

# Direct pseudo-partitives in American English



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## Summary

We present evidence of consistent usage of direct pseudo-partitives (e.g. *cup flour* cf. *cup of flour*) in American English (Table 2).

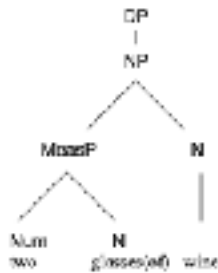
- ▶ Partitive constructions in COCA include a significant number of direct pseudo-partitives with measure/portion readings (1) (Tables 1-2).
  - ▶ This can support the view that **of is vacuous in measure/portion constructions** (Fig. 1) (see Jackendoff 1977, Stickney et al. 2011).
- ▶ There is a notable lack of direct pseudo-partitives with container+contents readings (2) (Table 1).
  - ▶ This can support the rare view that **of contributes a CONTAIN relation in container+contents constructions** (Fig.2) (e.g. Selkirk 1977).
- ▶ Altogether, this can support **distinct structures for measure/portion and container+contents constructions** (Selkirk 1977).
- ▶ This suggests that interface conditions (Chomsky 1995) impact surface realization, as a gradual process (in Kroch's 1989 sense).
- ▶ English is no longer as distinct from other Germanic languages; only Icelandic lacks direct pseudo-partitives.

## Data & Figures

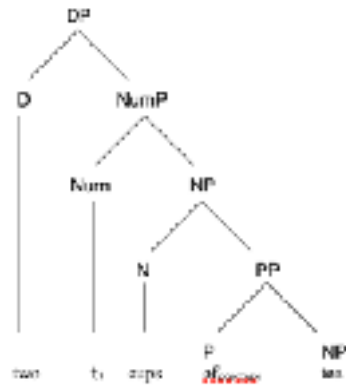
- (1) Ameena stirred two glasses (of) wine into the soup. (measure/portion)  
(2) Leda gripped two cups of tea by the handle. (container+contents)  
(3) Carolyn had one cup of coffee. (container implied?)

	Indir	Dir
measure/portion	41.18%	16.36%
container+contents	10.59%	0.00%
container implied?	40.59%	15.45%
list	0.00%	26.36%
other	7.65%	37.27%

**Table 1.** Readings of pseudo-partitives in percent per structure (indirect or direct).



**Figure 1.** measure/portion construction<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 2.** container+contents construction<sup>2</sup>

NOUN1	NOUN2	Indir	Dir
CUP	COFFEE	5348	16
CUP	TEA	2277	3
GLASS	WATER	2044	3
BOTTLE	WINE	1556	5
BARRELS	OIL	861	1
CUPS	COFFEE	649	2
BOTTLE	WATER	609	1
GLASS	MILK	537	1
CUP	WATER	479	1269*
POT	COFFEE	424	1
GLASSES	WINE	400	0
POT	WATER	369	0
BOTTLES	WINE	367	3
GLASS	CHAMPAGNE	344	2
CUP	SUGAR	146	1502*
TEASPOON	SALT	96	3276*
TSP	SALT	10	2010*

**Table 2.** Frequency of container/measure indirect and direct pseudo-partitives in COCA's top 1000 'NOUN of NOUN' and 'NOUN NOUN' forms

## Methodology

- ▶ Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, Davies 2008) chosen for balance so no particular genre could bias results.
- ▶ Top 1000 'NOUN of NOUN' and 'NOUN NOUN' forms searched, manually analyzed for N1 container + N2 substance forms.
  - ▶ Those not in the top 1000 of the respective search were individually searched.
- ▶ **Authentic pseudo-partitives** found among 'NOUN NOUN' forms via manual inspection; other forms (e.g. 'pot water' in a bong) excluded.
  - ▶ \* (Table 2) Those with more than 37 results were estimated based on a sample of 100 randomly chosen examples.
- ▶ **Readings** (Table 1) determined by manual annotation; tagged as ±substance and ±container depending on what is acted upon.
  - ▶ Substance is acted upon in (1)—i.e. the wine is stirred. Container is acted upon in (2)—i.e. the cup is gripped.
  - ▶ **Measure/portion** includes examples like (1) where the substance is acted upon and the container is not.
  - ▶ **Container+contents** includes examples like (2) where the substance is not acted upon and the container is.
  - ▶ **Container implied?** includes examples like (3) where neither the substance nor the container is acted upon.
  - ▶ **Items in a list**—e.g. *one cup water, one cup sugar, one teaspoon salt*—were annotated as such.
  - ▶ **Other** items did not fit the annotation scheme—e.g. *Opera is not my cup of tea; Cup Coffee Company*.

## Discussion

- ▶ **Direct pseudo-partitives are more strongly tied to measure/portion readings** than container+contents readings (Table 1).
  - ▶ There is no positive evidence of direct pseudo-partitives with container+contents readings.
- ▶ Assuming *of* is vacuous in all pseudo-partitives (see, e.g. Jackendoff 1977), the data does not inform theory at all.
- ▶ Assuming *of* expresses a CONTAIN relation in container+contents constructions but is vacuous in measure/portion constructions is supported by this data and has theoretical precedent (see e.g. Selkirk 1977, Rothstein 2012).<sup>1,2</sup> Figures based on Rothstein (2012).
- ▶ American English has direct pseudo-partitives (33% of inspected partitives), primarily used in the context of cooking, e.g. (1) (Table 2).
- ▶ **Germanic languages** generally have direct pseudo-partitives, though English and Icelandic do not (Wood 2020; Seržant 2021).
  - ▶ English had direct pseudo-partitives in Middle English after losing genitive morphology (Mustanoja 2016; Grestenberger 2015).
  - ▶ Middle English direct pseudo-partitives were rare, not established, and quickly died out—e.g. *a barel ale* (a barrel of ale) (Wood 2020).
- ▶ Container+contents and measure/portion constructions differ within Viennese German (Grestenberger 2015) and Dutch (Doetjes 2017).
  - (4) a. *zwei Gläs-er Wasser* (two glass-PL water, container+contents) b. *zwei Glas Wasser* (two glass.SG water, measure/portion)
- ▶ This may shed light on whether pseudo-partitives have uniform (e.g. Jackendoff 1977) or distinct structures (e.g. Selkirk 1977).

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