

ON ONE OF THE MEANINGS OF ABOUT

INESĖ ŠEŠKAUSKIENĖ

1. The subject of this paper is the semantics of one of the English prepositions – ABOUT which is considered to be synonymous to the prepositions AROUND and ROUND. All of them constitute a semantic microgroup.

1.1. The present analysis is fostered by the speculation, that neither modern dictionaries nor most grammars define the meanings of the given units adequately, i.e. they fail to delimit their meanings from one another as well as from the constituent context members (thus, neither paradigmatically nor syntagmatically). It is no news that in many dictionaries and grammars the meanings of the prepositions under study are described in a most confusing way – either they are given identical definitions of they are interpreted simply by substituting one for another [RHDEL; Swan, 1984; Close, 1979; Chalker, 1991; Alexander, 1988; DLKŽ; Balkevičius, 1963; UGE etc.]. Dictionary definitions, by the way, were empty criticized by U. Weinreich [Weinreich, 1962].

1.2. A review of abundant linguistic literature concerning the meaning of prepositions has led me to the following conclusions. Briefly summarizing it can be stated that, on the one hand, many linguists aim at structuring large and overall systems of the meanings of prepositions in various languages [Bennet, 1975; Kilius, 1973; Miller, 1985]. This, actually, is not a flaw in itself, but rather a natural outcome of the approach when the semantics of most of the prepositions are not described in full detail and a variety of texts, but rather in most general “concepts” (e.g. “surround” for all the prepositions under study) and fitted into a frame of the whole system. Rejecting the idea of a close examination of a large variety of texts linguists adhering to this approach usually overlook those at first sight minute differences between the meanings of the so called synonymous prepositions (e.g. *over* and *above*; *about*, *around* and *round*; *near*, *at* and *close to* in English; *apie* and *aplink*; *prie*, *šalia* and *greta* in Lithuanian etc.).

On the other hand, some linguists [Lindkvist, 1976; Leontjeva, Nikitina, 1969] define meanings of prepositions by supplying abundant examples containing them. This, however, gives no clue how to delimit the information supplied by the preposition from that given by the whole utterance. Logically, an obscure definition of one preposition leads to no less obscure definition of the synonymous ones.

As already mentioned, both views are absolutely flawless in themselves. They gain their importance only when the resulting definitions prove scientifically valid, and this, in our opinion, can not be achieved without a consistent verification of the hypothesized definitions on linguistic facts.

1.3. In this paper I adhere to the definition of meaning according to which the meaning of a linguistic unit embraces the information conveyed by the linguistic unit about its denotatum. It should supply enough information for a learner of language, who, like any of us, possesses general knowledge about the surrounding world, to be able to use that linguistic unit in his speech. Thus, the definition of a linguistic unit should predict its usage. The meaning of a linguistic unit cannot be identified with the information conveyed by the whole utterance either [Seliverstova, 1976, 126-127].

The analysis of the preposition ABOUT (as well as AROUND and ROUND) was carried out using test techniques¹.

Presuming that absolute synonymy is against the very nature of language, we support the view of those linguists who adhere to the idea that "there is no difference in form without some difference in meaning" [Bolinger, 1977, VII]. My further analysis, I hope, is a proof to this view.

2. In many modern grammars it has been rightly stated that at the bottom of the meaning of a preposition lies some particular spatial relation [Alexander, 1988; Leech, Svartvik, 1983; UGE]. Moreover, languages differ widely in their treatment of space. The idea has been further developed, amply explicated and exemplified by some other linguists [Maliar, Seliverstova, 1992]. I am not going to consider in detail the definition and particular features of space relevant for the analysis of prepositions. For the analysis of ABOUT in several of its meanings it is important that some object Y is chosen as the centre of spatial organization, the second object X is localized in space according to the relationship to Y. Moreover, in some meanings of the preposition under study Y determines the features of the surrounding space, which we shall call the region of Y (R) [Miller, Johnson-Laird, 1976, 388]. It should be stressed, however, that the term "object" refers not only to "one point" locations, but also to bounded areas or volumes, some unlimited ephemeral space etc., the character, position/movement of which, possible interaction between or among several objects can be determined by some spatial organization constituting the core of the

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meaning of a preposition. In the models with AROUND₁, some space X is further removed from Y, whereas AROUND₂, and ROUND, supplies no information about the presence/absence/formation of space but rather about the formation of a linear configuration of points of the trajectory of the moving/position of X in relation to Y.

Thus, first, in the semantic structure of ABOUT₁, the leading semantic feature seems to be a certain atmosphere (mainly expressed by X itself) of anxiety, tension etc. persisting in the space surrounding Y, for example:

(1) *The whole sky had put on a gigantic and harmonious haste which made the scurrying of the people in the streets ABOUT me seem nervous and paltry* [Murdoch, 203].

(2) *The melody drooped and climbed again with a kind of easy languor; the warm darkness seemed to pulse like blood ABOUT them* [Huxley, 137].

