

A Corpus Study of Partitive Expression - Uncountable Noun Collocations

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A Corpus Study of Partitive Expression – Uncountable Noun Collocations

Završni rad

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Summary

This research paper explores partitive expressions not only as devices that impose countable readings in uncountable nouns, but also as a means of directing the interpretive focus on different aspects of the uncountable entities denoted by nouns. This exploration was made possible through a close examination of specific grammar books, but also through a small-scale corpus study we have conducted. We first explain the theory behind uncountable nouns and partitive expressions, and then present the results of our corpus study, demonstrating thereby the creative nature of the English language. We also propose some cautious generalizations concerning the distribution of partitive expressions within the analyzed semantic domains.

Key words: *noncount noun, concrete noun, partitive expression, corpus data, data analysis*

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1. Introduction

Nouns are commonly classified into the categories of uncountable and countable nouns, and partitive constructions are used with noncount nouns when we want to refer to the entities denoted as countable entities. Partitive expressions are defined as constructions denoting a part of a whole (Quirk et al 1986: 245). Such constructions express both quality partition (e. g. kind of paper), and quantity partition (e.g. a piece of paper) (ibid:245).

This paper will focus on the usage of partitive expressions with uncountable nouns in order to portray their ability to change the meaning focus of a specific uncountable noun. To put it differently, we will explore partitive expressions as devices that allow us to focus on different aspects of the uncountable entities denoted by nouns. For example, *drizzle of butter* and *stick of butter* are two different partitive expressions used to denote two different aggregate states of the same thing (i.e. substance). They simultaneously denote their different qualities and quantities. In the former example (*drizzle of butter*), the partitive expression used denotes the quantity and the quality of the substance as a liquid matter, whereas the latter (*stick of butter*) denotes its quantity and quality as a solid matter.

This paper will start with a theoretical overview of this phenomenon, and will include some examples found in grammars of English language, viz. Quirk et al (1986), Buljan and Gradečak-Erdeljić (2013), Carter, McCarthy (2006), Biber et al (1999), and Radden and Dirven (2007). After the theoretical part, we continue with analysis of examples taken from the Corpus of Contemporary American English.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. *Distinction between Count and Noncount Nouns*

For the theoretical overview of the phenomenon of the partitive expressions, we have chosen to look into five different grammar books in order to get a more complete insight into the issue at hand. The grammar books in question include: Cambridge Grammar of English - A Comprehensive Guide - Spoken and Written English Grammar and Usage (Carter, McCarthy 2006), A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language (Quirk et al 1986), English Morphosyntax. On Nouns, Determiners and Pronouns (Buljan and Gradečak-Erdeljić 2013), Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (Biber et al 1999), and Cognitive English Grammar (Radden and Dirven 2007).

The first important theoretical point to be made in this connection is the basic distinction between countable and uncountable nouns. This is one of the basic distinctions commonly made in the system of nouns, the other major distinction being that between proper and common nouns. It is common nouns that lend themselves to further subclassification into countable and uncountable nouns (Buljan and Gradečak-Erdeljić 2013: 34).

Most basically, countable nouns denote entities that can be counted, while uncountable nouns denote entities that cannot be counted. To be more precise, countable nouns denote entities that we *conceptualize* as individuated bounded entities, while uncountable nouns denote entities *conceptualized* as undifferentiated masses or continua lacking boundaries. The latter include nouns denoting e.g. physical substances such as air, water, abstract states or emotions (boredom, happiness), and abstract concepts (freedom, justice). It is also important to note that the conceptualization of entities as countable and uncountable is partly motivated by our perception of the world in regards to the visual perception (seeing the world from the point where we, as observers, are positioned) (Radden and Dirven 2007: 38), but it is also partly arbitrary. Due to these different motivators, the conceptualization of entities as countable and uncountable

differs between languages in a way which we cannot explain, nor can we find grounds for just by looking at the objective facts. It is a thing of convention that, for example, the noun *information* is a countable noun in the Croatian language, and an uncountable noun in the English language, even though both expressions are used to refer to the same entity.

Even though nouns prototypically have a status as countable or uncountable, many nouns can be used in a countable or uncountable way by means of conversion (Quirk et al 1986: 248). In that way, an uncountable noun (such as *cheese*) can be "reclassified" as a countable noun involving a semantic shift so as to denote quality partition "kind/type/form of". For example:

(1) *A: What cheeses have you got today?*

B: Well, we have Cheddar, Gorgonzola, and Danish Blue (Quirk et al 1986: 248).

