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 & Ihssane 2016)

Class A: Suppletive forms: two distinct forms la sœur ‘the sister’ vs le frère ‘the brother’
Class B/C: Related forms: suffixes (B)/Determiner (C) change (le chanteur ‘the singer’)
Class D: Fixed-gender nouns: la/le ministr(e) ‘the minister’

1. Gender agreement patterns observed

- Failed Agree: inner DP’s noun copied onto outer DP but remains unpronounced
- Distinction between grammatical and semantic gender
- Grammatical gender: failed agreement only semantic agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)
- Semantic gender: functional projection Gender Phrase (GendP) only present for animate nouns

2. Sleeman & Ihssane (2016)

- Gender agreement in (superlative) partitives in French:
  - Class D nouns: only grammatical agreement (not verified by them!)
  - Class B/C nouns: unmarked for grammatical gender
  - Valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on GendP
  - No semantic gender value = Failed Agree (Preminger 2011)
  - Spell-out of default masculine gender

3. Aims and methods

- Sleeman & Ihssane’s results only based on a limited number of informants’ judgements
- Replicate Sleeman & Ihssane’s experiment on a larger scale and in a more systematic way

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 noun classes B, C and D included
- Sentences with semantic and grammatical agreement
- Control sentences
- Background questionnaire

4. Results

- An analysis that seems to work...

5. Towards an analysis

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

(T) le plus jeune des nouveaux ministres est Hélène.

Main theoretical assumptions:
- A two-noun analysis of partitives (cf. Sleeman & Ihssane 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

- Some nouns marked as 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, 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 & 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...

- Mentions that the most young of the new ministers is Hélène.

7. Conclusion

1. Replication of Sleeman & Ihssane’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