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

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Publication date
2018

Citation for published version (APA):
1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

(1) Le/la sentinelle ‘the guard’ – le/la génie ‘the genius’
(2) des Opfer ‘the victim’ – des Weise ‘the orphan’ – des Star ‘the star’

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitive constructions (i-iii):
- For French: Sleeman & Ihssane (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?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun classes (adapted from Ihssane &amp; Sleeman 2016)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtypical forms; two distinct forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>die Schwester ‘the sister’ – der Bruder ‘the brother’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class B/C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related forms: suff.: B (determiner) (C) change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>die Studentin – der Student ‘the student’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixed-gender nouns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>das Kind – ‘the child’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Sleeman & Ihssane’s analysis for French

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

(3) Class D sentinelle

- DP
- Gender Phrase [GendP]
- Only present for animate nouns

- F: feminine, M: masculine, N: neuter

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

- Pronunciation of noun remains unpronounced

Semantic agreement with French class D nouns:

- Gender agreement in superlative partitive constructions

Interim conclusion:

- Sleeman & Ihssane’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 & neuter

HYBRID GENDER = COMMON GENDER

Adapted from Hanson, Harley & Ritter (2002)

Gender feature hierarchy:

- Gender
- Common
- Feminine
- Masculine
- Neuter

Supporting evidence:

- The use of neuter in the outer DP is not grammatical when the inner DP is masculine/feminine

- "Das N./Der M./Die F./Der M. jüngste der Lehrer C. PL...
  'The youngest of the teachers...'"

- "Das N. jüngste der anwesenden Personen F./PL...
  'The youngest of the persons present...'"

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

-... simplified representation, results show a lot of variation

(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

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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 gender competition possible with German masculine/feminine class D nouns, but not/success so with French masculine?

Is gender to be understood as a continuum?

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