CLASSIFIER CONSTRUCTIONS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

This paper deals with the structures of classifiers in English. It studies the types of classifiers, their forms, meanings and analyses by grammarians. It involves some conclusions in regard to these issues and ends up with the references consulted.

1. Introduction

English is not a classifier language, but it has an open productive class of words that are functionally similar to classifiers, as in a herd of cattle and a box of cakes.

Classifiers have meaning which follows from the normal meaning. Many uses of words in classifier constructions need pragmatic rules which rely on the prior existence of conventional classifiers.

2. Definition of ‘classifier’

Lock (1996: 50-53) defines classifiers as words which subclassify the Thing. Classifiers identify a subclass which the Thing either is or is not a member of. So, assistant instructor is a subclassification of instructor, and assistant functions as a classifier.
Besides, **classifiers** can be realized by adjectives (e.g. **economic growth**), nouns (e.g. **city growth**), or participles (e.g. **living people**).

The meaning between the **classifier** and the **Thing** is not always predictable, as in **an ant heap**, meaning **a heap made by ants**.

Sometimes, a **classifier** classifies another **classifier**, as in **an electric circuit breaker**.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999: 326-328) define a **classifier construction** as a phrase consisting of a countable noun followed by **of** that precedes another noun, as in **a drop of water**. Generally, **classifiers** denote **a part of a whole**.

Fromkin et al. (2003: 576) define a **classifier** as “a grammatical morpheme that marks the semantic class of a noun.”

Lieber (2004: 182) defines **classifiers** as classifying morphemes.

Matthews (2007: 58) defines a **classifier** as “a form which marks a noun of a specific semantic class and which has to accompany a numeral”. For example: **two cups of tea**.

### 3. Classification of classifier constructions

As cited by Lehrer (1986: 109–148), classifier constructions may be classified into:

1) **Partitives:**

As cited by Lock (1996: 47–48), partitives are constructions consisting of two nouns linked by **of**, such as: **a piece of cake, an item of news**, and **a drop of rain**. The first noun (head) is a unit noun allowing the second noun (postmodifier) to be counted. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Premodifier</th>
<th>Head</th>
<th>Postmodifier</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>piece</td>
<td>of cake</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As stated by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999: 326–328), partitives are structures denoting a part of a whole. A partitive is a phrase consisting of a countable noun followed by **of** that precedes another noun, as in **a jar of jam** and **a breed of cattle**.

As viewed by Radford (2004a: 350, 2004b: 467), a partitive quantifier is “a word like **some/any** which quantifies over part of the members of a given set.”, as in **Some students study grammar**.

Huddleston and Pullum (2005: 98,303) state that the partitive denotes a part of a larger set or quantity rather than the whole thing.

In an explicit partitive, the head is followed by an overtly expressed **of** phrase, as in **[Some] of his remarks were right**.
In an implicit partitive, the of phrase is understood, but not overtly expressed, as in I have two books of her, but [both] are boring. Both is understood as both of them.

As mentioned by Matthews (2007: 289), partitives are constructions by which reference is made to some part of a whole. Thus, a partitive is any form or use of a form which can be translated by some, as in I ate a piece of bread, meaning I ate some but not all of the bread. Also see (8).

2) Pseudo – partitives: See (8).

3) Measure phrases: See (6-No.6) and (8).

4. **Taxonomy of classifiers:**

   As cited by Lehrer (1986: 109–148), eight types of classifiers can be listed:

   1. Unit classifiers (counters): a piece of furniture

   2. Fractional classifiers: two quarters of the cake

   3. Number set classifiers: dozens of animals

   4. Collective classifiers: a herd of rabbits

   5. Varietal classifiers: three species of barley

   6. Measure classifiers: one litre of oil

   7. Arrangement classifiers: four rows of students

   8. Metaphorical comparison classifiers: a slip of a girl, a dream of a house

5. **Syntax of classifier constructions**

   As stated by Lehrer (1986: 109–148), the syntactic form of classifier expressions is: \( \text{(Det) N}_1 \text{ pp [of (Det)N}_2 \]). For example:

   (1) a group of these boys
   a bunch of grapes
   hundreds of people
In English, we use classifiers when individuating masses, but classifiers are not obligatory.

(2) I like coffee.
   I like a cup of coffee.

Besides, mass (uncountable) nouns are freely used as countable nouns, and implicit classifiers are decided by the situation.

(3) Bring us four teas. (= four cups of tea)

Moreover, of cannot be replaced by another preposition. Sometimes, the PP may be preposed or postposed.

(4) Of the grapes, two bunches were eaten.

Two bunches were eaten of the grapes I bought.

However, some syntactic problems are involved in classifier expressions: which N is the head, whether of is generated in deep structure, whether of with the following NP make a PP, and whether different deep structures distinguish a bunch of grapes from a bunch of the grapes.

6. Semantic considerations about classifiers

Lehrer (1986: 109-148) cites that some classifiers are closely connected with certain nouns, such as a pride of lions, a gaggle of geese, a herd of cattle, a flock of sheep, a school of fish, and a swarm of bees.

