

# From Partitives to Vague Quantifiers. A Corpus-Based Study of English *handful* and Swedish *handfull*

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Syftet med föreliggande artikel är att med hjälp av korpusmaterial jämföra den kvantifierande potentialen hos engelskans *handful* och svenskans *handfull*. Resultaten av den empiriska analysen tyder på att de båda enheterna uppvisar en jämförbart hög frekvens av kvantifierande förekomster. Medan de kvantifierande förekomsterna av engelskans *handful* är mer eller mindre jämt distribuerade mellan konkreta inanimata, konkreta animata och abstrakta kollokater, uppvisar svenskans *handfull* en tydlig preferens för animata substantiv. Det som de två kvantifikatorerna likväl har gemensamt är att de endast kollokerar med räknebara nominalfraser, vilket verkar utgöra ett hinder för deras adverbialisering.

**Keywords:** grammaticalization, partitives, vague quantifiers, English, Swedish

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

While the most canonical indefinite quantifiers in English and Swedish, e.g. (*a*) *little* and *lite* ‘(a) little’, are of adjectival origin, vague quantification in both languages can also be expressed by means of genetically nominal items. The latter group is mostly comprised of partitive nouns which have developed a general, purely quantificational sense (‘a small/large number/amount of’), as illustrated by the following examples:

- (1) a. *We want to do this seriously, not only for a **bit** of fun.* (CORE)  
b. *Guitarist, 23, with own gear, transport and **loads** of experience looking for a competent, creative, energetic and committed drummer to form a face melting rock band based in Manchester.* (CORE)
- (2) a. *På så sätt bidrar insulin till uppbyggnaden av en **smula** kroppsfett.* (WN2013)  
‘In this way, insulin contributes to the production of **a little** body fat.’  
b. *Det är en fråga som alla borde ställa sig, eller borde ha ställt sig **massor** av gånger under de senaste veckorna.* (BM2014)

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<sup>1</sup> The abbreviations used for glosses in this paper are as follows: COM – common gender, NEUT – neuter gender, SG – singular number, PL – plural number, PST – past tense.

‘This is a question that everyone should ask themselves, or should have asked themselves **lots** of times during the last weeks.’

Building on grammaticalization theory, this paper takes a closer look at two semantically related quantifying nouns, namely English *handful* and Swedish *handfull*. As easily can be noted, both items display analogous morphological structure, as they consist of the element *hand*, denoting a body part, and the suffix *-ful(l)*, encoding the notion of plenitude. According to OnED, the scalar implications of English *handful* were semanticized as early as in the mid-15th century, whereas the earliest quantifier attestations of Swedish *handfull* available in SAOB date back to the beginning of the 18th century. The aim of the study pursued here is to compare the synchronic quantifier potential of the two items, operationalized as the frequency of use in the purely quantifying function in corpus samples, including a comparison of their respective collocational profiles, i.e. capability of quantifying over animate and abstract nominals.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 offers basic information pertaining to the grammaticalization of partitives into vague quantifiers. Section 3 describes the applied methodology as well as the sources of empirical material. The results of an analysis of naturally-occurring data from English and Swedish are presented in section 4. Finally, section 5 summarizes the main conclusions reached in the investigation.

## 2. From partitives to quantifiers: theoretical background

Partitives, also known as unit nouns (cf., e.g., Aarts *et al.* 2014), measure nouns (cf., e.g., Brems 2003), or classifiers (cf., e.g., Lehrer 1986), will be defined here as the first nominal elements in binominal constructions whose primary function consists in individuation, i.e. “bounding or unitizing the entities expressed by the second constituent” (Verveckken 2015: 48; cf. also Aarts *et al.* 2014: 293–294; Quirk *et al.* 1985: 249–252). Looked at from a semantic standpoint, partitives may be divided into (i) conventionalized measures, e.g. *a litre of milk*, (ii) containers, e.g. *a cup of tea*, (iii) fractions/parts, e.g. *a slice of bread*, (iv) quantums, used in relation to mass nouns, e.g. *a lump of sugar*, (v) collections, compatible with count nouns, e.g. *a group of students*, as well as (vi) forms, combining with both count and mass nouns, e.g. *a heap of books*, *a pile of sand* (Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2001: 530).

