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IS THE ENGLISH *GUINEA PIG* A PIG FROM GUINEA, AND THE GERMAN *MEERSCHWEINCHEN* A PIGGY FROM THE SEA?, OR TWO OLD PROBLEMS REVISITED*

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Abstract

The old problem of the origins of the English name *guinea pig* is discussed here in the context of its equivalents in some other European languages (one of them being German *Meerschweinchen*). Some new suggestions concerning both components of the English name and the original meaning of the German designation are made.

There can be of course no doubt that the modern English syntagm *guinea pig* consists of *Guinea* and *pig*. However, one cannot but wonder why this small animal, so utterly different from a pig, is nevertheless called a pig, as well as why it should be a pig from Guinea if it does not live in Guinea at all. Unfortunately, the answer given by English etymologists is not entirely satisfactory.

The most discussed question is that of *guinea*. Although this problem is still not really settled even today it nevertheless seems to be easier than the question of why this rodent was once called a *pig*.

A story can sometimes be heard that the element *guinea* was never intended to indicate the original habitat of the creature but referred instead to the name of a gold coin that was called a *guinea* because the gold used to mint these coins originated in

* I am grateful for the critical remarks of two anonymous reviewers, and very especially to one of them.

the West African country of that name. One guinea was supposed to have been the traditional price for the small rodent hence the *one-guinea pig* became the *guinea pig*. The story looks very much like a folk-etymological explanation and, besides, seems never to have been supported by specific data excerpted from historical documents and corroborating the suggested price.

A far more realistic idea seems to be as follows. *Guinea* was a name well-known in the Isles. The guinea pig, however, did not live in Guinea but in South America, specifically in Guyana. But the name *Guyana* was not well-known in the Isles. Thus it is a very plausible conjecture that the well-known word was substituted for the barely known one so that the syntagm *guinea pig* is a disguised version of **Guyana pig* ~ **Guiana pig*.¹ There is, however, a snag: if one asks for documentary attestation of **Guyana pig* one draws a blank – there is none.

This being the case, one is inclined to accept another explanation that runs as follows. Some English traders sailed from Guinea to South America and then came back to England. They were called *Guinea men* and the small rodent they brought from America was therefore called a *guinea pig*.² The “Third College Edition of Webster’s New World Dictionary of American English” assesses this explanation as believable but “[o]ther dictionaries pass over the matter in silence”, says David L. Gold (1996: 133) and closes this section of his article with a sincere statement: “I have no opinion”.

In the 2009 CD-ROM edition of the OED (being identical with OED 1989) the “*Guinea men* etymology” is not mentioned at all. Instead, the “*Guiana* etymology” is rejected without counterarguments (“Confusion with *Guiana* seems unlikely”), and the following possibilities are given: “Perh. the animal was thought to resemble the young of the Guinea Hog (*Potamochoerus*); or the name *Guinea* may have been applied loosely, as in some other instances, as a designation for an unknown distant country”.

The comparative status of both words (*guinea* and *pig*) is not identical because the animal is called a pig also in quite a few other languages (e.g. German *Meerschweinchen*, Danish *maršvin*, French *cochin d’Inde*, Polish *świnka morska*, Portuguese *porquinho-da-índia*, and so on) whereas the association of the ‘pig’ with Guinea (or Africa, in general) seems to be typical of English only (barring some calques like Dutch *Guinees biggetje* and Turkish *Ginedomuzu* [*<* Turkish *Gine* ‘Guinea’ + *domuz* ‘pig’]).

Two other peculiarities of non-English names should also be mentioned. First, there is no difference between ‘guinea pig’ and ‘harbour porpoise’ (hereinafter called just ‘porpoise’) in Danish, both are called *maršvin* (the word already known in Old Nordic; cf. also English *mereswine* for ‘porpoise’, and the Polish reflex of the Germanic word: *moršwin* ‘porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*)’). Second, in (West) Flemish, a guinea pig is called *Spaansche ratte* ‘Spanish rat’, which means that it is

¹ This suggestion was made, e.g. in Chambers 1872: “prob. a mistake for *Guiana-pig*”; however, see fn. 2.

² This explanation is accepted in modern editions of Chambers’s dictionary; however, see fn. 1.

associated with neither 'Guinea' (or 'India' like in French and Portuguese) nor 'pig'. Incidentally, the association with the rat appears far easier to understand than that with the pig. A serious question is, however, whether these two peculiarities point to important facts that can be used as explanatory arguments. In my opinion, this is actually the point: Two hints are hidden in Danish *marsvin* and Flemish *Spaansche ratte*. We shall return to these shortly.

