Sexless animates?

Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French

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Citation for published version (APA):

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Sexless animates? Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French
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Going Romance 2018
Universiteit Utrecht – 12.12.2018

1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

Noun classes (adapted from Ihsane & Sleeman 2016)
Class A: Suppletive forms: two distinct forms (cf. ‘le’ – ‘la’)
Class B/C: Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change
Class D: Fixed-gender nouns (cf. ‘le’ , ‘la’

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:
(4) [DP plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc, the most young of the new. guard.F.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
⇒ Class B/C nouns are marked for grammatical gender
⇒ Valuation through insertion of semantic gender value 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, 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 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 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 conditions
• 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) [le plus jeune des nouveaux ministres est Hélène, the most young of the new. ministers.f.PL 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 under specified gender
• masculine feminine

Features marking the mental lexicon:
• [m] masculine only
• [f] feminine only

⇒ 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 minister, professeur and sentinelle in different editions of the French Petit Robert dictionary:

⇒ Westveer, Sleeman & Abboh (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. the most young of the new. ministers.f.PL is Hélène]

⇒ Individual variation: difference in feature marking in the mental lexicon

(9) [La plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène. the most young of the new. ministers.f.PL is Hélène]

⇒ Individual variation: difference in feature marking in the mental lexicon

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