



## BOONTLING: A LOCAL LINGO

Thomas LaBorie Burns\*

*ABSTRACT:* This paper considers a version of English known as "Boontling," an authentic oral folk art, developed at the end of the 19th century by residents of the area of Boonville, a small rural town in northern California, USA. This study concentrates mainly on Boontling's linguistic inventiveness in forming words. With a vocabulary of about 1000 words, the lexis is derived, by using the rules of English syntax and word formation, from five basic sources: 1) words based on proper names; 2) borrowings from dialects and foreign languages; 3) onomatopoeia; 4) metaphorical expressions; 5) ellipses and other linguistic transformations.

*KEYWORDS:* lingo; oral; local-language; word-formation.

In northern California, in and around the small rural town of Boonville, located about a hundred miles northwest of San Francisco, in northern California, exists a local "language" that is recognizably English but is nevertheless quite unintelligible to a visitor. It is called "Boontling," a composite word formed from "Boont," the local nickname for the town of Boonville, and "ling," from lingo, a language used by a particular class of people for special purposes, like a jargon. Boontling is not a current fad but has been used in that area for over a century, although it is now dying out. It probably started in the neighboring valleys in the 1880s, and reached its popular peak in the years preceding the First World War, when it is said that all the inhabitants of the area could speak or understand it.

Boontling is not, strictly speaking, a language: phonologically, morphologically and syntactically, it is English. Its distinctiveness, like

---

\* Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais - UFG

that of most local dialects and of slang, derives from its lexis, especially nouns and verbs, although pronouns and functional words like prepositions and coordinators are the same as in ordinary English. What makes Boontling of interest to both sociologists and linguists is the inventiveness and resourcefulness of the local people in developing its extensive vocabulary, its peculiar mixture of word sources, and the mechanics of its word formations.

Boontling has a vocabulary of over 1000 words and expressions, which makes it considerably richer than the slang of certain social groups. One important word source is the proper names of former local people who came to be associated with a thing, an action, or some distinctive personal characteristic. The words for these things or features were thus coined from their names, as can be seen in the following table:

TABLE 1

<i>Words Taken from Proper Names</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
barney	to kiss or hug
otto	to work hard
florries	biscuits
frathey	wine
walter	a telephone
jay esser	a law-suit
scottied	hungry
charley ball	to embarrass
charley brown	a pie
zeese	coffee
greeley	newspaperman
booker	a Negro
cy millered	confused

Note in this table that names can become verbs (barney, otto, charley ball), nouns (fratley, florries, walter, charley brown), or adjectives (scottied). Note also that the adopted names can be first names (barney, otto, walter), last names (fratley), complete names (charley ball, charley brown), or even just initials (zeese, jay esser). The last example shows how English word formation is utilized: the initials J.S. becomes "jay esser," with the -er suffix indicating agency, and the name Scotty becomes "scottied," with the -ed ending forming a participle.

The coinages relate to notable or peculiar personality features of the individuals named. Thus, Barney was very affectionate, Otto was hard-working, Flora made good biscuits, Frati made wine, Walter owned the area's first telephone, Charley Ball was easily embarrassed, Charley Brown always ate his pie before his meal, Z.C. ("zeese") was a cook in a hunting-camp, J.S. ("jay esser") Ornbaum was litigious. Local folklore does not extend exclusively to human beings, as can be seen with the anonymous street dog with a big appetite known by a nickname ("scotty") derived from his breed (Scottish terrier). Two examples given are derived, by extension, from the names of historical, not local, personages of the time: "a greeley" was adapted from Horace Greeley (1811-72), a nationally known newspaper editor, and "a booker," from Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), the famous African American educator and author. Sometimes instead of a personal feature, names have originated from a local narrative, as with the adjectival expression "cy millered." According to a local story, there was once a fire in town during which the firemen went by mistake to the house of someone called Cy Miller (the fire was somewhere else); hence, to be "cy millered" came to mean "to be confused." Names can also be combined with other coinages to make the expression more specific. For example, a telephone is a "walter," but a pay phone is a "bucky walter." Early nickels had a buck (male) Indian stamped on one side and so came to be called "buckies." This use combined with the old cost of a phone call (five cents), a "bucky walter" became a public telephone.

