Sexless animates?

*Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French*

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1. Introduction
Sexless animates?

2. Sleeman & Ihstones (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)

3. Aims & methods
Sleeman & Ihstone’s results only based on a limited number of informants’ judgements
• Replicate Sleeman & Ihstone’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
• No 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

4. Results
Comparison noun classes

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

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

6. An analysis that seems to work...

(8) Le plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène.
Hélène is the most young of the (new) ministers.

(9) La plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Jean-Luc.
Jean-Luc is the most young of the (new) ministers.

Individual variation: difference in feature marking in the mental lexicon

7. Conclusion
1. Replication of Sleeman & Ihstone’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

References