Sexless animates?

*Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French*

Westveer, T.J.T.; Sleeman, A.P.; Aboh, E.O.
Sexless animates? Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French
Thom Westveer, Petra Sleeman & Enoch O. Aboh – Universiteit van Amsterdam
Going Romance 2018
Universiteit Utrecht – 12.12.2018

1. Introduction
Sexless animates?

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 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 & 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:
- 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 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) La plus jeune des nouveaux 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’s noun copied onto outer DP, but remains unpronounced
- There is a phase boundary between inner and outer DP

Feature marking hierarchy (based on Harley & Ritter 2002):
gender 
common 
masculine 
masculine feminine

Features marking the mental lexicon:
- [m] masculine only
- [f] feminine only
- [c, m] masculine + common
- [c, f] feminine + common

This follows the ongoing process of feminisation in French

6. An analysis that seems to work...
(8) Le plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres
the most young of the (new)ministers
- Class C noun, no gender mismatch in partitive est Hélène.
is Hélène

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

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 X) & (ii) Investigate same phenomena in German

References

Individual variation: difference in feature marking in the mental lexicon

Individual variation: difference in feature marking in the mental lexicon