In a similar way, a noun like *coffee*, which is normally noncount, can be reclassified as a count noun to carry different meanings.

(2) *Do you want tea or coffee?* (*coffee* used as a *noncount noun*)(Quirk et al: 248)

(3) *Can I have a coffee, please?* (= *a cup of coffee* – noun *coffee* used as a *count noun* carrying the meaning *an appropriate unit of something*)(ibid: 248).

(4) *Two coffees, please.* (= *two cups of coffee* – noun *coffee* also used as *count noun* carrying the meaning *an appropriate unit of something*)(ibid: 248).

(5) *This is a nice coffee.* (noun *coffee* used as a *count noun* carrying the meaning *a kind/sort/brand of something, i. e. coffee*) (ibid: 248).

(6) *I like Brazilian coffees best* (noun *coffee* used as a *count noun* carrying a meaning of *a kind/sort/brand of something, i. e. coffee*) (ibid: 248).

From the grammatical point of view, uncountable nouns are invariable. This means that they are incapable of changing formally to indicate singular and plural number, because the number distinction does not apply to them. To be more precise, we say that uncountable nouns are *fixed* in

the singular only (more commonly) or plural only. Hence their alternative names *singulariatantum* and *pluraliatantum* (Biber et al 1999: 81-82).

Uncountable nouns also fail to combine with any other linguistic units which imply the idea of number or countability. For example, the noun *car* when used as a countable noun can take on different articles, so it is possible to say *a car*, *the car*, while the noun *traffic*, as an uncountable noun cannot take on an indefinite article (**a traffic*), but only the definite one (*the traffic*).

To move this overview closer to the central topic of the paper, let us note that, as far as partitive expressions are concerned, both count and noncount nouns can enter partitive constructions (Quirk et al 1986). For instance, by combining the countable noun *apple* with the most general, and widely used partitive expression such as *a piece of*, we form a partitive construction – *a piece of apple*. In this example, we have a concrete countable noun which, when combined with a partitive construction, imposes further countability qualities on a noun that already possesses those qualities.

In our paper, however, we will only focus on those used with uncountable nouns to achieve their countable readings.

2.2. Partitive expressions

Partitive expressions, as previously defined, are constructions denoting a part of a whole. However, things are slightly more complex, since partition can involve quality partition (e.g. kind of paper) and quantity partition (e.g. a piece of paper) (Quirk et al 1986: 245).

Quality partition is expressed by a partitive count noun like *kind*, *sort*, or *type* followed by an *of-phrase*. For example:

(7) *a new kind of computer (singular partitive) --> new kinds of computers (plural partitive)*

To be more specific, partitive constructions consist of a count noun expressing a form, container or measuring unit, the relation expression *of*, and a mass noun expressing the substance (Radden and Dirven 2007: 86).

It is important to note that quality partition of noncount nouns may be expressed by alternative means, not only with the help of partitive expressions. Namely, sometimes all it takes is to use simple reclassification.

(8) *a nice kind of coffee* (partitive expression) --> *a nice coffee* (reclassification)

However, quantity and countability can very easily be expressed through general partitive nouns – in particular *piece*, *bit*, *item*, followed by an *of*-phrase. According to Carter, and McCarthy, these expressions are the most neutral and the most widely used partitive expressions (2006: 179). For example:

(9) *a piece of cake* (singular partitive) --> *two pieces of cake* (plural partitive)

(10) *a bit of chalk* (singular partitive) --> *some bits of chalk* (plural partitive)

(11) *an item of news* (singular partitive) --> *several items of news* (plural partitive)

The most widely used partitive expression is *a piece of*, which can be combined with both concrete and abstract nouns. For example;

(12) **concrete:** *a piece of bacon/chalk/coal/land/paper/butter/metal*

(13) **abstract.** *a piece of advice/information/news/research/work/idea*

In addition to these general partitives, there are some more restricted and descriptive TYPICAL PARTITIVES, which form expressions with specific concrete noncount nouns. This research paper will concentrate on those kind of restrictive partitives in the analytical part of the paper. Here are some examples of typical partitives found in Quirk et al (1986):

