

# MIMICRY, IDENTITY AND LITERATURE

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*Abstract: I will show in the paper the relation between mimicry and biology, and medicine and I will emphasize the role played by mimicry in social and human relations.*

*"People both mimic and are mimicked in nearly every social interaction, though neither the mimicker nor the mimicked are generally aware of its occurrence. People mimic what they observe in others, including facial expressions, emotions, behavioral movements, and verbal patterns. In the current review we focus on the causes and consequences of mimicry. Specifically, what causes mimicry to occur within a given social interaction and what are the [downstream consequences](#) of such mimicry? We position recent developments in the context of prior findings in order to emphasize the current direction of mimicry research. Then we turn to the role of mimicry in social disorders and discuss how mimicry may underlie social deficits in these disorders."*<sup>1</sup>

*Keywords: mimicry, identity, literature, social interaction, evolutionary biology*

## Introduction:

"In [evolutionary biology](#), **mimicry** is the evolved resemblance of an [organism](#) to something else, often another organism of a different species. Mimicry may evolve between different species, or between individuals of the same species. In the simplest case, as in [Batesian mimicry](#), a mimic resembles a model, so as to deceive a dupe, all three being of different species. A Batesian mimic, such as a [hoverfly](#), is harmless, while its model, such as a [wasp](#), is harmful, and is avoided by the dupe, such as an insect-eating bird. Birds hunt by sight, so the mimicry in that case is visual, but in other cases mimicry may make use of any of the senses. Most types of mimicry, including Batesian, are deceptive, as the mimics are not harmful, but [Müllerian mimicry](#), where different harmful species resemble each other, is [honest](#), as when species of wasps and of bees all have genuinely [aposematic](#) warning coloration. More complex types may be bipolar, involving only two species, such as when the model and the dupe are the same; this occurs for example in [aggressive mimicry](#), where a [predator](#) in [wolf-in-sheep's-clothing](#) style resembles its prey, allowing it to hunt undetected. Mimicry is not limited to animals; in [Pouyannian mimicry](#), an orchid flower is the mimic, resembling a female bee, its model; the dupe is the male bee of the same species, which tries to copulate with the flower, enabling it to transfer pollen, so the mimicry is again bipolar. In [automimicry](#), another bipolar system, model and mimic are the same, as when blue [lycaenid](#) butterflies have 'tails' or [eyespot](#)s on their wings that mimic their own heads, misdirecting predator dupes to strike harmlessly. Many other types of mimicry exist.

## Etymology

Use of the word [mimicry](#) dates to 1637. It derives from the [Greek](#) term *mimetikos*, "imitative", in turn from *mimētos*, the verbal adjective of *mimēsthai*, "to imitate". "Mimicry" was first used in zoology by the English [entomologists](#) [William Kirby](#) and [William Spence](#) in 1823. Originally used to describe people, "mimetic" was used in zoology from 1851.

[...]

Mimicry is an [evolved](#) resemblance between an organism and another object, often an organism of another species. Mimicry may evolve between different species, or between

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2352154615000455>

individuals of the same species. Often, mimicry functions [to protect from predators](#). Mimicry systems have three basic roles: a mimic, a model, and a dupe. When these correspond to three separate species, the system is called disjunct; when the roles are taken by just two species, the system is called bipolar. Mimicry evolves if a dupe (such as a predator) perceives a mimic (such as a palatable prey) as a model (the organism it resembles), and [is deceived to change its behaviour](#) to the mimic's selective advantage. The resemblances can be via any sensory modality, including any combination of visual, acoustic, chemical, tactile, or electric. Mimicry may be to the advantage of both organisms that share a resemblance, in which case it is [mutualistic](#); or it can be to the detriment of one, making it [parasitic](#) or [competitive](#). The evolutionary convergence between groups is driven by the [selective](#) action of a dupe. Birds, for example, use sight to identify palatable insects, whilst avoiding noxious ones. Over time, palatable insects may evolve to resemble noxious ones, making them mimics and the noxious ones models. Models do not have to be more abundant than mimics. In the case of mutualism, each model is also a mimic; all such species can be called "co-mimics". Many harmless species such as hoverflies are [Batesian mimics](#) of strongly defended species such as wasps, while many such well-defended species form [Müllerian mimicry](#) rings of co-mimics. In the evolution of wasp-like appearance, it has been argued that insects evolve to masquerade wasps since predatory wasps do not attack each other, and that this mimetic resemblance has had the useful side-effect of deterring vertebrate predators.

