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

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

Thom Westveer, Petra Sleeman & Enoch O. Aboh – Universiteit van Amsterdam
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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

(1) le sentinelle ‘the guard’ – le génie ‘the genius’
(2) des Opfer ‘the victims’ – die Waise ‘the orphan’ – der Bruder ‘the brother’

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitive constructions (i–ii):

➢ For French: Sleeman & Ihnsae [2016]
➢ Class B 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 Ihnsae & Sleeman 2016)

Class A
Suppletive forms: two distinct forms die Schwester ‘the sister’ – der Bruder ‘the brother’

Class B/C
Related forms: suffixes (B)/determiner (C) change die Studentin/F – der Student M ‘the student’
	note: Die/F die Studierende ‘the student’

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

2. Sleeman & Ihnsae’s analysis for French

Sleeman & Ihnsae [2016] distinguish grammatical and semantic gender:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Encoded where?</th>
<th>Interpretable?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical gender</td>
<td>Mental lexicon (in principle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semantic gender</td>
<td>Functional projection Gender Phrase [GendP] only present for animate nouns with class B/C: yes with class D: no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

➢ Sleeman & Ihnsae: class B/C nouns marked for grammatical gender in lexicon, valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on Gend

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

3. Research questions

Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French and German:

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

5. Results

… simplified representation, results show a lot of variation

Gender | Grammatical agreement | Semantic agreement
---------|----------------------|---------------------
Opfer | N | ✓ | X
Kind | N | ✓ | X
Person | F | ? | ?
Waise | F | ✓ | ✓
Star | M | ✓ | ✓
Flüchtling | M | ✓ | ✓

Class B/C
personne | F | ✓ | X
sentinelle | F | ✓ | X
personnage | M | ✓ | X
génie | M | ? | ?

Class B/C
M/F | ✓ | ✓ | ✓

French

 gender feminine masculine neuter
masculine feminine masculine feminine

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 Hansen, Harley & Ritter (2002)

➢ Gender feature hierarchy:

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

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/fails so with similar French nouns?

➢ Some animate nouns marked for gender in the lexicon (class D), others unmarked (class B/C)?

BUT

➢ Cannot explain difference between German neuter and masculine/feminine class D nouns?

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 valuation of semantic gender feature

How does this approach account for our results?

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


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


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

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

(12) *Die/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

(i) Das/Der/Die *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 *Le plus jeune de ces sentinelles est Paul.
the.F/M most young of these guard.F.PL is Paul

Interim conclusion:

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

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

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


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

(14) *Das/Der/Die *Das/nur jüngste der Lehrer.C.PL ...
‘the youngest of the teachers’...

(15) *Das/Der/Die *Das/nur 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

8. 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

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

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9. References

