Sexless animates?

*Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French*

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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

We have proposed a theoretical analysis that explains the agreement patterns observed in French. There is a phase boundary between inner and outer DP.

2. Sleeman & Ihnane (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 value
- 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 and methods

Sleeman & Ihnane’s results only based on a limited number of informant’s judgements
- Replicate Sleeman & Ihnane’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:
- The gender of the noun in the inner DP
- The gender of the predicate

(7) Le plus jeune des nouvelles ministres est Hélène.

The.7m.most young of the.new.m. ministers is Hélène.

Main theoretical assumptions:
- A two noun analysis of partitives (cf. Sleeman & Ihnane 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 the mental lexicon:
- [m] masculine only
- [f] feminine only
- [c, m] masculine + common
- [f, c] feminine + common
- [c, f] common

This follows the ongoing process of feminisation in French

(8) Le plus jeune des (nouvelles) ministres est Hélène.

The.7m.most young of the (new.m. ) ministers is Hélène.

4. Results

Comparison noun classes

Judgements of class D nouns

6. An analysis that seems to work...

(9) La plus jeune des (nouvelles) ministres est Hélène.

The.7f.most young of the (new.m. ) ministers is Hélène.

(10) La plus jeune des (nouvelles) sentinelles est Jean-Luc.

The.7f.most young of the (new.m. ) guards.f.m. is Jean-Luc.

(11) Le plus jeune des (nouvelles) sentinelles est Jean-Luc.

The.7m.most young of the (new.m. ) guards.f.m. is Jean-Luc.

7. Conclusion

1. Replication of Sleeman & Ihnane’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 in French

References: