

# On The Translatability And Untranslatability Of Stream-Of-Consciousness Techniques In Mrs. Dalloway

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## Abstract

*As a classic of modernist literature, Mrs. Dalloway holds a significant position in world literature due to its unique narrative style and profound themes. Its pioneering stream-of-consciousness techniques break free from the constraints of traditional narrative, delicately presenting the complex inner emotions and thought processes of characters. This paper focuses on the translation of stream-of-consciousness techniques in Mrs. Dalloway, adopting text analysis and comparative translation methods to explore the translatability of interior monologue, free association, and symbolic imagery, as well as the untranslatability of linguistic rhythm and prosody, cultural and historical contexts, and implicit logic. Through comparative research, it is found that although some elements of stream-of-consciousness techniques can be translated to a certain extent through translators' skills, allowing readers to grasp part of the original work's essence, untranslatable challenges persist due to linguistic and cultural differences—such as the difficulty in replicating linguistic rhythm and prosody, conveying the profound meanings of cultural and historical backgrounds, and presenting implicit logic. Therefore, translators need to adopt multiple strategies, including expanding cultural annotations, drawing on poetic techniques, and conducting interdisciplinary research, to improve the translation quality of Mrs. Dalloway and similar works, promote their understanding and acceptance in cross-cultural communication, and enable readers from different cultural backgrounds to better appreciate their charm.*

**Keywords:** Mrs. Dalloway; stream-of-consciousness techniques; translatability; untranslatability; translation strategies

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Date of Submission: 02-08-2025

Date of Acceptance: 12-08-2025

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## I. Introduction

### Overview of Mrs. Dalloway

Mrs. Dalloway, published by Virginia Woolf in 1925, is a classic work of stream-of-consciousness literature. Set in post-World War I Britain, it revolves around Clarissa Dalloway's single-day experience of preparing for an upper-class party. Through this everyday event, the novel not only depicts the protagonist's personal life but also reflects the profound social changes in Britain before and after World War I.

Woolf subtly presents the inner world of characters through her unique stream-of-consciousness techniques: while preparing for the party, Clarissa Dalloway's thoughts often shuttle between the past and the present, recalling her youth and emotional entanglements with Peter Walsh. Interwoven with her story is that of

Septimus Smith, a World War I veteran who develops delusions due to war trauma and eventually commits suicide before being subjected to forced treatment. This multi-narrative structure constructs a rich and complex social landscape through the flow of consciousness.

In terms of narrative, Woolf abandons the traditional linear model and employs techniques such as interior monologue and free association to allow characters' thoughts to jump freely. For example, when Clarissa Dalloway recalls Bourton Manor, her thoughts suddenly shift to details of party preparations, with no obvious logical transition—yet this realistically reflects the fluidity of thinking. Additionally, the novel uses symbolism: Big Ben symbolizes the passage of time, and the imagery of flowers metaphorizes the beauty and fragility of life.

The work profoundly reveals the living conditions of upper-class women in the Victorian era: Clarissa Dalloway, despite living in comfort, feels inner loneliness. Her choice of marriage reflects the compromise of love to secularity, and she gradually loses herself in social interactions. It also reflects the impact of World War I on the spiritual world. Septimus' experience represents the confusion and pain of post-war survivors, and his mental dilemma profoundly reflects the conflict between individual consciousness and the social symbolic order. Such fragmented flow of consciousness and alienation from reality are essentially psychological resistance to the discipline of the national power network (Ban Wang, 1992).

From the perspective of translation studies, its stream-of-consciousness style has “dual attributes”: core emotions and symbolic systems have the potential for cross-cultural transmission, while linguistic rhythm, culturally specific imagery, and the obscure nature of subconscious logic pose translation challenges (Hayriye Müge Gür, 2015). Analyzing the translatability and untranslatability of its stream-of-consciousness techniques is of practical significance for deepening literary translation theory and promoting cross-cultural communication of similar works.

