Gender agreement with animate nouns in French

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1. Aim: This paper focuses on gender agreement phenomena in French and examines contexts little discussed in the literature, where agreement takes place between an animate noun and various elements outside the strict DP (1-4). What we show is that in such examples gender agreement differs from gender agreement inside DP. Our proposal is that, in some cases, gender on the root can be overridden by a supplementary interpretable gender feature on n.

2. Background: Whereas in English there are no gender distinctions for the noun, in Romance masculine and feminine nouns can be distinguished, both for animate and inanimate nouns. Although for inanimate nouns gender is always arbitrary, for animate nouns grammatical gender does not always correspond to semantic gender, as illustrated by French: *la sentinelle* (f.) 'the sentinel' and *le médecin* (m.) 'the doctor', for example, can both refer to men and women. To account for the dual behavior of nouns (arbitrary or semantic gender), it has been proposed in recent literature (Kramer 2009; Atkinson 2012) that gender is not expressed in a single position within DP (e.g. on the root as in Alexiadou 2004 or on *n* as in Lowenstamm 2008) but in two positions: (i) on the root as an uninterpretable feature accounting for arbitrary/grammatical gender (*le magasin* (m.) 'the shop'; *la sentinelle* (f.) 'the sentinel') and (ii) on the head of nP as an interpretable feature accounting for semantic gender (*une chatte* (f.) 'a (female) cat'; *une enfant* (f.) 'a (female) child'; *un enfant* (m.) 'a (male) child'). Determiners and adjectives agree with the [±feminine] feature on *n* (*une chatte (f.) blanche* 'a white cat') or with the gender feature on the root (*un vieux magasin* (m.) 'an old shop', *la malheureuse sentinelle* (f.) 'the poor sentinel'). In the case of a non-specified noun, like *un enfant* 'a (male or female) child', the determiner and the adjective agree with the root, which gets default masculine gender.

3. Data: This analysis seems to account nicely for the local agreement between D, adjectives, and noun in D-A-N or D-N-A configurations. In this paper, however, we scrutinize this approach to determine whether it also accounts for less local agreement, i.e. agreement between the noun (phrase) and a predicate or a pronoun outside the strict DP. To do so, we focus on animate nouns with an unspecified gender feature on *n*:

(1) Le   plus jeune /La   plus jeune de mes chers enfants (j'ai   deux fils et
   the.masc more young/ the.fem   more young of my   dear children (I have two   sons and
   une fille)   s'   appelle Nina.
   a   daughter) REFL is.called Nina
   'The name of the youngest of my sweet children (I have two sons and a daughter) is N.'

(2) De tous   les mannequins, seul   le   plus jeune / seule   la   plus jeune
   of all.masc the models   only.masc the.masc more young/ only.fem the.fem more young
   - Melanie - parle bien l'anglais.
   – Mélanie - speaks well the English
   'Among all the models, only the youngest one – Mélanie – speaks English well.'

(3) Voilà mon   ancien   professeur de français. Elle/*Il s'   appelle   Mme Lagarde.
   here.is my.masc former.masc professor of French   she/he REFL is.called Mrs Lagarde
   'Here is my former professor of French. Her name is Mrs Lagarde.'

(4) Mon   ancien   professeur de français était toujours *content/contente
   my.masc former.masc professor of French was   always   satisfied.masc/satisfied.fem
   de mon travail. Elle vient de partir à la   retraite.
   of my   work she just   of leave in the retirement
   'My former French teacher was always satisfied with my work. She just retired.'

(5) La sentinelle arriva. Elle/*Il avait une longue barbe.
   the sentinel arrived. she/he had a   long   beard

What we observe is that when *n* is unspecified for semantic gender, the gender feature on the root can be overridden (1-2), must be overridden (3-4), or cannot be overridden (5).

4. Analysis: We propose an account for the data within a locality theory of agreement, according to which locality conditions on agreement may be more or less strict depending on the kind of agreement (Chomsky 1995, 2001, 2008, Rizzi 1990). Moscati & Rizzi (2011) test the hypothesis that locality ranking has a predictive power on the order of acquisition, in that a more local agreement process (D-A-N) is fully mastered earlier than less local agreement, such as S-V agreement or clitic – past participle agreement. We argue that locality also has predictive power in the case of agreement with animate nouns. Whereas subject-verb agreement and past participle agreement show that locality conditions may be more or less strict depending on the kind of agreement, on the basis of our data we show, on the other hand, that agreement may be more or less strict depending on the degree of locality and some features of the noun.

The analysis of agreement within the (French) DP put forth by Atkinson (2012) seems to be limited to local agreement within the strict DP: determiners/quantifiers/adjectives agree with the gender feature on the root or with the gender feature on n. If agreement takes place with an element outside the strict DP, i.e. when it is less local, we claim that, in French, gender on the root can be overridden by a supplementary interpretable gender feature on n (1-4). One such less local relation is agreement in a partitive construction: in (1), agreement with the root of the non-specified noun with default masculine gender does not necessarily take place. This shows that Atkinson's analysis only applies to the strict DP (*mes chers enfants*), but not to its expansion in the partitive construction. In (2), agreement with a constituent outside the complement of the partitive construction can take place. In other cases where agreement takes place with an element outside the (strict) DP and is thus less local, gender on the root must (3-4) or cannot (5) be overridden by an additional gender feature on n.

5. Conclusion: Our data suggest that, besides locality, what plays a role in gender agreement is: (i) an uninterpretable feature on the root, which makes gender on an agreeing pronoun, as in (5), also uninterpretable, (ii) default gender on the root, which can be overridden by a supplementary interpretable gender feature on n, at least for non-local agreement. Data such as the feminine variant of (1-2) and (3-4) suggest that with respect to agreement, not either n or the root takes part in the checking relation, as in Atkinson's analysis, but that agreement can take place with both of them at the same time. We argue that this is possible, because of valuation and the interpretable/uninterpretable character of the gender feature (Pesetsky & Torrego 2007). A feature on the root is always valued, i.e. specified (masc or fem) or default masculine, and uninterpretable. Checking is local. A valued gender feature on n and the root enters a local agreement relation with D and A within the strict DP. However, a non-specified, interpretable gender feature on n (the root having a masculine default gender feature), can (1-2) or must (3-4) get a specific value, depending on the distance from the feature sharing constituent. The French data suggest thus that agreement can take place in a cyclic way.

Atkinson, E. 2012. Gender features on *n* and the root: An account of gender in French. Talk at *LSRL 42*. **Kramer, R**. 2009. *Definite markers, phi-features and agreement: a morphosyntactic investigation of the Amharic DP*. Doctoral dissertation, UC Santa Cruz. **Moscati V. & L. Rizzi.** 2011. A typology of agreement processes and its implications for language development. Talk at *Going Romance*.