ON THE ISSUE OF OPTIONAL CLASSIFIERS. A LOOK AT ROMANIAN, RUSSIAN, AND HUNGARIAN

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Abstract. The paper addresses the issue of sortal 'unit' classifiers that optionally combine with count and mass nouns in a structure of the type numeral + classifier + noun in non-classifier languages. The issue of optional unit classifiers remains relatively under-studied even in those languages where they have been identified, such as Russian and Hungarian. No such enterprise has been undertaken with respect to Romanian, and therefore the paper is an attempt at filling the gap in the literature on optional vs. mandatory unit classifiers. After amassing and investigating the data, the paper proposes that optional unit classifiers in Romanian are merged in a single extended projection where the Number Phrase can be syntactically active or inert. When the classifier is silent, the Number Phrase is syntactically active thus enabling the noun to interact with the count system. On the other hand, when the classifier is overt, the Number Phrase is inert and the lexical noun is treated as mass. At the same time, the semantic reflex of merging optional unit classifiers in the structure is the emergence of a 'plurality of individuals' reading to the exclusion of a 'plurality of subkinds' reading.

Keywords: optional classifiers, unit classifiers, silent nouns.

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper investigates the issue of optional classifier N1s in numeral + classifier + noun (pseudo-partitive) constructions, of the type illustrated in (1-3) for Romanian, Russian, and Hungarian, respectively:

(1) un fir de trandafir *Romanian*
one CLAS.THREAD of rose.SG
'one rose'

(2) pjat' štuk jaic *Russian*
five CLAS.ITEM.PL.GEN egg.PL.GEN
'five eggs' (Khrizman 2016: 4)

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(3) egy szál rózsa *Hungarian*
one CLAS.THREAD rose.SG
'one rose' (Nemes 2023: 162)

For each of the constructions in (1–3) there is a corresponding numeral + noun variant available, where the numeral combines directly with the noun, without the mediation of a classifier. This is illustrated in (4–6):

(4) un trandafir
one rose
(5) pjat' jaic
five egg.PL.GEN
(6) egy rózsa
one rose

The paper addresses the role played by the classifiers in constructions of the type in (1–3) and proposes, along the lines of Dékány 2021, that there is a unique syntactic structure for the structures in (1-3) as well for those in (4–6), where the classifier is either overt or covert, respectively. When it is overt, the optional classifier has the role of showing 'individuation', in the sense of discriminating the 'plurality of individuals' reading to the detriment of the 'plurality of subkinds' reading (see Schvarcz and Nemes 2021).

The paper is organized as follows: section 2 provides an overview of classifier constructions in Romanian, of both the optional and the mandatory types, as well as a syntactic analysis of these constructions. Section 3 looks at some available analyses of optional unit classifiers in Russian and Hungarian. Section 4 takes the first steps towards a syntactic analysis of optional unit classifiers in Romanian, while section 5 gives some conclusions.

2. ON CLASSIFIER CONSTRUCTIONS IN ROMANIAN

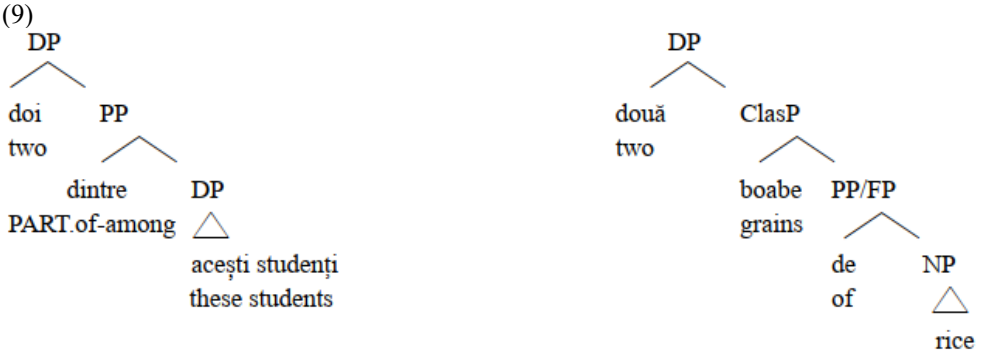
Romanian features classifiers as N1s in pseudo-partitive constructions (see Tănase-Dogaru 2012, 2017). These classifiers have been argued to be either overt or covert, i.e. silent. The paper represents the first attempt, to the best of my knowledge, to add optional classifiers to the inventory of Romanian classifiers.

