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

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

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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

Class D nouns marked for specific grammatical gender (M, F, (N)) in the lexicon

[1] le sentiment[.] ‘the guard’ – le génie ‘the genius’
[2] des Opfer ‘the victim’ – die Waise ‘the orphan’ – der Sturm ‘the storm’

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitive constructions (i-iii):

- 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)

What about German?

Class D nouns marked for specific grammatical gender in the lexicon

- Preminger, Omer. 2011.
- “If present, gender value copied together with noun”
- “Would be difficult to interpret in a formal sense…”
- “Can refer to females and males”
- “If no semantic gender value is inserted (5), cannot explain difference between German neuter and…”

3. Research questions

Gender agreement in superlative partitives 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?

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

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

Interim conclusion:
- Sleeman & Ihnsane’s analysis can explain difference between class B/C and class D nouns in French
- But 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. 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

Adapted from Hanson, Harley & Ritter (2002)

Gender feature hierarchy:

<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>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kind</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waise</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></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>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>victime</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentimentelle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personnage</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>X</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>

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/less so with similar French nouns?

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

References

- Prelinger, Glenn. 2011. Agreement or Infallible Operation: PhD dissertation, MIT.
- Sleeman, Petra & Tate Ritter. 2006. Gender micromorphology in partitive constructions with superlatives in French. Glaze 2 (1) 1-25.