Like natural languages, Boontling has borrowed words from (English) dialects and other languages that reflect the local culture, as in Table 2:

**TABLE 2**

<i>Lexical Borrowings</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
slug (Yorkshire dialect)	sleep
chigrel (Scotch-Irish “chig” = chew)	food
celd’m (Scotch-Irish “old dame”)	wife
weech (Scotch-Irish “wee child”)	small child
yattin (Scottish)	talking
doolsey (Spanish “dulce”)	sweet
boo (Pomo Indian)	potato
treckin (“trekking”)	walking
hob (“hobble”)	dance
harp (“harp on” = talk insistently)	talk

Early speakers of Boontling spoke American English with a midland English and Scotch-Irish dialect background. Uncommon dialect words contributed to Boontling, as well as words borrowed from Spanish and the Pomo Indian language, since California was Spanish before being settled (or invaded) by people of Anglo-Saxon stock, and Native American before it was Spanish. Other words are derived from synonyms or lexically related words (“treckin,” “harp”) or such words morphologically modified (“hob”) or elided (“celd’m” and “weech”).

Another feature of natural languages that Boontling shares is onomatopoeia, words created from a conventionalized rendering of the imitation of sounds, as those in Table 3:

**TABLE 3**

<i>Word</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
1. buzz chick	baseball
2. bohoyk	laugh loudly
3. charl	milk a cow
4. spat	small calibre rifle

The sound presumably imitated by each of these words is (1) that of a pitched baseball striking a glove, (2) that of rustic laughter, (3) that of milk striking a milk-pail, (4) that of a .22 calibre rifle being fired.

In the following table are some figurative expressions in Boontling, vivid metaphors that have their origins in common expressions and in either familiar or particular narratives:

**TABLE 4**

<i>Word</i>	<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Probable Derivation</i>
horn	drink	horns were once used as cups
casters	eggs	easter eggs
glimmers	eye-glasses	to glimmer
region	farm	—
shark	deceive	cf. "loan-shark"
earth	truth	—
lockin	marriage	locking = firmly uniting
fencejumpin	adultery	to jump a fence
burlappin	making love	burlap sacks used as a bed
spill dukes	fight	dukes = fists
dusties	cemetery	dust, dirt

pike to the dusties die		= travel to the cemetery
featherleg	cocky (adj.)	cock, rooster
apple-head	girl-friend	?
log-lifter	heavy storm	wind strong enough to lift logs
can-kicky	angry	to kick a can (in anger)
bright-lighter	city person	bright lights
shovel-tooth	doctor	local doctor with buck teeth
bulrusher	stranger	Moses in the bulrushes
many steps	intelligent	cf. "to have a lot upstairs" = be intelligent

Some of these have a metonymic origin, like "casters" or "featherleg" (from the feathers of a cock or rooster). Others like "can kicky" (deriving from "to kick a can" in anger), use standard English word formation suffixes on metaphorical coinages, or are old slang words that were derived from standard English words ("glimmers"). The word "dusties" may be metonymic (the dust for burial) or an allusion to the words of the Protestant funeral service ("ashes to ashes, dust to dust"); similarly, "bright-lighter" may be metonymic or allusive ("bright lights, big city"). "Spill dukes" combines a slang term, "dukes" (fists, as in the expression "put up your dukes"), with a new metaphor ("spill" for swing). The meaning of some metaphors may be comically familiar ("lockin" for wedding, "fence-jumpin" for adultery), while others remain unclear ("apple-head" for girlfriend).

In other cases from this list of figurative terms, some local characters who have remained anonymous, in contrast to the characters of Table 1, have contributed a distinctive trait that has become a general metaphor, as is the case of a local doctor who had the physical trait of protruding front teeth, from which feature all doctors came to be called "shoveltooth." There are also metaphorical expressions that are allusions to local or literary narratives, like "burlappin" and "bulrusher." Apparently, a couple was

once caught *in flagrante delicto* atop some burlap sacks, hence the verb “burlappin” for the sexual act. “Bulrusher” alludes to the Biblical story of Moses, who was by tradition found by the Pharaoh’s daughter, abandoned as a baby in the bulrushes. Hence, a person of unknown origin, a stranger, is, like Moses, from the bulrushes, “a bulrusher.”

Boontling also has many designations for geographical features in the Boonville area, either natural or man-made, such as lakes, rivers, and mountains, on one hand, and houses and buildings, on the other. Animals also may be designated by distinctive features: a “blue tail” means a rattlesnake, since the tails of a species of California rattlers have this color. A distinctive feature of an animal or plant may also suggest a metaphor: “buckeye” means “to loaf,” or hardly work, since the plant buckeye was considered to be very easy to cut.

