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 génie ‘the genius’
2) des Opern ‘the victim’ – die Waise ‘the orphan’ – der Bruder M ‘the brother’

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitive constructions (i-iii):

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

Class B/C
Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change
de Studentin ‘the Student’ – der Student M ‘the student’
die F/der M Studierende ‘the student’

Class D
Fixed-gender nouns
das Kind “N ‘the child’

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
    ➢ French feminine
    ➢ Grammatical agreement

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

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 common grammatical gender in the lexicon, specification through valuation of semantic gender feature

Comparison with Dutch gender system:
➢ Originally three genders: masculine & feminine & neuter
➢ Conflation of masculine and feminine: M + F = common
➢ Now two genders: common & neuter

HYBRID GENRE = COMMON GENDER

Adapted from Hanson, Harley & Ritter (2002)

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 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…

References:
Hanson, Rebecca; Heidi Harley & Elizabeth Ritter. 2002. Gender agreement with animate nouns in French. Selected Proceedings of the 41st Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America
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