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

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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

(1) [DP la sentinelle ‘the guard’] – [DP le génie ‘the genius’]
(2) [DP Opar ‘the victim’] – [DP le ‘orphan’] – [DP der Schüler ‘the student’]

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 ‘the sister’ – der Bruder ‘M the brother’

Class B/C  
Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change
die Studentin ‘F the student’ – der Student ‘M the student’
die F/o der M Studierende ‘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 where?</th>
<th>Interpretable?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gr[1]</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grammatical</strong></td>
<td>Mental lexicon (in principle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Semantic</strong></td>
<td>Functional projection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- With class B/C: yes
- With class D: no

- Sleeman & Ihssane: class B/C nouns *unmarked* for grammatical gender in lexicon, valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on Gen[D]

- German neuter
- French feminine

(3) Class D sentinelle
(4) Class B/C ministre
(5) Class B/C ministre

Failed Agree

D  ...   le [u: m] Gend  NP 
   
[ u: f]      sentinelle [u: f]   [i: f]          ministre     [i: _]        ministre

3. Research questions

Gender agreement in suppletive partitives in French and German:

1) Do we observe the same patterns as Sleeman & Ihssane (2016) in both German and French?
2) Can Sleeman & Ihssane’s analysis also account for German?

5. Results

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Gr[1]</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opfer</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>v</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kind</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>v</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Weise</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>v</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Star</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flüchtling</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>v</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>personne</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>v</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentinelle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>v</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personnage</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>v</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>génie</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class B/C</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>v</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If we apply this system to French and German:

- Class D: marked for specific grammatical gender in the lexicon
- Class B/C: marked for common grammatical gender in the lexicon, specification through valuation of semantic gender feature

How does this approach account for our results?

- Grammatical agreement with German neutral (and French) class D nouns:
  
  (10) [DP Das jüngste [DEGP jüngstes [GendP N [FP Kind [PP der [GendP N [NP Kinder]]]]]]

- Semantic agreement with German (and French) class B/C nouns:
  
  (11) [DP Das [DEGP jüngstes [GendP N [FP Kind [PP der [GendP N [NP Kinder]]]]]]

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

- Competition in agreement, caused by interfering common gender feature:


  This competition is not possible with German neutral class D nouns!

  - Neuter is not headed by common in (13), whereas masculine and feminine are headed by common

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

Comparative: German masculine/feminine class D nouns

HYBRID GENRE = COMMON GENDER

Adapted from Hansen, Harley & Ritter (2002)

Glossa:  
- Gender feature hierarchy:

7. Conclusion & outlook

- Grammatical agreement with German neutral 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 with German masculine/feminine class D nouns, but not/less so with similar French nouns?

Supporting evidence:

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

| (14) “Das N/Die F/Der M jüngste der Lehrer.C.PL...
  'The youngest of the teachers...'

| (15) “Das N jüngste der anwesenden Personen.F.PL...
  'The youngest of the persons present...'

Is gender to be understood as a continuum?

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