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 génie ‘the genius’
(2) les Opfer ‘the victim’ – die Weise ‘the orphen’ – der Bruder M ‘the brother’
• Can refer to females and males
• Grammatical or semantic gender agreement?

Gender agreement in suppletive participle constructions (i-ii):
• For French: Sleeman & Ihșiyan (2016)
• Class D: nouns only grammatical gender (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 Ihșiyan & Sleeman 2016)

Class A
Suspletive forms: two distinct forms
die Schüler versus der Schüler M ‘the brother’

Class B/C
Related forms: suffixes (B)/determiner (C) change
die Schüler + der Schüler M ‘the student’
die Vater/M Student/in ‘the student’

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

2. Sleeman & Ihșiyan’s analysis for French
Sleeman & Ihșiyan (2016) distinguish grammatical and semantic gender:

Encoded where?

Interpretable?

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

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

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

| [le [c: m] GendP [i: _] ministre [u: _] ministre]

• Semantic agreement with German (and French) class B/C nouns:
• Ihsane: Would be difficult to interpret in a formal sense…
• Can refer to females and males
• Cannot explain difference between German neuter and French class D nouns
• If present, gender value copied together with noun
• Second Gender Phrase in outer DP

• Originally three genders: masculine & feminine & neuter
• If no semantic gender value is inserted (5), neuter is not headed by common in (13), whereas masculine and feminine are headed by common

• We propose a gender feature hierarchy to account for these patterns

3. Research questions
Gender agreement in suppletive participles in French and German:
1) Do we observe the same patterns as Sleeman & Ihșiyan (2016) in both German and French?
2) Can Sleeman & Ihșiyan’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 N.PL is Paul/Mary
   • German neuter
   • Grammatical agreement

(ii) ??Die/Dir 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

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

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

BUT
• Cannot explain difference between German neuter and masculine/feminine class D nouns
• 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, (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 & neuter

HYPOTHETICAL COMMON GENDER

GendP | [gender [masculine | feminine | neuter]
| [masculine | feminine]
| [masculine | feminine]

Supporting evidence:
• The use of neuter in the outer DP is ungrammatical when the inner DP is masculine/feminine

(14) *Das/N/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: