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

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Citation for published version (APA):
Sexless animates? Gender agreement with fixed-gender nouns in German and French
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“Language Comparison and Typology: German and the Mediterranean languages”
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin – 12.10.2018

1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

(1) le sentinelle *‘the guard’ – le génie ‘the genius’
(2) des Opfer N ‘the victim’ – die Weise ‘the orphan’ – der Bruder M ‘the brother’

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

Gender agreement in superpartitive constructions (i-iii):

For: French: Sleeman & Ihsane (2016)
- Class D nouns: only grammatical agreement (not verified by them)
- Class B/C nouns: semantic agreement possible (gender mismatch between sent noun and subset noun accepted)

Gender agreement

Class D nouns marked for specific grammatical gender (M, F, M/F) in the lexicon

- Some animate nouns marked for gender in the lexicon (class D), others

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

Preminger, Omer. 2011.
Second Gender Phrase in outer DP
If present, gender value copied together with noun
Conflation of masculine and feminine: M + F = common

Semantic agreement with German masculine/feminine class D nouns

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

Hanson, Rebecca; Heidi Harley & Elizabeth Ritter. 2002.
Neuter is not headed by common in (13), whereas masculine and feminine are headed by common

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

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

Comparison in agreement, caused by interfering common gender feature:

(12) Jüngste/älteste der Personen ist Heinz.
the.M.F. youngest of the persons 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

2. Sleeman & Ihsane’s analysis for French

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Encoded where?</th>
<th>Interpretable?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grammatical gender</strong></td>
<td>Mental lexicon (in principle)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Semantic gender** | Functional projection Gender Phrase (GendP)
only present for animate nouns |

- With class B/C: yes
- With class D: no

- Sleeman & Ihsane: 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

(6) [DP La [DEGP plus jeune [GendP F [FP ministre [PP des [GendP _ [NP nouveaux ministres]]]]]]]

(7) [DP La [DEGP plus jeune [GendP F [FP sentinelle [PP de ces [GendP F [NP sentinelles]]]]]]]

(8) gender DP DP DP

(9) gender DP DP DP

Masculine feminine neuter common feminine

3. Research questions

Gender agreement in superpartitive constructions in French and German:

1) Do we observe the same patterns as Sleeman & Ihsane (2016) in both German and French?
2) Can Sleeman & Ihsane’s analysis also account for German?

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

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

(ii) ?? Die/der jüngste der Waisen ist Paul.
the.F/M youngest of the orphan.F.PL is Paul

(iii) La/Le plus jeune de ces sentinelles est Paul.
the.F/M most young of these guard.F.PL is Paul

Interim conclusion:
- Sleeman & Ihsane’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, (M/F)) in the lexicon

Class B/C nouns marked for hybrid grammatical gender (M/F), if 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

HYBRID GENDER = COMMON GENDER

Adapted from Hanson, Harley & Ritter (2002)

Gender feature hierarchy:

masculine feminine neuter common

(8) gender DP DP DP

(9) gender DP DP DP

masculine feminine neuter common

(13) gender DP DP DP

masculine feminine

(10) [u: m] Gend NP

(11) [i: f] Gend [u: f] person

(12) [u: f] Gend [i: f] personne

(13) [u: f] Gend NP

(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’…

Supporting evidence:

- The use of neuter in the outer DP is ungrammatical when the inner DP is 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: 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