WHITMAN AND LANGUAGE:
AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Although there are some specialized Whitman bibliographies, there is no bibliography of the primary and secondary sources presenting information about Whitman and language, a subject that fascinated him. Whitman confessed that he had difficulty getting the subject of language out of his mind and that he thought of *Leaves of Grass* as an experiment in language. He even kept a “Word” book that was a collection of various notes concerning language. However, such concerns about language were never formalized extensively in his writings. What statements he did make are scattered throughout his prose and poetry; his most sustained comments are in *Rambles Among Words*, a book on language and words that Whitman compiled with William Swinton, and *An American Primer*, his unfinished manuscript for a lecture on language. In view of his obsession with language, this annotated bibliography of sources about Whitman and language should prove a valuable resource for Whitman scholars interested in the topic.


Part I lists Whitman’s prose and poetical works that contain statements about language or individual words. Each entry includes a brief summary of Whitman’s comments on language as given in the work.

Part II lists secondary sources containing information about Whitman’s theory and use of language as well as his use of individual words. Usually, each entry includes a brief summary of the author’s ideas; however, when the author’s statements are very brief and very general, there is no annotation. The annotations in the bibliographies compiled by Scott Giantvalley and Donald Kummings are also very helpful.

I encourage readers to contact me about errors and omissions in this bibliography; I can be reached at the English Department, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078.

Part I. Whitman and Language: Primary Sources


Whitman’s major contributions include:

1. **Passages in Chapter 1, “Preliminary,” and Chapter 3, “The Idealism of Words.”**
   
   By reflecting man’s mind, words “present a humanitarian geology where histories, philosophies and ethics lie embodied and embalmed.” Furthermore, language is a living organism that constantly changes and that progresses cyclically. Also movements in a nation’s life are repeated in its language. The English language, one of immense assimilation and best suited to express the spirit of modern American life, is the best inheritance America has received.

2. **Chapter 6, “Words of Abuse.”**
   Whitman classifies words of abuse and discusses their etymology.

3. **Chapter 11, “The Growth of Words.”**
   Language, an organism that constantly changes and that acquires individuality, is alive in the sense that it displays “successive processes of growth and development within the limits of its linguistic individuality.” Thus, the English language has achieved an individual identity, like the English nation has, because it has been subjected to the same influences as the English people. There has been no adequate treatment of the English language; it needs a history, a dictionary, and a work like the “Teutonic Grammar” by Jacob Grimm. Whitman would like to write an epic of the blendings of all the elements included in the English language, but he must content himself, for now, with a brief discussion of “the most eminent contributions”—Anglo-Saxon, the French added during the Norman Conquest, and the Greek and Latin added during the sixteenth century.

4. **Chapter 12, “English in America.”**
   America contains a great potential for developing the English language; however, it is not surprising or fortuitous that English should be the speech of America, for English contains the spirit of the modern—“the splendid newness, the aspirations of freedom, individualism, democracy.” Although the English language is not at present adequate for the utterance of America, it can be because, more than any other language, it lends itself plastic and willing to the moulding power of new formative influences.” The English language must be shaped by copious verbal contributions of various idioms and according to the entire American spirit with its “large hospitality and impartiality.” Scholars have at-
tempted to discourage expansions of the language for hundreds of years and, because of this attempt, literary expression has become a “watery affair.” A new molder of the language is needed, and he must contain many qualities, among them a knowledge of the philosophy of speech and rich aesthetic instincts.


Whitman, Walt. “The American Idiom.” Unpublished MS fragments in the Feinberg Collection. Also in C. Carroll Hollis, “Whitman and The American Idiom,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech,* 43 (December 1957), 419–420. The English language is our most precious inheritance of the past because “it is not a fossil language, but a broad fluid language of democracy.” Nonetheless, it can be improved, and it must be adapted to America and the American spirit. A dictionary for the real words and a grammar of the people are needed.

