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

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1. Introduction

Sexless nouns?

Sexless animates?

(1) la sentinelle *‘the guard’ – le génie *‘the genius’

(2) des Opfer *‘the victim’ – die Weise *‘the orator’ – der Bruder *‘the brother’

➢ Can refer to females and males

➢ Grammatical or semantic gender agreement?

Gender agreement in superpartitive constructions (1-iii):

➢ For French: Sleeman & Ihssane (2016)

➢ Class D nouns: only grammatical gender 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 Ihssane & Sleeman 2016)

Class A

Suppletive forms: two distinct forms
die Schweizer *‘the sister’ – der Bruder *‘the brother’

Class B/C

Related forms: suffixes (B)/determiner (C) change
die Studentin – der Student *‘the student’
die/der M. Studierende *‘the student’

Class D

Fixed-gender nouns
das Kind *‘the child’

2. Sleeman & Ihssane’s analysis for French

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

I. Encoded where?

II. Interpretable?

Grammatical

Semantic

gender

Mental lexicon (in principle)

Functional projection Gender Phrase (GenderP)

only present for animate nouns

gender

With class B/C: yes

With class D: no

➢ Sleeman & Ihssane: class B/C nouns unmarked for grammatical gender in lexicon, valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on GenderP

(3) Class D sentinelle

(4) Class B/C ministre

(5) Class B/C ministre

Failed Agree

DP

DP

DP

GendP

GendP

GendP

sentinelle [u: f]

ministre [u: f]

ministre [u: f]

[I: f]

[I: f]

[I: f]

Sentences judged on a 5-point scale

Sentences with and without gender mismatch, including control sentences

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Interim conclusion:

➢ Sleeman & Ihssane’s analysis can explain difference between class B/C and class D nouns in French

(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 minishte [PP des [GendP _ [NP nouveaux ministres]]]]]

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

HYBRID GENDER = COMMON GENDER

Adapted from Hanson, Harley & Ritter (2002)

Gender feature hierarchy:

(8) [gender [masculine [feminine [neuter]]]]

(9) [gender [masculine [feminine]]]

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/feas so with similar French nouns?

Is gender to be understood as a continuum?

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

References:

- Interim conclusion:

➢ Sleeman & Ihssane’s analysis can explain difference between class B/C and class D nouns in French

(i) Oas/Der*Die älteste der Kinder ist Paul/Marie.

(ii) ??Die/Der jüngste der Waisen ist Paul.

(iii) La*/Le plus jeune de ces sentinelles est Paul.

Supporting evidence:

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