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

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1. Introduction
Sexless animates?

(1) Le sentinelte ‘the guard’ — le génie ‘the genius’
(2) des Opern ‘the victim’ — die Waise ‘the orphan’ — der Bruder ‘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 agreement (not verified by them!)
➢ Class B/C: nouns: semantic agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)

What do we observe?

Noun classes (adapted from Ihnsane & Sleeman 2016)

- Class A: Suppletive two distinct forms
die Schwester ‘the sister’ — der Bruder ‘the brother’
- Class B/C: Related forms: suffixes (B/determiner) (C) change
die Studentin ‘the student’
- Class D: fixed gender nouns

das Kind ‘the child’

What about German?

2. Sleeman & Ihnsane’s analysis for French
Sleeman & Ihnsane (2016) distinguish grammatical and semantic gender:

Encoded where? Interpretable?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammatical gender</th>
<th>Semantic gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental lexicon (in principle)</td>
<td>Functional projection Gender Phrase (GendP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>only present for animate nouns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

How does this approach account for our results?

If we apply this system to French and German:

(i) Das/\*Der\*Die älteste der Kinder ist Paul\*/Marie.
the.N/M/F oldest of the child.N.PL is Paul\*/Mary

➢ German neuter
➢ Grammatical agreement

(ii) ??Die/\*Der jüngste der Waisen ist Paul.
the.F/M youngest of the orphan.F.PL is Paul

➢ German feminine
➢ Semantic agreement

(iii) La/\*Le plus jeune de ces sentinelles est Paul.
The/F/M most young of these guard.F.PL is Paul

➢ French feminine
➢ Grammatical agreement

Interim conclusion:

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

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, (N)) 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
➢ Correlation of masculine and feminine: M + F = common
➢ Now two genders: common & neuter

HYBRID GENDER = COMMON GENDER

Adapted from Hansen, Harley & Ritter (2002)

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

(12) Der/\*Die jüngste der Personen ist Heinz.
the.M/F youngest of the person.F.PL is Heinz

➢ This competition is not possible with German neuter class D nouns!
➢ Neuter is not headed by common in (13), whereas masculine and feminine are headed by common

7. Conclusion & outlook

➢ Proposition: the gender hierarchy is a competition hierarchy

Is gender to be understood as a continuum?

➢ Would be difficult to interpret in a formal sense...

References: