

## A couple (of) changes in the ‘Brown family’: British and US English compared<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This investigation uses the ‘Brown family’ corpora to investigate changes in US and British English involving the noun *couple*, which has developed a quantifier meaning similar to ‘few’. The four corpora were developed in order to compare British and US English from the 1960s with data 30 years on, from the 1990s. The main finding is that US English leads the change. Although the corpora give some useful indicators for comparison purposes, *couple* is a low frequency item, and does not occur often enough for quantitative comparisons.

### 1. Introduction

This investigation employs the ‘Brown family’ of corpora, four corpora that were specifically created with direct comparison of British and US English in mind, and which have repeatedly been shown to be useful in investigations of language change (cf. Leech 2003; Leech 2011; Leech et al. 2009; Leech & Smith 2005; Mair 2002). The difference/change that I

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<sup>1</sup> During my time in Aarhus, Sten Vikner and I enjoyed collaboration on both research and teaching. One of our most stimulating teaching partnerships was the course ‘Current Topics in English Linguistics’, in which current topics were linked by several themes running through the semester, including the theme ‘Variation and Change’. During class discussions about differences between the British and US varieties of English, students and teachers sometimes resorted to a ‘down-and-dirty’ method of fact checking by searching the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Although general indications can be gleaned, the two corpora are not directly comparable, neither in time of collection nor in type of material. This paper attempts a comparison using directly comparable corpora. With fond memories . . . .

investigate is the grammaticalisation of *couple* in 20th century English; that is, how advanced the change is and whether similar changes are taking place in both varieties. The possibilities for differential language change include lag in one or other of the varieties, innovation in one or other of the varieties or parallel development (Hundt 2009: 32). The types of expressions that I focus on are those in which *couple* is followed by a prepositional phrase introduced by *of*, often termed  $[N_1 \text{ of } N_2]^2$  constructions as shown in (1).

- (1) A couple of people got on the bus.

In English, the noun *couple* has a number of meanings. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) (s.v. *couple*) identifies two major meanings: ‘that which unites two’ and ‘a union of two; a pair’. There are a number of sub-meanings, all having to do with twosomes. However, the OED entry, first published in 1893, has not been fully updated to include a more recent semantic change where *couple* can mean ‘an indefinite small number, a few’. This sense is mentioned in various newer dictionaries, e.g. Merriam-Webster (online). The OED does, however, mention a recent syntactic change, in which *of* is omitted in  $[N_1 \text{ of } N_2]$  expressions as in (2), which is cross-referenced with a different lexeme, *coupla*, as in (3), where the *-a* is what remains of the preposition *of*.

- (2) **OED** (1925 S. Lewis Martin *Arrowsmith*)  
A couple months in Italy

- (3) **OED** (1906 H. Green *At Actors' Boarding House*)  
A coupla parties is come for rooms!

Examples from the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) showing the semantic and syntactic features that I focus on can be seen in (4)–(8). In (4), there is an argument about how many dollars constitute *a couple*; in (5), *couple* is less than twenty, but by implication is more than two; in (5) and (7) *couple* is paraphrased as *few*; in (7) and (8) there is no *of*, and in (8), three examples are given. It appears that the meaning ‘a few’ is possible regardless of whether *of* is present or absent.

<sup>2</sup> The term  $[N_1 \text{ of } N_2]$  is used as a convenient notation, but I recognise that each noun may or may not be modified and that  $N_2$  is optionally preceded by a determiner in the structure: [determiner (modifier)  $N_1$  of (determiner) (modifier)  $N_2$ ].

- (4) **US English** (COCA: spoken)<sup>3</sup>  
 OLIVETTE OLIVER: It's not a couple of dollars. A couple of dollars is \$20. Thirty-four is a lot of money.  
 DAVID PAGAN: No, no. A couple of dollars is like \$10, \$15, \$20. A lot of money is like \$60, \$70.
- (5) **UK English** (BNC: spoken, conversation)  
 SP: PS50X And it won't take long. . . to move those wardrobes, only about (pause) twenty minutes.  
 SP: PS50T Oh it'll take us a couple of minutes! It won't take twenty minutes!
- (6) **UK English** (BNC: spoken, conversation)  
 the other one was fucking useless, well, it lasted for a couple of months, a few months  
 (BNC: conversation)
- (7) **US English** (COCA: spoken)  
 WINFREY: OK. Terence, you've had multiple affairs?  
 TERENCE: I had a couple affairs, three affairs.  
 WINFREY: So when you say a couple, a few, what does that really mean?
- (8) **UK English** (BNC: spoken, radio broadcast)  
 I can give you a couple examples of the more tangible advantages . . . One of them is called . . . Another example is the CASE Scheme . . . And finally on the undergraduate side . . .

Among more recent comprehensive grammars, Biber et al. (1999: 254) admit to the newer meaning of *couple* 'a small approximate number, not just two', including it under the broad heading of "quantifying nouns" (1999: 251), whereas Huddleston & Pullum (2011: 359–50) discuss *couple* in the context of "number transparent quantificational nouns", so called because they allow the number of the complement to determine the number of the entire DP. Quirk et al. (1985: 316) do not mention *couple*'s quantificational function at all; they discuss it as a collective noun, alongside e.g. *committee* and *audience*, a point that will be returned to later in this discussion. Note

<sup>3</sup> The spoken data in COCA is all from news broadcasts and all in the same register, unlike the BNC.

that the difference (noun or quantifier?) and the grammatical category of  $N_1$  in this type of expression is at the centre of the questions surrounding *couple*. Part of this investigation, addressed in Section 4, involves testing to assess whether *couple* functions as a typical quantifier.

The data for the investigation are taken from the Brown family of corpora, two sets of US English data collected in the 1960s and the early 1990s (BROWN and FROWN) and two sets of British English data collected in 1961 and the early 1990s (LOB and F-LOB). The four corpora each contain 500 samples of 2000+ words of running text of edited English prose. This allows comparison of two stages of each variety, 30 years apart, as well as comparison between the two varieties at an earlier and a later stage. Occasionally, the results are checked against other corpora: BNC (Davies 2004–); COCA (Davies 2008–); COHA (Corpus of Historical American English) (Davies 2010); NOW (News on the Web) (Davies 2013) and GloWbE (Global Web-Based English) (Davies 2013).

In section 2 below, I give the background to the grammaticalisation path of the change, noun to quantifier. Sections 3 and 4 report and discuss the results of the corpus search. Section 3 looks at the collocation patterns, i.e. what types of  $N_2$  are selected most frequently and section 4 discusses syntactic tests. Section 5 addresses the reduction or complete absence of the preposition *of* and Section 6 is the discussion and conclusion.

## 2. Language change noun > quantifier

The changes described above involving *couple* look similar to other noun > quantifier changes that have been discussed in detail in investigations of grammaticalisation. In this change,  $N_1$  starts as a lexical head, followed by a post-nominal prepositional phrase. However,  $N_1$  may become the modifier,  $N_2$  then functions as the head of the phrase, and  $N_1$  is a quantifier. As is common in grammaticalisation, the original nominal function is often preserved alongside the quantificational one. This can be seen with the noun *lot* as in (9).

- (9) a. An expensive lot of paintings is for sale. (lexical head)  
 b. A lot of expensive paintings are for sale. (quantifier)

Although the earlier lexical head meanings of *lot*, ‘portion of land’ or ‘set of things produced at the same time’ or ‘set of items sold together at an auction’ are still current, as in (9a), the quantificational use may be seen in (9b). Even though *lot* is singular, verbal agreement in (9b) is with the plural

*paintings*, showing that *paintings* is the head. Additionally, in some of these expressions *of* is often represented orthographically as *schwa* as in *a lotta* (and *lotsa*), as seen in (3), indicating the coalescence and phonological reduction typically associated with grammaticalisation (Brems 2001: 115). The change is set out in (10).

- (10) Reanalysis of [N<sub>1</sub> of N<sub>2</sub>] expressions  
 Re-bracketing from [N<sub>1</sub> [of N<sub>2</sub>]] to [[N<sub>1</sub> of] N<sub>2</sub>]

The nouns that typically participate as N<sub>1</sub> in this change are a diverse group, comprising quantities: e.g. *number*, standard measures: e.g. *pound*, partitives: e.g. *piece*, containers: e.g. *cup*, collectives: e.g. *swarm*, quantum: e.g. *lump*, and forms: e.g. *pile* (Koptjevskaja-Tamm, 2001). As mentioned above, categorising this particular group of N<sub>1</sub> nouns as a whole presents a challenge for grammarians and researchers alike. Although they are nouns, they do not always function as typical nouns but may be quantifiers (e.g. *a pile of trouble*) or degree modifiers (e.g. *a bit of a problem*). An early treatment (Lehrer 1986) calls them 'classifiers'. Granted, like classifiers, they allow non-count nouns to be counted, as in *six cups/lumps/piles of sugar*/\**six sugars*; however, there are clear differences from generalised classifier languages, where all nouns are stored in the lexicon as non-count, and require a classifier in order to be counted (Chierchia 2010). An obvious difference from nouns in classifier languages is that not all nouns of the group in question are restricted to selecting only non-count nouns. Whereas quantum select only non-count nouns (*lump of sugar*), collectives select only count nouns (*swarm of fireflies*) and forms and containers select both (*a pile of beans/rice*; *a cup of beans/rice*). While these nouns are clearly not classifiers in the traditional sense, neither are they nouns. Researchers use various terms for them, including 'complex nominal determiners' (Mirto & Necker 2007), 'non-numerical quantifiers' (Smith 2009), and 'size nouns' (Brems 2011). I adopt the terms of Quirk et al. (1985), 'open-class quantifiers'. They can be compared and contrasted to the 'closed class' (lower) quantifiers: *many*, (*a*) *few*, *several*, *much* and (*a*) *little*. The importance of this contrast will become clear in section 4.

The grammaticalisation literature has examined a number of specific N<sub>1</sub> nouns, both synchronically and diachronically: *jot of/scrap of/flicker of* (Brems 2007); *bunch(s) heap(s), pile(s), lot(s), load(s)* (Brems 2011); *heaps (of), lots (of)* (Brems 2012); *a lot of/lots of* (Smith 2009); *a piece/bit/shred of* (Traugott 2007); *a kind/bit/shred* (Traugott 2008). With respect to

the path the change follows, Traugott (2010: 46-48), building on Denison (2002) and on Traugott (2008: 27), identifies 5 general stages of the change, specifically sketching the history of *a bit (of)*, *a piece (of)* and *a shred (of)*. (See also Brems 2012; Claridge & Kytö 2014). The similarities and differences “illustrate well what has become a truism in work on grammaticalization: each string has its own history, but conforms to general schematic change-types in ways that are partly constrained by the particularities of the original meaning-form relationship” (Traugott 2010: 46). As far as I am aware, most diachronic investigations have focussed on British English, although frequency differences for *loads of* and *heaps of* have been noted between Australian and New Zealand English and British English (Smith 2009) and for *bunch of* between American English and other variants (Brems 2011: 180).

The five general stages that Traugott sketched are shown in (11).

- (11) I partitive (binominal); II extended partitive; III quantifier; IV degree modifier; V free adverb.

These may be illustrated with the example, *a bit of*, which is related to *bite* in the sense of ‘a mouthful’. Stage I, the partitive (*a bit/bite of bread*) is extended in stage II to non-food items, where the literal meaning ‘mouthful’ is bleached out and  $N_2$  can be abstract: *a bit of a secret*. The quantifier/degree modifier use arises in the 18th century where, for example, *a bit of a bastard business* means ‘somewhat of a’ or ‘rather a’, and *a bit of a kind of a sword* means ‘something like a sword’ rather than ‘a piece of a sword’. In the final two stages there is syntactic expansion; at stage IV *bit* is found pre-adjectivally as in: *a bit wiser*, *a bit richer*, *a bit taller*, *a bit shorter*, and in stage V as a free adverb as in: *I don’t like it a bit*.

Intuitively, the semantics of *couple* do not appear suited to a change of this type. The other lexical items listed above such as *load(s)*, *pile(s)*, *bunch(s)*, etc. have impreciseness and vagueness already built in; they have ‘ragged edges’, so to speak, whereas *couple* is precise in its reference to twosomes, i.e. two items joined, or a pair of items, or a sexual pair. Nevertheless, there appears to be some general tendency for items associated with twoness to extend their meaning to ‘two or more’. The cognate of *couple* means ‘few’ in Irish: *cúpla duine*, ‘a few persons’; *cúpla lá*, ‘a few days’; *cúpla bliain*, ‘a few years’ (Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla); and the expression *the cúpla focal* is frequently employed in Irish English to mean the Irish language.

- (12) **Irish English** (NOW Corpus: <https://www.irishcentral.com/news/irishvoice/sinn-fein-gaelic-obsession-an-obstacle-to-brex-it-progress>). Yes, that’s right, it’s about what people in the south derisively call “the cupla focal” (Irish for a couple of words, which is all the Irish that most people here can speak).

Of course, another example of an item associated with ‘twoness’ which has extended its meaning to mean ‘few’ is *pair*; the cognates of which in other Germanic languages can mean ‘few’.

- (13) **Danish** (Korpusdk; Familie-Journalen)  
 så lod hun hænderne glide søgende gennem  
 ‘as she let (her) hands glide, searching through  
de sidste par jordbærplanter  
 the last few strawberry plants.’
- (14) **Danish** (1722 Holb.Kandst.IV.2.)<sup>4</sup>  
 for din uforskammede Mund faar (du) et par Ørfigen  
 ‘for your rude mouth you get a couple ear-figs [=clip on the ear]  
 eller to (ligesom det kand falde sig til).  
 or two (as it may happen).’
- (15) **Dutch** (van Riemsdijk 1998:17)  
 a. quantificational reading  
 Er staan een paar schoenen op de tafel.  
*there stand.PL a pair shoes on the table*  
 ‘A few shoes are on the table.’
- b. partitive reading  
 Er staat een paar schoenen op de tafel.  
*there stand.SG a pair shoes on the table*  
 ‘a pair of shoes is on the table.’

Although Sten and I spent some time discussing the internal and external reasons why English failed to grammaticalise *pair*; we reached no firm conclusion. Possibilities include competition between *pair* and *couple*, or

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Sten Vikner for this early example of Danish *par*, ‘few’, i.e. for his indefatigable pursuit of empirical data.

the fact that *pair* is borrowed into English through Anglo-Norman (OED s.v. *pair*) whereas in the sister languages it comes directly from the Latin plural *paria*, (Falk & Torp 1911: 815). For more on *pair* see Wood (2019a) and for a comparison between *pair* and *couple*, Wood (2019b).

With respect to *couple*, the focus in this study is on stages I–III, i.e. partitive noun to quantifier. As was shown above, using *bit* as an example, in the first two stages the partitive noun,  $N_1$ , first expands its complements in stages I and II; the quantificational use does not appear until stage III. In Section 3 below, I first give some background to the development of *couple*, taken from Wood (2019b) before reporting the results from the corpus searches with respect to complement selection. Section 4 focusses on syntax and discusses the results of various syntactic tests that distinguish *couple* the noun from *couple* the quantifier.

### 3. *Couple* and its complements

As previous studies of grammaticalisation have noted, one of the criteria involved is ‘host-class expansion’ Himmelmann (2004). This was illustrated above with the example *a bit of bread* > *a bit of a secret*, i.e.  $NP_2$  is no longer restricted to concrete lexemes (Traugott 2007: 542). It follows then, that one of the possible differences between British and US English and between the 1960s and the 1990s could be in complement selection.

When the noun *couple* first appears in English in the 13th and 14th centuries, it is used for twosomes that are physically joined to each other, as in (16), referring to wood struts that make up the triangular part of a roof, or metaphorically joined, as in (17) (Middle English Dictionary (MED) s.v. *couple*).

(16) **Middle English** (c1380, *Sir Firumbras*)

Al þe coples cypres were & þe raftres wer al-so  
*all the couples cypress were & the rafters were also*  
 ‘All the couples were made out of cypress as were the rafters.’

(17) **Middle English** (c1280, *South English Legendary*)

þer nas couple In ierusalem of so clene lyue.  
*there NEG-was couple in Jerusalem of so clean life*  
 ‘There was not such a clean living couple in Jerusalem.’



Although the first scattered examples of abstract noun complements occur in the 16th century it is not until the end of the 17th century that abstract complements appear with any regularity; notably, in the 19th century, there is a marked increase in temporal (and distance and measure) expressions. I suggest that temporal expressions are an important indicator of the way in which complements of *couple* are expanded (Wood 2019b). In everyday interactions minutes, hours, days and miles are not usually measured with exact precision and invite interpretation as 'approximately'. In the 19th century, these are often accompanied by hedges. Note the upper limit in (18), the lower limit in (19), the approximation in (20), and the uncertainty in (21). The examples below are from the CLMET3.0 corpus (Diller et al. 2011).

- (18) (1811, Jane Austen)  
but Miss Steele could not be kept beyond a couple of minutes, from what was uppermost in her mind.
- (19) (1839, Charles Darwin)  
Two immense stones, each probably weighing at least a couple of tons.
- (20) (1826, Benjamin Disraeli)  
In about a couple of hours Mr. Beckendorff entered.
- (21) (1909, Jerome K. Jerome)  
"Well, by the road," I answered, "I daresay it may be a couple of miles."

