

Recorded in 1937, below is the text of the only existing record of the voice of Virginia Woolf talking about “Words.”

From “Moments of Being,” London BBC, distributed in the U.S.  
by Audio Forum (Guilford, CT, 1981)

“All we can say about them as we peer at them over the edge of their deep, dark, and only fitfully illuminated cavern in which they live—the mind—all we say about them is that they seem to like people to think before they use them, and to feel before they use them. But to think and feel not about them, but about something different. They are highly sensitive, easily made self-conscious. They do not like to have their purity or their impurity discussed. If you will start a society for pure English, they will show their resentment by starting another for impure English. Hence the unnatural violence of much modern speech as a protest against Puritans. They are highly democratic, too. They believe that one word is as good as another, uneducated words as good as educated words, uncultivated words as good as cultivated words. There are no ranks or titles in their society, nor do they like being lifted on the point of a pen and examined separately. They hang together in sentences, paragraphs, sometimes of whole pages at a time. Then they hate being useful. They hate making money. They hate being lectured about in public. In short, they hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change. Perhaps that is their most striking peculiarity—their need of change. It is because the truth they try to catch is many sided, and they convey it by being many sided—flashing first this way, then that. Thus, they mean one thing to one person, another thing to another person; they’re unintelligible to one generation, plain as a pikestaff to the next. And it is because of this complexity, this power to mean different things to different people that they survive.”