INVESTIGATING BOOBSLANG
DIANA LOOSER

Boobslang (from boob ‘prison’), also known as boob jargon, is a type of argot used amongst prison inmates, defined by Greg Newbold in The Big Huey as ‘the jargon of the jail’. He adds, ‘Many of the terms involved in this language are specific only to prisons and criminal subcultures and will be unfamiliar to the person on the street’. A language of the underworld (initially known as ‘can’t’) originated in England during the 16th century and has long been noted as a characteristic of criminals and criminal subcultures—the language of pirates, beggars, highwaymen, convicts and, during the 19th century with the construction of what we know as the modern prison, prison inmates.

The words and expressions which comprise boobslang have accumulated over a number of decades from a variety of sources and are constantly being added to. This provides inmates with a colourful and varied vocabulary which may be used within the jail environment: to refer succinctly to everyday objects and persons; to convey emotions, beliefs and attitudes and to indicate solidarity networks and identities; as a ‘secret code’; and as a way of maintaining the complex systemic relations extant in the prison society. The usage of boobslang among inmates is dependent upon certain variables, being used slightly differently according to age, ethnic identity, crime, location and gender of the inmate.

During 1998 I carried out research into the vocabulary and functions of the ‘boobslang’ used by inmates at Paparua (Christchurch Men’s) Prison. This was an extension of two previous studies carried out in Canterbury prisons; Rolleston Men’s Prison in 1996 and Christchurch Women’s Prison in 1997. So far my research has collected about 1600 terms and their usages. Space will not allow a discussion of all these terms, but this article will describe of a number of terms which fall into various subject categories. The aim is to provide an insight into the nature of the colourful language used by prisoners at Paparua.

BOOBSLANG TOPICS

Boobslang words may be roughly grouped into seven main semantic categories which would appear to reflect main areas of interest or concern regarding inmates’ well-being or goals or significant things in their lives. These are terms for: places and procedures—places and procedures—is boob itself, meaning prison. As has been seen in the case of boobslang, boob can prefix many words, for example, boobgear for prison clothing; boob issue for an issue of toiletries; boob gun for a tattoo machine; boob glove for a characteristic prison tattoo giving the impression that the person is wearing a fingerless glove; and boobhead, a chronic recidivist, or one who prefers to be in jail rather than on the Outside. Other terms for places and procedures include big bird for a transfer to another prison by aeroplane, fish bowl or fish tank for the Control Room, work parade, which refers to the ordered positions in which inmates line up before starting work in the morning, and Bahamas for the pound (solitary confinement cell). Watching sky is another interesting term for being in the pound; this refers humorously to the view of the sky as seen through the mesh top of the solitary confinement cell, which is contrasted with being able to watch the Sky television channels. As there is no television in the cell, ‘sky’ is the only thing an inmate can watch.

The boobslang vocabulary also includes terms for authority figures. Although better known terms such as pig, filth, and heat are common, five-o is also used to describe a police officer; and headline is also used by some to refer to the police (from ‘po-LICE’). A prison psychiatrist is known as a trick cyclist or the google factory. Prison guards are generally referred to by the widely known term screw, but, interestingly, there are more terms for those officers who are either new to the prison or have just finished training, such as baby screw, schoolboy screw, prospect, new on the floor, rookie and scobe. The latter term is a blend of letters from two words: screw for prison guard, and probie, a white gang prospect still in training.

Boobslang also comprises a great many words and expressions to do with crimes and sentences. Lag is a general term used to refer to a sentence or to an inmate. Examples are big lag (life sentence or preventive detention), a wicked lag (any sentence over seven years, life, or preventive detention), and a bed-and-breakfast lag (a very short sentence). To knock your lag out is to serve your time in prison. Inmate terms include old lag, old lagger (someone who has been in and out of prison for years), and baby lagger or first lagger (someone serving their first prison term—usually a short one). A long sentence may be called the big Huey (Long), in reference to Governor Huey Long of Louisiana, notorious for his harsh sentences, and a life sentence may be referred to as doing the lot, all up, or the bitch. Preventive
detention can be black bitch because, as one inmate explained, ‘there’s no light at the end of the tunnel’. Words for crimes include armo for an armed robbery, tank for a burglary involving a safe (presumably from the usage of the bank, as you, simply to a safe), and code R and sour grape (rape). Terms for weapons are also frequent, including iron (firearm) and shiv (a stabbing weapon, especially one which can be broken off to leave the object inside the victim, for example, those made from glass or Perspex).