(14) *an atom/grain of truth*

- | | |
|---|--|
| (15) a bar of chocolate/soap/gold/iron | (22) a lump of coal/lead/sugar |
| (16) a blade of grass | (23) a sheet of paper/metal/ice |
| (17) a block of ice/flats/seats/shares | (24) a slice of bacon/bread/cake/meat |
| (18) a cut of lamb/meat; a joint of meat (BrE) | (25) a speck of dust/dirt |
| (19) a drop of water/oil/whisky | (26) a stick of chalk/dynamite/celery/candy |
| (20) a grain of corn/rice/sand/salt | (27) a strip of cloth/land/paper |
| (21) a loaf of bread | (28) a suit of clothing clothes, armour |

Furthermore, partitive expressions are often used metaphorically to describe more abstract quantities (Carter, McCarthy 2006: 179):

- (29) *They had a **slice of luck** when the coach went off the road but didn't hit anything.*
- (30) *One had to add a **dash of realism** and a great big dollop of gratitude to a situation like this.*
- (31) *Only a **handful of people** turned up at the concert. It was very disappointing.*

In the following section we will introduce the methodology of our study, and then, in part 4, present the results of our analysis.

3. Methodology

The main source of data for our corpus study of partitive expressions was the Corpus of Contemporary American English. We tailored our search to extract as many of the *typical* partitive expressions with uncountable nouns as possible. We further narrowed our search to include only specific concrete noncount nouns.

To be more precise, the first step in our analysis was to make a general search of the Corpus of Contemporary American English for the partitive expressions that could be elicited with the search string *a [n*] of [n*]*.

This type of search enabled us to get a generous number of different partitive expressions. After this step was completed, we specifically chose the head nouns that appeared to be most productive and most interesting. These were later put into different categories according to particular semantic classes. To be more specific, the categories we decided to divide our search results into included: partitive expressions connected to nouns denoting food, nature, and material. Then we narrowed down our focus so that, in the next step, our search of the COCA¹ involved searching for the partitive expressions associated with particular nouns. For instance: *a [n*] of butter*. This procedure gave us insight into different qualities (and quantities) of the head noun that are put into focus when it is combined with specific partitive expressions.

In our paper, we concentrate on expressions that are not as commonly used as the most neutral, and widely used partitive expressions such as *bit of*, *part of*, *item of*. To put it differently, we were mainly interested in descriptive typical partitives. These partitive expressions were found, and checked for authentic uses in the Corpus of Contemporary American English.

¹Acronym COCA refers to the Corpus of Contemporary American English

4. Results

In the following sections we will present our analysis and will specifically focus on explaining how they square with the basic goal of our study.

The database will be divided and analyzed in three basic categories of nouns: categories of food, nature, and material. Within each section we will try to detect patterns in terms of what kinds of meaning shifts are involved when particular nouns are associated with multiple partitive expressions.

This section will start with a typical example of multiple partitive expressions used with a single uncountable noun to shift our focus to different aspects of the latter.

(1) *He dug a scrap of paper out of his pocket and walked in.*

(2) *There was a pause, accompanied by a rustling of paper.*

(3) *The world would unfurl below me like a bright picture on a scroll of paper and there would be nothing holding me to ground.*

In these example sentences, we can see different qualities of the noun *paper* coming into focus. We can conclude that this is mainly possible because of the count noun in the first part of the partitive expression (specifically – *scrap*, *rustling*, and *scroll*) that is used to express different qualities of the noun. To be more specific, in example (2), the center of our attention is brought to the auditory qualities that are produced by *paper* when it is handled. Example (1), in turn, focuses on the small size plus possibly also irregular shape of the paper. Example (3) refers to a particular size (length) and shape of paper, a ‘form(at)’ which is conventionally used for particular formal functions.

4.1. Partitive Expressions Connected to Food

In this part of the paper, we will look into some of the nouns from the food category, which is the most productive, and the most interesting category we were able to find. The reason for this being that noncount nouns connected to food allow us most diversity, as the entity itself can appear in different states of aggregation (and can therefore be packaged differently), and its size and condition can be expressed through different units of measurement. Furthermore, the way we interact with a particular food item can also influence the way we refer to it (for example, as consumers when we want to express its taste and texture). The head nouns from this category were carefully selected, as we tried to focus on those that allow for the biggest variety of partitive expressions that can be coupled with the specific food items.

As the first example for this category, we chose the noun *honey*.

