Sexless animates?

Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French

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Citation for published version (APA):
1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

2. Sleeman & Ihnsane (2016)

Sexual agreement in (superlative) 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
- Original agreement between set noun and subset noun
- Gender value copied together with noun
- Semantic gender agreement: gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted

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
- 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

3. Aims & 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:
- Grammaticality judgement Task with 70 native speakers of French
- Online task using Google Forms
- 80 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

Judgments of class D nouns

5. Towards an analysis

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

Gender agreement competition, the outer DP can agree with:
- The gender of the noun in the inner DP
- The gender of the predicate

Main theoretical assumptions:
- A two-noun agreement 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):

6. An analysis that seems to work...

(8) *Le plus jeune des (nouvelles) ministres est Hélène.

(9) La plus jeune des (nouvelles) ministres est Jean-Luc.

Individual variation: difference in feature marking in the mental lexicon

7. Conclusion

Future research:
- (I) Investigate quantified partitives (one of the X) & (II) Investigate same phenomena in German

References