

**INDEFINITE, PARTITIVE STRUCTURES AND THEIR
INDIVIDUALISED “READING”**

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Abstract: *The distinction mass - count nouns has always been long discussed by grammarians due to their difficulty in finding a homogenous point of view. The present study aims to clarify the different interpretations of massive nouns, laying stress on their individualized “reading”. Starting from different occurrences of massive nouns there has been established the role played by the indefinite article **a/ an** in structures comprising a massive entity.*

Key words: *individualized “reading”, conversion, occurrence, subspecies, modifier.*

The semantic category of the partitive is specific to the nominal group, but it also comprises the verbal group, through the presence of those verbs showing a whole - part relationship: *to segment, to compose, to fractionize, to decompose, to unite*, etc. The partitive is well-represented at the lexical level. There are more parts of speech that render a partitive relationship, expressing a part taken from the whole or the quantity of an object.

This category is said to have been long discussed by grammarians, its forms being initially incorporated in other grammatical classes. The traditional grammar mentions only a few cases of partitive usage (*a quarter of metre, one of us*), specifying the attributes that express the partitive (GA I, ed. 1966: 342).

Other authors like Kr. Sandfeld and H. Olsen mention “the indefinite pronouns”, suggesting “an indefinite quantity or number of individuals”, without recalling the existence of the partitive. The partitive category is closely related to quantifiers. Partitive quantifiers such as the indefinite determiners (*much, little, some* etc), express a certain quantity from a whole, others are part of prepositional constructions with specific prepositions (*de, din, dintre*).

Another category of quantifiers comprises sequences such as: *un gram de, o fărâmbă de, un strop de*, in which *de* is a functional preposition, different from the lexical preposition *de* in sequences such as: *un elev de-al Elenei, unul de-ai voștri*. The indefinite, partitive structures are part of a more extensive analysis which is not the main purpose of this writing.

The present study aims to clarify the different interpretations of massive nouns, laying stress on their individualized “reading”. The starting point is the conversion of a massive term into a countable one. In the case of a mass noun for concrete stuff, its count noun variant has as its denotation either units or what the mass noun denotes or sorts of what it denotes (*coffee, cheese, wheat* etc.). The most

common conversion is that of sorts which is specific to such nouns as: *bread*s, *clays*, *salts*, *teas*, *silks* etc. As regards the opposition countable/ non-countable, specialists concluded that the distinction is a purely grammatical one, without any connection with the semantic distinction. In Palmer's opinion, grammar and significance are far from having a close relationship.

„It is easy enough to show that grammatical distinctions are not semantic ones by indicating the many cases where there is not a one-to-one correspondence. An often quoted example is that of *oats* and *wheat*. The former is clearly plural and the latter singular...Further examples are to be found in *foliage* vs *leaves*, in English *hair*, which is singular, vs. French *cheveux*, plural. These distinctions are grammatical and do not directly correspond to any categories of meaning.” (1990: 34-35).

By comparison with English, where there is a discrepancy between nouns as *oats* or *wheat*, because of the presence of plural morphemes in the first case, in Romanian, things are clear, in the sense that these entities have massive status. The grammatical interpretation raises certain questions related to the arbitrary nature of the opposition countable / non-countable. The meaning of a noun does not completely clarify its countable or massive status especially since the differences in meaning are not accurate. The different interpretations of the above mentioned nouns are not fully justified, especially as *oats* (despite the plural form) is not a real countable, since it has no singular equivalent **oat*. This implies that *oats* and *wheat* are similar, with the same status as their Romanian equivalents.

Another type of conversion denotes servings of the denotation of the specific mass entity (*beers*, *chocolates*, *pizza*). Abstract massive terms also have a countable equivalent with the correlated shift in meaning of sorts of emotions (*grief*, *astonishment*, *like*, *dislike*, *sorrow* etc).

We can conclude that mass entities can be easily converted into countable ones with a limited variety of shifts in denotation. The same phenomenon of conversion is emphasized in the following examples:

He drank some wine last night.

He drank a wine last night.

He drank a delicious wine last night.

At a closer analysis, such examples highlight the notion of “species” or “variety” expressed by Van del Velde “On admet (...) très généralement que l'article *un* lorsqu'il est combiné avec un nom de matière contribue à isoler une espèce de la matière en question par le biais d'une qualité spécifique” (1995: 139).

The individualized “reading”

Apart from the interpretation in terms of subspecies, one should also account for the individualized “reading” of such constructions. The sequence *a mass noun + a modifier* is both opposed to the “subspecies reading”: *He drank a delicious wine* (one variety of wine, of Bordeaux, Pinot Noir, Riesling etc.) and the particular “reading”: *He drank a delicious wine last evening* (in the sense that he

drank a particular, unique wine, for example Odobesti semi-dry wine, produced in 2000). As it can be noticed, the “subspecies reading” expresses the notion of *wine* in a more extensive way, whereas the “particular reading”, restricts the sphere of the notion.

The following utterances:

A white hoar-frost covered the earth.

A thick dust spread over the road.

