Sexless animates?

*Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French*

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Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French
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1. Introduction

We have proposed a theoretical analysis that explains the agreement patterns observed in French. This follows the ongoing process of feminisation in French, which has led to changes in gender agreement patterns.

2. Sleeman & Ihane (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 the noun
- 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 & Ihane's results only based on a limited number of informants' judgements
- Replicate Sleeman & Ihane's experiment on a larger scale and in a more systematic way
- Provide a theoretical explanation for the agreement patterns we observe

Methodology:
- Grammaticality 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 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>Noun Class</th>
<th>Agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class B</td>
<td>grammatical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class C</td>
<td>semantic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Judgements of class D nouns

- Only semantic agreement
- Both gender values accepted
- Only grammatical agreement
- Both gender values rejected

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) Le plus jeune des nouveaux ministres est Hélène, the.most young of the new.m. ministers is Hélène

Main theoretical assumptions:
- A two-noun analysis of partitives (cf. Sleeman & Ihane 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 vs. unspecified gender
- Masculine vs. feminine

Features marking the mental lexicon:
- [m] masculine only
- [f] feminine only
- [m, f] feminine vs. masculine

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
professeur > masculine noun
sentinelle > feminine noun

Petit Robert (2016)
ministre > masculine noun
professeur > noun
sentinelle > feminine noun

⇒ Westveer, Sleeman & Abih (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) ministres est Hélène, the.most young of the (new.m.) ministers est Hélène
- Class C noun, no gender mismatch in partitive

(9) La plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène, the.most young of the (new.m.) ministers est Hélène
- Class D noun, gender mismatch in partitive

Individual variation: difference in feature marking in the mental lexicon

7. Conclusion

1. Replication of Sleeman & Ihane'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 in French

Future research: (1) Investigate quantified partitives (one of the X) & (2) Investigate same phenomena in German

References
- Sleeman, Petra & Tabea Ihane. 2016. Gender mismatches in partitive constructions with superlatives in French. Glossa 1:1, 1-22