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) des Opfer ‘the victims’ – la Weise ‘the orphans’ – des Star ‘the stars’

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

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

(i) For French: Sleeman & Ihnsane (2016)
(ii) Class D nouns: only grammatical gender agreement (not verified by them)
(iii) 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 Schweiter‘ the sister’ – der Bruder ‘the brother’

Class B/C
Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change
die Studentin ‘ the student’ – der Student ‘ the student’
die Fächer ‘ the subjects’ – der Fächer ‘ the subjects’

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

2. Sleeman & Ihnsane’s analysis for French

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

- Encoded where?
  - Interpretable?

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

- Two-noun analysis of superlative partitives:
  - Noun of inner DP (set) copied onto outer DP (subset)
  - Copied noun remains unpronounced
  - If present, gender value copied together with noun
  - Second Gender Phrase in outer DP

- Seem to require grammatical gender in lexicon, valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on GenD

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

- If no semantic gender value is inserted (5), Failed Agree (Preminger 2011) takes place, resulting in spell-out of default masculine gender

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

(6) la [DEGP plus jeune [GendP F [FP sentinelle [PP de ces [GendP F [NP sentinelles]]]]]

- 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 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

HYPOTHESIS: COMMON GENDER

Adapted from Hansen, Harley & Ritter (2002)

Gender feature hierarchy:

(8) gender
masculine feminine neuter
(9) gender
masculine feminine

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: How is the agreement competition possible with German masculine/feminine class D nouns, but not/fails so with similar French nouns?

Is gender to be understood as a continuum?

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

References

- Blume, Tomas, & Harly, Sleeman 2015. Gender agreement with animate nouns in German. Selected Proceedings of the 4th International Workshop on Grammatical Agreement
- Kooi, Bavo 2011. Agreement as a fallible operation.