The syntactic and semantic differences between partitives (PC= partitive constructions) as in (1)a and pseudopartitives (PSP) as in (1)b are well known (cf. Jackendoff 1977).

(1) En. a.  a slice of that cake  (restricted set: partitive)  
b.  a slice of cake   (unrestricted set: pseudopartitive)

Both constructions superficially appear to consist of two nominals, which are usually designated \(N_1\) and \(N_2\).

In English, both partitive and pseudopartitive constructions are formed with the preposition of. However other languages, e.g. Danish, Swedish, Dutch, and German employ different strategies for each, a linking morpheme for the partitive as in (2), and juxtaposition for the pseudopartitive as below: (Hankamer and Mikkelsen 2008:318):

(2) Da. a.  en  gruppe  af  turisterne (PC)  
  one  group  of  tourists-DEF  
  ‘one group of the tourists’

b.  en  gruppe  turister (PsP)  
  one  group  tourists  
  ‘a group of tourists’

There is a third strategy, case:

(3) Fin. a.  ala  tästä  hyvästä  kakusta (PC)  
  bit:NOM  this:ELAT  good:ELAT  cake:ELAT  
  a bit of this good cake

b.  säikki  perunoita (PsP)  
  sack:NOM  potato:PART.PL  
  a sack of potatoes  
  (Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2001:1)

In Finnish PCs the substance is in elative case whereas in the PsP the substance takes partitive.

Languages have three strategies for expressing PsP.

- What makes a language “choose” between the strategies?
- Can languages change from one strategy to another?
Alexiadou, Haegeman and Stavrou (henceforth AHS) (2007:457) speculate that “a fruitful avenue for future research” is that languages with overt case morphology (Greek, German) use juxtaposition and languages without nominal case morphology (English, Romance) have a linking morpheme.

“The counterpart of the linking of in the juxtaposed PsP is probably the overt case agreement between N1 and N2. Such a hypothesis would attribute the two sub- types of pseudopartitive to a parametric difference and in particular to a difference in morphology”.

(4) **Hypothesis:** Languages with overt case morphology use juxtaposition in pseudo partitives, and languages without nominal case morphology (English, Romance) have a linking morpheme

2. **Testing the hypothesis synchronically:**

The following table summarizes preliminary typological data (Wood: 1998). P indicates a preposition, C indicates case and J juxtaposition.

(5) **Table 1: Partitive and pseudopartitive constructions:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>PC</th>
<th>PsP</th>
<th>PsP (alternative)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>P of</td>
<td>P of</td>
<td>J</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>P van</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>P met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>P von</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>P von; C genitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Icelandic</td>
<td>P af</td>
<td>P af</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>P av</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>P med</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>P af</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>P med</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>P de</td>
<td>P de</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>P di</td>
<td>P di</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>P de</td>
<td>P de</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>C genitive</td>
<td>C partitive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macedonian</td>
<td>P od</td>
<td>J</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>P apo</td>
<td>J</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armenian</td>
<td>C ablative</td>
<td>J</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finnish</td>
<td>C elative</td>
<td>C partitive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungarian</td>
<td>C ablative</td>
<td>C ?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>C ablative</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>P min</td>
<td>J</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>J</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>J</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Languages that use juxtaposition also have a prepositional construction; the “noun complement” or “container” reading:
The problem with the hypothesis in (4) is immediately apparent. As AHS point out, West Flemish and Dutch do not have considerably more case than English.

As well as the problem with West Flemish and Dutch, in the West Germanic languages, we may add Icelandic and Danish as counterexamples in the North Germanic family. Icelandic is a language with rich nominal case morphology and a linking morpheme (Delsing 1993:201):

(8) Ic. eitt kiló af essu smjöri (PC)
    a/one:N.NOM kilo:NOM.SG of this:N.SG.DAT butter:DAT.SG
    a/one kilo of this butter

(9) Ic. eitt kiló af smjöri (PsP)
    a/one:N.NOM kilo:NOM.SG of butter:DAT.SG
    a/one kilo of butter

As was seen in (2) Danish is a language with impoverished nominal morphology and no linking morpheme ((Hankamer and Mikkelsen 2008:318).

