ONOMATOPOEIA: THINGS THAT GO BUMP

A. ROSS ECKLER
Morristown, New Jersey

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 onomatopoeize 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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sudden</th>
<th>Extended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>high beep (cheep)</td>
<td>creak screak squeak squeal screech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peep (chirp)</td>
<td>plink ting ping ding ring sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(clink)</td>
<td>clank BANG CLANG whang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(tick)</td>
<td>click zip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(tap) rat-a-tat</td>
<td>(chirp) screech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>snap CLAP slap WHACK</td>
<td>(tick) click</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crack clack</td>
<td>(clink)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pop flop</td>
<td>plink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tonk W3 whomp bong BOOM</td>
<td>(tap)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cunk W3 clump whump</td>
<td>crunch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 CK; 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 K**: 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
- punch: ZOK, CRUNCH
- WAP
- SMASH
- CRASH
- RIP
- POT
- SMACK
- PAT

- club: WHAM
- WAP
- rolled newspaper: WHAP
- chair: SMASH
- BAM
- CRASH
- WHAM
- CRUNCH
- fying-pan
- dock: WHAP
- canoe: BONK
- WUMP
- tennis racket: THWANG
- chair: SMASH
- BAM
- CRASH
- WHAM
- CRUNCH
- fying-pan

- thrown objects: rock
- BAP
- ball: BONK
- golf ball: BONK
- ZOK
- BONK
- basketball: WAP
- SOX
- BONK
- m: football
- BONK
- p: baseball
- BONK
- cp

- thrown objects: rock
- BAP
- ZOK
- BONK
- i: golf ball
- BONK
- SOX
- BONK
- cp

- can: BONK
- t: shoe
- WAMP
- g: caviar tin
- TINK
- g: alarm clock
- BOP
- g: line drive
- POW
- p: flower-pot
- [B-flat musical note]
- frisbee
- BONK
- m: mailbox
- door
- BONK
- p: magnet
- CLANK
- b: coffee mug
- KONK
g

- head runs into: chandelier
- CLUNK
- another head
- THUD
- s: wall
- BANG
- j: tree
- CHUNK
- g: windshield
- THONK
- g: ceiling
- THUNK
- b: stop sign
- SMACK
- g: alarm clock
- BOP
- g: line drive
- POW
- p: flower-pot
- [B-flat musical note]
- frisbee
- BONK
- m: mailbox
- door
- BONK
- p: magnet
- CLANK
- b: coffee mug
- KONK
g

- 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
- 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: SSSHHKKK
- j: CRASH
- gh: from sofa

- THUMP
- l: baby falls
- WHAMP
- i: weighted bird falls
- FLUMP
- b: falls between fence slats
- SHUNK
- g: other falls
- THBOOMM
- THWOK
- x: pillow
- FOOF
- g

COLLISIONS

- man-to-man
- (man-to-animal)
- fast
- KAPOW
- KAPONW
- 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: BOWNK
- q: door
- SPONKK
- x: WHAM
- cg: wall
- BONK
- g

- CRASH
- h: THWUMP
- x: snowbank
- WUMP
- c: mailbox
- KLUNK
- n: ringside
- THWUMP
- 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
c
- TAMP
- 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 1 table WHAM ghij FOUND j BANG n chair arm BAM k television set SMASH BAM k tape cassette BAM k spider SQUISH g beetle BANG e wall BANG t

knocks on door KNOCK ghjnoonwz BANG m BAMMITY BAMM m NOK NA–NOK NOG q RAT–A-TAT-TAT n WHING WHAM m knock on wall KNOCK g

slap hands SLAP m high-five SMACK k SLAP 1 clap hands CLAP acdikgksy hit ketchup bottle POONK 1 shoe falls into hand CLUNK c pac 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 CLONK q teddy bear PLOP g blocks CRASH s anvil CLANG s bar stool CRASH h canvas backdrop FWHOOMP 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 GLICKETY 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 FLINK b large sheet of wood WHAP g fake “moon” on backdrop CRASH g

COLLIDING OBJECTS

car crash GRUNCH 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 newspaper 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 BANG 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 CHRONK 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 cider bear hits table WHAM w box into shopping cart CLUNK t slipper hits radio THUNNUNK 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 POOM 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 cac bed slams into wall WHACK g pots bang together CLANG g slamming doors: slam shut SLAM cgilmooy SLAMB q SLAMMM SLAMM x slam
COLLECTIVE AGITATION OF OBJECTS

golf clubs in bag RATTLE CLANK b BB shot spilled RATTLE i coat hangers
SLING empty tin cans CLANK u dishes and pots in sink C-CLUNK-K
SPASH 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 CERRAKKK u
battering ram breaks door KRAK 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 cop jumped on CRASH o CRACK g

SPORT SOUNDS

golf: ball hits tree BONK WHACK ZANG VAP ZORK b hits metal post CLANG
SWANG 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
SPASH b hit by putter JAB b NOX KLIX t puts wrong FLUB e hit
bucket of balls simultaneously KARLOOIE 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 BUM
BONK b hits catcher's mitt PLUNK t wet ball hits mitt SPLORSH
SPLORY 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 ball with hand NAB b
paddle connected to ball with elastic: BONG DOING j BAP e BOK c

WAR SOUNDS

battering ram breaks door KRAK 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 SCREEEEECH j SCREEEEEEEEE g SCREEECH i joth SCREEE
SCRREE c SKREEEEE x SCRREEEEEEHH c SCRREEECH e
unicycle brakes hard SCREECH b
grocery cart wheels SQUEE SQEEK-K SQEE SQEEEK SQEEK t SCRREE t
door CREEAK s CREEEEEEEEAK j CREEAAKK c lid of mummy box OOOEEEEEEEK g
shoes SQUEAK g baby seat SQUEAK j visor on helmet REEEEEK 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-RAPE 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 SCRRIK g operate pepper mill GRIK-K t
dig in ground DIG SCRAPE BRUSH c shiny up pole SHINNY b
rip socks open RIP g rip sofa with claw WIPE g rip bandages off
R-R-RIP-P-P RIP-P-P t rip airplane skin RIP j rip door off refriger-
ator RIP o rip swimsuit RIP k clothing RIP k RIPPP 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

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