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 Ihsane & Sleeman 2016)

- Class A: Suppletive forms: two distinct forms (la soeur – le frère, the sister – the brother)
- Class B/C: Related forms: suffix, (de)terminer (C) change (la chanteuse – le chanteur, the singer)
- Class D: Fixed-gender nouns (la ministe, the minister)

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

(4) [m] le plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc, the m. most young of the (new. m.) sentinelles, is 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

⇒ 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)

(4) [m] le plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc, the m. most young of the (new. m.) sentinelles, is Jean-Luc.

⇒ Class D noun, gender mismatch in partitive

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:

- 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 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) [m] le plus jeune des nouveaux ministres est Hélène, the m. most young of the (new. m.) 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 = unspecified gender

masculine feminine

masculine feminine

Features marking the mental lexicon:

- [m] masculine only
- [c, m] masculine + 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 sentinelle in different editions of the French Petit Robert dictionary:


ministre > masculine noun ministre > noun

professeur > masculine noun professeur > noun

sentinelle > feminine noun sentinelle > feminine noun

⇒ Westveer, Sleeman & Abboh (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) Le plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène. the m. most young of the (new. m.) ministers, is Hélène.

⇒ Class C noun, gender mismatch in partitive

(9) La plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministères est Hélène. the f. most young of the (new. f.) minister, is Hélène.

⇒ Class B 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

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

References