

# The West Frisian quantifier system and the “mass only” puzzle\*

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## 1. Introduction

Quantifiers like German *ein bißchen* ‘a bit’ or French *un peu* ‘a bit’ have the curious property that they can only occur with mass nouns, not with plural nouns. Quantifiers like German *wenig* or French *peu*, which have roughly the same meaning, do not have this “mass only” restriction. Unexpectedly, the (West) Frisian quantifier *in bytsje* ‘a bit’ seems to be lacking the “mass only” property as well. In this paper I will show that the particular properties of *in bytsje* in Frisian are closely related to the overall structure of the Frisian quantifier system. The unusual behaviour of *in bytsje* might suggest a solution to the “mass only” puzzle.

## 2. The “mass only” puzzle

In an inspiring squib Doetjes (1998) presents the “mass only” puzzle and speculates a bit on its solution. This section briefly outlines the data and summarizes Doetjes’ tentative account of the problem.

Across languages, nominal low degree quantifiers that may combine with mass nouns seem to be generally incompatible with plural nouns. A clear example is Dutch *een beetje* and its etymological counterparts in other West Germanic languages:

- |     |                           |                                 |
|-----|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| (1) | een beetje geld/*vrienden | (Dutch)                         |
| (2) | ein bißchen Geld/*Freunde | (German)                        |
| (3) | a bit of money/*friends   | (English)                       |
| (4) | en betj jil/*frinjer      | (North Frisian: Fering-Öömrang) |

High degree quantifiers, whether nominal or not, do not show this “mass only” restriction; if they combine with mass nouns, they are compatible with plurals too.

Compare, e.g.:

- (5) a. een boel geld/vrienden  
       ‘a lot of money/friends’ (Dutch)  
       b. veel geld/vrienden  
       ‘much money/many friends’

Moreover, low degree quantifiers which are not nominal do not show the restriction either, as is quite nicely illustrated by the ‘minimal pairs’ in (6):

- (6) a. een weinig geld/\*vrienden  
       ‘a little money/friends’ (Dutch)  
       b. weinig geld/vrienden  
       ‘little money/few friends’  
       (7) a. un peu d’argent/\*amis  
       ‘a little money/friends’ (French)  
       b. peu d’argent/amis  
       ‘little money/few friends’

The nominal low degree quantifier in the a-examples only combines with mass nouns, whereas the non-nominal counterpart in the b-examples accepts both mass nouns and plurals.

Also quantifiers like Dutch *wat* and English *some*, which are neutral with respect to degree, show no “mass only” restriction:

- (8) (heel) *wat* geld/vrienden  
       (9) (quite) *some* money/friends

Doetjes attempts to account for the “mass only” puzzle by comparing the semantics of Dutch *een beetje* ‘a bit’ to that of its near-synonyms *weinig* ‘little/few’ and *wat* ‘some’. She suggests that the fact that *een beetje* is a “mass only” quantifier is basically due to fear of ambiguity. To be compatible with both mass nouns and plurals *een beetje* would have to be ambiguous, i.e. it would have to be able to evaluate both a small amount and a small number. To avoid this ambiguity the two meanings are lexicalized in two different items: *een beetje* ‘a bit’ and *een paar* ‘a few’. With *weinig* ‘little/few’ and *wat* ‘some’ the ambiguity problem does not arise: *weinig* is a relative quantifier (as opposed to the absolute quantifier *een beetje*), i.e. it indicates a quantity that is evaluated relative to a contextually determined norm which is external to the quantifier, and therefore it need not be ambiguous; the neutral (purely existential) quantifier *wat* is underspecified as to number or amount evaluation.

There are some problems with Doetjes’ proposal. First of all, it does not explain why only low degree quantifiers are “mass only”. In fact, her account predicts that high degree quantifiers like Dutch *een boel* ‘a lot’ would have the “mass only” restriction as well. As we will see in Section 4.2. *een boel* is an absolute quantifier,

contrasting with *veel* ‘much/many’ in much the same way as *een beetje* contrasts with *weinig* (cf. (5)). Nevertheless, it combines perfectly well both with mass nouns and plurals. Further, the fact that “mass only” quantifiers are nominal plays no role whatsoever in Doetjes’ account. If the solution of the “mass only” puzzle that I will propose in Section 5 is right, their nominal nature is a non-trivial property of the pertinent quantifiers. Finally, from a semantic point of view, it is questionable whether amount and mass evaluation are so fundamentally different that having them both in one lexical item would lead to unacceptable ambiguity.

Before proposing an alternative account of the “mass only” puzzle, I would like to bring up a nominal low degree quantifier that does not seem to show the “mass only” restriction. The discussion of this element may give us some clues to the solution of the puzzle.

### 3. The properties of Frisian *in bytsje* ‘a bit; little/few’

Remarkably, the nominal low degree quantifier *in bytsje* in (West) Frisian, although etymologically related to those in (1)–(4), seems to lack the “mass only” property. Compare:

- (10) *in bytsje jild/freonen*  
 ‘a bit of money; little money/few friends’

It would probably be more correct to say that *in bytsje* is ambiguous or, alternatively, that there are two lexical items *in bytsje* in Frisian: in one meaning this quantifier is completely similar to its etymological counterparts in other Germanic languages, also in having the “mass only” restriction; in the other meaning, however, it is more or less synonymous with relative quantifiers like Dutch *weinig* ‘little/few’. This is clearly shown by the sentences in (11), where *in bytsje* can have both interpretations:<sup>1</sup>

- (11) a. *Hy hat mei dy affearen in bytsje jild fertsjinne.*  
 he has with that business a bit-of money earned  
 ‘He earned a bit of/little money with that business.’  
 b. *Ik ha in bytsje leard op ’e universiteit.*  
 I have a bit learned at the university  
 ‘I learned a bit/little at university.’

Actually, the sentences in (11) are disambiguated by their stress pattern. In both interpretations the main sentence stress is on *jild* and *leard* respectively, but in its absolute reading (‘a bit’) *in bytsje* remains unstressed, whereas in its relative reading (‘little’) it has a strong secondary stress. For the moment, I will neglect this stress distinction, but I will return to it in Section 5.

In (12), where *in bytsje* is followed by a plural noun or where subject–verb-agreement shows that a plural interpretation is intended, it can only mean ‘few’:

- (12) a. Der wienen in bytsje freonen op syn begraffenis.  
 there were a bit-of friends at his funeral  
 ‘There were few friends at his funeral.’  
 b. Der wienen net in bytsje dy’t dy beskiter leauden.  
 there were not a bit who-that that cheat believed  
 ‘There were not few who believed that cheat.’

The same ambiguity as in (11) is found when the degree quantifier *in bytsje* is employed as a VP modifier (cf. Doetjes 1997). It can have both an absolute and a relative (frequentative) interpretation (the remark on the disambiguating function of stress made above with regard to (11) applies here as well):

- (13) Wy ha in bytsje kuire yn ’e fakânsje.  
 we have a bit walked in the holidays  
 ‘We walked a bit/hardly ever in the holidays.’

Note that in the Dutch translation of (13) *een beetje* could only be used in the absolute reading; in order to get the relative reading one would have to use *weinig* (or *maar een beetje*).

More proof that Frisian *in bytsje* can be a relative quantifier is provided by the ‘*navenant*-test’. Frisian *in bytsje* is compatible with adverbs like *navenant* ‘relatively’ (see (14a)), whereas Dutch *een beetje* is not (see (14b)). Again, Dutch has to use *weinig* here:

- (14) a. Wy ha *navenant* in bytsje rein hân fan.‘t.jier.  
 we have relatively a bit-of rain had this-year  
 ‘We had relatively little rain this year.’  
 b. Wij hebben naar verhouding \*een beetje/weinig regen gehad dit jaar.

That *in bytsje* can be used as a relative (gradable) quantifier is further indicated by the fact that it may combine with the degree markers *hoe* ‘how’ and *sa* ‘so’ in exclamative sentences:

- (15) a. It is alderraarst, hoe’n bytsje reinwetter oft wy hân ha fan.‘t.simmer!  
 it is astonishing how-a bit-of rainwater if we had have this-summer  
 ‘It is astonishing, how little rain we had this summer’  
 b. Der wienen fan.‘t.jier sa’n bytsje flinters!  
 there were this-year so-a bit butterflies  
 ‘There were so few butterflies this year!’

Also in this case Dutch would have to put in *weinig*.