It has been argued that pseudo-partitives are best amenable to an analysis in terms of a single extended projection, i.e. one two-headed determiner phrase, one of which is lexical, and the other functional (or semi-lexical) (Tănase-Dogaru 2009, 2012, 2017). The semantic reflex of the single-DP structure[2] is the fact that pseudo-partitives typically have one referent. The functional element *de* is a manifestation of (abstract) genitive case (Tănase-Dogaru 2011).

[2] It has been argued (see Tănase-Dogaru 2011, 2012) that a second type of N1 of N2 structure, i.e. the binominal qualitative construction, is also of two kinds: one which consists of a single DP structure (*idiotul de doctor*/ idiot.DEF of doctor / 'that idiot of a doctor') and one which consists of a double DP structure (*idiotul de doctorul Popescu* / idiot.DEF of doctor.DEF Popescu / 'that idiot of Popescu, the doctor')

The (simplified) syntactic representations below (in (9)) are meant to show that the main syntactic distinction between a standard partitive structure (7) and pseudo-partitive structure (8) lies in the presence of two DPs or one DP, respectively. In turn, the two DPs in (7) give rise to a two-referent interpretation, while the single DP in (8) gives rise to a one-referent interpretation.

(7) doi dintre[3] (acești) studenți
two PART.of-among (these) students
'two of the / these students'
(8) două kilograme de zahăr
two kilos of sugar
'two kilos of sugar'
(9)



The nominal that fills the first position in the pseudo-partitive construction behaves syntactically as a classifier in classifier languages like Mandarin Chinese (i.e., *zhi* in (10)), in the sense that serves the same 'individuation' purposes by enabling the noun it ranges over to interact with the count system (see Borer 2005, Tănase-Dogaru 2009, 2017).

(10) Qianmian turan tiao chulai yi zhi laohu (Chen 2003: 1170)
Front suddenly jump a CLAS tiger
'A tiger jumped suddenly in front of us'

The classifier-like behavior of N1s in pseudo-partitive constructions can be witnessed in the classification below (from Tănase-Dogaru 2024):

(11) a. un gest de omenie — unit nouns
a gesture of humanity
b. un pahar de vin — container nouns
a glass of wine
c. un dram de onoare — measure nouns
a grain of honour
'a little honour'

[3] Modern Romanian has two specialized prepositions that encode standard partitivity: *din* / PART.of-in / 'from' and *dintre* / PART.of-among / 'among'. Pseudo-partitivity is encoded by means of the preposition *de* 'of' (see Tănase-Dogaru and Ușurelu 2015).

d. un bob de fasole — shape nouns
a grain of beans
'a bean'

e. o sută de cărţi — cardinal nouns
a hundred of books
'a hundred books'

f. o pereche de mănuşi — quantifier nouns
a pair of gloves

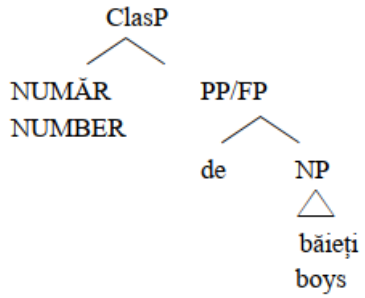
g. o categorie de substantive — kind nouns
a category of nouns

A special type of classifiers, i.e., silent classifiers, was shown to exist in two types of Romanian constructions: 'what-of' exclamatives and bare partitives (see Tănase-Dogaru 2008 a,b, 2024 a,b).

'what-of' exclamative constructions (see (12) with the simplified syntactic representation in (13)) were shown to contain the silent classifier NUMBER (Tănase-Dogaru 2007, 2009, Kayne 2005, Leu 2008, van Riemsdijk 2005):

(12) Ce de băieţi la petrecere! = Ce NUMĂR de băieţi la petrecere!
What of boys at party = what NUMBER of boys are at party
'There are so many boys at the party'

(13)

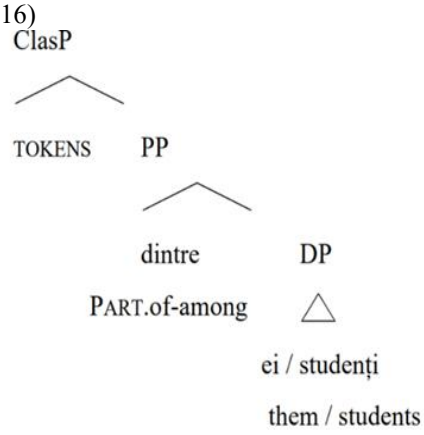


In the case of bare partitives, illustrated in (14-15) below, the whole outer D layer of the partitive construction is missing. Following van Riemsdijk (2005), it was argued in Tănase-Dogaru (2024a) that the silent classifier is TOKENS with partitive subjects, where there is plural agreement with the silent classifier, and AMOUNT with partitive objects.

(14) Au mai venit TOKENS dintre ei.
Have more come TOKENS PART.of-among them
'Some of them have come / have kept coming'

(15) Am băut AMOUNT din suc.
(I) have drunk AMOUNT PART.of-in juice.
'I have eaten part of the cake'

(16)



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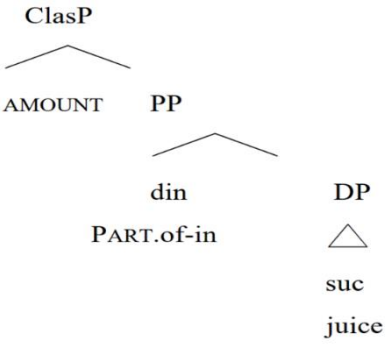


The purpose of this section has been to offer a complete, though simplified, picture of classifier constructions in Romanian. The next question that needs to be addressed is where optional classifiers fit in this picture. In order to do that, the following section looks at two languages for which optional classifiers have been discussed: Russian and Hungarian.

3. OPTIONAL CLASSIFIERS IN RUSSIAN AND HUGARIAN

The aim of the present section is to offer an overview of both the data and the analyses that have been proposed for optional classifiers in Russian and Hungarian.

3.1. Optional classifiers in Russian

Optional classifiers in Russian have been investigated by Sussex (1976), Yadroff (1999), Goto (2012), Khrizman (2012), a.o., but the problem remains relatively understudied.

The first features researchers noticed about optional classifiers in Russian is that they occur with countable nouns and that they make up a closed class: *čelovek* ‘person’, *štuka*

'item', *yedinitsa* 'unit', *duša* 'soul', and *golova* 'head' (see, for instance, Goto 2012: 14). The examples in (18 – 22) illustrate the use of these classifiers[4]:

(18) a. Da, imenno universitetskyi seminar, gde pjat'
Yes, exactly university seminar, where five
čelovek studentov
CLAS.PERSON.GEN.PL student.GEN.PL
'Yes, it was exactly the kind of university seminar, attended by five students.'
b. U Meri pjat' **čelovek** detey
At Mary.GEN five CLAS.PERSON.GEN.PL child.GEN.PL
'Mary had three children'

(19) a. Aspid zaglotil pjat' **shtuk** gigantskikh buterbrodov.
Aspid swallowed five CLAS.ITEM.GEN.PL huge.GEN.PL sandwich.GEN.PL
'Aspid swallowed five huge sandwiches.'
b. Mikhalkov syedal shest' **shtuk** otbivnykh.
Mihalkhov ate six CLAS.ITEM.GEN.PL chop.GEN.PL
'Mihalkhov ate six chops.'

