

AY, WORDS!

On fine-tuning words

2026

On fine-tuning words

I want to write here and now about words. Words, which are at the very heart of our lives. And if we are to enjoy life to the full, we must master them.

The Royal Spanish Academy defines a word as: “A linguistic unit, generally endowed with meaning, which is separated from others by potential pauses in pronunciation and spaces in writing”. If that is what a word is, then count me out.

However, to counterbalance this, the Dictionary of the Spanish Language tells us: “A fundamental and minimal unit of human language endowed with meaning that can be used independently and is separated from others by pauses in speech or blank spaces in writing”. You can count me out on that one too!

“Basic unit of language”—well! That damned word that won’t come to mind! And yet I know only too well that words are our salvation, they are everything.

So right now, I’d like to take a further look at what exactly words mean in our intellectual lives.

I write poetry because it’s a way of getting actively engaged in a battle with words. In the same way that singing, as a friend of mine used to say, is like taking words out for a walk.

I write general texts that sometimes even I like. Like the latest one about a conversation with Immanuel Kant, the philosopher, on an open-air terrace at the Puerta de Toledo in Madrid, while having a few beers. When I say that a good teacher is one who uses their words to inspire their pupils to dream, and who teaches their fellow teachers to do the same with their pupils, I am simply following the laws of logic learnt from Immanuel Kant.

I write texts about architecture which I believe help to shed light on many of the things that happen – that happen to me – in this beautiful creative endeavor that is architecture, for me the most beautiful endeavor of all. My latest piece, a rewritten version of ‘On the Wisdom of Architecture’, isn’t half bad, I reckon. Inspired by T. S. Eliot and sprinkled with borrowings from Aristotle, it’s very, very clear.

And now, onwards and upwards! I’m looking for a Spanish grammar to try and clear my head a bit more.

And to think I’d promised myself I’d stop writing on 24 August 2014!

Today my friends from the Pérez Galdós bookstore in Madrid are bringing me a copy of the Elementary Spanish Grammar published by Luis Vives. I’ll let you know how it

goes. In the meantime, my mind keeps reminding me of that certain something that still lingers, not altogether clearly, from Saint John of the Cross.

But the crux of the matter is words. How, after so many years, can we come to master something that is capable of illuminating – and even sparking and setting alight – our lives? Well might you say, ‘after all these years!’ And my reply would be that it is precisely at this stage in life that one enjoys these things the most. At least I do, and so did my friend Goya when, well into his old age, he drew and wrote the words ‘I am still learning’.

Kant, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, speaks to us of a solid structure in the edifice of human existence, and how this structure must be firm and capable of sustaining us. Well, in the same way, words must sustain our spiritual life, our intellect and our heart – words!

Despite having promised 12 years ago to ‘put a stop to’ writing, here I am still writing. Of course, I said ‘a’ and not ‘the’—once again, the power of words! That ‘a’ allows me to write again. That’s where we’ve ended up. Because ‘a’ is an indeterminate or indefinite article, while ‘the’ is a determinate or definite article.

And after these - perhaps unnecessary - musings, some of us carry on writing. Fine-tuning our words, just as one fine-tunes a musical instrument so that it sounds better – much better! – the miracle of music, or in my case, poetry.

If, in a poem, you move a word to a different place, or add or remove a final letter, things happen – lots of things happen. Try it out for yourselves with your favorite poem. You’ll be amazed at the precision required by that constant battle with words that is poetry.