The makeup and structure of the inmate society are of central interest. Therefore, there are many words for types of inmate (decided either by personality, reputation, or criminal offence) and relationships between inmates. There are words for people who have respect, for example boss (someone who has respect but is not gang affiliated) and king pin (leader who has gained his position either from intimidation or from being in control, solving the problems), and for those who do not have respect, such as a frip, named of course by some as ‘anyone you don’t regard in the same class as you, especially someone who hasn’t done a lot of jail’.

INMATE SOLIDARITY

A very important aspect of inmate relations is solidarity. A person who breaks this by marking (informing to the authorities) risks serious reprisals. Once labelled a nark (informing on the grounds of ethnic identity, so terms such as flour bin (a Paketa); Bruce (an Asian—from Bruce Lee) and T.H. Lowry (a Maori) are in use.

Another boobslang category is concerned with terms relating to business activities. These ‘business activities’ generally involve trade among inmates in the prison and the movement of contraband between the prison and Outside. There are terms for money: bat for a hundred-dollar note, a brick and blue chips for a ten-dollar note. Lettuce for a twenty and tomato for a hundred-dollar note. A cockatoo is someone who keeps peg (keeps watch) for someone else, for example, in a fight, when doing drugs or tattooing. To charge something is to insert contraband into one’s rectum to hide and transport it, as opposed to checking, where contraband is not actually inserted, yet is held between the cheeks of one’s bottom (a safe), and code R and sour grape (rape).

The final two categories—gang-related terminology, and words pertaining to drugs and drug-use—differ slightly from the others in that they are largely ‘importational models’. This means that, although many of these terms may be spawned within the prison environment, or widely used within it, they refer to actions and interests of criminal subcultures outside the prison (i.e. gangs and drug-users) and have their ultimate origin and influence from these external groups. These terms are also more likely to be used on the Outside within these groups.

GANG TERMS

Gang affiliations give rise to terms such as dog for a member of the Mongrel Mob Gang. From this, the term kenneled is coined for a Mongrel Mob member’s cell—literally, in both cases, a house (cell) for a dog. As many gangs are set up on ethnic lines, with their ideology informed by racial prejudice, terms used for gang members tend to be racist in character or to describe racial aspects of other gangs. Usually, a gang trainee for a ‘black’ gang is a prospect, whereas a gang trainee for a ‘white’ gang is a probie. More descriptive terms such as light bulb heads, cue balls, nude nuts, bumpheads, pin heads and chrome domes derive from attitudes to Skinheads; to go ten skin bowling is a term meaning to beat up Skinheads. The term Oh One for a Skinhead has an interesting derivation: it comes from their characteristic expression ‘Oi Oi’ used as a greeting. When written in capitals OI OI (for example, as in the case of tattoos) it looks like the numerals zero one, or ‘oh one’. At a deeper level, a number may swear on their gang, for example, using the words, Straight up on Oi, or Straight up on the Mob. This implies an absolute word of honour, ‘like swearing on your mother’s grave’.

A large number of the terms gathered from the prison were to do with drugs and devices and ways of taking them. There are many examples, but some interesting ones include: blue lady (a glass syringe); blue lagoon (bangle prepared in a solution for intravenous injection; in the syringe it is a blue liquid); bones (tengemies, originally called Ts, then T-Bones, then just bones); elbow (a pound of marijuana, from ‘lb’ (el-bie) for pound); johnny dip (LSD—rhythmic slang for ‘trip’); Mr Miggles (heroin); opals (100mg morphine sulphate tablets—because they are pearly grey); rub-a-dub (used occasionally to refer to ascetic ahindred, an agent added to Class B drugs, for example, morphine, to turn them into Class A drugs, for example, heroin); and skunk (weed) (marijuana of very high quality).

