

Sexless animates? Gender agreement with fixed-gender animate nouns in superlative partitives in French

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In French, there exist animate nouns that can refer to both females and males, but nevertheless only have one fixed gender, either feminine or masculine, as in (i):

- (i) a. *le génie*
 the.M genius
 b. *la victime*
 the.F victim

These nouns raise issues with respect to gender agreement in cases where the noun's gender does not match its referent's sex: Should gender agreement follow the noun's grammatical gender or rather the referent's biological (semantic) gender?

An interesting case of such agreement issues is provided by superlative partitive constructions, as in (ii). Although there are no explicit rules about gender agreement in such sentences, native speakers of French do have intuitions about it. According to Sleeman & Ihsane (2016), with a fixed-gender feminine noun like *sentinelle* 'guard' as in (ii) (as inner set DP), for instance, they prefer grammatical over semantic agreement, resulting in the feminine form *la plus jeune* 'the.F youngest' in the outer subset DP, even though the referent *John* in (ii) is male:

- (ii) *La/*Le plus jeune des nouvelles sentinelles s'appelle Jean.*
 the.F/.M most young of.the new.F.PL guard.F.PL is.called John
 'The youngest of the new guards is called John.'

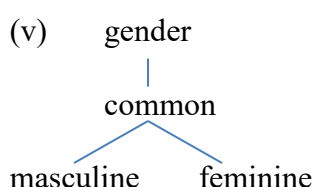
By means of a Grammaticality Judgment Task, we probed into the intuitions of 100 native speakers of French with regards to gender agreement in superlative partitive constructions. A previous study by Sleeman & Ihsane (2016) had already shown that the choice for either semantic or grammatical gender agreement depends on different factors, such as the type of animate noun involved. However, their results are based on just a limited number of informants' judgments. Therefore, the present study aims at investigating gender agreement in superlative partitives on a larger scale and at comparing the behaviour of fixed-gender nouns to other classes of animate nouns that have both a masculine and a feminine form (either derived by a suffix alternation, e.g. *le directeur – la directrice* 'the director.M/.F', or by just changing the article *le/la ministre* 'the.M/.F minister').

Our results show that native speakers of French in superlative partitives generally prefer grammatical gender agreement with fixed-gender animate nouns, but semantic gender agreement with other classes of animate nouns. However, the picture appears not to be that clear cut if we take a closer look at the individual nouns, not only showing differences between noun classes, but also within one noun class. This also holds for the fixed-gender animate nouns, as shown in (iii-iv):

- (iii) *La/*Le plus jeune des nombreuses victimes est Monsieur Dupont.*
 the.F/.M most young of.the many.F.PL victim.F.PL is Mr. Dupont
 'The youngest of the many victims is Mr. Dupont.' [4,12 – 2,31]
 (iv) *?La/?Le plus jeune des génies présents est Hélène.*
 the.F/.M most young.F of.the genius.M.PL present.M.PL is Helen
 'The youngest of the geniuses present is Helen.' [3,08 – 3,29]

Whereas with the feminine fixed-gender noun *victime* in (iii), grammatical agreement is strongly preferred, resulting in the use of the feminine form *la plus jeune*, despite referring to a male, with the masculine noun *génie* in (iv) the difference in judgment is much smaller, indicating that semantic agreement, in this case with the female referent *Hélène* is quite acceptable too.

A potential theoretical account thus not only has to explain the differences between the classes of animate nouns, but should also be able to account for the differences within one noun class. Many studies have discussed agreement relations in the DP in relation to the representation of gender or number features in the derivation (e.g. Alexiadou 2004; Matushansky 2013; Fathi & Lowenstamm 2016; Sleeman & Ihsane 2016). Some studies have proposed a feature geometry to account for the hierarchical ordering of different types of nominal features within the DP (e.g. Hanson et al. 2002). Building on the concept of feature geometry, we propose that gender features are hierarchically ordered as represented in (v):



We argue that this gender feature hierarchy can account for the agreement patterns surfacing from our results. In our view, all nouns are marked for grammatical gender in the lexicon, but the difference in preference for semantic or grammatical agreement depends on the degree of specification of grammatical gender on each noun. The nouns that go with grammatical agreement are explicitly marked as either masculine or feminine and this gender feature surfaces throughout the partitive construction, not giving space for semantic agreement on the outer subset DP. On the contrary, the nouns for which semantic agreement is preferred are marked with a less specific, hybrid gender feature, which we term common gender. In the inner set DP the common gender feature surfaces, resulting in common gender agreement, identical to masculine agreement in French. In the subset DP, this common gender feature may be further specified as either feminine or masculine through semantic agreement, giving rise to a gender mismatch between the inner and the outer DP. As we will show, this analysis covers the different agreement patterns of all classes of animate nouns, but also the differences between individual nouns of one noun class.

References

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