(20) a. Emu nuzhno shest', po krayney mere, pjat' **yedinits** rybishček.
Him need eat, at least, five CLAS.UNIT.GEN.PL fish.GEN.PL
'He has to eat at least five fish.'
b. 2000 **yedinits** vagonov dal'nego sledovaniya.
2000 CLAS.UNIT.GEN.PL wagon.GEN.PL long.GEN.SG distance.GEN.SG
'2000 long-distance wagons.'

(21) a. emu prinadlezhalo 27 **duš** krest'yan
him.DAT belonged 27 CLAS.SOUL.GEN.PL peasant.GEN.PL
muzhskogo pola.
male.GEN.SG gender.GEN.SG
'he owned 27 male peasants.'
b. emu pozhalovano 660 **duš** krest'yan s zemleyu
him.DAT granted 660 CLAS.SOUL.GEN.PL peasant.GEN.PL with land.INSTR
'he was granted 660 peasants with land.'

(22) a. Vybrakovat'15-20 **golov** korov
Cull 15-20 CLAS.HEAD.GEN.PL cow.GEN.PL
'Cull 15-20 cows'
b. Na MTF № 1 — 400 **golov** korov.
At dairy farm No. 1 — 400 CLAS.HEAD.GEN.PL cow.GEN.PL
'There are 400 cows at dairy farm No. 1.'

As the examples show, *čelovek* takes count nouns denoting human referents which indicate profession, occupation, nationality or kinship terms, *štuka* takes count nouns denoting inanimates or animals (insects, birds, dogs, etc.), and *yedinitsa* takes count nouns and collective nouns like *equipment*. The most restricted in terms of N2 collocates seem to be *duša* and *golova*, in the sense that the former is most commonly used with the word *krest'yane* 'peasants' to refer to serfs mainly in 18th and 19th century texts, while the latter most frequently collocates with *cattle* (see Goto 2012).

[4] The examples are taken from the Russian National Corpus (in Ciucea (2023)).

The table in (23) (from Goto 2012, 15) gives the occurrences in the Russian National Corpus:

(23) Occurrences in the Russian National Corpus (Goto 2012, 15)

Numeral classifier	Number of occurrences in the corpus
čelovek	1496
štuka	680
edinica	177
duša	172
golova	143

One of the most influential analyses of optional classifier in Russian, Khrizman (2016), operates a distinction between: a) counting classifiers like *piece* and *bottle* in English, which are treated as relational nouns, b) individual classifiers in Mandarin Chinese, which are treated as operators from kinds to countable predicates, and c) optional classifiers in Russian, which are analyzed as measure predicates. In this framework, a construction such as *pjat' štuk jaic* 'five items eggs' is treated on a par with a measure construction like *five liters of water,* the difference being that, while the latter measures pluralities in liter units, the former measures pluralities in natural units.

Khrizman (2016) argues convincingly that optional classifiers are a closed set of measure words that measure sums of entities in terms of natural units. In this respect, to my mind, they resemble count-classifiers in Chinese (see (24)), which name the unit in which the noun naturally occurs (Cheng and Sybesma 1999, 514):

(24) a. san ge ren
three CLAS person
'one person'

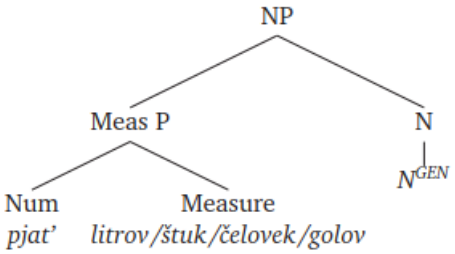
b. san ben shu
three CLAS book
'three books'

The evidence provided in favor of this analysis comes from the following domains: optional classifiers are preferred in measure contexts and less natural in counting contexts, and numerals used with optional classifiers cannot be dropped. This also happens in numeral NPs with explicit measure words such as *meter*. On the other hand, numerals can be dropped in count classifier constructions with nominal classifiers such as *butylka* 'bottle' or *kusok* 'piece'.

