



**HAL**  
open science

# Feeling and meaning: the exceptional centrality of feel in Mrs Dalloway

Stéphanie Béligon

► **To cite this version:**

Stéphanie Béligon. Feeling and meaning: the exceptional centrality of feel in Mrs Dalloway. *Études de stylistique anglaise*, 2019, 15, 10.4000/esa.4278 . halshs-02424880

**HAL Id: halshs-02424880**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02424880>**

Submitted on 18 Dec 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



## Feeling and meaning: the exceptional centrality of *feel* in *Mrs Dalloway*

Stéphanie Bélignon

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/esa/4278>

DOI: 10.4000/esa.4278

ISSN: 2650-2623

**Publisher**

Société de stylistique anglaise

**Electronic reference**

Stéphanie Bélignon, « Feeling and meaning: the exceptional centrality of *feel* in *Mrs Dalloway* », *Études de stylistique anglaise* [Online], 15 | 2019, Online since 27 November 2019, connection on 10 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/esa/4278> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/esa.4278>

---

This text was automatically generated on 10 December 2020.

Études de Stylistique Anglaise

---

# Feeling and meaning: the exceptional centrality of *feel* in *Mrs Dalloway*

Stéphanie Béligon

---

- 1 At the end of *Mrs Dalloway*, Sally Sutton is positive: “For she had come to feel that it was the only thing worth saying – what one felt. [...] One must say simply what one felt” (Woolf 1996, 195), and the verb *feel* and its nominal derivatives (*feel* and *feeling*) are indeed omnipresent in the novel<sup>1</sup>, which frequently alludes to what all the characters feel, even when, like Septimus, they are supposed to feel nothing<sup>2</sup>.
- 2 *Feel* has therefore an exceptional status in Woolf’s novel and its extensive use suggests that it is both a key element in the text and a valuable interpretative tool. The lexeme is highly polysemous, and refers to varied aspects of human life, from perception to cognition by way of affects. However, the distinction between those meanings is not always clear-cut, so that the verb unifies these different dimensions of human existence. As we shall see, in the novel, *feel* also shows how the characters go beyond their own individual experience to connect with their past selves or with other characters thanks to sensations and emotions.
- 3 Moreover, *feel* refers to comprehension and in *Mrs Dalloway*, perception and affects are linked with the emergence of meaning, in a movement that coincides with the three semantic areas of the verb, so that the latter encapsulates the characters’ progression when they can transcend their experience.
- 4 The first section of this paper deals with the different meanings of *feel* and shows how its polysemy is exploited in the novel. The second section aims to demonstrate that Woolf relies on the semantic and syntactic variety of the verb to suggest that perceptions and affects are shared by the characters, so that feelings seem to become autonomous, independent from the experiencers they emanate from. Finally, the article deals with the passage from perception to understanding, from experience to revelation, and shows that this transition follows the verb’s semantic programme.

## The many shapes and forms of feelings

- 5 *Feel* is characterized by its polysemy and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, gives about thirty definitions of the verb. Some of its meanings are related to perception, especially tactile perception, some to affects and others to cognition. This section first provides a few examples of the different uses of the verb in the novel; secondly, the following questions are addressed: how to account for the semantics of the verb? What do its meanings have in common? Why does one and the same lexeme express three distinct semantic domains? What unitary conception underlies those meanings?

### Examples

- 6 The novel includes a large sample of the uses of the verb *feel*, as the quotations below illustrate. In examples (1) and (2), *feel* refers to tactile sensations, either voluntary (cf. example (1))<sup>3</sup>, or involuntary (cf. example (2))<sup>4</sup>:

(1) "Let her sleep," said Dr. Holmes, *feeling her pulse*. (Woolf 1996, 153)<sup>5</sup>

(2) But whether I'd have chosen quite like that if I could have known, thought Mrs. Dempster, and could not help wishing to whisper a word to Maisie Johnson; to *feel on the creased pouch of her worn old face the kiss of pity*. (Woolf 1996, 25)

- 7 Example (3) is still about physical perception, but not tactile sensations<sup>6</sup>:

(3) Some one had trod on the skirt. She had felt it give at the Embassy party at the top among the folds. (Woolf 1996, 36)

- 8 The verb can also refer to the perception of an intangible entity:

(4) It was like running one's face against a granite all in the darkness! It was shocking! It was horrible! [...] she *felt his hostility; his jealousy; his determination to break into companionship*. (Woolf 1996, 34)

- 9 *Feel* is connected with affects, as well<sup>7</sup>:

(5) He had never *felt so happy* in the whole of his life! (Woolf 1996, 52)

- 10 Finally, the lexeme can refer to cognition<sup>8</sup>:

(6) And she *felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it not to look at it* (Woolf 1996, 34)

- 11 This semantic variety goes along with a whole range of constructions, as *feel* can be followed by an object in the form of a nominal phrase, as in examples (1), (2) or (4), an infinitive clause (cf. example (3)), a *that*-clause (cf. example (6)) or a predicative adjectival phrase (cf. example (5)).

- 12 These examples evidence the vast semantic and syntactic possibilities of *feel*, which fits into a large number of environments. However, one of the characteristics of the verb is precisely to blur the boundaries between its use cases.

### Sensory syncretism

- 13 In example (7), the predicate combines Clarissa's compassion for Evelyn Whitbread with her discomfort based on her opinion concerning her own clothes, in a sort of zeugma:

(7) Evelyn was a good deal out of sorts, said Hugh, intimating [...] that his wife had some internal ailment, nothing serious, which, as an old friend, Clarissa Dalloway would quite understand without requiring him to specify. Ah yes, she did of course;

what a nuisance; and *felt very sisterly and oddly conscious at the same time of her hat*.  
(Woolf 1996, 4)

14 Through the coordinator *and*, the character's sympathy and self-consciousness are placed on an equal footing.

15 Example (8) is characterised by the same zeugmatic tendency, as it mixes affects and proprioception:

(8) One had to pay at the desk, Elizabeth said, and went off, *drawing out*, so Miss Kilman *felt, the very entrails in her body*, stretching them as she crossed the room, and then, with a final twist, bowing her head very politely, she went. (Woolf 1996, 134)

16 Miss Kilman feels that Elizabeth's concrete spatial movement has an effect on her own organs, and the fictional bodily changes suggest the history teacher's emotional pain, which is in keeping with Damasio's theory equating a feeling and the perception of physiological changes:

As body changes take place, you get to know about their existence and you can monitor their continuous evolution. You perceive changes in your body state and follow their unfolding over seconds and minutes. That process of continuous monitoring, that experience of what your body is doing while thoughts about specific contents roll by, is the essence of what I call a feeling. If an emotion is a collection of changes in body state connected to particular mental images that have activated a specific brain system, the essence of feeling an emotion is the experience of such changes in juxtaposition to the mental images that initiated the cycle. (Damasio 1994, 145)

17 In example (9), the *that*-clause reflects Richard's thoughts but their cognitive content is underpinned by his compassion, as is made clear by the NP *the poor creature*:

(9) So [...] Ellie Henderson craned rather forward, and it wasn't so much she who minded not having any one to talk to [...] but it was Richard himself who *felt that he could not let the poor creature go on standing there all the evening by herself*. (Woolf 1996, 172)

18 *Feel* intertwines several types of experience, and the novel is based on the verb's potential in the sense that it does not force its usual meanings. Its polysemy raises the question of why the verb expresses those different aspects of human life. Two types of answer can be given: the first is ontological and relies on the idea that these phenomena have a common ontological substrate; the other is semantic in nature, and addresses what the uses of *feel* all have in common. The next subsection deals with the second approach.

### A semantic representation of *feel*

19 According to Paulin (2003, 133), "*Feel* est un relateur qui localise deux éléments X et Y l'un par rapport à l'autre et qui attribue une qualité Z à X ou Y"<sup>9</sup>. She offers the following semantic meta-definition of the verb: "perceive or ascertain by touch or some other perception". This seems a very effective summary that covers all of the meanings of *feel* but two questions remain unanswered: how does *feel* differ from other verbs of perception, since *smell*, *sound*, *taste* or *look* also ascribe a quality to the object of perception. Secondly, why does the lexeme referring to the sense of touch also express other forms of sensitivity, whereas the other verbs of perception tend not to?

20 To answer those questions, a characterization of the sense of touch and of the role played by the skin may be necessary so as to define what distinguishes them from other physiological senses and organs. Consoli (2003, 21) points out that:

La peau [...] est non seulement l'organe du toucher, dont elle est à la fois le contenant et le support, mais l'organe privilégié, visible, de la vie de relation, le lieu de naissance de la tendresse, la limite de l'individu et la représentante de la limite de son espace psychique.<sup>10</sup>

21 In other words, the skin plays an essential emotional and psychological role because it marks the limits of an individual: it ensures a transitional role between the perceiving subject and the outside world, it is a place of constant contact between the subject and what surrounds him/her. As the skin envelops the entire body, it is consubstantial with the body and therefore stands for the experiencer's sensitivity as a whole.

22 The hypothesis defended here is that to be complete, a semantic representation of *feel* has to take into account the characteristics of the sense of touch and of its main organ. The following semantic representation may then be offered:

- if x is the perceiver or experiencer,
- x becomes aware of y by contact with y,
- $x \neq y$  (in the case of the perception of an external reality but also in the case of affects, in which the experiencer perceives himself/herself as other than himself/herself),
- y has an effect on x (in the case of touch, affects and cognition).

