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 Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)

- Class A: Suppletive forms: two distinct forms (la sentinelle, the ‘sister’ – le gendre, ‘the brother’)
- Class B/C: Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change
- Class D: Fixed-gender nouns (la députée, ‘the woman’; le géne, ‘the genius’)

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

(4) [F]/[M] plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc

⇒ Replicates 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
- 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

2. Sleeman & Ihsane (2016)

2.1. Gender agreement in (superlative) partitives in French:

- Class D nouns: only grammatical agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)
- Class B/C nouns: semantic agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)

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:
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5. Towards an analysis

The theoretical analysis should explain:
- Common features 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

(T) la(e) plus jeune des nouveaux ministres est Hélène

⇒ The most young of the new. m. pl. minister 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

Gender feature hierarchy (based on Harley & Ritter 2002):

- gender: common + underspecified gender
- masculine/feminine

5.1. Features marking in the mental lexicon:

- [m] masculine only
- [c, m] masculine + common
- [f] feminine only
- [c, f] feminine + common

⇒ Some nouns marked as either [f] or masculine [m] ⇒ Some nouns marked with a hybrid feature [c, f] or [c, m]

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

⇒ Westeveer, Sleeman & Alboh (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 is Hélène.

⇒ Refer to entries for the nouns ministre, professeur and sentinelle in different editions of the French Petit Robert dictionary:

Petit Robert (2016)

- ministre: masculine noun
- professeur: masculine noun
- sentinelle: feminine noun

⇒ Westeveer, Sleeman & Alboh (2018)

⇒ Class D noun sentinelle still marked as feminine: gender mismatches less acceptable

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- If gender mismatches are accepted with a noun, this noun is marked as either [c, f] or [c, m] in the mental lexicon

6.1. Towards an analysis that seems to work...

Class B/C nouns: semantic agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)

Class D nouns: only grammatical 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
- Valuation through assignment of semantic gender on value of 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 (set) copied onto outer DP (subset), remains unpronounced
- If present, gender value copied together with noun (F)
- 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

(5) [m] la(e) plus jeune des nouveaux docteurs est Hélène.

⇒ With class B/C yes ⇒ with class D: no

3. Results

Comparison noun classes

4. Results

Judgements of class D nouns

6. An analysis that seems to work...

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