On the basis of the historical findings (Wood 2019b), briefly sketched above, I searched the four corpora for five different complement types: concrete, abstract, semantically empty (*things/times*), temporal, distance/measure, in order to find whether one variety selects abstract nouns or temporal nouns significantly more frequently than the other. The results are shown in Table 1. Representative sentences from each of the five complement types taken from BROWN are in (22)–(26).

	BROWN (US 1960s)		FROWN (US 1990s)		LOB (UK 1960s)		F-LOB (UK 1990s)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
concrete N <sub>2</sub>	42	49.4%	43	57.3%	30	56.7%	42	46.2%
abstract N <sub>2</sub>	3	3.5%	2	2.7%	2	3.7%	3	3.3%
times/things	3	3.5%	5	6.6%	2	3.7%	8	8.8%
temporal	31	36.5%	23	30.7%	15	28.3%	34	37.3%
distance/ measure	6	7.1%	2	2.7%	4	7.6%	4	4.4%
<b>Total examples</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 1. Complements of couple (of) in the Brown family corpora

- (22) [T]the doctor ordered a couple of ballplayers to carry the catcher into the dressing room.
- (23) I shall first indicate a couple of weaknesses in Fromm's analysis.
- (24) I could hear my man moving around, heard him cough a couple of times.
- (25) A truth-revealing crisis erupted in Katanga for a couple of days this month.
- (26) Last year's volume was at the top a couple of inches below the ceiling.

Most striking across the board is the low incidence of abstract nouns of the type in (23). Most of the non-concrete complements are either temporal and measure expressions or vague nouns such as *times* and *things*.

However, given the small size of the sample the actual differences cannot be considered significant in this paper and the results are inconclusive. For the UK, the figures show the percentage of concrete nouns decreasing between the 1960s and the 1990s and the temporal expressions and *times/things* increasing. Although this could indicate an expansion of the type described above, the figures for US English show the reverse.

Although the collocates give some indication of how the meaning has extended (Traugott's stage I to II), it is impossible to tell from the

examples whether the meaning is 'two' or 'a few'. This ambivalent or vague use (Brems 2011: 46) is favoured by a less concrete  $N_2$  and, I argue, by examples like (25)–(26), in which speakers and writers appear to be estimating time, distance and measurement. Only the wider context disambiguates between partitive and quantifier, as was seen in extended examples (4)–(8). In order to assess whether *couple* sometimes behaves as a quantifier, i.e. to distinguish between partitive and quantifier, syntactic tests are needed, and I turn to these in Section 4 below.

#### 4. Syntactic Tests

According to (Traugott 2008: 27) there are at least three 'robust criteria' for distinguishing partitive use from quantifier use:

- i) In the partitive, the initial determiner agrees with  $N_1$  and in the quantifier it agrees with  $N_2$ ;
- ii) In the partitive, but not in the quantifier, the second NP may be preposed: *of an apple, a bit*; \**of a liar a bit*;
- iii) In the quantifier construction, the first noun can be replaced by one word: e.g. *a bit of/rather/quite a talker*.

Other indicators include, iv) agreement with the predicate and v) adverbial properties (collocation with adjectives and verbs e.g. *a bit green*; *I sort of liked it*) (Traugott 2007: 531). I assume that *couple* does not yet have adverbial properties, so the fifth criterion is not applicable.

Replacement by one word would mean replacing the expression *a couple of*, and indeed it would be possible to substitute *several*, or *a few* for most examples, although that does not give an indication as to whether the speaker has two or more in mind. In section 4.1, I briefly explain why the tests involving agreement and movement mentioned above are not ideal either and, in Sections 4.2 and 4.3, I explore two other tests: pre-nominal and post-nominal *more* and pre-modification of  $N_1$ .

##### 4.1 Agreement and movement tests

Agreement tests are based on the principle that in a binominal construction, agreement is with the head, which is expected to be  $N_1$ , but in the quantifier construction is with  $N_2$ .

Verbal agreement tests are in general limited anyway, because the binominal in question has to be in subject position and  $N_1$  and  $N_2$  have to differ in number. However, *couple* is a collective, leading to an

additional complication with verbal agreement. This verbal agreement test is straightforward for *lot*. The quantifier vs the lexical use of *a lot of* was shown in (9). Although *a lot* is arguably singular, considering that the indefinite determiner *a* selects only singular nouns, in the quantifier verbal agreement is with  $N_2$ . The test turns out to be problematic for testing *couple* as an  $N_1$  because *couple* is a collective noun that can take singular or plural agreement depending on the point of view, whether the unit or individuals within the unit are the focus (Quirk et al.1985: 748). Hence, *couple* usually has a plural verb when it refers to two persons: *The couple are happily married*, whereas the verb is singular when *couple* denotes a unit: *Each couple was asked to complete a form* (Quirk et al.1985: 759). This notion extends to [ $N_1$  of  $N_2$ ] expressions as can be seen in (27)–(29). Singular verbal agreement indicates the *months* and *days* are considered a unit and plural indicates the *years* are considered individually. This gives no indication of whether the use is quantificational. The three spoken examples below are from COCA:

### US English

- (27) I'm like, a couple of months is not going to matter with thyroid cancer.
- (28) Now, Mr. Hammock, I gather that a couple of days is just about the margin you think that many people have in Ethiopia.
- (29) A couple of years were enough for me. I survived.

For these reasons, the verbal agreement criterion will not be considered further.

The other agreement test Traugott mentions is determiner agreement. This also is of limited value. First, open class quantifiers occur most often with the indefinite article and, in English at least, neither the definite nor the indefinite article agree with the noun. Also, as discussed above, the collective *couple* can be singular or plural. In the corpora investigated there are only 3 examples with a demonstrative, all singular, but (30) and (31), at least, could equally well be plural. None of this helps with the question of whether *couple* is a lexical noun or a quantifier.

- (30) **LOB** (fiction)  
I learnt quite a lot that was useful in the course of that couple of hours at the Bloomsbury.

- (31) **LOB** (press)  
 For this last couple of weeks he has been shooting off his predictably pursed mouth . . .  
 (LOB: press)
- (32) **F-LOB:** (fiction)  
 [H]e was talking about turning fully pro but first he needed to lose that couple of stone.

Finally, Traugott (2008: 27) mentions movement tests. These are based on the idea that after rebracketing the structure is  $[[N_1 \text{ of } N_2]]$ , i.e. the preposition *of* incorporates as part of  $N_1$  and there is no longer a prepositional phrase constituent that can be moved. This test should be qualified by adding that this movement is possible if the second nominal is definite, but not if it is indefinite, i.e. the test distinguishes between true partitives and pseudopartitives. The difference is that ordinary partitives involve restricted or contextually bound sets, whereas pseudo-partitives involve unrestricted or unbounded entities (Selkirk 1977, Jackendoff 1977). The difference is summed up as in (33) exemplified in (34).

- (33) partitive elements: make sets accessible for quantification  
 ordinary partitives: involve restricted or contextually bound sets  
 pseudopartitives: involve unrestricted or unbounded entities
- (34) a. a pile of that mud/a group of my students  
 (restricted set: partitive)  
 b. a pile of mud/a group of students  
 (unrestricted set: pseudopartitive)

It can be seen from (35)–(37) that if  $N_2$  is definite, the movement is grammatical but moving indefinite *a couple of leaflets* is ungrammatical.

- (35) **UK English** (BNC: spoken, *Abbey Life: training session*)  
 I'll leave you a couple of these leaflets which do explain a lot of the areas we've covered tonight.
- (36) a. \*It was a couple \_\_\_\_\_ I left of leaflets.  
 b. It was a couple \_\_\_\_\_ I left of these leaflets.

- (37) a. \*Of leaflets I'll leave you a couple \_\_\_\_\_.  
 b. Of these leaflets I'll leave you a couple \_\_\_\_\_.

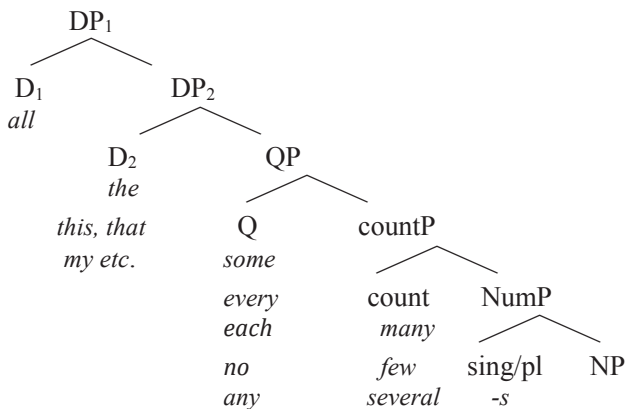
The problem with this test is that preposed prepositional phrases do not often turn up in corpus data and have to be judged by elicitation. Pursuing this further is beyond the scope of this paper. I return to the difference between partitives and pseudopartitives in section 5, in the discussion of the preposition *of*.

Having concluded that the criteria for distinguishing quantifiers suggested by (Traugott 2007, 2008) are not applicable to *couple*, I go on to discuss two other tests, the position of *more* and pre-modification of quantifiers.

#### 4.2 Post nominal more

It was pointed out above that 'few' is the newer meaning of *couple*, and that *few* can often replace *couple*. In this section, I focus on structural and distributional similarities between *couple* and *few* in order to assess whether *couple* has similar quantifier characteristics. In (38) I give a cartographic representation of the nominal functional area (based on Epstein 1999), which I use to highlight that there are (at least) two areas for quantifiers, a higher one (QP) for more determiner-like quantifiers and a lower one (countP) that includes numerals. A number of other researchers have proposed layers in the DP (e.g. Zamparelli 2000) the exact details are not important here, except to highlight that there are structural differences between the lower and higher groups of quantifiers.

(38)



The test that I apply for *couple* as a quantifier in present-day English exploits the position of *more*, meaning 'In addition to what has been specified or implied' and which is "used only after a designation of quantity or number (definite or indefinite)" (OED s.v. *more* C. II 4.b). As is shown in example (39), *more* can precede but not follow a bare noun. (40) shows that with higher (QP) quantifiers, *more* can occur between a quantifier and noun, but is ungrammatical in the postnominal position. (41) shows that with numerals and the lower (countP) quantifiers the postnominal position is fine.

- (39) a. After a while, they had more children.  
 b. \*After a while, they had children more.
- (40) a. After a while, they had some/no more children.  
 b. \*After a while, they had some /no children more.
- (41) a. After a while, they had  
 (a) few/many/several/two more children.  
 b. After a while, they had  
 (a) few/many/several/two children more.

Therefore, the use of *more* following a determiner as in (40) and (41) indicates that the determiner is a quantifier, and the use of *more* following the noun, as in (40) and (41) distinguishes between a higher and a lower quantifier. As shown in the constructed example in (42) and the corpus example in (43), *couple* patterns with the low quantifiers, i.e. is similar to *few*.

- (42) a. After a while, they had a couple more children.  
 b. After a while, they had a couple children more.
- (43) **US English** (COCA: spoken)  
 And we will have a couple minutes more in some parts of the country to continue our chat.

In view of this, I searched the four Brown family corpora for examples of pre- and post-nominal *more* following *couple*. Although both US corpora have pre-nominal examples, there are none in LOB, the earlier British English corpus, although there are examples in the later British corpus, F-LOB. All examples found are shown in .

(44) **BROWN**

[A]nd a couple more cops to hold them at a decent distance.

**FROWN**

They went through it all a couple more times.

