Sexless animates?

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Sexless animates? Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French

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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

Noun classes (adapted from Ihsane & Sleeman 2016)

Class A: Suppletive forms: two distinct forms io sono ‘the sister’ = le frère, le ‘the brother’

Class B/C: Related forms: suffixes (b)/determiner (c) change io chanteur = le chanteur ‘the singer’

Class D: Fixed-gender nouns 

io femme, sexe ‘the woman’ 
io gâteau ‘the cake’

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

(4) Plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc.

⇒ Replication of Sleeman & Ihsane’s experiment on a larger scale:

(5) Plus jeune de l’aéroport est Hélène.

⇒ Previous investigated by Sleeman & Ihsane (2016)

3. Aims & Methods

Sleeman & Ihsane’s results only based on a limited number of informants’ judgements

⇒ Replicate Sleeman & Ihsane’s experiment on a larger scale and in a more systematic way

⇒ Provide a theoretical explanation for the agreement patterns we observe

Methodology:

Grammar Detecting Judgement Task with 70 native speakers of French

⇒ Online task using Google Forms

⇒ Sentences judged on a 5-point scale, presented in random order

⇒ 13 different noun classes B, C and D included

⇒ Sentences with semantic and grammatical agreement

⇒ Control sentences

⇒ Background questionnaire

5. Towards an analysis

The theoretical analysis should explain:

⇒ 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) Le plus jeune des nouveaux ministres est Hélène.

⇒ The most young of the new. ministers est Hélène.

Main theoretical assumptions:

⇒ A two noun analysis of partitives (cf. Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)

⇒ Inner DP’s noun copied onto outer DP, but remains unpronounced

⇒ There is a phase boundary between inner and outer DP

Gender feature hierarchy (based on Harley & Ritter 2002):

gender common = underspecified gender

masculine feminine

masculine feminine

masculine feminine

Features marking in the mental lexicon:

⇒ [m] masculine only

⇒ [f] feminine only

⇒ [c, m] masculine + common

⇒ [c, f] feminine + common

⇒ Some nouns marked as either feminine [f] or masculine [m]

⇒ Some nouns marked with a hybrid feature [c, f] or [c, m]

This follows the ongoing process of feminisation in French

⇒ Compare the entries for the nouns ministre, professeur and sentinelle in different editions of the French Petit Robert dictionary:


ministre > masculine noun ministre > noun

professeur > masculine noun professeur > noun

sentinelle > feminine noun sentinelle > feminine noun

⇒ Westveer, Sleeman & Aboh (2018)

⇒ Class D noun sentinelle still marked as feminine: gender mismatches less acceptable

In this way, we can account for variation:

⇒ If gender mismatches are not accepted with a noun, this noun is marked as either [f] or [m] in the mental lexicon

⇒ If gender mismatches are accepted with a noun, this noun is marked as either [c, f] or [c, m] in the mental lexicon

6. An analysis that seems to work...

Le plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène.

⇒ The most young of the (new) ministers est Hélène.

⇒ Class C noun, no gender mismatch in partitive

La plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène.

⇒ The most young of the (new) ministers est Hélène.

⇒ Class D noun, gender mismatch in partitive

References


⇒ Sleeman, Petra & Tabea Ihsane. 2016. Gender mismatches in partitive constructions with superlatives in French. Glossa 1 (1), 1-20