Sexless animates?

Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French

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1. Introduction

Sexless anamnes?

Noun classes (adapted from Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)

- **Class A**: Suppletive forms: two distinct forms (e.g., la petite, the little) vs. le petit, the small)
- **Class B/C**: Related forms: suffix (-s) determines (C) change to (s) chanteuse, the singer)
- **Class D**: Fixed-gender nouns (e.g., le ministre, the minister) vs. le garçon, the boy)

⇒ Class D nouns can refer to both females and males!

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

(1) Le plus jeune des sentinelles est Hélène.

- **Gender agreement competition**
  - the outer DP can agree with:
  - Class B/C nouns: semantic agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)
  - Class D nouns: grammar error

How do they explain these agreement patterns?

⇒ Distinction between grammatical and semantic gender

- Class B/C nouns: marked for grammatical gender
- Valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on Gend

No semantic gender value = Failed Agree (Preminger 2011)

⇒ Spell-out of default masculine gender

- Two noun analysis of superlative partitives: noun of inner DP (test) copied onto outer DP (subset), remains unpronounced
- If present, gender value copied together with noun (F)
- Second Gender Phrase in outer DP
- If Failed Agree has taken place in inner DP, second chance to insert semantic gender value in outer DP (6)

4. Results

(10) La plus jeune des (nouvelles) sentinelles est Jean-Luc.

- Class D noun, gender mismatch in partitive

(11) Le plus jeune des (nouvelles) sentinelles est Jean-Luc.

- Class D noun, gender mismatch in partitive

5. Towards an analysis

The theoretical analysis shows:
- General differences between the noun classes
- Variation within the results

Gender agreement competition, the outer DP can agree with:

1. The gender of the noun in the inner DP
2. The gender of the predicate

7. Conclusion

1. Replication of Sleeman & Ihsane’s experiment on a larger scale:
- Semantic agreement is preferred with class B and class C nouns
- Grammatical agreement is preferred with class D nouns

2. We have proposed a theoretical analysis that explains the agreement patterns observed

Future research: (i) Investigate quantified partitives (one of the X) & (ii) Investigate same phenomena in German

References