

## The Cross-linguistic Spitten Image: Etymology and Fluid Dynamics

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Among the stock examples of popular etymology in language change regularly cited in the scholarly, popular and electronic press is the familiar expression for a child who closely resembles a parent (with metaphorical extensions to other cases of resemblance). Most professional and amateur lexicographers take *spittin(g) image* to be a folk-etymological reanalysis of an original *spit an(d) image*. Some, on the other hand, insist that the true source of the expression is, in fact, *spirit and image*, while smaller minorities opt for *splitting image* or *spit image* as the ur-form. It has even been maintained—with total, if misplaced, confidence—that the *spit* in question is the metal or wooden skewer for roasting meat.

If, with the majority, we grant the primacy of *spit an(d) image*, what remains to be explained is (i) why it is typically the FATHER who is the source of the ‘image’ in question (a pattern that persists into current usage as indicated by usenet postings), (ii) what spittle or saliva has to do with genetic transmission, (iii) what motivates the apparently redundant conjunction if *spit = image*, (iv) what phonological, morphological, and psychological processes yield the range of attested forms, and especially (v) why we find so many cross-linguistic parallels of this expression.

Yet another variant of our expression—*spitten image*, with a dialectal passive participle functioning as an attributive adjective—is occasionally acknowledged, only to be summarily dismissed as a “corrupted pronunciation” in the OED and elsewhere. I will show that dialectal, semantic and cross-linguistic evidence converges on the plausibility of *spitten image* as the actual source of the expression in question. I will further maintain that this figure—attested in a wide variety of languages—is motivated by the analogy between spittle and another bodily fluid visually and texturally similar to it but more directly relevant to the transmission of genetic material. The identification of spit = semen will be supported briefly with evidence from Egyptian mythology, Old Testament law, Talmudic commentary, classical French verse, urban legends associated with defeated German and American soldiers, and the history of English slang.