Sexless animates?

*Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French*

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1. Introduction

We have proposed a theoretical analysis that explains the agreement patterns observed. In this way, we can account for variation:

- Distinction between grammatical and semantic gender
- Gender agreement competition, the outer DP can agree with:
  - Class B/C nouns: only grammatical gender (not verified by them)
  - Class B/C nouns: semantic agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)

This follows the ongoing process of feminisation in French.

2. Sleeman & Ihsane (2016)

Gender agreement in (superlative) partitives in French:

- Class D nouns: only grammatical gender (not verified by them)
- Class B/C nouns: semantic agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)

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 (5)
- 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 and 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 Test 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

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) La plus jeune des nouveaux ministres est Hélène.

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

Features marking the mental lexicon:

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ministre</td>
<td>masculine noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professeur</td>
<td>masculine noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentinelle</td>
<td>feminine noun</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Westveer, Sleeman & Aboh (2018)

- Class D noun sentinelle still marked as feminine: gender mismatches less acceptable

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.

Individual variation: difference in feature marking in the mental lexicon

- [m] masculine noun
- [f] feminine noun
- [c, m] masculine + common
- [c, f] feminine + common
- [c, m, f] masculine + common
- Gender mismatches less acceptable

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