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Binominal constructions of small quantity in Russian and Italian

This paper offers a contrastive analysis of binominal constructions expressing small quantity in Italian and Russian, focusing on six core nouns (*goccia/kaplja*, *briciola/kroška*, *granello/krupica*). Through a combined quantitative and qualitative corpus-based approach, the study investigates how these nouns evolve from literal measure expressions to metaphorical and grammaticalized quantifiers or degree modifiers. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from grammaticalization theory and usage-based Construction Grammar, the analysis highlights the role of cognitive profiling, metaphorical shift, and negative polarity contexts in shaping these constructions. Findings reveal significant cross-linguistic asymmetries. In Russian, metaphorical uses are tightly linked to negative polarity and emotional intensification, especially in singular forms. Italian, by contrast, shows a broader functional diversification, including the emergence of masculine forms (*goccio* and *briciolo*) that have undergone structural decategorization, losing their morphological features of number, and acquired abstract quantificational or scalar functions. Particular attention is paid to the semantic features of N_1 elements, whose combination with N_2 's shapes metaphorical reinterpretation, often grounded in domains such as emotions (*briciola/briciolo*) or epistemic knowledge (*krupica*). The study demonstrates that while Italian and Russian share typological similarities in binominal quantification, their metaphorical paths and grammaticalization processes diverge markedly. These findings provide insight into the interplay of lexis, grammar, and discourse, and offer a framework for future diachronic and typological investigations of quantifier constructions across languages.



Key words: contrastive linguistics, binominal constructions, quantifier constructions, degree constructions, grammaticalization

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Биномиальные конструкции с указанием на малое количество в русском и итальянском языках

На фоне исследований о грамматикализации биномиальных конструкций, обозначающих количество, в статье представлен сопоставительный анализ биномиальных конструкций, выражающих значение малого количества в русском и итальянском языках. Исследование сосредоточено на шести ключевых существительных (*goccia/капля*, *briciola/крошка*, *granello/крупница*) и основано на сочетании количественного и качественного анализа данных. В рамках теорий грамматикализации и грамматики конструкций автор рассматривает, как данные существительные переходят от буквального обозначения меры к метафорическим и грамматикализованным функциям квантификаторов или модификаторов степени. Результаты выявляют значительные межязыковые асимметрии. Анализ показывает, что при внешнем типологическом сходстве биномиальные конструкции

мало количества в русском и итальянском языках демонстрируют различные траектории метафоризации и грамматикализации. Работа вносит вклад в изучение взаимодействия лексики, грамматики и прагматики, а также открывает перспективы для дальнейших типологических исследований количественных конструкций.

Ключевые слова: контрастивная лингвистика, биномиальные конструкции, выражающие интенсивность признака квантификационные конструкции, грамматикализация

Благодарности. Я выражаю искреннюю благодарность анонимным рецензентам за их бесценные отзывы и конструктивные комментарии к этой рукописи. Их проницательные предложения и подробные критические замечания значительно повысили качество этой работы. Время и усилия, которые они посвятили рецензированию этой статьи, высоко оцениваются мною, их вклад сыграл решающую роль в доработке и улучшении окончательной версии рукописи. Все оставшиеся ошибки или упущения являются исключительно моей ответственностью.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, scholars have shown increasing interest in binominal constructions of the type $[N_1]$ of $[N_2]$ that serve a quantifying function, such as the English *a pile of commonplaces*, *loads of furniture*, or *a bunch of grapes* [Brems, 2003]. In their prototypical form, these constructions involve head nouns that do not explicitly denote units of measurement – such as *meter*, *acre*, or *ounce* – but instead refer to spatially continuous entities that either contain a portion of mass (e.g., *bucket of water*) or consist of it (e.g., *bunch of flowers*) [Ibid., p. 88]. According to R.W. Langacker, these constructions represent an emerging means of quantification and “constitute a diverse and open-ended class” [Ibid.]. In addition to their literal meaning, they have also developed figurative uses. This semantic extension is made possible by “a conception of their typical size, which is part of their encyclopedic characterization” [Langacker, 1991, p. 88]. Owing to their rich semantic content and cognitive associations, these constructions possess significant pragmatic potential. They have been examined within various theoretical frameworks, most notably grammaticalization theory and Construction and Cognitive Grammar. E.C. Traugott, for instance, has explored their diachronic development in English using a constructional approach, according to which changes in form and meaning take place simultaneously [Traugott, 2008, 2015]. S.Ch. Li and

E. Rachilina have investigated Russian binominal constructions – particularly those expressing large quantities – highlighting their grammaticalization process from a cognitive perspective [Li, 2005; Rachilina, Li, 2009]. L. Brems (2003, 2007, 2010) has provided an analysis of measure nouns, including those of small quantity, as quantifiers in English and Dutch, raising important questions about the grammaticalization of low-frequency constructions and the status of the measure noun in these constructions. The degree of grammaticalization of Italian measure constructions has been addressed more recently by A. Giacalone Ramat (2019). P.M. Cotta Ramusino et al. (2025) adopt a similar perspective to compare binomials denoting small quantities in three Slavic languages: Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian. Furthermore, binominal constructions of this type have also been noted to function as classifier-like elements and sometimes exhibit actional or verb-like properties [Benigni, 2022; Benigni et al., 2023], thus potentially representing a link between nominal and verbal categories.

Although binominal constructions have been extensively studied, their small-quantity subtypes have attracted much less scholarly interest. Based on rich empirical data, the present study aims to explore further the theoretical issues these constructions pose and to contribute to a better understanding of their structure and function. It focuses specifically on binominal constructions of the type $[N_1]$ of $[N_2]$ – and, in Russian, $[N_1 + N_{2GEN}]$ – as illustrated in examples (1) and (2), in Russian and Italian, respectively.

(1) Ru

В ней нет ни *капли* вины и ни *крошки* страха
(Timestamped JSI webcorpus 2014–2021 Russian, Sketch Engine)
'There isn't a drop of guilt or a shred of fear in her.'

(2) It.

<...> Ci sono subito due *briciole* di malinconia.
(Italian Trends 2014 – today, Sketch Engine)
'Here are immediately two crumbs of melancholy.'