What is characteristic of items of this sort is that they typically participate in so-called pseudo-partitive constructions, schematized as *N1 of N2* in English and *N1 (av/med) N2* in Swedish. According to Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2009: 671), pseudo-partitive constructions differ from true partitive ones in that only the latter involve “a presupposed set of items or a presupposed entity,” and hence, in contrast to the former, allow referential NPs with a definite determiner. In other words, while pseudo-partitive structures have just one referent, partitive ones involve two referents: one being a set or, more generally, a whole, and the other

a subset or a subpart thereof (Alexiadou *et al.* 2007: 396). Accordingly, whereas the phrase *a group of people* exemplifies the former type of constructions, *a group of the people* and *a heap of their toys* represent the latter category. Interestingly, some languages, such as Swedish, make a formal distinction between the two types of constructions:

- (3) a. partitive construction  
*en kopp av detta te*  
 a.COM cup.SG.COM of this.NEUT tea.SG.NEUT  
 ‘a cup of this tea’
- b. pseudo-partitive construction  
*en kopp te*  
 a.COM cup.SG.COM tea.SG.NEUT  
 ‘a cup of tea’

As shown in (3a), only a partitive construction requires the employment of an intermediate preposition in Swedish. A pseudo-partitive one, on the other hand, typically constitutes a mere juxtaposition of two nominal elements, as in (3b). It must be added, however, that some partitive nouns indicating collections, e.g. *grupp* ‘group’, containers, e.g. *flaska* ‘bottle’, and forms, e.g. *hop* ‘heap’, have also been observed to sometimes occur with the preposition *av* ‘of’ or *med* ‘with’ even in the latter construction (cf. Delsing 1993; Ekberg 1994; Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2001).

As demonstrated by, among others, Brems (2003, 2007, 2011), Delbecque & Verweckken (2014), and Verweckken (2015), there is a tendency for partitives incorporating a “conception of [their] typical size” (Langacker 1991: 88) to grammaticalize into indefinite (vague) quantifiers, which are “imprecise in their specification of number or amount” (Jackson 2013: 119). Following Dotjes (1997: 141–142), such quantifiers may also imply the degree of intensity of what the associated nominal predicate stands for, as is the case with non-count psychological nouns. Depending on whether a particular quantifier indicates a high or low quantity/degree, it can be labelled as either *multal* or *paucal* (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 365–366).

The first stage of the aforementioned grammaticalization process manifests itself in “the semanticization of quantifier meaning through repeated pragmatic inferencing of size or scalar implications that are part of the lexical semantics of the [partitive noun]” (Brems 2011: 108), so that the pertinent item expresses the speaker’s quantitative assessments based on “a scale with some implicit norm or standard” (Radden & Dirven 2007: 117). As a result of this semantic change, partitives undergo collocational broadening (Brems 2011: 103–105), i.e. they start to combine with nominals which do not satisfy their original selectional requirements. The items *handful* and *handfull*, for instance, originally collocate with concrete N2s referring to stuff which can be held in one hand, yet when employed as quantifiers, they may easily combine with animate and abstract collocates, e.g. *a handful of people*; *en handfull timmar*

‘a few hours’, as well as with inanimate concrete nouns violating the original combinatorial restrictions exhibited by the partitives under discussion, as exemplified by (4–7):

- (4) *You pass a liquor store, some shops, a bank, a post office, a handful of cottages.* (CORE)
- (5) *The amount of new climate damage that Enbridge and a handful of private oil companies propose to pump down ENTPA and into your future air and water is 150 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> (150 MtCO<sub>2</sub>) each year.* (CORE)
- (6) *Den arabiska tv-kanalen visas i nuläget bara i en handfull amerikanska städer.* (WN2013)  
 ‘The Arabic TV-channel is currently available only in a few American cities.’
- (7) *Däremot så finns det en handfull bloggar som jag tyvärr undviker att besöka.* (BM2014)  
 ‘On the other hand, there are a handful of blogs that I, sadly, choose not to visit.’

Moreover, such elements are no longer compatible with other quantifiers (cf. Keizer 2007: 136): *\*three bits of patience*; *\*många massor av tid* ‘many lots of time’. In addition, they display restricted modification patterns, as they can only be pre-modified by emphatic adjectives, e.g. *a little bit of time*; *en hel massa folk* (cf. Brems 2011: 201).

