Sexless animates?

Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French

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Sexless animates? Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French
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1. Introduction
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Noun classes (adapted from Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)

Class A
Suppletive forms: two distinct forms (a) female “the sister” – (b) masculine “the brother”

Class B/C
Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change (change = chanteau, – “the singer”)

Class D
Fixed-gender nouns,

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

(4) Text plus jeunest les sentinelle est Jean-Luc. the F/M most young of the guard F.PL is Jean-Luc.

⇒ Grammaral 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 unmarked for grammatical gender

⇒ Valuation through insertion of semantic gender on Valuation through insertion of semantic gender on

⇒ 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

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

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:

1. The gender of the noun in the inner DP

2. The gender of the predicate

(T) Ia(e) le plus jeune des nouveaux ministre est Hélène. the.F/M most young of the new. (m) ministers 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 = undifferentiated gender

masculine feminine

⇒ Features marking in the mental lexicon:

• [m] masculine only

• [f] feminine only

• [c, m] masculine + common

• [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

⇒ Compare the entries for the nouns ministre, professeur and sentinelle in different editions of the French Petit Robert dictionary:

Petit Robert (1977) Ministry

ministre > masculine noun ministre > noun

professeur > masculine noun professeur > noun

sentinelle > feminine noun sentinelle > feminine noun

⇒ Westveer, Sleeman & Aboh (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) ministre est Hélène.

⇒ Common noun, no gender mismatch in partitive

⇒ Interpretable?

⇒ Only grammatical gender

(9) La plus jeune des (nouveaux) sentinelle est Jean-Luc.

⇒ Class D noun, gender mismatch in partitive

⇒ Interpretable?

⇒ Only grammatical gender

4. Results

Judgements of class D nouns

Class of D nouns

⇒ Only semantic agreement

⇒ Both sentences accepted

⇒ Only grammatical agreement

⇒ Both sentences rejected

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


• Sleeman, Petra & Tabea Ihsane. 2016. Gender mismatches in partitive constructions with superlatives in French. Glossa 1(1), 1-40.