Perhaps the most interesting linguistic feature is shaped words, as in Table 5:

TABLE 5

<i>Word</i>	<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Derivation/ Shaping Mechanism</i>
gorm	food	<i>gormandize</i>
grayb	old man	<i>graybeard</i>
hairecm	dog	<i>hairy-mouth</i>
moshe	machine	<i>machine: machi-moshe</i>
pleeble	play ball	<i>playb(a)ll: playble-pleeble</i>
smalch	small change	<i>small change</i>
nonch	bad	<i>n(o)t much: nomuch – nonch</i>
tidrik	party	<i>tea dri(n)k: teadrik – tidrik</i>
skoolch	teacher	<i>school (tea)cher: schoolcher – skoolch</i>
skipe	preacher	“sky pilot” – <i>sky pilot</i>
pickem-up-billies	dirty socks	“Pick (th)em up, Billy”

The Boontling word may be an abbreviated form of a semantically related English word (“gorm” from “gormandize,” or eat heartily), an elision (“plecble” for play ball, “skoolch” for school-teacher”), or a combination of elision and metaphor or metonymy (“skipe” for sky-pilot or preacher, “haircem” for (hairy-mouth) dog), as well as other mechanisms, like cropping or adding syllables and shifting accents.

Historically, “harpin boont” (speaking Boontling) probably began as a game, with early inventors coining new words and expressions and trying them out on their companions. There was evidently a censoring process, since coinages had to be approved by listeners in accordance with what were considered the lingo’s rules or principles. From young men’s game to full-fledged lingo took a number of years, but eventually everyone in the Boonville area was using it as a kind of second language, especially suitable for talking about local, practical, every-day matters. Its restrictive or exclusive function made it useful also for discussions of taboo areas of experience and eloquent verbal insult.

As with adolescent or ethnic slang, Boontling was cultivated as a means of reinforcing group solidarity and excluding outsiders, and in this sense had some historically specific uses. The local baseball team could communicate verbally in Boontling with each other, while opponents had to resort to the customary baseball sign-language. Soldiers from Boonville who served in the world wars could write home and tell their friends and relatives where they were and what they were doing without having their letters censored by their military commanders, as was common practice for reasons of security during wartime. The two wars doubtless had a declining effect on Boontling, with the resulting mobile population in and out of the area and the reduction of the geographical isolation that contributed to the maintenance of a local lingo.

Nowadays, with the speaking of Boontling an artificially maintained art, a group called the Boontling Club meets to decide on any recent coinage – a kind of local, informal version of the French Academy. Like



any expression of local folklore that has lost its original inspiration, Boontling is doomed to its current decadence and eventual extinction. It has been studied academically, notably by an English professor at California State University at Chico, who compiled a Boontling dictionary and wrote a descriptive book (Adams, 1971), from which most of the examples here have been taken. After some national publicity, Boontling enjoyed a brief revival at home: it was taught to children in school and a course was given at a community college, but fluent speakers have decreased drastically in numbers, with the Boontling Club evidently the last bastion of fluency. Social change, especially the pervasive presence of the mass media, with their tendency to impose a homogeneous linguistic standard, has turned a once socially vital art into something merely quaint, a mere tourist attraction, which is perhaps the regrettable but inevitable fate of all authentic folk linguistic art.

**RESUMO:** *Este trabalho examina uma versão de inglês, chamada "Boontling," uma autêntica arte oral popular que surgiu no fim do século 19 entre os habitantes da região de Boonville, uma pequena cidade rural no norte do estado de Califórnia, EUA. Este estudo se concentra na criatividade do Boontling em formar palavras. O seu vocabulário de 1000 palavras se deriva, através das regras e normas de sintaxe da língua inglesa, de cinco fontes básicas: 1) nomes próprios; 2) empréstimos de dialetos do inglês e de outras línguas; 3) onomatopéia; 4) expressões metafóricas; 5) elipse e outras transformações linguísticas.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *linguagem popular; oral; formação de palavra*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

ADAMS, Charles. *Boontling: An American Lingo*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971.

\_\_\_\_\_. "A Wee Deek on Boont Harpin': A Brief Introduction to Boontling." [pamphlet] Boonville, California: Boontlingers Club, 1961.