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

Westveer, T.J.T.; Sleeman, A.P.; Aboh, E.O.

Citation for published version (APA):
1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

(1) (§) sensiNelle ‘the guard’ — le génie ‘the genius’

(2) des Opfer N ‘the victim’ — die Weise ‘the orphan’ — der Sturm M ‘the storm’

- 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 F ‘the sister’ — der Bruder M ‘the brother’

Class B/C
- Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change
die Studentin F ‘the student’ — die Fester M ‘the student’
die Fester M Studierende ‘the student’

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

2. Sleeman & Ihnsane’s analysis for French

Steeman & Ihnsane (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 (GenP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>only present for animate nouns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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

Failed Agree

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
- Now two genders: common & neutral

HYBRID GENDER = COMMON GENDER

Adapted from Hansen, Harley & Ritter (2002)

(8) [DP La [DEGP plus jeune [GendP F [FP ministre [NP nouveaux ministres]]]]]

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

5. Results

(i) Das/N/Der*Die älteste der Kinder ist Paul/Marie.
- the N/M/F oldest of the child NLP is Paul/Mary

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

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

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

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

(14) *Das/N/Die/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...’

6. 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

7. Conclusion & outlook

- Grammatical agreement
- Semantic agreement
- Person and number features

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(8) gender

(9) gender

If we apply this system to French and German:

- Class D: marked for specific grammatical gender in the lexicon
- Class B/C: marked for common grammatical gender in the lexicon, specification through utilization of semantic gender feature

How does this approach account for our results?

- Grammatical agreement with German neuter (and class D) nouns:

(10) [or Das [DEGP jüngste [GendP N/M/F [FP Kinder [NP [DEGP [GendP _ [NP [GendP _ [NP [GendP _ [NP [U: m]]]]]]]]]]]]]

- Semantic agreement with German (and French) class B/C nouns:

(11) [or La [DEGP plus jeune [GendP F/M [FP ministre [NP nouveaux ministres]]]]]

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

- Competition in agreement, caused by interfering common gender feature:

- the F/M youngest of the person F.PL 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

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

Unresolved issue: Why is the agreement competition possible with German masculine/feminine class D nouns, but not/feasibly so with French feminine?