

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