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-Oömrang) |

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* constrasts 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:

(11) a. Hy hat mei dy affaren in bytsje jild fertsjinne.

*He earned a bit of/little money with that business.*

b. Ik ha in bytsje leard op ‘e universiteit.

*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 wienennet 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 kuiere yn ’e fâkânsje.*
   *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.*
   ‘We had relatively little rain this year.’

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 alderaarst, hoe’n bytsje reinwetter oft wy hân ha fan.’t.simmer!*
   *it is astonishing how-a bit-of rainwater if we had 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:
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(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. 2

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 interpret-
ed 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.

(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):4

(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:

- *in soad* can be a relative quantifier (like *in bytsje*);
- *folle* is a negative polarity item;
- *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)).

(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.’

In contrast to Frisian *een boel/veel /\_\_\_thuis. 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:

\[(27) \quad a. \quad \text{Hja hie navenant in soad frijdagen.} \quad \text{‘She had relatively a lot of days off’} \\
    \qquad \text{she had relatively a lot of days off} \] 

\[(27) \quad b. \quad \text{Ze had naar verhouding *een boel/veel vrije dagen.} \quad \text{‘She had relatively a lot of days off’} \]

Frisian *een boel* 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:

\[(28) \quad \text{Der ha *folle/in soad besikers by de útstalling west.} \quad \text{‘A lot of people visited the exhibition.’} \]

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:

\[(29) \quad a. \quad \text{Der ha net folle besikers by de útstalling west.} \quad \text{‘Not many people visited the exhibition.’} \\
    \qquad \text{there have not many visitors at the exhibition been} \] 

\[(29) \quad b. \quad \text{Ik wol net leauwe, dat se folle bleberbeiëen fûn ha.} \quad \text{‘I don’t think, that they found many blueberries.’} \\
    \qquad \text{I will not believe, that they found many blueberries have} \] 

\[(29) \quad c. \quad \text{Sûnder folle wurdennaam se ôfskie.} \quad \text{‘Without many words she took leave.’} \\
    \qquad \text{without many words took she leave} \] 

\[(29) \quad d. \quad \text{Ik freegie.my.of, oft er folle Arabysk ken.} \quad \text{‘I wonder, if that he much Arabic knows} \\
    \qquad \text{‘I wonder, if he knows much Arabian.’} \] 

\[(29) \quad e. \quad \text{Wat sil men de folle fan sizze?} \quad \text{‘What shall I say?’} \\
    \qquad \text{what shall one there much about say} \]
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:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(30) a. } & \text{Hoefolle boeken/*hoe'n soad boekenhast kocht?} \\
& \text{how-many books have-you bought?} \\
& \text{‘How many books did you buy?’} \\
\text{b. } & \text{Ik wol net mear as safolle boeken/*sa'n soad boeken ha.} \\
& \text{I want not more than so-many books have} \\
& \text{‘I do not want to have more than so many books.’} \\
\text{c. } & \text{Hjahat likefolle boeken besteld as ik.} \\
& \text{she has just-as-many books ordered as I} \\
& \text{‘She ordered just as many books as I did.’} \\
\text{d. } & \text{Der wurdetefolle boeken útjûn.} \\
& \text{there are too-many books published} \\
& \text{‘Too many books are published.’}
\end{align*}
\]

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

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(31) a. } & \text{It is alderraarst, hoefolle/hoe'n soad boeken oft se kocht hat.} \\
& \text{it is astonishing how-many books if-that she bought has} \\
& \text{‘It is astonishing, how many books she has bought.’} \\
\text{b. } & \text{Hyhie safolle/sa'n soad boeken, dat er se net mear bergje koe.} \\
& \text{he had so-many books that he them not anymore store could.} \\
& \text{‘He had so many books, that he could not store them anymore.’}
\end{align*}
\]

4.4 *min* ‘few/little’

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

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(32) a. } & \text{Der sit te min sâlt yn 't sop.} \\
& \text{there sits too little salt in the soup} \\
& \text{‘There is too little (not enough) salt in the soup.’} \\
\text{b. } & \text{Der wiener te min fleanmasinen om de lju te evakuearjen.} \\
& \text{there were too few airplanes in-order-to the people to evacuate} \\
& \text{‘The were too few (not enough) airplanes to evacuate the people.’}
\end{align*}
\]
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 waerder omgefaar 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 ðe kost, der stîket 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) \[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{Dutch} & \text{Frisian} \\
\text{zo min mogelijk} & \text{sa min mooglik} \\
(\text{net}) \text{zo min} & (\text{krekt}) \text{likemin} \\
\text{evenmin} & \text{likemin} \\
\text{niettemin} & \text{likemin} \\
\text{min of meer} & \text{min ofte mear} \\
\text{minder/minst} & \text{minder/minst}
\end{array}
\]

'as little/few as possible'

'likewise not'

'likewise not'

'nonetheless'

'more or less'

'less/least'

Note that the expressions in (34) are all degree contexts originally.6

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

5. The “mass only” puzzle revisited

The discussion of Frisian \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{een boel} is an absolute quantifier like \textit{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 (\textit{un peu}, \textit{een weinig}, \textit{ein bisschen}, etc.). This suggests that the “mass only” restriction is somehow connected to the nominal nature of these quantifiers. Apart from \textit{in bytsje} nominal low degree quantifiers are invariably “mass only” in Frisian, e.g.:
In fact, \textit{in bytsje} in its absolute meaning is “mass only” in Frisian too. It might be suggested that \textit{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 \textit{in bytsje} is stressed like a (measure) noun (cf. \textit{in bytsje JILD} ‘some money’ — \textit{in flesse WYN} ‘a bottle of wine’), in its relative meaning as an adjective (cf. \textit{in BYTSJE JILD} ‘little money’ — \textit{in FRÁNSKE WYN} ‘a French wine’). The same applies to \textit{in bytsje} in its adverbial use: in its absolute meaning it is stressed like an object noun phrase (cf. \textit{in bytsje KUIERJE} ‘to walk a bit’ — \textit{in bytsje ITE} ‘to eat a bit’), in its relative meaning as an adverbial (cf. \textit{in BYTSJE KUIERJE} ‘to walk hardly ever’ — \textit{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:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{inhopenspul/minsken} ‘a lot of trouble/people’
  \item \textit{inknoarre hier/boeken} ‘a lot of rent/books’
  \item \textit{inslompe jild/freonen} ‘a lot of money/friends’
  \item \textit{in pôle wurk/fügels} ‘a lot of work/birds’
\end{itemize}

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 \textit{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 wyn ‘a very little bit of wine’
   (ii) in hiellyts bytsje wyn ‘id.’

4. Next to in soad there are some dialectical 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. minvermogen ‘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.

References


