Gender agreement and mismatches: the syntactic structure of quantified and superlative partitives

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1. Introduction

The problem: acceptability of gender mismatches in partitive constructions

Superpartitive partitives: German = French

(a) Der/De jüngste der Studenten
(b) Le/la plus jeune des étudiants = Le/la jüngste der Studenten

The youngest of the students is Irene.

Quantified partitives: German ↔ French

(a) Ein-er/eine der
(b) Un-ein der

One of the students is Irene.

How to explain this contrast?

4. Quantified vs. superpartitive partitives

Difference between quantified (8) and superpartitive partitives (9):

Superpartitive partitives headed by a DP

→ Referential projection: links superpartitive to its referent in discourse

4.1 Superpartitives: French = German

Gender mismatch accepted in German (13), but not in French (12):

Why would semantic feature valuation be allowed in German?

→ Gender syncretism in the plural in German: no gender value on lower D in (13)!

4.2 Quantified partitives: French ↔ German

3. The proposal: A small clause analysis for partitives (cf. Sleeman & Kester, 2002)

Predicative construction with nominal relator: No PP!

3.1 Partitives involve a silent nominal classifier

Partitives may contain a classifier-like element:

(5) a. Ein Exemplar der Büch-er.

Presence of classifier also suggested by Falco & Zamparelli (2019): classifier attested in other languages, e.g. Turkish 'item' (von Heusinger & Kornfilt, 2017):

(6) Meyve-ler in üc tane-sin-i ye-di-m.
    fruit-pl-GEN three,3SG.acc items-3SG.acc eat-PST-1SG

→ No copy theory of movement (Sleeman & Iñáñüe, 2016): silent nominal classifier

3.2 Partitives involve a nominal relator

Den Dikken (2006): nominal predicate analysis for qualitative constructions (7) i.e. an idiot of a doctor

→ of = nominal relator (copula)

In partitive constructions, nominal relator...

→ spells out as preposition de in French
→ assigns genitive case in German
→ No PP in partitive constructions!

5. Concluding remarks

Novel syntactic analysis of both quantified and superpartitive partitives:


→ No PP: but nominal relator, spells out as de in French: assigns genitive case in German

→ Silent nominal classifier, no copying

Explanation of agreement differences between French and German

→ Semantic feature valuation applies, if...

1. the construction is headed by a referential element = DP
   • => Mismatch accepted in superpartitive partitives in French and German

2. if the lower D does not bear any gender value = last resort
   • => Mismatch not accepted in quantified partitives in French
   • => Mismatch accepted in quantified partitives in German