

# Some puzzles of disagreement (or, how to disagree in French)

Christopher Davis and Grégoire Winterstein

University of the Ryukyus

Université du Québec à Montréal

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(Context: a game in which there is a lion card)

## Attested example

- (2) **Le** Mat n'est pas complètement  
the.MASC Fool isn't completely

**négative.**

negative.FEM

'The Fool is not completely negative.'

[https://www.voyanceenligne.org/  
le-mat-ou-le-fou.htm](https://www.voyanceenligne.org/le-mat-ou-le-fou.htm)



# Puzzle 1

- ▶ The gender of the predicate adjective 'disagrees' with that of the subject NP determiner.
- ▶ *Puzzle 1: What allows such disagreement?*
- ▶ *Answer: two distinct sources of agreement:*
  1. **grammatical** agreement: agreement driven by syntactic feature matching
  2. **referential** agreement: agreement driven by gender (social or lexical) of referent

## Two kinds of agreement

- (1) a. **Le**<sub>[M]</sub> **médecin**<sub>[M]</sub> est **satisfaite**<sub>[F]</sub>.  
the.MASC doctor is satisfied.FEM  
'The doctor is satisfied.'  
(Context: the doctor is a **woman**<sub>[F]</sub>)
- b. **Le**<sub>[M]</sub> **ragoût**<sub>[M]</sub> n'est pas **contente**<sub>[F]</sub>.  
the.MASC stew isn't happy.FEM  
'The stew isn't happy.'  
(Context: referring to a **woman**<sub>[F]</sub> who ordered stew)
- c. **Le**<sub>[M]</sub> **lion**<sub>[M]</sub> est **remise**<sub>[F]</sub> en jeu.  
the.MASC lion.MASC is put.back.FEM in play  
'The lion was put back in play.'  
(Context: a game in which there is a lion card (⇒ **carte**<sub>[F]</sub>))

## Referential agreement with pronouns

- ▶ Analogous to disagreement with co-referring pronouns.
- ▶ GGF (Abeillé and Godard 2021) about dislocates (IV.6.7.1, p.488): the dislocate agrees with the proform, with some exceptions for social/grammatical gender mismatches:

(3) (Example (a) from GGF; constructed examples for other cases)

- Elle** m'a dit de me reposer, **le** médecin.  
3.SG.FEM told.me to myself rest the.MASC doctor  
'The doctor, she told me to rest.'
- Elle** est à droite, **le** ragoût.  
3.SG.FEM is to right the.MASC stew  
'The stew, she is to the right.'
- Elle** est utile, **le** lion.  
3.SG.FEM is useful the.MASC lion  
'The lion, it's useful.'



## Some conclusions

- ▶ It's not only proforms that can get referential agreement; predicate adjectives can as well.
- ▶ So predicate agreement need not be grammatical agreement with the subject.
- ▶ Not limited to social gender/gendered profession nouns (a); also applies to metonymic nouns (b) and lexical gender (c).

## Puzzle 2

Question: Can the predicate in these examples show grammatical rather than referential agreement?

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- (4)
- a. ?**Le**<sub>[M]</sub> **médecin**<sub>[M]</sub> est **satisfait**<sub>[M]</sub>.  
the.MASC doctor is satisfied.FEM  
'The doctor is satisfied.'  
(Context: the doctor is a **woman**<sub>[F]</sub>)
- b. #**Le**<sub>[M]</sub> **ragoût**<sub>[M]</sub> n'est pas **content**<sub>[M]</sub>.  
the.MASC stew isn't happy.FEM  
'The stew isn't happy.'  
(Context: referring to a **woman**<sub>[F]</sub> who ordered stew)  
⇒ can only refer to a male customer, or to a literal stew that is unhappy.
- c. **Le**<sub>[M]</sub> **lion**<sub>[M]</sub> est **remis**<sub>[M]</sub> en jeu.  
the.MASC lion.MASC is put.back.FEM in play  
'The lion was put back in play.'  
(Context: a game in which there is a lion card (⇒ **carte**<sub>[F]</sub>))

## Puzzle 2

**Question:** Why can't our stew example trigger grammatical agreement?

**Answer:** metonymy requires referential agreement when possible.

**Corollary:** our card example is not a case of metonymy.

- ▶ It seems like metonymy (the 'stew' example (b)) requires referential agreement in a way the other examples do not.
- ▶ The 'card' example (c) must therefore use a different mechanism than the 'stew' example (b).
- ▶ The pressure to use referential agreement when available might be stronger for social gender, hence the '?' in (a) (cf. Corbett 1991; Burnett and Bonami 2018).

## Puzzle 3

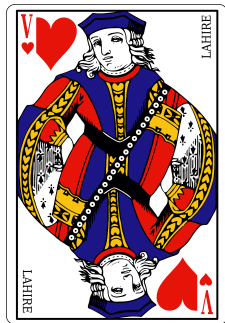
What about within the NP? Can we switch the gender of the definite article?