On that day the river had a bluey water.

do not highlight the subspecies or particular “reading”, instead they develop an individualized interpretation, which characterizes the particular occurrence of the mass term delimited by the boundaries of the spatiotemporal dimension.

The adjective *bluey*, in the above mentioned sentence, does not necessarily imply a specific property of *water*, instead it describes the colour of the river water on a certain day. The same goes for *white* and *thick* which characterize the particular occurrences of *hoar frost* and *dust* specified by the situational context.

The utterance *He drank a delicious wine last evening*, does not make reference to the particular quantitative occurrence of the *wine*, but it focuses on the type of *wine* which he drank. The glass of wine does not simply characterize the quantity of wine that a person drank, which happened to be delicious, but *wine* as a massive occurrence is considered delicious.

The sentence *This beekeeper has a good honey* is somehow ambiguous and gives rise to two interpretations, the individualized interpretation (the honey of this beekeeper is good) and the “variety” interpretation (this beekeeper has a good honey, multifloral honey of Cluj Napoca).

At the syntactic level, one can notice the impossibility of the individualized “reading” of having a plural quantifier.

**He drank several delicious wines last evening.*

**Two thick dusts spread over the road.*

The principle of individuality that stands for the usage of the indefinite article is closely related to the limits that impose the restricted character of an entity (*earth, road, river*), to the occurrence of the massive noun (*wine, water, dust*). In other words, the indefinite article *a/an* in *On that day, the river had a bluey water*, expresses the limited character of the occurrence *water*. Since *water* belongs to the river, its occurrence is limited to the limits of the individual *river*.

There is always a *river - water* connection, implying that the omission of the indefinite article does not change the relationship between a certain entity and the occurrence of the massive noun.

As expressed by Kupferman (2000: 218), there is a pre-established relationship between *river* and its *water*, rendering the usage of the indefinite article in a nominal group which is not modified by the partitive. This makes possible the sentence *On that day, the river had some water*, unlike **On that day, the river had a water* which is incorrect in the absence of the modifier.

The presence of the adjective or modifier is necessary since it brings further information for an utterance which otherwise wouldn't bring anything new. Without an adjective, the occurrence of the massive noun has no proper limits. It remains identical with all the other particular occurrences of the noun. The water of the Thames, of the Nile, the water we drink every day, they are all water. They are not different, since the features and dimension of water are not limited. In the absence of the distinctive limits, they cannot be rendered as individuals. The predicative element restricts the open dimension of the massive noun, which allows understanding the particular occurrence as distinct and individualized, due to the boundaries established by the modifier.

The adjectives *white* and *bluey* express the colours of the *hoar-frost* and *water* respectively, whereas *thick* describes the consistency of the *dust*. It is this qualitative limit emphasized by the modifier that justifies the usage of the indefinite article.

The principle of individuality does not necessarily imply the distribution of staff or mass noun in qualitative occurrences of the type *N+ modifier* as in the case of *wine*, which can be divided into subspecies: *white wine*, *dry wine*, *sweet wine* etc. The distinction becomes evident at the level of particular occurrences.

There is also necessary to clarify the status of the adjective, the entity X, the massive noun (N), as well as the relationship between X and N. The structure *He drank a delicious wine last evening* underlines a particular occurrence of the massive entity, but it does not develop an individualized "reading", instead it covers the subspecies interpretation. The adjective *delicious* refers to the type of wine the person drank on a certain occasion (1945 Chateau Mouton-Rothschild, 1787 Chateau Lafitte).

In the case of the *river water* expressed in *On that day, the water of the river was bluey*, the relationship part - whole gives rise to the idea of individualization. The individualization of the whole (river) is manifested through the individualization of the parts.

The indefinite article and the individualized "reading"

The following utterances:

This beekeeper has always produced a high-quality honey.

This beekeeper has always produced honey.

Our butcher always sells a very good meat

Our butcher always sells very good meat.

are to be distinguished in terms of using or not the indefinite article. Although these sentences seem to have similar meanings, the presence or absence of the article has important consequences for their interpretation. The indefinite article helps to create the individualized "reading". It has expressed that the good quality of the *honey* or *meat* is directly related to the specific persons that produced them (*this beekeeper*, *our butcher*).

The absence of inherent boundaries, in the case of utterances lacking *a/an*, shows that *the good honey* and *the very good meat* exist independently of the beekeeper and the butcher. In the absence of the indefinite article, the massive entity is used in its general sense. The contexts with and without *a/an* involve double interpretation:

- a. *a/an* is used to underline that the adjective is specific to the particular occurrence of the mass term, delimited by an entity X, and the property expressed by the modifier is related to or depends on the entity itself.
- b. the absence of the article suggests that an entity X possesses an occurrence of the mass noun + modifier, which is built independently of this entity.

We can conclude that, on the one hand, the distinction countable/ non-countable is not clear cut, the utterances being sometimes ambiguous, while in terms of individualized “reading”, the presence or the absence of the indefinite article, plays a major role in clarifying the situational contexts.

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