Sexless animates?

*Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French*

Westveer, T.J.T.; Sleeman, A.P.; Aboh, E.O.

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Sexless animates? Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French

1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

Noun classes (adapted from Ihsane & Sleeman 2016)

Class A Suppletive forms: two distinct forms to express ‘the sister’ – le Frère, le ‘the brother’

Class B/C Related forms: suffixes [s], [s], change to change to – le chantier, ‘the singer’

Class D Fixed-gender nouns: le Frère, le ‘the guard’

 encoded where? Interpretable?

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?

The distinction between grammatical and semantic gender

No semantic gender value = Failed Agree (Preminger 2011)

Spell-out of default masculine gender

Towards an analysis

2.7. Conclusion

3. Aims & methods

Sleeman & Ihsane’s results only based on a limited number of informants’ judgements

Reproduce 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

Comparison noun classes

Judgements of class D nouns

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

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

Features marking in the mental lexicon:

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

This follows the ongoing process of feminisation in French

- Compare the entries for the nouns ministre, professeur, et 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 & Abob (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.

Le plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène.

(9) La plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène.

La plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène.

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

References