To account for the patterns exemplified in (1)–(2), the analysis is conducted within the broad framework of a usage-based Construction Grammar approach. Following E.C. Traugott, these constructions are treated as individual micro-constructions, related to meso- and even macro-constructions expressing quantity [Traugott, 2008, p. 32] (e.g., in Russian, constructions with numerals followed by the genitive case). Given the synchronic focus of this study, it is possible to draw on the concepts of inheritance links and motivation, also understood in the context of quantifier constructions.

From a synchronic perspective, these constructions may be also interpreted as representing one stage in a broader grammaticalization pathway from quantifier phrases to degree modifiers.

The concepts of *base* and *profile* from Cognitive Grammar [Croft et al., 2004; Langacker, 2013] are also essential for understanding how different speakers cognitively represent and construct novel associations in binominal constructions of the form $[N_1]$ of $[N_2]$, as they not only express the small quantity but also the “quality” of the quantified objects. While the association between *drop* and a liquid substance is readily interpretable, the cognitive basis for its use with abstract nouns or solid substances requires further exploration.

In addition to their semantic and cognitive features, the pragmatic distribution of small-quantity binominals – particularly their frequent occurrence in negative polarity contexts – deserves attention. As thoroughly discussed by L. Brems (2007), sensitivity to negative polarity may account for the grammaticalization of these constructions even in the absence of high-frequency usage. Negative polarity contexts also activate two distinct pragmatic processes: they minimize the quantified reading and intensify the expression of minimal quantity [Brems, 2007; see also Giacalone Ramat, 2019].

Ultimately, there is a clear rationale for comparing two languages from the same linguistic family, yet belonging to different subgroups. Cross-linguistic comparison can shed light on processes and changes that may occur even in unrelated languages, as such phenomena are intrinsically tied to underlying cognitive and communicative mechanisms [Traugott, 2015].

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the data and methodology; Section 3 analyzes the data based on the theoretical framework outlined above; and Section 4 discusses the findings and draws some conclusions.

2. Data and methodology

To operationalize these theoretical assumptions, the present study examines binominal constructions of the type $[N_1]$ of $[N_2]$ (and in Russian, $[N_1 + N_{2\text{GEN}}]$). Generally, these constructions may feature different types of N_1 :

i) a concrete or abstract noun with no inherent size component, such as ru. *gora*, it. *montagna*, ‘mountain’, ru. *more*, it. *mare*, ‘sea’, ru. *reka*, it. *fiume*, ‘river’ and similar. These nouns undergo a semantic and metaphorical shift to function as metaphorical quantifiers and degree modifiers, as in ru. *more ljudej*, it. *un mare di gente*, ‘a sea of people’;

ii) a concrete noun that also functions as a measure noun, such as ru. *mešok*, it. *sacco*, ‘sack’, ru. *kaplja*, it. *goccia*, ‘drop’, which typically appears in literal quantifying contexts (e.g. ru. *mešok muki*, it. *sacco*

di farina, ‘sack of flour’). When used with non-prototypical N_2 collocates, however, they acquire a metaphorical, intensifying meaning, as illustrated in examples (1) and (2).

The binomials examined here belong to type (ii). They are size nouns that, in certain contexts and with specific collocates, undergo a metaphorical shift and a pragmaticalization process that transform them from measure nouns into metaphorical quantifiers and degree modifiers.

For each language, three nouns were selected from a larger set¹, beginning with the Russian data and identifying their equivalents using the Russian–Italian parallel corpus of the Russian National Corpus:

Ru. *kaplja, kroška, krupica*

It. *goccia, briciola, granello*

Eng. ‘drop’, ‘crumb’, ‘grain’

Two of the nouns – *drop* and *grain* – can be classified as strictly (small) size nouns, whereas *crumb*, although referring to a very small part of a dry substance, cannot *strictu sensu* be considered a size noun. The initial selection was based on the distinct semantic and cognitive characteristics of these three nouns. While the feature SMALL is shared by all three, each noun also possesses additional semantic properties that, it is argued, contribute to the metaphorical processes. *Drop* represents the minimal measurable unit of liquid substances and is thus associated with the semantic features FLUID and COHESIVE. *Crumb*, on the other hand, is characterized by being FORMLESS and FRAGMENTARY; it is a remainder of something larger, thus suggesting incompleteness, scarcity, and at the same time intrinsic value – especially when associated with bread. Finally, *grain* denotes the fundamental unit of certain cereals and is conceptually relevant as something small that can be gathered to form a larger quantity, thus carrying the features COMPLETE PART OF A WHOLE and VALUABLE. Although the numerous diminutive forms of these nouns in both languages fall outside the scope of this study, some attention will be devoted to two Italian nouns, *briciolo* and *goccio*² for the insight they can give into the grammaticalization process.

2.1. Dataset

The present study draws on data from two corpora available on Sketch Engine, which are comparable in both size and content:

¹ K.A. Bordjugova lists the following nouns: *edinicy* ‘a few’, *kaplja* ‘drop’, *kapel'ka* ‘tiny drop’, *kroška* ‘crumb’, *krochi* ‘crumbs’, *kučka* ‘small heap’, *gorstka* ‘tiny handful’, *iskra* ‘spark’, *krupica* ‘grain’ [Bordjugova, 2015, p. 42].

² *Briciolo* and *goccio* are the masculine forms of *briciola* and *goccia*, respectively, marked by the ending -o. While their literal meanings are the same, they are used in different contexts, as will be shown.

- Italian Trends Corpus (2014 – today) (10,031,703,651 tokens);
- Timestamped JSI Russian Web Corpus (7,218,536,772 tokens).

Both corpora consist of news articles and texts from sources that are updated on a daily basis. The data were retrieved using the Corpus Query Language (CQL).

The data have been analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative analysis employed frequency and concordance tools applied to the entire datasets, while the qualitative analysis was performed on a random sample of 300 occurrences for each word. To ensure the validity of the chosen sample, the convergence and stabilization of empirical frequency was examined, as discussed in Section 3. A summary table will be provided for each word, presenting the overall results.

The qualitative analysis considers both the N_2 collocates and their contextual environments, as previous studies have shown that factors such as negative polarity sensitivity are closely associated with the use of these binominal constructions [Brems, 2007; Giacalone, 2019]. The qualitative analysis was also essential to distinguish metaphorical from literal uses of the nouns. Because the metaphorical shift may function differently for singular and plural forms of the nouns³, the queries were carried out separately for both forms. The analysis further considers the use of in/definite articles and adverbs that function as modifiers or accompany the constructions.