Maybe the hypothesis can be sustained (or maybe not). Let’s put the synchronic problem aside (for now) and consider diachronic data.

3 Testing the hypothesis diachronically:

What about comparing diachronically instead of synchronically? Older English used juxtaposition:

(10) I bequethe . . . . my peir bedys of calcidenys gaudied with siluer and gilt. . . .
    I bequeath . . . . my pair beds of chalcedony decorated with silver and gilt
    my pair of beds
    (1482 copy of will of Margaret Paston)

The change to the prepositional strategy would be from a more synthetic strategy to a more analytic one and would support the hypothesis in (4).

However, there is no overt case agreement between pair and beds.

Earlier English (overt case morphology) → Later English (less case morphology)

juxtapositional pseudopartitives → prepositional pseudopartitives

pair beds → pair of beds
And, I have noticed PDE speakers also using juxtaposition. From observation of PDE colloquial speech it is apparent that English speakers regularly say *couple* and not *couple of* (data from COCA):

(11) Kate, welcome to the program. I have actually a **couple questions** for you please.  
    (Ray Suarez: NPR Talk of the Nation 1998)

(12) Well, you know, when you see these kind of studies, you have to ask yourself a **couple of questions**.  
    (NPR Talk of the Nation 2009)

This is change in the reverse direction:

- **Prepositional pseudopartitives** → **Juxtapositional pseudopartitives**
  - *couple of minutes* → *couple minutes*

How do we interpret this observation?

There are least two possibilities:

1) English changed from a juxtapositional to a prepositional strategy and is starting to change back to a juxtaposition strategy. This would be strong evidence against the hypothesis in (4)
2) *couple* is a special isolated example that can explained in some other way

### 4. Distinction between partitives and pseudopartitives (what is changing to what?)

The distinction between partitives and pseudopartitives was made very early on in significant papers by Jackendoff (1977) who formulated the “Partitive Constraint”; the embedded NP in a partitive must be definite, and Selkirk (1977) who is responsible for the term “pseudopartitive”.

#### 4.1 Semantic distinction

The basic semantic distinction is that in a partitive part is taken from a definite set; in a pseudopartitive part is taken from an unbounded set:

- Partitive elements \( \rightarrow \) make sets accessible for quantification
- Ordinary partitives \( \rightarrow \) involves restricted or contextually bound sets
- Pseudopartitives \( \rightarrow \) involves unrestricted or unbounded entities

In English, partitive and pseudopartitive constructions use the preposition *of*.

(13) En. a. a slice of that cake (restricted set: partitive)  
     b. a slice of cake (unrestricted set: pseudopartitive)

(14) En. a. a number of her objections (restricted set: partitive)  
     b. a number of objections (unrestricted set: pseudopartitive)
(15)  
a. three pounds of that stew meat (restricted set: partitive)  
b. three pounds of stew meat  (unrestricted set: pseudopartitive)  

4.2 Syntactic distinction  
Selkirk (1977:303) claims that the pseudopartitives are “simple noun phrases”.

Movement tests (below) show that, whereas in partitives N₁ and N₂ are two constituents, in pseudopartitives there appears to be only one constituent.

In partitives but not pseudopartitives the of phrase can be extraposed (Selkirk 1977:304):

(16)  
a. How many pounds [of those apples] did you buy?  (PC)  
b. How many pounds [of apples] did you buy?  (PsP)  

(17)  
a. How many pounds ____ did you buy [of those apples]?
   (PC)  
b. *How many pounds ___ did you buy [of apples]?
   (PsP)  

In partitives but not pseudopartitives the of phrase can be topicalised:

(18)  
a. I bought three pounds of those apples.  (PC)  
b. I bought three pounds of apples  (PsP)  

(19)  
a. [Of those apples] I bought three pounds ______.  (PC)  
b. *[Of apples] I bought three pounds ________  (PsP)  

Moreover, in partitives but not pseudopartitives, N₂ can be extracted.