- (5)
- a. **La** médecin est **satisfaite**.  
the.FEM doctor is satisfied.FEM  
'The doctor is satisfied.'  
(Context: the doctor is a woman)
  - b. \***La** ragoût n'est pas **contente**.  
the.FEM stew isn't happy.FEM  
'The stew isn't happy.'  
(Context: referring to a woman who ordered stew)
  - c. **La** lion est **remise** en jeu.  
the.FEM lion.MASC is put.back.FEM in play  
'The lion was put back in play.'  
(Context: a game in which there is a lion card)

Again, a disanalogy: the (b) example does not pattern with (a) and (c).

## Additional card data

- (6) Au flop, miser sur **une valet** alors que  
at the flop to bet on a **FEM jack** when  
tu as relancé le flop est peu crédible  
you raised the flop is little credible  
'On the flop, betting on a jack when you raised  
the flop is not really credible.'  
<https://www.wam-poker.com/t/jouer-ak-en-cash-game/86476/9>



## Puzzle 3

**Question:** What licenses the (apparently) disagreeing article in (a) and (c)?

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**Answer:** These articles actually *do* agree with the head noun.

- ▶ In (a), the head noun is actually feminine or underspecified (i.e. for speakers who accept this, they have two entries for *médecin*, one masculine and one feminine, or one gender-underspecified entry). Cf. Corbett 1991; Burnett and Bonami 2018
- ▶ In (c), there is a covert feminine noun (*carte*) which licenses agreement. No such strategy for (b), hence ungrammatical.
- ▶ **Corollary:** only grammatical agreement within the NP.



## *la médecin* vs \**la ragoût*

- ▶ Speakers who accept/use *la médecin* have innovated an underspecified or homophonous 'feminized' lexical entry. (Burnett and Bonami 2018)
- ▶ Technically, either two homophonous lexical items *médecin<sub>M</sub>* and *médecin<sub>F</sub>* or a single gender-underspecified lexical item *médecin<sub>∅</sub>*.
- ▶ In *la médecin*, the article agrees in gender with either *médecin<sub>F</sub>* or *médecin<sub>∅</sub>*.
- ▶ By contrast, *ragoût* is lexically masculine for all speakers (no 'feminization', since stews don't have social gender).
- ▶ So only *ragoût<sub>M</sub>* in the lexicon.
- ▶ Only grammatical agreement available within NP ⇒ *la ragoût* is ungrammatical.

## More metonymic examples

For anyone unhappy with our stew example:

- (7) a. Le/\*la chignon<sub>M</sub> n'est pas contente.  
the.MASC/the.FEM bun isn't happy.FEM  
'The bun isn't happy.'  
(Referent: a woman with a hairbun)
- b. La/\*le moustache<sub>F</sub> n'est pas  
the.FEM/the.MASC moustache isn't  
content.  
happy.MASC  
'The moustache isn't happy.'  
(Referent: a man with a moustache)

## *la lion*

Shouldn't the argument from above make the 'lion' example (c) ungrammatical?

- ▶ *lion* is grammatically masculine; also referentially masculine (refers to a male lion).
- ▶ The corresponding feminine noun is *lionne* 'lioness'.
- ▶ The 'lion card' example with *la lion* can be used in a context with a male lion on the card.
- ▶ If we port the analysis from (a) to *la lion*, we would have to say that speakers have innovated a feminized version of *lion* which does not restrict reference to female sex and which co-exists with feminine *lionne*.
- ▶ Not the most plausible story.
- ▶ So what's going on?
- ▶ ⇒ Covert noun *carte*<sub>[F]</sub>.

(8) **La** *carte*<sub>F</sub> lion est **remise** en jeu.  
the.FEM card lion.MASC is put.back.FEM in play  
'The lion card was put back in play.'

(5-c) **La** *carte*<sub>F</sub> lion est **remise** en jeu.  
the.FEM card lion.MASC is put.back.FEM in play  
'The lion was put back in play.'  
(Context: a game in which there is a lion card)

Covert nouns in French evidenced by 'stranded' *de*:

- (9) a. *la*<sub>F</sub> *nouvelle*<sub>F</sub> [*chanson*<sub>F</sub>] *de* Metallica  
the.FEM new.FEM song GEN Metallica  
'the new Metallica song'
- b. *la*<sub>F</sub> *nouvelle*<sub>F</sub> [~~*chanson*<sub>F</sub>~~] *de* Metallica  
the.FEM new.FEM song GEN Metallica  
'the new Metallica (song)'

## Puzzle 3, Redux

- (5) a. **La<sub>F</sub> médecin<sub>F</sub> est satisfaite.**  
the.FEM doctor is satisfied.FEM  
'The doctor is satisfied.'  
(Context: the doctor is a woman)  
⇒ feminized noun
- b. \***La<sub>F</sub> ragoût<sub>M</sub> n'est pas contente.**  
the.FEM stew isn't happy.FEM  
'The stew isn't happy.'  
(Context: referring to a woman who ordered stew)  
⇒ no feminized noun available
- c. **La<sub>F</sub> [carte<sub>F</sub>] lion<sub>M</sub> est remise en jeu.**  
the.FEM card lion.MASC is put.back.FEM in play  
'The lion was put back in play.'  
(Context: a game in which there is a lion card)  
⇒ elided head noun