What points to an advanced grammaticalization of partitives are changes at the level of syntax. When a binominal phrase with a partitive noun occupies the subject position in an English sentence, the verb normally agrees in number with the N1-element, as in (8a). Conversely, with a nominal quantifier in the N1-slot, it is the number value of the N2 that determines subject-verb agreement (Langacker 1991: 89; Quirk *et al.* 1985: 264), as in (8b):

- (8) a. *Three lots.PL of land.SG were.PL/\*was.SG sold.*  
 b. *There is.SG/\*are.PL lots.PL of time.SG.*

By contrast, in Swedish, the special status of such quantifiers does not manifest itself syntactically in subject-verb concord, the reason being that verbs in the language at issue do not inflect for number or gender. However, adjectival predicative complements invariably agree in number with the N2-element (cf. Kinn’s [2017] comments pertaining to Norwegian):

- (9) *En massa personer var nyfikna/\*nyfiken.*  
 a.COM mass.SG.COM person.PL.COM be.PST curious.PL/curious.SG.COM  
 ‘A lot of people were curious.’

Swedish likewise provides evidence for the neutralization of the grammatical gender of partitive nouns affected by the discussed type of grammaticalization, as mirrored in the co-occurrence of grammaticalized partitives such as *handfull* ‘handful’ and *massa* ‘mass’, both of which are originally common gender nouns, with the neuter article:

- (10) a. *ett*            *handfull*            *experter*  
 a.SG.NEUT    handfull.SG.COM    expert.PL.COM  
 ‘a few experts’
- b. *ett*            *massa*            *tid*  
 a.SG.NEUT    mass.SG.COM    time.SG.COM  
 ‘a lot of time’

Moreover, it is even possible to observe an occasional omission of the indefinite article, typically preceding nominal quantifiers:

- (11) *Det* *var*    *massa*            *polis**er*.  
 it    be.PST    mass.SG.COM    police.officer.PL.COM  
 ‘There were a lot of police.’

Nevertheless, the last two phenomena are still relatively rare, and the corpus data scrutinized in the present study offer neither any instances of Swedish *handfull* combining with *ett* nor examples of the omission of the indefinite article. Notably, however, partitives involved in all of the aforementioned syntactic changes may be looked at as having undergone yet another grammaticalization phenomenon in addition to semantic generalization, namely (partial) decategorialization (cf. Brems 2011: 111; Heine 2003: 579).

Still, elements affected by the above-discussed grammaticalization process typically differ with respect to their quantifier potential, both intra- and cross-linguistically. This may concern the frequency of a given item’s occurrence in the purely quantifying function in language use as well as its ability to quantify over animate and abstract (count and non-count) nominals. The remainder of this paper therefore reports on a comparative study of two items of this kind, namely English *handful* and Swedish *handfull*.

### 3. Methodology

The first stage of the empirical investigation involved the extraction of random samples of 100 occurrences of the English item *handful* and Swedish *handfull* in the binominal N1 (*of/av/med*) N2-construction (i.e. 200 attestations in total), where N1 stands for the partitive noun/quantifier, and N2 refers to the nominal being assessed in terms of quantity, from the Corpus of Online Registers of English (henceforth CORE) as well as the Swedish Bloggmix 2014 Corpus (henceforth BM2014) and the Webbnyheter 2013 Corpus (henceforth WN2013).<sup>2</sup> The collected attestations were grouped into (i) partitive, (ii) quantifier, and (iii) indeterminate uses, the last category encompassing instances which are ambiguous between the partitive and the purely quantificational reading. All types of uses were then further classified

<sup>2</sup> Samples of 50 attestations were extracted from both Swedish corpora. The main criterion here was that the English and Swedish source material should encompass texts which belong to similar registers, and which were produced in the same period of time. Thus, the entire dataset comprises Internet texts, including online news, from the years 2013–2014.

in accordance with the N2-type, i.e. assigned to one of the following categories: (i) concrete count, (ii) concrete non-count, (iii) animate, (iv) abstract count, or (v) abstract non-count. The final step consisted in formulating semantic generalizations over the types of nouns typically collocating with the elements under scrutiny.