Based on these and other pieces of evidence (decrease in animacy, approximative inversion constructions, reduced individuation), Khrizman (2016) analyzes Numeral + Unit Classifiers + Noun constructions in Russian as measure expressions where the classifier introduces a unit of measure.

In *pjat' štuck jaic*, 'five items eggs', *štuck* combines with the numeral *pjat'* to form a measure predicate denoting the set of sums of objects which measure 5 natural units.

(25)



I will come back to this analysis in section 4, in order to determine to what extent it can be transferred to Romanian contexts.

3.2. Optional classifiers in Hungarian

One of the most puzzling facts about Hungarian is the fact that it does not have plural marking on nouns in quantificational contexts (Nemes 2023: 6), so that a cardinal numeral combines directly with a singular count noun:

(26) három áuto
three car.SG
'three cars'

A second interesting fact about the way Hungarian counts entities is that sortal classifiers are optional, which makes Hungarian surprisingly similar to Russian and Romanian, with the important difference that the counted noun is singular (27):

(27) három (szál) virág
three (CLAS.THREAD) flower.SG
'three flowers'

Szabó & Tóth (2018) distinguish between seven types of classifiers in Hungarian (given in (28)). Out the seven types, the sortal classifier *szem* 'eye' and the 'default' classifier *darab* 'piece' seem to qualify for the status of optional (sortal) classifiers. To these two examples, we can add the classifier *szál* 'thread' (see, for instance, Nemes 2023).

(28) a. két szem kukorica — sortal classifier
Two CLAS.EYE corn
'two grains of corn'
b. két csapat gyermek — group classifier
two CLAS.GROUP child
'two groups of children'
c. két doboz tej — container classifier
two CLAS.BOX milk
'two boxes of milk'

d. két kilo kenyér — standard measure
two CLAS.KILO bread
'two kilos of bread'

e. két csepp vér — non-standard measure
two CLAS.DROP blood
'two drops of blood'

f. két pár cipö — *pár*
two CLAS.PAIR shoe
'two pairs of shoes'

g. két darab könyv — *darab*
two CLAS.PIECE book
'two books'

According to Dékány (2011, 2021), all nouns in Hungarian are mass; therefore, for the noun to appear in quantificational contexts, it needs an overt or covert classifier, which is taken to be the default classifier *darab* 'piece':

(29) három szál virág
three CLAS.THREAD flower.SG
'three flowers'

(30) három (*darab*) virág
three CLAS.PIECE flower.SG
'three flowers'

As for the difference in interpretation between the covert classifier and the overt classifier constructions, Schvarcz and Nemes (2021) take it to be the following: numeral-noun constructions that lack an overt classifier are ambiguous between a plurality of individuals and a plurality of subkinds reading; on the other hand, numeral-noun constructions that feature an overt classifier receive a plurality of individuals reading. For example, contexts which indicate multiple instantiations of kinds are incompatible with a sortal classifier (31):

(31) a. Isten két (?/*darab) embert teremtett a hatodik napon:
God two CLAS.PIECE man.ACC create.PAST.3SG DEF.ART sixth day.SUP
férfit és nőt.
man.ACC and woman.ACC
'God created two people on the sixth day: a man and a woman'

b. Isten két darab embert teremtett a hatodik napon:
God two CLAS.PIECE man.ACC create.PAST.3SG DEF.ART sixth day.SUP
Ádámot és Évát.
Adam.ACC and Eve.ACC.

I will return to the syntactic and semantic analysis of Hungarian optional classifiers in section 4. The next section investigates Romanian optional classifiers and takes the first steps towards a syntactic analysis.