VANGED ORIGINS

As with many vocabularies, boobslang does not originate from a single source. Because of the gradual accumulation of terms over several years from different people with different backgrounds, for different objects and procedures and for different reasons, these terms have an extensive variety of origins. Boobslang terms may originate from variants of pre-existing words, or may come into being as a result of outside (even international) sources and influences—hence, there is an element of intertextuality in the manufacture of prison slang terms.

Some changes include acronyms, taken either from current English or from boobslang. Examples include: B&A, which stands for brake and bit, rhythmic slang for fit, drug-users’ slang for a hypodermic syringe and needle; D.I.C. (Dick in Child—a corruption of Drunk in Charge) for a child molestation offence: ‘he’s in for being caught D.I.C.’; K.F. for Kid(die) Fucker, a paedophile; K.P. for King Pin, a leader who has gained his position either from intimidation or from being in control, the one who solves any problems; and occasionally for Kackle Pants, a satiric derivative of King Pin, an inmate who thinks he is in control when he is not; S.N.U. from Special Needs Unit, for mentally unbalanced or potentially suicidal inmates, and from this S.N.U. material, a mad or deranged person.

RHYMING SLANG

A significant proportion of boobslang terms, especially those used by older inmates with past prison experience, has rhythms slang origins. The commonest form of this is Cockney rhyming slang, which began as a lower-class London dialect, and is also found in other institutions such as military camps. Because of its inventive language play, rhyming slang was opaque to outsiders and was consequently adopted by criminal subcultures who added their own terms, thus producing an evolving subculture language. There are many examples of rhyming slang in use at Paparua: Al Capone, dog and bone, and eau de cologne for the telephone, Billy Lid for a kid (child), Bugs Bunny for funny, or money, china plate for one’s friend or mate, currant cake for awake (aware, informed), Egna Brit for shit, frog and toad for a road, hairy ape for rape, rub-a-dub for the pub, pig’s ear for beer, T.H. Lowry for Maori, and turdundove for ‘in love’ (turdundoves are a traditional symbol of fidelity). There are also terms specific to the prison situation such as Noah’s ark for a nark (informer), lost and found for the pound (solitary confinement punishment cell) and four-by-two for a screw (prison guard, warden).

One of the greatest influences upon prison slang, however, is the influence of mainstream popular culture. The influence of film, television, radio, and the mass market has had a profound impact upon the new terms that are generated in the prison environment. Sporting stars, for example champion 100-metre sprinter Carl Lewis and baseball star Babe Ruth, are represented by such terms as (do a) Carl Lewis (to run away, make an escape) and Babe Ruth (the truth). Cartoon characters such as Warner Brothers’ Bugs Bunny (see above ‘funk (money)’) appear, as well as Mutley (aviator ‘baddie’ Dick Dastardly’s green dog in the 1960s Hanna Barbera cartoon Stop the Pigeon) for a police sniffer dog which searches the prison for drugs; and Captain Caveman (a character

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3
from the cartoon *The Flintstones*) for an inmate who always remains in his cell, or cave. It is also interesting to note that New Zealand prison slang has the added influence of the Maori language. Boobslang terms of Maori origin include whare for a cell (lit. ‘house’ – a cell is also referred to as one’s house), henake for the pound, solitary confinement (lit. ‘eeltrap’), uma rapiti, meaning to escape or run away (lit. ‘run rabbit’) and hemmel [sic], a written form of the Maori word hemo (dead, in a coma). Boobslang is a fascinating form of language which perceptively reflects the tensions and complications of being in prison and the areas of interest and group goals of the prison inmates. Boobslang displays the inmates’ cynical attitude towards their surroundings and situation, but is also a keen illustration of the piquant sense of humour and wry intelligence shared by many of these people. Prison language serves emotional, social, and practical purposes, helping inmates to accommodate to the prison environment, by giving them a system with which to refer to places, procedures and people around them, and helping them to define their own place within that environment. Boobslang has a life, colour, and personality of its own and makes intriguing research.

