# 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.
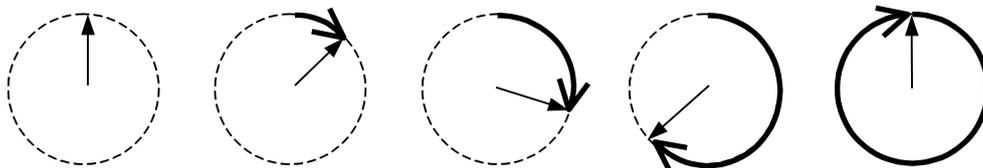


Some uses only retain the idea that every direction is represented in the path (COMPLETENESS: *the moat round the castle*, *to spiral round*) and drop the property of CONSTANCY (that all the vectors of the path have the same length). Sometimes only only part of the circle is present (INVERSION 'semicircle': *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:
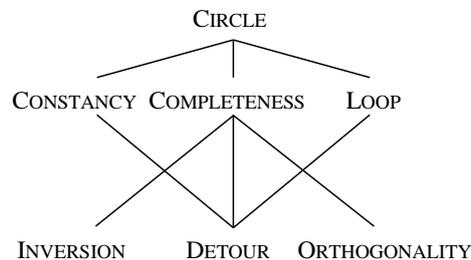


The strongest (most restrictive) meaning is at the top and the weaker meanings, that are implied by it, are below it, partially ordered. Intuitively then, the meanings of *round* range from perfectly round at the top to less round when we go downwards.

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:    *de hoek om* 'round the corner' ORTHOGONALITY

*de kamer rond* 'round the room' COMPLETENESS

Predicates:    *Deze weg is om* 'This way is longer' DETOUR

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[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 shows 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:

om < rond < 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* (*omme*) still covered the whole range of meanings that it now has to share with *rond* and

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*rondom*. 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

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