Mimicry can result in an [evolutionary arms race](#) if mimicry negatively affects the model, in which case the model can evolve a different appearance from the mimic. Mimics may have different models for different [life cycle](#) stages, or they may be [polymorphic](#), with different individuals imitating different models, as occurs in [Heliconius](#) butterflies. Models tend to be relatively closely related to their mimics, but mimicry can be of vastly different species, for example when spiders mimic ants. Most known mimics are insects, though many other examples including [vertebrates](#), plants, and fungi exist.”<sup>2</sup>  
After presenting above the mimicry among birds and insects let’s continue with our list of examples:

The world of animals is also a good example of mimicry. Many animals and plants can easily imitate the appearance, the sounds and even the smells and behaviors of other beings. The most interesting example in this regard are the monkeys. They imitate so well our gestures that is almost surreal. For example, their physical appearance, which in certain circumstances is almost identical with ours: I refer here to their faces which show pain, joy, sorrow etc. just as ours. Or the way monkeys use different instruments to access food. They use small, thin sticks to extract ants, which for them are delicacies, from branches of trees or honey from honeycombs. They use these sticks just as we use spoons and forks. The next example is even more interesting. In the picture below we see two monkeys sitting one in front of other and patting each other and laughing of something. Science would say that this behavior is all about social bounding. But don’t you consider that they mimic a human discussion between two good friends who share a good joke together?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mimicry#>



(source: Internet. Google images: [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Two-sub-adult-males-of-geladas-engaging-in-a-play-fighting-session-The-phenomenon-of\\_fig3\\_325109842](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Two-sub-adult-males-of-geladas-engaging-in-a-play-fighting-session-The-phenomenon-of_fig3_325109842). Taken today 19.06.2025)

What about this one? A monkey playing with her baby just as human adults play with children.



(source: Internet. Google images: [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/An-adult-bonobo-female-playing-with-an-unrelated-infant-The-airplane-an-adult-lies-on\\_fig4\\_325109842](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/An-adult-bonobo-female-playing-with-an-unrelated-infant-The-airplane-an-adult-lies-on_fig4_325109842) Taken today 19.06.2025)

There are also other animals that mimic human gestures like dogs and horses.

Dogs can easily mimic us humans. They can be our playmates, our protectors as are the dogs used by the police forces, they can be wonderful nannies for small children and babies – the Internet abounds with short movies about dogs and babies. Dogs, due to their senses, can be even doctors alerting people about the imminence of a heart attack for example. They can, just as a human companion, bring different items to people who cannot move.

Horses too can save lives just as people do. They are usually an important part of the treatment for autism and patients with this disease have registered considerable improvement.

### **Mimicry and medicine**

The field of medicine evolved so much in recent years that different diseases can be treated by using mimicry treatments. For example, molecular mimicry can be used to create new cells in our body that are similar with ours replacing the sick ones. They can even stimulate our autoimmune system and fight different diseases.

There is a branch in the field of medicine that registered innovation in recent years and which uses mimicry: bioengineering. Its main objective is the development of new human tissue and even organs that can be identical with the original ones and in this way to save many, lives.

Bioengineering uses biomaterials which imitate human nature, and their composition is considered less harmful to our bodies than traditional ones.

### **Mimicry and people:**

As in the case of animals, we use mimicry every day. When we associate this concept with people there are different aspects that must be taken into consideration. We cannot exist as individual entities. We need other people around us to be complete. If we study our society, our cities, country and even the entire world we realize that mimicry is an important part of us individuals. For example, it is inevitable that in a community, a person, who although has his own identity and individualism and is proud of them, to mimic with other peoples around him just because, in his vision, are better than him.

