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: two distinct forms to la sœur: “the sister” vs. le frère, “the brother”
- Class B/C: Related forms: suffix + determiner (C) change to chanteuse, “the singer”
- Class D: Fixed-gender nouns

Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French:

- Class D nouns: only grammatical agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)

2. Sleeman & Ihsane (2016)

Gender agreement in (superlative) partitives in French:

- Class D nouns: only grammatical agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)

- Class B/C nouns: semantic agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)

- Class D noun, no gender mismatch in partitive

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

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

5. Towards an analysis

Theoretical analysis:

- 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

Main theoretical assumptions:

- A two-noun analysis of partitives

- Inner DP’s noun copied onto outer DP, but remains unpronounced

- There is a phase boundary between inner and outer DP

Gender feature hierarchy (adapted from Harley & Ritter 2002):

- Gender: common vs. underspecified gender

masculine feminine masculine feminine

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

- [c, m, f] masculine + common

This follows the ongoing process of feminisation in French

6. An analysis that seems to work...

Individual variation: difference in feature marking in the mental lexicon

- Nouns marked as [m] or [f] in lexicon: agreement with inner DP

- Nouns marked as [c, m] or [c, f] in lexicon: agreement with predicate

7. Conclusion

References

