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

Westveer, T.J.T.; Sleeman, A.P.; Aboh, E.O.

Publication date
2018

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Sexless animates? Gender agreement with fixed-gender nouns in German and French

Thom Westerveer, Petra Sleeman & Enoch O. Aboh – Universiteit van Amsterdam
“Language Comparison and Typology: German and the Mediterranean languages”
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin – 12.10.2018

1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

(1) je sentinelle “the guard” – le génie “the genius”
(2) des Opfer “the victim” – die Weise “the orphie” – der Bruder M “the brother”

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitive constructions (i-iii):
- For French: Sleeman & Ihnsane (2016)
- Class D nouns: only grammatical gender agreement (not verified by them)
- Class B/C nouns: semantic agreement possible (gender mismatch between set noun and subset noun accepted)

What about German?

Noun classes (adapted from Ihnsane & Sleeman 2016)

| Class A | Suppletive forms: two distinct forms – die Schwester F “the sister” – der Bruder M “the brother” |
| Class B/C | Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change die Studentin F “the student” – die Filder M Studierende “the student” |
| Class D | Fixed-gender nouns – das Kind N “the child” |

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 N.PL is Paul

(iii) La/Le plus jeune de ces sentinelles est Paul.
the F/M most young of these guard N.PL is Paul

Interim conclusion:
- Sleeman & Ihnsane’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

German

Hybrid Gender = Common Gender

Adapted from Hanson, Harley & Ritter (2002)

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:
  (10) [u: Das [u: zeshste [u: des [u: Kind [u: der [u: du: Kind]]]]]]
  - Semantic agreement with German (and French) class B/C nouns:

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

- Competition in agreement, caused by interfering common gender feature:
the N/M/F youngest of the person N.PL is Heinz

- 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

References


4. Methodology: Grammatical Judgement 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

Supporting evidence:

- The use of neuter in the outer DP is ungrammatical when the inner DP is masculine/feminine

(14) *Das M/Der M jüngste der Lehrer/C/PL...
the M/F youngest of the teachers...

(15) *Das M jüngste der anwesenden Personen/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 so with French masculine/feminine class D nouns?

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

- Two-noun analysis of superlative partitives:
  - Noun of inner DP (set) copied onto outer DP (subset)
  - Copied noun remains unpronounced
  - If present, gender value copied together with noun
  - Second Gender Phrase in outer DP

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

- German neuter: common
- German feminine: semantic
- German masculine: grammatical

- Cannot explain difference between German neuter and masculine/feminine class D nouns
- Preminger, Omer. 2011.
- Can refer to females and males
- Conflation of masculine and feminine: M + F = common
- French:
- Competition in agreement, caused by