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

Sexless animates?

Noun classes (adapted from Ihnsae & Sleeman 2016)

Class A
Suppletive forms: two distinct forms to sœur: the ‘sister’ – le frère, the ‘brother’

Class B/C
Related forms: suffixes (fr)/determiner (C) change to chanteur – le chanteur, “the singer”

Class D
Fixed-gender nouns le/la, feminine ‘the guard’

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:
(4) [f] the.F/.M most young of.the new.F.PL minister.F.PL = Hélène

2. Sleeman & Ihnsae (2016)

Gender agreement in (superlative) partitives in French:
1. 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
⇒ Semantic agreement is preferred with class B and C nouns

Variation within the results
1. The gender of the noun in the inner DP

Class C noun, no gender mismatch in partitive
⇒ Semantic agreement is preferred with class B and C nouns

Class B/C Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change
⇒ Nouns marked as [c, f] or [c, m] in the mental lexicon

3. Aims and methods

Sleeman & Ihnsae’s results only based on a limited number of informants’ judgements
⇒ Replicate Sleeman & Ihnsae’s experiment on a larger scale and in a more systematic way
⇒ Provide a theoretical explanation for the agreement patterns we observe

Methodology:
- Grammarmatical 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

4. Results

Comparison noun classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Judgment (b)</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>F/M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>with</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>only grammatical</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with semantic</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Judgements of class D nouns

40% 70% 80%

Individual variation: difference in feature marking in the mental lexicon

5. Towards an analysis

The theoretical analysis should explain:
- General differences between the noun classes
- Discrepancies 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

⇒ Theoretical analysis: a noun in the inner DP may have default features in the mental lexicon

6. An analysis that seems to work...

Class B/C nouns unmarked for grammatical gender
⇒ Only semantic agreement

Le plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène.
La plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène.

⇒ 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

1. Replication of Sleeman & Ihnsae’s experiment on a larger scale:
- Semantic agreement is preferred with class B and 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 Ihnsae. 2016. Gender mismatches in partitive constructions with superlatives in French. Glossa 1(15), 1-20