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Westveer, T.J.T.; Sleeman, A.P.; Aboh, E.O.

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Sexless animates? Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French
Thom Westveer, Petra Sleeman & Enoch O. Aboh – Universiteit van Amsterdam
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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

Noun classes (adapted from Ihsane & Sleeman 2016)

Class A: Suppletive forms; two distinct forms (ex: elle + le ‘the sister’ = le ‘the brother’)
Class B/C: Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change (e.g. chanteur → le chanteur)
Class D: Fixed-gender nouns (ex: le ‘the guard’ = la ‘the genius’)

Gender agreement in superlative partitives: (4)

4) ‘Le plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc. the. m. most. F. young. of. the. F. PL. guard. F. PL. is Jean-Luc.

2. Sleeman & Ihsane (2016)

Gender agreement in (superlative) partitives in French:

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 unmapped for grammatical 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 copied onto outer DP (subset), remains unpronounced

(4) \[ \text{If present, gender value copied together with noun (5)} \]

(5) \[ \text{No semantic gender value = Failed Agree (Preminger 2011)} \]

(6) \[ \text{Spell-out of default masculine gender} \]

3. Aims & Methods

Sleeman & Ihsane’s results only based on a limited number of informants’ judgements

⇒ Replica 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 noun classes B, C and D included

⇒ Sentences with semantic and grammatical agreement

⇒ Control sentences

⇒ Background questionnaire

4. Results

Comparison noun classes

Judgements of class D nouns

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) \[ \text{Le plus jeune des nouveaux ministres est Hélène. the. m. most. F. young. of. the. m. PL. minister. m. PL. is Hélène.} \]

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 masculine feminine

masculine feminine masculine feminine

masculine feminine masculine feminine

Features marking in the mental lexicon:

⇒ [m] masculine only

⇒ [f] feminine only

⇒ [c] common masculine/feminine

⇒ [m] masculine only

⇒ [f] feminine only

⇒ [c] common masculine/feminine

⇒ Some nouns marked as either feminine [f] or masculine [m]

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

This follows the ongoing process of feminisation in French

⇒ Compare the entries for the nouns minis ter, prof esseur and sentinelle in different editions of the French Petit Robert dictionary:


⇒ minis ter = masculine noun

⇒ prof esseur = masculine noun

⇒ sentinelle = feminine noun

⇒ Westveer, Sleeman & Aboh (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) \[ \text{Le plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène. the. m. most. F. young. of. the. m. PL. minister. m. PL. is Hélène.} \]

⇒ Class D noun, gender mismatch in partitive

⇒ Dormant gender agreement in partitive

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⇒ Dormant gender agreement in partitive

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

⇒ We have proposed a theoretical analysis that explains the agreement patterns observed

Future research:

⇒ Investigate quantified partitives (one of the X) & (II) investigate same phenomena in German

References


⇒ Sleeman, Petra & Takeshi Ihsane. 2016. Gender mismatches in partitive constructions with superlatives in French. Glossa 1 (1), 1-20