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A Half an Hour Revisited

Att ha en obestämd artikel »för mycket» vid *half* ("a half a dozen") är en företeelse i vissa typer av vardagsengelska som i normativa sammanhang betraktas som ett rent språkfel. Konstruktionen är dock inte alldeles ovanlig, vilket förstås av Fowlers uppgivna kommentar: "This vulgarism seems to be getting curiously common". Alarik Rynell, professor emeritus i engelska vid Stockholms universitet, diskuterar här konstruktionen mot bakgrund av litterära belägg.

With his brief article "A Half an Hour" in *Moderna språk* LI, 1957, 215 f. F.A. Hall succeeded in arousing not only its readers' astonishment but also their curiosity about the origin and frequency of this use of the indefinite article both before and after *half* in one and the same noun phrase. The only authority quoted by Hall is Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar* II and (especially) VII. Not unexpectedly, this usage is also dealt with by Christophersen, in *The Articles* 1939, 48 (§16). Of later writers on this phenomenon may be mentioned one more Dane, Schibsbye, in *A Modern English Grammar* 1965, 285 (§12.2). Two seemingly conflicting opinions are to be found in two works by Partridge: in *Usage and Abusage* 1964 (first published 1947), 142: "Whereas one says a *half-dozen*, one does not say a *half a dozen*" and in *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* 1984 (first published 1937), 521: "but for how many years have British children been chanting 'A half a pound of tuppency rice, a half a pound of treacle...?'" (there quoted from Beale). A negative attitude is taken up by Follett in his *Modern American Usage* 1966 (first published 1935), 33: "One of the articles has no excuse for being in a *half an hour* or a *half a glass*. (A pharmaceutical leaflet recommends a *half a glass of water* eleven times in seven inches of print.)" and by Greenbaum & Whitcut in the *Longman Guide to English Usage* 1988, 329: "Do not, in any case, write a *half a*".

The question of the origin of this usage falls into two parts: When? and How? Neither dictionaries nor concordances contain any Old or Middle English instances. In the OED, under *Half a*. 1 c, there is, however, an early example: "c 1500 *Melusine* xxxvi. 244 The whiche they recountred a half a myle fro the toun". In the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays *halfe an houre / a dozen* is three times preceded by *some* (LLL Vii90, H VIII IVi66—both *houre*—, RJ IIIiv27—*dozen*),* but never by *a*. In M.D. George's *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires... in the British Museum* V 234 one print (No. 5363), which probably dates from 1776, has this verse: "Mark but that look of his / That half a smile, that half a grin, / That speak the Eunuch-

*The abbreviations in the references are, it is hoped, self-explanatory not only here but also below.

Soul within / His feeble-featured Phiz!", where *half a* is, it is true, both times preceded by *that* and not by *a* (cf. below).

The verse quoted at the end of the last paragraph is a misquotation from *The Spleen*, which "is an attack on Colman for his play 'The Spleen or Islington Spa', a farce produced 7 Mar. 1776 at Drury Lane by Garrick". Now, a perusal of *The Dramatic Works of George Colman* I-IV, 1777 (facsimile edition 1976) has yielded five *half-a-dozen*, two *half-a-score*, and one *half-a-crown*. Together with instances in the OED, such as *Half-a-crown's* 1623 (1825), *half-a-crown* 1717 (1871), *Half-a-crown* 1851, *half-a-dozen* 1843, and *half-an-hour* 1882, and a number of hyphenated instances in modern fiction (e.g. Sillitoe OD 1989 four *half-a-crown* and one *half-a-dollar*), these early examples from Colman indicate how this construction arose. As has been noted, before me, by Schibsbye, "some of these phrases have become stock units". That the simultaneous use of *a* both before and after *half* is due to the fact that *half an hour* (etc.) forms a unit should be clear from the occurrence of "*Half-a-crown, Half-a-dozen, Half-an-hour, etc.*" as a separate entry in the OED and of determinatives other than *a* before the *half* phrase (see below).

Seeing that the cases registered below number as many as 114 (because of differences between editions nine other examples had to be left out of account), the reader may be inclined to think that this usage is by no means infrequent. It should be borne in mind, however, that the (mainly fictional) texts searched are no fewer than 786 (510 British, 228 American, 48 Commonwealth—including South African). As one and the same text sometimes contains more than one instance (see below), this construction is, in fact, to be found in only 69 (34 American, 31 British, 4 Commonwealth) of the texts that have been read, i.e. in between 8 and 9 per cent of them. Although the British texts that have been investigated are much more than twice as many as the American texts, no fewer than 67 cases are American (A) and only 42 British (B). The truth of Collinson's comment quoted by Jespersen (VII 12.9₂) "*A half an hour* is quite common and has not struck me as American" is hardly confirmed by the figures arrived at here. Four of the five Commonwealth (C) instances occur in novels by Lessing.

Since it has been argued that this usage is a colloquialism, the number of instances that have been found in speech (S) might have been expected to be higher than it is, 44 out of the 114 cases. Even more surprising is the fact that only 18 instances occur in utterances made by persons whose speech may be characterized as substandard (s).

The two most common nouns in such *half* phrases are *hour* (31) and *dozen* (17), followed by *dollar* (7), *minute*, *mile*, and *block* (6 each), *day* and *crown* (4 each), *million*, *hundred*, and *buck* (3 each), while as many as 24 nouns occur only once each (see below).

23 times the noun preceded by *a* (etc.) *half a* is followed by another noun (a). When that noun is in the plural, as it is in 13 cases where it follows *dozen* and 6 cases where it follows the numerals *hundred* (3), *million* (2), and *thousand* (1), the initial indefinite article, which occurs in 9 of these cases, must, of course, refer to the attributive noun. When the first determiner is not *a* but is *the* (five times), *some* (twice), *my*, *its*, and *'s* (once each), its reference is, however, uncertain. The four remaining cases, where the second noun is in the singular, are quite different, and it is by no means surprising that three of them (all four American) are hyphenated: *a half-a-million tip*, *a half-a-day calendar*, and *this half-a-homicide case*. Altogether, hyphens (- -) have been used eight times only.

The vast majority of cases is, not unexpectedly, made up of the 80 instances of *a* preceding such a *half* phrase—in five of these cases *a* is followed by an adjective. Ten times the *half* phrase is preceded by *the*—three times followed by *next* and once in *the most changeful*. The four cases of *another* as a determinative—three times in *another half an hour*, once in *another half a pack*—are reminiscent of phrases like *another two days*. Even more natural appears the occurrence of *some* before such a *half* phrase (cf. the three Shakespeare examples referred to above), since *some* is in all these seven cases an adverb rather than a pronoun. Contrary to its use as an adverb in *that rare a species* (Fowles ET 1974), *that bad a cook* (Atwood LO 1976), *that long a novel* (M. Amis M 1984), *that good a family* (Irving CHR 1985), *that strong a punch* (Oates YMRT 1987), and *that long a street* (Gee G 1988), *that* functions as a pronoun in the three instances of *that half a*, and so does *this* (once) before a *half* phrase. Except for *every*, which is used three times in such a way, all the other determinatives, *one* (followed by two adjectives), *my*, *your*, *his* (followed by *last*), *its*, and the genitive of a noun (*'s*) appear only once each in this construction.

Since the number of texts (and pages) investigated differs considerably from one writer to another, no safe conclusions can be drawn from figures showing how often the various writers have used this *half* construction. It may, however, be worth mentioning that out of the 50 writers (25 American, 23 British, 2 Commonwealth) who use it as many as 30 have it once only. Among the other 20 writers Faulkner has 13 instances (occurring in 6 books) and Dos Passos 11 (in 4 books), but 6 of the 9 dubious cases that had to be left out of account occur in his works. These two Americans are followed by Greene, who has 7 (in 4 books), M. Amis (3 books), Doctorow (1 book), and Farrell (2 books) 5 each, Wolfe (1 book) and Lessing (3 books) 4 each, Canning (1 book), Joyce (2 books), Newby (1 book), O'Brien (2 books), Mark Twain (1 book), and B. Macdonald (1 book) 3 each,

Dickens (2 books), Steinbeck (1 book), Salinger (1 book), Styron (1 book), Warren (1 book), and Wm Kennedy (1 book) 2 each. It is to be noted that in the vast majority of books—in fact, 717 out of 786!—there is not a single instance of this *half* construction.

Examples

hour

a half an hour Joyce D 1914, 96 (BS); Dos Passos MT 1925, 27 (AS); Faulkner Ms 1927, 280 (AS); ib., 284 (AS); id. Ss 1929, 1 (A); Dos Passos 42nd P 1930, 260 (ASs); ib., 288 (A); id. NN 1932, 68 (A); Faulkner LA 1932, 332 (ASs); Cheyney YCHW 1937, 151 (B); B. Macdonald EI 1945, 198 (A); Greene HM 1948, 31 (BS); Salinger CR 1951, 16 (A); ib., 151 (AS) Hemingway OMS 1952, 71 (A); O'Brien CG 1960, 62 (B); ib., 105 (BS); Jong F 1980, 209 (A).—a full half an hour M. Amis RP 1973, 175 (B); a fucking half an hour Wolfe BV 1987, 459 (ASs); a tedious half an hour M. Amis LF 1989, 19 (B).

the next half an hour Greene HM 1948, 170 (BS); id. MQ 1982, 185 (B); M. Amis M 1984, 37 (B).

some half an hour Lessing PM 1954, 159 (C); Rendell LF 1986, 32 (B).

every half an hour Greene MWBYH 1967, 127 (B); M. Amis LF 1989, 28 f. (B).

