Sexless animates?
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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 Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)

Class A: Suppletive forms: two distinct forms
la sœur (the sister) = le frère (the brother)

Class B/C: Related forms: suffixes (5d) determiner (C) change in
la chanteuse = le chanteur

Class D: Fixed-gender nouns
la maîtresse = le maître

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

(4) Répa plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc.
la plus young of the .guard.PL
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

⇒ Variation through insertion of semantic gender on Valuation

⇒ 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)

3. Aims & methods

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

⇒ 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

(7) Le plus jeune des nouveaux ministres est Hélène.
la plus young of the .new.ministros
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 = 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

⇒ Compare the entries for the nouns ministre, professeur and sentinelle in different editions of the French Petit Robert dictionary:

Petit Robert (1977)

ministre > masculine noun
professeur > masculine noun
sentinelle > feminine noun

⇒ Westveer, Sleeman & Aboh (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.
la plus young of the .new.ministros
is Hélène.

⇒ Class B noun, gender mismatch in partitive est ministere

⇒ 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)

(9) La plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène.
la plus young of the .new.ministros
is Hélène.

⇒ Class C noun, gender mismatch in partitive est ministre

⇒ 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

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