———. “America’s Mightiest Inheritance,” *Life Illustrated* (1856). Also in *New York Dissected,* ed. Emory Holloway and Ralph Adimari. New York: Rufus Rockwell Wilson, 1936, pp. 55–65. Language cannot be traced to its origins and only language endures. The English language, America’s best inheritance, is a composite language. It and all European tongues are varieties of Asiatic stock; the most important part of English is the Anglo-Saxon stock. Whitman calls for a writer of the people of America and a perfect English dictionary. In his appendix, he lists French words and meanings with suggested pronunciations.


“Good-bye My Fancy,” p. 540.


“[Language for America],” p. 630.

This poetic passage excluded from Leaves of Grass celebrates some of the characteristics of English.


“Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances,” p. 120.


“Pensive and Faltering,” p. 455.


It is not the words of his poetry, but what they suggest and represent that is important.


The poet is able to translate every idiom into his own—to join them all into one. He presents the words of true poems, and such words allow the reader to form poems for himself by giving him “religions, politics, war, peace, behavior, histories, essays, daily life, and every/thing else.”


“Song of Myself,” pp. 28–89.

This poem is not so much an important source for Whitman’s philosophy of language as it is a summary of his basic ideas and theory of poetry.

“Song of the Open Road,” pp. 149–159.
Words are more than “those upright lines” and “those curves, angles, dots.” However, language is inadequate and cannot express nature, life and flux on the rolling earth; it can only suggest the truths of life.
“What Am I After All,” p. 392.
“Yonnondio,” p. 524.

—. Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts, ed. Edward F. Grier. 6 vols. New York: New York University Press, 1984. These volumes bring together Whitman’s various notes on language, including the sections of Rambles Among Words that seem to have been written by Whitman; many of the notes are from the Feinberg Collection (Library of Congress). See especially the section on “Words,” vol. 5, pp. 1621–1709, and the section on “Oratory,” vol. 6, pp. 2221–2244.

Whitman’s comments on the poet and literature are much more extensive than those on language (pp. 411–413); yet they provide further understanding of his view of language. Whitman feels that the coming genius of American poetic expression would be a result of the use of the American idiom and of slang.
“Preface, 1876, to the Centennial Edition,” pp. 464–474. Also in Leaves of Grass:


“Unfulfill'd Wants – The Arkansas River,” pp. 217–218. Whitman makes the brief comment that “One wants new words in writing about these plains, and all the inland American West—the terms, far, large, vast, etc., are insufficient.”


Part II. Whitman and Language: Secondary Sources


Adams, Charles M. “Whitman's Use of 'Grass,'” *American Notes and Queries*, 6 (February 1947), 167–168. Adams makes a query about Whitman’s use of “grass.” Did Whitman in some places in *Leaves of Grass* use “the word as a piece of printer’s slang, that is, to mean ‘a person who does casual work around the shop’ or ‘the work such a person does.’”? 


Allen, Gay Wilson and Charles T. Davis, eds. "Introduction," *Walt Whitman's Poems: Selections with Critical Aids*. New York: New York University Press, 1955, pp. 1–51. This is a very good introduction to Whitman and pp. 36–51 are especially informative about Whitman and language. Whitman recorded the distinctive features of America in his diction, and he also tried to suggest America's function as a melting-pot. He was attracted by technical terms, colloquial and dialectal phrases, and slang. Allen and Davis feel that his language is fresh because "it grows out of a new attitude toward experience." Moreover, "it acquires range and richness from the poet's ready acceptance of vocabularies that come from a variety of tongues, skills, and disciplines."


Amyot, Gerald F. "Walt Whitman's Language Experiment," *Walt Whitman Review*, 20 (September 1974), 97–103. Amyot agrees with the position that he believes recent critics of Whitman are taking—"that Whitman was indeed a conscious linguistic craftsman, a writer who thoroughly acquainted himself with words, their meanings, and their relationships." Furthermore, Whitman felt that there was a strong relationship between language and life and that language came from concrete reality. He wanted, through his "language experiment," to find and use the words that would express the America he saw emerging.


Batchelor, Sally Ann. "Whitman's Yawp and How HeYawped It," *Walt Whitman Review*, 18 (September 1972), 97–101. Most of this article is an explication of Section 52 of "Song of Myself." At the end Batchelor expands slightly upon "yawp."
Bauerle, Richard F. “Whitman’s Index to His Scrapbook: A ‘Map’ of His ‘Language World,’” *Walt Whitman Review*, 26 (December 1980), 158–162, 165, 166. Bauerle studies the lists of words pasted inside the front cover and on the front end paper of Whitman’s Scrapbook. He concludes that they are “a listing of topics and fields of knowledge about which Whitman wished to know more.”

Beaver, Joseph. *Walt Whitman—Poet of Science*. New York: King’s Crown Press, 1951. Brief comments on language throughout. Although Beaver discusses primarily Whitman’s knowledge of various sciences and the weaving of this knowledge into his poetry, he indicates some of Whitman’s scientific terminology.

Bernbrock, John E. “Walt Whitman and Anglo-Saxonism.” Ph.D. Dissertation. North Carolina, 1961. DAI 22 (1962): 2789–2790. In the two introductory chapters, Bernbrock presents a narrative description of relevant documents related to Whitman’s own study of language and various early language projects. The MS notes and word lists give insight into Whitman’s linguistic approach to poetry and his methods of composition. Bernbrock also discusses a language textbook that Whitman was familiar with and that was the work of popular contemporary 19th-century linguists. In his two main chapters, Bernbrock explains how Whitman’s diction and prosody were influenced by his interest in the Anglo-Saxon background of our race—Anglo-Saxon institutions, language, and literature.


Burke, Kenneth. “Policy Made Personal: Whitman’s Verse and Prose—Salient Traits,” *Leaves of Grass: One Hundred Years After*, ed. Milton Hindus. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966, pp. 74–108. With reference to *Democratic Vistas*, Burke explains Whitman’s political philosophy in general and then the way that that policy expresses itself in *Leaves of Grass*. Burke uses words and phrases quoted from Whitman in his discussion. Many of the terms explained are common ones, but Burke discusses the various meanings Whitman gave them. He concludes with an explication of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.”

Campbell, Killis. “The Evolution of Whitman as Artist,” American Literature, 6 (November 1934), 254–263. Campbell briefly comments on Whitman’s revisions of passages dealing with sex; Whitman dropped some of the more indelicate phrases.

———. “Miscellaneous Notes on Whitman.” Studies in English (University of Texas), 14 (July 1934), 116–122. Campbell discusses briefly Whitman’s use of the figure metanoia, literary echoes, coinages and other rare words, and textual errors in Leaves of Grass. He also includes bibliographical notes.


Colum, Padraic. “The Poetry of Walt Whitman,” The New Republic, 19 (June 14, 1919), 213–215. Colum presents a passage on language that was deleted from “As I Sat Alone By Blue Ontario’s Shore.”
Cooke, Mrs. Alice Lovelace. "Whitman's Indebtedness to the Scientific Thought of His Day," *Studies in English* (University of Texas), 14 (July 1934), 89–115. Cooke discusses Whitman's use of science in a few of his poems, and in doing so she indicates some of his scientific terminology.

Coy, Rebecca. "A Study of Whitman's Diction," *Studies in English* (University of Texas), 16 (1936), 115–124. Whitman added to the common stock of words by using borrowings from foreign languages, colloquial American speech, Americanisms, technical and commercial terms, and pedantic and archaic words. For each of these ways, Coy gives useful classifications and statistics. She concludes, "he produced, not the great representative American speech of which he dreamed, but only a Whitmanesque dialect which will remain forever personal and inimitable."

