

MISCELLANY

THE CLITIC *-UVA* (< *OF A*)

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Constructions like *not much of a problem*, *a slip of a girl*, *a whale of a ball game*, and *a doozy of a screwup* are part of general usage. In the last three, the construction can be described as “consisting of determiner + noun (N₂) + *of* + indefinite article + noun (N₁)” (Quirk et al. 1986, 1285); it is, moreover, “not a regular prepositional postmodification” but a “special case of prepositional apposition [of] singular count nouns where the *of*-phrase is subjective” (1284).¹ Partly due to the colloquial flavor of such constructions, the univervative (bound) aspect of the sequence *of a*—phonetically and grammatically—is occasionally reflected in its being spelled *uva*, as in *helluva* (cf. 1285) and its more sanitized variant *heckuva*. This quasi-phonetic spelling, in turn, has the force indirectly of confirming the establishment here of a clitic, namely *-uva*.²

A construction resembling ones with *-uva* omits *of* and involves adjectives, rather than pronouns or nouns (e.g., *not that big a deal*, *not so wonderful an idea*), where the adjective is preceded by a demonstrative pronoun (and typically by negation). Based on my own observation of media language, I have noted an increasing incidence of contamination between constructions with *of a* and those with DEMONSTRATIVE + ADJECTIVE + INDEFINITE ARTICLE. For instance, instead of *not that big a deal* or *not that good a player*, this tendency gives us *not that big OF A deal* and *not that good OF A player*—and even *not so /much different OF A plan*.³

Collateral phenomena in the same vein are colloquial partitive constructions (“quality partition”; Quirk et al. 1986, 249) with headwords that designate a category, particularly *kind*, *sort*, and *type*. Thus the stylistically neutral *kind of fish*, *sort of play*, and *type of equation* have their more informal counterparts *kind of a*, *sort of a*, and *type of a*, as in *what kind OF A thing* for *what kind of thing* (cf. Quirk et al. 1986, 451). With *kind of* and *sort of* there is also the phonetic tendency to elide the consonant and reduce the vowel in *of*, resulting in the pronunciation that is sometimes represented orthographically as *-a* (= /ə/), as in *kinda* and *sorta*. The univervation (and potential cliticization) represented by *kinda* and *sorta* is significant because it points in the direction of a subsumed semantic shift: the words *kind*, *sort*, and

type—now “partitive count nouns” (Quirk et al. 1986, 249)—have the original lexical meaning of QUALITY par excellence but have been reinterpreted as QUANTIFIERS.⁴

Herein, I think, lies the kernel of an explanation of the formation of the clitic *-uva*. In inherited constructions like *so fair a maid* the force of the intensifier (by definition) is to quantify the following adjective, specifically by altering the meaning to that of “indefinite (positive) EXTENT.” But the quantificational meaning of this construction is only weakly expressed; hence the inducement to make it more explicit by interpolating the quintessentially quantificational preposition *of*. This would seem to be the motivation for the formation and spread of the clitic *-uva*.

NOTES

1. Earlier discussions of the phenomena subsumed by the phrase in question and directly related matters can be found in Curme (1931, 85, 544–45), Jespersen (1914, 364; 1949, 87–88, 339–42), and Mencken (1945, 452). I am grateful to Robert A. Rothstein for these references.
2. One can ask why—if *-uva* is productive, as claimed here—only *helluva* and *heckuva* seem to have this spelling. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that the function words *of* and *a* are so common as to resist any change in their spelling even when they are immediately contiguous. The resistance can be overcome only when the word they follow belongs to emotive vocabulary, including profanity.
3. Here are two recent examples heard from speakers on television and radio: “too low of a price” (Bill Gates, “Moneyline News Hour,” CNN, 10 Nov. 1999); “not that serious of a problem” (Bob Edwards, “Morning Edition,” NPR, 16 Nov. 1999). Note the construction’s evident spread to the intensifier *rather* as a noun phrase modifier: “rather of a problem” (Milton Friedman, interview, “Morning Edition,” NPR, 9 Dec. 1999). For more data and references to earlier literature, particularly with respect to *big of a*, see Fitzmaurice (2000, esp. 56–59).
4. The term *quantifier* is being used in the most general sense here, meaning any linguistic entity that designates or demarcates a quantity (rather than in the restricted sense of modifiers of entities that can be pluralized).

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