In the given meaning the surrounding space is filled with an ephemeral atmosphere, the nature of which is decided by the characteristics of X (mostly) expressing sound, scent, touch and, naturally, visual perception) and its perception by the speaker. Thus, it is quite natural, that the preposition ABOUT easily collocates with the verb SEEM which is considered to be the verb of subjective perception (cf. (1), [Usonienė, 1991, 32]. On the other hand, following the suggested definition, it is hardly possible that the kind of atmosphere as described above could be created by some linear circular trajectory of X(es) moving/positioned in relation to Y, cf.:

(3) *I can make my thumb and forefinger meet AROUND your bicep.*
I could snap your neck like a carrot. ABOUT

(Orwell, 224)

Naturally, the information about the formation of a linear trajectory of X(es) in relation to Y for ABOUT₁, is irrelevant, cf.:

(4) *The car went ABOUT the bend/corner.*

Secondly, it should be stressed, that the choice of ABOUT₁ presupposes that space does not form in relation to Y, it is kind of given, perceived as previously already existing, and X here functions as some ephemeral atmosphere persisting in the space surrounding Y. Thus, it is highly improbable and, as the experimental data shows, even impossible to use the preposition ABOUT in the utterances of the following type:

- (5) *"Did you hear the jet-fighter yesterday?"*
"Yes, it was roaring somewhere ABOUT the railway station".

Here X is being located in some segment of space surrounding Y, moreover, the action "roar" as performed by X's chaotic movement possibly covers some segment of space, thus, the most consistent and logical here, as indicated by the informants, would be the usage of AROUND.

Thirdly, for ABOUT₁, a component of a very short distance is also relevant, i.e. the space surrounding Y is located very close to it, probably, indistinguishable from it, consequently, contacts between X and Y can occur. Thus, ABOUT₁ does not collocate with word-groups indicating long distances, for example:

- (6) *In the distance all ABOUT the castle we could see vast areas of arable soil.*

The occurrence of AROUND in the utterance of the discussed type was considered by the informants as the most natural, the acceptability of ROUND was rated 3-4 points.

It should be stressed, however, that the very component of contact does not belong to the semantic structure of ABOUT₁, it can only come out as a consequence of a particular denotative situation, or, as J. Miller (1985, 88) remarks, "the question of contact may well be decided by individual lexical items other than the preposition".

Fourthly, due to the semantic components described above, the feature of a regular circle for ABOUT₁, unlike ROUND₁, is irrelevant. This is supported, first of all, by a very low percentage of examples where ABOUT₁ collocates with verbs of movement, also by the unacceptability of the collocation *ABOUT and ABOUT in the type of utterances presented below:

- (7) **The gnat amused itself by humming ABOUT and ABOUT her head.*

Here the usage of ROUND is preferred, and some informants even considered it mandatory. However, compare the following:

- (8) *The evening brought out clouds of gnats to dance in a frenzy ABOUT her head, and below the branches of the fruit trees [Hill, 121].*

In the example above, I think, the idea of a regular full circle is possible, but not mandatory.

3. Summing up what has been stated, it can be concluded, that ABOUT, at least in one of its meanings, is in no way identical to ROUND and AROUND. This is due to its specific semantic structure, namely: (1) some ephemeral atmosphere persists in the space surrounding Y; (2) that space

functions as already given but not formed by the moving/position of X(es); (3) that space is situated at a very short (perhaps minimal) distance from Y. The components of a full and regular circle or the linear trajectory/position of X for the given meaning of the preposition ABOUT are irrelevant.

Thus, the present analysis has shown that despite the fact that there are a lot of contexts in which the prepositions are freely interchangeable, their contribution to the utterance differs. On the other hand, there are contexts which do not allow the substitution of one preposition for the other. The results of this analysis supports the view that absolute synonymy is an extremely rare phenomenon in a language.

APIE VIENĄ IŠ ABOUT REIKŠMIŲ

Inesa Šeškanskienė

R e z i u m ė

Straipsnio tikslas – išsamiai aprašyti vieną iš anliškojo prielinksnio ABOUT reikšmių.

Pirmoje dalyje apibrėžiama lingvistinio vieneto reikšmė ir bendrais bruožais apžvelgiamos kai kurios prielinksnų reikšmės traktuotės, sutinkamos lingvistinėje literatūroje. Atkreipiamas dėmesys į daugelyje dabartinių žodynų ir gramatikų pateikiamų prielinksnų reikšmių aprašymo neadekvatumą.

Antroje dalyje aprašomi ir bandomi įrodyti vartojimo/ nevartojimo faktais tokie vienos iš prielinksnio ABOUT reikšmių komponentai: (1) erdvėje, supančioje Y, sukuriama atmosfera X, perteikianti įtampą, nerimą ir pan.; (2) ši erdvė funkcionuoja kaip duota, o ne sukuriama X-o (X-u) išsidėstymo ar judėjimo; (3) ši erdvė išsidėsčiusi labai arti nuo Y.

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