Daggett, Gwynne Harris. "Whitman's Poetic Theory," Dissertation. North Carolina, 1941. [No reference in DAI.] In this discussion of Whitman's poetic theory, Daggett also comments on Whitman and his theory of language. Between 1855 and 1860, Whitman entertained the theory that words and their implications might be as powerful as nature, or more so, and he thought of them as having "natural life: the ability to grow and reproduce ideas." However, he realized how inadequate they are since they are artificial and hence limited. The glory and magic of the original vanishes when words are applied to the object or idea. The spell of nature is broken by applying the words; the originals possess a quality that defies recording. Whitman came to believe that it may be possible to escape the limitations of poetic expression by being emancipated from dependence upon the medium of language, and he supposed that men might some day be able to communicate without words, perhaps intuitively.


Dressman, Michael R. "Goodrich's Geography and Whitman's Place Names," *Walt Whitman Review*, 26 (June 1980), 64–67. Dressman believes that "a comparison of certain manuscript notes in Whitman's own hand with certain of the passages in Goodrich's Geography indicates that Whitman used the book to assemble information about the various states and their characteristic geographic features and resources."


Daybooks and Notebooks. Dressman discusses Whitman's idea for and efforts toward a "Perfect English Dictionary."


———. "Whitman, Chaucer, and French Words," Walt Whitman Review, 23 (June 1977), 77–82. Dressman thinks Whitman’s "primary concern with Chaucer was in regard to that poet's place in the development of English, particularly Chaucer's part in enriching English with borrowings from French." He briefly discusses Whitman’s annotations on two Chaucer essays and concludes "Whit­man saw himself as a kind of latter-day Chaucer."


Fridholm suggests that Whitman coined a word or borrowed one from another language when he felt that he had exhausted the possibilities of the English vocabulary. He supports his suggestion with examples.

Furness, Clifton Joseph, ed. Walt Whitman’s Workshop: A Collection of Unpublished Manuscripts. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928, pp. 3–24, 35, 124–126, 221–222. Furness discusses characteristics of Whitman’s writings that are presented in this book. He feels that Whitman achieved his power with words more by getting new implications from them, than by using fresh vocabulary, for often a common word had special significance for him. He also discusses Whitman’s comments on “adhesiveness.”


Harrison, Phillippa. “‘Eidolons’: An Entrance Song,” Walt Whitman Review 17 (June 1981), 35–45. Harrison discusses the dictionary’s and Whitman’s meaning of “eidolons.” She also discusses some of the other diction, which usually is very abstract and not effective. His use of French is affected, she feels.


Hollis, C. Carroll. Language and Style in Leaves of Grass. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983. Hollis discusses Whitman in terms of the oratorical tradition in mid-nineteenth-century America. With its careful application of recent speech act theory to the understanding of Whitman’s poetic structure up to the 1860s, and with its exploration of how various characteristic oratorical and
journalistic techniques formed the basis of Whitman's poetic language, Hollis's book is the most thorough examination to date of Whitman's style. Hollis includes statistical analysis demonstrating dramatic decreases after 1860 in Whitman's use of finite verb elements and dramatic increases after 1860 in his use of Romance-Latin based words, all indicating a radical shift in Whitman's conception of poetry, as Whitman retreated into a more conventional poetic diction.

———. "Names in *Leaves of Grass,*" *Names,* 5 (September 1957), 129–156. Hollis gives information concerning Whitman's use of names, as well as insights into his general theory of language. Whitman felt strongly that the names for places and people should come out of the experiences of America and that names keeping Americans tied to the Old World should be avoided. He wanted to correct any inappropriate names.


———. "Whitman and William Swinton: A Co-operative Friendship," *American Literature,* 30 (January 1959), 425–449. Hollis discusses the collaboration of William Swinton and Walt Whitman in writing *Rambles Among Words,* and he lists the passages in the book that he, Charles Feinberg, and Gay Wilson Allen agree were written by Whitman even though only Swinton's name is given as author.