Let us move on now to the German name *Meerschweinchen* (< *Meer* 'sea'; *Schwein* 'pig, swine'; *-chen*, a diminutive suffix) 'guinea pig'. The fact that this word once had also two synonyms, viz. *Meerschweinlein* (DWB s.v. *Meerschwein*; lit. *Meer*+*Schwein* [exactly as in *Meerschweinchen*] + *-lein*, a diminutive suffix [functionally parallel to *-chen*]) and *Meerferkel* (OE s.v. *Meerschweinchen*; lit. *Meer* 'sea' + *Ferkel* 'piglet') confirms us in our belief that our understanding of the morphological and etymological structure of this word (i.e., *Merr*+*Schwein*+*chen*) is correct. Nevertheless, one detail disrupts harmony: another morphological division is also possible, namely: *Meerschwein*+*chen*. This may appear to be nothing but a word formation game without any practical meaning. In reality, however, the other morphological division is something more than a pure demonstration of possibilities.

German *Meerschwein(chen)* 'porpoise' exactly corresponds to the Danish word *marsvin* id. and the latter word can, in addition, mean 'guinea pig'. The same polysemy is also found in the older German word *Meerschwein* that displays as many as four meanings: '1. porpoise; 2. guinea pig; 3. porcupine; 4. capybara'. This may appear a little strange at first glance but a closer look proves very revealing.

First, concerning their habitat, these animals can be divided into three groups: (a) porpoises living exclusively in water; (b) capybaras, which are semi-aquatic, i.e. they spend only some of the time in water, living primarily on land; (c) porcupines and guinea pigs which are exclusively terrestrial.

Second, capybaras do recall pigs when grazing on grasslands. This resemblance appears to be readily observed because it manifests itself in various languages, cf. for instance English *water pig*, French *cochon d'eau* and German *Wasserschwein* (incidentally, this German word was also used to denote '1. dolphin; 2. tapir; 3. hippopotamus; 4. roundworm' which means that, on balance, the German *Wasserschwein* once had, including a 'capybara', five meanings, see DWB).

Third, porcupines also live on land. Their resemblance to pigs does not at once strike the eye. Nonetheless, they are sometimes called *quill pigs* in American English and *porc-éspin* in French.

All these facts make possible some etymological observations:

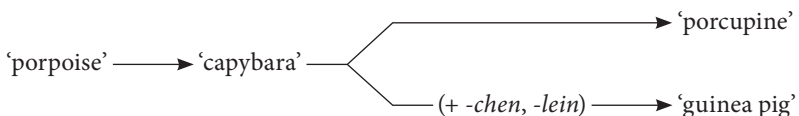
1. The oldest and probably original (that is, not the morphological-etymological but, instead, the oldest real) meaning of the German *Meerschwein* and Danish *marsvin* was 'porpoise'.
2. German *Meerschwein* 'porpoise' was an adequate name for capybaras, too, that actually are semi-aquatic animals and resemble pigs (in this context, cf. also English *porpoise* < French *pourpois* id. < Latin *porcopiscus* < *porcus* 'pig' + *piscus* 'fish'). The semantic change was only possible because *Meerschwein* was

morphologically transparent. It was its etymological meaning «sea pig» that served as a starting point of the change, i.e. «sea pig» > ‘capybara’ (rather than ‘porpoise’ > ‘capybara’).

3. Next, a few parallel semantic changes followed. The meaning ‘capybara’ yielded both ‘porcupine’ and ‘guinea pig’. In both cases the German diminutive suffix *-chen* (or *-lein*) was added in order to better differentiate between the older (‘capybara’) and the newer (‘guinea pig’) meaning. Thus, the correct morphological analysis should be: *Meerschweinchen* < *Meerschwein+chen* (rather than: < *Meer+Schweinchen*), that is: a *Meerschweinchen* etymologically is a ‘quasi-*Meerschwein*’ (not a ‘small *Meerschwein*’, contrary to what later calques suggest, cf. Polish *świnka morska* [< *świnka* ‘piggy’ + *morska* ‘nautical, marine, sea (adj.)’]; the German word *Meerferkel*, too, points to an etymologically incorrect interpretation because the use of *Ferkel* ‘piglet’ was only possible if *Meerschweinchen* was perceived as *Meer+Schweinchen*). By contrast, German *Meerschweinlein* is a correct guise, to be understood as *Meerschwein+lein*, i.e. a diminutive parallel to *Meerschwein+chen*.
4. Guinea pigs are admittedly much smaller than capybaras (even if both species are close relatives, in genetic terms). Besides, guinea pigs do not live in water. Thus, the semantic change of ‘capybara’ > ‘guinea pig’ was apparently based on some other characteristic features. There were probably two: (a) they both seek for eatable plants in that they walk around with lowered head, i.e. they display similar foraging patterns, and (b) they have both a coat of hair.
5. The reasons for the ‘capybara’ > ‘porcupine’ change appear less self-evident. The most striking difference between these animals are the porcupine’s quills because the capybara has none. However, it needs to be pointed out that the quills mostly lie flat on the body unless the porcupine feels threatened, a fact that makes “the most striking difference” between them and capybaras remarkably less substantial.

In addition, the contour and the size of capybaras and those of porcupines, as well as the general impression they make on the observers must have made the “hair or quill difference” rather unimportant because both species have been associated with pigs in various languages, cf. for instance: ‘capybara’ = English *waterpig*, French *cochon d’eau*, Dutch *waterzwijn*, German *Wasserschwein*; ‘porcupine’ = English *quill pig*, French *porc-épin*, Dutch *stekelvarken*, German *Stachelschwein*.

6. The evolutionary chain of the semantic changes in German presumably was as follows:



7. Concerning Polish *świnka morska* ‘guinea pig’ = Russian *morskaja svinka* id. and German *Meerschweinchen* id. (all three lit. ‘sea piggy’) a hypothesis can

sometimes be heard that the original meaning was approximately *‘oversea(s) piggy’ rather than just ‘sea piggy’. This does not, however, sound really convincing. One can be quite sure that the adjectival meaning ‘oversea(s)’ would be rather expressed in a different way, namely by Polish *zamorski*, Russian *zamorskij* or German *Übersee-*. – See the Postscript below.

8. The English term *guinea pig* cannot admittedly be derived directly from any stage of the German evolution. A common element of both languages is the association with the pig. This is valid for French *cochon d’Inde* and Portuguese *porquinho-da-índia* as well. In these Romance names the word meaning ‘India’ certainly concerns America rather than India proper. If English *Guinea* can be identified with *Guyana* in this phrase, the English phrase is typologically almost identical with the Romance ones: «a pig, somehow connected with America».

However, guinea pigs are not known to have been called **Guyana pigs* in any Romance language. Spanish has *conejilio de Indias*, that is an ‘India(n) bunny’. Some other Romance languages are a little more advantageous to us: Portuguese *porquinho-da-índia*, Italian *porcellino d’India*, French *cochon d’Inde*, all lit. ‘India(n) pig(gy)’.

One thinkable suggestion is that Portuguese *da-índia*, Italian *d’India* and French *d’Inde* might have been incorrectly rendered as **Dindy* in English, and the whole Romance syntagms might have primarily been calqued as English **Dindy pig*. Over time the incomprehensible word **Dindy* was first changed into **Dinny*, and then replaced with the common word *Guinea*. Two facts seem to underpin this conjecture. First, two designations of this rodent are used interchangeably in the older Latin biological terminology: *Porcellus Indicus* and *Porcellus Guineensis*, so that the notions ‘of India’ and ‘of Guinea’ were apparently viewed as synonyms. Besides, the 17th century English spellings like ‘Guiny (Pig)’ (Gayton 1654: 179) and ‘ginny (pig)’ (Wilkins 1668: 158) can be both interpreted as “missing links” between (**Dindy* →) **Dinny* and *Guinea*. Nevertheless, there are too many question marks in this suggestion to look upon it as something more than a risky conjecture.

Or should we perhaps give more consideration to the Spanish *conejilio* ‘bunny’ (see above)? If one translates this Spanish word into English as ‘coney’ one is perhaps tempted to think of *guinea* as a corrupted form of *coney*. But how should then the whole Spanish syntagm *conejilio de Indias* be translated? This possibility, if tempting at first glance, in fact leads nowhere.

Did the *Jamaican coney*, sometimes referred to as *Indian coney*, take part in the formation of the *guinea pig* as well? Both animals are rather similar to each other; nevertheless, this possibility does not seem to have been etymologically investigated so far.

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From what has been said above two hypotheses seem to raise some hope for the future: the *Guyana* and the **Dindy* one. The latter one may seem adroit and clever but the lack of attestations of words like **Dindy* or **Dinny* reduces its value to that of an “original

conjecture without prospects". The same could be said of the *Guyana* hypothesis since **Guyana pig* is not attested either. We seem to have reached an impasse.

Nevertheless, some light probably can be shed upon our problem if one takes into consideration the origins of the English word *cavy* 'rodent of the family of *Caviidae*, including among others guinea pigs and capybaras'. This word is an English reflex of Latin *cavia*, being a disguised form of *cabiai* (ODEE), a designation taken over from the Carib language, called also Galibi, and belonging to the Cariban language family. Which means that these rodents actually became known to Europeans in an area mostly spreading across northern South America and called *The Guianas* in the English geographical terminology.

