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

Westveer, T.J.T.; Sleeman, A.P.; Aboh, E.O.

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Thom Westveer, Petra Sleeman & Enoch O. Aboh – Universiteit van Amsterdam
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1. Introduction
Sexless animates?

(1) le singe féminin ‘the guard’ – le génie M ‘the genius’
(2) Das Opfer N ‘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 superpartitive constructions (i-iii):

➢ For French: Sleeman & Ihssane (2016)
➢ Class D: no only grammatical gender agreement (not verified by them!)
➢ Class B/C: 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 – der Student M ‘the student’
die Fächer M ‘the subject’

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:

(iii) Class D sentinelle (4) Class B/C ministre (5) Class B/C ministre Failed Agree

- Encoded where?
- Interpretable?

Graded gender

- Mental lexicon (in principle)
- No

Semantic gender

- Functional projection Gender Phrase (GenderP)
- 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 Gender Phrase

(3) [DP La [DEGP plus jeune [GendP [NP nouveaux ministres]]]]

(4) [DP le [DEGP jüngste [GendP [NP kind]]]]

(6) [La [DEGP plus jeune [GendP [NP anouveau ministres]]]]

(7) [La [DEGP plus jeune [GendP [NP sentinelle]]]]

3. Research questions
Gender agreement in superpartitive constructions 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?

(6) [La [DEGP plus jeune [GendP [NP nouveau ministres]]]]

(8) [La [DEGP plus jeune [GendP [NP sentinelle]]]]

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

5. Results
Results...

(i) Das/Der*Die älteste der Kinder ist Paul/Marie.

(ii) ??Die/Der jüngste der Waisen ist Paul.

(iii) La/Le plus jeune de ces sentinelles est Paul.

Interim conclusion:

➢ Sleeman & Ihssane’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?

Gender feature hierarchy:

- Gender
- Common: masculine, feminine, neuter

HYBRID GENRE = COMMON GENDER

Adapted from Hansson, Harley & Ritter (2002)

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
- Now two genders: common & neuter

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 class D) nouns:

(10) [La Das [DEGP jüngste [GendP [NP Kind]]] der [DEGP [DP des [DP neuern ministres]]]]

- Semantic agreement with German (and French) class B/C nouns:

(11) [La [DEGP jüngste [GendP [NP ministe]]] des de [DEGP [NP neuer ministres]]]

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

- Comparison is not possible with German neuter class D nouns!

References


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?

Is gender to be understood as a continuum?

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