———. "Whitman on 'Periphrastic' Literature . . . Speculations on an Unpublished MS Fragment," *Fresco,* 10 (Winter-Spring, 1960), 5–13. Hollis first dates the MS fragment and then he speculates as to what information it provides about Whitman. He also discusses "carlacue" and "sweet sap tickles" that appear in the 1855 edition of "Song of Myself," but not later.


Jarrell, Randall. “Some Lines from Whitman,” Poetry and the Age. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953, pp. 112–132. He gives examples to support the statement that “Whitman was no sweeping rhetorician, but a poet of the greatest and oddest delicacy and originality and sensitivity, so far as words are concerned.” However, Jarrell doesn’t discuss the examples, but simply lists them. He does comment on some of the characteristics of Whitman’s syntax.

Johnston, Kenneth G. and John O. Rees, Jr. “Whitman and the Foo-Foos: An Experiment in Language,” Walt Whitman Review 17 (March 1971), 3–10. Johnston and Rees discuss the meaning of this slang term “foo-foos” which was in current usage on the New York stage about 1855 and which was used in the play A Glance at New York and then in Leaves of Grass.


———. “Style of Leaves of Grass,” Reminiscences of Walt Whitman, with extracts from his letters and remarks on his writings. London: Alexander Gardner, 1896, pp. 149–190. There is little on Whitman’s theory of or use of language, although Kennedy does list technical, idiomatic, and slang terms from early poems.

Killingsworth, Myrth Jimmie. “Another Source for Whitman’s Use of ‘Electric,’” Walt Whitman Review, 23 (September 1977), 129–132. Killingsworth responds to comments made by Cynthia Sulfridge in “Meaning in Whitman’s Use of ‘Electric.’” Killingsworth believes that, at least in “I Sing the Body Electric,” Whitman’s use of “electric” comes from “the concept of ‘sexual electricity’” used by medical writers of sex education literature in the 1850s and 1860s.

Lenhart, Charmenz S. “Walt Whitman and Music in Leaves of Grass,” Musical Influence on American Poetry. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1956, pp. 161–209. Lenhart discusses primarily the parallels between Whitman’s poetry and music with little on his use of or theory of language. He concludes that Whitman wavered between the vocabularies of instrumental and vocal music, but uses vocal references when he was most impassioned. The musical terms he used often indicated what he was doing in his verse.


Mabbott, Thomas Ollive. “Review of Comprehensive *Leaves of Grass*, edited by Blodgett and Bradley,” *Walt Whitman Review*, 11 (June 1965), 55–56. Mabbott complains that many of the explanatory notes for words are inadequate; the notes are either too meager or incorrect.


Marx, Leo. “The Vernacular Tradition in American Literature: Walt Whitman and Mark Twain,” *Die neueren Sprachen*, Beiheft III (1958), 46–57. Marx briefly discusses the links between Whitman’s use of the vernacular, Twain’s style, and the political assumptions underlying the work of both men, but he is most concerned with the latter.


Metzer, Charles R. *Thoreau and Whitman: A Study of Their Aesthetics*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961, pp. 57–82. Metzer feels that Whitman asserts that the meaning of words at one instance in language is fixed by the author's familiarity with language and the things suggesting language and that he makes this assertion because he realizes the nebulousness of the meaning of words out of context. Therefore, Whitman was concerned with language and with the facts of life; he used words as things and wanted to vivify the facts with words.


Mills, Barriss. "Whitman's Poetic Theory," *Emerson Society Quarterly*, 55 (Spring 1969), 42–47. Mills's discussion concerns primarily Whitman's poetic theory, but it is also useful as a study of Whitman and language. Whitman seemed to be moving toward a radical definition of a poem ("the printed form of words" and "the 'essence' of experience which the printed poem tries, unsuccessfully, to express"). He sought "new relations of the poet to his poems, to experience and to his readers"; he finds all finished poems incomplete and unsatisfactory. Whitman fully realized the difficulty of expressing and explaining experience with words, artificial devices.

