



Size nouns matter: a closer look at *mass(es) of* and extended uses of SNs



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ABSTRACT

While a fair share of attention has recently been devoted to the grammaticalization process of size nouns in general (see Traugott, 2008) and individual case studies in particular (see Brems, 2003; Verveckken, 2012; De Clerck & Coleman 2011), there is still enough food for thought and room for further analysis. In this paper we want to address two aspects that have not received sufficient attention so far. First, we will focus on grammaticalized uses of yet two other size nouns (SNs), i.e. *mass of* and *masses of* and compare their quantificational potential with other SNs, such as *bunch*, *heap* and *load of* as studied in Brems (2011). This comparison will call for a repositioning of SNs on the grammaticalization cline and a reassessment of the criteria used in Brems (2011) and the notion of degree of grammaticalization. Secondly, we will shift attention away from 'common' quantifying uses to intensifying adverbial uses of SNs, e.g. *heaps nicer*, and the possible effect these uses have on their current position on the grammaticalization cline.

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1. Introduction

Syntagms of the '(determiner) (modifier) NP₁ + *of* + (determiner) (modifier) NP₂'-type are perhaps the best known representatives of the binominal construction, and their semantic-syntactic organization has also received most of the attention in the literature on the topic (e.g. Akmajian & Lehrer, 1976; Aarts, 1998; Keizer, 2001; Denison, 2002; Brems, 2003; Willemse, 2005; Traugott, 2008; Langacker, *forth.*, Verveckken, 2012). Both formal and cognitive-functional frameworks have tackled the descriptive-theoretical challenges they pose, e.g. the identification of the head (e.g. Quirk *et al.*, 1985; Halliday, 1994; Traugott, 2008) and the tests used for its identification (Hudson, 1987; Aarts, 1998). Others have focused on parallels and differences between different types of binominals, categorial gradience or the possibility of a constructional network (Denison, 2006; Aarts *et al.*, 2004; Keizer, 2007). In addition, NP *of* NP-binominals have frequently been argued to be the locus of (ongoing) grammaticalization, subjectification and decategorialization processes. In some cases the nominal elements seem to have lost or are losing typically nominal features such as the potential for pre- and postmodification, pluralization, etc. (e.g. **a nice wonder of a city*, **bunches of idiots*, etc.) and may be shifting to the categories of quantifier, intensifier, hedger, etc. From this perspective the current variation in several binominal constructions can be seen as cases of synchronic layering (Hopper and Traugott, 2003).

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This paper, too, will address binominal syntagms within the framework of grammaticalization, and will focus on two main aspects, based on empirical analysis. First, the quantification potential of *mass of* and *masses of* will be compared to other size nouns. With their more abstract lexical source semantics, *mass* and *masses of* complement previous research on size nouns such as *bunch*, *heap* and *load* which started out as nouns with very specific lexical meanings. The comparison will call for a critical reassessment of the parameters that are used to measure degrees of grammaticalization and grammaticality: since a clear lexical source construction seems to be missing for *mass(es) of*, semantic criteria of grammaticalization to do with degrees of delexicalization become less reliable and are in need of closer scrutiny.

Secondly, we will take a closer look at intensifying uses of size nouns such as *it is loads softer*, in which non-nominal predicates are modified in terms of degree or frequency. Extension to contexts outside the source construction is generally considered to be a sign of increased grammaticalization (see [Himmelmann, 2004](#)), but, as we will see, some of these uses pose a challenge for further research as some nouns seem to have acquired intensifying potential without first having developed an entrenched productive quantifier use, e.g. *I love you bunches and bunches*.

As such, both case studies in their own way hence raise interesting theoretical and methodological questions about how to measure degrees of grammaticalization: first, the lexical-semantic contrasts between the vaguer meaning of *mass* and the previously investigated size nouns with very specific source lexical meanings raises the question of whether and to what extent such lexical properties affect the degree of grammaticalization and whether similar proportions of quantifying uses may be regarded as symptoms of equal degrees of grammaticalization or not. Furthermore, by examining instances which seem to skip a number of stages, the second case study questions default presentations of grammaticalization as a smooth process with successive transgressions (at least in the study of size nouns), which also calls for a reassessment of grammaticalization diagnostics and especially degrees of grammaticalization. It raises the issue of whether size nouns which have intensifying uses but lack quantifying attestations, can (still) be regarded as more advanced in terms of grammaticalization in comparison with quantifying size nouns that lack intensifying uses.

Section 2 first discusses the pathway of change that characterizes the development of size nouns from head noun to quantifier, which will serve as the backdrop to the analysis of *mass of* and *masses of* in Section 3. Section 3.2 provides a comparison between the different size nouns, which leads to a critical examination of existing parameters of grammaticalization. Section 4 focuses on intensifying uses of size nouns in corpus and web data, followed by a discussion of the repercussions of the results on existing categorizations and assumptions of gradualness in grammaticalization in Section 5.

2. From size noun to quantifier: the path often taken

Recent attention to the development of size nouns in the context of grammaticalization has led to an upsurge of publications that nicely capture some of the most important features and changes that characterize increased grammaticalization (e.g. [Keizer, 2001](#); [Brems, 2003, 2007, 2010](#) and [2011](#); [Denison, 2005](#); [De Smedt et al., 2007](#); [Langacker, forthcoming](#); to name but a few).

Based on synchronic and additional diachronic data, [Brems \(2011\)](#) has argued that size nouns (SNs) such as *bunch/load(s)/heap(s) of* in binominal NPs display synchronic variation which is the result of semantically driven grammaticalization processes. Semantic extension or delexicalization motivates changes in the distribution of SNs (in this case collocational broadening) which may eventually lead to a complete syntactic reanalysis.

In non-head uses, [Brems \(2011\)](#) distinguishes two major functions: a quantifier use as in (1) and a valuing (-quantifying) use – mainly with *bunch/load of* – as in (2) to (4), in which the referent is evaluated rather than, or in addition to, being quantified.

(1) I went up the steps of a church and into a back room where **a bunch of people** were having a meeting. (COCA 1995 ACAD)

(2) What **a bunch of gobbledeygook** ([Brems, 2011](#), p. 186)

(3) Dear U.M.: Wait a minute! You mean to tell me that **a bunch of Belgians** were using Japanese machinery to undermine the very foundation of the capital of the United States – so they could fill it up with Italian subway cars? (COCA 1991 WashPost)

(4) Movie stars my ass. **A bunch of suckers**. Give me a house with a backyard anytime. (COCA FIC 2009)

We will briefly elaborate on the development of *bunch* as a case in point, as put forward in [Brems \(2011\)](#). First, in its pre-delexicalization and pre-grammaticalization stage *bunch* has a readily identifiable head noun use, which is still fully lexical and literal in meaning, referring to a somewhat unruly, untidy cluster of things fastened or growing together at one point, holding the component parts together. In this meaning, it is collocationally restricted to a rather limited set of postmodifying nouns, such as types of flowers and herbs, *grapes*, *bananas*, *carrots*, etc. In such uses *bunch* still clearly functions as the head of the binominal noun phrase and controls verb agreement, as shown in (5).

(5) In the upper center of Braque's first collage, *Fruit Dish 1912*, **a bunch of grapes** is rendered with such conventionally vivid sculptural effects as to lift it practically off the picture plane. (COCA 2002 MAG)

In subsequent stages the 'cluster' meaning expressed by *bunch* is increasingly backgrounded, which opens up collocational possibilities with regard to the type of noun that can appear in the NP₂ slot. We gradually move to a stage where humans and

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