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Sexless animates?
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Sexless animates? Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French

1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

Noun classes (adapted from Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)

- Class A: Suppletive forms: two distinct forms (e.g., “the sister” = le frère, “the brother”)
- Class B/C: Related forms: suffixes (D) determiner (C) change to: le chanteur, “le chanteuse” (the singer)
- Class D: Fixed gender nouns (e.g., ministre, “the minister”)

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

- (4) Réflète plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc. thm. about the youngest of the sentinelles is Jean-Luc.
- (5) La plus jeune des sentinelles est [f, m] in the mental lexicon

Feature marking in the mental lexicon:

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

Main theoretical assumptions:

- Grammatical or semantic gender agreement?
- Previously investigated by Sleeman & Ihsane (2016)

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
- 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 Failed Agree has taken place in inner DP, second chance to insert semantic gender value in outer DP (6)

Variation within the results

- General differences between the noun classes
- Individual variation:
  - Function project Pronoun Phrase (GendP) only present for animate nouns

3. Aims and 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

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

4. Results

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

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

Factors marking in the mental lexicon:

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

This follows the ongoing process of feminisation in French

- Compare the entries for the noun ministre, professeur and sentinelle in different editions of the French Petit Robert dictionary:
  - Petit Robert (1977)
  - Petit Robert (2016)

- Nouns marked as feminine (f) or masculine [m] or in a hybrid feature [c, f] or [c, m]

6. An analysis that seems to work...

Le plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène. Hélène is the youngest of the (new) ministers.

(8) NP [m] (nouveaux) ministres Hélène [f] D

(9) NP [m] (nouveaux) ministres Hélène [f] D

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: (i) Investigate quantified partitives (one of the X) & (ii) Investigate same phenomena in German

References