4. OPTIONAL CLASSIFIERS IN ROMANIAN. A PROPOSAL

The aim of the present section is twofold. On the one hand, it aims at showing that Romanian possesses optional classifiers, thus extending the inventory of classifiers to a tripartite classification: overt mass classifiers, covert / silent classifiers, and optional classifiers. Secondly, the section aims at proposing a syntactic analysis that captures the (fine-grained) semantic distinctions between the overt and optional classifier constructions.

4.1. The data

Although Romanian has plural marking on nouns, which enables the noun to interact directly with the cardinal numeral (32), classifiers may sometimes appear with otherwise count nouns (33-36) or mass nouns (37-38):

(32) trei flori
three flower.PL

(33) a. trei fire de floare
three CLAS.THREAD.PL of flower.SG
'three flowers'
b. trei flori
three flower.PL
'three flowers'

(34) a. trei fire de ceapă
three CLAS.thread of onion.SG
'three onions'
b. trei cepe
three onions.PL
'three roses'

(35) a. trei capete de vită
three CLAS.HEAD.PL of cattle
'three heads of cattle'
b. trei vite
three cow.PL
'three cows'

(36) a. trei căpățâni de varză
three CLAS.HEAD.PL of cabbage
'three cabbages'
b. trei verze
three cabbage.PL
'three cabbages'

(37) a. un calup de unt
one CLAS.BLOCK of butter
'one butter'
b. un unt
one butter.SG
'one butter'

(38) a. trei tablete de ciocolată
three CLAS.BAR of chocolate
'three bars of chocolate'
b. trei ciocolate
three chocolate.PL
'three bars of chocolate'

A first observation related to the data is the fact that constructions where there is no overt classifier ambiguous between a plurality of subkinds (39a) and a plurality of individuals reading (39a). On the other hand, constructions that feature an overt classifier only receive a plurality of individuals reading (40) (see Schvarcz and Nemes 2021, Nemes and Schvarcz 2022 for Hungarian):

(39) a. Am nevoie de trei verze: una roșie, una albă și una de Bruxelles.
(I) have-need of three cabbages: one red, one white and one of Brussels
'I need three (kinds of) cabbages: a red one, a white one, and a Brussels sprout.'

b. Am nevoie de trei verze; patru ar fi prea mult.
(I) have-need of three cabbages; four would be too much
'I need three cabbages; four would be too much.'

(40) a. ?? Am nevoie de trei căpățâni de varză: una roșie, una albă și una de Bruxelles.
(I) have-need of three CLAS.HEADS of cabbages: one red, one white and one of Brussels
'I need three cabbages: a red one, a white one, and a Brussels sprout.'
b. Am nevoie de trei căpățâni de varză; patru ar fi prea mult.
(I) have-need of three CLAS.HEADS of cabbage; four would be too much.
'I need three cabbages; four would be too much'

A second observation is that optional classifiers cannot appear in the absence of a cardinal numeral, or, at the very least, they sound odd (41) (see Khrizman 2016 for Russian):

(41) a. ??În vază sunt fire de trandafir.
In vase are CLAS.THREADS of rose.
'intended: There are several individual roses in the vase.'
b. ??Are capete de vită
(she) has CLAS.HEADS of cattle
'intended: she has several individual heads of cattle'

Finally, a third observation relates to adjectival modification. Unlike Russian (see Yadroff 1999, Khrizman 2016), where optional unit classifiers simply cannot be modified by adjectives, in Romanian, optional classifiers are semantically bleached, so that adjectival modification refers to the quantified nominal (42):

(42) a. În vază sunt trei fire putrezite de trandafir.
In vase are three CLAS.threads rotten of rose
'There are three rotten roses in the vase.'
b. Am folosit trei căpățâni aromate de varză.
(I) have used three CLAS.heads fragrant of cabbage.
'I have used three fragrant cabbages.'

These observations all seem to pinpoint the functional or semi-lexical nature of optional classifiers. At the same time, the role of the optional classifier is to disambiguate the 'individual unit' reading, to the detriment of the 'kind of' reading. The next section proposes a syntactic analysis that could capture this kind of semantics.

4.2. A syntactic analysis of Romanian optional classifiers

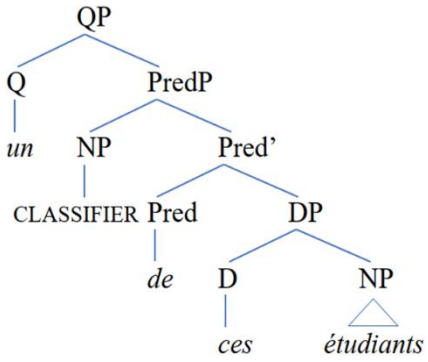
The proposed syntactic analysis follows the lines of investigation in van Riemsdijk (1998), Borer (2005), and Westveer (2021).

According to Westveer (2021), partitives contain a silent classifier, a noun with the meaning *piece*, *token*, or *unit*, that heads the subset NP and expresses a token interpretation (see also Tănase-Dogaru 2024a). In certain contexts, these classifiers are overt (43–44):

(43) a. un exemplaire des livre-s — French
one copy of.the.PL book-PL
b. ein Exemplar der Bücher — German
one copy the.GEN.PL book.PL
'one copy of the books'

(44) a. două exemplare din carte — Romanian
two copies PART.of-in book
'two copies of the book'
b. cartea în două exemplare
book.DEF in two copies
'the book in two copies'

(45)



Romanian features a construction a special construction in (22) with the overt general (default) classifier *bucată* 'piece/unit'. I take this default classifier to be essentially similar to the Hungarian classifier *darab* 'piece' (see Dékány 2011, 2021):

(46) a. Am cumpărat țigări la bucată
(I)have bought cigarettes at piece
'I bought (units of) cigarettes'
b. Aici sunt toate prăjiturile la bucată, trebuie doar să alegi[5]
here are all cakes at piece, must only SBJV choose.2SG
'All (units of cakes) are here, you only need to choose'
c. Scaun... Preț per bucată, disponibil doar la set de 4 bucăți[6]
Chair... Price per piece, available only at set of 4 pieces
'chair… price per piece, available only in sets of 4 pieces'

The same type of construction is available with mass nouns, where the classifier expressing a unit of measurement is overt (47):

[5] https://emagazin.maripusc.ro/category.php?id_category=28

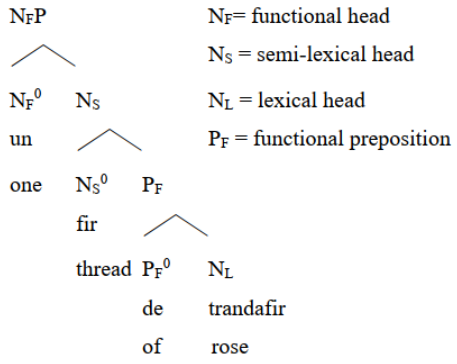
[6] https://www.emag.ro/scaun-snow-disponibil-in-doua-culori-gri-si-crem-pret-per-bucata-disponibil-doar-la-set-de-4-bucati-snow/pd/D7Q869BBM/

(47) a. Am cumpărat material la metru
(I)have bought fabric at meter
'I bought (meters of) fabric.'
b. Am cumpărat vin la litru
(I)have bought wine at liter
'I bought (liters) of wine'

Following Khrizman (2016), the examples in (46) and (47) will be analyzed as measure expressions in which the classifiers introduce a unit of measure.