(4) *He was fishing out a cold biscuit and looking for a jar of honey.*

(5) *But a teaspoon of honey and lemon without tea can do wonders for a dry, scratchy throat.*

(6) *Crispy fried chicken thighs get cozy with tender biscuits and a drizzle of honey.*

(7) *She rolled the last word around her tongue like a stream of honey.*

From these examples, we can see how partitive expressions used with the same noun can make a significant shift in our understanding of the food item in question. So in the example (4), the partitive expression includes the noun *jar*, which denotes a type of container. In example (5), the focus is on the measuring unit (*teaspoon*), and in examples (6) and (7), the partitive expressions used serve to denote the aggregate state of the item, namely liquid. Furthermore, in example (7), the shift in focus takes on a metaphorical meaning, as the partitive expression used with *honey* (*stream*) is used to denote the sluggishness with which something is done, and this particular food item is compared to a river.

As another example, we will observe the noun *chocolate*.

(8) *He bought an orange and **a bar of chocolate**, and glanced over a newspaper.*

(9) *He brought **a spoonful of chocolate** to his lips and blew on it.*

(10) *Frank had a sandwich, an apple, two carrots, and **a square of chocolate**; Tub put out one hard-boiled egg and a stick of celery.*

(11) *He snapped his fingers and caught **a dribble of chocolate** off his chin with the back of his hand, which he licked.*

Depending on the choice of the partitive expression used with the noun *chocolate*, our focus is brought either to the way it is packaged (as in the example (8)), or to a kind of measuring unit suitable for this particular food item (as in examples (9), and (10)). However, in the example (11), the partitive expression that is used (*dribble*) shifts our focus to the liquid state of chocolate, and in a somewhat metaphorical way carries the meaning of it moving slowly because of being too thick.

Butter is another great example of nouns from the food category. It is an item that can take on different partitive expressions in order to make a significant shift in the way we perceive the entity.

(12) *Somewhere in the middle of it all, I dropped **a stick of butter**, and I reached down to pick it up before someone slipped and fell.*

(13) *I stood at the kitchen window with my carrot and **tub of butter**, mulling, brooding, noodling, chewing, and so forth.*

(14) *Melt **a tablespoon of butter** in a skillet over medium heat, and make pancakes.*

(15) *She handed me a hard roll with a thick **slab of butter** in the middle.*

In the case of *butter*, the main shift in our focus that certain partitive expressions bring about has to do with the state of aggregation this food item is in. So in example sentences (12), (13) and (15) we are mainly concerned with its qualities as a solid matter, and in (14), we are mainly concerned with its qualities as a liquid matter. Furthermore, partitive expressions in (13) and (14) can also refer to the packaging form butter comes in, while (12), (14) and (15) can refer to specific units of measurement suitable for *butter*, depending on its state of aggregation. For example, we would use the expression *stick of butter* when referring to unit of measurement of a solid matter, but *tablespoon of butter* when referring to a unit of measurement of a liquid matter. Furthermore, *stick of butter*, and *tablespoon of butter* can both be converted into grams, and other measuring units for weight. To be more specific, a *stick of butter* equals to 113.4 grams, while a *tablespoon of butter* amounts to 14.18 grams.

If we were to make more general conclusions when it comes to items from this category, we could say that, depending on the state of the food item we choose to bring focus to, partitive expressions can serve a purpose of putting an emphasis on specific qualities of the item in question, such as its packaging (container) form, measuring unit, and state of aggregation.

4.2. Partitive Expressions Connected to Nature

In this part of the paper, we will mostly focus on the nouns expressing natural phenomena. They are commonly considered to be uncountable, which allows them to be coupled with specific partitive expressions in order to express their countable qualities. Typical examples of nouns that fall into this category include nouns such as *energy*, *rain*, *lighting*, *fire*, *gravity*, *wind*, *darkness* etc.

The first noun that we will look into is *rain*. Through the examination of the COCA, we were able to look into specific characteristics that come into focus when coupling different partitive

expressions with this particular noun. For example, it is most commonly combined with the noun that denotes its liquid state, such as *drop*.

(16) *Clouds gathered but did not shed **a drop of rain**.*

(17) *Then something - a breath of wind from a new direction - **a spatter of rain** light as a feather's touch - gave warning.*

(18) *When sunlight, which we see as white, shines through **a curtain of rain**, most of the light passes unaltered through the center of the droplets.*

(19) *As she searched for some answer, Mary heard the sound of **a torrent of rain** hitting the canopy of foliage above them.*

In all the four examples, the particular partitive expressions refer to the liquid form of the matter in question. But it is the choice of the partitive expression that makes a change in how we perceive the quantity and the quality of this specific entity.