another half an hour Canning MFDHE 1934, 343 (BS); Greene HM 1948, 236 (B); id. MQ 1982, 186 (B).

dozen

a half a dozen Twain LM 1883, 309 (ASsa); London ME 1909, 1 (A); Bentley TLC 1912, 32 (BSa); Faulkner LA 1932, 355 (ASs); Graves CG 1934, 136 (Ba); Osborne LBA 1957, 84 (BSa); Styron CNT 1967, 100 (Aa); ib., 333 (A); Newby SAF 1968, 163 (Ba).

the half a dozen Newby SAF 1968, 172 (Ba); ib., 193 (Ba); Lessing MS 1974, 152 (Ca).

some half a dozen Murdoch FE 1956, 130 (Ba); Fowles DM 1977, 653 (Ba).

every half a dozen Golding DV 1979, 43 (B).

my half a dozen Sterne SJ 1768, 33 (Ba).

the old Surveyor's half a dozen Hawthorne SL 1850, 33 (Aa).

dollar

a half a dollar Dos Passos MT 1925, 295 (ASs); Faulkner Ss 1929, 275 (AS); id. Sy 1931, 181 (4 A, 4 S); Steinbeck GW 1939, 233 (ASs).

minute

a half a minute Twain LM 1883, 172 (AS); Dos Passos MT 1925, 88 (A); Pynchon GR 1973, 578 (A); M. Amis M 1984, 9 (B).

that half a minute Dickens GE 1861, 317 (BSs).

one bewildering and clumsy half a minute D. Thomas PAYD 1940, 112 (B).

mile

a half a mile B. Macdonald EI 1945, 230 (A); T. Williams SND 1947, 134 (ASs); Updike RRx 1971, 88 (AS).—a good half a mile Faulkner AILD 1930, 177 (As).

some half a mile Dickens HT 1854, 13 (B- -); Weldon Pr 1978, 83 (B).

block

a half a block Dreiser AT 1925, 76 (A); Dos Passos 42nd P 1930, 6 (A); McCullers HLH 1940, 300 (A); Findley Ws 1977, 155 (C- -); Doctorow BB 1989, 268 (A); ib., 302 (A).

day

a half a day Faulkner SP 1926, 86 (A); Caldwell TR 1932, 147 (A); Farrell JD 1935, 114 (ASs); Wolfe BV 1987, 251 (ASsa- -).

crown

a half a crown Canning MFDHE 1934, 164 (BS- -); ib., 166 (B- -); O'Brien MROS 1978, 49 (BSs).

that half a crown Lerner MFL 1956, 26 (ASs).

million

a half a million Wharton HM 1905, 83 (ASa- -); Dos Passos MT 1925, 317 (Aa); Wolfe BV 1987, 151 (ASa).

hundred

a half a hundred Doctorow BB 1989, 282 (Aa).

the half a hundred Lessing FGC 1969, 496 (Ca).

its half a hundred Wm Kennedy BPGG 1978, 219 (Aa).

buck

a half a buck Farrell YMSL 1934, 42 (A); ib., 178 (ASs).

his last half a buck Wm Kennedy BPGG 1978, 259 f. (A).

century

the most changeful half a century Hartley GB 1953, 284 (B).

year

a half a year Twain LM 1883, 410 (ASs).

second

a half a second Joyce U 1922, 506 (B).

score

a half a score Jerome TMB 1889, 108 (B- -).

pound

a half a pound Cheever F 1977, 122 (AS).

stone

a half a stone Joyce U 1922, 631 (BSs).

gallon

some half a gallon Linklater JA 1931, 95 (B).

pint

your half a pint Mackenzie WG 1947, 85 (BS).

bowl

a half a bowl Farrell JD 1935, 32 (AS).

bottle

a half a bottle Steinbeck GW 1939, 139 (ASsa).

glass

a half a glass Dos Passos 42nd P 1930, 316 (A).

tumbler

a half a tumbler Faulkner Ss 1929, 325 (A).

pack

another half a pack Warren AKM 1946, 461 (A).

centimetre

a half a centimetre D.Morris NA 1967, 51 (B).

thousand

the half a thousand Lessing FGC 1969, 479 (Ca).

loaf

a half a loaf Doctorow BB 1989, 27 (A).

rye bread

a stale half a rye bread Doctorow BB 1989, 248 (A).

sandwich

that half a sandwich Greene C 1966, 290 (BS).

chocolate cake

a half a chocolate cake B.Macdonald EI 1945, 237 (A).

head

a half a head Warren AKM 1946, 46 (A).

skull

a half a skull Farrell YMSL 1934, 354 (AS).

homicide

this half a homicide Wolfe BV 1987, 131 (ASa- -).

gale

the half a gale Dos Passos NN 1932, 185 (A).

poem

a half a poem Dos Passos BM 1936, 77 (A).

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