(20)  
a. These are the apples which I have just bought a pound of _____.  
b. *These are apples which I have just bought a pound of ______.  

(17) and (19) show that in the partitive, the string of words that appears to be a PP, of those apples is a constituent while in pseudopartitives, of apples, appears not to be a separate constituent.

(20) shows that in the partitive, the string of words that appear to be a DP, those apples, is a constituent, while in pseudopartitives, apples is not. Together these data show that in pseudopartitives there appears to be only one constituent, a pound of apples, whereas in partitives each noun heads its own phrase.

Additional evidence cited for N₁ not being a head is that an adjective preceding N₁ can modify N₂. The first noun is “transparent” to modification.

(21)  
a. a delicious box of apples  
b. a box of delicious apples
The evidence suggests that in true partitives, $N_1$ and $N_2$ are both heads.

(22)

There are two different basic analyses of pseudopartitives. One treats the measure phrase as a semi-functional head and the $N_2$ as the lexical head.

(23)

The structure in (23) is more compatible with juxtaposed pseudo partitives and classifier languages:
(24) Ch. san wan tang
three Cl-bowl soup
*three bowls of soup*
Cheng & Sybesma (1998:386)

(25) Ch. san ben shu
three Cl pens
*three pens*
Du. drie glazen wijn
three glass-PL wine
*three glasses of wine*

The alternate analysis (Corver 1998:223) treats pseudopartitives was predicates similar to expressions like

(26) that idiot of a doctor (that doctor is an idiot)

(27) [a [water bottle]]

(28)

The challenge so far:
Possible change: which direction?
Unifying the two analyses
5 How robust is the *couple* data?
Possibly the examples of juxtaposed *couple* in PDE and juxtaposed *pair* in ME are not robust:

5.1 *couple* in PDE

*Couple* can form a partitive and a pseudopartitive with *of*:

(29) a. A couple of her questions were a bit off the mark. (PC)
    b. Let me ask a couple of questions. (PsP)

(30) a. [Of her questions] a couple _____ were a bit off the mark. (PC)
    b. *[Of questions] a couple _____ were a bit of the mark. (PsP)

Couple in BNC: 100 million words, 10 million spoken (UK, 1980s-1993)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1916</th>
<th>21</th>
<th>(1.09%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>couple</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>couple of</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(31) Yes. Mhm. and that if we want to borrow it in a *couple weeks* time
    (Teachers' conference: creative arts group (Edu/inf). Rec. on 3 Sep 1992)

(32) and we've heard them mentioned a *couple times* already this week.
    (Trade Union Annual Congress (Busn). Rec. on 8 Jun 1993)

*weeks* (2), *times* (2), *examples* (2), *years* (1) . . . . . .

COCA: over 400 million words, 20 million words each year from 1990-2009 (equally divided among spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts).

“...It includes 20 million words each year from 1990-2009 and the corpus is also updated every six to nine months (the most recent texts are from Summer 2009). Because of its design, it is perhaps the only corpus of English that is suitable for looking at current, ongoing changes in the language”.

COCA: *couple* in spoken texts only:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>15,158</th>
<th>2,244 (14.8%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>‘couple of’</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>‘couple’</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(33) It didn't work, Chris. Everybody got screwed except for a *couple people* who make more than $2.8 million a year.
    (The Chris Matthews Show Various Times NBC)

(34) Table 2: 10 most frequent constructions in COCA (all texts)
The PDE data are robust. So we have both loss of the juxtaposed partitive earlier English and possible development of juxtaposed pseudopartitives in PDE.

5.2 couple in ME
Etymology is Old French:

- Of animals: A pair of opposite sexes.

(35) ME. Alle schulen dye for his dedes..Out-taken Eihte soules, and **of vche beest a couple**.

> Everyone should die for his deeds. . .taken out eight souls and a couple of each beast

(1362 LANGL. P. Pl. A. x. 169)

- A brace of dogs used for hunting, *esp.* harriers or spaniels; also, a brace of conies or rabbits.

(36) A noyse as hit hadde ben **a thyrtty couple** of houndes.