It is therefore possible that:

9. Both capybaras and guinea pigs became first known to Europeans in The Guianas.
10. No distinction was originally made between 'capybara' and 'guinea pig'. The modern reflex of this evolutionary stage is the English word *cavy*.
11. In the course of time the distinction was made in the individual evolution of English and German. The English introduced two new designations (a loan-word *capybara* and a compound lexeme **Guyana pig* ~ **Guiana pig* which will later evolve into *guinea pig*) without abandoning the umbrella term *cavy*. Contrarily, the German language preferred a semantic (and partially morphological) evolution. It first used the etymological meaning «sea pig» of the word *Meerschwein* 'porpoise' to name the 'capybara', and then added a diminutive suffix to produce the form *Meerschwein+chen* denoting a 'quasi-capybara', i.e. a 'guinea pig'. The further mental evolution was based on the small size of guinea pigs which suggested the meaning 'piggy' (*Schweinchen*) rather than 'pig' (*Schwein*) and, thus, the original *Meerschwein+chen* became a *Meer+Schwein+chen*. This change made justified and understandable the use of the suffix *-chen*; but, then, the word-initial *Meer-* and, by the same token, the semantics of the word became incomprehensible.
12. Another question is why this sort of *cavy* was called a *pig*. No final answer is as yet apparent but a suggestion can be made: The notion «pig» will have probably first been used for capybaras because they actually resemble "hairy pigs", especially while foraging. If this is correct the idea originally hidden behind the English expression *guinea pig* essentially is «Guiana quasi-capybara».
13. Considering the evolution discussed in [2] and [6] one may interpret the German word *Meerschweinchen* as an attempt at expressing the idea of a «small quasi-capybara that looks a bit like a porpoise».

Two common features characterise the English and the German designation of the guinea pig: the word *pig* ~ *Schwein(chen)* did not originally concern the pig and, instead, the invisible animal in the background, called the pig, was the capybara. The remaining features (such as semantic evolution and biological or geographical associations) are different in both languages.

Postscript

My sincere thanks for an interesting discussion go to Mirosława Podhajecka (Opole) who has called my attention to different attestations from numerous sources in various languages. It is of course out of the question to discuss all these records at length here. At least one thing, however, should be mentioned:

The fact that Polish *świnka zamorska*, lit. ‘overseas piggy’ is first attested in 1759 (DRUA, vol. 2: 602, s.v. *lapin des Indes*), whereas *świnka morska*, lit. ‘sea piggy’ (being the only name of this rodent in present-day Polish) only twenty years later, that is in 1779 (Kluk 1779: 84) does not necessarily mean that *morska* is a substitution for *zamorska*. A time gap of only twenty years is, in my opinion, too short for such an inference. Another process seems equally possible: (a) The Polish form *świnka morska* was the original translation of German *Meerschweinchen*; (b) The German word was etymologized in a way more or less similar to the statement in Adelung’s dictionary (1798, vol. 3: 141): “Es ist in Guinea und Brasilien einheimisch, und hat die erste Hälfte seines Namens daher, weil er [sic!] über Meer nach Europa gebracht worden, wo es hin und wieder zur Lust aufgezogen wird” – it can be seen here that Adelung, too, made both mistakes: he viewed *Meer* in this name as conceptually equal to *Übersee* and connected this animal with Guinea; (c) Polish *świnka morska* was, possibly under German influence, reinterpreted as *świnka zamorska* and the latter form, hypercorrectly regarded original and etymologically motivated, was (by sheer chance or, maybe, exactly because *this* form was regarded correct?) attested twenty years earlier than the truly original designation *świnka morska*.

An additional argument against the original character of the term *zamorska* is the fact that its German “proto-form” would have been **Überseeschweinchen* which is actually not attested in any source. The hypothesis that the German *Meer...* was translated into Polish as *zamorska* (instead of *morska*) is hardly believable and clearly teleological.

The above scenario looks much more complex and sophisticated than a simple substitution of *zamorska* by *morska*. The problem, however, is that the simpler explanation cannot be correlated with the German designation which cannot in its turn possibly be left out in the etymology of the Polish word since German is the most realistic conduit of transmission (Cariban [? → Dutch] → German → Polish) and very especially because the weird coincidence of using diminutives with the meaning ‘piggy’ in both languages can be best explained as a Polish translation of the German name.

A dictum usually attributed to Albert Einstein: “Everything should be made as simple as possible but no simpler” remains valid here too (even if Einstein never actually formulated it this way).

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