Homonyms, Synonyms, Cant, and Confusion

F. F. Peterson

One of the most delightful aspects of soil surveyors is their predilection to puns. Some professions are so dreadfully serious, even to the point of self-certification, that they can't play with words much less invoke irony. I feel that way on days that my liver acts up. Perhaps it was an early infection with puns (e.g., a recent one alluding to medical pompousness, “there are academic soil scientists and practicing soil scientists”), or it may have been field parties chortling over having slipped a name past bow-tied eminences in Washington (e.g., the Fugawee series), but whatever, peoples’ uses of words intrigue me. Indeed, I have been caught in enough of my own malapropisms that I find great satisfaction in pointing out others’ errors. Today I feel liverish, so let me write about series and consociations, identifying and classifying, and taxon and taxonomic unit.

Several years ago, I was in a workshop assessing reconnaissance soil surveys. We wanted to talk about low intensity surveys that (1) have map units with delineations within which there is only one named kind of soil or miscellaneous area, as well as having (2) the familiar soil-association map units with two or more named components. For interpretations, the location of the named soil body is secure for mono-component delineations, but somewhat vague for the components of soil-association delineations. Kind of map unit, in this sense of number of components, is as important as, and is a separate problem from the categorical level at which the components are identified or their phasing. At that time, reconnaissance soil surveys (i.e., Order 4) had already been made in Nevada using phases of soil Families to identify the soils. When we tried to write a general description of the kinds of map units used in different kinds of soil surveys—not to speak of generalized soil maps—we could not name map units with mono-component delineations because in the cant, or jargon, of the day these were called series map units in comparison with soil complex and association map units. This was a homonymous use of the word series, with the meaning of mono-component rather than taxonomic category or class of such a category. But it was also jargon, since soil identification at the Family, Subgroup, etc., levels is also possible. Some few have even extrapolated from this jargon usage to the claim that we shouldn't map with soil identifications above the Series category! Now, many puns are based on homonyms (the same word having different meaning in different contexts), but those are meant to be humorous.

1 Plant Soil Water Science Division, University of Nevada-Reno.