> a noise as if it had been thirty couple of hounds

(1470-85 MALORY Arthur X. xiii. 434)

- without *of* (US colloquial)

(37) A couple months in Italy (1925 S. LEWIS Martin Arrowsmith xvi. 188)

Couple was not used without *of* until the 20th century.
5.3 pair in ME

The etymology is Anglo-Norman, though it is in Middle Dutch (Dutch paar), Middle Low German (Icelandic pár, Swedish par, Danish par), Middle High German (German Paar) apparently directly from Latin.

A search in the Paston letters for ‘pair’ (payer, payre, peyre, peyir, peyr, paire, peir, peire) reveals:

41 juxtaposed pseudopartitives
5 prepositional pseudopartitives where N₂ is premodified
3 prepositional pseudopartitives where N₂ is postmodified

- juxtaposed pseudopartitives:
  (38) I bequethe to Marie Tendall, my goddoughter, my peir bedys of calcidenys gaudied with siluer and gilt. ... (1482: copy of will of Margaret Paston)

- prepositional pseudopartitives where N₂ is premodified
  (39) and iij payer of newe shetys of iij levis of iij ellys and an half long
       and three pair of new sheets
       (1487: will of Elizabeth Poynings or Browne, née Paston)

- prepositional pseudopartitives where N₂ is postmodified
  (40) Item, on peyre of sensers of siluer and gilt with scripture
       one pair of sensors of silver and gilt (1464 Inventory of John Paston)

A postmodifier does not necessarily demand a preposition as (38) above shows. All the examples are singular.

According to the OED (sv. pair): earlier English did not always use a preposition and the use of pair in the plural seems to be fairly modern development:

Pair is now followed by of, as in ‘a pair of gloves’; but of was often omitted in Middle English and early modern English, as ‘a pair gloves’ . . . and German ein Paar Handschuhe. After a numeral pair was until recently frequently used in the singular form; ‘three pair shoes’ (compare German drei Paar Schuhe). This is now chiefly non-standard.

The unmarked plural without of is obsolete:
(41) two pair wheels

The unmarked plural with of now regional and nonstandard as in (42):
(42) BMB Iron Horse, in perfect working order, with two pair of wheels (1977 Grimsby Evening Tel. 5 May 3/6 (advt.))
6. The features of \( N_1 \) and \( N_2 \)

*Pair* and *couple* are behaving differently. *Couple* no longer refers just to two as *pair* still does so it would seem to be more semantically “bleached” than *pair* i.e. further along the path towards becoming functional.

6.1 Restrictions on \( N_2 \)

If \( N_2 \) is a count noun, it can never be both singular and +count. It has to be a bare plural. \( N_1 \) counts \( N_2 \) into sets:

\[
(43) \quad \text{A pile of stones} \\
\quad \text{Six piles of stones}
\]

If \( N_2 \) is a non-count noun, \( N_1 \) portions the substance:

\[
(44) \quad \text{a slice of chicken} \\
\quad \text{three slices of chicken}
\]

\[
(45) \quad \text{a drop of water} \\
\quad \text{three drops of water}
\]

6.2 Restrictions on \( N_1 \)

The nouns that can form \( N_1 \) in pseudopartitives designate a certain quantity, amount or number and always take complements (AHS 402).

A number of researchers have attempted to classify the various \( N_1 \)s


\[
(46) \quad \text{Table 3 classification of possible } N_1 \text{s}
\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>( N_1 )s</th>
<th>En</th>
<th>Du</th>
<th>Da</th>
<th>Sw</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantity</td>
<td><em>pair, number</em></td>
<td><em>aantal</em></td>
<td><em>antal</em></td>
<td><em>antal,</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure</td>
<td><em>pint, pound</em></td>
<td><em>liter</em></td>
<td><em>liter, kilo</em></td>
<td><em>liter, kilo</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardinal</td>
<td><em>dozen, million</em></td>
<td><em>dusin</em></td>
<td><em>dussin</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partitive</td>
<td><em>slice, piece</em></td>
<td><em>snee</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Container</td>
<td><em>bottle, box</em></td>
<td><em>krat</em></td>
<td><em>kasse</em></td>
<td><em>flaska, lâda</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective (for count nouns)</td>
<td><em>swarm, herd</em></td>
<td><em>kudde</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantums (for mass nouns)</td>
<td><em>lump, drop</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>drøbe</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms (for mass and count nouns)</td>
<td><em>pile, bunch</em></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>bunke</em></td>
<td><em>bunt</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinds</td>
<td><em>type</em></td>
<td><em>soort</em></td>
<td><em>slags</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A number of researchers have pointed out that all N₁s do not behave alike syntactically.