In today's world where boundaries are melting away, we are free to go wherever we want and meet whoever we want. What I want to underline is the fact that it is a fine line between identity and mimicry. For example, if we travel in any country on this globe, we consider polite to have more information about their customs, culture and language so when we are there to be able to blend in easily. And this is fine we are appreciated. But when we mimic their customs and words and insert them in our own ones is it fine? Are we still preserving our own identity or we lose it? There is a term that is well known today: global language and in general is associated with English. Why? Simply because everybody knows English sometimes even better than their own languages. The reasons for this situation are different: historical, social, economic etc.

Let's take into consideration the historic aspect. Linguists have attentively studied the struggle for identity in what concerns different languages. Let me be more exact: the British Empire is responsible for the loss of identity of many conquered territories. There are many studies about the effects of colonization and the way it affected people and territories. Even today these effects are still visible. There are countries, like India for example, where language is a combination between English words and Indian dialects. And the examples can continue with countries that are British ex-colonies where cars circle on the right part of the road instead of left as it would be normal. Or cities where buildings instead of preserving their identity are mimicking the English ones. Let's take our example. We, Romanians, although having a wonderful culture and language mimic and love other cultures customs. We love fast food although our own cuisine is appreciated everywhere for being tasty and healthy, we use many English, American words when we speak Romanian because we consider this blend more interesting than our own language and we replace our traditional celebrations with foreign ones. One more aspect related to mimicry and language: as I said before knowing another language or customs when we go somewhere is considered a sign of respect for the people we meet. But when there is too much use of those words and customs something is not right. We need to know the boundaries between identity and individualism and mimicry in a degrading aspect.

### **Mimicry and literature**

There are many authors which considered the subject of mimicry as an important part of their literary activity. In their books, travel logs, biographies they analyzed subjects as colonialism, post-colonialism, identity, hybridity and mimicry.

There are some important aspects related to mimicry that can be seen in these works:

1. "Mimicry can serve as a form of resistance, allowing colonized individuals to subvert the authority of colonizers while appearing to conform.

Mimicry functions as a form of resistance by allowing colonized individuals to adopt aspects of the colonizer's culture while simultaneously exposing the contradictions inherent in colonial authority. By mimicking their oppressors, colonized subjects can reveal the absurdity

of colonial dominance, using imitation as a tool for critique. This strategy creates a space where the colonized can assert their agency, complicating the simplistic view of absolute colonial control.

2. The concept of mimicry highlights the ambivalence of colonial power; colonizers often feel threatened by the very imitation that they promote.
3. In literature, mimicry can be used to critique colonial attitudes by revealing the contradictions in how colonizers view themselves versus how they view those they colonize.

The concept of mimicry challenges traditional notions of colonial authority by demonstrating that power is not simply imposed but is also contested through acts of imitation. By mimicking colonial behaviors and languages, colonized subjects expose the inherent instability within colonial rule, illustrating that authority relies on constant reinforcement. Furthermore, mimicry complicates representation in literature; it shows that identities are not fixed but are shaped through complex interactions between different cultures, ultimately questioning who holds the power to define identity.

4. Mimicry is not merely imitation; it can create a new space for identity that is both shaped by and distinct from colonial influences.

The implications of mimicry on identity formation are profound, as it creates a complex interplay between assimilation and self-definition. Colonized individuals may adopt elements of the colonizer's culture as a means of gaining acceptance or power, leading to hybrid identities that blend both influences. However, this mimicry can also result in a fragmented sense of self, as individuals navigate between cultural expectations imposed by both the colonizers and their own heritage.”<sup>3</sup>

In **conclusion**, this concept of mimicry, although studied intensively recently, has still many aspects to reveal. It has ramifications in many fields and can be interpreted in so many ways that it will continue to present interest for scholars, researchers and historians for a long period of time.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://library.fiveable.me/key-terms/introduction-contemporary-literature/mimicry>