

It's filthy, stinking, lucky and rich

by Sabine Eiche

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In times of yore, when people told stories, they often gave the leading roles to animals, transforming them into the embodiment of certain human traits – the bee is busy, the fox is cunning, the hare fast, the tortoise slow, and so on. The pig is one of the few animals associated with qualities ranging from the worst to the best. Right now, around New Year's, some countries hail the pig as a celebrity, considering it a bringer of luck (more on that below).

Look in a thesaurus under pig and you will find a series of words, each of which has a specific meaning. Pig (from the Middle English "pigge") refers, strictly speaking, to the young animal. The name for the adult animal is swine, deriving from the Old English "swin." It's close to the German "Schwein" and also related to the Latin adjective "suinus." Boar is the adult male, sow the female. The word hog (perhaps of Celtic origin) signifies a castrated male swine. Pork, the term we generally use for the meat, comes from the Latin "porcus," swine. By the 17th century, porker was the word for a pig raised for food.

In various languages, pig, swine, sow and hog can also be employed figuratively to refer to people in a derogatory sense, alluding to their gluttony, greed, coarseness or dirtiness. As a matter of fact, such an application of the words was known already to the ancient Romans. For the poet Horace, "porcus" became a term of reproach against a glutton. "Majalis," castrated boar in Latin (and root of the Italian "maiale," the word for pork meat), was used in a disparaging sense by Cicero in his oration against Lucius Calpurnius Piso.

At some point, the German “Schwein” acquired a figurative meaning that is at the other end of the spectrum from gluttony and filth. It meant, and still means, luck, as in the phrase “Schwein haben” – to be lucky. The proper German word for luck is “Glück” (the English and German both derive from the Middle High German “gelücke”). Sometimes “Schwein” is used in German as an intensifier. “Schweineglück,” for instance, means great luck. Likewise, the word “Schweinegeld” (“Geld” is money in German) means a lot of money. When you say something costs “Schweinegeld,” you’re saying it’s very expensive. Stink plays a similar figurative role in both German and English. We say stinking rich (or filthy rich), meaning extremely rich – the German expression is “stinkreich.”

In German-speaking countries, the luck-bringing pig (“Glücksschwein”) is a star performer around New Year’s Eve. It’s especially popular on greeting cards and as confectionery. When I was a child, I’d see the old year out in the company of a pink marzipan pig. A version of the “Glücksschwein” made it to America – the famous pink peppermint pig, born in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., in the 1880s and still going strong.

Winston Churchill, who loved animals, once said, “I like pigs. Dogs look up to us. Cats look down on us. Pigs treat us as equals.” Now ask yourself, why would that be? Something to muse over as the new year begins.