

Some binominal size noun constructions in English and French: a contrastive corpus-based perspective

Lieselotte Brems, University of Liège, University of Leuven

Abstract

This paper compares binominal size noun constructions in English and French from a contrastive perspective based on analysis of parallel and monolingual corpus data. It is argued that, even though there are structural similarities between the constructions in both languages, there are differences in the frequency of their use and constructional equivalence is only partial. There are differences in terms of premodification potential, which can be explained by typological differences between the two languages. Another difference lies in the formal reflexes and agreement features, which is again in keeping with the typological profiles of both languages. Translation equivalence is also typically only partial and depends on the use (e.g. quantifier versus head use).

1. Introduction

Binominal syntagms are a type of complex NP attested in many European languages involving two nominal elements which are possibly linked by some linking element, i.e. (determiner) (modifier) NP1 + *of/van/von/de/di/Ø* + (determiner) (modifier) NP2. This paper will focus on binominal size noun (SN) constructions, in which NP1 is a size noun, and compare them in English and French.

Brems (2011) argued that English SN expressions, such as *heap(s) of*, *load(s) of* and *bunch of* synchronically display functional (head versus modifier status) and formal variation (premodification, plural versus singular SN, etc.). A SN such as *bunch* can function as a head noun with lexical meaning (1), as a quantifier (2), or as (part of) an evaluative expression (3):

- (1) [...] **a very large bunch of flowers** with a neat little card [...]
(WBO)
- (2) She is sitting in the kitchen with **a bunch of other women** from the area (WBO)
- (3) The report is just **a bunch of gobbledegook** (Internet)

In (1) the *of*-phrase specifies what the bunch consists of. *Bunch* here refers to a constellation of flowers tied together at one point. The SN and

Brems, Lieselotte. 2015. "Some binominal size noun constructions in English and French: a contrastive corpus-based perspective." *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 14(1):90-115.

the referent of NP2 are typically coextensive, i.e. they refer to the same object in reality. The SN can be modified by qualitative adjectives in this use, as in *a very large bunch*. In (2) *a bunch of* refers to a quantity of NP2 and can be substituted by a more canonical monomorphemic quantifier such as *many*. In (3) *a bunch of* is more concerned with expressing intensified evaluation than with quantification. It is difficult to paraphrase *a bunch of* by *much* here. A better paraphrase seems to be ‘it really is gobbledygook!’. In both (2) and (3) *bunch of* functions as a modifier. In addition to these three uses, SNs also appear in ambivalent uses. In Brems (2011) a distinction was made between ambiguous and vague uses. Ambiguous examples allow two distinct readings depending on two contextualizations, as in (4):

- (4) We had to move **loads of furniture and stuff**. (WBO)

This can either be interpreted as literal loads that have to be carried, or as referring to large quantities of furniture. In vague examples, two layers of meaning interact, but give rise to one global meaning. These examples are typically metaphorical as in (5):

- (5) The British have forged a fine tradition of gardening and cannot afford to sit on their well-clipped laurels. Striding past **the compost heap of nostalgia** comes Christopher Lloyd. (WBO)

Importantly, vague examples do not allow disambiguation.

The synchronic variation in form and function was argued to be the result of diachronic grammaticalization processes from an original lexical head noun use to uses with modifier status. The various English SNs looked at were shown to have grammaticalized to various extents. For some expressions, such as *a lot of* and *lots of*, the quantifier use has become the near-exclusive one, whereas others, such as *pile(s) of* have hardly grammaticalized. The following figure from Brems (2011: 203) sets the various English SNs looked at in that study out on a scale of grammaticality representing the synchronic percentages of (evaluative) quantifier uses.

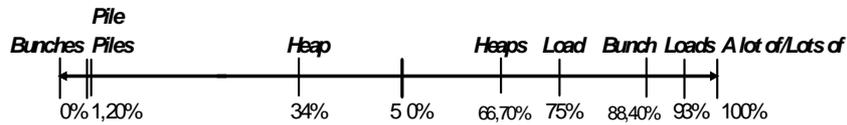


Figure 1: Scale of grammaticality (Brems 2011: 203)

Interestingly, corpus analyses showed that the various uses of SN expressions display systematic co-selection patterns between the SN and pre- or postnominal collocates (Stubbs 1995). On the one hand there were collocations between prenominal (sets of) determiners/ adjectives/quantifiers, and on the other hand between SN+ *of* and the (premodified) NP2. This is why they were argued to be collocationally constrained constructions, i.e. templates in which some positions are predetermined or ‘filled in’, viz. by collocations. Table 1 sums up the most important ones and gives examples from the corpora.

