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Sexless animates? Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French

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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

Noun classes (adapted from Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)

- Class A: Suppletive forms: two distinct forms [a] “sister” – le frère, le “brother”
- Class B/C: Related forms: suffixes [b,a] (determiner) [c] change to chanteur, chanteuse, “the singer”
- Class D: Fixed-gender nouns [m, f, m’]: “the guard”

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

- Feature marking in the mental lexicon:
  - If gender mismatches are not accepted with a noun, this noun is
    - [m] masculine only
    - Inner DP’s noun copied onto outer DP, but remains unpronounced

A two-noun analysis of partitives (cf. Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)

Variation within the results

- 5. Towards an analysis
- Towards an analysis

1. Replication of Sleeman & Ihsane’s experiment on a larger scale:
   - Background questionnaire
     - 13 different nouns of noun classes B, C and D included
     - 80 sentences judged on a 5-point scale, presented in random order
   - Online task using Google Forms

2. Aims & methods

- Replication of Sleeman & Ihsane’s experiment on a larger scale:
  - Background questionnaire
    - 13 different nouns of noun classes B, C and D included
    - 80 sentences judged on a 5-point scale, presented in random order
    - Online task using Google Forms

- Aims & methods

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 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

7) [DP la plus jeune des nouveau ministres est Hélène, the most young of the new ministers is Hélène]

Main theoretical assumptions:
- A two-noun analysis of partitives (cf. Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)
- Inner DP 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 masculine
  - feminine feminine

Features marking 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):
    - ministre: masculine noun
  - Petit Robert (2016):
    - ministre: noun
  - professeur: masculine noun
  - professeur: noun
  - sentinelle: feminine noun
  - sentinelle: feminine noun

⇒ Westveer, Sleeman & Abush (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 (nouvelles) ministres est Hélène. is the most young of the (new) ministers est Hélène.

⇒ Class C noun, no gender mismatch in partitive

(9) La plus jeune des (nouvelles) ministres est Hélène. is the most young of the (new) ministers est Hélène.

⇒ Class C noun, gender mismatch in partitive

7. Conclusion

1. Replication of Sleeman & Ihsane’s experiment on a larger scale:
   - Semantic agreement is preferred with 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: (1) Investigate quantified partitives (one of the X & (I) investigate same phenomena in German

References