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

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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

Sexless nouns?

(1) le sentinelle ‘the guard’ — le génie ‘the genius’
(2) des Oppen ‘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 suppletive partitive constructions (i-iii):

For French: Sleeman & Ihssane (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 about German?

Noun classes (adapted from Ihssane & Sleeman 2016)

Class A: Suppletive forms: two distinct forms die Schwester ‘f the sister’ — der Bruder M ‘the brother’
Class B/C:
Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change die Studentin ‘f the Student’ ‘the student’
Class D:
Fixed-gender nouns das Kind ‘n the child’

2. Sleeman & Ihssane’s analysis for French

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Encoded gender</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 (GendP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>only present for animate nouns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

— Sleeman & Ihssane: 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

1. Class A
2. Class B/C
3. Class D

What’s the point scale?

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

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

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

Interim conclusion:
— Sleeman & Ihssane’s analysis can explain difference between class B/C and class D nouns in French

4. Methodology: Grammatical Judgment Test

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

But what about German?

5. Results

(i) Das/*Der/Die älteste der Kinder ist Paul/Marie.
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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
— Correlation of masculine and feminine: M = F = common
— Now two genders: common & neutral

French feminine

French masculine

French neutral

Gender feature hierarchy:

HYBRID GENDER = COMMON GENDER

Adapted from Hanson, Harley & Ritter (2002)

Supporting evidence:

— The use of neutral in the inner DP is grammatical when the inner DP is masculine/feminine
— The youngest of the teachers...
— The youngest of the persons present...

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 these patterns

Unsolved issue: Why is the agreement competition possible with German masculine/feminine class D nouns, but not/s occasionally with French masculine/feminine?

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