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) [DP La sentinelle ‘the guard’ – DP le génie ‘the genius’]
(2) [DP Opfer ‘the victim’ – DP die Weise ‘the orphial’ – DP der Sturm ‘the storm’]

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitive constructions (i-ii):
- For French: Sleeman & Ihssane (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 gender agreement with German masculine/feminine class D nouns?

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

- **Grammatical gender**
  - Mental lexicon (in principle)
  - No
- **Semantic gender**
  - Functional projection Gender Phrase (GendP)
  - Only present for animate nouns
  - With class B/C: yes
  - With class D: no

> 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

- If no semantic gender value is inserted (5), 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 DP le plus jeune DP [sentinelle F [DP de ces [sentinelle F [NP sentinelle]]]]]
(7) *[la DP le plus jeune DP [F [sentinelle F [NP de ces [sentinelle F [NP sentinelle]]]]]]

Interim conclusion:
- Sleeman & Ihssane’s analysis can explain difference between class B/C and class D nouns in French
- Some animate nouns marked for gender in the lexicon (class D), others unmarked (class B/C)?

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

(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 & Ihssane’s analysis can explain difference between class B/C and class D nouns in French
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6. A slightly different approach
Assumption: all nouns are marked for grammatical gender, but not all to the same degree of specification

- 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 (and French) class D nouns:
  - *[la DP le [sentinelle F [DP de ces [sentinelle F [NP sentinelle]]]]]
  - Semantic agreement with German (and French) class B/C nouns:
  - *[la DP le plus jeune DP (ministre F [DP des [ministre F [NP de ces ministres]]]]]

But what about semantic agreement with German masculine/feminine class D nouns?
- Competition in agreement, caused by interfering common gender feature:
  - *[la DP le plus jüngste der Personen.F.PL ist Heinz.
the.m.F. youngest of the person.F.PL is Heinz]

- This competition is not possible with German neutral class D nouns!
- Neutral is headed by common in (13), whereas masculine and feminine are headed by common

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

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**Supporting evidence:**
- The use of neuter in the outer DP is ungrammatical when the inner DP is masculine/feminine
  - *(14) Das.N/Die/F/Der.M jüngste der Lehren.C.PL ...
the.m.F. youngest of the teachers...

7. Conclusion & outlook
- Grammatical agreement with German neutral 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 not/fails so with similar French nouns?

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