

Spitten image: Etymology and fluid dynamics.

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## Spitten image : Etymology and Fluid Dynamics

Laurence R. Horn

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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*Spitten Image:*

Etymology and Fluid Dynamics

Laurence R. Horn

**spitting image** *n.* A perfect likeness or counterpart. [Alteration of *spit and image*, from *spit*, an exact likeness, as in *the very spit of*. . .]

—*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition, 2000

A child who bears a striking resemblance to a parent is frequently referred to as a ['spit \_\_\_\_\_ n 'Im \_\_\_\_\_ d \_\_\_\_\_] of that parent, orthographically represented variously as *X is the spitting image/spittin' image/spit and image of Y*. But which of these (if any) is the original representation, and which the altered form and imperfect likeness?

The versions above are far from the only candidates for the honor, as seen from queries to (and responses from) the "expert" witnesses holding forth at traditional and electronic podiums. Here is Rebecca Jones (1999) at the *Denver Rocky Mountain News's* "Wacky Question Research Center":

Is it "spitting image" or "spittin' image" or "splitting image" —and why?

—Norma Brown, Denver

We vote for "spittin' image." Some scholars contend the phrase is a corruption of the term "spit and image," meaning so-and-so is so much like someone else that he could have been spit out of that person's mouth. Others suggest that the original phrase was "spirit and image," as in "he's the very spirit and image of his father," identical in spirit as well as in looks. The latter seems a bit more genteel, don't you think? In any case, the *g* should be silent.

We return below to Brown's genteel alternative, *splitting image*, and the role of the silent *g*.

For the majority of language columnists,<sup>1</sup> *spittin' image* is a euphemistic alteration or "corruption" of the original expression, *spit and image*:

Dear Word Detective: I'm in the midst of an argument with a friend over the expression "spittin' image," meaning look-alike. He insists that the expression is "splitting image." Which of us is correct? What is the origin of this expression?

—Linda, via the Internet [End Page 33]

You are correct, although your friend's attempt to make "spittin' image" make more sense as "splitting image" (as if one person had split into two) merits an honorable mention. Your friend's version, incidentally, is a good example of a process known as "folk etymology," whereby an unfamiliar or seemingly nonsensical phrase, often very old, is altered slightly to make it more understandable in modern terms.

But the phrase is definitely "spitting image" or "spittin' image," meaning "exact likeness" and it's based on an earlier form, "spit and image," which first appeared around 1859. . . .

When we dip into the archives,<sup>2</sup> we quickly ascertain that both *spittin' image* and *spit and image* were antedated by the counterfactual verbal expression *as if X were spit out of Y's mouth*. (Here and below, material from the archives of the *Dictionary of American Regional English* [DARE 1985-] was graciously provided by Joan H. Hall; other sources include Stevenson 1948 [s.v. LIKENESS], Wright's *The English Dialect Dictionary* [EDD] 1961, Urdang 1985 [s.v. SIMILARITY], the *Oxford English Dictionary* [OED2] 1989, and Whiting 1989.)

*spit* as verb

two girles . . . , the one is like an Owle, the other as like an Urchin, as if they had beene SPITTE out of the mouthes of them. [Breton 1602, 5; cited in Binns 1898]

Now look I as like the Dutchman as if I were SPIT out of his mouth. [Houghton 1605, act 4, sc. 1; cited in Stevenson 1948]

My dear father, I know it is you by instinct; for methinks I am as like you as if I were SPIT out of your mouth. [Dryden 1668, act 5, sc. 1; cited in Stevenson 1948]

We are of our father the devil, . . . as like him as if SPIT out of his mouth. [Ness 1690, 1: 159; cited in OED2]

He is as like his father as if he was SPIT out of his mouth: said of a child much resembling his father. [Gross...

## SPITTEN IMAGE: ETYMYTHOLOGY AND FLUID DYNAMICS

LAURENCE R. HORN

*Yale University*

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A CHILD WHO BEARS a striking resemblance to a parent is frequently referred to as a [ˈspɪtən ˈɪmədʒ] of that parent, orthographically represented variously as *X is the spitting image / spitten' image / spit and image of Y*. But which of these (if any) is the original representation, and which the altered form and imperfect likeness?

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