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On, Near, About and Round About in Russian

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Вокруг да около: beat around the bush, miss the point

The other day someone asked me a simple question: What's the difference between возле (near) and около (near)? And I said, "Well, actually, you see, hmmm, they are more or less synonyms but sometimes not."

Impressive response, no?

It was, as you will see, a correct answer if not what you would call articulate. But the question reminded me that it was time to work on one of my favorite obsessions — mastering Russian prepositions. So today I'm going to look at four of them, all of which describe location and are

close in meaning: возле (near); вблизи (close to); около (near, by, around); вокруг (around).

For once, all of them only use one case: the genitive. Stand up and give them a round of applause. And all of them are both adverbs and prepositions (don't panic; more on that in a minute). And all of them, except perhaps вокруг, are rather approximate, which means that you aren't likely to sound stupid when you use them. After all, "near" is in the eye of beholder, right?

Let's get started.

Возле means near, next to, by, close to, not far from. Add an object, inanimate or animate, put it in the genitive case and you are good to go. Возле деревни, на лужайке, увидел козу (I saw a goat on the pasture near the village). Возле каждой картины ◙ небольшой поясняющий текст (There is a small explanatory note by every painting). You can be near a person, too: Он стоял возле неё и глядел разинув рот (He stood near her with his mouth hanging open and stared).

The adverb возле means "nearby" and doesn't cite a specific person or object that it is close to. Я живу на перекрёстке, она — возле (I live at the corner and she lives nearby).

Вблизи (or it's more archaic and slightly poetic version, близ) means near, close to, next to. It tends to be used more with cities and places than возле is. Here's an example from Mikhail Bulgakov's "Master and Margarita": Маргарита Николаевна со своим мужем вдвоём занимали весь верх прекрасного особняка в саду в одном из переулков близ Арбата (Margarita Nikolayevna and her husband had the entire top floor of a marvelous manor house in a garden on one of the little streets close to the Arbat).

Both близ and вблизи can sometimes mean "near" in a more figurative sense: Доходность долгосрочных облигаций осталась вблизи отметки 11,9% годовых (The income from long-term bonds remained close to 11.9% annually).

And близ and вблизи can stand alone as adverbs: Вблизи ветер подул сильнее (When we got close, the wind was stronger). Лесные заросли поглотил ночной мрак, даже вблизи ничего нельзя было увидеть (The forest undergrowth was swallowed up by the darkness of night, and even close up you couldn't see anything).

Вокруг means around in the sense of surrounding something in a circle. We non-native speakers love this word because unlike so many Russian prepositions, this one uses the genitive case when there is circling movement and when there is static placement in a circle. So: Мы все сидели вокруг стола и слушали выступающего (We all were sitting around the table and listening to the speaker) and Они сели вокруг стола (They sat down around the table). Земля вращается вокруг солнца (The earth revolves around the sun).

Вокруг can also have a figurative meaning: Постоянно возникал спор вокруг одних и тех же вопросов (There was a constant fight about the same questions). This was a staple of Soviet-era official statements and gave translators a headache, since the problem wasn't an event, but rather some foggy discussions or actions or statements or armed conflicts that were connected in some undefined way with an event. Главное место в переговорах заняла

ситуация вокруг Ирака (The main subject in the negotiations was the situation concerning Iraq). In political circles, they love вокруг, since it makes obfuscation a snap.

And like the other words, вокруг can stand alone as an adverb: Он смотрит вокруг (He looks around).

The last of our favorite four prepositions is около, which also mean near or close to, but it has an additional meaning of approximately that is not associated with location. To our great joy, it can also be used with verbs of motion and still uses the genitive case: Лечь около печки (Lie down by the Russian stove). As it does with static location or position, like in this saying: Около воды, да не замочиться. This is literally "By the water but you can't get wet," but more poetically "Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink" from Coleridges' "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

The other usage concerns time, measures and numbers. This is easy for us English speakers because we use the same expression: "Служебный роман" я смотрел около 4 раз (I've seen "Office Affair" about four times). Посолить и поперчить, полить коньяком и готовить ещё около 2 минут (Add salt and pepper, pour cognac over it, and cook it for about another two minutes). And then, whatever it is, dig in.

The adverbial usage is used when something is or isn't around in general: Живём мы одни, около никого нет (We live alone and there isn't anyone around).

And then there is the expression вокруг да около (literally the very opaque "around yes near"). This expression is used when someone is dancing around a subject without coming out and saying it, or driving around in circles, or missing the mark. Автор не стал ходить вокруг да около, а назвал героев своими именами (The author didn't beat around the bush; he called a spade a spade with his characters). Зачем ходить вокруг да около, когда можно играть в открытую? (Why beat around the bush when you can act out in the open?)

Finally, to make a five-pointed prepositional star, I'm going to add one more near-by-next-to preposition. It also uses the genitive case but differs a bit from the other four. This is the one-letter preposition "у." Unlike the other four, it can't stand alone as an adverb, and it has a number of meanings unrelated to location or position, like ownership (У меня новая машина — I have a new car); origin (Я занял деньги у родителей — I borrowed money from my parents); or residence (Он живёт у подруги — He lives with his girlfriend). But one of its primary meanings is by, next to, near: Мы сидели у костра (We sat by the fire). Я буду ждать тебя у входа (I'll wait for you by the entrance)

So, which of these next-to prepositions is nearest and which is farthest away? After a blitz survey of my infinitely patient neighbors, we came to... no firm conclusion. But in general, most of them thought that у was closest (perhaps because of the sense of ownership?) followed by вблизи followed by возле. Около was deemed by most to be the farthest away.

Got it? Go forth and make plans to meet your friends by/near/or at some landmark over the weekend!

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