Considering that, as already mentioned, all three nouns represent size nouns, in the analysis the literal reading will be distinguished from the metaphorical, while the quantified reading will be considered to be on a continuum with the literal one.

3. Data analysis and discussion

3.1.1. *Kaplja* ‘drop’: Russian data

The noun *kaplja* was searched in the Russian corpus using the CQL tool⁴. The query was designed to identify the noun in both singular and plural

³ In Italian, for instance, the plural form of size nouns of big quantity does not support the metaphorical shift [see Giacalone Ramat, 2019, p. 3].

⁴ The search has been carried out using the following search strings: 1. [lemma=“капля” & number=“s”] [tag=“N...g.”] – to retrieve all singular forms of the lemma *капля* followed by a genitive singular noun.; 2. [word=“ни” | word=“не”] []? [word=“капли”] [tag=“N...g.”] – to search for instances where *капли* follows *ни* or *не*, possibly separated by any token (see also note 3 to Table 1); 3. [word=“без”] []? [word=“капли”] [tag=“N...g.”] – to retrieve occurrences of *капли* within a variable distance from the preposition *без* (‘without’); 4. [word=“лишь”] []? [lemma=“капля” & number=“s”] [tag=“N...g.”] – to identify instances in which the singular form of *капля* is preceded by *лишь*. A parallel search was conducted substituting *лишь* (‘only’) with the adverb *даже* (‘even’); 5. Finally, plural forms were queried using [lemma=“капля” & number=“p”] [tag=“N...g.”], followed by specific searches for each case as outlined above.

forms, as well as its most frequent occurrences in negative polarity contexts. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Occurrences and frequency of the singular and plural forms of *kaplja*

	Occurrences	Ipm ¹	Negative polarity ²		
			<i>ne/ni</i>	<i>bez</i>	<i>liš/daže</i>
<i>Kaplja</i> (sg.)	10 377	1.44	2612 ³	923	94/90
<i>Kapli</i> (pl.) ⁴	13 098	1.81	22 000	10	52/103

¹ Number of hits per million tokens.

² The query has been aimed at identifying the contexts in which only *ne* or *ni* occur at a variable distance from the genitive forms of the word. This type of query catches also other possible modifiers, such as *odna* ('one') *edinaja* ('single')

³ Regarding the negations *ne* and *ni*, the data shows that the search for *ne* yields only 74 occurrences, while the double negation (*ne/ni* + *kapli*) appears 2612 times. Given this significant difference, only the results for the double negation are presented here.

⁴ The homonymy between the genitive singular of a feminine noun and its nominative plural form is a well-known issue in corpus queries for Russian language. To estimate the extent of this ambiguity, a sample of 300 occurrences, on the basis below discussed of the empirical frequency, was manually analyzed: 204 were plural forms (across various cases), 62 were genitive singular forms (mostly preceded by a negation), and 34 were genitive singular occurrences found in the idiom *dve kapli vody* ('two drops of water') or following the numerals 2, 3, or 4, with a percentage of 68% of real plural forms. If the 34 cases where the genitive follows numerals – interpretable as semantic plurals – are included, the overall percentage rises to 79.3%.

The words *ne*, *ni*, *bez*, *liš*, and *daže* have been identified as the most frequent triggers of negative polarity contexts, though they are certainly not the only ones. Nevertheless, the results can be considered reliable within a reasonable margin of approximation. The number of plural forms appears to be higher than that of singular forms, although the homonymy between the genitive singular and nominative plural forms must be taken into account. Overall, these discrepancies do not significantly affect the results, as the impact of homonymy on the automatic retrieval of negative polarity contexts is minimal. As shown in Table 1, the most notable difference concerns polarity sensitivity, which is markedly higher in the singular form than in the plural, where it is almost negligible⁵.

⁵ In discussing the sensitivity of SSNs to negative polarity (NP) contexts, L. Brems (2007) draws on M. Israel's work (1996; 2004), who mentions the role of "weakly negative form(s)" [Israel, 2004, p. 710]. The dataset presented in L. Brems (2007?) is significantly smaller than the one discussed in the present article. The role of NP contexts should therefore be revisited in a dedicated analysis to better evaluate their relationship with these binomials.

To assess the distribution of literal and metaphorical uses of the target word, we manually analyzed a random sample of 300 instances extracted from the larger dataset of 10 377 occurrences⁶. The chart in Figure 1 illustrates how the relative frequencies of both literal and metaphorical uses converge as the number of observations increases. The curve representing metaphorical usage stabilizes around 59%, while literal usage stabilizes around 41%. These values suggest a strong predominance of metaphorical usage in the data. The early fluctuations in both curves diminish after approximately 150 observations, indicating that the frequency estimates become increasingly stable and reliable. Such stabilization, a well-established criterion in empirical frequency methods, supports the representativeness of the sample and justifies the use of a reduced dataset for estimating overall trends in usage⁷.

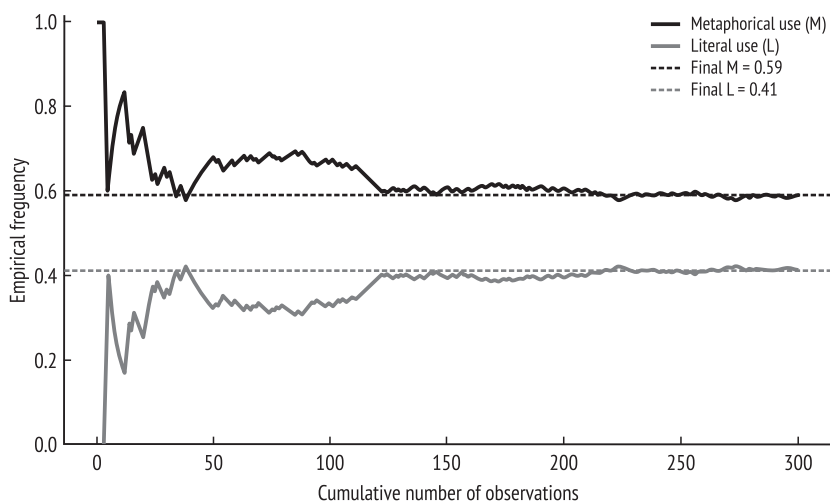


Fig. 1. Distribution of literal (41%) and metaphorical (59%) uses

The results obtained through the combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches yield several important insights. First, in Russian, the noun *kaplja*

