Sexless animates?

Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French

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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 & Ihnane 2016)

Class A: Suppletive forms: two distinct forms for theta (the sister) = le frère(e), the brother

Class B/C: Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change to chanteur(e) = ‘the singer’

Class D: Fixed-gender nouns

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

(4) [DP la plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc.
the.M most young of.the.F.PL minister.M.PL is Hélène

2. Sleeman & Ihnane (2016)

Gender agreement in (superlative) partitives in French:

[Class D nouns: only grammatical agreement (not verified by them!)]

[Nouns with class B/C: 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

⇒ Gender agreement competition, the outer DP can agree with:

- If present, gender value copied together with noun (5)
- Second Gender Phrase in outer DP

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

- If present, gender value copied together (noun) (E)
- If Failed Agree in outer DP, second chance to insert semantic gender value in outer DP (6)

3. Aims & methods

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

⇒ Replicate Sleeman & Ihnane’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 Test with 70 native speakers of French
- Online test 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

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) [DP la plus jeune des nouveaux ministres est Hélène.
the.M.M most young of.the.M.PL minister.M.PL is Hélène

Main theoretical assumptions:

- A two-noun analysis of partitives [cf. Sleeman & Ihnane 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 + unspecified 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
- [c,m,f] all

⇒ 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

⇒ Petit Robert (2016) = 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...

(8) [DP le plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène.
the.M most young of.the.M.PL minister.M.PL is Hélène

⇒ Class C noun, no gender mismatch in partitive

(9) [VP/TP le plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène.
the.M most young of.the.M.PL minister.M.PL is Hélène

⇒ Class D noun, gender mismatch in partitive

7. Conclusion

1. Replication of Sleeman & Ihnane’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

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