

# snippets

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# *Le dernier Metallica: Coercion, default gender, and reference*

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We analyze the contrast exemplified in (1).

- (1) a. T'as écouté **le dernier (de) Metallica?**  
you.have listened the.MASC latest.MASC of Metallica  
'Have you heard the latest Metallica?' ⇒ referring to an album
- b. T'as écouté **la dernière \*(de) Metallica?**  
you.have listened the.FEM latest.FEM of Metallica  
'Have you heard the latest Metallica?' ⇒ referring to a song

In (1a), the masculine NP naturally refers to an album, while the feminine NP in (1b) naturally refers to a song. The opposite interpretations are not possible. Moreover, the preposition *de* is optional in (1a), but obligatory in (1b). These examples raise two questions: (i) how is reference constrained, and (ii) what accounts for the difference in grammaticality in the versions without *de*? The versions with *de* are naturally analyzed with a covert head noun (*album* or *chanson*), which constrains reference and determines the grammatical gender of the entire NP (Gouet, 1976). For example, (1a) with *de* is analyzed as *le dernier [album] de Metallica*, where the masculine noun *album* is covert. If, by contrast, we posit a covert *album* in the *de*-less version of (1a), the resulting NP would be *le dernier [album] Metallica*, which is ungrammatical. In order to have a grammatical underlying NP, we would need to have *le dernier [album de] Metallica*, in which the non-constituent *album de* is deleted or otherwise made covert (see the analysis by Gouet (1976) and the rebuttal by Morin (1977), whose data do not however exemplify the gender asymmetry that we report here).

We propose that in the *de*-less version of (1a) the proper noun *Metallica* is reinterpreted as a common noun by metonymic coercion (Abeillé and Godard 2021, p. 439). The resulting NP defaults to masculine, which is the unmarked gender in French (Abeillé and Godard 2021, p. 382). This is why the example without *de* in (1b) is ungrammatical — there is no way here to derive the marked feminine gender on the article and adjective. Having defaulted to masculine gender, however, reference is now constrained to objects which would normally be referred to with masculine nouns. Semantically, there is nothing blocking metonymic coercion from generating a “song” interpretation, but the default masculine gender exploited in this construction blocks this interpretation, because the (syntactically absent) “target noun” *chanson* is feminine.

Example (2) is parallel to (1) with one difference: here we have a proper noun referring to a famous (female) radio show host, for which the most obvious metonymic interpretation is episodes of that host’s show, with the target noun *émission* “show/episode” being grammatically feminine in French. This interpretation is available in (2b) with *de*, which by hypothesis results from covert *émission*. The same interpretation, however, is unavailable without *de*. The *de*-less version is

necessarily masculine (despite the social gender of Pascale Clark), as in (2a), and this in turn requires a masculine target noun for the interpretation, which in this case is pragmatically difficult to resolve since it is not clear what would be referred to (unless already contextually specified).

- (2) a. T'as entendu parler **du prochain (de) Pascale Clark?**  
you.have listened talk of.the.MASC next.MASC of Pascale Clark  
'Have you heard about the next Pascale Clark?' ⇒ referring to ???
- b. T'as entendu parler de **la prochaine \*(de) Pascale Clark?**  
you.have listened talk of.the.FEM next.FEM of Pascale Clark  
'Have you heard about the next Pascale Clark?' ⇒ referring to a radio show

In short: Metonymic coercion in French can result in a noun phrase with no lexically determined gender, which defaults to masculine gender. This in turn results in a referential restriction to entities which would naturally be referred to using lexically masculine nouns, despite the absence of any such noun in the sentence itself. In terms of grammatical architecture, one might have thought that the mechanism driving default gender assignment would be a purely PF phenomenon, without consequences for semantic interpretation. We see though that this is not the case, and that the process of default gender assignment ends up restricting referential possibilities, and thus seems to have consequences at the level of LF. This raises the question: what mechanism underlies this kind of referential restriction, and where else in the grammar might we see its effects?

## References

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