⁶ To the best of our knowledge, the only reliable way to distinguish literal uses, such as “Достаточно капнуть туда каплю йода <...>” ‘It is enough to drop a single drop of iodine there’, from metaphorical ones (“И есть ли хоть капля смысла <...>?” ‘And is there even a drop of meaning?’), is to examine each occurrence in context. Although computational methods for metaphor detection exist, they are not yet sufficiently reliable for fine-grained corpus analysis of this kind. This manual screening was performed on 300 occurrences for each word, which, based on their empirical frequencies, can be considered sufficient to represent the entire dataset.

⁷ I would like to thank Luca Sala Gallini for his valuable suggestion to examine the empirical frequency and for his assistance in presenting the results in graphs.

‘drop’ is used metaphorically primarily in the singular form, while in the plural, the metaphorical shift appears to be marginal.⁸ Second, all occurrences in negative polarity contexts are metaphorical, as the manual examination of the 300 data has shown.⁹ These findings suggest, on the one hand, that the process of decategorization is nearly complete, as the new quantifier and degree meaning applies exclusively to the singular form; on the other hand, they confirm previous research – particularly L. Brems (2007) – which emphasizes the significant role of negative polarity contexts in facilitating metaphorical shift and, consequently, in processes of grammaticalization, whereby the expression comes to denote and emphasize a very small quantity. The second step of the analysis aims to identify the cognitive processes underlying the extension of usage to non-liquid and, subsequently, abstract collocates. To this end, the frequency tool was used to automatically extract collocates from the entire dataset, ranked by frequency. Table 2 provides an overview of the results.

Table 2

The type frequency of the first 15 collocates for *kaplja* ‘drop’

Collocate	Hits	Collocate	Hits
Воды ‘water’	2250	Сомнения ‘doubt’	103
Крови ‘blood’	1860	Жизни ‘life’	93
Масла ‘oil’	368	Совести ‘conscience’	93
Терпения ‘patience’	282	Никотина ‘nicotine’	89
Дождя ‘rain’	200	Стеснения ‘embarrassment’	56
Макияжа ‘maquillage’	157	Косметики ‘Cosmetics’	49
Пота ‘sweat’	137	Сожаления ‘regret’	34
Йода ‘Iodine’	128		

Apparently, the first three positions are well expected, as they are the prototypical liquid substances profiled by *drop*, however, at a closer look at the occurrences, some observations are due. First, both water and blood

⁸ This claim is based on the manual examination of the random sample of 300 occurrences. Out of the 204 genuine plural forms, 195 display a literal use, while only 9 show a metaphorical one.

⁹ More precisely, in the manual examination of 300 occurrences, 59 examples – belonging to the 59% of metaphorical uses – occurred in NP contexts, whereas in the 41% of literal uses, only 6 examples showed such a context. These findings confirm that NP contexts are more closely associated with metaphorical than with literal uses.

occur metaphorically, not just literally. One of the most frequent examples with water is the idiom ‘like two drops of water’ (3). Other occurrences, in negative polarity contexts, hint at signifying the complete absence of water. Likewise, a drop / some drops of blood occur in their literal and quantified meaning, but also very often with a metonymic and/or metaphorical shift, by which blood stands for conflict, war, death and similar (4).

(3) Герой этого фильма, как *две капли воды* похожий на Михаила Касьянова, <...>
‘The protagonist of this film looks exactly like Michail Kas’janov <...>’

(4) Они смогут войти сюда, только если всех нас убьют, мы будем драться *до последней капли крови*
‘They will only be able to get in here if they kill us all; we will fight to the *last drop of blood*’

In a similar way, *pot* ‘sweat’ and *makijaž* ‘maquillage’ are used predominantly in negative polarity contexts, and degree meaning prevails over the quantified. The abstract nouns in the first 15 positions may broadly be classified within the semantic field of emotions, in line with the conceptual metaphor EMOTIONS ARE LIQUIDS [Kövecses, 2000].

3.1.2. *Goccia* ‘drop’: Italian data

An identical query was performed for the Italian equivalent *goccia*, the results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Occurrences and frequency of the singular and plural forms of *goccia*

	Occurrences	Ipm	Negative polarity ¹
			<i>neanche, nemmeno, neppure</i>
<i>Goccia</i> (sg.)	14 541	1.33	528
<i>Gocce</i> ² (pl.)	15 381	1.47	4

¹ The query has been aimed at identifying the contexts in which only *neanche, nemmeno, neppure* ‘not even’ occur at a variable distance from the N₂. This type of query catch also other possible modifiers, such as *una* ‘one’, *unica* ‘unique’.

² The plural form of the feminine noun *goccia* is marked by the ending *-e*.

As shown in Table 3, the data unequivocally demonstrate that the discrepancy between the singular and plural forms is especially salient in negative polarity contexts while, overall, NP does not seem to be so relevant. In Table 4 the first 15 collocates of *goccia* are listed.

Table 4

The first 15 collocate types for *goccia* 'drop'

Collocate	Hits	Collocate	Hits
Sangue 'blood'	2677	Detersivo 'laundry soap'	218
Pioggia 'rain'	2008	Latte 'milk'	204
Olio 'oil'	1966	Energia 'energy'	195
Sudore 'sweat'	1120	Aria 'air'	175
Limone 'lemon'	618	Petrolio 'petrol'	135
Succo 'juice'	372	Carburante 'fuel'	134
Acqua 'water'	297	Sapone 'soap'	131
Aceto 'vinegar'	270		

