Sexless animates?

*Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French*

Westveer, T.J.T.; Sleeman, A.P.; Aboh, E.O.

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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

Noun classes (adapted from Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)

Class A: Suppletive forms: two distinct forms to refer to "the sister" – le/femme, the "brother" – le/homme.

Class B/C: Related forms: suffixes (C) or determiner (B). Change to chanteuse, chanteur, le chanteur, the singer

Class D: Fixed-gender nouns: le/femme, sentinelle, the guard.

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

(4) [f] feminine only

(5) [c, m] masculine + common

(6) [c, f] feminine + common

Gender agreement in (superlative) partitives in French:

Class D nouns: no gender agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)

2. Sleeman & Ihsane (2016)

Gender 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

- Class B/C nouns: unmarked 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 (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 & 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:

- Grammatical judgement Test 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

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

Main theoretical assumptions:

- A two-noun analysis of partitives (cf. Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)
- Inner DP 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
- feminine masculine
- feminine masculine

6. An analysis that seems to work...

Le plus jeune des (nouvelles) ministres est Hélène.

Hélène.

(9) La plus jeune des (nouvelles) ministres is the most young of the (new C.P.) ministers x.P.
⇒ Class C noun, gender mismatch in partitive

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

Jean-Luc.

(10) La plus jeune des (nouvelles) sentinelle[s] est Jean-Luc.

⇒ Jean-Luc.

Class D noun, gender mismatch in partitive

6. An analysis that seems to work...

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⇒ Jean-Luc.

Class D noun, gender mismatch in partitive

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

References