

ONOMATOPOEIA: THINGS THAT GO BUMP

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According to the Ninth Collegiate, onomatopoeia is the naming of a thing or action by a vocal imitation of the sound associated with it. There are more than one hundred onomatopoeic words in the Collegiate that exhibit this characteristic, identifiable by the use of the words NOISE or SOUND in the definition.

The purpose of this article is twofold: to suggest a taxonomy of onomatopoeia by relating the types of sounds depicted to the choice of vowels and consonants in the word, and to augment the Websterian collection with a large number of words for sounds that have been coined by comic-strip writers and illustrators from March 1988 to the present.

To avoid being overwhelmed by comic-strip material, I have limited the study to those sounds produced by inanimate objects, setting aside the many cries, grunts and other vocalizations emitted by comic-strip characters, both human and animal. However, this line cannot be drawn with as much precision as one would like, for there are many words coined to imitate such vocalizations as snoring, spitting, coughing, gargling, sneezing, sipping through a straw, vomiting, kissing, and the like.

Since comic strips often portray the misadventures of their characters, a large number of onomatopoeic words are required to describe impacts of the human head or body with its environment: falls, blows to the head, and the like. This has suggested a two-part division. This article describes the coinages associated with accidental (or purposeful) bumps, bangs and falls of both human and inanimate objects, including war and sports: things that go bump. The closely-related noises of friction and breakage are also included. A subsequent article will describe the coinages associated with the more-or-less normal noises of everyday life, in particular the technology associated with powered vehicles, appliances and common household objects: the daily grind. At the end of the latter article I give words for symbolic or faint noises that are rarely if ever actually heard.

Comic-strip coinages have been featured in *Word Ways* once before, in an article by John McClellan in August 1980; his listing of some 500 terms (from AAAA to Z-Z-Z) was alphabetic rather than taxonomic, and included vocalizations. In a related article, Maxey Brooke described how foreigners onomatopoeicize one very special sound, the barking of a dog, in February 1975.

Turning now to a possible taxonomy of onomatopoeia, the Ninth

Collegiate words relating to things that go bump or scrape (but not splash) are presented below in a two-dimensional array with the pitch (frequency) of the sound on the vertical axis and the duration of the sound on the horizontal. A third characteristic, the loudness of the sound, appears to be less often recognized by the definitions; sounds characterized as "loud" are indicated by boldface, and faint ones by parentheses. The duration of the sound is often characterized as "sharp", "explosive", or "abrupt" or, if more extended, "resonant", "sonorous", or "ringing".

Solid Objects Colliding or Sliding

	sudden		extended	friction
high	beep (cheep)			creak screek
	peep			squeak squeal
	(chirp)			screech
		plink	ting ping ding ring	
		(clink)		
	(tick)	click zip		swish
		clank	BANG CLANG whang	whoosh swoosh
			twang	
	(tap) rat-a-tat			
	snap	CLAP slap WHACK	CRASH	scratch scrape
	crack	clack		
	pop	flop		
	tonk W3	whomp	bong BOOM	
	tunk W3	clump whump		crunch
low		flump	thunk	

Using the definitions as a general guide, I propose a more specific taxonomy of sound pitch and sound duration based on the choice, respectively, of vowels and consonants. Most of the dictionary words are one-syllable, with an initial consonant (or cluster), a vowel, and a final consonant (or cluster). The vowels carry information about pitch, and, to some extent, loudness: E and I are used for faint high-pitched sounds, A for louder sounds of medium pitch, and O and U for sounds of low pitch that are neither especially loud or soft. The consonants carry duration information, for which I propose the following interpretations:

initial T B P C CR; final P CK T: abrupt, striking wood, ground, human or animal tissue

final NK: abrupt, striking metal

initial W WH Z: object rushing through air prior to impact

final NG: object striking metal which vibrates or resonates

final MP: less abrupt, object striking something yielding

initial CH R: less abrupt impact

second L (as CL FL): echoic impact (not abrupt, having a brief extent)

final SH: more extended impact; frictional contact

initial S SCR SQ; final CH: friction between solids

This taxonomy can be illuminated by turning to the much larger corpus of comic-strip coinages. Some effort has been made to place similar sorts of bumps and falls under the same heading. The comic

strips from which the sounds have been taken are identified by single lower-case letters (see Appendix for codes).

