Sexless animates? Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French
Thom Westveer, Petra Sleeman & Encho O. Abosh – Université van Amsterdam
Going Romance 2018
Universiteit Utrecht – 12.12.2018

1. Introduction
Sexless animates?

Noun classes (adapted from Sleeman & Ihmsane 2016)

| Class A | Suppletive forms: two distinct forms in Spec DP, “the sister” – “le frère”, “the brother” |
| Class B/C | Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change in noun classes, “the singer” |
| Class D | Fixed-gender nouns |

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

(4) Plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc. the mo./most young of the guard ‘guard’ is Jean-Luc.

⇒ Grammatical gender in the mental lexicon:

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

Class A: Suppletive forms: two distinct forms

Sleeman & Ihmsane’s results only based on a limited number of informant’s judgements

Replicate Sleeman & Ihmsane’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

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

The main theoretical assumptions:

A two-noun analysis of partitives (cf. Sleeman & Ihmsane 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

[f] feminine only

[c, m] masculine + common

[c, f] 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

6. An analysis that seems to work...

(8) Le plus jeune des (nouvelles) ministres est Hélène. the mo./most young of the (new) ministers is Hélène.

⇒ Class B noun, no gender mismatch in partitive agreement

(9) La plus jeune des (nouvelles) ministres est Hélène. the ml./most young of the (new) ministers is Hélène.

⇒ Class C noun, gender mismatch in partitive agreement

⇒ Nouns marked as [m] or [f] in lexicon: agreement with inner DP

⇒ Nouns marked as [c, m] or [c, f] in lexicon: agreement with predicate

1. Replication of Sleeman & Ihmsane’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