[Y]ou might try picking a couple more boats.

**LOB**

(No examples)

**F-LOB**

He wound on and took a couple more shots then politely thanked Marie.

After some thought, tin of Miller Lite, and a couple more guitar solos which sent the audience wild.

For comparison, I also checked for *some more* and *several more*, which I found in all four corpora, although, again, there are few results. For *some more* the numbers are: BROWN (1), FROWN (4), LOB (5), F-LOB (1) and for *several more*: BROWN (3), FROWN (1), LOB (1), F-LOB (1).

(45) **BROWN**

Please find some more reporters like that young man from Denver.

**FROWN**

We had stopped by and told him to catch some more snakes for us.

**LOB**

[A]nd joining some more geese on the mud to the west.

**F-LOB**

Go and get us some more hot water, Heather, love.



(46) **BROWN**

This is simple enough, but several more points of interest may be mentioned as relevant.

**FROWN**

Moral Majority persisted for several more years under new leadership.

**LOB**

[B]ut the specificity should be confirmed by testing against several more examples of D-positive and D-negative red cells.

**F-LOB**

There were several more phone calls, of course, as the evening went on.

The examples in (44) show *couple* has similar syntactic behaviour to higher quantifiers such as *some* and lower quantifiers such as *several*. The absence of examples in LOB could indicate a lag in British English, though with so few examples nothing definite can be proposed. Unfortunately, there are no examples of post nominal *more* with *couple* in any of the four corpora, which would distinguish between higher and lower quantifiers. It seems, however, even in US English the construction is fairly new; a search in COHA (Corpus of Historical American English) reveals that the earliest US example is from 1941.

(47) **US English** (COHA: 1941, fiction)

you better go to college for a couple years more, that's what I say.

Surprisingly, although (43) and (47) show postnominal *more* with *couple* in US English, I could find no similar examples in BNC. As a further check for [couple N *more*] in British English I searched GloWbe (Corpus of Global Web-Based English), which has about 1.9 billion words of text from twenty different countries. I found no British English examples there either, although there are 12 examples from the US four from Canada and four from Australia. Singapore has two and New Zealand, Sri Lanka and the Philippines one each.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> A reviewer suggests, given the low number of tokens, checking Google Ngrams might be useful. This is indeed a possibility. More insight into what is happening in British English could be found by comparing the earlier and later versions of the British National Corpus: BNC and BNC2014. I leave these many options for future work.

(48) **Philippine English** (GloWbe).

A few years ago, hubby had to take off his wedding ring because his ring finger had an accident. That happened a couple times more so he didn't wear the ring for about a year or so.

The absence of examples from British English might indicate that the construction with *more* following the noun is not found in British English at all. A check in the BNC for *few* easily dispels that notion.

(49) a. **UK English** (BNC: written, fiction)

But if you carry on for a few more days on an unofficial basis, that's your business.

b. **UK English** (BNC: written, non-fiction)

Your beautiful scheme is ruined. You let things lapse for a few days more.

In conclusion, it can be noted that in the Brown family data the number of tokens is low overall, not only for *couple* but also for examples with the quantifiers, *few*, *several* and *some*. However, the construction [a couple more N] was found in both the 1960s and the 1990s in US English but only in the 1990s in British English, giving an indication that British English may lag behind. This led to a check as to whether the postnominal construction [a couple N more], which would indicate a low quantifier, is found in British English at all. Spot checks in GloWbe failed to discover British English examples.

**4.3 Pre-modification**

Another way in which the lexical head use and the quantifier use differ is in the restrictions on pre-modification. If  $N_1$  and  $N_2$  are nouns it should be possible to freely modify both, but if  $N_1$  is a quantifier, the modification possibilities are limited (Brems 2011: 195). Table 2 gives a comparison between the most frequent premodifiers of *few* and *couple* in BNC and COCA.

	pre-modifiers of <i>few</i>		pre-modifiers of <i>couple of</i>	
	BNC	COCA	BNC	COCA
1	past (840)	past (5931)	past (102)	past (1100)
2	good (68)	select (310)	good (11)	rough (28)
3	precious (41)	precious (235)	extra (10)	extra (26)
4	previous (32)	lucky (150)	mere (4)	good (26)
5	privileged (30)	final (132)	previous (3)	odd (16)
6	final (22)	privileged (74)	free (3)	tough (15)
7	fair (19)	fortunate (67)	bad (2)	final (14)
8	extra (18)	chosen (65)	busy (2)	long (11)
9	select (17)	previous (52)	final (2)	bad (10)
10	lucky (13)	top (52)	hectic (2)	busy (9)
11	following (13)	extra (48)	right (2)	just (9)

Table 2. Comparison of most frequent premodifiers of *few* and *couple* in BNC and COCA

As can be seen, the overwhelmingly most frequent modifier of *few* and of *couple* in both varieties is *past* in temporal expressions. Examples from both varieties are shown in (50) and (51).

(50) **UK English** (BNC: spoken, meeting)

- a. tremendous resources have gone into the health service over the past few years.
- b. We've done relatively well in the past couple of years.

(51) **US English** (COCA: spoken)

- a. We've been talking about it the past few days.
- b. We have spent the past couple of days showing some of the devastation it has wreaked.

Here, however, *past* does not modify *few* and *couple* alone, but the entire DP. Its frequency is indicative of the prevalence of temporal expressions.

For the purposes of identifying quantifiers the relevant modifiers are scalar, e.g. *good* and *fair* in (52)–(54), examples selected from Table 2.

- UK English** (BNC: spoken, conversation)  
 (52) a fair few roadworks which could hold you up.
- (53) Oh yeah we've got a good few mushrooms there.
- (54) **UK English**  
 She stopped me in town funny enough erm oh a good couple of weeks ago like. . .

Here, the modifier *good* is “Used to emphasize that a quantity, number, etc., is at least as great as, and quite probably greater than, stated” (OED sv. *good* 11a). So, a *good few mushrooms* and a *good couple of weeks ago* do not mean that the *mushrooms* were ‘good’ or the *weeks* were ‘good’, but refer to the quantities, *few* and *couple*. In this sense *couple* cannot mean two but means the ‘upper limit of *few*’.

In my searches of the four Brown corpora family I found three examples of pre-modification in each of BROWN, and FROWN, one in LOB and six in F-LOB, shown in (55).

- (55) **BROWN**  
 past couple of hours; last couple of years (2).
- FROWN**  
 that last couple of years; next couple of days (2).
- LOB**  
 this last couple of weeks.
- F-LOB**  
 first couple of nights; past couple of seasons; past couple of years; good couple of minutes; previous couple of months; last couple of pages.

As can be seen, they all refer to temporal expressions. Only in F-LOB, did I find a scalar modifier used in a similar way to (52) and (54), shown in (56):

- (56) he spent a good couple of minutes scanning the contract and, at the end, far from being devastated by his losses he wrote out promissory-notes and made a dignified exit.

In conclusion, although there are not enough examples to show any meaningful comparison in the pre-modification data in this section, the

similarities between *few* and *couple* as well as the prominence of temporal expressions have been demonstrated. The particular example in (56), from the later UK corpus shows that *couple* is quantificational.

Section 5 looks at the status of the preposition *of*, which is the other developing feature of *couple* expressions mentioned in the introduction.

### 5. Preposition reduction/absence

The final feature that has the potential to vary between US and British English and between the earlier and later corpora is the absence of *of* shown in examples (7) and (8) above. Selkirk (1977: 308) specifically points out that “the measure phrase *a couple* optionally permits *of* to be absent”. She uses example (57) as part of her argument that pseudopartitives (where the second nominal is indefinite) have a different structure from partitives (where the second nominal is a mass noun or a plural count noun).

(57) **English** (Selkirk 1977. ex. (82))

Can I borrow a couple (of) sheets of paper?

This general idea of structural differences between partitives and pseudopartitives is supported by data from other Germanic languages where, in general, with the exception of Icelandic, pseudopartitives do not always use a preposition. The difference between partitives and pseudopartitives was already mentioned in connection with (36) and (37) above and examples from Dutch and Danish can be seen in (13)–(15). In Germanic languages other than English, two types of pseudopartitives are easily identified, the DPC (Direct partitive construction), without a preposition and the IPC (Indirect partitive construction) that uses a preposition. This makes English typologically the odd one out among the Germanic languages because it needs a preposition in both constructions. Examples are shown in (58) and (59).

(58) **Danish** (Hankamer & Mikkelsen 2008 ex. 29 & 61)

a. en spand vand (pseudopartitive, DPC)

*a*.<sub>COM</sub> *bucket*.<sub>COM</sub> *water*.<sub>NEU</sub>  
‘a bucket of water’

b. en spand med vand (pseudopartitive, IPC)

*a*.<sub>COM</sub> *bucket*.<sub>COM</sub> *with/of water*.<sub>NEU</sub>  
‘a bucket of/with water’

- (59) **Dutch** (van Riemsdijk 1998: 15, ex. (18) & (19))
- a. drie kisten sigaren (pseudopartitive, DPC)  
*three boxes cigars*  
 ‘three boxes of cigars’
- b. drie kisten met sigaren (pseudopartitive, IPC)  
*three boxes with cigars*  
 ‘three boxes of/with cigars’

The preposition is generally considered obligatory in English, as it is in the Romance languages.

A reviewer brings up an interesting point, whether preposition omission as shown in (2) and reduction, as shown in (3), repeated here as (60) and (61), can be treated as the same phenomena.

- (60) **OED** (1925 S. Lewis Martin *Arrowsmith*)  
A couple months in Italy

- (61) **OED** (1906 H. Green *At Actors' Boarding House*)  
A coupla parties is come for rooms!

If they are, then omission can be considered the far end of a grammaticalisation cline that gradually reduces *of* to *schwa* and then zero. If they are not, there are two different phenomena, reduction as a result of grammaticalisation as well as “dropping” the preposition to give something akin to (58) and (59) seen in other Germanic languages. Here, I will assume the most straightforward solution, the former. As *of* is a grammatical lexeme, reduction is expected anyway. Note also that all the data in the Brown family corpora are from written language. When it comes to spoken corpora, transcription conventions in the compilation would also have to be considered.

In the Brown family corpora, examples without *of* are not found in the UK, only in the two US corpora, shown in (62)–(67). The specific texts show that all the examples come from fiction apart from (67), which is reported speech in a news article. It is likely that in all these examples the author is attempting to depict a non-standard speaker.

**BROWN**

- (62) (Dell Shannon, *The Ace of Spades*)  
bout nine o'clock, I call and see if you got any. A couple decks for me, Mr. Skyros- and ten-twelve to sell, see, I like to have a little ready cash.
- (63) (Richard S. Prather, *The Bawdy Beautiful*)  
According to Rose, he arrived here a couple minutes before nine and spotted Thor in the water.
- (64) (Clark McMeekin, *The Fairbrothers*)  
We'll have oystchers- couple bar'l oystchers'll fetch in a crowd any time.

**FROWN**

- (65) (Robert B. Parker, *Double Deuce*).  
A couple kids were sitting in the van with the doors open.
- (66) (Thomas Berger, *Meeting Evil: A Novel*)  
"You interested in some partying? We'll pick up a couple bottles."
- (67) (News: *The Daily Chronicle*)  
"We lost a fire-eater a couple weeks ago, so Red does it now."

The US corpora also have two examples of reduced *of*, (68) and (69). These also are from fiction texts. Note also the non-standard spelling of *oysters* in (64), the non-standard *hissself* in (68), the reduced *have* of *must have* in (69). In these examples, the authors attempt to use orthography to depict a non-standard speaker.

- (68) **BROWN** (Gene Caesar, *Rifle for Rent*)  
even after he'd heard about Lewis, even after he'd been shot at a couple o' times *hissself*!"
- (69) **FROWN** (William de Buys. 'Devil's Highway.' *Story 40*)  
Musta been twenty miles. That's a steep mountain too, we had to rest every *coupla* miles.

Although fiction authors cannot be relied on to always give an accurate representation of natural language, they are often accurate observers of certain stereotypical ‘non-standard’ features. These results indicate that the absence of *of* is more likely in US English and that the change starts in vernacular speech.

Since no examples were found in the Brown family UK corpora, I checked whether it occurs in the BNC. There are only 14 examples without *of*, 9 of them from the spoken section, including (70). In the written section 4 of the 5 examples are from fiction and one is reported speech from a magazine article, again an indication that the change starts in vernacular/colloquial speech.

(70) **UK English** (BNC: spoken, conversation)

A: You been round (*pause*) once?

B: I’ve been round a couple times thank you.

Moreover, the N<sub>2</sub>s in the spoken examples are all temporal expressions: *minutes*, *days* etc. or *times* or *things*, i.e. there are no concrete nouns.

Finally, returning to the reduced *of*, depicted orthographically as *coupla*, first mentioned in example (3) and found only in the FROWN corpus, as seen in (69), a search in the BNC finds no spoken examples, only written ones. Similarly, *coupla* is only found in the written form in COCA.

(71) **UK English** (BNC: written, email)

Gav, a coupla things re: your article Maybe you could include a previous post/thread as an example of the ‘humour’?

(72) **US English** (COCA: written, *Denver Post*, sports section)

House of Cards haven’t moved a muscle since clinching division a coupla weeks ago.

This spoken/written difference is noteworthy. It appears that transcribers of spoken corpora, who presumably are transcribing what they hear, detect no phonological remnant, producing transcriptions like (70), whereas the written register favours *coupla*, the *-a* presumably representing a reduced *of* as in *lotsa* mentioned above. My personal perception, when I listen to speakers who leave out *of*, is that I do not hear a *schwa* at all. Maybe this is what transcribers hear also when they transcribe the language for spoken



corpora, whereas fiction writers work with the orthographic analogy of *sorta* (sort of) *lotsa* (lots of) and *gotta* (got to) when they attempt depictions of non-standard speech.

As suggested by a reviewer, I tried a Google Ngram search (Michel et al. 2011), following up the question of British and US differences with *of* by comparing *couple days* in British and American English 1800–2000. The frequency of *couple days* starts to rise rapidly in British English in 1981, whereas the rise in US English starts earlier, in the mid 1960s; something similar is found with *couple years*. On the other hand, *coupla* behaves very differently, starting to rise in the 1920s in British English and slightly earlier in US, reaching a peak in the mid 1940s before falling off.

In conclusion, regarding the absence of *of*, the investigation into the Brown family corpora reveals this feature is much more likely to be found in US English than in British English, as no British examples are found. However, follow-up searches in the BNC find a few examples in British English, but only in conversation and fictional texts. These findings are consistent with what was found in Brown and Frown. When a new feature appears in the language, it usually starts in casual speech and moves into the written registers later (if at all). Early in the change, it is more likely to appear in speech and in fictional dialogue rather than in more formal written text types.

## 6. Conclusion

This investigation uses four corpora consisting of two sets of US data from the 1960s and early 1990s and comparable sets from British English, collected in the same time periods, to investigate the change in the lexical item *couple*. These corpora were chosen with the aim of using completely comparable data. The data is approached in two different ways, first collocation patterns are investigated and then syntactic tests are applied to find whether *couple* functions as a quantifier. The main differences observed are between British and US English, and between 1960s and 1990s British English. There are few differences between earlier and later US English.

Collocation patterns are similar in both varieties and the main finding here that temporal expressions are very frequent. I suggest that in everyday interactions people 'guesstimate' time and distance and this reinforces the meaning 'an approximate low number, a few'. The syntactic tests aim to find whether *couple* behaves as a quantifier. The robust criteria

usually employed to find the headedness of [ $N_1$  of  $N_2$ ] expressions are not applicable to *couple* as a collective noun. I suggested two other tests, the position of *more* and pre-modification. The low token count is not such a critical issue with the syntactic tests. Presence of a feature indicates a high likelihood that it occurs (although the absence may just be due to the limitations of the corpus.. The premodification test found only one example (from 1990s UK English) as evidence of the quantifier *couple*, but it did show that *couple* has a very similar premodification pattern as the low quantifier *few*. The most significant findings involve the examples from both early and later US English and later British English in which *more* follows *couple*, which indicates that it is a quantifier, and indicates that US English leads in the change. US English is also leading in the omission of *of*. Some interesting questions were raised as to the relationship between *of* absence and reduction (*coupla*).

It must be acknowledged that although the corpora in the Brown family have a million words each and have been used successfully for a number of comparisons of verbal features, e.g. modal verbs, *couple* is found to be a low frequency item and larger data sets are needed for further investigation.

### List of corpora used

BNC – British National Corpus (BrE, 1980s-1993)

BROWN – (AmE 1961)\*

COCA – Corpus of Contemporary American English (US 1990-2015)

COHA – Corpus of Historical American English (US 1810s-2000s)

CLMET3.0 – Corpus of Late Middle English Texts (BrE 1720-1920)

F-LOB – Freiburg-LOB Corpus (BrE 1991)\*

FROWN – Freiburg-Brown Corpus (AmE 1992)\*

GloWbE – Global Web-Based English (Web, 20 countries)

LOB – Lancaster-Oslo-Bergen Corpus (BrE 1961)\*

(Corpora marked \* are members of the Brown family of corpora. Further particulars of corpora may be found at <http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/CoRD>.)

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