We can see that examples (16) and (17) denote smaller quantities of rain, while examples (18) and (19) denote larger quantities of this same entity. Most interestingly perhaps, the choice of the partitive expression in example (17) plays on the onomatopoeic properties of the expression, as the word *spatter* itself resembles the sound that small drops of rain make when they fall on a surface.

As a different example of an uncountable noun denoting natural phenomena, we can look into the noun *wind*.

(20) ***A gust of wind** disturbed the layer of fresh-fallen snow lining the rooftops and sent it swirling downward.*

(21) *Almost immediately **a blast of wind** snatched her umbrella from her hand and pitched it somewhere into the next county.*

(22) *It was the calm after the storm, and there was barely **a whisper of wind** on the water's surface.*

(23) *The fire crackled and the wireless hummed and a whistle of wind rustled through the eaves of the house.*

Similarly to the previous example, different aspects of the same entity have been put into focus by simply coupling it with different partitive expressions. So, in examples (20) and (21), we can understand the wind as a very powerful force, while in examples (22) and (23), the wind does not appear to be so strong. Quite the opposite, *a whistle* and especially *a whisper* denote the relatively soft sound of the wind. In these examples, this entity is almost personified, as the *wind* is metaphorically given the characteristics and abilities that people normally have.

When it comes to the partitive expressions in this category of nouns, we again see that our choice of the particular partitive expression is motivated by the specific characteristic of the entity that we want to be the focus of our attention. Consequently, nouns connected to nature and natural phenomena are most commonly coupled with partitive expressions that denote audiovisual characteristics of a particular natural phenomenon because that is the aspect of the entity that is most noticeable, and therefore allows for most variety.

4.3. Partitive Expressions Connected to Material

In this part of the paper we are going to look into specific nouns connected to material. This is also a highly productive category, as we will soon observe. Noncount nouns that refer to material include nouns such as: *coal, steel, wood, aluminum, asphalt, chalk, cloth, concrete, cotton, glue, lumber, wool, sand, metal* etc.

As the first example in this category of nouns, we are going to look into the noun *metal*.

(24) *The frost minion lashed out, knocking the sheet of metal from its hinges.*

- (25) *And over it all is the now more distant **clank of metal** as the drawer is opened and the nightmare momentarily ended...*
- (26) *They could see the **gleam of metal** from the shadows, but the undergrowth kept them from identifying the ship.*
- (27) *The normally quiet county road was littered with bodies and **shards of metal** and glass.*
- (28) *He had been impaled by a gleaming white **chunk of metal**, apparently some piece of fuselage.*

As we can see from these examples, this noun can take on a generous number of partitive expressions. Partitive expressions that are coupled with it can denote quality of the sound it produces (as in the example (25)), but also visual appearance of what it produces (as in example (26)). Therefore, *gleam* as a part of partitive expression possesses an ability to allude to our visual senses, while *clank* alludes to our auditory senses. Examples (27), and (28) denote a smaller part of a bigger entity, so in the former example (*shards of metal*), the quality of the metal that comes into focus its size. To be more specific, it denotes how tiny, and also sharp this entity is. *Chunk of metal* refers to a bigger part of the entity, and the word itself evokes ideas of irregularity, lack of precision (as it implies that this entity was not handled with care, but was actually randomly cut), and shifts our focus to the actual size, and shape of *metal*.

The next noun from the category of materials that we are going to look into is *sand*.

- (29) *Every single **grain of sand** was picked up with a pair of pincers and documented with laser measurements.*
- (30) *The festival takes place on Johnson's Beach, a rocky **stretch of sand** packed with near-naked bodies roasting in the sun.*
- (31) *The next time you're at the ocean, scoop up a **handful of sand** and try to imagine how it got there.*

(32) *The first built his house on a pile of sand, and it was destroyed as soon as the storm hit.*

(33) *" We can not rebuild this economy on the same pile of sand, " the president said.*

From these examples, we can see the diversity of partitive expressions that this noun allows for. *Grain of sand* (29), *stretch of sand* (30), and *handful of sand* (31) all serve to make the head noun countable in such a way as to shift our focus onto its ability to be measured in one way or another. Example (29) denotes the smallest unit of the entity, and according to the COCA, it is the most common partitive expression used with this particular noun. On the other hand, example (31) denotes a bigger unit of measurement, but it also includes a kind of tactile perception which evokes the idea of it being held in your own hand. It also gives us an image of the shape *sand* gets when it is being held.