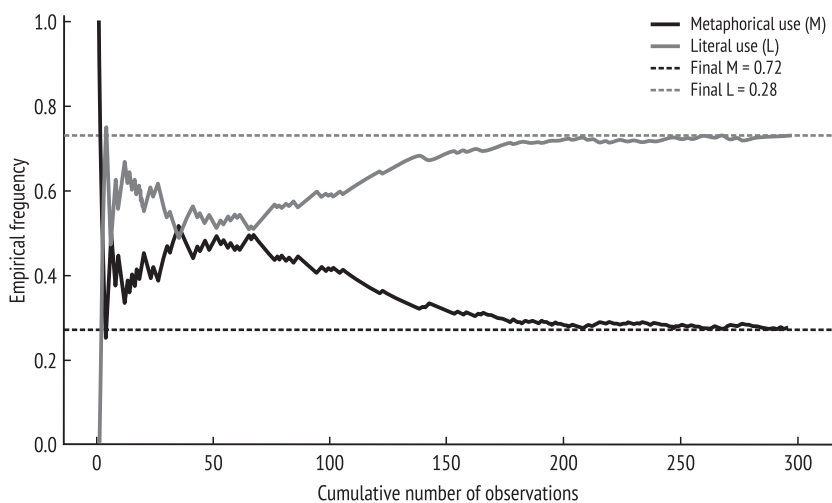


Fig. 2. Distribution of literal and metaphorical uses according to empirical frequency

The 15 most frequently occurring collocates (Table 5) reveal that no nouns with abstract meaning or referring to solid substances appear among the top entries, except for *energia*. A closer examination shows that non-liquid or abstract collocates are only marginally represented: *splendore*

‘splendor’ occurs 66 times, *speranza* ‘hope’ – 37, *vita* ‘life’ – 54, *talento* ‘talent’ – 24, *felicità* ‘happiness’ – 22, *luce* ‘light’ – 22, and *solidarietà* ‘solidarity’ – 20. Table 5, and Figure 2, based on the same principle as above, present the distribution of literal and metaphorical meanings. Interestingly, in the Italian language, *goccia* is predominantly used with its literal meaning also in the singular form. It should be noted that this use is nearly exclusive in the plural form. At the same time, most metaphorical uses occur in negative polarity contexts.

Table 5

**Distribution of literal and metaphorical uses
(a random sample of 300)**

	Literal, %	Metaphorical, %
<i>goccia</i>	72.0	28.0
<i>gocce</i>	97.6	2.3

3.1.3. *Goccio* ‘drop’: Italian data

The situation observed with the Italian *goccia* construction, which functions mainly with the literal-quantifying meaning, hints at one direction of development represented by the noun *goccio*, which appears to represent a further step in the grammaticalization process with its 2196 occurrences and an IPM of 0.21. Notably, according to a core principle of constructionalization theory [Traugott, Trousdale, 2013], which focuses on the emergence of new constructions – i.e., form–meaning pairings – during language change, both form and meaning have changed in this case: the masculine form *goccio* has replaced the feminine *goccia*, and its function has also shifted. Unlike *goccia*, which can be used literally to mean ‘a drop of’ or ‘some drops of’, *goccio* functions almost exclusively as a quantifier, denoting a small amount (5). The plural form *gocci*, although attested, is extremely rare (only three occurrences in the corpus). As already pointed out in relation to *briciolo* by A. Giacalone, “[t]he singular pattern of Italian may be interpreted as a sign of grammaticalization, because the head noun has lost the category feature of plurality” [Giacalone, 2019, p. 4]. Moreover, in line with the grammaticalization process, *goccio* can also function adverbially, occurring without any accompanying N_2 (6). These features point to an ongoing process of structural decategorization. The occurrence of *goccio* in negative polarity contexts is limited (approximately 5.3%), and its pragmatic function of intensification is less prominent. Its role as a quantifier is primarily evidenced by its frequent use in recipes. Use with metaphorical collocates is almost entirely limited to *hapax legomena* (7).

- (5) <...> quindi cuocetele sfumando con un *goccio* di vino bianco e poca acqua.
‘Then cook them, deglazing with a *splash* of white wine and a little water’.
- (6) Un film ben costruito, recitato e scritto, che ci pare un *goccio troppo* mainstream per la competizione veneziana.
‘A well-constructed, well-acted, and well-written film, which strikes us as just a *bit* too mainstream for the Venice competition’.
- (7) <...> che tampona con la tenerezza e un *goccio* di malinconia ogni piccola deriva, e non conosce spietatezza.
‘<...> who/which soothes every small drift with tenderness and a *hint* (drop) of melancholy, and knows no ruthlessness.’

3.2.1. *Kroška* ‘crumb’: Russian data

A crumb is the smallest part of a dry substance – a fragment of a whole – so the small quantity it represents is often perceived as *INSUFFICIENT*, *negligible*, but *VALUABLE*. The frequency in the corpus is summed up in Table 6.

Table 6

Occurrences and frequency of the singular and plural forms of *kroška*

	Occurrences	Ipm	Negative polarity		
			<i>ne, ni</i>	<i>bez</i>	<i>liš’/daže</i>
<i>Kroška</i> (sg.)	(617 ¹) 393	0.09	20	18	11
<i>Kroški</i> (pl.)	433	0.06	42	–	10

¹ In fact, upon excluding all instances in which *kroška* functions as an appositive (i.e., *kroška* followed by a proper noun), a total of 393 occurrences remain.

The only significant collocates from a frequency perspective, included NP contexts, are *bread* and, more generally, *food*. As shown in Table 7, most collocates are concrete nouns directly related to the literal meaning of *crumb*, while abstract nouns appear only as *hapax legomena*.

That said, it should be noted that in negative polarity contexts – and particularly in reference to *bread* and *food* – the use is metaphorical rather than literal, as illustrated in examples (8–9), conveying the complete absence of these substances and, by metonymy, of nourishment. This continued preference for combinations involving *bread* and this semantic field is likely due to the strong cultural and symbolic value attributed to bread.

Table 7

Most frequent collocate types for *kroška* ‘crumb’

Collocates (>10)	Hits	Collocates (>10)	Hits
Хлеба ‘Bread’	120	Other food	33
Печенья ‘Biscuits’	22	Stones and building materials	83
Еды ‘Food’	14	Abstract nouns	22

(8) Бывало и так, что в доме не было ни крошки хлеба, а дети донашивали друг за другом одежду.

‘There were times when there wasn’t a *single crumb of bread* in the house, and the children wore each other’s hand-me-down clothes’

(9) В холодильнике – ни крошки еды. В квартире ужасный бардак, тараканы, мухи.

