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
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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

(1) le sentinelle ‘the guard’ – le genie ‘the genius’
(2) le Opfer ‘the victim’ – la Weise ‘the orphral’ – der Starker ‘the star’

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives constructions (i-ii):
- For French: Sleeman & Ihnsane (2016)
- Class D nouns: only grammatical agreement (not verified by them!)

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

Class B/C nouns marked for

- Conflation of masculine and feminine: M + F = common

Class D nouns: only grammatical agreement (not verified by them!)

- In this case, a gender mismatch may arise (6)

Competition in agreement, caused by

- masculine
- feminine
- neuter

References

- References: References (Sleeman, Department of Linguistics, University of Amsterdam, 2002).
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- References (Sleeman, Department of Linguistics, University of Amsterdam, 2002).

2. Sleeman & Ihnsane’s analysis for French

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

- Encoded where?
- Interpretable?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender agreement</th>
<th>Grammatical gender</th>
<th>Semantic gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental lexicon (in principle)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>With class B/C: yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only present for animate nouns</td>
<td>With class D: no</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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

- DP
- DP
- DP

(6) [DP Das [DEGP jüngste [GendP N [FP Kind [PP der [GendP N [NP Kinder]]]]]]]
(7) [DP La [DEGP plus jeune [GendP F [FP sentinelle [PP de ces [GendP F [NP sentinelles]]]]]]]

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

Hybrid gender = common gender

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

Gender feature hierarchy:

- masculin
- femminile
- neuter

Supporting evidence:

- The use of neuter in the outer 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…’

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

U Jesse: 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...

References

- References: References (Sleeman, Department of Linguistics, University of Amsterdam, 2002).
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