## **II. Literature Review**

As the pinnacle of Woolf's stream-of-consciousness creation, Mrs. Dalloway and its unique narrative techniques have long been a cross-disciplinary focus of modernist literature and translation studies. Academic discussions on its stream-of-consciousness techniques involve both theoretical deconstruction of the techniques themselves and exploration of the possibility of their cross-linguistic conversion, providing an important academic foundation for this paper's study on the translatability and untranslatability of stream-of-consciousness.

In terms of theoretical deconstruction of stream-of-consciousness techniques, Elizabeth Abel, in *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis*, reveals the deep connection between Woolf's stream-of-consciousness and psychoanalytic theory. She points out that the psychological world of characters constructed by Woolf through interior monologue is essentially a literary representation of primitive psychological patterns in the subconscious, such as “mother-infant relationships” and “emotional contradictions.” This representation is not a disordered fragment of thought but implies traceable emotional logic and psychological clues (Abel, 1989). This discovery provides a key insight into the translatability of stream-of-consciousness: since the core of stream-of-consciousness is the “flow of emotions and psychological logic,” translators can partially reproduce the essence of stream-of-consciousness in the target language if they can capture and convey such logic—such as Clarissa Dalloway's excitement in recalling life at Bourton and her melancholy over the passage of time. Although Abel's research does not directly address translation issues, her argument about the “internal logic” of stream-of-consciousness provides theoretical support for exploring translatable dimensions such as “emotional transmission in interior monologue” and “logical sorting of free association.”

Jane Goldman, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf*, sorts out the formal characteristics and literary value of stream-of-consciousness in Mrs. Dalloway from a macro perspective. She emphasizes that Woolf's stream-of-consciousness breaks the linear time of traditional narrative through “the eternalization of

momentary experience”—such as the symbolism of Big Ben’s chimes for time and characters’ sudden retrospection of past fragments. The emotional intensity and symbolic meaning of such “moments” constitute an important carrier of the translatability of stream-of-consciousness (Goldman, 2006). For example, imagery such as “flowers” and “windows” repeatedly appear in the stream of consciousness, and their symbolic meanings (e.g., “flowers symbolize the fragility and splendor of life”) have cross-cultural commonality. Translators can convey their connotations through accurate imagery conversion, which embodies the translatability of symbolic imagery. Goldman also points out that the “isomorphism between linguistic rhythm and the flow of characters’ consciousness” in stream-of-consciousness—such as short sentences expressing rapid thinking and long sentences expressing lingering emotions—is an important innovation of Woolf. Although this view is more oriented toward untranslatability, it conversely suggests that translators can compensate through Chinese’s own rhythmic features (e.g., four-character phrases, parallel sentences), providing practical ideas for exploring translatability.

Gharaei and Dastjerdi’s study on Persian translations of Mrs. Dalloway provides an important reference for filling the first gap. By comparing the translation practices of free indirect discourse in two Persian versions, they specifically analyze the differences in translators’ handling of grammatical features such as tense retrospection, pronoun adjustment, and the function of present participles, revealing the effectiveness of translatability strategies for stream-of-consciousness narrative forms in different versions. This highlights the necessity of discussing the translatability of stream-of-consciousness in conjunction with specific translations (Gharaei et al., 2012).

Summarizing existing research, academia has paid attention to the psychological logic and formal characteristics of stream-of-consciousness techniques, laying a foundation for translatability studies: Abel’s psychoanalytic perspective reveals the “transmissibility of emotions and logic” in stream-of-consciousness, while Goldman’s formal analysis points out the “cross-cultural commonality of symbolic imagery and momentary emotions.” However, there are two shortcomings in existing research: first, the systematic comparison of translatability strategies in specific translations is still weak, such as how different translators handle the logical clues of free association; second, the integrated discussion of “limits of translatability” and “compensation strategies” is insufficient. Based on the above theoretical framework, this paper will analyze the transmission paths of translatable elements in stream-of-consciousness by comparing Chinese translations of Mrs. Dalloway, and explore solutions to untranslatability, aiming to enrich the research paradigm of stream-of-consciousness literary translation.

### **III. Analysis Of The Translatability Of Stream-Of-Consciousness Techniques In Mrs. Dalloway**

As the core artistic feature of Mrs. Dalloway, stream-of-consciousness techniques present both challenges and a certain degree of translatability in translation. Translators have preserved part of the original essence in their translations through various means, allowing readers to appreciate its charm to some extent. The translatability of stream-of-consciousness techniques is reflected in the emotional transmission of interior monologue, the logical sorting of free association, and the meaning conversion of symbolic imagery. These translator strategies confirm the nature of translation as seeking a balance between possibility and impossibility (Cai Longquan, 2008).

#### **Translatability of Interior Monologue**

Interior monologue is the direct expression of characters’ inner thoughts and emotions, playing a crucial role in presenting their psychological activities (Zhao Bo, 2013).

**Original text:** “What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air.”

This sentence vividly embodies Clarissa Dalloway’s memories and excitement about her past life at Bourton as she prepares for the party, serving as a typical fragment of interior monologue.

**Translation by Jiang Xiangming:** “太有意思了！太刺激了！对她而言，这感觉始终如一。以前在伯顿时，她猛地推开落地长窗，冲向户外，此刻她仿佛又听到了那较链轻微的嘎吱声。”

In terms of wording, this translation uses highly emotional expressions like “太有意思了！太刺激了！”, vividly and straightforwardly conveying the character’s excitement and agitation, allowing readers to quickly grasp her joyful and carefree mood at that time. In terms of translation techniques, it first emphasizes the current feeling, then naturally transitions to past experiences through word order, clearly and fluently presenting the layers and logic of interior monologue. It focuses on introducing emotions first and then unfolding memories, effectively conveying Clarissa Dalloway’s excited and nostalgic mood when recalling the past.

**Translation by Wang Jiaxiang:** “多么开心！多么刺激！她一直觉得是这样，当年在伯顿时，她一把推开落地窗，冲向户外，此刻她似乎还能听到那较链轻微的嘎吱声。”

This version also uses concise and powerful words to render the character’s cheerful and excited inner state. The wording is easy to understand, conforming to Chinese expression habits and facilitating readers’ comprehension. Its translation technique mainly follows the original narrative order, translating the memory content sequentially, enabling readers to easily enter the character’s inner world through the translation. It focuses more on truthfully conveying the character’s inner emotions and thoughts in a natural and plain manner.

### **Translatability of Free Association**

Free association is a key element of stream-of-consciousness techniques, where characters’ thoughts freely shuttle between different times, spaces, and scenes. Seemingly illogical yet closely connected, it reflects the emotional and memory bonds in their subconscious (Shen Fuying, 2005).

**Original text:** “She was thinking of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally, of herself as she had been then, of her life now, of all the things that had happened since she had last seen Peter. She was thinking of the war, of the dead, of the future. She was thinking of everything and nothing.”

This description accurately presents the sudden leaps in Clarissa Dalloway’s thoughts, from past people and events at Bourton to the war, death, and the future, embodying the free flow of her consciousness (Shangguan Qiushi, 2003).

**Translation by Jiang Xiangming:** “她想起了伯顿，想起了彼得，想起了萨利，想起了那时的自己，想起了现在的生活，想起了自从上次与彼得分别后所发生的种种事情。她想到了战争，想到了逝者，想到了未来。她思绪万千，却又一片空白。”

Through the continuous use of “想起了” this translation clearly sorts out the thread of the character’s associations, helping readers track the trajectory of consciousness and truthfully reproduce the scenario of free association. Its translation technique is concise and direct, strictly following the original order to completely retrace the content of association. In particular, the vivid expression “思绪万千，却又一片空白” exquisitely conveys the complexity of the character’s associations and occasional mental blankness, deeply transmitting complex and subtle emotions. It strengthens the emotional connotation of association through accurate summarization of thoughts, highlighting the translator’s keen grasp of the character’s psychological rhythm.

**Translation by Wang Jiaxiang:** “她在想着伯顿，想着彼得，想着萨利，想着那时的自己，想着现在的生活，想着自从上次见到彼得以来所发生的一切。她想着战争，想着死者，想着未来。她浮想联翩，又心不在焉。”

This version is plain and natural. In terms of translation techniques, it also follows the original word order, ensuring logical coherence. The expression “浮想联翩，又心不在焉” accurately conveys the character’s state of having rich and active thoughts while being somewhat distracted during free association, fitting her psychology. It focuses more on vividly presenting the complex and elusive emotional state during the character’s association.

### **Translatability of Symbolic Imagery**

In Mrs. Dalloway, symbolic imagery is a key element for conveying themes and emotions, enriching the work’s layers and metaphors. Big Ben is a highly representative symbol of time.

**Original text:** “Big Ben struck the hour, and its sound reverberated through the air, a solemn reminder of the passage of time.”

In this sentence, the echoing chime of Big Ben profoundly symbolizes the relentless passage of time and the continuous progress of life, deeply touching the characters’ inner worlds (Li Wei, 2014).

**Translation by Jiang Xiangming:** “大本钟敲响了整点，那声音在空气中回荡，肃穆地提醒着人们时光的流转。”

In translating this original sentence, the wording “敲响了整点” accurately reflects the specific scenario of Big Ben chiming on the hour, allowing readers to more vividly imagine the scene. The use of “肃穆地” emphasizes the solemn and dignified atmosphere brought by Big Ben’s chime, highlighting the awe-inspiring nature of its symbolism as time. In terms of translation technique, it follows the original word order, fluently conveying the original meaning. Through such expression, it effectively transmits the serious and solemn emotional content of Big Ben as a symbol of the passage of time, highlighting its symbolic significance.

**Translation by Wang Jiaxiang:** “大本钟敲响了，钟声在空中回荡，冷峻地提醒人们时光在流逝。”

This version uses concise wording: “敲响了” straightforwardly presents the action of Big Ben chiming, and “冷峻地” is unique, giving a sense of the relentless and indifferent passage of time. In terms of emotional transmission, it focuses more on reflecting the inevitability of time and the cold implication of its passage. In translation technique, it also converts naturally, enabling readers to grasp the important imagery of Big Ben symbolizing the relentless passage of time in the text.

## **IV. Analysis Of The Untranslatability Of Stream-Of-Consciousness Techniques In Mrs. Dalloway**

In the translation of stream-of-consciousness techniques in Mrs. Dalloway, despite translators’ efforts to present its unique charm, numerous untranslatable factors persist due to differences between Chinese and English languages and cultures, which to some extent affect target-language readers’ full appreciation of the original stream-of-consciousness art.

### **Untranslatability of Linguistic Rhythm and Prosody**

In stream-of-consciousness literary works, linguistic rhythm and prosody are closely aligned with the flow of characters’ consciousness, constituting a core element of their artistic charm. In Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, she creates a unique linguistic rhythm through the alternation of long and short sentences, repetition, parallelism,

and unique punctuation use, vividly mirroring the ups and downs of characters' thinking. However, this is extremely difficult to replicate in translation (Gao Fen et al., 2004).

**Original text:** "She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on."

The repetition of the sentence pattern "She felt... at the same time..." and the rapid switching of short sentences in the original text vividly present the instantaneous interweaving and collision of Clarissa Dalloway's complex and contradictory emotions, constructing a rapid and agile linguistic rhythm that makes readers feel as if they can perceive the rapid jumps and transitions of the character's consciousness.

**Translation by Jiang Xiangming:** "她觉得自己非常年轻，可同时又老得不成样子了。她像把刀似的切入到每件事物的内部，同时又置身事外，冷眼旁观。"

Although this version is not significantly erroneous in semantic transmission, in terms of linguistic rhythm, due to Chinese expression habits, the sense of rapidity and consciousness flow created by the original's sentence patterns and punctuation are greatly weakened, and the rhythm of the translation tends to be stable. This "domestication" is both due to linguistic differences and may implicitly reflect the adaptation of ideology to local reading habits (Liu Chengping et al., 2015), exacerbating the untranslatability of rhythm and prosody. Translators may unconsciously weaken the original's jumping rhythm to make the translation more in line with the target readers' cognitive logic, further amplifying the untranslatability of rhythm and prosody.

**Translation by Wang Jiaxiang:** "她觉得自己非常年轻，与此同时又不可言状地老迈。她像一把刀，切入万物，同时又在外面观望。"

This version uses concise words, retaining the basic semantics and imagery, but similarly fails to fully convey the sense of rapid flow and jumps in the original consciousness in terms of rhythm. It mostly adopts conventional word order and sentence combinations, with translation focusing on content transmission, resulting in the complete loss of the original's unique rhythmic beauty.

### **Untranslatability of Cultural Background and Historical Context**

In the stream-of-consciousness descriptions of Mrs. Dalloway, Britain's specific cultural background and historical context are deeply intertwined, constituting a thorny challenge for translation. Fragments such as "There was an old lady, a Mrs. Hilbery, who lived in Kensington, and who was supposed to know all about the poets and the people who had known the poets. Clarissa had been taken to see her once or twice when she was a girl, and she remembered the dark room, the smell of violets, and the old lady in the big chair talking about Byron and Shelley." contain elements deeply rooted in British culture and history—such as Mrs. Hilbery, the living environment in Kensington, the smell of violets, and discussions about poets—reflecting the unique cultural atmosphere and social ecology of the time. In translation, cultural elements such as the salon culture of Mrs. Hilbery and the symbolic significance of Byron and Shelley are untranslatable, and their deep meanings are easily lost (Tian Qingfang, 2007).

**Translation by Jiang Xiangming:** "有一位希尔伯里夫人，住在肯辛顿，据说对诗人以及那些与诗人有过交往的人了如指掌。克拉丽莎小时候曾被带去拜访过她一两次，她还记得那间昏暗的屋子、紫罗兰的香气，还有那位坐在大椅子上谈论拜伦和雪莱的老妇人。"

This version faces the problem of difficulty in fully transmitting cultural background information. Although the translator accurately translates the original text, readers still need a certain reserve of British cultural knowledge to better understand the British cultural traits and historical background implied in the original. Otherwise, the role and significance of these cultural elements in the stream of consciousness will be greatly diminished and fail to be fully appreciated by readers.

**Translation by Wang Jiaxiang:** “有一位希尔伯里夫人，住在肯辛顿，据说对诗人以及认识诗人的人无所不知。克拉丽莎小时候曾被带去见过她一两次，她还记得那昏暗的房间、紫罗兰的香气，还有那位坐在大椅子上谈论拜伦和雪莱的老妇人。”

This version also accurately translates various elements of the original text with precise wording, with clear handling of characters and places, and uses conventional translation methods to ensure accurate semantic transmission. However, in terms of cultural background and historical context, readers unfamiliar with British literary and cultural history can hardly truly understand the characteristics of the cultural circle in which Mrs. Hilbery lived from the translation. In terms of emotional content transmission, it only presents the basic recall scene, making it difficult for readers to immerse themselves in the emotional context created by the specific British cultural background. It focuses more on faithfully presenting the original text's literal meaning.

### **Untranslatability of Implicit Logic in Stream-of-Consciousness**

The flow of characters' consciousness in stream-of-consciousness works is not entirely illogical but contains subtle and obscure clues of emotional, psychological, or subconscious logic (Chen Yongguo, 2003). This is closely related to the author's cultural background, personal experience, and the overall atmosphere of the work, making it difficult to fully present such implicit logic to target-language readers in translation. Take “The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning - fresh as if issued to children on a beach.” as an example: the sudden jump from specific matters such as preparing to remove doors and the arrival of Rumpelmayer's men to the feeling of a fresh morning and association with children on the beach seems abrupt, but it is actually the result of the natural collision of inner desires. Clarissa Dalloway's association between doors and the beach morning stems from the subconscious subjective splicing of life fragments. This illogical logic, which is the true reflection of the soul, is difficult to fully convey in translation (Wen Hongjia, 2002).

**Translation by Jiang Xiangming:** “一会儿得把那些门卸下来，伦佩尔梅耶尔家的人很快就到。这时，克拉丽莎·达洛维念头一转，这清晨是何等美妙——清新得如同专为沙滩上嬉戏的孩童准备的礼物一般。当下，她的心思已从繁忙的家务筹备中短暂抽离，沉浸在这片刻的清新与宁静之中。”

This version attempts to reflect the sense of time urgency through “一会儿”and “很快”, and uses“念头一转”and “当下”to show the process of consciousness transformation, supplemented by descriptions of the character's psychological state. However, even so, readers still struggle to understand why such a leap in consciousness occurs, because the translator fails to fully explain the underlying implicit logic, making it difficult for readers to naturally follow the flow of the character's consciousness like readers of the original text—highlighting the untranslatability in translation.

**Translation by Wang Jiaxiang:**“要把那些门卸下来，鲁佩尔梅耶尔家的人就要来了。然后，克拉丽莎·达洛维想，这是个多么美好的早晨啊——清新得仿佛是给海滩上的孩子们的。”

Similarly, although this version uses concise words and is faithful to the original order, maintaining the plot presentation, its translation technique is conventional and does not provide additional explanation of the logical clues of consciousness transformation. For readers unfamiliar with stream-of-consciousness writing characteristics, it is difficult to identify the underlying logic of the leap from door-related matters to the praise of the morning in the translation. They can only understand different emotional states but cannot grasp the internal reasons for the transformation of consciousness, overly focusing on direct semantic transmission while showing obvious deficiencies in presenting implicit logic.

## V. Conclusion

Mrs. Dalloway stands out in world literature with its unique stream-of-consciousness techniques, and the exploration of translatability and untranslatability in its translation reveals the complex landscape of stream-of-consciousness literary translation.

In terms of translatability, interior monologue, free association, and symbolic imagery have crossed linguistic barriers to a certain extent through translators' ingenuity. Jiang Xiangming's and Wang Jiaxiang's translations each demonstrate their strengths in handling these elements—either through vivid vocabulary and clever word order, or by adhering to faithfulness to the original and natural plainness—opening a window for readers to access part of the original's spiritual world. However, untranslatable factors persist. Differences in linguistic rhythm and prosody make it difficult for translations to convey the original's agile rhythm and enhance emotional atmosphere; many British culturally specific elements in cultural background and historical context often lose their deep meanings in translation; the subtlety and complexity of implicit logic in stream-of-consciousness often confuse readers in understanding the flow of characters' consciousness.

Therefore, translators need to continue delving into cultural connotations and build cultural bridges. When facing challenges in cultural background and historical context, they should expand the depth and breadth of annotations, incorporating cultural background stories, historical context sorting, and even multimedia resources (such as links to cultural documentaries and displays of historical images) to assist readers' understanding. In terms of linguistic rhythm and prosody, they can draw on poetry translation techniques, exploring new sentence combinations and vocabulary prosodic matching strategies—such as using Chinese four-character phrases and reduplicated words to create a unique rhythm. At the same time, interdisciplinary research is indispensable: combining psychology to analyze the author's creative psychology and readers' reception psychology, introducing computer science to assist in analyzing stream-of-consciousness translation cases in large-scale corpora, and exploring commonalities and patterns. These efforts will comprehensively improve the quality of stream-of-consciousness literary translation, helping Mrs. Dalloway and similar works shine in global cultural exchanges, and enabling readers from different cultural backgrounds to more deeply appreciate their artistic charm.

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