BLOWS TO THE HEAD OR BODY

fist THUMP n POW eh PUNCH c ZONK l CRUNCH e BAM ek CUFF b ZOT t
 WHAP h SMASH CRASH RIP k open hand SLAP jan POINK b WAP f SMACK g
 pat by hand PAT e
 club WHAM b WAP ~ rolled newspaper WHAP gl broom WHACK o tennis
 racket THWANG y chair SMASH BAM CRASH WHAM CRUNCH g frying-pan
 WHACK t doll WHAP p canoe paddle BONK f WUMF w board WHAP WHAPP p
 thrown objects: rock BAP c ZONK b ball BONK i golf ball BONK i ZOK b
 WHONK b basketball WAP s BONK m football BONK p baseball BONK cp
 soccer ball WHAK s can BONK t shoe WHAP g caviar tin TINK g alarm
 clock BONK g BOP g line drive POW p flower-pot [B-flat musical
 note] g frisbee BONK m mailbox door BONK p magnet CLANK b coffee
 mug KONK g
 head runs into: chandelier CLUNK-K t another head THUD s wall BANG j
 tree CHUNK g windshield THONK g ceiling THUNK b stop sign SMACK g
 soft objects as weapons: teddy bear WHUMP u WHOP g pillow WHUMP e
 powder FLIT h
 fingers mashed by window SLAM g by hammer WHACK l WHAM i

FALLS

head on typewriter CLUNK w head on table BONK j SPLAT k WHOP g
 THUNK k head on pillow PLOP m
 body on ground or floor THUMP n THUNK k THUD gln KLUNK np SPLAT g
 FWOOP q from great height BAM ch SSHHKKK j CRASH gh from sofa
 THUMP l baby falls WHUMP i weighted bird falls FLUMP b falls be-
 tween fence slats SHUNK g other falls THBOOM THWOK x pillow FOOF g

COLLISIONS

man-to-man (man-to-animal) fast KAPOW KAPOWW POW c CRASH WHAM l
 CRUNCH n slow BUMP p body-check BUMP p cat runs into man's knee
 BUMP g
 man hits object: football dummy ZOK b skier hits tree WUMP o BWONK q
 door SPONKK x WHAM cg wall BONK g CRASH h THWUMMP x snowbank
 WUMPH c mailbox KLUNK n ringside THWUMMP x car hits man WHAM f
 man thrown in trash BAM y safe topples on animal WHAM j
 dog's tail hits floor THUMP u dog jumps on man's head BOINK g

FANCY FOOTWORK

man kicks man BOOT jp BOOM jl WHAM l WAP c BAM h
 man kicks dog KICK g WHOK b PUNT g POOMP g BOOT g BAP c
 man kicks door BAM p car wheel KICK b rock BAP c soccer ball BOOT s
 football POONT q
 jumps on table WHAM g roach WHAMP WAP j bed STOMP k swimsuit STOMP k
 leaf pile FOOSH y down steps BONK c through ping-pong table CRASH o
 on mole tunnel STAMP o floor BAM k
 stamps foot STOMP g taps foot TAP cly hop across floor BOINK d HOP g
 tap-dancing TAPPITY gm tap foot TAP cly
 walking PAD j female shoes KLOP-KLOP-PA KLOP-P t

HANDS AND FISTS

fist hits back of chair BLAM l table WHAM ghij POUND j BANG n chair
 arm BAM k television set SMASH BAM k tape cassette BAM k spider
 SQUISH g beetle BAM e wall BANG t
 knocks on door KNOCK ghjmnstwz BANG m BAM BAMMITY BAMB m NOK NA-NOK
 NOG q RAT-A-TAT-TAT n WWHING WHAM m knock on wall KNOCK g

slap hands SLAP m high-five SMACK k SLAP l
 clap hands CLAP acdigklsy hit ketchup bottle POONK l
 shoe falls into hand CLUNK c
 pat hand PAT e stomach PAT g chest PAT g lap PAT - thump chest
 THUMP g
 tap finger on chair arm TAP n table THUMPA s electric shaver TAP i
 flick spider FLINK g bird's back TAP g tap metal newspaper TANG y

