On *Less* and *Amount* Used with a Plural Count Noun

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This presentation is concerned with the *less* and *amount* constructions that are used with a plural (count) noun, like the followings:

(1) a. Machines have *less problems* ... I would like to be a machine, wouldn't you? (1999, *Off Premises*, Hollier, Denis)
   b. All right, to your knowledge, is Prozac being widely prescribed for that wide *an amount of difficulties*? (1991, *The Power of Prozac*, CNN King)

Grammar and usage books prescribe that we should say *fewer problems* and *a large/good/great number of difficulties*. So we will investigate the following questions:

1) how widely these constructions are used in (the recent) English,
2) if these constructions newly emerged, as argued by Bauer (2002) and others,
3) if they are really increasing these days, as Foster (1968: 217-18), Bauer (2002), Mair & Leech (2006: 320), Quirk *et al.* (1985: 263, 264), and Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 350, 1126) have argued.
4) and what the causing factor(s) is/are on the appearance of these constructions.

We found out, through the examination of the large-scale corpora such as COCA, COHA, BNC, that these constructions are not new usages and are not increasing these days, contrary to Foster(1968: 217-18), Bauer(2002), Mair & Leech(2006: 320) and others. It is clear that these constructions cannot be ignored as mere speech errors. They have been used for a long time in English. Our argument is that the constant use of these constructions is not ascribed to the changes of *less* and *amount* themselves, but to the recategorization/respecification/reclassification of plural nouns into singular nouns in “certain” circumstances through semantic extension. The phenomenon of nouns shifting from the category mass to count (e.g. *two coffees*) is relatively well-known. We argue that the vice-versa recategorisation is also possible. The main evidence for this argument is that other quantifiers such as *much*, *(a) little, deal of and quantity of*, which are normally used with a non-count singular noun, can also be used with a plural (count) noun, just like *less* and *amount*, as in the following:

(2) They try to find out how *much students* have learned and how well they can use it. (1991, *New republic*)

And we also found that nearly the same specific group of nouns are used with both *less* and *much* in their plural form. So our (tentative) conclusion is that the *much*+plural construction might have been the source construction for the *less*+plural or the *amount of*+plural constructions.

**Key words:** *less, amount of, much, COCA, COHA, BNC, Google Books*