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Space to manoeuvre

Space. In the past months, I've heard scientists from several disciplines in multiple sectors from the United States, the European Union and Britain use this simple word to convey different things. None of the concepts involved could be described as exactly straightforward, even though the brevity of the word seems a proxy for certitude.

For example, structural biologists use it when discussing 'fold space', which could pertain to the number of shapes a particular protein can take on, the number of protein families, or the total number of proteins in the Universe (a different kind of space entirely). But industrialists use space to describe their strategic niche compared with those of their competitors.

Confusion grows when considering the word's usage in a structural genomics company. In these instances, it can be hard to tell if the chief executive is talking about the company's scientific strategy or its business plan.

I'm even less sure of the word's origins than I am of its precise usage in any scientific or business context. I suspect it started in mathematics or theoretical physics, then later crossed over into biology. This points to the physicist as the likely semantic vector. The theory makes some sense, as physicists dominated structural biology in its early days and also moved into the financial world, where the term's frequency is perhaps greatest.

Whatever the origins, the word's trajectory serves as both a linguistic artefact and a signpost. An artefact because its multiple uses suggest that science is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary. And a signpost because the varied meanings could serve as a warning about how difficult it can be for scientists in different disciplines and sectors to speak the same language.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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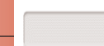
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