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

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

**1. Introduction**

**Sexless nouns?**

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

(2) das Opfer N *’the victim’ — die Weise F *’the orator’ — der Staat M *’the state’

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

Gender agreement in superpartitive constructions (i–ii):

- 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)

**3. Research questions**

Gender agreement in superpartitive constructions in French and German:

1) Do we observe the same patterns as Sleeman & Ihnsane (2016) in both German and French?

2) Can Sleeman & Ihnsane’s analysis also account for German?

**3. Results**

(... simplified representation, results show a lot of variation)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grammatical agreement</th>
<th>Semantic agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opfer</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kind</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weise</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flüchtling</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class B/C</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personne</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>victrix</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentinelle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personnage</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>génie</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class B/C</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**German**

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

**How does this approach account for our results?**

- Grammatical agreement with German neuter (and French) class D nouns:
  
  (10) [u: Das [u: dopp. [u: ein Kind [u: der [u: des [u: eines [u: eines [u: Kindern]]]]]]]]

- Semantic agreement with German (and French) class B/C nouns:
  
  (11) [u: La [u: die plus jeune [u: F [u: der [u: des [u: eines [u: ein neun [u: neun]]]]]]]]

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

- Competition in agreement, caused by interfering common gender feature:
  
  (12) [Dop./Dopp. [u: die jüngste [u: der [u: des [u: eines [u: eines [u: Personen]]]]]]

- 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

**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/der 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

**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 & neutral

**HYBRID GENDER = COMMON GENDER**

Adapted from Hansen, Harley & Ritter (2002)

- Gender feature hierarchy:
  
  (8) gender
      
      (9) neutral
          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/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 those patterns

**Unsolved issue:** Why is the agreement competition possible with German masculine/feminine class D nouns, but not so in such similar French?

**Is gender to be understood as a continuum?**

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