Table 1: SN constructions as collocationally constrained constructions

Head	Quantifier	Evaluative Quantifier	Ambivalent
<i>Bunch of grapes/ flowers/ parsley</i> <i>Lorry-load of tombstones</i> <i>Three bunches of chrysanthus</i> <i>Untidy heaps of stones.</i>	<i>Bunch of studies/ guys/ suits/ practising</i> <i>Heaps of questions/ people/ praise</i> <i>A whole bunch of studies</i>	<i>They are a bunch of morons!</i> <i>His excuse is a whole load of rubbish</i> <i>A right bunch of misery guts</i>	<i>We had to move loads of furniture and stuff.</i> <i>You can pick up a load of plant pots at a sale</i> <i>Striding past the compost heap of nostalgia...</i>
-(Subsets) of concrete nouns -Premodifiers apply to the entire construction and are unrestricted	-Concrete, abstract and animate nouns -Restricted premodifiers echo the quantifier meaning	-Animate and abstract nouns -Restricted premodifiers echo the evaluative meaning (negative semantic prosody)	Mix of features of both constructional patterns

Size noun constructions can be considered to be a cross-linguistic category in that many European languages have them, e.g. Italian (6), Spanish (7), Dutch (8) and German (9), as shown by the following examples drawn from VanDale's translating dictionaries¹

- (6) Un **sacco di bugie** [...]
 - 'a lot/bunch of lies'
- (7) Silvia y François se habían conocido en un café de París hacía **un montón de años**.
 - 'Silvia and François met in a café in Paris many years ago'
- (8) De brave jongen krijgt weer **hopen stress**.
 - 'The good boy has heaps of stress again'
- (9) Das kostet **eine Menge Geld**.
 - 'It costs a lot of money'

In this paper I want to focus on comparing English and French SN expressions. Both languages seem to have constructions that are structurally and functionally similar. Whereas the linking particle in English is *of*, it is *de* in French:

- (10) Assis sur **un tas de sable**, il passait et repassait la pierre sur le vif. (FT)
 - 'on a pile of sand'
- (11) Votre époux ne vous a, à aucun moment, témoigné **le moindre brin de jalousie?** (FT)
 - 'not the slightest whiff/hint of jealousy'
- (12) Le premier ministre s'est récemment vanté de sa campagne publicitaire, Avantage Canada, qui n'est rien d'autre qu'**un ramassis de platitudes**. (FT)
 - 'nothing but a bunch of platitudes'

There have not been that many detailed (contrastive) studies on SN constructions (but see Buvet 1993, Benninger 2001, Foolen 2004 and Brems & Verveckken 2008). The present paper takes a contrastive perspective, hitherto under-researched, the central question being

¹ VanDale's translating dictionaries are available via the VPN service of the KU Leuven: <https://stuiterproxy.kuleuven.be/zoeken/,DanaInfo=vowb.van.dale.be+zoeken.do>.

whether similar-looking SN constructions in English and French function analogously. How are SN expressions for which structural ‘cognates’ exist translated between English and French and in specific genres or registers? On the basis of samples of *tas de* vs. *heap(s) of*, *handful(s) of* vs. *poignée(s) de*, and *whiff of* vs. *brin de* from monolingual corpora such as WordbanksOnline (WBO), the Yahoo-based Contrastive Corpus of Questions and Answers (YCCQA) (De Smet 2009) and Frantext (FT), as well as parallel corpora, it will be argued that they show the same range of meanings, though to different extents and in different ways.

2. Research questions, data selection and corpora²

The main research question is: how are SN expressions for which structural ‘cognates’ exist translated between English and French in specific genres and registers? In other words, is there constructional and/or translational equivalence or overlap between the two languages?

To this end a series of English and French SNs were selected. The English expressions are *heap(s) of*, *whiff of* and *handful of*. For French I selected *tas de*, *flopée(s) de*, *bande(s) de*, *brin de* and *poignée de*. These include both literal translations and hypothesized functional translations, as suggested by translating dictionaries such as Collins Roberts (<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english-french>).

In addition, the list also subsumes both SNs indicating relatively large quantities/amounts (*tas*, *heap(s)*, *pile(s)*) more evaluative ones (*bunch*, *bande*, *flopée*) and smaller quantities/amounts (*brin*, *whiff*, *handful*). The case study on *tas de* and *heap(s) of* will be discussed in more detail than the other ones.

Monolingual data were extracted from WBO for English, and FT and YCCQA for French. FT is a database which contains 4000 texts from Medieval until contemporary French, mostly from literary registers (<http://www.frantext.fr/>). YCCQA contains over 29 million words from the period 2006 to 2009 and consists of questions and answers submitted

² The starting point of the corpus analysis is a number of supervised MA papers written for a course on contrastive linguistics which I teach at the ULg (University of Liège). The corpus analyses were supervised by me as the students went along and have been checked again and often heavily corrected for the present paper. The authors of the various papers are listed in the reference section.

by users of the Yahoo answers website for English, French, German and Spanish. Since FT is not very diversified in terms of genre and mostly contains more formal and literary French, the French YCCQA subcorpus brings in more informal and conversational-like French.

WBO is a 57 million word synchronic corpus containing spoken and written English mainly from the 1990s onwards, from different regions and registers. The English data are either American or British depending on the case study at hand.

Parallel data come from the open access corpus OPUS (<http://opus.lingfil.uu.se/>), more specifically the *europarl* and *opensubtitles* subcorpora. The first one contains transcriptions from debates in the European Parliament and on the whole has a more formal streak, whereas the second one consists of subtitles of movies and TV series and often include more informal conversational discourse. It should be noted that it is not always clear which language was the original source language. The parallel corpus investigations are quite limited in scope and not bi-directional.

The monolingual analyses should yield detailed insights into how both constructions work in both languages and can hence inform us on their potential constructional equivalence. Do SN constructions have the same range of uses across these two languages, i.e. head, quantifier and evaluative, or will additional uses crop up? Discoursal features such as genre restrictions and polarity sensitivity will be studied. Formal characteristics will be checked, such as types of premodifiers in NP1, NP2 collocates, concord patterns and the preference of singular and plural forms of the SN in the various constructional uses. In French, as opposed to English, determiners and adjectives agree with the noun they modify in number and gender. As is well-known adjective placement is different in French and English as well in the sense that it is typically postnominal in French and prenominal in English (cf. Quirk et al. 1985, Grevisse & Gosse 2010).

Obviously, in comparing two monolingual corpora one is faced with the problem of comparability. As indicated above, I have tried to bypass this by looking at French data from different levels of formality, so as to warrant comparison with the data from WBO.

The parallel corpus data make it possible to assess translation equivalence. Are English SN expressions translated by French ones or are different strategies used. Is it, for instance, more likely that quantifier

uses of SN expressions are more frequently translated by a SN expression or not? For multilingual analysis the potential existence of so-called translation universals should be taken into account, i.e. is translated text characterized by ‘universal’ tendencies such as explicitation and simplification? If so, this would mean that translated French and English, in our case, are non-authentic varieties of the languages being studied and results of this type of corpus analysis should be taken with a grain of salt. See e.g. Baker (1993) and Mauranen & Kujamäki (2004) for more information about the existence of translation universals. In addition, when analysing the subtitles data it has to be taken into account that other concerns than translation equivalence are at stake, such as restrictions on the number of characters of the translations (see Guillot 2010). A last word of caution pertains to the fact that the varieties of English represented in both parallel data sets are restricted. As for the European Parliament there are obvious restrictions (in the sense that it will contain European varieties of English only), and for the subtitles corpus it is often impossible to figure out the regional variety.

3.3. *Case studies*

3.1 *Tas de/d’ and heap(s) of*

The hypothesis behind this case study is that because of their similarity in source semantics and the fact that they both occur in the binominal construction defined earlier, *tas* and *heap(s)* might also be functionally equivalent in both languages. In the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) *heap* is defined as “A collection of things lying one upon another so as to form an elevated mass” as well as “A large number or quantity” in colloquial English. This indicates that in English it can combine with count and uncountable nouns. The Trésor de la Langue française informatisée (TLFi) defines *tas* as “accumulation d’une matière, de choses de même nature ou de nature différente, arrangées avec ou sans ordre et placées les unes sur les autres” and “Terme de quantification: fam. *Un tas de/des tas de* + subst.”. For *tas de* I relied on the morphological form of determiners and such to tell the difference between the singular and plural form.

An exhaustive sample of 282 instances was extracted from FT, which was complemented by an exhaustive one of 24 hits from YCCQA.

To match this, a random sample of 306 instances was extracted from the British subcorpora of WBO.

Tables 2 and 3 summarize the frequency with which the various constructional uses are attested in the monolingual data sets.

Table 2: *heap(s) of* in WBO

	<i>Heap</i>		<i>Heaps</i>	
	#	%	#	%
HEAD	119	60	37	34
QUANTIFIER	33	17	52	48
EVALUATIVE-Q	18	9	0	0
AMBIGUOUS	11	6	19	18
VAGUE	16	8	0	0
TOTAL	197	100	109	100

Table 3: *tas de* in Frantext and YCCQA

	<i>Tas (sg.)</i>		<i>Tas (pl.)</i>	
	#	%	#	%
HEAD	96	52.75	31	25
QUANTIFIER	65	35.71	79	63.71
EVALUATIVE-Q	17	9.34	10	8.06
AMBIGUOUS	4	2.20	4	3.23
VAGUE	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	182	100	124	100

The tables make clear that the evaluative (quantifier) is restricted to the singular form *heap of*, whereas in French both forms can express it. Moreover, there are no vague instances of *tas de*. The head noun use occurs with inanimate (negative), concrete nouns as NP2 in both languages, but in the English data one occasionally also finds ‘animate’ collocates which typically refer to people in an objectified way. In the

examples (13)-(16) contextual clues pointing to a head use interpretation have been underlined.

- (13) Akinbiyi ripped off his shirt and took off like a madman before being submerged beneath **a heap of colleagues** near the Leicester dugout. (WBO)
- (14) On peut regarder de nouveau les nuages qui glissent à l'envers, les guêpes qui s'affairent autour **des petits tas d'ordures**, les lézards, les caméléons, les herbes qui tremblotent dans le vent. (FT)
'small piles of garbage'
- (15) Sur les tas de fumier qui sont dans les champs vous ferez mettre à chaque fois qu'on les aura augmentés de la bonne terre qui les couvre de deux doigts d'épaisseur afin que le soleil ne les sèche pas. (FT)
'on the dungheaps'
- (16) as befits a former staffer on The Economist, he fills his book with stories reinforcing the notion that the economy is more like a living organism than a machine. He opens with ant foraging. A traditional economist, seeing an ant nest equidistant from **two identical heaps of sugar**, would expect the ants to divide their energies randomly between the heaps. (WBO)

The French head noun use is less commonly premodified (i.e. in only about 3% of the cases), which can be explained by means of the specific structure of the NP in English compared to French. The latter only allows a relatively small number of adjectives and other elements before the head noun, whereas English typically allows elaborate strings of premodifiers. In French the following pre-nominal elements were attested: *autres, grand, gros, hauts, interminable, joli, petit(s), large* and the cardinal number *deux*. Example (14) is repeated here as (17).

- (17) On peut regarder de nouveau les nuages qui glissent à l'envers, les guêpes qui s'affairent autour **des petits tas d'ordures**, les lézards, les caméléons, les herbes qui tremblotent dans le vent. (FT)
'small piles of garbage'

- (18) Dans un quartier du port, je voyais passer leur vie une meute de garçons établis sur les hauts tas de bois de construction débarqués, eux aussi, de Norvège. (FT)
'high piles of wood'
- (19) One wall, the wall against which the central part of the house stood, was still standing, but the rest of that structure had utterly collapsed, falling away into **an irregular heap of masonry**. (WBO)

Both indefinite and different kinds of definite determiners occur in French head noun uses, which is similar to English.

- (20) Par-dessus **mon tas de bouquins**, je lui ai souri: "Bonjour" (FT)
'my pile of books'
- (21) à quelques mètres de lui, sur **un tas de pierres**, des rats procédaient à leur toilette. (FT)
'a pile of stones'
- (22) At dawn that day, far to the south of the lonely tower near Soissons, the shadow of Castillon d'Arbizon's castle had fallen across **the heap of timbers** ready for the heretic's burning. (WBO)
- (23) In the chair was what he'd taken, on entering the room, to be **a heap of clothes**. (WBO)
- (24) **Those two heaps of mail** still need to be processed (WBO)

Subject-verb agreement is typically between the SN (i.e. the head noun) and the verb or adjective in both languages:

- (25) On the far side of the road, the far side to the buildings, was a heap of sandbags, inexpertly stacked and no more than waist height. (WBO)

- (26) À Arnouville-lès-Gonesse, il grimpait sur **un tas de pavés** devenu navire. (FT)
'a pile of cobblestones'

In the quantifier use plural *heaps of* and *tas de* are more commonly used than their singular counterparts *heap/tas de* (48% vs. 17% in English and 64% vs. 36% in French). The NP2 collocates are not restricted to concrete nouns anymore. Abstract and animate nouns are also possible in the quantifier use:

- (27) **un tas d'**idées (FT), **un tas d'**actions (FT), **un tas de** gens (FT), **un tas de** choses (YCCQA), **des tas de** filles (FT), **des tas d'**illusions (FT), **des tas d'**animaux (FT), **des tas de** réponses (YCCQA), **des tas de** chansons (Yahoo), **des tas de** critères (YCCQA)
- (28) **heaps** of ice cream (WBO), **heaps** of goodies (WBO), **heaps** of junk (WBO), **heaps** of character (WBO), **heaps** of energy (WBO), a **heap** of bad debts (WBO), a **heap** of abuse (WBO), a **heap** of contradictions (WBO)

French (*des*) *tas de* has a preference for concrete inanimate, then animate and then abstract NP2s. In English, *heaps of* mostly combines with inanimate, then abstract and animate collocates and for *heap of it is* first abstract, then inanimate and animate collocates.

In the quantifier use there is hardly any premodification, or *whole* in English, and the determiner is typically indefinite.

- (29) Fresh in, we've got promo material from The Stands and The Rocks and **a whole heap of rarities** including gems from Radiohead, The Thrills and REM so you can max out your credit card on us. (WB)
- (30) Mais elle aussi, elle se faisait **des tas d'illusions**, sur nous, ses élèves. (FT : prose, roman)
'many/heaps of illusions'

- (31) Et alors, tu renâcles petit cheval tu n'es pas courageuse, **des tas de filles** réussissent à tout «concilier», sourire aux lèvres, n'en font pas un drame comme toi. (FT : prose, roman)
'many girls'
- (32) Particularly associated with them has been the Hungarian pianist Andras Schiff, who, over the years, has played **a whole heap of late-night Bach** in the Usher Hall. (WB)

Subject-verb agreement is between NP2 and the verb:

- (33) There was **heaps of white powder** scattered across the road and we obviously feared that it was anthrax. (WB)
- (34) But you're not going to achieve that if there are **a whole heap of club games**. (WB)
- (35) Je suppose qu'**un tas de gens** mettraient à profit l'heure tardive et ma beauté sauvage pour traquer la fillette. (FT)
'a lot of people'

When it comes to the evaluative (quantifier) use, in English only singular *heap of* appears in this function, but it remains an infrequent use, and more typical of *load* and *bunch*. Typically there is a comparison of some object with a negative 'heap' of something:

- (36) And unfortunately at that moment Paul Kempton came out of the back door of the house and made towards the car. Because you own **this heap of rubbish** you think you own the road, do you? (WBO)

In French reference is to objects or people:

- (37) Espèce de gros dégueulasse, espèce de saloperie ambulante, espèce de gros tas de merde... tu peux aller te faire foutre ! (FT)
'big pile of shit'

Note the type noun expression 'espèce de...' in (37), which has a similarly evaluative function.

- (38) On se presse pour nous bloquer, Zingaro se débat comme un beau diable en vitupérant, fait des signes orduriers par-dessus le marché:
«**Tas de mafiatés pourris!** (FT)
'bunch of filthy/corrupt Mafiosi'
- (39) ... qu'ils allaient enfin pouvoir se reposer et qu'en fait ils aimaient mieux **leurs tas de ferraille** que la vie et les gens, sûrement. (FT)
'their heaps of scrap iron'

The final uses to be discussed are the ambivalent ones. In English, the ambiguous use is more frequent for *heaps of* than for *heap of* and displays concrete NP2 collocates:

- (40) Then the pain became too great and he jumped down and crept into the most obscure corner he could find among **the heaps of boxes and files**. (WBO)
- (41) Everything else you pack will stay in your suitcase until you go home - leaving you with **a heap of unnecessary ironing** to do to smooth out the crumples before you put them back in a drawer unused for another year. (WBO)

In French plural and singular *tas de* appear in ambiguous contexts:

- (42) Une rue où, pour des raisons que j'allais apprendre aussi, on trouve presque tous les soirs et devant presque toutes les portes, **des tas de chiffons** jetés. (FT)
'a heap of thrown away rags'
- (43) Maintenant, les jeunes, ils se carrent les miches devant un ordinateur, ils lui tripotent les boutons, et on récolte comme ça **un tas de feuilles**, et on fait des «recoupements», quel marasme... (FT)
'a heap of pages'

In sum, *tas de* and *heap(s) of* seem relatively similar in terms of the variety of uses they can express, the overall types of collocates the various uses combine with and the fact that the plural forms function more often as quantifier. However, vague uses with *tas de* were not found in the material. There are also different collocational preferences and semantic prosodies within the quantifier uses of *tas de* and *heap(s) of*. On the whole there are fewer ambivalent uses in French. *Tas de* overall functions as a quantifier more often than *heap(s) of* and is generally considered as the most strongly grammaticalized SN. There are differences between the singular and plural forms of both SNs in the evaluative quantifier use for instance. In addition, the evaluative use in French also occurs with animate NP2s. There are also differences in the premodification potential which can be explained by the different internal make-up of the French and the English NP.

What do the parallel data add to this? An exhaustive extraction of 58 examples from europarl was analysed, which contained 36 instances of singular *tas de* and 16 plural ones.

- (44) Chaque jour, on nous rapporte des cas de viol, de meurtre et de torture , mais il se trouve **un tas de gens** pour prétendre que c' est exagéré .
We have daily reports of rapes, murder, torture, and **a lot of people** say, "Oh , this is an exaggeration ". (Europarl)
- (45) Je ne peux que constater avec une certaine lassitude qu'il reste **un tas de choses** à faire.
I can, with a certain amount of resignation, state that there is **much** still to be done. (Europarl)
- (46) Il y a aussi des possibilités en fonction de l'attitude du conducteur : la somnolence, la mauvaise vue, le manque de réactions, le manque de pratique et de théorie entraînent **un tas de coûts**.
There are possibilities, too, in the area of driving safety: falling asleep at the wheel, defective vision, slow reaction times, inadequate practical and theoretical knowledge - all these give rise to **heavy costs**. (Europarl)

- (47) J'ai reçu **des tas de lettres** et de messages électroniques.
I have received **piles of letters and e-mails** (Europarl)
- (48) Monsieur le Président, ma machine à voter fait un bruit très étrange et **des tas de lumières** se sont allumées.
Mr President, my voting machine is making a very strange noise and it has **a lot of lights** on it. (Europarl)

Depending on the type of use, translations differed. Tables 4 and 5 list the attested translations for singular and plural *tas de* per use. Token frequencies are between brackets. The most frequent options are listed first and the rest are ordered alphabetically.

Table 4: Parallel data singular *tas de*

HEAD	QUANTIFIEUR	EVALUATIVE-Q
7	27	2
<i>pile</i> (2)	<i>lot</i> (8)	<i>load</i> (1)
<i>heap</i> (1)	<i>host</i> (4)	non-binominal (1) (<i>in tatters</i>)
<i>load</i> (1)	<i>range</i> (3)	
<i>mass</i> (1)	<i>all</i> (1)	
<i>mound</i> (1)	<i>all kinds of</i> (1)	
<i>zero</i> (1)	<i>heavy</i> (1)	
	<i>load</i> (1)	
	<i>many</i> (1)	
	<i>much</i> (1)	
	<i>number</i> (1)	
	<i>pile</i> (1)	
	<i>raft</i> (1)	
	<i>reams</i> (1)	
	<i>variety</i> (1)	
	<i>zero</i> (1)	

Especially in the quantifier uses there is quite a lot of variation. In addition to translations by means of SN expressions, we also found more canonical quantifiers such as *many* and *much*, type noun expressions such as *all kinds of* and adjectives with scalar semantics such as *heavy*. In some cases the SN expression remained untranslated, i.e. *zero*. *Heap(s) of* are never used as a translation for the quantifier use, but *pile(s) of* are to some extent. *Lot(s) of* occur most frequently. The head use and evaluative use were typically translated by means of SN expressions, in

one case by means of *heap of*, but not in a binominal construction with *of*. In that example the French expression *tas de fumier* was translated as *dung heap*.

Table 5: Parallel data plural *tas de*

HEAD	QUANTIFIER	EVALUATIVE-Q
1	14	1
<i>mounds (1)</i>	<i>lot (2)</i> <i>amount (1)</i> <i>load (1)</i> <i>lots (1)</i> <i>many (1)</i> <i>masses (1)</i> <i>much (1)</i> <i>multitude (1)</i> <i>numbers (1)</i> <i>pile (1)</i> <i>piles (1)</i> <i>plenty (1)</i> <i>zero (1)</i>	<i>scrapheaps (1)</i>

3.2 Handful(s) of *and poignée(s) de*

For this case study a random sample of 150 instances of *handful(s) of* was extracted from the British subcorpora of WBO, of which 140 were singular and 10 were plural. For French a random sample of 150 instances of *poignée(s) de* from FT de yielded 128 singular forms and 22 plural ones. The monolingual corpus analysis revealed that the English and French expression behave very similarly. There is a majority of quantifier uses for the singular forms. *Handful of* has 86.4% compared to 50% for *handfuls of*. *Poignée de* has 49.2% and *poignées de* has 13.6%. The relatively higher percentage of head noun uses for *poignée de* can be explained by the fact that frequent fixed expressions like *poignée de porte* ('door handle') and *poignée de main* ('handshake') were classified as head noun uses as well.

The head noun uses often contain contextual clues which make it easy to recognize them. NP2 collocates are typically concrete and the SNs can be premodified, as in (49).

- (49) Quand j'avais jeté **la première poignée de terre** sur le cercueil de mon père, je m'étais dit: « Voilà, maintenant tu es seul ». (FT)
'the first handful of soil'
- (50) D'ailleurs ces policiers ne se privaient pas de sortir de leurs poches des bagues de valeur en disant: « Tiens, cela n'est pas du toc! » ou **une poignée de billets de 1000 ou 500 francs** en disant: « Tiens, j'ai oublié cela ». (FT)
'a handful of 1000 or 500 franc notes'
- (51) She shook her head and picked up **a handful of earth**, letting it trickle through her fingers (WBO)
- (52) I felt in my pockets and brought out **a handful of loose change** (WBO)

Quantifier uses are most frequent for the singular forms in both languages and only allow premodification restricted to quantitative expressions, such as *tiny* in English. *Handful of* and *poignée de* most commonly quantify inanimate referents, but concrete animate and abstract collocates are also attested.

- (53) The Ethiopian prisoners were kept in a narrow valley. There were several thousand men and only **a handful of guards**. (WBO)
- (54) **une poignée de génies** à venir étaient nourris de Platon, de Virgile et d'Horace, de Montaigne, d'Henri Heine, de Hegel et de Marx, le concours d'entrée à une école. (FT)
- (55) [...], and it seems improbable that such elaborate and well-laid-out systems were operated by **a tiny handful of people** (WBO)
- (56) inducing mostly a gentle drifting stupor with **a handful of vivid dreams** interspersed in between. (WBO)
- (57) Le cimetière est minuscule. **Une poignée de tombes, une poignée de cyprès**; des pierres. (FT)
'a handful of tombs' 'a handful of cypresses'

There are some productive patterns in French referring to measurements of time, e.g. *poignée d'heures/de minutes*, etc.

The number of ambiguous uses, typically with singular forms, is fairly similar for French and English, i.e. 6.7% and 8.6% respectively.

- (58) Je ne voudrais surtout pas rater leur lente avancée dans le port, un mouchoir sur la tête pour me protéger du soleil, **une poignée d'amandes grillées** pour traverser le temps, (FT)
'a handful of grilled almonds'
- (59) When I returned, I brought more cushions and a blanket, a bottle of wine and **a handful of raisins** for the ferret who accompanied me. (WBO)

There are also some evaluative uses with negative NP2s, especially in French.

- (60) [...] la gigantesque et planétaire cohorte de naïfs gogos, qu'avaient conduits à la ruine et laissés sur la paille les anonymes décisions **d'une poignée d'irresponsables crétiens incompetents** (FT)
'a handful of irresponsible and incompetent idiots'

The parallel corpus data yield 20 examples of singular *handful of*, all of which are quantifier uses. It is translated by *poignée de* 8 times, *quelques* 8 times, *certaines* once and remains untranslated 3 times.