## 4. Results

Presented below are the results of the first part of the quantitative analysis of the empirical data, which consisted in determining the proportions of particular uses of English *handful* and Swedish *handfull* in the corpus samples:

Table 1. Types of uses of English *handful* and Swedish *handfull*

Type of uses	No of attestations (%)	
	English <i>handful</i>	Swedish <i>handfull</i>
<b>Partitive</b>	12 (12%)	7 (7%)
<b>Quantifier</b>	85 (85%)	90 (90%)
<b>Indeterminate</b>	3 (3%)	3 (3%)

As can be noted, both of the analysed elements exhibit a comparably high proportion of quantifier uses, with their partitive attestations being conspicuously rarer. In what follows, the collocational profiles of the two items are further scrutinized quantitatively, and additional qualitative comments are offered as to the semantic classes represented by their recurrent N2-collocates. The qualitative discussion is illustrated with a number of representative corpus examples.

### 4.1. English *handful*

The following table reveals the distribution of the concrete (count and non-count), animate, and abstract (count and non-count) collocates of English *handful* in its partitive, quantifier, and indeterminate uses:

Table 2. Types of N2-collocates of English *handful*

N2-type	No of attestations (%)		
	Partitive	Quantifier	Indeterminate
<b>Concrete count</b>	5 (5%)	29 (29%)	1 (1%)
<b>Concrete non-count</b>	4 (4%)	0 (0%)	2 (2%)
<b>Animate</b>	2 (2%)	30 (30%)	0 (0%)
<b>Abstract count</b>	1 (1%)	26 (26%)	0 (0%)
<b>Abstract non-count</b>	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Although the partitive attestations of *handful* are rather scarce in the data, it is possible to discern a certain regularity, namely that in this type of uses, the item under analysis normally appears in the context of culinary recipes:

- (12) *Cook for a couple of minutes then add 200ml of chicken stock and a **generous handful of fresh pak choi leaves**. Finally add a **handful of cooked noodles**, cut the beef into thick slices and eat immediately.* (CORE)

Additionally, *handful* turns out to be capable of functioning partitively also in relation to animate and abstract nouns, in which case its semantics is similar to that of *group* or *set*, even though such attestations are extremely rare (cf. Table 2):

- (13) *Whenever I hear about “rock star” female designers, it’s **the same handful of women** being mentioned.* (CORE)
- (14) *The two candidates must care because women are the majority of voters in America, women vote in larger numbers than men, and women voters have determined the outcome of **the last handful of presidential elections**.* (CORE)

Moreover, one of the examples suggests that *handful* may likewise function as a negatively charged collective noun, functionally akin to *pack* or *bunch*:<sup>3</sup>

- (15) *They’re just **a handful of Americans** exercising their First Amendment rights to bellyache, not proposing anything serious.* (CORE)

As far as its quantifier attestations involving animate N2-collocates are concerned, in turn, *handful* invariably quantifies over count nouns with human referents. Also worth emphasizing here is that when the binominal phrase with *handful* occupies the subject position, the verb typically agrees in number with the N2-element:

- (16) *There are **a handful of people** who know the truth and it must eat away at them.* (CORE)
- (17) *A lot of kids play violent video games but only **a handful of children** are violent.* (CORE)
- (18) *There are only **a handful of experts** who can discuss stars and galaxies in a way that lay people can easily understand.* (CORE)
- (19) *At each stage **a handful of players** dominate, not just in primary agriculture but in food manufacturing and retailing.* (CORE)
- (20) *Only **a handful of 20th century writers** tantalize our senses as well as Smith.* (CORE)

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<sup>3</sup> Even though such attestations are referred to as valuing quantifier uses in Brems (2011), I will treat them as partitive rather than quantifier ones, the reason being that their function is to bound the N2-referents in terms of their assumed negativity rather than to convey a purely quantitative assessment thereof.

The abstract collocates accompanying *handful* represent rather diverse semantic classes. For instance, many of them are event-denoting nominals:

- (21) *Florence and the Machine started off by playing a handful of gigs in and around London, and in August 2007, the band performed at the first year of the 1234 Shoreditch Festival, performing alongside Lightspeed Champion on the MySpace Main Stage which was hosted by manager Nash's DJ double act, Queens of Noize.* (CORE)
- (22) *He won the league with Real Madrid but only played a handful of games so he will not have been that happy in Madrid.* (CORE)
- (23) *We've seen it in a handful of mainstream games, but never, to my knowledge, as a core mechanic.* (CORE)
- (24) *More than 25,000 wells drilled have caused a handful of micro-seismic events that can barely be felt.* (CORE)

Importantly, what is common to all of the abstract N2-collocates of *handful* is that they belong to the count category.

