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 Ihsane & Sleeman 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Gender Marking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Suppletive forms: two distinct forms for [m] (the ‘sister’) and [f] (the ‘brother’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B/C</td>
<td>Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change for masculine (m) and feminine (f)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Fixed-gender nouns: feminine = ‘the guard’; masculine = ‘the genius’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Class B nouns can refer to both females and males!

2. Sleeman & Ihsane (2016)

Gender agreement in (superlative) partitives in French:

- Class D nouns: only grammatical agreement might be observed between noun and partitive
- Class B/C nouns: semantic agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and partitive noun accepted)

How do they explain these agreement patterns?

- Distinction between grammatical and semantic gender
- Valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on gender mismatch in inner DP
- Spell-out of default masculine gender

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

- If present: gender value copied together with noun (E) (Sleeman & Ihsane 2011)
- If Failed Agree in outer DP: second chance to insert semantic gender value on noun (E)

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

Methodology:

- Grammaticality Judgement Task with 70 native speakers of French
- Online task using Google Forms
- BO 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

4. Results

- Class B noun, no gender mismatch in partitive

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:

- The gender of the noun in the inner DP
- The gender of the predicate

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
- [m] masculine
- [f] feminine

Features marking the mental lexicon:

- [m] masculine only
- [f] feminine only
- [c] common

This follows the ongoing process of feminisation in French.

- ‘Guard’ (feminine) and ‘sister’ (masculine) found in different editions of the French Petit Robert dictionary.

6. An analysis that seems to work...

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

-.sexless noun, gender mismatch in partitive

- Est Hélène.
- Est Jean-Luc.

- With class B/C: yes
- With class D: no

7. Conclusion

- We have proposed a theoretical analysis that explains the agreement patterns observed

References