OBJECTS FALLING TO GROUND

thrown down: food dish PLOP g box KLUNK g cards FLAP h blocks KLUNK i
 toppled over: privy SPLAT b chair SPLAT k WHAM l table BONK c lamp
 BAM CRACK h CRASH hy coat box CLOMP q teddy bear PLOP g blocks
 CRASH s anvil CLANG s bar stool CRASH h canvas backdrop FWHOOOMP d
 toy airplane BONK s salt block KLUNK b pebble GRUNGE b coin TING g
 toy from cereal box CRASH g styrofoam blocks CLUNK s cat dish
 CLOP g golf ball on stairs KLUNK i cans in grocery sack CLANK CLUNK t
 pile of dirt PLOP s pile of paper into wastebasket WOMP k pile of
 paper onto desk FWOMP k one piece of paper into suggestion box
 SPLUCK b drinking glass BONK j acorns CLICKETY g clam hits rock
 BONK b bounces to ground BLAP b ice cubes TINK g platter of dishes
 CRASH BOING CLATTER SLOSH e muffin PLOP k can CLINK m carrot PLUNK b
 large sheet of wood WHAP g fake "moon" on backdrop CRASH g

COLLIDING OBJECTS

car crash GRUNTCH c at slow speed WAK-K t shopping cart hits car KLUNK t
 animal life: bat hits penguin BAT j club hits cockroach WAM l hits
 snake WHAM b hits spider WHANG b spray can hits bug KRONG g news-
 paper hits spider WHAP g newspaper hits bug WHAP g ball hits turtle
 THUNK b bird hits kite BONK b falls to ground KLUNK b
 hammer stake in ground WACK h nail to board BANG h BAM o nail to wall
 WHAM b to fix leak BANG CLANG y BANG n geological hammer on rock
 TINK b general hammering BAM y POW y gavel on table BAM d
 bat hits doll WHAP y club hits tree WHANG b baton hits coffin WUMP f
 spatula hits potatoes WHAP j club of ham hits salad WHAM g spoon
 hits pan BAM k KLUNK i drum on pot THONKA s chair hits table CRASH a
 toy banged on floor BAM e poke umbrella in sand CHONK g
 thrown objects: rock hits wall WHACK e book hits television SPLAKKT x
 tuning fork hits piano CLUNK b fork hits table CHONK g ball hits
 wall WAP t teddy bear hits table WHAP g box into shopping cart
 CLUNK t slipper hits radio THWUNNK x phone at wall SMASH BASH k
 pillow hits bed BAM k hits wall WHOMP g
 toboggan hits rock CRASH c sled hits snow mogul FOOM l sled hits
 snowman WUMP c car runs over cow BUMP g unicycle strikes clam
 BONK b metal bar hits metal bed TWANGGG e metal tray hits table
 WHANG g cat bed slams into wall WHOCK g pots bang together CLANG g
 slamming doors: slam shut SLAM cgilmnoy SLAMB q SLAMMM SLAMM x slam

open SKTAMM x SLAM j car door W-WHAM t car hood SLAM o car trunk
 SLAM gt car door hits another car door BANG SCUR-ATCH t slam phone
 down SLAM jkl BLAM k BAM k

COLLECTIVE AGITATION OF OBJECTS

golf clubs in bag RATTLE CLANK b BB shot spilled RATTLE i coat hangers
 TLING g empty tin cans CLANK u dishes and pots in sink C-CLUNK-K
 SPLASH CLATTER CLAK t female bracelet and necklace KLUNK JINGLE KLINK
 KLINK-A t coins fall on table PLINK s empty bottles jostle CLINK n
 drinking glasses clink CLICK b CLINK w

BREAKAGE

glass: window by baseball CRASH o window CRASH ej window by brick
 CRASH a break bottle with teeth CRUNCH h bottle breaks in fall to
 floor CRASH o glasses shatter SMASH CRASH KISHHH TINKLE g
 arm breaks KRAK t eggshell cracks CRIKK g dog cracks bone CRRRAKKK u
 battering ram breaks door KRACK d file cabinet broken into SKAKK x
 plastic toy SNAP c scotch tape dispenser SNAP g dog collar SNAP g
 pencil CRACK SNAP b table top jumped on CRASH o CRACK g

