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 to express ‘the sister’ = le/fille, le/brother
- Class B/C: Related forms: suffixes (D/b) determine (C) change
- Class D: Fixed-gender nouns: la/mère, le/chauffeur, la/ministre, le/ministre

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

(4) plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc.

(5) plus jeune des sentinels is Jean-Luc.

⇒ 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

How do they explain these agreement patterns?

- Class B/C nouns unmatched for grammatical gender

- Valuation through insertion of semantic gender on V

- No semantic gender value = Failed Agree (Preminger 2011)

- Spell-out of default masculine gender

Two-noun analysis of superlative partitives: noun of inner DP (ust) 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:

- Grammatical judgement task with 70 native speakers of French

- Online task using Google Forms

- Background questionnaire

4. Results

Comparison noun classes

Judgements of class D nouns

5. Towards an analysis

Theoretical analysis shown:

- General differences between the noun classes

- Variation within the results

Gender agreement competition, the outer DP can agree with:

- The gender of the noun in the inner DP

- The gender of the predicate

6. An analysis that seems to work...

(8) Le plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène.

⇒ Hélène.

Class D noun, gender mismatch in partitive

(9) La plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Hélène.

⇒ Hélène.

Class C noun, gender mismatch in partitive

(10) La plus jeune des (nouveaux) sentinelles est Jean-Luc.

⇒ Jean-Luc.

Class D noun, gender mismatch in partitive

(11) Le plus jeune des (nouveaux) sentinelles est Jean-Luc.

⇒ Jean-Luc.

Class C noun, gender mismatch in partitive

Individual variation: difference in feature marking in the mental lexicon

References

