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?

(1) le sentinelle ‘the guard’ – le genie ‘the genius’
(2) des Opfer ‘the victims’ – die Weise ‘the sages’ – der Bruder ‘the brother’

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitives 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)

2. Sleeman & Ihssane’s analysis for French
Sleeman & Ihssane (2016) distinguish grammatical and semantic gender:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Encoded where?</th>
<th>Interpretable?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grammatical gender</strong></td>
<td>Mental lexicon (in principle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Semantic gender</strong></td>
<td>Functional projection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⇒ Sleeman & Ihssane: class B/C nouns unmarked for grammatical gender in lexicon, valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on GendP

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

(3) In both (3) & (4), gender feature is syntactically visible, but (5) is uninterpretable


(7) [la [u: f] [u: f] NP sentinelle [i: f] des [u: m] [u: f] [i: f] sentinelles]]

What about German?

3. Research questions
Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French and German:

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

5. Results
(... simplified representation, results show a lot of variation)

<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>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kind</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weise</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flüchtling</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class B/C</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personne</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sentinelle</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>personnage</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>genie</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✗</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class B/C</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⇒ Gender agreement between class B/C and class D:

(iii) ››Die/Der jüngste der Waisen ist Paul.
the.F/M youngest of the orphan.F.PL is Paul

Interim conclusion:
⇒ Sleeman & Ihssane’s analysis can explain difference between class B/C and class D nouns in French

⇒ BUT

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)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender feature hierarchy:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>xo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>masculin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>klein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>klein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>klein</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Supporting evidence:
⇒ The use of neuter in the inner DP is ungrammatical when the inner DP is masculine/feminine

(14) “Das/Ni/Der/F/Der.M jüngste der Lehrer.C.PL ...
‘The youngest of the teachers…’
(15) “Das/Ni 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

Unsolved 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