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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 Ihsane & Sleeman 2016)

- Class A: Suppletive forms
  - feminine only
  - masculine only
- Class B/C: Related forms
  - suffix (B)/determiner (C) change
- Class D: Fixed-gender nouns
  - feminine
  - masculine

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

(4) [f] feminine only
(5) [m] masculine only


Class D nouns can refer to both females and males!

Semantic agreement is preferred with class B and class C nouns

- Class B/C nouns: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change

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
- Valuation through insertion of semantic gender on V'

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 (F)
- If present, gender value only semantic

semantic

Grammatical

gender

Mental lexicon (in principle)

No

Interpretable?

With class B/C: yes

With class D: no

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
- Previous investigated by Sleeman & Ihsane (2016)

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4. Results

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) [f] Je plus jeune de ces [m] messieurs est 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):

- common = underspecified gender
  - masculine feminine
  - masculine feminine
- Features marking in the mental lexicon:
  - [m] masculine only
  - [f] feminine only
  - [c] feminine + common
  - [s] some nouns marked as either feminine [f] or masculine [m]
  - [h] some nouns marked with a hybrid feature [c, f] or [c, m]

This follows the ongoing process of feminisation in French

Feature hierarchy based on Harley & Ritter 2002:

- 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
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

- We hypothesise that 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...

- Le plus jeune dans le groupe

- La plus jeune dans le groupe

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 quantitative partitives (one of the X) & (ii) Investigate same phenomena in German

References