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

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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

(1) La sentinelle ‘the guard’ – le génie ‘the genius’
(2) das Opfer ‘the victim’ – die Weise ‘the wise’ – der Bruder ‘the brother’

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

Gender agreement in superpartitive constructions (i-ii):

➢ For French: Sleeman & Ihnsane (2016)
➢ Class D: nouns only grammatical gender agreement (not verified by them)
➢ Class B/C: semantic agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)

What about semantic agreement with German masculine/feminine class D nouns:

➢ If no semantic gender value is inserted, ungrammatical when inner DP is masculine/feminine

Semantic agreement with German masculine/feminine class D nouns:

➢ Difficult to interpret in a formal sense...

Class B/C: marked for common grammatical gender in the lexicon, specification through valuation of semantic gender feature

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

➢ Can refer to females and males

Class B/C nouns: semantic agreement possible (gender mismatch

Neuter is not headed by common in (13), whereas masculine and feminine are headed by common

2. Sleeman & Ihnsane’s analysis for French

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

(3) DP S sentinelle DP
(4) DP B/C ministre DP
(5) DP B/C ministre Failed Agree

➢ Two noun analyses of superpartitive pronominals:
  ➢ Noun of inner DP (set) copied onto outer DP (subset)
  ➢ Noun of inner DP copied together with noun
  ➢ Gender Phrase in outer DP

Sleeman & Ihnsane: class B/C nouns unmarked for grammatical gender in lexicon, valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on Gender Phrase

(6) [DP La [DEGP plus jeune [GendP F [FP ministre [PP des [GendP C [NP nouveaux ministres]]]]]]
(7) [DP La [DEGP plus jeune [GendP F [FP ministre [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 common grammatical gender in the lexicon, specification through valuation of semantic gender feature

Comparison with Dutch gender system:

➢ Originally three genders: masculine & feminine & neutral
➢ Conflation of masculine and feminine: M = F = common
➢ Now two genders: common & neutral

HYBRID GENDER = COMMON GENDER

Adapted from Hanson, Harley & Ritter (2002)

Gender feature hierarchy:

5. Results

(i) Das/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.

Interim conclusion:

➢ Cannot explain difference between German neuter and masculine/feminine class D nouns
➢ Some animate nouns marked for gender in the lexicon (class D), others unmarked (class B/C)?

6. 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

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:

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

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

➢ 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

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 notfeasible with similar French nouns?

Is gender to be understood as a continuum?

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

References: