

胡鑫镛 著

A Guide to the Usage of
Semantically-related
English Prepositions

英语近义词介词
用法指南



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A Guide to the Usage of Semantically-related English Prepositions

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Preface

Since published in 1989 by the East China Normal University Press, the Chinese edition of *A Guide to the Usage of Semantically-related English Prepositions* has established itself in China as a unique, innovative, reliable guide to the usage of semantically-related English prepositions, which is an acute problem for learners of English as a second language. Some English prepositions semantically seem similar to, and interchangeable with, one another, however in reality they have different shades of meaning. Before the book appeared, there was no such guide to the usage of semantically-related English prepositions in China. At that time, how to choose the correct preposition was a perplexing puzzle for learners of English, and that explains why the book became an instant bestseller as soon as it came out. Currently the first edition is out of print and sold out. Based on the original book, this new English edition has thoroughly been revised and redesigned, providing an up-to-date, accessible resource for teachers, advanced learners and undergraduate students of English.

“Semantically-related English prepositions” refer to those prepositions that, in some cases, can be interchanged with little or no difference, but in other circumstances, although semantically similar, differ from one another in meaning and in use. For example, “She wore her hair long *about* her neck” and “She wore a necklace *round/around* her neck”. In the former, the necklace formed a circle round her neck; while in the latter, her long hair hung near her neck, but did not form a closed circle

around it. Further examples: “Do you know *about* him? = Do you know something about him?” and “Do you know *of* him? = Are you aware of his existence?”

The primary aim of this book is to present teachers and students of English with a comprehensive guide to the usage of semantically-related English prepositions by using simple explanations and illustrative examples taken from the works of distinguished, authoritative scholars of English.

This edition is divided into two parts:

- Part One: A guide to the usage of semantically-related English prepositions, providing a clear guideline on how to choose the correct preposition from those that are semantically-related and seem interchangeable.
- Part Two: An a-z of collocation of semantically-related English prepositions in use.

I am indebted to those scholars of English whose works have exerted a huge influence on my thinking and who have directly or indirectly contributed to the main theme, contents and wording of this book. Some of the theoretical approaches are adopted from their great works, listed at the end of the book in acknowledgement of their positive contributions, and beyond doubt this book would not have come into being without them. All the examples quoted are gleaned from books, periodicals, newspapers, and other publications in English-speaking countries, the UK and the USA in particular. Most of the examples are anonymous, assumed as genuine. Only occasionally are sources given when needed for an in-depth analysis and comprehensive explanation of certain controversial grammatical issues.

Xinyong Hu, 2015

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Part One

Usage of Semantically-related English Prepositions

1. About, around, round

1.1.1 These three prepositions all denote spatial relationships, have about the same meaning, and are generally interchangeable. **Round** is used chiefly in British English, and **around** chiefly in American English.

1.2.1 When used with a verb denoting movement, these three prepositions refer to movement or position that has no definite direction, lack of purpose, meaning “here and there”, “in lots of places”, “in different parts of”, “somewhere in” and similar ideas, implying the meaning of “scattered”.

They are wandering *about/around/round* the city.

Mr. Smith is traveling *about/around/round* the world. ①

They flutter round you like moths *about* a candle.

Look *about/around/round* you and you will see flowers everywhere.

The children were running *around/about* everywhere.

I like doing odd jobs *about/around* the house.

Clothes were scattered *about/around* the room.

They are also interchangeable when referring to “somewhere near” or mindless activity.

I lost my purse *about/around/round* here.

I wish you'd stop fooling *about/around/around* here.

About is frequently used in these senses in British English.

① In American English, “around the world” means circumnavigating the globe. **About** means “here and there”.

We were wandering *about* the town for an hour or so.

She looked *about* the room.

The papers were strewn *about* the room.

But we prefer **around/round** to **about** in American English when talking about going to all or most parts of a place.

We are going *around/round* the old part of the town.

When referring to movement that has no definite direction, these three prepositions tend to occur with the following verbs: **get**, **go**, **move**, **run**, **travel**, **walk**, **swim**, **row**, **look**, etc.

1.2.2 About and around/round are interchangeable when they refer to movement with no definite direction, emphasizing the meaning of “scattered” (cf. 1.2.1), but **around/round** carries an association of a circle or curve. In other words, both **around** and **round** are used to express the idea of circulation motion or position in a circle. Compare:

The children ran *about/around/round* the park.

The children ran *around/round* the park.

In the first example, **about/around/round** means “the children ran in the park without definite direction”; in the second example, emphasis is put on the circular movement of the children.

He goes *about* the country lecturing about the evils of drink. (Wood)

She twined the flowers in wreaths and bound them in rings *around/round* the brown water-jars. (Shibsbye)

Hundreds of people were walking *about* the streets. (Hill)

Go *round/around* the corner carefully. (Hill)

She walked *around/round* the car and looked at the wheels. (Heaton)

In short, **about** is not generally used in this sense in modern English, i. e. **about** cannot replace **around/round** in reference to circular movement.

He only wanted to get *round/around* (* *about*) the next corner. ①

They sat *round/around* (* *about*) the table.

The Moon goes *round/around* (* *about*) the Earth.

We ran *round/around* (* *about*) the outside of the house to the back,
looking for the dog.

Let me show you *around/round* (* *about*) the house.

He lives somewhere *round/around* (* *about*) Manchester.

1.2.3 When referring to following an approximate circular route past a corner or obstacle, **around/round** is the only option.

The guards followed and chased them *round/around* a corner.

The bus sped *round/around* the corner.

This area is full of streams and bogs and other natural obstacles, so we
have to walk *round/around* them to reach the town.

Here **around** is more common in American English,^② and **round** is a little more common in spoken English.

1.2.4 In British English, **round** is generally used to refer to a circular movement, and **around** is used to mean “in the area of” or “in all directions from center”. Compare:

The spaceship traveled right *round* the world in 40 minutes. (DCE)

I traveled *around* the world for a few years. (DCE)

The earth goes *round* the sun. (Palmer)

He lives somewhere *around* Manchester. (Alexander)

The winner of the race got *round* the course in record time. (Hill)

Many people stood *around* the injured man. (Heaton)

1.2.5 It follows that in reference to something/somebody on the other side of a corner or obstacle, **round** or **around** is usually

① The asterisk * shows that a word, a phrase or a sentence is grammatically unacceptable.

② Geoffrey Leach et al.: *An A-Z of English Grammar & Usage*, p. 7, Longman, 2001

used.

Steven parked his car *round/around* the corner (on the other side of the corner).

She caught up with us just *round/around* the block (on the other side of the block).

I glanced around nervously but the car park was *round/around* the back of the warehouse and it seemed everywhere fairly deserted.

We used to have a car park *round/around* the corner, not far from our house.

1.2.6 **Round/around** can refer to hitting something in passing, while **about** cannot.

If you don't shut up, you might get a clip *round/around* (* *about*) the ear. Eventually Peter wrestled Tom to the floor and boxed him *round/around* (* *about*) the ears, making Tom's head swim.

1.3.1 The three prepositions, used with certain verbs other than those mentioned in 1.2.1, refer to a stationary position or state, meaning "on any side of", "in the whole area of" a place.

People were standing *about/round/around* the bus stop waiting for the bus.

There aren't many shops *about/round/around* here.

She went *about/round/around* the house and saw that all the windows were barred.

He started sleepwalking and shuffled *about/round/around* the house at night.

But, in American English, **about** would not be used in this way. Even in British English the use of **about** here is considered old-fashioned, usually found in literature, as a colloquial expression.

1.3.2 In British English, **round** is commonly used to refer to a stationary position, meaning "on all sides of somebody/

something”, or “surrounding somebody/something”; while, in American English, **around** is usually used to express the same meaning.

She put her arm *round/around* him.

He had a scarf *round/around* his neck.

But **around** is sometimes used even in British English to denote a stationary position when the surrounding phenomenon is usually expressed by an uncountable or a plural noun.^①

The pipe *music* shrilled suddenly *around* her.

She began to be frightened by the pandemonium of *sights* and *noises* that surged *around* her.

They walked away, with *arms around* each other's shoulders.

1.3.3 Round and around strongly suggest the concept of “surrounding”, referring to a closed circle; **about** only has a vague sense of “surrounding”, meaning “near a certain center”.

The children sat *round/around* the teacher.

They stood all *about* him as he sat.

The first example means that the children formed a circle surrounding the teacher, whereas the second example means that “they” sat near “him”, but did not necessarily form a circle round him.

She wore her hair long *about* her neck.

She wore a necklace *round/around* her neck.

In the former, the necklace formed a circle round her neck; while in the latter, her long hair hung near her neck, but did not form a closed circle around it. This contrast is further exemplified by the following sentences:

① K. Schibsbye: *A Modern English Grammar*, pp. 303 - 4, OUP, 1979