Sexless animates?

*Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French*

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1. Introduction

Sexless anates?

Noun classes (adapted from Ihsane & Sleeman 2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Suppletive forms: two distinct forms (e.g., &quot;the sister&quot; = le/mitre, &quot;the brother&quot; = le/mitre)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B/C</td>
<td>Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change (e.g., chanteur = le chanteur)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Fixed-gender nouns (e.g., ministre = minister)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Class D nouns can refer to both females and males!

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

(4) RaThe plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc.

The theoretical analysis should explain:

- Distinction between grammatical and semantic gender
- Valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on Gend
- No semantic gender value = Failed Agree (Preminger 2011)
- Spell-out of default masculine gender

Two-noun analysis of superlative partitives: noun of inner DP (st) copied onto outer DP (sub), 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 [6]

5. Towards an analysis

The theoretical analysis should explain:

- General differences between the noun classes
- Variation within the results

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 = underspecified gender
- [m] masculine
- [f] feminine

Features marking gender in the mental lexicon:

- [m] masculine only
- [f] feminine only
- Some nouns marked as either [f] or [m] in the mental lexicon

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:


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>feminine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ministre</td>
<td>ministre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professeur</td>
<td>professeur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentinelle</td>
<td>sentinelle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do weitzer, Sleeman & Abot (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. (9) La plus jeune des (nouvelles) sentinelles est Jean-Luc.

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 XI) & (ii) Investigate same phenomena in German

References


Sexless anates? Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French

Thom Westerwe, Petra Sleeman & Enock O. Abot – Universiteit van Amsterdam
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