‘There wasn’t a *single crumb of food* in the fridge. The apartment was a complete mess – cockroaches, flies, and filth everywhere’.

As far as the plural form is concerned, the collocates with a significant frequency are just a few: bread occurs 147, biscuits 42, food 33, and all the others, included materials, occur less than 10 times.

3.2.2. *Briciola* ‘crumb’: Italian data

In this case, the Italian data considerably differs from the Russian ones: not only is *briciola* used more frequently (see Table 8), especially in the plural, but it also co-occurs with a greater number of abstract nouns, as shown in Table 9 (where singular and plural forms are grouped together).

Table 8

Occurrences and frequency of the singular and plural forms of *briciola*

	Occurrences	Ipm	Negative polarity
			<i>non, neanche, nemmeno, neppure</i>
<i>Briciola</i> (sg.)	895	0.08	56 (0,1%)
<i>Briciole</i> ¹ (pl.)	1854	0.18	18

¹ As for *goccia* ‘drop’ and its plural *gocce*, the plural of the feminine noun *briciola* ‘crumb’ is formed with the ending *-e* (*briciole*).

Furthermore, as in Russian, even occurrences with food-related nouns – typically used literally – tend to take on a metaphorical meaning in negative polarity contexts, expressing the complete absence of something (10).

(10) Nessuno si degna di offrire a noi meridionali *nemmeno una briciola* di pane.

‘No one even deigns to offer us southerners so much as a *crumb* of bread.’

Table 9

Most frequent collocates types for *briciola* ‘crumb’

Collocates (>10) sg.	Hits	Collocates (>10) pl.	Hits
Pane ‘bread’	107	Pane ‘bread’	647
Potere ‘power’	38	Cibo ‘food’	48
Speranza ‘hope’	29	Biscotti ‘biscuits’	32
Energia ‘energy’	26	Pasta ‘pasta’	28
Umanità ‘humanity’	20	Potere ‘power’	27
Tempo ‘time’	17	Dignità ‘dignity’	19
Consenso ‘consensus’	17	Felicità ‘happiness’	18
Verità ‘truth’	15	Speranza ‘hope’	17
Dignità ‘dignity’	13	Impasto ‘dough’	17
Cibo ‘food’	13	Biscotto ‘biscuit’	17
Felicità ‘happiness’	12	Consenso ‘consensus’	17
Libertà ‘freedom’	11	Luce ‘light’	16
		Pan ‘bread’	15
		Vita ‘life’	14
		Panettone ‘panettone’	14

As observed, abstract nouns – although more commonly found in collocations with the singular form – also appear with the plural. These nouns do not belong to a single, well-defined semantic class, but they tend to cluster around the domain of feelings and emotions. Some refer specifically to emotional states, while others denote positively connoted concepts such as truth and humanity, or values like power and consensus – entities for which even a small amount (‘a crumb’) is perceived as highly valuable.

3.2.3. *Briciolo* ‘a bit’

As in the case of *goccio*, a comparable process can be observed with *briciolo*, the masculine (with ending *-o*) counterpart of *briciola*, which appears exclusively in the singular and occurs with notably high frequency.

Table 10

Occurrences and frequency of *briciolo* ‘a bit’

	Occurrences	Ipm	Negative polarity
			<i>non, neanche, nemmeno, neppure</i>
<i>Briciolo</i> (sg.)	9297	0.84	437 (4.7%)

In line with A. Giacalone (2019, p. 14), our data confirm that *briciolo* never denotes a small fragment of food and exclusively collocates with nouns expressing emotional or epistemic concepts (Table 11). *Briciolo* proves that a constructionalization process has occurred, as both gender and number have shifted – along with the meaning. The data also suggest that negative polarity contexts are relatively infrequent, which may indicate that, once the grammaticalization process is complete, the factors that initially facilitated it are no longer necessary.

Table 11

The first 15 collocates types for *briciolo* ‘a bit’

Collocates	Hits	Collocates	Hits
Speranza ‘hope’	514	Normalità ‘ordinariness’/‘normality’	125
Dignità ‘dignity’	474	Fiducia ‘trust’	104
Umanità ‘humanity’	376	Attenzione ‘attention’	104
Fortuna ‘chance’	208	Credibilità ‘credibility’	102
Allegria ‘joy’	192	Rispetto ‘respect’	96
Serenità ‘peace’	182	Testa ‘head’	96
Verità ‘truth’	151	Follia ‘folly’	96
Energia ‘energy’	128	Ottimismo ‘Optimism’	94

Briciolo builds upon the semantic features of *briciola* – namely fragmentariness, insufficiency, and value – and is used to convey both degree and evaluative functions (11).

(11) Mi son chiesto: la coerenza e un *briciolo di dignità* dove sono andati a finire?

‘I asked myself: consistency and an *ounce of dignity*, where did they go?’

3.3.1. *Krupica* ‘grain’: Russian data

As already stated in Section 2, *grain* denotes the fundamental unit of certain cereals or of some material as sand, gold and others, and is conceptually relevant as something small that can be gathered to form a larger quantity, the features that can be selected in the conceptualization process, apart from the small size, are its being defined, independent and able to interact with other bits concurring to form something bigger. The semantic component INDIVIDUAL, SINGLE is effectively reflected in the frequent use of modifiers such as indefinite pronouns (*каждая, какая-то, кое-какая, любая*), or deictics and determined modifiers (*эта, та, из тех, одна*).

(12) Наш долг – представителей более молодых поколений – бережно хранить *каждую крупицу* правды.

‘It is our duty, as representatives of younger generations, to carefully preserve *every grain* of truth.’

Table 12

Occurrences and frequency of the singular and plural forms of *krupica* ‘grain’

	Occurrences	Ipm	Negative polarity		
			<i>ne, ni</i>	<i>bez</i>	<i>liš’/daže</i>
<i>Krupica</i> (sg.)	382	0.5	6 + 31 ¹	7	3 + 10 ²
<i>Krupicy</i> (pl.)	854	0.12	5	–	30

¹ Manual screening of the “supposed” plural forms (see the cell below) preceded by *ne* or *ni* revealed that, out of 36 occurrences, only 5 were true plural forms (nominative or genitive cases), while the remaining 31 were in fact genitive singular. These 31 instances are therefore reported here.