## A reminder: The original disagreement

- (1) a. **Le<sub>M</sub>**        médecin est **satisfaite<sub>F</sub>**.  
the.MASC doctor    is    satisfied.FEM  
'The doctor is satisfied.'  
(Context: the doctor is a woman)
- b. **Le<sub>M</sub>**        ragoût n'est pas **contente<sub>F</sub>**.  
the.MASC stew    isn't        happy.FEM  
'The stew isn't happy.'  
(Context: referring to a woman who ordered stew)
- c. **Le<sub>M</sub>**        lion        est **remise<sub>F</sub>**        en jeu.  
the.MASC lion.MASC is    put.back.FEM in play  
'The lion was put back in play.'  
(Context: a game in which there is a lion card)

## Puzzle 4

Trying to reverse the disagreement:

- (10) a. \***La**<sub>F</sub> médecin est **satisfait**<sub>M</sub>.  
the.FEM doctor is satisfied.MASC  
'The doctor is satisfied.'  
(Context: the doctor is a woman)
- b. \***La**<sub>F</sub> ragoût n'est pas **content**<sub>M</sub>.  
the.FEM stew isn't happy.MASC  
'The stew isn't happy.'  
(Context: referring to a woman who ordered stew)
- c. \***La**<sub>F</sub> lion est **remis**<sub>M</sub> en jeu.  
the.FEM lion.MASC is put.back.MASC in play  
'The lion was put back in play.'  
(Context: a game in which there is a lion card)

Question: Why is disagreement between article and predicate only allowed in one direction?

## Puzzle 4

- ▶ For (b), feminine article is blocked, as discussed above.
- ▶ For (a) and (c), the feminine article is licensed grammatically as discussed above.
- ▶ Thus, subject NP is feminine.
- ▶ So, grammatical agreement of predicate would result in feminine form.
- ▶ But the referent is also feminine. So referential agreement too would result in feminine form.
- ▶ So no path here for masculine agreement in predicate.



## Puzzle 5: Cards vs. Stews

- (11) a. **Le<sub>M</sub>** ragoût n'est pas **contente<sub>F</sub>**.  
the.MASC stew isn't happy.FEM  
'The stew isn't happy.'
- b. \***Le<sub>M</sub>** ragoût n'est pas **content<sub>M</sub>**.  
the.MASC stew isn't happy.MASC  
'The stew isn't happy.'  
(Context: referring to a woman who ordered stew)
- (12) a. **Le<sub>M</sub>** lion est **remise<sub>F</sub>** en jeu.  
the.MASC lion.MASC is put.back.FEM in play  
'The lion was put back in play.'
- b. **Le<sub>M</sub>** lion est **remis<sub>M</sub>** en jeu.  
the.MASC lion.MASC is put.back.MASC in play  
'The lion was put back in play.'  
(Context: a game in which there is a lion card)

- What allows (12-b) but not (11-b)?

## Puzzle 5

- ▶ Two possibilities for the lion:
    - ▶ In the context of the game, a lion meets the selectional restrictions of the predicate, i.e. lions can enter/leave the game etc.
    - ▶ *le lion* acts as a proper name for the card
  - ▶ Stews however cannot be happy/unhappy, or be considered as having the properties of a guest at restaurant ; nor does it seem plausible that *le ragoût* works as a proper name
- ⇒ Two paths for *le lion*:
- ▶ Metonymy allows for a feminine marked predicate (like for the stew)
  - ▶ Additionally, treating lions as in-game individuals allows for a masculine marked predicate (contra stews)

## Outlooks

- ▶ Not all examples are very much liked by all speakers:

- (13) a. **Le** lion est **remise** en jeu.  
the.MASC lion.MASC is put.back.FEM in play  
'The lion was put back in play.'
- b. **Le** Mat n'est pas complètement  
the.MASC Fool isn't completely  
**négative.**  
negative.FEM  
'The Fool is not completely negative.'

- ▶ Sharp contrast remains with our examples marked as \*
- ▶ Preference for a dislocate structure in (13-a)?
- ▶ The more "distance" there is between subject and predicate, the more natural the disagreement (as in (13-b))? See also agreement by proximity?
- ▶ Experimental data would be welcome

# References I

-  Abeillé, Anne, and Danièle Godard, eds. 2021. *La grande grammaire du français*. Actes Sud/Imprimerie Nationale Editions.
-  Burnett, Heather, and Olivier Bonami. 2018. “Linguistic prescription, ideological structure, and the actuation of linguistic changes: Grammatical gender in French parliamentary debates.” *Language in Society* 48 (1): 65–93. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404518001161>.
-  Corbett, Greville G. 1991. *Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.