SPORT SOUNDS

golf: ball hits tree BONK WHACK ZANG VAP ZORK b hits metal post CLANG
 BWANG BONG DING DONG KLINK b hit by club SHUNK b WHAP WAK POP WHACK i
 SLICE b WOK GOLF KRAK b POW p hits puddle SPLAT i hits pond
 SPLASH b hit by putter JAB b NOX KLIK t putts wrong FLUB e hit
 bucket of balls simultaneously KABLOOIE b clubs in bag RATTLE CLANK b
 archery: arrow (rubber tip) hits floor WAP c hits tree THOK h hits
 target THOK h
 baseball: ball hit by bat CRACK co WHACK o POW pt WHAP c ball
 hits ground BONK p hits turtle THUNK b hits man POW p tag base
 runner NAB b bunted BUNT b dribbled with bat BIPPITY BLAP BAP BOP
 BONK b hits catcher's mitt PLUNK t wet ball hits mitt SPLORSH
 SPLORK WHAP b ball hits fielder's glove THOK c PLUNK p PLOP i
 WAP c pitched ball WHOOSH b man slides into base SLIIIIIDE b
 basketball: ball in basket PLUNK p bounce on floor THUMP i
 football: kick ball POONT q referee whistle PHWEET e TWEET b
 croquet: hit ball with mallet WHACK c
 horseshoes: shoe hits peg CLANG d
 soccer: tackle CRUNCH n ball hits earphones PONK s kick ball BOOT s
 ping pong: hit ball with paddle POCK o
 bowling: ball nicks pin PLINK t ball in washing machine THUMP BUMP
 WHUMP o
 tennis: hit ball with racket BONK s hit cabbage patch doll THONK s
 frisbee: catch NAB b
 paddle connected to ball with elastic: BONG BOING j BAP e BOK c

WAR SOUNDS

battering ram breaks door KRACK d spear thrown in tree THUNK o arrow
 hits tree THOK h stones, arrows rain down ZAP ZING POW BOP h swords
 clashing CLANG h helmets bump together BONK BUMP CLANK CLUNK BING w

FRICTIONAL SOUNDS

car brakes hard SCREEECH j SCREEEEEEEE g SCREECH ijotb SCREE
 SCREEE t SKREEEE x SCREEEECHH c SCREEECH e
 unicycle brakes hard SCREECH b
 grocery cart wheels SQUEE SQUEEK-K SQEE SQEEEK SQUEEK t SCREE t
 door CREEAK s CREEEEEEEEAK j CREEAAKK c lid of mummy box OIEEEEEEEK g
 shoes SQUEAK g baby seat SQUEAK j visor on helmet REGEEK g
 pencil on paper SKRITCH b SCRIBBLE gl pen on paper SKRITCH bm carve
 letters on rock SKRITCH b window glass cutter SKREEEEEE g
 fingernails dug into floor SKRCHCHHH j cat slides down tree SCREEEEE g
 dog scratches fleas SCRATCH y scratches door with paw SCRATCH u cat
 stomach scratched SCRATCH g
 car door drags on sidewalk SCR-R-R-R-APE t drag box on floor SCOOTCH c
 slide into base SLIIIIIDE b slide down snow mountain SCHLOOP b
 push suitcase under airplane seat SQUISH SMASH STUFF WAD MUSH k
 tighten corset SCRİK g operate pepper mill GRIK-K t
 dig in ground DIG SCRAPE BRUSH c shinny up pole SHINNY b
 rip socks open RIP g rip sofa with claw SWIPE g rip bandages off
 R-R-RIP-P-P-P RIP-P-P t rip airplane skin RIP j rip door off refrig-
 erator RIP o rip swimsuit RIP k clothing RIP k RIPP h open enve-
 lope RIP j tear paper RIP bkm RIIIPP s book page RRRIP g tear book
 apart SHRED k bottom of paper bag RIP g ticket RIP b
 cut carrots CHOP k credit cards CHOP k paper CLIP jy SNIP gy CHOP
 CUT y cut thread SNIP y
 crush aluminum can SCRNNCH e crumple paper CRUMPLE l

APPENDIX

a Agatha Krumm b B.C. c Calvin and Hobbes d Doonesbury e BeetleBailey
 f The Far Side g Garfield h Hagar i Hi and Lois j Bloom Country
 k Cathy l Blondie m Momma n Andy Capp o Moose p Peanuts q Pogo
 r Tiger s Safe Havens t They'll Do It Every Time u Marmaduke
 v Gasoline Alley w Toles (editorial cartoons) x Spiderman y Grammy
 z Ziggy