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 Sleeman & Ihnsane 2016)

Class A
Suppletive forms: two distinct forms (e.g. le/la 'the sister' – le/la frère/ère 'the brother')

Class B/C
Related forms: suffixes (B)/determiner (C) change (e.g. le/chanteur => le chanteur)

Class D
Fixed-gender nouns: le/gene 'the guard' inne/gene 'the genius'

⇒ Class D nouns can refer to both males and females and make agreements.

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

(4) [f] plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc.

⇒ [c, f] feminine + common

⇒ [c, m] masculine + common

2. Sexless animates? Gender agreement in (super)partitives in French:

• Class D nouns: only grammatical agreement (not verified by them!)
• Class B/C nouns: semantic agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)

How do they explain these agreement patterns?

⇒ Distinction between grammatical and semantic gender

⇒ Valuation through insertion of semantic gender on noun: Val semantic gender value = Failed Agree (Preminger 2011)

⇒ Spell-out of default masculine gender

Two noun analysis of superlative partitives: noun of inner DP (set) copied onto outer DP (subset), remains unpronounced

• If present, gender value copied together with noun (E)
• 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)

3. Aims and methods
Sleeman & Ihnsane’s results only based on a limited number of informants’ judgements

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

⇒ Provide a theoretical explanation for the agreement patterns we observe

Methodology:
• Grammatical judgement Task with 70 native speakers of French
• Online task using Google Forms
• NO sentences judged on a 5-point scale, presented in random order
• 13 different nouns of noun classes B, C and D included
• Sentences with semantic and grammatical agreement
• Control sentences
• Background questionnaire

4. Results

Comparison noun classes

Judgements of class D nouns

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) [f] Le plus jeune des nouveaux ministres est Hélène.

⇒ [f] feminine + common

⇒ [m] masculine + common

Main theoretical assumptions:

• A two noun analysis of partitives (cf. Sleeman & Ihnsane 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

Features marking in the mental lexicon:

• [m] masculine only
• [f] feminine only
• [c, m] masculine + common
• [c, f] feminine + common

⇒ Some nouns are marked as either [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:

Petit Robert (1977)

ministre > masculine noun
professeur > masculine 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...

(8) [f] Le plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres

⇒ [f] feminine + common

⇒ [m] masculine + common

⇒ [c, m] masculine + common

⇒ [c, f] feminine + common

⇒ Nouns marked as [m] or [f] in lexicon: agreement with inner DP

⇒ Nouns marked as [c, m] or [c, f] in lexicon: agreement with predicate

7. Conclusion

1. Replication of Sleeman & Ihnsane’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 sexless phenomena in German

References


• Westveer, Thom; Petra Sleeman and Enoch O. Aboh. 2018. Sexless animates? Functional projection Gender Phrase (GendP) only present for animate nouns With class B/C: yes With class D: no