Finally, in the elliptical fixed expressions (exclamations) in (16) *(in) bytsje* clearly has the denotation ‘little’ as well:

- (16) a. (in) bytsje doel!  
           ‘What utter nonsense! (lit. a bit purpose)’  
       b. (in) bytsje ferstân!  
           ‘How crazy can you get! (lit. a bit brains)’

Doetjes (1998:29) discusses a contrast between *wat* ‘some’ and *een beetje* ‘a bit’. Whereas *wat* can be modified by the intensifying adverb *heel*, *een beetje* can not:

- (17) a. heel wat wijn  
           ‘a whole lot of wine’  
       b. \*een heel beetje wijn  
           ‘(lit.) a whole bit of wine’

She argues that adding *heel* turns *wat*, which denotes an undetermined quantity, into a high degree quantifier; this would be impossible in the case of *een beetje*, because *een beetje* always denotes a small quantity. As the following Frisian example shows, this cannot be true:

- (18) a. gâns wat wyn  
           ‘a whole lot of wine’  
       b. gâns in bytsje wyn  
           ‘id.’

In (18) the intensifying adverb *gâns* ‘quite’ turns both *wat* and *in bytsje* into high degree quantifiers. That this has nothing to do with the (absolute vs. relative) meaning of Dutch *een beetje* and Frisian *in bytsje* is shown by the English examples in (19):

- (19) a. quite a bit of money  
       b. quite a few friends

Recall that English *a bit* is a “mass only” quantifier just like Dutch *een beetje*. That Dutch does not have an expression corresponding to Frisian (18b) and English (19a) is probably simply due to the fact that Dutch lacks an intensifying adverb like Frisian *gâns* or English *quite*, which may precede the indefinite article.<sup>2</sup>

Frisian (20a), the equivalent of Dutch (17b), is ungrammatical as well. More or less synonymous intensifying adverbs following the indefinite article are possible in Frisian, however, as (20b, c) show, but in these cases *in bytsje* can only be interpreted as a relative quantifier.

- (20) a. \*in hiel bytsje wyn  
           ‘a whole bit of wine’  
       b. in wakker bytsje wyn/boeken  
           ‘very little/few wine/books’  
       c. in benaud bytsje wyn/boeken  
           ‘precious little/few wine/books’

The question remains why *heel/hiel* is impossible in (17b)/(20a) and why it is perfect with high degree quantifiers like *een boel/in soad* ‘a lot’:

- (21) a. een heleboel wijn  
          ‘a whole lot of wine’  
      b. in hiel soad wyn  
          ‘id.’

Note that *heel* and *hiel* in (17b)/(20a) and (21) are not actually adverbs modifying the quantifiers *een beetje/in bytsje* and *een boel/in soad*, but rather adjectives modifying the nouns *beetje/bytsje* and *boel/soad*. I assume, therefore, that the ungrammaticality of (17b)/(20a) resides in the mutual semantic incompatibility of the adjective *heel/hiel* and a small quantity denoting noun, just like, the other way round, the grammaticality pattern in (22) is due to the incompatibility of the adjective *klein/lyts* ‘little’ a high degree denoting noun.<sup>3</sup>

- (22) a. een klein beetje/\*kleine boel wijn  
          ‘a little bit/little lot wine’  
      b. in lyts bytsje/\*lyts soad wyn  
          ‘id.’

#### 4. The Frisian quantifier system

In the previous section we established that Frisian *in bytsje* can be ambiguous between an absolute “mass only” quantifier meaning ‘a bit’ and a relative quantifier meaning ‘little/few’. In this section I will show that this unexpected behaviour of *in bytsje* is closely connected to the intricacies of the Frisian quantifier system (for a general description, see Tiersma (1985:90)).

##### 4.1 ‘Many/much’ and ‘few/little’ in Frisian

Considering the quantifier system of Frisian we will limit ourselves to the part of it that involves the expressions for ‘many/much’ and ‘few/little’. I present the most important of these in (23):<sup>4</sup>

- |      |             |              |
|------|-------------|--------------|
| (23) | ‘many/much’ | ‘few/little’ |
|      | in soad     | in bytsje    |
|      | folle       | min          |

The first observation that can be made with respect to the Frisian quantifier system is that the ‘basic’ quantifiers *folle* ‘many/much’ (cf. Dutch *veel*, German *viel*) and *min* ‘few/little’ have been largely replaced by nominal quantifiers. Next to *folle* one finds the nominal quantifier *in soad* (etymologically: ‘a cooking portion’) and the

nominal quantifier *in bytsje* has nearly completely superseded *min*. In fact, one may say that the common expressions for ‘many/much’ and ‘few/little’ in Frisian are *in soad* and *in bytsje*, whereas *folle* and *min* are more or less marked. The system is not symmetric, however: *folle* is less restricted in its use than *min*. Concretely, *in soad*, *folle* and *min* show the following properties/restrictions:

- a. *in soad* can be a relative quantifier (like *in bytsje*);
- b. *folle* is a negative polarity item;
- c. *min* only appears after the degree marker *te* in present-day Frisian

In the next sections I will discuss these quantifiers and their properties in some more detail.

#### 4.2 *in soad* ‘a lot; much/many’

The contrast that we found between Frisian *in bytsje* and Dutch *een beetje* (and its equivalents in other languages) reappears with Frisian *in soad* ‘many/much’ and nominal quantifiers like Dutch *een boel*. In Dutch *een boel* is an absolute quantifier, like *een beetje*, whereas in Frisian *in soad* can be a relative quantifier, like *in bytsje*. Again, it would perhaps be better to say that *in soad* is ambiguous between an absolute and a relative reading, or, alternatively, that there are two lexical items *in soad*.

Since high degree quantifiers like *in soad* do not have the “mass only” restriction the ambiguity of *in soad* and the contrast with Dutch is not immediately obvious in prenominal use:

- (24) a. *in soad jild/freonen*  
           ‘a lot of money/friends’ (Frisian)  
       b. *een boel geld/vrienden*  
           ‘id.’ (Dutch)

Like *in bytsje*, however, *in soad* can be used as a VP modifier and in this case it is ambiguous between an absolute and a relative reading (cf. (25a)); Dutch *een boel*, on the other hand, can only have an absolute reading (cf. (25b)).<sup>5</sup>

- (25) a. Wy ha in soad kuiere yn 'e fakânsje.  
           we have a lot walked in the holidays  
           ‘We walked a lot/often in the holidays.’  
       b. We hebben een boel gewandeld in de vakantie.  
           ‘We walked a lot in the holidays.’

This is clearer yet when the predicate only allows the relative reading of the quantifier:

- (26) a. Wy binne in soad thús.  
           we are a lot at-home  
           ‘We are often at home.’

- b. Wij zijn \*een boel/veel thuis.

In contrast to Frisian *in soad* Dutch *een boel* is not allowed in (26); Dutch must take recourse to the relative quantifier *veel* here.

The *navenant*-test yields the same result:

- (27) a. Hja hie *navenant in soad* frijdagen.  
           she had relatively a lot-of days-off  
           ‘She had relatively a lot of days off.’  
       b. Ze had naar verhouding \*een boel/veel vrije dagen.

Frisian *in soad* can be combined with adverbs like *navenant* ‘relatively’ (cf. (27a)), whereas Dutch *een boel* cannot (cf. (27b)). Again, Dutch can only use *veel* here.

### 4.3 *folle* ‘many/much’

The bare quantifier *folle* ‘many/much’ has become a negative polarity item in modern Frisian (cf. E. Hoekstra 1996). Therefore, in non-negative contexts, only *in soad* is possible:

- (28) Der ha \*folle/in soad besikers by de útstalling west.  
           there have many/a lot-of visitors at the exhibition been  
           ‘A lot of people visited the exhibition.’

In negative contexts, i.e. in the scope of a negative adverb (29a), in ‘negative raising’ sentences (29b), in the scope of the negative preposition *sûnder* ‘without’ (29c), in the complement of dubitative verbs (29d), or in an inherently negative expression like (29e), *folle* may appear:

- (29) a. Der ha net folle besikers by de útstalling west.  
           there have not many visitors at the exhibition been  
           ‘Not many people visited the exhibition.’  
       b. Ik wol net leauwe, dat se folle blebberbeien fûn ha.  
           I will not believe, that they many blueberries found have  
           ‘I don’t think, that they found many blueberries.’  
       c. Sûnder folle wurden naam se ôfskie.  
           without many words took she leave  
           ‘Without many words she took leave.’  
       d. Ik freegje.my.ôf, oft er folle Arabysk ken.  
           I wonder, if-that he much Arabic knows  
           ‘I wonder, if he knows much Arabian.’  
       e. Wat sil men dêr folle fan sizze?  
           what shall one there much about say  
           ‘What shall I say?’



Except in (29e), where *folle* seems to be idiomatically fixed, it is always possible to replace *folle* by *in soad*.

There is one non-negative context, where *folle* may and, in fact, must appear. Although the relative quantifiers *in soad* and *in bytsje* are antonyms (polar opposites), the positive form *in soad* is *non-oriented*, i.e. it can not be neutralized in the context of degree markers and simply denote quantity (cf. Bierwisch 1967, Klooster 1976). Therefore, with degree markers like *hoe* ‘how’, *sa* ‘so’, *like* ‘as’ and *te* ‘too’ only *folle* can be used:

- (30) a. Hoefolle boeken/\*hoe’n soad boeken hast kocht?  
how-many books have-you bought?  
‘How many books did you buy?’  
b. Ik wol net mear as safolle boeken/\*sa’n soad boeken ha.  
I want not more than so-many books have  
‘I do not want to have more than so many books.’  
c. Hja hat likefolle boeken besteld as ik.  
she has just-as-many books ordered as I  
‘She ordered just as many books as I did.’  
d. Der wurde tefolle boeken útjûn.  
there are too-many books published  
‘Too many books are published.’

The degree markers *hoe* and *sa* can, however, be combined with both *folle* and *in soad* in exclamative sentences, in which they do not have a neutralizing effect (for the corresponding sentences with *in bytsje*, see (15)):

- (31) a. It is alderraarst, hoefolle/hoe’n soad boeken oft se kocht hat.  
it is astonishing how-many books if-that she bought has  
‘It is astonishing, how many books she has bought.’  
b. Hy hie safolle/sa’n soad boeken, dat er se net mear bergje koe.  
he had so-many books that he them not anymore store could.  
‘He had so many books, that he could not store them anymore.’

#### 4.4 *min* ‘few/little’

The bare quantifier *min* only appears behind the degree marker *te* ‘too’ in present-day Frisian:

- (32) a. Der sit te min salt yn ’t sop.  
there sits too little salt in the soup  
‘There is too little (not enough) salt in the soup.’  
b. Der wienen te min fleanmasinen om de lju te evakuearjen.  
there were too few airplanes in-order-to the people to evacuate  
‘The were too few (not enough) airplanes to evacuate the people.’

In older Frisian, roughly one century ago, *min* could still combine with the degree markers *hoe* ‘how’ and *sa* ‘so’ in exclamative sentences. Compare:

- (33) a. Ho min waerd er om gefaar tocht.  
 how little was there of danger thought  
 [J. Hepkema, Heech oan, en Smalbrêgge net ienris bisile (1873: 12)]  
 ‘How little were they aware of the danger.’
- b. To arbeidjen for de kost, der stiket in ûs tid sa min eare in.  
 to work for the living there sticks in our time so little honour in.  
 [D.H. Zylstra, Sljucht en Rjucht (1901: 117)]  
 ‘To work for a living, there is so little honour in it these days.’

In the course of this century *min* has been replaced by *in bytsje* after *hoe* and *sa*, but not after *te* (note that fusion of *hoe* and *sa* with the indefinite article *in* is also found in the demonstrative pronouns *hoe’n* ‘what kind of a’ and *sa’n* ‘such a’).

The quantifier *min* occurs in Dutch as well, but here its use is completely limited to fixed expressions (which partly occur in Frisian too):

(34) Dutch	Frisian	
zo <u>min</u> mogelijk	sa <u>min</u> mooglik	‘as little/few as possible’
(net) zo <u>min</u>	(krekt) <u>likemin</u>	‘likewise not’
even <u>min</u>	<u>likemin</u>	‘likewise not’
niet <u>temin</u>	–	‘nonetheless’
<u>min</u> of meer	<u>min</u> ofte mear	‘more or less’
<u>minder/minst</u>	<u>minder/minst</u>	‘less/least’

Note that the expressions in (34) are all degree contexts originally.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas in Frisian *min* has been replaced by the nominal expression *in bytsje*, Dutch has used the quantifying adjective *weinig* for this purpose (cf. *te weinig* ‘too few/little’). This has happened even more radically in German: although a few traces of *min* can be found here as well (e.g. *mindest*), German uses *wenig* even in contexts where Frisian and Dutch still have *min* (cf. *weniger/wenigst, möglichst wenig, mehr oder weniger*).

#### 4.5 On the development of the Frisian quantifier system

As the previous sections have shown, the nominal expressions *in soad* and *in bytsje* have replaced the bare quantifiers *folle* and *min* in many contexts in Frisian. This raises the question of the historical development of the Frisian quantifier system. Although it is a bit tricky to determine the precise causal relations that led to the changes in the system, I would like to propose the following tentative account.

Originally, Frisian possessed the quantifiers *folle* ‘many/much’ and *min* ‘few/little’. The exact scope and development of *min* lies somewhat in the dark. As we have seen in the previous section it has been marginalized in all West Germanic

languages for whatever reason. A factor that may have played a role in Frisian is that *min* became used as an adjective with the meaning ‘bad’. As a result, the homonymous *min* ‘few/little’ may have been avoided. At any rate, the reduction in scope of *min* caused a lexical gap; a new word for ‘few/little’ was required. In Dutch and German this gap was filled by the adjective *wenig/wenig*. I assume that in Frisian two strategies were taken to solve the problem. On the one hand, the nominal expression *in bytsje* was put to use. Although *in bytsje* was an absolute quantifier that could not combine with plural nouns it was now more or less forced to become a relative quantifier and assume the meaning ‘little/few’. On the other hand, the negation of *folle* was used to render ‘little/few’. When asked to translate a Dutch sentence like *Ik heb weinig geld* ‘I have little money’ many speakers of Frisian would probably say *Ik ha net folle jild* ‘I have not much money’. This use of *net folle* for ‘few/little’ may well fit in with a general inclination to understatement and the use of *negatio contrarii* in Frisian (cf. Gosses 1934: 4–5). Consequently, however, *folle* became relatively frequent in negative contexts and developed into a negative polarity item.<sup>7</sup> The gap that this development left in non-negative contexts was filled by *in soad*, which as the antonym of *in bytsje* may already have been expansive anyway. The formerly absolute quantifier *in soad* underwent a similar development as *in bytsje*: it became a relative quantifier and acquired the meaning ‘many/much’.

## 5. The “mass only” puzzle revisited

The discussion of Frisian *in bytsje* and the Frisian quantifier system has demonstrated that an account of the “mass only” puzzle in terms of ambiguity is not satisfactory. First, the case of *in bytsje* shows that small amount and small number evaluation can be performed by one lexical item (or, alternatively, two homophonous lexical items). This need not be fatal for Doetjes’ account, as it involves ambiguity between an absolute and a relative meaning, not between small amount and small number evaluation within one absolute quantifier (as would be the case if *in bytsje* could mean both ‘a bit’ and ‘a few’). More importantly, however, the ambiguity approach does not explain the difference between high and low degree quantifiers. As we saw above, Dutch *een boel* is an absolute quantifier like *een beetje*, but it does not exhibit the “mass only” restriction. Let me, therefore, suggest another explanation of the “mass only” puzzle.

First, note that “mass only” quantifiers are all noun phrases (*un peu, een weinig, ein bißchen*, etc.). This suggests that the “mass only” restriction is somehow connected to the nominal nature of these quantifiers. Apart from *in bytsje* nominal low degree quantifiers are invariably “mass only” in Frisian, e.g.:

- |      |                             |                           |
|------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| (35) | in krom jild/*sinten        | ‘a bit of money/cents’    |
|      | net in drip iten/*mûzen     | ‘not a bit of food/mice’  |
|      | net in grissel kwea/*boeken | ‘not a bit of evil/books’ |
|      | net in sprût rein/*fûgels   | ‘not a bit of rain/birds’ |

