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 sentimente/f "the guard" – le génie M "the genius"
(2) des Opfer/N/"the victim" – die Waise/"the orphan" – der Bruder M "the brother"

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

Gender agreement in superpartitive constructions (i-ii):

➢ 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)

What about German?

2. Sleeman & Ihssane’s analysis for French

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

- Encoded where?
- Interpretable?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grammatical gender</th>
<th>Semantic gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental lexicon (in principle)</td>
<td>Functional projection Gender Phrase (GendP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only present for animate nouns</td>
<td>With class B/C: yes</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 B sentinelle DP
(4) Class B/C ministre DP
(5) Class B/C ministre Failed Agree

- No semantic gender value is inserted, Failed Agree (Preminger 2011) takes place, resulting in spell-out of default masculine gender
- In this case, a gender mismatch may arise (6)

(6) La/la plus jeune [sentinelle M/la] ministre [des + [wau + [wau новоu + [sentinelles]]]]

- If no semantic gender value is inserted (5), Failed Agree takes place, resulting in spell-out of default masculine gender

Interim conclusion:

➢ Sleeman & Ihssane’s analysis can explain difference between class B/C and class D nouns in French

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

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

3. Research questions

Gender agreement in superpartitive constructions 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

(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:

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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

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
➢ Coarsification of masculine and feminine: M ≈ F = common
➢ Now two genders: common & neuter

HYBRID GENDER = COMMON GENDER

Adapted from Hanson, Harley & Ritter (2002)

Gender hierarchy:

(8) gender
masculine feminine neuter
(9) gender
masculine feminine

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 neutral (neuter) and French class D nouns:

(10) [u: Das [u: jüngste [u: Kind [u: der [u: (u: Kind)]]]]]]

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

(11) [u: La [u: plus jeune [u: ministre [u: des + [wau + [wau nouveau + [ministres]]]]]]]

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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/fails so with similar French nouns?

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

References