Bulmer, Ralph. 1985. Trees, grerbs, wugs, snurms and quammals: The new universal natural history of Cecil H. Brown. Journal of the Polynesian Society 91(4): 431–37.

This is a somewhat critical review of Brown's 1984 book, *Language and Living Things: Uniformities in Folk Classification and Naming*. RB notes that CB "seems set to become the George Peter Murdock of cognitive anthropology, dedicated to the discovery o funiversals in human classification and building up a vast cross-cultural data bank in aid of this project" (431). This is the "first book-length attempt to survey folk-biological classifications on a global scale and come up with general statements as to how human beings categorise plants and animals" (431).

CB presents five broad classes of plants, and five broad classes of animals:

Plants

trees

grerbs

grasses

vines

bushes

Animals

fish

birds

snakes and/or worms

wugs (i.e., insects and other miscellaneous little creatures)

mammas (a class extended to include other terrestrial quadrupeds of significant size)

RB states that CB is "at best half-right. His generalisations about plant classifications seem better supported than those about classifications [432] of animals; and even ini respect of plant categories, his historical speculations should be treated with reserve" (431–2).

The crux of CB's analysis is that there are discontinuities in nature and thus

"an inevitable tendency, over time, for human languages/cultures to give formal recognition to these classes. It will be arued below that Brown's assertion that the groups he recognises form natural discontinuities ini is part erroneous, and that even where such discontinuities clearly exist they provide a quite inadequate explanation for the regularities, and irregularities, of human classifications" (432)

Brown follows Berlin in labeling the 10 classes, "life-forms". RB criticizes this in that while the majority of the 10 classes that CB proposes are indeed life-forms according to Berlin's criteria, some are lower level (generics): 'grass', 'snake', and 'fish'. Particularly the latter two in some societies contain only two or three named subdivisions. "Thirdly, Berlin et al. require that at least one of the immediately contained subdivisions of a life-form is named by a primary lexeme, meaning in practice that its name should not consist of the term for the life-form plus a modifier. In a minority of cases wehre it suits him to do so, Brown also ignores this stipulation" (433). Then RB notes the following, significant point:

Brown does, however, exclude from his tabulations taxa for which no named subdivisions are reported. These are often cases where certain kinds of, for example, grasses, have their own names while there is a further term which applies exclusively to the residue of grass forms which are not individually named. Brown refers to these cases as 'Incipient Life-forms' (433)

NOTE: that in this case a life-form is used to refer to items that are not individually named. This is an important consideration: certain life-forms (and perhaps generics) exclude named taxa that might in some circumstances be considered subordinate.

Another point that RB makes is that even though the discontinuities in fauna are more pronounced than those of flora, there is more universal agreement in upper-level floral divisions:

Yet, even among peoples speaking related languages and occupying adjacent territories with broadly similar faunal lists, there is considerable variation in the ways in which the animal kingdom is partitioned. If plants, which are in nature continuous, are partitioned by human languages in relatively uniform ways, whereas animals, which are in nature discontinuous, are partitioned very diversely, this surely suggests that there is a far greater measure of pan-cultural uniformity in human interactions with, and perception of, plants than there is in human relations with animals. In other words, while the folk-biological taxa which Brown surveys necessarily bear some relationship to discontinuities in nature, most basically they reflect culturally determined human interests and concerns and thus in innumerable instances the continuities and discontinuities of nature are at least partially ignored. (434)

NOTE: This is an important consideration. What RB claims is that it is not discontinuities that lead to commonalities in classificatory schemes but "culturally determined human interests and concerns". Later RB again notes that "the major folk-taxa applied to animals are very diverse" (435).

RB summarizes his view (and cf. to P. Dwyer's comparison of Berlin and Bulmer's taxonomies:)

My own view is that, while [436] acknowledging our debt to Berlin and Brown, we should take the concept of 'life-form'—and Berlin's other 'universal ethnobiological categories' (Berlin, Breedlove, and Raven 1973:215)—less seriously, and compare total structures of animal and plant classifications with as few preconceptions as possible about the content of categories, the llinguistic forms in which they are expressed, and the contexts of their application (436)

NOTE that this, again, is relevant to the less formalized approach of Bulmer, which seems more focused on culturally specific patterns of nomenclature and classification and less on deriving common taxonomic structures shared across all cultures and representative of a universal cognitive pattern of naming and classifying nature.

Finally, RB notes that Brown is also concerned with evolutionary patterns of nomenclature: "Brown's objective is not merely to set up universally applicable typologies for cross-cultural comparisons of a synchronic kind, but to establish regularities of historical sequence in the development of cultural categories" (436). RB calls Brown's methodology "dubious" and concludes that "the use for historical reconstructions of oversimplified and incomplete data on present-day systems of classification can only lead to even more oversimplified and distorted interpretations of the past" (436)

Finally, in regard to polysemy, RB does not accept Brown's assertion that in cases in which 'tree' and 'wood' are polysemous that 'tree' emerged and 'wood' was the original basic term. RB suggests that the direction of extension could well be in either direction.

RB concludes that Brown's work is "provocative and contentious" (437).