Sexless animates? Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French

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1. Introduction

We have proposed a theoretical analysis that explains the agreement patterns observed in French. In this way, we can account for variation:

- Distinction between grammatical and semantic gender
- Value through insertion of semantic gender value on Gender Phrase (GendP)
- Spell-out of default masculine gender

Main theoretical assumptions:

1. The gender of the noun in the inner DP

2. Replication of Sleeman & Ihsane’s experiment on a larger scale:
   - With class B/C: yes
   - With class D: no

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:

- 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

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

**GendP** le plus jeune des nouveaux ministres est 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):

- **common > underspecified gender**
- **masculine > feminine**
- **masculine + common > feminine + common**
- **masculine only > feminine only**

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

- **Petit Robert (2016)**
  - ministre > masculine noun
  - professeur > noun
  - sentinelle > feminine noun


In this way, we can account for variation:

- If gender mismatches are not accepted with a noun, this noun is marked as either [f] [m] in the mental lexicon.
- If gender mismatches are accepted with a noun, this noun is marked as either [c, m] or [c, f] in the mental lexicon.

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

6. An analysis that seems to work...

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

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

- **Common**
- **Grammatical gender**
- **Semantic gender**

Interpretable? No

7. Conclusion

1. Replication of Sleeman & Ihsane’s experiment on a larger scale:

- Semantic agreement is preferred with class B and class C nouns

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

References