## 4.2. Swedish *handfull*

Shown below is the distribution of the concrete (count and non-count), animate, and abstract (count and non-count) collocates of Swedish *handfull* in its partitive, quantifier, and indeterminate uses:

Table 3. Types of N2-collocates of Swedish *handfull*

N2-type	No of attestations (%)		
	Partitive	Quantifier	Indeterminate
<b>Concrete count</b>	5 (5%)	26 (26%)	3 (3%)
<b>Concrete non-count</b>	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
<b>Animate</b>	0 (0%)	43 (43%)	0 (0%)
<b>Abstract count</b>	0 (0%)	21 (21%)	0 (0%)
<b>Abstract non-count</b>	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

As is the case with its English counterpart, Swedish *handfull* in its partitive uses tends to appear in culinary recipes, collocating with nouns referring to foodstuffs:

- (25) *2 laxfiléer färskpasta en handfull räkor hackad chili hackad vitlök* (BM2014)  
 ‘Two salmon fillets, a handful of shrimps, chopped chili, chopped garlic’
- (26) *En knippe färsk dill 1 handfull coctailtomater* (BM2014)  
 ‘A bundle of fresh dill, a handful of cocktail tomatoes’

In its quantifier uses involving animate nominals, Swedish *handfull*, like English *handful*, invariably quantifies over count nouns with human referents, even though the former displays a more conspicuous preference for this type of N2-collocates (cf. Tables 2 and 3):

- (27) *Därför så känns det mycket tråkigt när en handfull anonyma personer försöker förstora allting.* (BM2014)  
 ‘For this reason, it feels very bad when **a few anonymous people** try to destroy everything.’
- (28) *En handfull politiker säger sig vara upprörda över att svenskarnas läsförståelse sjunker.* (WN2013)  
 ‘Some politicians claim to be appalled by the fact that the Swedes’ reading comprehension is deteriorating.’
- (29) *Enligt honom har en handfull av skolans 170 elever ännu inte kommit tillbaka till skolan.* (WN2013)  
 ‘According to him, **some of the school’s 170 pupils** have not yet returned to school.’

In the abstract domain, by contrast, the Swedish quantifier *handfull* exhibits a propensity for nouns standing for what can be broadly described as measure units, both spatial (29) and temporal (30–32), the latter being most frequently represented by the N2 *gånger* ‘times; occasions’:

- (30) *jag, min syster och mamma bestämde oss för att gå en handfull kilometers promenad* (BM2014)  
 ‘I, my sister and mom decided to go for a walk of **a few kilometres**’
- (31) *även om det bara handlar om en handfull sekunder är det betydligt långsammare än att använda den inbyggda kameran för att ta en bild* (WN2013)  
 ‘Even if it’s only about just **a few seconds**, that’s considerably slower than if you use the in-built camera to take a picture’
- (32) *han har haft feber en handfull gånger och typiskt att han ska få det nu* (BM2014)  
 ‘He’s had a fever **a few times** before, so most probably he’ll get one now again’
- (33) *prinsen var 3 år gammal och hade bara träffat honom en handfull gånger* (BM2014)  
 ‘The prince was three years old and had only seen him **a few times**’

## 5. Conclusion

Both English *handful* and Swedish *handfull* have developed highly productive quantifier uses involving both concrete and abstract collocates. Their partitive attestations, in turn, are typical of the culinary register, and as such normally involve N2s referring to foodstuffs. The data suggest nonetheless that the English item is more likely to function partitively also in relation to animate and abstract collocates, even though the number of such uses is rather negligible (cf. Table 2). Another difference is that while the quantifier uses of English *handful* are more or less evenly distributed between concrete inanimate, concrete animate, and abstract count collocates (cf. Table 2), Swedish *handfull* displays a pronounced predilection for animate nouns (cf. Table 3). Moreover, in the abstract domain, the Swedish item reveals a preference for nouns denoting various measure units, especially temporal ones, its most frequent N2-collocate of this type being *gånger* ‘times; occasions’. English *handful*, on the other hand, more frequently combines with event-denoting nominals. Importantly, when functioning as quantifiers, both items exhibit general incompatibility with mass nominals, which may be assumed to constitute a blocking factor for their adverbialization (cf., e.g., *a bit better*; *vänta en smula* ‘to wait a bit’ vs *?\*a handful better*; *?\*vänta en handfull* ‘to wait a handful’), which typically constitutes another stage in the grammatical evolution of partitive nouns (cf., among others, Doetjes 1997, 2008; Traugott 2008).

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