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

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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

(1) Es ist ein Fabeltierschen, ein Kind M der Tiere.
(2) der Smaragdlosen...‘the poor lawyer’ – der Student M ‘the student’

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

Gender agreement in superlative participial 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 about German?

Noun classes (adapted from Ihnsane & 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

Class D: Fixed-gender nouns

das Kind N ‘the child’

3. Research questions

Gender agreement in superlative participles in French and German:
1) Do we observe the same patterns as Sleeman & Ihnsane (2016) in both German and French?
2) Can Sleeman & Ihnsane’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 NPL 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
➤ 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, IN) 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
➤ Coexistence of masculine and feminine: M = F = common
➤ Now two genders: common & neutral

HYBRID GENDER = COMMON GENDER

Adapted from Hanson, Harley & Ritter (2002)

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

(b) Competition in agreement, caused by interfering common gender feature:

(12) ‘Der 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

➤ Grammar 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/less so with similar French nouns?

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