1) Unit classifiers:

Lehrer (1986:109-148) cites that there may be some arbitrary lexical cooccurrences. For example: in a head of cabbage (lettuce), cabbage and lettuce are spherical as are heads. Also, roundish vegetables can be classified by other roundish objects, as in a ball (moon /sphere) of cabbage.

As head and stalk are based on shape in their meaning and use, many other unit classifiers are also based on shape, as ball, loaf, cube, slice, string and sheet (e.g. a ball of yarn, a sheet of paper, a cube of mud, a loaf of bread).

In a piece of furniture, piece means part, and since furniture is placed in sets or groups, so piece retains its meaning as part.

Moreover, some unit classifiers are derived from verbs (e.g. a swallow of milk, a glimmer of light, a sip of water, a slice of bread, a pinch of salt).

However, some unit classifiers are derived from nouns (e.g. a ray of hope, a beam of light).

2) Fractional classifiers: (e.g. a part of life, two portions of the budget).
3) Number set classifiers: (e.g. a hundred of the old men)

Most of the two types (2 and 3) are handled by the syntax and semantics of quantifiers. Some number set classifiers are used informally (e.g. zillions, oodles, scads) since they refer to a vague large number, as in: I told you a million (zillion) times to study.

4) Collective classifiers:

Both unit classifiers and collective classifiers have lexical arbitrariness in their collocations besides their semantic content. Though their use and distribution follow from their meaning, there is an arbitrary or conventional element in the classifiers of both types.

Moreover, collective classifiers reveal some property of the object, as in leap of deer, flight of swallows, and sloth of bears.

Collective classifiers, as cited by Huddleston and Pullum (2005: 89) and Leech et al. (2006:54), collective classifiers are generally count nouns, but even in the singular, they refer to groups of people, animals, or things. When they occur in the singular as head of the subject NP, the verb can, especially in BrE, be either singular or plural, though AmE favours the singular, as in a crowd of students was (were) singing.

However, collective classifiers refer to a number of individuals, but the actual number is vague. For nondomestic animals, a herd, a flock, etc. would be a group of animals living together in a place. A flock of sheep may include less than a dozen to several thousand individuals. But for domestic animals, human agency may play a role. Some animal classifiers have more specific meanings, as in litter (of puppies, kittens) which refers to plurality as well as to individuals born to the same mother at a time.

The collective classifiers bunch and cluster involve number and arrangement: bunch denotes a larger quantity and a closer proximity than cluster (e.g. a bunch of bananas (grapes), a cluster of cherries (tree blossoms)).

Regarding pair and brace, both denote number, namely two (e.g. a pair of shoes, a brace of ducks).

Other collective classifiers are family, class, team, audience, committee, staff, board, and jury.

5) Varietal classifiers:

They denote the variety of objects. For example: four species of rice denote four various types of rice; all kinds of roses denote all various sorts of roses.

They, as a stated by Lehrer (1986: 109-148) have the following characteristics:

a. They, unlike the other classifiers, do not denote a quantity.
Classifier Constructions In English.

b. They, unlike the other classifiers, occur with singular after of. When the varietal classifier is singular, a singular N follows, and sometimes the indefinite article is used.

(5) My favourite type of bean is available.
(6) A kind of (a) man, but not* A kind of the man ....

c. Plural varietal classifiers require plural or mass nouns after of.
(7) My favourite types of beans are available.
(8) Various sorts of matter can be discussed.

d. Kind, type, and sort are general, and can be used with most nouns, sometimes with subtle semantic differences.
(9) We need many kinds (types) (sorts) of sweets.

e. Some varietal classifiers are specific to some domains: in biology (e.g. classes, species); in anthropology (e.g. race); in animal breeding (e.g. breed); in manufactured goods (e.g. brand); in cars (e.g. make); in car types (e.g. model); and in clothes (e.g. size, style).
(10) This size (style) of clothing is good.

6) Measure classifiers:
Lehrer (1986: 109-148) divides measure classifiers into: fixed (exact) measures and irregular (inexact) measures.

1. Fixed measures:
   They are small and closed.
   (11) Three pounds of beans ....
   (12) Four miles of bush ....
   (13) A hundred barrels of oil ....
   (14) Six cups of flour ....

2. Irregular measures:
   They are almost limitless.
   (15) A mouthful of food ....
   (16) A pail of milk ....
   (17) A packet of powder ....
   (18) Six cups of tea ....