In fact, *in bytsje* in its absolute meaning is “mass only” in Frisian too. It might be suggested that *in bytsje* in its relative meaning has shifted category, i.e. is not a noun anymore. The stress distinction referred to in Section 3 might suggest this. In its absolute meaning *in bytsje* is stressed like a (measure) noun (cf. *in bytsje JILD* ‘some money’ — *in flesse WYN* ‘a bottle of wine’), in its relative meaning as an adjective (cf. *in BYTSJE JILD* ‘little money’ — *in FRÂNSKE WYN* ‘a French wine’). The same applies to *in bytsje* in its adverbial use: in its absolute meaning it is stressed like an object noun phrase (cf. *in bytsje KUIERJE* ‘to walk a bit’ — *in bytsje ITE* ‘to eat a bit’), in its relative meaning as an adverbial (cf. *in BYTSJE KUIERJE* ‘to walk hardly ever’ — *KOMSELDEN KUIERJE* ‘to walk seldomly’).

Their nominal nature, however, cannot be the only reason for the “mass only” restriction of nominal low degree quantifiers, because nominal quantifiers denoting a large quantity never show the restriction. All nominal high degree quantifiers in Frisian confirm this. Compare:

- |      |                        |                           |
|------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| (36) | in hopen spul/minsk    | ‘a lot of trouble/people’ |
|      | in knoarre hier/boeken | ‘a lot of rent/books’     |
|      | in slompe jild/freon   | ‘a lot of money/friends’  |
|      | in pôle wurk/fûgels    | ‘a lot of work/birds’     |

So, apart from their nominal nature the fact that they denote a small quantity seems to be of some relevance to “mass only” quantifiers. The basic question is then: why do nominal quantifiers denoting a small quantity only combine with mass nouns?

The answer to the “mass only” puzzle that I would like to propose is quite straightforward. I assume that the “mass only” restriction is basically a conceptual semantic restriction. The quantifiers involved are nouns, i.e. ‘things’ from a conceptual point of view. It seems plausible that ‘things’ denoting a small amount are preferably conceived of as part of some stuff, not as a container or collection of other things. The smaller a ‘quantity-thing’ the less things (observable to the human eye) it may comprise. With non-nominal, ‘pure’ quantifiers this problem does not arise; they do not denote ‘quantity-things’, but rather ‘quantity-properties’. If nominal low degree quantifiers with a small amount denoting noun are “mass only” for the reason just mentioned, small number evaluation can only be dealt with by special absolute quantifiers involving a noun that inherently refers to number (e.g. Frisian *in pear* ‘a few’).

## Notes

\* For useful comments on a draft of this paper, I thank Siebren Dyk, Jenny Doetjes, Eric Hoekstra, Willem Visser and an anonymous reviewer. They do not necessarily agree with my conclusions.

1. Note that in its relative reading *in bytsje* is more often than not preceded by the degree particle *mar* ‘only’. For presentational reasons I omit the degree particle in the examples. This is perfectly possible, but seems to require a somewhat stronger intonational focus on the quantifier.

2. Both English *quite* and Frisian *gâns* can quantify over an indefinite noun phrase as well. Compare:

(i) Kiel is quite a town

(ii) Kiel is *gâns* in stêd

3. Both (17b) and (20a) can be ‘saved’ by inserting the adjectives *klein* and *lyts* respectively:

(i) in heel klein beetje wijn ‘a very little bit of wine’

(ii) in hiel lyts bytsje wyn ‘id.’

4. Next to *in soad* there are some dialectal variants like *in protte* and *in bulte* which behave like *in soad* in all relevant respects. The adverb *gâns* can also combine with mass nouns and bare plurals in which case it means ‘a lot of’ (e.g. *gâns jild/freonen* ‘a lot of money/friends’). Since it only functions as an absolute quantifier it is left out of consideration here.

5. The anonymous reviewer accepts *een boel* with a relative meaning in Dutch, but most of my informants firmly reject it.

6. The quantifier *min* also appears in a few compounds in Frisian and Dutch, cf. Fr. *minachtsje*/D. *minachten* ‘to despise (lit. to consider little)’, Fr. *minmachtich* ‘not numerous, not in great numbers’, *minmânsk* ‘not strong’, D. *minvermogend* ‘of limited means’. These also originated from contexts in which *min* was preceded by a degree marker (cf. *Hy wie te min mânsk* ‘He was too weak (lit. too little capable)’).

7. This is a relatively recent development that seems to have taken place in the first half of the 20th century.

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