23 The meanings of *feel* are related to both the continuity and the borderline between the world and the perceiver, as well as to the interface between these two entities. This representation is reminiscent of Woolf's non-fiction writings, in which the experiencer is famously described as having access to the outside reality through a protective "membrane" or an "envelope", as the author makes clear in "A Sketch of the Past" or in her essay "Modern Fiction":

The next memory – all these colour-and-sound memories hang together at St Ives – was much more robust; it was highly sensual. [...] The buzz, the croon, the smell, all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one such a complete rapture of pleasure that I stopped, smelt; looked. (Woolf 2002, 80)

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (Woolf 1994, 160)

24 *Feel*, inasmuch as it implies both a contact and a distinction between the perceiver and the perceived, is the linguistic counterpart of this "semi-transparent envelope". The perception it denotes seems to be the only possible mode of knowledge in the paradigm defined by Woolf, since the outer world is accessible only through that envelope, which seems to be iconic of the semantic components of *feel*: this almost imperceptible (cf. *semi-transparent*) entity separates the human subject from what he/she perceives, but is also the necessary condition of perception that gives all its sensory qualities to the perceived<sup>11</sup>.

## A potential fully exploited

### *Feel* or the law of contradiction

- 25 As we have seen in the preceding section, touch is the sense modality associated with *feel*, but some of the characteristic features of that morphological sense are to be found in the other meanings of the verb, which blurs the distinction between different dimensions of human experience. The following lines aim to demonstrate that the lexeme shows the breadth of individual inner lives, as the characters experience contradictory sensations, share their affects or thoughts, and abolish their spatial and temporal limits through sensations and emotions.
- 26 In several passages, *Mrs Dalloway* insists that feelings are not subjected to the law of noncontradiction:
- (10) She would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that. She *felt very young*; at the same time *unspeakably aged*. (Woolf 1996, 6)
- 27 Clarissa's self-perception is obviously contradictory, as she has two opposites and logically incompatible sensations; as a consequence, it becomes problematic, even tyrannical, to try to pin down anyone's identity.
- 28 In so far as the characters can feel contradictory sensations, they can distance themselves from their own identity:
- (11) The hall of the house was cool as a vault. Mrs. Dalloway raised her hand to her eyes, and, as the maid shut the door to, and she heard the swish of Lucy's skirts, she *felt like a nun who has left the world* and feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions. (Woolf 1996, 27)
- (12) I haven't *felt so young for years!* thought Peter, *escaping (only for an hour or so) from being precisely what he was, and feeling like a child who runs out of doors, and sees, as he runs, his old nurse waving at the wrong window*. (Woolf 1996, 51)
- 29 Clarissa and Peter feel as if they had become someone else; however, it is worth noticing here that they are both conscious of their own identity, as manifested by the preposition *like*, which refers to similarity but not identity<sup>12</sup>. In other words, while giving them access to an experience that is not theirs, the feeling does not deprive them of their individuality.
- 30 In example (13),
- (13) [...] *this post that she felt herself to have become*, for oddly enough she had quite forgotten what she looked like, but *felt herself a stake driven in at the top of her stairs*. Every time she gave a party *she had this feeling of being something not herself*, and that every one was unreal in one way; much more real in another. (Woolf 1996, 173)
- the metamorphosis is closer to being complete, as the extract differs from "she felt like a stake driven in at the top of her stairs" or "she felt as if she were a stake driven in at the top of the stairs". However, the use of the pronoun *herself* suggests that Clarissa is divided into two entities: she is both perceiver/experiencer and perceived. To that extent, she undergoes a partial reification – and indeed assimilates herself to an object – but remains a human observer.

### Communicating vessels

- 31 The characters' self-perception as other than themselves shows that they can go beyond their own experience, maybe because what they feel does not belong to them.

- 32 Example (14) deals with Clarissa's perception, and yet, the experiencer is referred to as "one", as if her feelings were not peculiar to her:

(14) For having lived in Westminster — how many years now? over twenty — *one feels* even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. (Woolf 1996, 2)

- 33 In example (15), this time, Clarissa appropriates an emotion that is not supposed to be compatible with her gender so that her feelings enable her to break with the conventional limits she is socially subjected to:

(15) yet she could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman, not a girl, of a woman confessing, as to her they often did, some scrape, some folly. And whether it was pity, or their beauty, or that she was older, or some accident — like a faint scent, or a violin next door (so strange is the power of sounds at certain moments), she did undoubtedly then *feel what men felt*. (Woolf 1996, 30)

- 34 As characters can experience others' feelings, perceptions and intuitions seem to be goods common to all, which are sometimes detached from those they emanate from. This may be the reason why the characters' thoughts echo one another:

