Sexless animates?

Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French

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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

Noun classes (adapted from Ihsane & Sleeman 2016)

Class A

Suppletive forms: f. = sœur ‘the sister’; m. = frère ‘the brother’

Class B/C

Related forms: suffix ‘-ier’ (e.g., ‘le chanteur’ ‘the singer’)

Class D

Fixed-gender nouns: m. = ministre ‘the minister’; f. = sentinelle ‘the guard’

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

(4) [f/m] plus jeune des [f/m] sentinelle est Jean-Luc.

(5) le most young of the [f/m] guard [f/m] is Jean-Luc.

If gender mismatches are accepted with a noun, this noun is marked as either [f] or [m] in the mental lexicon.

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 on Gend

⇒ 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.

⇒ 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

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

4. Results

(6) [m/f] plus jeune des [m/f] sentinelle est Hélène.

(7) [m/f] most young of the [m/f] guard [m/f] is 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

6. An analysis that seems to work...

(1) La plus jeune des ‘the most young of the’ (new. PL) ministre est Hélène.

(2) La plus jeune des ‘the most young of the’ (new. PL) ministre est Hélène.

(3) La plus jeune des ‘the most young of the’ (new. PL) ministre est Hélène.

(4) La plus jeune des ‘the most young of the’ (new. PL) ministre est Hélène.

Individual variation: difference in feature marking in the mental lexicon

Sentinelle [f]

Ministre [m]

Jean-Luc [m]

Hélène [f]

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

Ihsane, Tabea and Petra Sleeman. 2016. Gender agreement with animate nouns in French. Selected Proceedings of the 43rd Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages (LSRL), 1-25.