Going back to the syntactic analysis of optional classifiers, I follow in essence van Riemsdijk (1998), where pseudo-partitive are extended projections (48), and propose that in Romanian, when the classifier is silent, the Number Phrase performs divisibility (Borer 2005) enabling the noun to interact with the count system (49):

(48)



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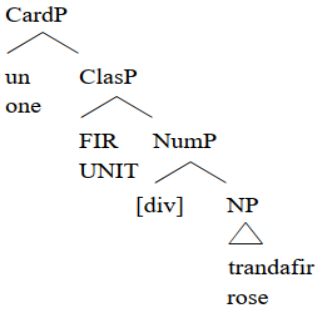
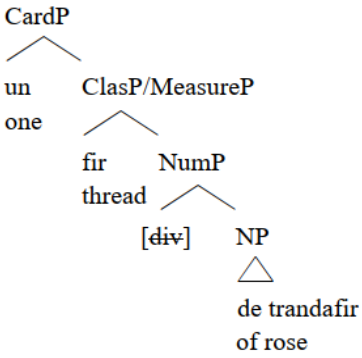


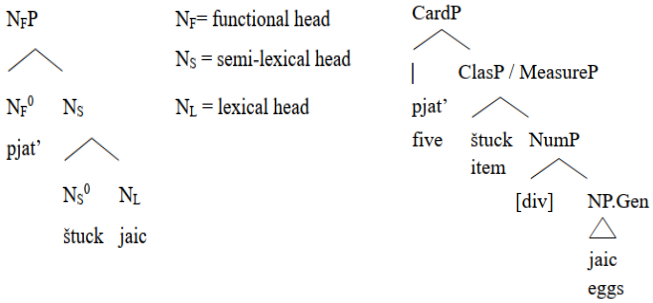
Alternatively, when the classifier is overt, NumP is inert and the lexical noun is treated as mass (50):

(50)



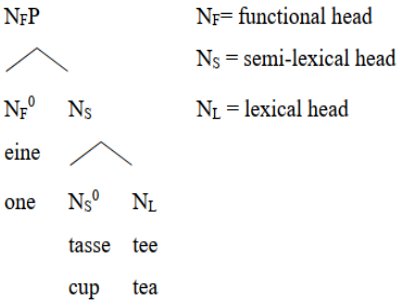
Taking another look at the data from Russian, and retaining the interpretation in terms of measure expressions in Khrizman (2016), I propose to analyze the structure of *pjat' štuck jaic* 'five CLAS.PIECE eggs' as in (51). This analysis captures both the logic of the extended projection argument (51a) and the case-assignment properties of *pjat'* 'five' and *štuck* 'piece' (51b).

(51) a. b.



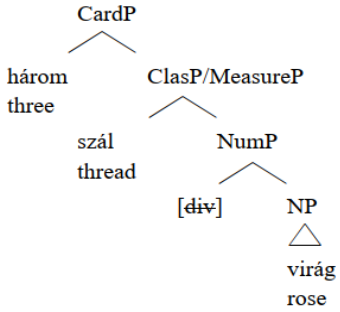
The proposed structure is similar to the one underlying juxtapositional pseudo-partitives in German (van Riemsdijk 1998):

(52)



The same analysis can be extended to Hungarian, for which I propose the following derivation (in (53)) (following in essence Dékány 2021):

(53)



This section has proposed that in Romanian optional classifier constructions, when the classifier is silent, the Number Phrase is syntactically active and thus performs divisibility, therefore enabling the noun to interact with the count system. On the other hand, when the classifier is overt, the Number Phrase is inert and the lexical noun is treated as mass.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has looked at the issue of optional classifiers in Romanian, Russian, and Hungarian. Although optional unit classifiers have been identified and investigated by a number of researchers for Russian and Hungarian, the existence of such classifiers has not been noted in Romanian before.

Optional unit classifiers in Romanian represent a closed class, containing functional or semi-lexical items such as *fir* 'thread', *cap* 'head', *căpățână* 'head'. When the classifiers are overt, their role is to disambiguate the 'individual unit' reading, to the detriment of the 'kind of' reading.

In point of their syntax, the paper has proposed that they represent single extended projections where the Number Phrase can be syntactically active or inert. When the classifier is silent, the Number Phrase is syntactically active and thus performs divisibility, therefore enabling the noun to interact with the count system. On the other hand, when the classifier is overt, the Number Phrase is inert and the lexical noun is treated as mass.

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