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

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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

(1) Je sentinelle f ‘the guard’ – le génie M ‘the genius’
(2) Le opérateur M ‘the operator’ – de l’opérateur M ‘the operator’

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

Gender agreement in superlative participles constructions (I-III):
- For French: Sloman & Ihssane (2016)
- Class B 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?

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

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
   \[ \text{German neuter} \]
   \[ \text{Grammatical agreement} \]

(ii) ??Die/Der jüngste der Waisen ist Paul.
    the.F/M youngest of the orphan.F.PL is Paul
   \[ \text{German feminine} \]
   \[ \text{Semantic agreement} \]

(iii) La/Le plus jeune de ces sentinelles est Paul.
    the.F/M most young of these guard.F.PL is Paul
   \[ \text{French feminine} \]
   \[ \text{Grammatical agreement} \]

Interim conclusion:
- Le Sloman & 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
- Coherence of masculine and feminine: M = F = common
- Now two genders: common & neuter

HYBRID GENDER = COMMON GENDER

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

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

Is gender to be understood as a continuum?
- Would be difficult to interpret in a formal sense...

References: