Lexical Competition: ‘Round’ in English and Dutch

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Abstract
This paper studies the semantic division of labour between three Dutch words, om, rond and rondom, all three corresponding to the English word (a)round. First the range of senses covered by the English word is described in model-theoretic terms and ordered according to strength. Relating these senses to the three Dutch words shows that they are themselves ordered from weak to strong: om < rond < rondom. This ordering corresponds to a phonological and morphosyntactic ordering, a finding that can be explained by pragmatic principles in a framework that uses bidirectional optimization.

1 Introduction
The English preposition (a)round corresponds to three words in Dutch: om, rond and rondom.

(1) a. A man put his head round the door - Een man stak zijn hoofd om de deur
    b. They sat round the television - Ze zaten rond de televisie
    c. the area round the little town - het gebied rondom het stadje

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How do these words divide the semantic labour of that single English word? Do they each have their own fully specified lexical meaning or is there a general principle that regulates their specialization from underspecified meanings? In order to answer this question we first need a good description of the range of meanings covered by round.

2 The semantics of ‘round’

In [7] I describe in formal terms the range of shapes (paths) that can be described as round in English, using a vector-based spatial model [5] in which a path is a sequence of vectors. A vector can either represent the position of (a part of) an object relative to an origin (in the shape sense of being round and the motion sense of going round), or the axis of an object (needed for the rotation sense of turning round) [6].

The strongest sense of round is that of a perfect CIRCLE represented as the set of perfectly circular paths (a round disk, go round in circles), but there are many weaker senses.

Some uses only retain the idea that every direction is represented in the path (COMPLETENESS: the moat round the castle, to spiral round) and drop the property of CONSTANCY (that all the vectors of the path have the same length). Sometimes only only part of the circle is present (INVERSION ‘semicircle’: a round arch, to round the cape, to turn round; ORTHOGONALITY ‘quartercircle’: a round chin, round the corner). Other uses of round involve paths that return to their point of origin (LOOP: a round-trip) or are not straight (DETOUR: the long way round). These senses,
when defined as sets of paths in a model, are partially ordered by the subset relation:

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CIRCLE

CONSTANCY  COMPLETENESS  LOOP

INVERSION  DETOUR  ORTHOGONALITY
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The strongest (most restrictive) meaning is at the top and the weaker meanings, that are implied by it, are below it, partially ordered. Intuitively then, the meanings of round range from perfectly round at the top to less round when we go downwards.

The interpretation chosen for round is usually the strongest meaning compatible with the (linguistic) context, in line with the Strongest Meaning Hypothesis of Dalrymple et al. for reciprocals [2]. [7] casts this hypothesis in Optimality Theoretic terms.

3 ‘Round’ in Dutch

The next step is to determine how Dutch om, rond and rondom divide up the meaning range of round that we mapped out in the preceding section. I will single out one pattern in the data.\(^1\) In most constructions, om and rond show a clear contrast:

\[(2)\]  

Postpositions:  

\[\text{de hoek om} \quad \text{‘round the corner’ ORTHOGONALITY}\]  

\[\text{de kamer rond} \quad \text{‘round the room’ COMPLETENESS}\]

Predicates:  

\[\text{Deze weg is om} \quad \text{‘This way is longer’ DETOUR}\]

\(^1\) Not all uses of these three words can be captured in terms of the path meanings of section 2. For example, in the temporal domain we find om vijf uur ‘at five o’clock’ versus rond vijf uur ‘round five’, senses that require definitions that go beyond the scope of this paper.
We zijn rond ‘We are back where we started’ LOOP

Compounds:  
  omweg ‘detour’ DETOUR
  rondweg ‘ring road’ COMPLETENESS

Particles:  
  omkijken ‘look behind’ INVERSION
  rondkijken ‘look around’ COMPLETENESS

What we see is that rond takes on stronger interpretations than om. This is especially clear with minimal pairs (like omweg ‘detour’ and rondweg ‘ring road’). It can also be seen in the semantics of particle verbs with om and rond. Dutch grammars show that rond only takes interpretations involving COMPLETENESS (rondbazuinen ‘trumpet in all directions’, rondfietsen ‘cycle in circles’). Om on the other hand productively expresses interpretations with DETOUR meaning (omrijden ‘take a detour driving’), INVERSION (omdraaien ‘turn around’) and ORTHOGONALITY (omschoppen ‘kick over’), all three weaker than COMPLETENESS. The COMPLETENESS uses of om that exist are no longer productive (e.g. ombinden ‘tie around’). This strongly suggests that as particles om and rond have complementary meanings.

Rondom is clearly restricted to the stronger meanings when we compare it with om and rond:

(3)  
  CIRCLE: om/rond/rondom de paal lopen ‘walk round the pole’
  COMPLETENESS: om/rond/rondom de balk gebonden ‘tied round the beam’
  INVERSION: om/rond/?rondom de televisie zitten ‘sit round the television’
  ORTHOGONALITY: om/?rond/?rondom de hoek staan ‘stand round the corner’

These examples also show us that, as prepositions, om, rond and rondom are not always complementary. The generalization that suggests itself is that
while *om* and *rond* can relate to the same basic range of meanings that we found in English, in certain constructions *om* has a tendency towards weaker meanings and *rond* towards stronger meanings, while *rondom* is restricted to the senses involving *completeness*. We can therefore order these words semantically from weak to strong in the following way:

\[ \text{om} < \text{rond} < \text{rondom} \]

4 Pragmatics of ‘round’

Why would the three Dutch words for ‘round’ divide their labour in this way? What I would like to suggest is that this division of labour is the result of a grammaticalization process that can be understood in pragmatic terms (using Horn’s division of pragmatic labor [3], Levinson’s M-principle [4] and Blutner’s (weak) bidirectional optimization [1]): markedness in form corresponds with markedness in meaning. The increasing semantic markedness in *om*, *rond* and *rondom* is aligned with a markedness ordering *om* < *rond* < *rondom* on the sound and syntax side. This formal markedness can be seen in a variety of ways. It is shown phonologically in the relative weight of the three words and their stress behaviour (*om* can remain unstressed in compounds, for instance). *Om* and *rond* are morphologically simple, *rondom* is a compound. *Om* is part of the native stratum of Dutch, *rond* was borrowed from French. *Om* participates in a wide range of grammatical constructions and uses, while *rond*, and especially *rondom*, are much more restricted in their grammatical behaviour and grammaticalization. For example, *om* can be stranded, like the other basic prepositions of Dutch, but *rond* and *rondom* cannot: compare *er om* (derived from *om het* ‘around it’) with *er rond* and *er rondom*.

It is interesting to note that the Middle Dutch form of *om* (*ommen*) still covered the whole range of meanings that it now has to share with *rond* and
While *om* is being grammaticalized (becomes weaker in meaning), its original strong, lexical meaning is being taken over by other words.

We can see that the combination of model-theoretic semantics and Neo-Gricean pragmatics proves its fruitfulness in explaining language contrasts, historical developments and patterns of polysemy.

**References**