² The same as explained above.

As will be shown below, these nouns do not have comparable frequency in the two languages.

In all the cases of negative polarity, *krupica* collocates with abstract nouns, except for one case in which the grain’s small size is used to visualize the tiniest parts of computer (12).

- (12) ...самоорганизующиеся микроскопические компьютеры, размеры которых не превышают *крупницу* песка.
 ‘...self-organising microscopic computers no bigger than a *grain of sand*’.

Krupica is frequently used to conceptualize information as in (13):

- (13) ...к журналистам *The Guardian* попала лишь *крупница информации* о финансовых вливаниях в имидж Украины.
 ‘The journalists at *The Guardian* received only a *grain of information* about the financial investments in Ukraine’s image.’

The collocates, in both singular and plural forms, are abstract nouns denoting epistemic concepts (Table 13) such as knowledge, information, news, and history – entities that are cognitively perceived as aggregations of numerous small units. This cognitive association may explain the noun’s marked preference for this specific semantic field.

Table 13

**The collocates of the singular
and plural forms ≥ 10 for *krupica* ‘grain’**

Collocates (sg.)	Hits	Collocates (pl)	Hits
Правды ‘truth’	60	Информации ‘information’	206
Информации ‘information’	49	Правды ‘truth’	54
Творчества ‘art’	21	Золота ‘gold’	48
Соли ‘salt’	20	Знаний ‘knowledge’	24
Золота ‘gold’	19	Соли ‘salt’	19
Истины ‘truth’	18	Истины ‘truth’	18
Знаний ‘knowledge’	12	Истории ‘history’	17
		Сведений ‘showing’	17
		Данных ‘data’	13
		Мудрости ‘wisdom’	11
		Опыта ‘experience’	11
		Времени ‘time’	10
		Пыли ‘dust’	10

- (14) Но из скудных официальных сообщений и *собранных крупиц* информации от нескольких наших украинских источников <....>
 ‘But from the meager official reports and the *collected bits* of information from a few of our Ukrainian sources <....>’

In these contexts it is frequently encountered after the verbs *собираты/собрать* ‘gather’, and *соединять* ‘unite’. This meaning is made evident also by the frequent use of the Dative plural form *по крупицам* ‘bit by bit’ as in (15).

- (15) Сложно переоценить роль поисковых отрядов в деле восстановления по *крупицам* судеб погибших во время Великой Отечественной войны солдат.
 ‘It is difficult to overestimate the role of search teams in the restoration *bit by bit* of the fate of soldiers who died during the Great Patriotic War.’

3.3.2. *Granello* ‘grain’: Italian data

Granello occurs significantly more frequently in the Italian corpus than in the Russian one (see Table 14).

A look at the collocates (Table 15) clearly reveals a preference for concrete nouns in Italian.

Despite the apparent predominance of concrete collocates, a closer analysis reveals that they are often used metaphorically (16), not only literally (17).

Table 14

Occurrences and frequency of the singular and plural forms of *granello*

	Occurrences	Ipm	Negative polarity
			<i>non, neanche, nemmeno, neppure</i>
<i>Granello</i> (sg.)	3050	0.27	101
<i>Granelli</i> (pl.)	2936	0.27	4

- (16) Ma gli incentivi sono un *granello* di sabbia
 ‘But the incentives are just a *grain* of sand.’
- (17) Diversi i sintomi con cui la persona reagisce all’inalazione di un *granello* di polline.
 ‘A person may react to the inhalation of a single *grain* of pollen with a range of symptoms.’

The collocate types ≥ 10 for *granello* 'grain'

Collocates	Hits	Collocates	Hits
<i>Sabbia</i> 'sand'	1742	<i>Terra</i> 'earth'	20
<i>Polvere</i> 'dust'	510	<i>Colpa</i> 'guilt'	17
<i>Sale</i> 'salt'	190	<i>Speranza</i> 'chance'	17
<i>Pepe</i> 'pepper'	60	<i>Sporco</i> 'dirty'	16
<i>Zucchero</i> 'sugar'	38	<i>Ghiaccio</i> 'ice'	14
<i>Verità</i> 'truth'	36	<i>Polline</i> 'pollen'	14
<i>Riso</i> 'rice'	29	<i>Materia</i> 'matter'	10
<i>Senapa</i> 'mustard'	27		

Due to the high number of occurrences, it was necessary to refer to empirical frequency, as illustrated in the chart in Figure 4, based on the analysis of 300 occurrences.

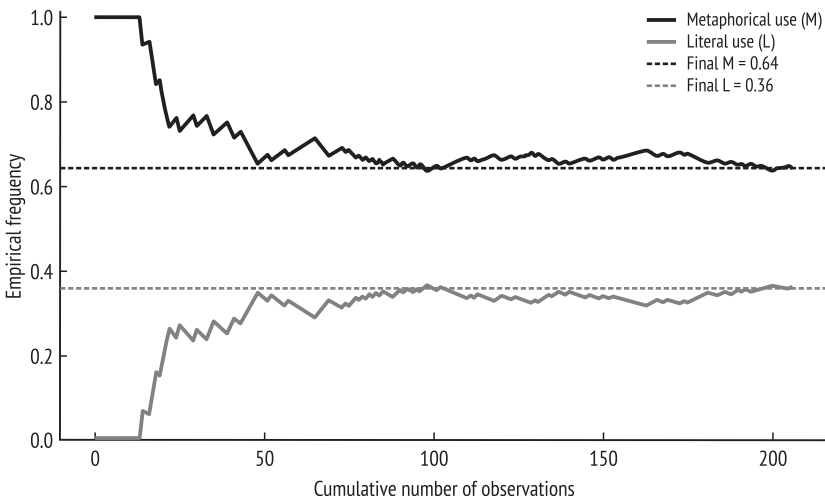


Fig. 3. Distribution of literal and metaphorical uses of *granello*

In negative polarity contexts, *granello* functions as a degree intensifier, while in many other contexts it is perceived as a disruptive element – something that interferes with the functioning of a mechanism (e.g., *ingranaggi* 'gears' (12)).

(12) Il *granello* di sabbia che rischia di inceppare gli ingranaggi della ripresa economica.