- (61) Accordingly, we have confined ourselves to **a handful of issues** and I only intend to pick out two particular aspects.
En conséquence, nous avons limité nos réflexions à **quelques éléments** et je me concentrerai ici uniquement sur deux points. (Europarl)
- (62) For example, there are environmental hazards which arise only in particular Member States, and perhaps only for **a handful of producers** in those States.
Il y a des risques environnementaux qui n'existent que dans certains États membres ou qui ne concernent que **certaines productions spécifiques**. (Europarl)

The literal translations *handful* and *poignée* hence seem to be quite similar both in terms of constructional versatility and translational equivalence.

3.3 Whiff of *and* brin de

Unlike the previous two items studied, *brin* and *whiff* both refer to small quantities. They do not have the same referential meaning, but might be functional equivalents as small size nouns (see Brems 2007).

TLFi defines *brin* as “Filament délié de chanvre, de lin. Fil, toile de brin (de première qualité). Les brins d'une corde. Par anal. (Radio) Brin d'une antenne : fil d'une antenne. Brins d'un câble électrique (→ multibrin). Jeune pousse (d'un végétal). *Un brin d'herbe, de muguet, de persil*. Fig. *Un beau brin de fille* : une fille grande et bien faite (cf. Une belle plante*). Petite partie longue et mince (d'une matière, d'un objet). *Un brin de paille*. → fétu. *Brin de laine*.” In the OED *whiff* is defined as “A slight puff or gust of wind, a breath”. Merriam-Webster adds to this the quantifier meaning of “a slight trace or indication”.

Extractions come from the British sections of WBO for *whiff(s) of* and from FT for *brin(s) de*. Tables 6 and 7 give an overview of the token frequencies and percentages of uses for the singular and plural SNs.

Table 6: *whiff(s) of* in WBO

	<i>whiff</i>		<i>whiffs</i>	
	#	%	#	%
HEAD	61	32	6	86
QUANTIFIER	11	6	0	0
EVALUATIVE-Q	0	0	0	0
AMBIGUOUS	9	5	0	0
VAGUE	110	57	1	14
TOTAL	191	100	7	100

Table 7: *brin(s) de* in FT

	<i>brin</i>		<i>brins</i>	
	#	%	#	%
HEAD	50	35	51	94
QUANTIFIER	3	2	0	0
EVALUATIVE-Q	14	10	2	4
AMBIGUOUS	69	48	1	2
VAGUE	7	5	0	0
TOTAL	143	100	54	100

It seems that the singular forms function as quantifier more easily, even though the percentages are still quite low, e.g. (63) and (64), which is typical for so-called small SNs. Plural forms as in (65) and (66) typically function as head nouns.

- (63) Je l'attends à l'arrivée avec **un brin d'inquiétude**. Pourvu qu'on ne l'ait pas changée ! Maman a reçu un petit mot de Bijou qui a ramené Beaudouin à Maisons-Laffitte. (FT)
'with a bit of anxiety'
- (64) All it takes now is a touch of churlishness or **a whiff of greed** and the resulting explosion of indignation is sufficient to dispatch the wretch to the sporting equivalent of kingdom come. (WBO)
- (65) Il ne sent pas le parfum végétal et frais **des brins d'herbe écrasés** sous son poids, il ne sent pas non plus la puanteur qui s'exhale de son corps, de ses vêtements. (FT)
'of blades of crushed grass'
- (66) Robin Darwin's Italian housekeeper had cooked a delicious meal - **the unusual sweet, alcoholic whiffs of Marsala** or boiling vermouth and cream always evoked Robin's house, used as I was, at mealtimes, to the smell of boiled potatoes or boiled carrots. (WBO)

The types of collocates in the head noun use are in keeping with the different semantics of the SNs, e.g. *a whiff of cat's pee*, *un brin de persil*, and are typically concrete and inanimate (and often uncount). As a quantifier, *brin de* and *whiff of* typically combine with abstract nouns, e.g. *un brin de lenteur/d'étonnement/jalousie*; *a whiff of greed*.

French has many fixed expressions with *brin de*, which are not attested for *whiff of*, e.g. *brin de fille* ('very pretty girl'), *faire un brin de conduite* ('accompanying someone'). Such French expressions were all counted as lexical head noun uses:

- (67) Commerce de détail posés, les choses fragiles, fruits toujours mûrs, légumes qui ne tarderont pas à être défraîchis, oeufs qu'il a achetés dans des fermes, un peu sales et **petits brins de paille** collés à la coquille, de toutes les tailles et de toutes les couleurs, pas calibrés. (FT)
'small wisps of straw'
- (68) Je n'ai jamais vu d'autre femme. Que Sycorax, ma mère, et celle-ci. Mais Sycorax n'était rien auprès de tant d'excellence. STÉPHANO : C'est donc **un beau brin de fille**? (FT)
'a very beautiful girl'

