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Sexless animates? Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French
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1. Introduction
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Noun classes (adapted from Ihnane & Sleeman 2016)
Class A: Suppletive forms: two distinct forms (a /b), “the sister” = la/le sœur, “the brother” = le/la frère.
Class B/C: Related forms: suffixes (b) determine (C) change (la/Sœur) = le/la chanteuse, “the singer” (la/le ministe), “the minister”
Class D: Fixed-gender nouns (a) feminine = “the guard” (la/le garde)
⇒ Class D nouns can refer to both females and males!

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:
(4) [F]/[M] plus young of the guard F/PL is Jean-Luc

2. Sleeman & Ihnane (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 GendP
⇒ 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 (F)
⇒ 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 & 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 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

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]/[M] le plus jeune des nouveaux ministres est Hélène, the[M/F] most young of the new[F/M] ministers 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):

6. An analysis that seems to work...
Le plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène. Hélène

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

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) (J) Investigate same phenomena in German

References