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

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Sexless animates? Gender agreement with fixed-gender nouns in German and French
Thom Westerweel, Petra Sleeman & Enoch O. Abob – Universiteit van Amsterdam
“Language Comparison and Typology: German and the Mediterranean languages”
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1. Introduction
Sexless animates?
(1) Le sentinelle ‘the guard’ – le génie ‘the genius’
(2) Das Opfer ‘the victim’ – die Weise ‘the orphian’ – der Bruder M ‘the brother’

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitive constructions (i–iii):
- For French: Sleeman & Ihosvane (2016)
- Class D nouns: only grammatical agreement (not verified by them!)
- If present, gender value copied together with noun
- This competition is not possible with German neuter class D nouns!

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Encoded where?</th>
<th>Interpretable?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical gender</td>
<td>Mental lexicon (in principle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semantic gender</td>
<td>Functional projection Gender Phrase (GenD)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

3. Research questions
Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French and German:
1) Do we observe the same patterns as Sleeman & Ihosvane (2016) in both German and French?
2) Can Sleeman & Ihosvane’s analysis also account for German?

5. Results
(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 & Ihosvane’s analysis can explain difference between class B/C and class D nouns in French
- Some animate nouns marked for gender in the lexicon (class D), others unmarked (class B/C)?

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 & neutral
- Coherence of masculine and feminine: M = F + common
- Now two genders: common & neutral

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender feature hierarchy:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>masculine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>masculin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

7. Conclusion & outlook
- Grammatical agreement 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 those patterns

Unsolved issue: Why is the agreement competition possible with German masculine/feminine class D nouns, but not/false so with similar French nouns?
- Is gender to be understood as a continuum?
- Would be difficult to interpret in a formal sense...

References:
- Bakker, Babette; Heine, Elke & Ritter, Lizzy (2002). Gender and person marking on the verb in German.