(16) [...] which was somehow to Hugh's credit, and to the credit of the sentiments which his pen expressed (so *Richard Dalloway felt*) as Hugh began carefully writing capital letters with rings round them in the margin, and thus marvellously reduced Lady Bruton's tangles to sense, to grammar such as the editor of the *Times*, *Lady Bruton felt*, watching the marvellous transformation, must respect. (Woolf 1996, 111)

- 35 The two parenthetical clauses suggest that Richard Dalloway's thoughts find their extension in Lady Bruton's. Similarly, Clarissa's feelings are similar to Septimus's:

(17) How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning [...] and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, *feeling* as she did, standing there at the open window, *that something awful was about to happen* (Woolf 1996, 1)

(18) and as [...] the sleeper feels himself drawing to the shores of life, so he *felt* himself drawing towards life, the sun growing hotter, cries sounding louder, *something tremendous about to happen*. (Woolf 1996, 68)

## Feeling nothing

- 36 If feelings are shared by characters, at the other end of the spectrum, what does it mean to *feel nothing*, as Septimus is repeatedly said to? He clearly has a rich inner life, and the phrase rather refers to his disconnection from people around him:

(19) For now that it was all over, truce signed, and the dead buried, he had, especially in the evening, these sudden thunder-claps of fear. He *could not feel*. As he opened the door of the room where the Italian girls sat making hats, he could see them; they were rubbing wires among coloured beads in saucers; they were turning buckram shapes this way and that; the table was all strewn with feathers, spangles, silks, ribbons; scissors were rapping on the table; but something failed him; he *could not feel*. (Woolf 1996, 87)

(20) Far away he heard her sobbing; he heard it accurately, he noticed it distinctly; he compared it to a piston thumping. But he *felt nothing*.

His wife was crying, and he *felt nothing*; only each time she sobbed in this profound, this silent, this hopeless way, he descended another step into the pit. (Woolf 1996, 90-91)

- 37 Example (19) shows that Septimus is not deprived of affects, since he is struck by "thunder-claps of fear"; he also perceives and identifies his surroundings precisely, so



that his lack of feeling refers in fact to the discrepancy he feels between his mood and the young women's. Similarly, in the next passage, his wife's tears plunge him into despair but his *feeling nothing* means that he is unable to reach out to her.

- 38 Septimus's "feeling nothing" suggests by contrast that feeling involves sharing and empathizing.

## Time and space

- 39 Feelings enable the characters to transcend their individuality, to identify with someone or something they are not, i.e. to share in a sort of communal experience. Their spatial and temporal location is therefore abolished:

(21) But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she *felt herself everywhere; not "here, here, here"; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere*. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she has with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter – even trees, or barns. (Woolf 1996, 154)

(22) How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (*for a girl of eighteen as she then was*) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen (Woolf 1996, 1)

- 40 Example (21) once again stresses the contradiction between the character's outer reality and her feelings: while Clarissa is particularly anchored in a place ("she tapped the back of the seat"), she has a feeling of boundlessness (cf. *everywhere*).
- 41 The syntax of example (22) creates uncertainty as to the origin of the feeling, which is both Clarissa at the time of the narrative and the young woman she was thirty years earlier.
- 42 To the extent that what is felt is detached from the subject that seems to be its source, it acquires autonomy, as if it were a concrete object.

## Feelings as independent realities

- 43 Feelings seem to inhabit the characters, who are only their repositories, regardless of their own will:

(23) She could not even get an echo of her old emotion. But she could remember going cold with excitement, and doing her hair in a kind of ecstasy (*now the old feeling began to come back to her*, as she took out her hairpins, laid them on the dressing-table, began to do her hair), with the rooks flaunting up and down in the pink evening light, and dressing, and going downstairs, and feeling as she crossed the hall "if it were now to die 'twere now to be most happy." (Woolf 1996, 33)

- 44 The emotion felt decades ago "come[s] back" to Clarissa when she repeats the gestures she made at the time; it seems to be endowed with a sort of existence independently of the moments when Clarissa actually experiences it. Moreover, by means of the nominal form *feeling* itself, the affect is construed as an independent entity, as suggested by the part of speech it belongs to<sup>13</sup>. A feeling is compared with an object (cf. "some grain of pearl or diamond"):

(24) As a person who has dropped *some grain of pearl or diamond* to the grass and parts the tall blades very carefully, this way and that, and searches here and there vainly, and at the roots, so she went through one thing and another; no it was not

Sally Sutton saying that Richard would never be in the Cabinet because he had a second-rate brain (it came back to her) [...]. It was a *feeling*, some unpleasant feeling, earlier in the day perhaps. (Woolf 1996, 122)

- 45 Trying to identify one's feeling is equated with looking for some jewel and as a matter of fact, for Clarissa, what has been felt is endowed with some kind of a material existence:

(25) Since she was lying on the sofa, cloistered, exempt, *the presence of this thing which she felt to be so obvious became physically existent*; with robes of sound from the street, sunny, with hot breath, whispering, blowing out the blinds. (Woolf 1996, 122)

- 46 Woolf expresses the same idea in "A Sketch of the Past": "Now [...], is it not possible – I often wonder – the things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence" (Woolf 2002, 81).

- 47 According to Mignot (2015), for Woolf, "Les pensées s'affranchissent du moi qui les produit et les perçoit ; elles semblent acquérir une indépendance"<sup>14</sup>. The same observation can be made about sensations and affects.

- 48 This reification reaches its peak in the plural form *feelings*, which often designates artificial and conformist opinions in the novel:

(26) Then somebody said – Sally Seton it was – did it make any real difference to one's *feelings* to know that before they'd married she had had a baby? (Woolf 1996, 58)

(27) Hugh was slow, Hugh was pertinacious. Richard said one must take risks. Hugh proposed modifications in deference to people's *feelings*, which, he said rather tartly when Richard laughed, "had to be considered[.]" (Woolf 1996, 111)

- 49 In the first excerpt, the goal of Sally Sutton's allusions to feelings is precisely to shock the guests who she thinks are too conventional; conversely, in the second extract, Hugh's respect for "people's feelings" is representative of his attachment to the established order.

- 50 Through their sensations, affects and thoughts, the characters escape their individuality and identity; they feel as if they were different people, and go beyond their spatial, temporal and social location. It therefore comes as no surprise that feelings can be shared by several characters, so that feelings are detached from their experiencers and turn into independent realities. They are both highly personal, since they are concerned with the experiencers' inner lives, and public, and have consequently an ambivalent status.

- 51 This is not their sole contradictory dimension; as we shall see in the next section, they are also linked with both threat of disintegration and revelation.

## Feeling and meaning

- 52 *Feel* is on the boundary between disintegration and meaning. How can this ambivalence be explained?

### The dangers of feeling: disintegration

- 53 Feelings can shake up the world of the experiencer, who, like a plant, is subjected defencelessly to the events that affect him/her:

(28) for the shock of Lady Bruton asking Richard to lunch without her made the moment in which she had stood shiver, as a plant on the river-bed *feels the shock of a passing oar* and shivers: so she rocked: so she shivered. (Woolf 1996, 28)

- 54 Events – in this case, Lady Bruton’s inviting Richard to lunch – assail the subject, who has to face them unprotected, and is shaken by affects that are sometimes overpowering. Feelings can be, at the very least, a shock. However, understanding puts an end to that state:

(29) But – but – why did she suddenly *feel*, for no reason that she could discover, *desperately unhappy*? [...] no, it was not Sally Seton saying that Richard would never be in the Cabinet because he had a second-class brain [...]; nor was it to do with Elizabeth either and Doris Kilman; [...] Her parties! That was it! Her parties! Both of them [Richard and Peter] criticised her very unfairly, laughed at her unjustly, for her parties. That was it! That was it!

Well, how was she going to defend herself? Now that she knew what it was, she *felt perfectly happy*. (Woolf 1996, 122)

- 55 Clarissa’s initial unhappiness gives way to serenity when she understands what caused it.

## Composition

- 56 Once the explanation has been found and a meaning given to the first feeling, the shock is followed by an ecstatic epiphany (cf. “a sudden revelation”, “some astonishing significance”):

(27) It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and *felt* the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! (Woolf 1996, 30)

- 57 The following extract from “A Sketch of the Past” goes along the same lines “... as one gets older one has a greater power through reason to provide an explanation; and [that] this explanation blunts the sledgehammer force of the blow” (Woolf 2002, 84). The transmutation takes place because it is possible to forge a coherent whole from experience, so that the latter is no longer perceived as the contact with a sharp-edged object:

[A blow] will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind the appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting into words that I make it real; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. (Woolf 2002, 84)

- 58 This is redolent of the “semi-transparent envelope” alluded to in “Modern Fiction”, without which the perceiver is not protected from the blows inflicted by the outer world.

- 59 The feeling resulting from a first experience is in itself another experience which transcends the previous one and gives it not only its meaning but also its sense-based qualities:

(28) Brief, broken, often painful as their actual meetings had been, what with his [Peter’s] absences and interruptions [...], the effect of them on his life were immeasurable. [...] You were given a sharp, acute, uncomfortable grain – the actual meeting; horribly painful as often as not; yet in absence, in the most unlikely

places, it would flower out, open, shed its scent, let you touch, taste, look about you, get the whole feel of it and understanding, after years of lying lost. (Woolf 1996, 155)

60 Peter contrasts his actual encounters with Clarissa, generally unpleasant, with what they become later on, when their meaning but also their “texture” dawn on him.

61 The observations in *Mrs Dalloway* and in “A Sketch of Past” are consistent with Barrett’s findings. According to Barrett (2006), emotions are not purely physical reactions, they only occur when the flow of affects is categorized; they are given an identity only when cognitive work has been carried out, even if the latter is almost instantaneous. She argues that:

emotions are not biologically given, but are constructed via the process of categorization. [...] Specifically, the experience of feeling an emotion, or the experience of seeing emotion in another person, occurs when conceptual knowledge about emotion is brought to bear during the act of categorization. The experience of feeling emotion occurs when a person categorizes his internal state. (Barrett 2006, 27)

62 Two steps can thus be identified:

First, affect is a basic, biological substrate that is available to be categorized. Second, the conceptual knowledge that is called forth to categorize affect is tailored to the immediate situation, is represented in sensorimotor cortex, and is acquired from prior experience and supported by language. (Barrett 2006, 30)

63 Experiencing an emotion consists among other things in isolating it in the flux of core affect:

the act of categorization performs a kind of figure-ground segregation (Barsalou 1999, 2003) so that the experience of an emotion will pop out as a separate event from the ebb and flow in ongoing core affect [...]. In doing so, people divide ongoing changes in core affect into meaningful experiences. (Barrett 2006, 36)

64 In that process, language plays a key-role:

the conceptual act model suggests an intrinsic role for language in the emergence of emotional events. It is consistent with a strong version of linguistic relativity (Whorf, 1956), that is, that language forms the basis of experience. In the case of emotion, language shapes core affective phenomena into the emotional reality that we experience. Language not only enters into the categorization process, but it also directs the development of emotion category knowledge in the first place (by guiding which nonlinguistic information is included in an emotion category as it is being constructed during the learning process). (Barrett 2006, 37)

65 The steps and elements described by Barrett are similar to those mentioned by Woolf: raw experience only becomes meaningful when it is analysed and filtered by words because it can then be identified, named and therefore made whole.

66 This analysis of emotions evidences the coherence of the three semantic areas of *feel*: sensations make up the biological substrate underpinning affects, which turn into emotions when categorization, that is, cognition, comes into the picture and gives them meaning. As we shall see in next subsection, the emergence of meaning is correlated to that of an impersonal self.

## Meaning and transcendence

67 Neveux (2016) comments on the passage quoted in (27) and notes that “la métaphore *split* est suivie d’une autre, *pour*, se déverser, les deux exprimant un bonheur des sens et

du sens transcendantal qui dépasse le soi, le je”<sup>15</sup>. She also notes that “[l]orsque Peter fait l’expérience heureuse du moment signifiant [...], il ressent ce plaisir et ce sens comme de moins en moins personnels”<sup>16</sup>, as suggested by the passage “every ounce of pleasure, every shade of meaning; which both were so much more solid than they used to be, so much less personal” (Woolf 1996, 79 quoted by Neveux 2016).

- 68 The dissolution of self is also alluded to in “A Sketch of the Past”, where the I gives way to pure sensation and pleasure: “I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture” (Woolf 2002, 80). And indeed, the revelations Woolf hints at are related to the idea of a pattern in which individual identity is lost:

at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is a hidden pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven’s quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. (Woolf 2002, 85)

- 69 The “moments of being”, which Woolf contrasts with the “cotton wool of daily life”, are therefore an access to meaning, but also to the “hidden pattern” connecting “all human beings”, thus making sense of the separate constituents of the world seen as a work of art.

### Clarissa’s parties: connecting disconnected feelings?

- 70 This explains the importance Clarissa gives to her parties; in the same way as the novelist endeavours to “put the severed parts together”, Clarissa tries to gather separate individuals together:

(29) What she liked was simply life. [...] in her own mind now, what did it mean to her, this thing she called life? [...] Here was So-and-So in South Kensington; some one up in Bayswater; and somebody else in Mayfair. And she *felt* quite continuously a sense of their existence; and she *felt* what a waste; and she *felt* what a pity; and she *felt if only they could be brought together*; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create; but to whom? (Woolf 1996, 122-123)

- 71 *Feel* highlights the raw character of sensations and affects, which only acquire meaning when they are digested by the experiencer; lived experience is then transcended, and sensations and affects give way to understanding, thus passing from one meaning of *feel* to another.

## Conclusion

- 72 The omnipresence of *feel* in *Mrs Dalloway* goes hand in hand with the exceptional thematic importance of perception, affects and cognition in the novel. The different meanings of the verb are underpinned by the idea of both contact and distinction between perceiver/experiencer and what is perceived. The sense of touch is thus a sort of matrix for the other meanings of *feel*.
- 73 To that extent, *feel* also seems to be the linguistic counterpart of the “semi-transparent envelope” conjured up by Woolf; the latter encapsulates *feel*’s semantic core inasmuch

as it constitutes an almost imperceptible membrane that separates the experiencer from the outer world, and, at the same time, is a prerequisite for meaning to emerge.