In English there are quite a number of vague uses, which do not occur for French *brin de*. The English examples typically contain contextual clues such as *hangs in the air* or *in the air*, which bring in the metaphorical layer:

- (69) Minutes later they are secure in their traps and the bets have been placed. The desperation in the eyes of the trackside audience is tangible. **A whiff of anticipation hangs in the air.** (WBO)
- (70) France won't take Ireland lightly and there'll be **a strong whiff of vengeance in the Parisian air** today. Furthermore, of course, they have the all-powerful spur of a Grand Chelem, the first since the championship was expanded to six nations. (WBO)

In the various uses the indefinite article is most common, e.g. (63), (64), (68), (69), (70), but in the head noun use and vague use we do find more

variation and premodifying adjectives, as illustrated by (66), (67), (68), (70) and the following examples:

- (71) In the Twilight Club, at the back of Gerrard Street, the customers were also greeted by **the prickly whiff of marijuana**, which hung in the air like the taste of sin. (WBO)
- (72) She was preparing the infusion set already - and even after all my years in hospitals, **the sudden whiff of disinfectant** caught me off-guard, pinching my nostrils like clean, stinging fingers. (WBO)
- (73) Elle allait me servir de rempart et de soutien, d'assise et de tremplin. **Un simple brin d'herbe irradié** par un rayon de soleil : la Rencontre ! (FT)
'a simple radiating blade of grass'

In quantifier uses too premodification can be found, which is mainly restricted to *pas le moindre* and *petit* in French and *not the faintest/slightest* for *whiff*. As argued in Brems (2007), small SNs are often polarity sensitive. For *whiff* it was argued that it mostly occurs in negative polarity contexts, as illustrated by (75). *Brin de* also occurs in those contexts but far less often in the data set at hand. An example of a negative polarity context with *brin de* is (74).

- (74) Votre époux ne vous a, à aucun moment, témoigné **le moindre brin de jalousie**. (FT)
'not the slightest hint of jealousy'
- (75) There's **not the faintest whiff of disingenuity** in his manner – rather, it's impossible to doubt him. (WBO)

Extractions were also made from the parallel corpus europarl, which yielded 16 examples, all of which are vague except for one quantifier use. In this data set *whiff of* is not translated by *brin de*. It is translated by such expressions as *relents de*, *odeur de*, *rumeur de*, *parfum* or verbs such as *sentir*, as in (77).

- (76) We are pretending to believe, as Mr Poignant has said, that this war does not have **a terrible whiff of oil** and that Bush's real objective is to return Iraq to the Iraqis.
Nous feignons de croire, comme l'a dit M. Poignant, que cette guerre n'a pas **une terrible odeur de pétrole** et que l'objectif de Bush est bien de rendre l'Irak aux Irakiens. (Europarl)
- (77) Some this morning will detect **the whiff of hypocrisy**; but it is not actually hypocrisy, it is the smell of fear: fear that public support for the whole EU project will finally collapse if Turkish entry is pursued.
Ce matin, d'aucuns auront **sentit l'hypocrisie**, mais il ne s'agit pas d'hypocrisie, en fait, c'est l'odeur de la peur : la peur que le soutien des citoyens en faveur de l'ensemble du projet européen finisse par s'écrouler si l'on tente tout à fait sérieusement de faire entrer la Turquie. (Europarl)
- (78) I turn now to the discharge for Parliament's budget, where Parliament must be especially careful to avoid **the least whiff of the suggestion** that it might treat its own funds with less rigour than it treats those of others.
J'en viens à la décharge du budget du Parlement. Sur ce point, le Parlement doit être particulièrement prudent pour éviter **toute rumeur** selon laquelle il pourrait se montrer moins strict au sujet de ses propres crédits qu'avec ceux attribués à d'autres. (Europarl)

It hence seems that the source semantics of both SNs make it difficult for them to be translational equivalents especially in head and vague uses.

4. Conclusions and prospects for future research

The case studies of a selection of English and French SNs have to some extent answered the questions to do with the constructional and translational equivalence set out in Section 2. Constructional equivalence seems to be partial. Within the binominal set-up there are differences in terms of premodification potential, which can be explained by the fact that English NPs allow for extensive prenominal premodification whereas French typically has postnominal modifiers. In addition,

whereas in English evaluative quantifier uses were mostly restricted to singular forms of the SNs, we saw that plural *tas de* for instance could also express evaluative meaning. Finally, another difference lies in the formal reflexes and agreement features, which is again in keeping with the typological profiles of both languages.

The parallel corpus data revealed that translation equivalence is also typically only partial at best. In some cases it depended on the use (e.g. quantifier versus head use). Often though, non-binominal means of indicating quantity are used or the SN construction remains untranslated. Hence, even though the individual monolingual studies might point out theoretical similarities between two SNs, the parallel corpus does not necessarily confirm this. Differences in semantic prosody preferences and polarity sensitivity help explain the lack of translational equivalence.

It is clear that the case studies presented in this paper need to be complemented with more research on other SNs and other comparisons. In addition, it would be good to incorporate other corpora and make systematic bi-directional comparisons.

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