Mirsky, D. S. "Walt Whitman: Poet of American Democracy," *Dialectics*, 1(1937), 11–29. Whitman's diction is new, not because it is colloquial, but because Whitman uses it to deal with new subjects.


Pound, Louise. "Two Curious Words," *American Speech*, 30 (May 1955), 95–96. Pound discusses the etymology of "carlacue" and concludes that this form was known in Whitman's region and was not a manipulation of a standard word.

-----. "Walt Whitman and the Classics," *Southwest Review*, 10 (January 1925), 75–82. Pound discusses Whitman's linguistic borrowings from Greek and Latin.
Pound doesn't attempt to be complete in citation of examples, but she does enter almost all the French words Whitman introduced into his writings, and she comments on the ones he knew and liked best. He especially liked French agent nouns or personal nouns, but he seldom used French verbs. She groups his French words under military words and place words, social words, and literary and miscellaneous words.

Although Pound is concerned mostly with the influence of Italian music on Whitman's poetry, she does list the terms he borrowed from Italian music. She feels that his Italian terms usually seem more political and are less far-fetched than his French terms.

Whitman created many abstract nouns, but few adjectival, adverbial, and verbal words. He also shortened or manipulated native words or loan words. She concludes, "In vocabulary . . . except for his peculiar reliance upon foreign loan-words, he better illustrates the taste of the Twentieth Century than that of the Nineteenth."


Read provides numerous examples of Whitman using Indian place names, but gives special attention to Paumanok and Manhattan.

Resnick comments very briefly on Whitman's sources of neologisms.

Rosenthal studies Whitman's use of words she calls "measuring terms," words that indicate quantitative comparison, the word "number" and actual numbers, and the word "prove," a word Whitman frequently uses in a quantitative context. She limits her study to his writing through 1855.


Smith, Fred Manning. "Whitman's Poet-Prophet and Carlyle's Hero," PMLA, 55 (December 1940), 1146-1164. Smith lists some of Whitman's favorite words and phrases that were also used by Carlyle.


Southard, Sherry G. "Whitman and Language: His 'Democratic' Words." Ph.D. Dissertation. Purdue University, 1972. DAI 33 (March 1973): 5143A. Whitman proclaimed America in words from all stages of language, all languages, all levels of language, and all areas (all professions and fields) and especially in words that described and expressed America and Americans. A study of his diction reveals that Whitman was much more knowledgeable about words and language than critics have generally supposed. He employed obsolete words frequently. He didn't use foreign words extensively, except those from French. Nonetheless, whenever he did use an obsolete word or a foreign term, he generally used it accurately and effectively. Furthermore, he illustrated his considerable knowledge of the language through his widespread use of learned words.

Stein, Marian. "'Comrade' or 'Camerado' in Leaves of Grass," Walt Whitman Review, 13 (December 1967), 123-125. Stein discusses Whitman's use of these words and possible origins.


Sulfridge, Cynthia. "Meaning in Whitman's Use of 'Electric,'" Walt Whitman Review, 19 (December 1973), 151-153. For Whitman, the adjective "electric" means having the forcefulness or power of the quintessential life experiences and is used for describing various objects and experiences.


———. “Walt Whitman’s Language and Style.” Ph.D. Dissertation. Yale University, 1982. DAI 43 (June 1983): 3914A–3915A. Warren studies *Leaves of Grass* as a “language experiment” and explores the historical background of Whitman’s organic theory of language: Humboldt, Schleicher, Christian Bunsen, Maxmilian Schele de Vere. He then examines *Rambles Among Words* and offers a vision of Whitman’s language where “the synchronic ‘ensemble’ of the English language reveals the diachronic ‘vista’ of its future development.” Warren also analyzes the many grammatical eccentricities and variations found in the early editions of *Leaves*.

Wells, Henry W. “Matter and Spirit,” *The American Way of Poetry*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1943, pp. 29–43. Wells’s comments on Whitman and language are brief and general; however, he does discuss the combination of the objective and subjective in Whitman’s poems.


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