Sexless animates? Gender agreement with fixed gender nouns in German and French

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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

(1) le sentiment de ‘the guard’ — le génie M ‘the genius’

(2) das Opfer M ‘the victim’ — die Waise F ‘the orphan’ — der Bruder M ‘the brother’

— Can refer to females and males
— Grammatical or semantic gender agreement?

Gender agreement in superlative partitive constructions (i-ii):

— For French: Sleeman & Ihnsane (2016)
— Class D nouns: only grammatical gender agreement (not verified by them!)
— Class B/C nouns: semantic agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)

What about German?

2. Sleeman & Ihnsane’s analysis for French

Sleeman & Ihnsane (2016) distinguish grammatical and semantic gender:

- Grammatical gender
  - Functional projection of Gender Phrase (GendP)
  - Only present for animate nouns

- Semantic gender
  - Mental lexicon (in principle)

- Interpretable?
  - No
  - With class B/C: yes
  - With class D: no

- Sleeman & Ihnsane: class B/C nouns unmarked for grammatical gender in lexicon, valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on GendP

(3) Class D sentinelle

(4) Class B/C ministre

(5) Class B/C ministre Failed Agree

3. Research questions

Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French and German:

1) Do we observe the same patterns as Sleeman & Ihnsane (2016) in both German and French?

2) Can Sleeman & Ihnsane’s analysis also account for German?

5. Results

(... simplified representation, results show a lot of variation)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grammatical agreement</th>
<th>Semantic agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opfer</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kind</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waise</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flüchtling</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class B/C</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personne</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>victime</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentinelle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personnage</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>génie</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class B/C</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. A slightly different approach

- Assumption: all nouns are marked for grammatical gender, but not all to the same degree of specification

- Class D nouns marked for specific grammatical gender (M, F, IN) in the lexicon

- Class B/C nouns marked for hybrid grammatical gender (M/F), not specified as either masculine or feminine yet

Comparison with Dutch gender system:

- Originally three genders: masculine & feminine & neuter
- Conflation of masculine and feminine: M = F = common
- Now two genders: common & neuter

Interim conclusion:

- Sleeman & Ihnsane’s analysis can explain difference between class B/C and class D nouns in French

But what about semantic agreement with German masculine/feminine class D nouns?

- In this case, a gender mismatch may arise (6)

4. Methodology: Grammatical Judgment Task

Native speakers of German (n = 20) and French (n = 70)

- Sentences with and without gender mismatch, including control sentences
- Sentences judged on a 5-point scale

6. Conclusion & outlook

- Gender agreement with animate nouns in French
- Some animate nouns marked for gender in the lexicon (class D), others unmarked (class B/C)?

7. Unresolved issue:

- Is gender to be understood as a continuum?
- Would be difficult to interpret in a formal sense...

References


Supporting evidence:

- The use of neuter in the outer DP is ungrammatical when the inner DP is masculine/feminine

- “Das/N/Die/F/Der M ist jungster der Lehrer C.PL...”
  - “The youngest of the teachers...”

- “Das/N/Die/F/Der M jungster der Lehrer C.PL...”
  - “The youngest of the persons present...”

- Is gender to be understood as a continuum?
- Would be difficult to interpret in a formal sense...

- Comparability with German neuter and French class D nouns
- Semantic agreement with German masculine/feminine class D nouns
- Semantic agreement with French and German class B/C nouns
- We propose a gender feature hierarchy to account for these patterns

- Unresolved issue: Why is the agreement competition possible between German masculine/feminine class D nouns, but not/sis so with similar French nouns?

- Is gender to be understood as a continuum?
- Would be difficult to interpret in a formal sense...