Diana Looser is a doctoral student and tutor in the English Department at the University of Canterbury.
The New Zealand Dictionary Centre is jointly funded by Oxford University Press and Victoria University of Wellington to research all aspects of New Zealand English and to publish New Zealand dictionaries and other works.

INCOMINGS TO THE CENTRE

Words or meanings which are found to be specifically ‘New Zealand’ in origin or use are added to our ‘comings’ database. Readers are invited to send us any words and phrases used in New Zealand which they think may have their origin, or distinctively different uses here, and which do not appear in current dictionaries. The Centre’s ‘comings template’ on which such words and phrases are recorded before being entered into the database is provided in the brochure enclosed with this issue of NZWords to help interested readers gather useful data. You are warmly invited to make copies of this form to record information which you think might be relevant, and to send your contributions to the Centre. A website is being planned to show the work of the Centre and it will also include a copy of the template form.

Who’s Centric Now?

Both the Director and Associate Director of the NZDC will be speaking at an international conference on post-colonial Englishes titled ‘Who’s Centric Now?’, to be held in Canberra from 27-29 October, and hosted by the Australian National Dictionary Centre, Oxford University Press, and the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University.

Graeme Kennedy’s paper is entitled ‘The Distribution of Maori Words in New Zealand English’, and Tony Deverson’s ‘New Zealand, New Zealand English, and the Dictionaries’. For further information or enquiries please contact:

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(Note: you can also register for the conference at the above website).

FROM THE CENTRE

Graeme Kennedy, Director
New Zealand Dictionary Centre

For much of the last few months the New Zealand Dictionary Centre has been engaged in establishing electronic databases of New Zealand English, and most especially of the words and phrases collected by Harry Orsman over almost half of the present century. These databases, including an electronic version of Dr Orsman’s Dictionary of New Zealand English, can now be rapidly accessed and searched by computer. With access to impressive dictionary databases such as those at Oxford and at the Australian National Dictionary Centre in Canberra we are able to check for evidence on the origins and history of words used in New Zealand and on new forms and distinctive meanings which have emerged here. We are very grateful for the support of John Simpson, editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, and Bruce Moore, Director of the Australian Dictionary Centre, and of their staff in cooperating so generously with us.

The Centre has begun to build up its database of previously unrecorded words of New Zealand English and recently advertised research fellowships to encourage full-time study for persons interested in undertaking research in New Zealand lexicography. I am delighted to be able to announce that from a strong field of applicants Dianne Bardsley of Hawera and John Macalister of Featherston have been appointed as the first research fellows at the Centre.

Ms Bardsley will be undertaking a project to identify aspects of the contribution made by rural New Zealand to the New Zealand English lexicon. She has taught English at Hawera High School since 1982 and her long-standing interest in New Zealand English has resulted in a number of publications including works on English in New Zealand during the Depression and World War 2.

John Macalister has recently completed an MA in Applied Linguistics at Victoria University of Wellington and plans to work during his tenure of the Fellowship on the ways in which Māori has contributed to the development of New Zealand English. Mr Macalister has taught English in Kiribati, Namibia, Thailand, and Cambodia, as well as New Zealand, and most recently, during his MA studies, compared the use of words of Māori origin in the School Journals of the 1960s with those of the 1990s.

There are clearly many areas of New Zealand life in which the distinctive words used here have yet to be recorded. This was superbly illustrated in NZWords 2.1, where Jim Cameron’s informative article showed how the practice of the law has left its trace in the variety of English spoken in New Zealand. Almost certainly there are many words used in domestic contexts which have yet to be captured in our dictionaries (remember copper sticks, made of wood, of course), and then there are the words used first or with distinctive meanings by such diverse groups as missionaries and miners, farmers and freezing workers, soldiers, sportsmen and sportswomen, trampers and teachers, and many other professions and trades.

MAILBAG

The Editor of NZWords welcomes readers’ letters and other contributions on their recent observations of New Zealand usage, both positive and negative. Please write to:

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A written directive for a stay at a bach belonging to friends instructed me to ‘snib’ the lock. The meaning of snib was clear from context: the word itself was new to me and somehow amusing. When I asked my friends about it, they looked at me wide-eyed and said, ‘Of course, “snib”—what else would you say?’

The Oxford English Dictionary Second Edition (OED2, 1989) gives snib either as noun to mean ‘a catch or fastening for a door, window, lock, or the like’ or as verb to mean ‘to fasten (a door, etc.) by means of a snib or catch’. The word has an interesting history. OED2 labels the noun ‘Chiefly Sc[ots]’ and says it is of doubtful origin, perhaps adopted from Low German snibe (German schnippe), snib (Swedish snibb) a heak, beaklike point; the verb is simply labelled ‘origin[ally] Sc’.

Examples of usage are given from such authors as James M. Barrie and Arthur Conan Doyle, and range from 1825 through 1891 for the noun and 1808 through 1971 for the verb.

Snib is to be found, of course, in the Scottish National Dictionary (Vol. 8, 1971) and in Webster’s Third International Dictionary (1961). It is not in the Australian National Dictionary (1988) nor The Marquise Dictionary of Australian Cologaugal Language (1988); neither is it in the Dictionary of New Zealand English (1997) or the earlier Henemann New Zealand Dictionary (1989). Spell checkers on New Zealand computers reject snib as a word. All of this last is a bit surprising because snib seems to be still in broad usage only in New Zealand.

Once common in the Scottish language, snib has little current use among speakers in that country. A native Scot in his mid fifties, a student of English linguistics at the University of Wisconsin (USA), says the word is now only dialectal in Scots. In England the word seems already to have been regarded as a provincialism as early as 1917: ‘They laughed at me in London when I talked about “snibbing” the windows.’ (Douglas, O. [Anna Buchan], The Setons, page xiii). A Pocket Oxford dated 1924 does not list the word. From Canada there is a single tantalising 1971 quote, published in The Islander (21 November, page 2, Victoria, British Columbia): ‘The windows were not only unbroken but snibbed shut.’ Perhaps a relict Scot or errant New Zealander?

Despite the numbers of Scots immigrants who settled in the United States, snib never became established in American usage. The three examples I was able to find all came from such immigrants or their children. The first, a quote slip in the files of the Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE), came from an unidentified informant of Scots background in an area of Scots settlement. Dated 1973, it recalls usage from the early 1920s in Monongahela, Pennsylvania: ‘To set the snib on a door lock to lock it … So you either “snibbed” or “unsnibbed” the lock …’. The second example, found in Prairie Winds, a publication of the Thomas County [Kansas] Historical Society, is from a reminiscence written in 1993 by a woman whose parents had moved there from Scotland about 1900. She noted that ‘the screen door would be snibbed on the inside to keep the flies out and mother would be working in the kitchen.’ An American friend of mine recognized snib immediately. Although she does not and did not use the term herself, she said it was a commonplace word to her Scots parents, who immigrated to New Jersey in the 1920s.

Although also used in the wider senses as defined above by OED2, in New Zealand snib has had reference especially to Yale-type locks. This sort of lock is set into the door separately from the door handle and latch. The key goes in on the outside of the lock only; on the inside there is a small handle or lever and a button. To allow normal passage through the door, the small handle on the lock is turned so that the latch is no longer engaged. Then the button is pushed up to hold the spring-loaded latch in. The door is now ‘on the snib’. To ‘snib’ the lock, the button is pushed the other way. This releases the latch, so that entry from outside can be only by key. The door is then ‘snibbed’. Because newer houses in New Zealand have a lock built into the door handle, all this snibbing may soon be a thing of the past.

**Dialect Survival**

Thus snib exists both as noun and as verb. The little lever on the lock is described as the ‘snib’, and ‘snibbed’ is used to describe the state of the lock. To ‘snib the door’ means to set the lever to lock it; to ‘snib it open’ means to set the lever to make it unlocked. In the wider usage, if a door or window is ‘snibbed’, it implies that it is fixed either in the locked or unlocked position.

According to Elizabeth Gordon of the Origins of New Zealand English project at the University of Canterbury (ONZE), dialectal words have not tended to persist in New Zealand English beyond the first generation of speakers in the new country. Snib is essentially a dialect word which has continued in general use. All those New Zealanders aged 45 or older whom I asked about snib know and use the word. It is also familiar to younger New Zealanders, but less commonly used by them. Most said as well that they felt the word was on its way out of the Kiwi vocabulary.

But perhaps the word will not be lost completely. Snib does still seem to have a bit of occasional use outside New Zealand. Several months ago an episode of ‘Blue Heelers’, set in a small New South Wales outback town and produced in Australia, had one of the characters making sure the lock was snibbed. This suggests some continued familiarity with the word in the West Island. And there is a website which offers for purchase a security screen door lock with ‘inside snib’ and a key which ‘overrides the snib operation’. The lock can be got from a company called ‘EPCO Architecture Hardware (Australia) Pty. Ltd.’ located, however, in Taipei, Taiwan!

Sheila Kolstad is the Senior Science Editor of the Dictionary of American Regional English at the University of Madison, Wisconsin, and a frequent visitor to New Zealand.

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NZWORDS COMPETITIONS

NZWORDS COMPETITION NO. 1: Results

In our inaugural competition competitors were asked to supply a TV guide-style promo piece of 30 words or fewer for a New Zealand literary work (fiction or non-fiction).

The small number of contributors should be congratulated on their witty reductionism, literary work (pot-boiler?), and ‘new old words’ which are supported by published evidence.

Brand new words can be slang or regional, and will come from anywhere in the world where English is spoken. They can even be recent borrowings from other languages. New old words, on the other hand, are words from earlier centuries which have so far escaped inclusion in the Dictionary. All new words may be submitted using a form, details of which are available on the OED website: www.oed.com.

John Simpson, Chief Editor, OED, said: ‘There is no longer one English—there are many Englishes. Words are flooding into the language throughout its history, and the developments in world English. When the online edition was launched, I would be delighted to have a host of new people helping us map the past, present, and future of English.’

NZWORDS COMPETITION No. 2

Lexicography is mostly serious business, and especially in today’s politically correct times dictionary-makers make great efforts to suppress personality and prejudice in order to provide scientifically objective accounts of a language’s vocabulary.

At the same time a more idiosyncratic and attitudinal strand has always been part of the history of English dictionary writing, from Samuel Johnson’s notorious definitions of words such as oats and Whig (and lexicographer ‘harmless drudge’) to our own Harry Orsman’s wonkery ‘a person given to unproductive activity’. In America Ambrose Bierce made a name for himself as an ‘alternative’ lexicographer. His quirky, sardonic contributions were collected in 1911 in The Devil’s Dictionary (diplomacy ‘the patriotic art of lying for one’s country’; dictionary ‘a malevolent literary device for cramping the growth of a language ...’). For this competition readers are invited to come up with concise definitions in this more opinionated, subversive style for two or three of the omnipresent trials and trappings of life at millennium’s end: computers, television, road rage, fast food, politicians, political correctness, the millennium itself—or whatever bugs you!

First prize $100 worth and second prize $50 worth of books from the OUP catalogue.

ENTRIES CLOSE 30 DECEMBER 1999.

Entries sent by email should also contain a snail mail address.