However, *stretch of sand* (31) refers to the spread, i.e. length of asand-covered terrain. In other words, it denotes the ability of this noun to be expressed not only as a thing that can be measured according to its weight, shape, and size, but also its length.

The last example (33) shows how this noun, along with its partitive expressions, can be used in a metaphorical sense. If we compare it to the previous example (32), we can see that the same partitive expression is used, but there is a shift from the literal to the metaphorical interpretation. Example (32) refers to the literal meaning of the expression because, based on the rest of this sentence, we are likely to believe that the *house* was in fact built on sand. In example (33), it is obvious that the expression is not used in the literal sense because we do not imagine *economy* to be built in the same way that a house is built. In example (33), the metaphorical sense of the expression serves to portray the difficulty, volatility of macroeconomic circumstances, and, as a result, the slim chances of economic success.

Glass is similar to the noun *metal* when it comes to the choice of partitive expressions.

- (34) *He looked at them, saw shards of glass embedded in the protective covering he wore for the crime scene.*
- (35) *Not a shot was fired or a pane of glass broken.*
- (36) *There was an opening that wasn't an opening - a great sheet of glass letting the light escape.*
- (37) *The probing beams of light prick the eye muscle as delicately as slivers of glass.*
- (38) *She heard the clink of glass hitting tin as the nurse disposed of the morphine container in the waste basket.*
- (39) *He lands in a shower of glass and debris on a wooden bench, breaking it in two.*

As we can see from these examples, the partitive expression that *glass* takes on are very similar to those of the noun *metal*.

In examples (35) and (36) the focus is on the form this particular object can be sold in. These expressions refer to the selling size of *glass*, but they are also the expressions we are likely to use when we want to refer to the entity in such a way as to simultaneously put into focus its size, form, and shape. Examples (34) and (37) refer to a smaller unit of the entity in question, which we imagine to be sharp and capable of causing physical injury and pain. Example (39) is similar, although the use of the partitive expression *shower of glass* is metaphorical. It connotes the same dangers that accompany the mere idea of broken *glass*. *Clink of glass* (example 38) puts into focus the sound this entity produces when it is handled. *Clink* also possesses some of the onomatopoeic qualities that we identified with the nouns covered in section 4.2.

When it comes to the noncount nouns connected to materials, we can conclude that partitive expressions that can be used with them serve a purpose of putting into focus their size, shape, and form, but they also have an ability to appeal to our senses, particularly our tactile and audiovisual senses. Furthermore, these nouns can also be used metaphorically and sometimes even onomatopoeically.

5. Conclusion

After examining several grammar books and completing our small-scale corpus study, we found that speakers of English have a range of expressive options when it comes to making uncountable nouns countable. We examined several semantic domains where the nouns can easily pair up with a range of different partitive expressions to take on different countable readings. In other words, we examined partitive expressions as devices that enable us to express different aspects of the conceptually unbounded entities denoted by the associated uncountable nouns. Quite often, these expressions appeal to a variety of our senses (auditory, visual, tactile), but often simply denote the form, container or measuring unit conventionally associated with the entity concerned.

The main focus of our study was on noncount concrete nouns paired up with typical partitives from the categories of food, nature and material. As a general statement, we can say that partitive expressions connected to food typically serve to portray the aggregate state of the associated entity, its conventional packaging (container) and measuring unit. When it comes to nature, partitives readily focus on the audiovisual aspects of the unbounded uncountable entities coded in the nouns, but they also easily take on metaphorical meanings and onomatopoeic qualities. Partitive expressions connected to material most typically engage our tactile perception and audiovisual senses. But they also resemble the food and the nature category as they may also denote conventional forms of packaging, measuring units, while also occasionally taking on interesting metaphorical overtones.

We would need to carry out a more extensive study to see to what extent these patterns would hold over a larger database. But, the one conclusion that can safely be drawn is that partitive expressions are not completely unconstrained. Their use and compatibility with particular nouns reflects the most significant and typical ways in which we interact with the world around us.

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