However, there is a systematic polysemy between container words, which can be used as classifiers, and words for amounts.
The suffix-ful, when added to nouns, is a productive way of creating new classifiers. Often-ful can be deleted.
   (19) A pocketful of coins... 
   (20) A pocket of coins ... 
   (21) A roomful of people ... 
   (22) A room of people ... 
   (23) A mouthful of food ..., but not * A mouth of food...
Moreover, Biber et al. (1999:253) state that different measures, used as classifiers, apply to different products or types of martial. On the other hand, Hornby et al. (1963:1180) classify Measure classifiers into seven types:

i. **Long Measure**: inch, foot, metre, yard, rod, pole, perch, chain, mile, league
   - a yard of cloth

ii. **Dry Measure**: gallon, peck, bushel, quarter
    - a peck of beans

iii. **Surveyors' Measure**: inch, link, chain, furlong, mile
    - a mile of land

iv. **Nautical Measure**: foot, fathom, cable, sea mile
    - a fathom of depth

v. **Square Measure**: square inch, square foot, square yard, square acre, square mile
    - a square acre of land

vi. **Cubic Measure**: cubic inch, cubic foot, cubic yard, cubic acre, cubic mile
    - a cubic mile of land

vii. **Liquid Measure**: gill, pint, quart, gallon
    - a pint of milk / a gallon of petrol

7) **Arrangement classifiers**: Like some unit classifiers (e.g. ball, loaf, cube, slice, string, sheet), some arrangement classifiers (e.g. stack, row, line, heap, pile) are also based on shape in their meaning and use. Lehrer (1986:109-148) provides some examples:

   (24) Six rows of trees … .
   (25) A pile of books … .

8) **Metaphorical comparison classifiers**: Lehrer (1986:109-148) pinpoints that the meanings of these classifiers involve comparisons between the two nouns, and the classifier nouns are understood metaphorically. These classifier expressions seem to be confined to specific semantic classes: strong and aggressive, weak and small, good and desirable, or bad and undesirable. Besides, there must be a before the second noun, and the second noun must be singular and countable.

   (26) A bear (tiger) of a man … , but not* A bear of man … .
   (27) A slip (wisp) of a girl … , but not* A slip of girls … .
   (28) A dream (honey) of a woman …. , but not* A dream of woman…. 
   (29) A devil (hell) of a situation … , but not* A devil of situations…. 

The noun in the classifier slot functions as a metaphorical comparison. So, a **bear of a man** means a man who is like a bear.
7. **Recognizing classifiers**

Lehrer (1986:109-148) states the means of recognizing classifiers:

1. **By the form:** 
   
   \[(\text{Det}) \, \text{N} \, \text{of} \, (\text{Det})\]

   The classifier is \(N_1\).

   (30) A herd of cattle ...

2. **By meaning:**

   Some classifiers are recognized by their meaning, such as: *type*, *cup*, *group*, *litre*, *row*, etc., such as *a litre of petrol* and *a row of desks*.

3. **By -ful:**

   The suffix *-ful* marks the classifier, such as: *mouthful*, *spoonful*.

4. **By the speaker's or hearer's assessment of similarity between the meaning of the noun in the classifier classes.**

   Thus, these phrases are as 'containers':

   (31) A ship of fools ...
   (32) An island of travellers ...
   (33) A year of fun ...

5. **By analogy to the existing semantic classifiers:**

   (34) A boat of Iraqis ...
   (35) A file of servants ...
   (36) A blast of hunters...

8. **Analyses of classifier constructions**

   As mentioned earlier in (3) by Lehrer (1986: 109-148), classifier constructions include:

   - partitives, pseudo-partitives, and measure phrases.
   - However, there are different syntactic analyses for these types.

   Partitives contain a determiner between *of* and the following NP, as in:

   **Three pounds of that meat** ... . The head is **three pounds**, and **of+NP** does not form a PP in deep structure.

   Pseudo-partitives do not contain a determiner between *of* and the following NP, as in: **A bunch of flowers** ... . The head is **flowers**, and **of+NP** does not form a PP.

   Measure phrases contain quantifier or quantifier-like nouns, as in: **Many objections**... . and **A number of objections** ... . The head is **objections**.

   Partitives have the following syntactic analysis:
Pseudo-partitives sometimes and measure phrases always have the following syntactic analysis:

Figure (1): Three pounds of that meat ... .

Figure (2): A number of objections... .
9. **Conclusions**

The following conclusions may be drawn from the research:

1. English is not a classifier language. Often there is no conventional classifier. But speakers can coin new classifiers by extending the meaning of existing classifiers, by using metaphors, or by finding a long paraphrase. Thus, classifiers are an open class, and the pattern for them is very productive.

2. A full analysis of classifier constructions involves an interaction of syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and collocational factors.

3. The syntactic frame is: \((D) \ N_1 \ pp[\text{of} \ N_2]\), where \(N_2\) is a plural or a mass noun. Sometimes, the \(PP\) may be postposed, and postposed constructions are best when a determiner is present in \(N_2\).

4. Unit classifiers can be found with countable nouns, but physical classifiers cannot.

5. A few classifiers are tied to specific nouns, and their meaning adds little to the meaning in the case of their normal collocation.

6. In other cases, the meaning of \(N_1\) determines the classifier meaning honestly, as in **a bowl of sugar, a box of fruit, a page of writing**. So, as agreed by Gorrell (1995:3), in sentence recognition, classifier constructions may be predictable from the semantics of the first noun.

7. As agreed by Quirk et al. (1985:327), three partitives, with a definite determiner, express an entire thing or some specific part of that thing.
### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title and Details</th>
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