Sexless animates?
*Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French*

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Sixless animates? Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French
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1. Introduction
Sixless animates?

Noun classes (adapted from Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)

Class A
Suppletive forms: two distinct forms to le souverain, “the ruler” – le souverain, “the brother”

Class B/C
Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change to: a chanteuse, “the singer”
la/ba chanteuse, “the musician”

Class D
Fixed-gender nouns
la/m, feminine “the guard”
b/a, feminine “the genius.”

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

(4) [DP plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc, la plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc]

⇒ Grammatical or semantic gender agreement?
⇒ Previously investigated by Sleeman & Ihsane (2016)

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 on value
⇒ 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 (5)

Valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on Gend

Class B/C Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change

Class D nouns can refer to both females and males!

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 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

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 le plus jeune des nouveaux ministres est Hélène, the most young of the new ministers is 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

Features marking in the mental lexicon:
⇒ [m] masculine only
⇒ [+c, [m]] masculine + common
⇒ [+f, feminine] 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 sentimente in different editions of the French Petit Robert dictionary:


ministre > masculine noun ministre > noun
professeur > masculine noun professeur > noun
sentimente > feminine noun sentimente > feminine noun

⇒ Westveer, Sleeman & Aboh (2018)
⇒ Class D noun sentimente 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) Le plus jeune des nouveaux ministres is Hélène. the most young of the new ministers is Hélène
⇒ Class C noun, no gender mismatch in partitive

(9) La plus jeune des nouveaux ministres est Hélène. the most young of the new ministers is Hélène
⇒ Class D noun, gender mismatch in partitive

Class C noun or 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

Future research: (i) Investigate quantified partitives (one of the X) & (ii) Investigate same phenomena in German

References