- 74 The verb also crystallizes a conception of feelings characteristic of the novel: they take place at the interface between the experiencer and the world, and are what relates the characters to one another; individuals thus go over their personal experience while maintaining their identity. *Feel* condensates major elements of Woolfian writing, which gives it its almost trivial and, at the same time, exceptional status; it is central in Woolf's conception of what writing is in the sense that it is an access to meaning and to an impersonal consciousness, which is the very essence of self.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BARRETT, Lisa Feldman. 2006. "Solving the emotion paradox: Categorization and the experience of emotion." *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10.1: 20-46.
- British National Corpus, <https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/>, accessed 26 June 2019
- CONSOLI, Sylvie. 2003. *La Tendresse. De la dermatologie à la psychanalyse*. Paris: Odile Jacob.
- DAMASIO, Antonio. 1994. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. Putnam Publishing New York: Avon Books.
- Oxford English Dictionary, <http://www.oed.com/>, accessed 26 June 2019
- LANGACKER, Ronald W. 1998. "Conceptualization, symbolization, and grammar". In M. TOMASELLO (ed.), *The New Psychology of Language. Cognitive and Functional Approaches to language structure*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Erlbaum, p. 1-39.
- LANONE, Catherine. 2013. "Virginia Woolf ou l'opacité de la transparence." *Études britanniques contemporaines* [En ligne], 44, <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/463>, accessed 26 June 2019.
- LAPAIRE, Jean-Rémi & ROTGE, Wilfrid. 1998. *Linguistique et grammaire de l'anglais*. Toulouse : Presses Universitaires du Mirail.
- MIGNOT, Elise. 2015. "Le pronom personnel *one* dans *A Room of One's Own* de Virginia Woolf. Engagement ou désengagement ?" *Études de Stylistique Anglaise* 9, <http://journals.openedition.org/esa/779>, accessed 26 June 2019.
- NEVEUX, Julie. 2016. "Stream of consciousness ou points de confluence ? Temporalité et conscience dans *Mrs Dalloway* : une approche psycholinguistique et cognitive", *Études de Stylistique Anglaise* 10, <http://journals.openedition.org/esa/743>, accessed 07 November 2019.
- PAULIN, Catherine. 2003. « Polysémie et complémentation verbale : le verbe *feel* dans tous ses états ». In C. Delmas, L. Roux (eds.) *Correct, Incorrect en linguistique anglaise*, C.I.E.R.E.C, Travaux 113, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne Jean Monnet, p. 129-155.
- WOOLF, Virginia. 1996 [1925]. *Mrs Dalloway*. London: Penguin Books.
- WOOLF, Virginia. 2002. *Moments of Being*. London: Pimlico.

WOOLF, Virginia. 1994 [1925] "Modern Fiction." In A. McNEILLIE (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, IV, 1925-1928. London: the Hogarth Press, p. 157-165.

## NOTES

1. There are 185 occurrences of the verb *feel* and its derivatives (0.3% of all words in *Mrs Dalloway*), which are therefore 4.3 times more frequent in the novel than in the *British National Corpus*, for example (where they correspond to 0.07% of the total number of words).
2. The sequences "he felt nothing" (Woolf 1996, 90) and "he could not feel" (Woolf 1996, 87, 88) occur respectively two and six times in the novel to characterize Septimus.
3. It is defined as "To examine or explore by touch" by the *OED*.
4. "To have the sensation of physical contact with (something); to perceive (an object) by the sense of touch" (*OED*).
5. In this example as in the others, the emphasis is mine.
6. "To perceive or become aware of (something acting in the specified way or being in the specified condition) by sense of touch or other physical sensation" (*OED*).
7. "To entertain a specified sentiment or conviction; to be in a specified frame of mind" (*OED*)
8. "To have a conviction or impression that (something) is the case, esp. based on emotion, intuition, or other indefinite grounds; to think, believe, hold as an opinion (*OED*)
9. "Feel is a relator which locates two elements X and Y in relation to each other and ascribes a quality Z to X or Y" (my translation).
10. "The skin [...] is not only the organ of touch, of which it is both the container and the support, it is also the privileged, visible organ of the life of relationship, the birthplace of tenderness, the limit of the individual and the representative of the limit of the latter's psychological space" (my translation).
11. This analysis is to some extent in keeping with Lanone's: "Dans *Sketch of the Past*, Virginia Woolf décrit un souvenir d'enfance fondateur, mêlant le ressac des vagues au battement d'un store à la fenêtre, écran de lumière jaune qui donne à la petite Virginia le sentiment d'être lovée dans la poche semi-transparente d'un grain de raisin. Cette pellicule translucide donne à la vision son grain et fonctionne comme métaphore de la perception, mais aussi de la mémoire et de l'écriture" (Lanone 2013). ("In *Sketch of the Past*, Virginia Woolf describes a founding childhood memory, mixing the backwash of the waves with the beating of a window-blind filtering a yellow light, making little Virginia feel that she nestles in a semi-transparent grape. This translucent film gives vision its grain, and works as a metaphor for perception, but also for memory and writing" – my translation).
12. As Lapaire and Rotgé (1998, 263) put it, "LIKE ne franchit pas les limites de l'**analogie** (qui est correspondance entre deux termes essentiellement **différents**)" (emphasis in the original) ("LIKE does not cross the boundaries of **analogy** (which is the correspondence between two essentially **different** terms" – my translation).
13. As Langacker (1998, 18) explains, "The claim, then, is that a noun profiles a *thing*, in an abstract and broadly inclusive sense of that term. [...] But what is a "thing"? My working hypothesis is that a thing is the product of two fundamental and ubiquitous cognitive phenomena. The first is *grouping*, whereby entities are singled out and conceived in relation to one another to the exclusion of others. [...] The second relevant phenomenon, call it *reification*, is the manifestation of a group as a unitary entity for higher level cognitive purposes."
14. "Thoughts free themselves from the self that produces and perceives them; they seem to become independent" (my translation).

15. “The metaphor *split* is followed by another one, *pour*; both express the pleasure of the senses and of transcendental meaning going beyond the self” (my translation).
16. “When Peter goes through the happy experience of a meaningful moment, he feels that this pleasure and this meaning are less and less personal” (my translation).

## ABSTRACTS

This article deals with the use of the verb *feel* and the substantive *feeling* in *Mrs Dalloway*. The high number of occurrences of those lexemes testifies to their centrality in the novel, which gives them an exceptional status. This contribution aims to demonstrate that the great polysemy of *feel*, which refers to sensations, affects and cognition, is underpinned by a semantic core that recalls not only the Woolfian vision of perception but also the role that writing and language play for Woolf as she defines them in some of her non-fiction writings. Indeed, unlike other verbs of perception, *feel* expresses a sense modality related to the direct contact between the perceiver and the perceived, and the effect that the latter has on the former. It is connected with both fusion and distinction. In that sense, it is reminiscent of the *semi-transparent envelope* that Woolf evokes in “A Sketch of the Past” and which stands for the contact with and the protection against the outside world. We shall see that *feel*'s semantic core is to be found in all its uses and that the text exploits this potential to make sensations and feelings the privileged access to the outside world and to meaning. The thesis defended here is therefore that the polysemy of *feel* is a central interpretative key to the novel, hence its exceptional status in *Mrs Dalloway*.

Cet article porte sur l'emploi dans *Mrs Dalloway* du verbe *feel* et du substantif *feeling*. Leur importante présence numérique témoigne de leur centralité dans le roman, qui leur confère un statut exceptionnel. Cette contribution a pour objectif de démontrer que la grande polysémie de *feel*, qui renvoie aux sensations, aux affects et à la cognition, est sous-tendue par un noyau sémantique qui rappelle non seulement la vision woolfienne de la perception mais aussi le rôle de l'écriture et du langage pour Woolf tels qu'elle les définit dans certains de ses écrits non-fictionnels. En effet, à la différence d'autres verbes de perception, *feel* exprime une modalité sensorielle liée au contact direct entre percevant et perçu et à l'effet que le perçu a sur le percevant. Il dit à la fois la fusion et la distinction. En cela, il rappelle la *semi-transparent envelope* qu'évoque Woolf dans « A Sketch of the Past » et qui est à la fois contact avec et rempart contre le monde extérieur. Nous verrons que le noyau sémantique de *feel* se retrouve dans tous ses emplois et que le texte exploite ce potentiel pour faire du *feeling* l'accès privilégié au monde extérieur et à la signification. La thèse défendue ici est donc que la polysémie de *feel* est une clef de lecture centrale du roman et que le lexème occupe une place exceptionnelle dans *Mrs Dalloway*.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** feel, feeling, sensations, perception, affects, emotions, Mrs Dalloway, Woolf (Virginia)

**Mots-clés:** feel, feeling, sensations, perception, affects, émotions, Mrs Dalloway, Woolf (Virginia)



## AUTHOR

### STÉPHANIE BÉLIGON

Sorbonne Université  
CeLiSo – EA 7332

Stéphanie Béligon is a lecturer in English linguistics at Sorbonne University. She is a member of the research center CeLiSo (Centre de Linguistique en Sorbonne).

Her research deals with lexical semantics applied to the expression of perception and affects.

Stéphanie Béligon est maître de conférences en linguistique anglaise à Sorbonne Université. Elle est membre du centre de recherche CeLiSo (Centre de Linguistique en Sorbonne). Ses recherches portent sur la sémantique lexicale appliquée au domaine de la perception et des affects.