. After being brought to a boil, it was left to simmer for 2 hours until the liquid was reduced roughly by half. Finally it was strained through a fine cheesecloth, and the contents of the cheesecloth discarded—only the

Figure 1. Classes and Species under Travigne’s Classification System



² Travigne was not a particular fan of fish, and therefore did not bother to distinguish between what are nowadays recognized to be separate and distinct species under the modern classification system. To Travigne, anything having gills was considered “poisson” (fish).

broth was to be consumed in this stage. The third and final phase, the pâté test, involved sautéing a 489.5 gram (1 *livre poids de marc*) sample in garlic, onions, and butter for 7 minutes. The mixture was next finely chopped and blended with Cognac and Madeira, and then pressed into a buttered mould. Chilled and left overnight in a tightly sealed container, it was eaten the next day after spreading it on toasted bread.

Observations

After each stage of the evaluation process, Travigne wrote down detailed notes of his impressions. It was here that he put to use his experienced palate, describing in words the subtle

variations in texture and flavour that existed between one species and another. Later, after thorough review and comparison of his notes, he arranged each animal type into one of five distinct classes, as shown in figure 1. We can see that under Travigne’s system, the vast majority of animals belonged to a single class, namely, *Poulet* or “chicken”. It can also be observed that although initially Travigne limited himself to domesticated or indigenous species, as time went on, he gradually began to branch out into foreign and other specimens.

It should be noted that *Animaux comestibles* never reached a finished state; it was a work in progress, under

constant revision throughout most of Travigne's adult life. His notes also indicate that as the number of tested and classified species began to grow he had considered grouping them into sub-classes based on the tenderness or dryness of the meat. For example, one such sub-class was to include turkey and bear, among others. Sadly, these ideas were never fully formalised, as Travigne passed away at the young age of 27 due to inflammation of the brain. This is now believed by medical historians to have been caused by the ingestion of common garden slugs, known carriers of a lung worm parasite causing eosinophilic meningitis. One can only presume Travigne was at the time expanding his research to include the more exotic species; alas, no indication is given in his notes as to which class he thought this organism should belong.

Conclusion

Today's system of biological classification has remained largely unchanged since its inception over two centuries ago. Recent years, however, have seen a flurry of new ideas gain increasingly wider acceptance among the scientific elite. Travigne's method of classification, though by no means new, demonstrates a simple logic that is worthy of reconsideration. Though critics might denounce its theoretical basis by alleging that taste is the most subjective of the senses, one could equally argue that it is also the most discerning. The system of Louis Travigne presents us with a concise yet viable alternative that demands a second look.

References

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