‘The *grain* of sand that risks jamming the gears of economic recovery.’

Despite the predominantly metaphorical meaning of the word *granello*, it is noteworthy that its use in negative polarity contexts is relatively infrequent.

4. Conclusions

Against the background of ongoing scholarly research on binominal constructions expressing quantity, this study has offered a contrastive analysis of binominal constructions denoting small quantity in Italian and Russian. It focused on six core nouns (*goccia/kaplja*, *briciola/kroška*, *granello/krupica*), with special attention to their metaphorical development as well as to their grammaticalization and pragmaticalization processes.

Because previous research has highlighted the preference of such constructions for NP contexts, the search strings were designed to capture these contexts. Although the search for negative contexts may not have been exhaustive, it nonetheless yielded additional data relevant to this issue, which needs to be explored further. For instance, all non-assertive contexts – e.g., *У него есть хоть капля разума* ‘He has at least a drop of reason’, where the nouns not only quantify but also intensify, expressing absence, scarcity, or emotional intensity – identified during the manual screening should be systematically retrieved through automatic searches. In addition to the quantitative retrieval of data – such as NP contexts and collocates – and given the well-known homonymy between the genitive singular and the nominative plural of feminine Russian nouns, a qualitative examination of random samples of 300 occurrences was conducted with two main objectives: first, to assess the significance of NP contexts for singular and plural forms; and second, to determine the proportion of metaphorical and literal uses of the nouns in both languages. The reliability of the selected sample was verified by observing the convergence and stabilization pattern of empirical frequency. A further issue that had to be taken into account was the different behaviour of singular and plural forms in these binomials.

With regard to the criteria outlined above, Section 3 discussed the data and yielded the following results.

1. Concerning NP contexts – a factor already discussed in the literature – it was observed that across both languages, singular forms are more strongly associated with metaphorical uses and NP contexts, partially confirming

the role of such environments in facilitating semantic shift, as suggested by previous studies (e.g., [Brems, 2007; Giacalone Ramat, 2019]). It must be stressed, though, that only the singular form of *kaplja* – and, to a lesser extent, *kroška* – shows NP contexts that can be considered relevant factors in metaphorical development or grammaticalization, while in all other cases, in both languages, the percentage of such occurrences does not appear to be so significant. This is therefore a direction in which further research is required, in order to investigate all possible NP contexts, including non-assertive ones, and to extend the analysis to a larger set of nouns. A weaker connection between NP co-occurrence and plural forms can likewise be confirmed. Moreover, the two Italian nouns that appear to have undergone a full process of constructionalization – *goccio* and *briciolo* – interestingly do not display a strong link with NP contexts, although *briciolo* occurs slightly more frequently in such environments.

2. With regard to the metaphorical processes undergone by the nouns and the consequent paths of conceptualization, the data retrieved through the automatic search of collocates, combined with the manual screening of at least 300 occurrences for each noun, yielded the following results.

First, all nouns – with the exception of the Italian plural *briciole* – undergo metaphorical extension predominantly in the singular form rather than in the plural. The metaphorical use does not display parallel behaviour in the two languages: *kaplja* is frequently used metaphorically, whereas its Italian counterpart *goccia* is not. The Russian *kaplja* is most often conceptualized as a small quantity of emotion, feeling, or a similar abstract notion, thereby confirming the conceptual metaphor EMOTIONS ARE LIQUID.

Kroška shows a preference for concrete collocates, mostly referring to food, yet closer examination reveals that it is used predominantly metaphorically – and in NP contexts – to indicate the complete absence of something, thus pointing to the development of the noun into a degree modifier rather than a quantifier. The inherent features of SCARCITY and VALUE associated with the concept of “crumb” likely serve as a semantic basis for metaphorical extensions. In Russian, the strong link with a limited set of collocates suggests that we are dealing with a process of idiomatization rather than grammaticalization.

Italian *briciola* and *briciole*, by contrast, tend to collocate with abstract nouns belonging to the semantic field of emotions, suggesting a completely different path of conceptualizing emotions in Italian. While *briciola* marks an initial stage – combining with nouns that denote emotions or positively connoted abstract qualities – the process culminates in *briciolo*.

The comparison between *granello* and *krupica* further reinforces this asymmetry. While Russian *krupica* is primarily used in epistemic and informational contexts – often emphasizing gradual accumulation (“bit by bit”) – Italian *granello* shows a strong preference for concrete collocates, although it is also frequently used metaphorically to denote disruption or minimal impact, still retaining its primary concrete features (e.g., *un granello di sabbia negli ingranaggi*).

3. As far as the grammaticalization and/or constructionalization processes are concerned, the empirical data yield particularly interesting results. Almost all nouns show a preference for the singular form in the process of metaphORIZATION, thus suggesting a certain degree of decategorization. Although NP contexts are not always significant, the manual examination shows that they occur almost exclusively in metaphorical environments, and even in the case of *kroška*, where concrete collocates predominate, they display metaphorical and degree-related meanings.

In Italian, a broader functional split can be observed. In particular, the emergence of the masculine forms *goccio* and *briciolo* indicates a more advanced stage of constructionalization: both nouns have undergone a shift in gender, number, and even category, and are now used primarily with quantifying (*goccio*) or intensifying (*briciolo*) functions. *Briciolo*, one could argue, has become a full scalar modifier, gradually losing its lexical core in favour of an abstract quantificational and degree meaning.

These findings lead to further observations concerning the semantic and cognitively salient features of N_1 in its combination with N_2 and the relevance of NP contexts, which needs further investigation.

Altogether, the results of this research suggest that although both languages share the typological basis for binominal constructions of small quantity, the processes of metaphorical shift, constructionalization, and semantic and functional extension vary significantly. Italian appears to offer a wider range of structural and pragmatic flexibility, particularly through the grammaticalization of masculine variants. Russian, on the other hand, reveals a tighter correlation between negative polarity and metaphorical intensification, particularly within emotional and evaluative domains. Overall, the value of a comparative approach in studying binomials expressing small quantity is clearly confirmed, as the comparison highlights the limits of some theoretical issues and suggest new perspective for research.

Future research may explore the diachronic paths of these constructions, their potential parallels in other Indo-European languages, and their implications for the interface between lexis, grammar, and discourse pragmatics.

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