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 Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)

Class A
Suppletive forms: two distinct forms
la f. sœur ‘the sister’ – le frère ‘the brother’

Class B/C
Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change
la chanteuse ‘the singer’

Class D
Fixed-gender nouns
la/le professeur ‘the minister’

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

We have proposed a theoretical analysis that explains the agreement patterns observed. There is a phase boundary between inner and outer DP. In this way, we can account for variation:

- If gender mismatches are accepted with a noun, this noun is marked
- If present, gender value copy 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

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 partitives (cf. Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)

Variation within the results

- A two-noun analysis of partitives (cf. Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)
- Variation in the results

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:
- Grammatical Judgement Task with 70 native speakers of French
- Online task using Google Forms
- Control sentences (cf. Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)
- Provide a theoretical explanation for the agreement patterns we observe
- Methodological limitations

4. Results

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

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 < underspecified gender
- masculine feminine
- masculine feminine
- masculine feminine

Features marking in the mental lexicon:

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

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:
- Petit Robert (1977)
- Petit Robert (2016)

6. An analysis that seems to work...

Individual variation: difference in feature marking in the mental lexicon

References

- Sleeman, Petra and Petra Skewman. 2016. Gender agreement with animate nouns in French. Second Gender Phrase in outer DP.