Delsing (1993: 203),

\( N_1 \) may be classified into two groups, “genuine quantifiers” prototypically used as quantifiers: *antal, dussin, kilo, liter* [number, dozen, kilo, litre]

and

“ordinary nouns that are temporarily used as quantifiers”*: flaska, lâda, bunt, hop* [bottle, box, bunch, crowd].

Hankamer and Mikkelsen (2008) report something similar for Danish.

While juxtaposition is possible with all categories, \( N_1 \)s that can never occur in the prepositional construction include *liter, kilo, paar*.

The genuine quantifiers can never be used with the preposition *med*, ‘with’ do not take a plural and are hard to compound with the noun.

(47)

a. A pound of apples / *an apple pound* (more quantificational)
b. A slice of bread /?a bread slice (partitive)
c. A lump of sugar / a sugar lump (quantum)
d. A pile of sand / a sand pile (form)

Grimshaw, (2007:202)

distinguishes between ‘quantity nominals”: *pound, a lot*

and **containers and portions**: *box, scoop and wad (of paper), bunch*.

Van Riemsdijk (1998:17)

quantifier nouns are closed class items and functional.

(most) measure nouns, partitive nouns, container nouns, collective nouns are semi-lexical heads.

*couple* would seem to be part of the closed class along with *pair* and *number*

But *couple* was not used without *of* in earlier English whereas *pair* was (as far as I have looked)

What about other possible functional nouns, e.g. *pound*

6.3 **Pound as an N₁**

Etymology: very early borrowing from Latin with cognates in West Frisian *pûn*, Dutch *pond*,
Low German, *pund*, German *Pfund*, Swedish *pund*, Danish *pund*.

The unchanged plural was long retained following a cardinal number, a common feature of words denoting units of measurement (e.g. *foot, mark*) and still common in colloquial and regional English (OED sv. *pound*)
Partitive genitive:

(48) lc wifmon hæfde ane yndsan goldes & an **pund** seolfres. (Alfred *Orosius* 800)

*Each woman had one once (of) gold and one pound (of) silver*

without *of*:

(49) & who so is absent at þilk masses wiþ-oute verry cause schal paie to þe brotherede a **pound wex**

(1389 GILDA CARPENTAR LONDON)

(50) To pay.. foir ilk merk land ilk yeir **ane leische pund** butter at Alhallomes.

for each mark (of) land each year one Livonian pound (of) butter at Hallowmas

(1575 Orkney)

(51) **Six pund musk almonds** at 12s. per pund. (1675)

with *of*:

(52) He ðousend **pound** of sterlynges (1297)

(53) & he be warned, he schal paie a **pound of wex** to þe li3t foreseid,

(1389 THE GILD OF THE ANNUNCIATION AND ASSUMPTION, ST. PAUL'S)

(54) I will that prestes of my parisch kirk have a quarte of wyne and a **pund** of wax candill
to syng wyth on the day of my buryng, and at the obet also. (1393)

Present-day English cookery register

(55) 3 pounds tomatoes, peeled, seeded and chopped 1 bay leaf 1 **pound spaghetti** Salt and pepper

**Conclusion/further directions**

Couple is different: it was borrowed from OF later than the other nouns that enter into the juxtaposition construction

**Sources**

British National Corpus (BNC) [http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/](http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/)

Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) [www.americancorpus.org/](http://www.americancorpus.org/)


Helsinki corpus of Middle English texts

**References**


Oxford English Dictionary 2nd ed.