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 génie ‘the genius’
(2) das Opfer ‘the victim’ – die Weise ‘the orphah’ – 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 & Ihnsae (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?

Noun classes (adapted from Ihnsae & Sleeman 2016)

Class A:

Surname forms: two distinct forms
die Schwester “the sister” – der Bruder ‘the brother’

Class B/C:

Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change
die Studentin ‘the student woman’
die Fächer ‘the subject’

Class D:

Fixed-gender nouns
das Kind ‘the child’

2. Sleeman & Ihnsae’s analysis for French

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

Encoded where?

Interpretable?

Gr. gender

Mental lexicon (in principle)

No

Sem. gender

Functional projection of Gender Phrase (GenP)

With class B/C: yes

With class D: no

– Sleeman & Ihnsae: class B/C nouns unmarked for grammatical gender in lexicon, valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on GenP

(3) Class D sentinelle

DP

D

D

la [u: f] sentinelle [u: f] [i: f] [i: _]

[la: f] GendP DP

sentinelle [u: f] [i: _] [i: f]

(4) Class B/C ministre

DP

D

D

le [u: f] ministre [i: c: m] [i: f]

[le: f] GendP DP

ministre [i: c: m] [i: _] [i: f]

(5) Class B/C ministre

Failed Agree

DP

D

D

(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 sentinelle [PP de ces [GendP F [NP sentinelles

3. Research questions

Gender agreement in superpartitive constructions in French and German:
1) Do we observe the same patterns as Sleeman & Ihnsae (2016) in both German and French?
2) Can Sleeman & Ihnsae’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

Interim conclusion:
– Sleeman & Ihnsae’s analysis can explain difference between class B/C and class D nouns in French
– German neuter
– Grammatical agreement

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)?

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

– German neuter
– Grammatical agreement

(ii) ??Die/Der jüngste der Waisen ist Paul.

the.F/M youngest of the orphan.F.PL is Paul

– German feminine
– Semantic agreement

(iii) La/Le plus jeune de ces sentinelles est Paul.

the.F/M most young of these guard.F.PL is Paul

– French feminine
– Grammatical agreement

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
– Coreferent of masculine and feminine: M = F = common
– Now two genders: common & neuter

HYBRID GENDER = COMMON GENDER

Adapted from Hanson, Harley & Ritter (2002)

Gender feature hierarchy:

masculine

feminine

masculine

neuter

neuter

common

French

masculine

feminine

masculine

neuter

neuter

common

masculine

neuter

neuter

common

German

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 [DEGP [i: jüngste [GendP [u: F [FP [u: ministre [PP des [GendP [C [NP [i: _ [u: m] [i: f]]

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

(11) [u: La [DEGP [i: plus jeune [GendP [F [FP [i: ministe [PP des [GendP [C [NP [i: _ [u: f] [i: f]]

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

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

(12) [DEGP jüngste der Personen ist Heinz. he.M.F youngest of the person.F.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

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

Unsupported 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


Ihnsae, Rebecca; and Sleem. 2016. Gender agreement with animate nouns in French. Selected Proceedings of the 44th Conference of the South Eastern Linguistic Association. (2016)