On a structural difference between quantified and superlative partitives: evidence from French and Italian grammaticality judgements on gender agreement
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In French, superlative partitives present an interesting case of gender agreement, as they can give rise to a competition between grammatical and semantic agreement. When the set noun refers to a group of females and males, this noun is usually in the default masculine plural form (*nouveaux ministres* in (1)). If the superlative refers to a female subset, the superlative could either grammatically agree with the masculine default gender of the set noun (1a) or semantically agree with the sex of the subset, a female, and be in the feminine (1b):

(1)   a.   *Le   plus jeune des   nouveaux ministres est Hélène.*
              the.M most young of.the new.M.PL minister.PL is   Hélène
        b.   *La   plus jeune des   nouveaux ministres   est Hélène.*
              the.F most young of.the new.M.PL minister.PL is   Hélène

The results of a grammaticality judgement task we carried out with 70 native speakers of French indicates that they generally prefer semantic (1b) over grammatical (1a) agreement in a superlative partitive (Author et al. (submitted)).

      In this paper, we check if another type of partitive construction in French, quantified partitives, shows comparable behaviour and we investigate the same phenomenon in quantified and superlative partitives in Italian. We propose a theoretical analysis to account for gender mismatches in both types of partitive constructions.

      Our results show that in quantified partitives, native speakers of French generally prefer grammatical (2a) over semantic (2b) agreement, thus displaying the opposite pattern to superlative partitives:

(2)   a.   *Un   des   nouveaux ministres   est Hélène.*
              one.M of.the new.M.PL minister.PL is Hélène
        b.   *Une des   nouveaux ministres   est Hélène.*
              one.F of.the new.M.PL minister.PL is Hélène

      We also submitted a translated and adapted versions of our tests to 299 native speakers of Italian. Interestingly, the Italian data confirm the pattern observed for French: in Italian grammatical agreement is also preferred in quantified partitives (3a), while semantic agreement is preferred in superlative partitives (4b):[1]

(3)   a.   *Uno dei   nuovi   insegnanti è Giulia Pareschi.*
              one.M of.the new.M.PL teacher.PL is Giulia Pareschi
        b.   *Una dei   nuovi   insegnanti è Giulia Pareschi.*
              one.F of.the new.M.PL teacher.PL is Giulia Pareschi

(4)   a.   *Il   più intelligente dei   nuovi   insegnanti è Sofia Arbore.*
              the.M most intelligent of.the new.M.PL teacher.PL is Sofia Arbore
        b.   *La   più intelligente dei   nuovi   insegnanti è Sofia Arbore.*
              the.F most intelligent of.the new.M.PL teacher.PL   is Sofia Arbore

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[1] The difference in grammaticality judgement (on a 5-point scale) between the (a-b) sentences in examples (1-4) is significant in all cases, as calculated by a mixed-effects model in *R*.

To account for the differences in acceptability of semantic agreement between quantified and superlative partitives in French and Italian, we claim that these two partitive types are structurally different, accounting for the fact that it is possible to override the set noun's grammatical gender in superlative, but not in quantified partitives. We propose theoretical analyses of both partitive types within the framework of Generative Grammar that account for this structural difference.

Cardinaletti & Giusti (2017) – considering quantified partitives to be the genuine type of partitive – argue that the outer DP (referring to the subset) contains an empty element, which shares the gender features of the inner DP's noun (referring to the set), as in (5):

(5)   [$_{QP}$ [$_{QP'}$ [$_Q$ *Un*][$_{DP}$ *e*.M]] [$_{PP}$ [$_P$ *de*][$_{DP}$ *les nouveaux ministres*.M]] *est Hélène.*

In this, case, grammatical agreement prevails, as both the inner and the outer DP must share the same gender feature. The partitive PP is merged as a complement of the quantifier.

The data from French and Italian show that Cardinaletti & Giusti's analysis of quantified partitives cannot be extended to the partitive PP of superlative partitives.

For superlative partitives we propose a more complex structure, inspired by Cinque's (2015) double-headed raising analysis of relative clauses (partly based on Kayne (1994)). In Cinque's analysis, a sentence with a relative consist of a matrix and of a subordinate relative clause, the latter being merged in the specifier position of a functional projection. Each clause contains an identical noun (i.e. the complex sentence is double-headed), but the noun of the matrix clause is deleted under identity with the noun of the relative clause.

In a similar vein, we argue that superlative partitives also consist of two clauses, matrix and subordinate, both headed by a noun. Since the noun of the matrix clause is identical to the one in the subordinate clause, the former is unpronounced. As in Cinque's analysis, the subordinate partitive PP is merged in the specifier position of a functional projection. The structure for superlative partitives is shown in (6):

(6)   [$_{DP}$ [$_D$ *La*][$_{DegP}$ [$_{Deg}$ *plus*][$_{FP}$ [$_{AP}$ *jeune*][$_{FP}$ [$_{PP}$ [$_P$ *de*][$_{DP}$ *les nouveaux ministres*.M]][$_{NP}$ [$_N$ ~~*ministre*~~.F]]]]]]] *est Hélène.*

As a consequence, in a superlative partitive the partitive PP is less tightly related to the outer DP than in a quantified partitive, being merged in a specifier rather than in a complement position. Since, under this view, inner and outer DP are less closely related, it is possible to have different gender features on the inner and the outer DP, leading to a gender mismatch. Time permitting, we will discuss some other interesting similarities and differences in the French and Italian data.

References
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