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) la sentinelle ‘the guard’ – le garde ‘the guard’
(2) les Opfer ‘the victims’ – die Opfer ‘the victims’ – der Opfer ‘the victims’

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitive 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)

What about German?

Noun classes (adapted from Ihssane & Sleeman 2016)

Class A
- Suppletive: two distinct forms
die Schwester ‘the sister’ – der Bruder ‘the brother’

Class B/C
- Related forms: suffix (B)/terminer (C) change die Studentin ‘the student’
die Führer ‘the leader’

Class D
- Fixed-gender nouns
da Kind ‘the child’

2. Sleeman & Ihssane’s analysis for French

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

- Encoded where?
  - Characteristic in lexicon (in principle)
  - No
- Interpretable?
  - Characteristic for animates
- With class B/C: yes
  - With class D: no

- Gender agreement with German neuter and French class D nouns
  - 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 & Ihssane: class B/C nouns unmarked for grammatical gender in lexicon, valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on Gend

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

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

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

- French feminine
- Grammatical agreement

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

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)?

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 and neuter
- No correlation of masculine and feminine: M = F = common
- Now two genders: common & neuter

HUGER GENRE = COMMON GENRE

Adapted from Hanson, Harley & Ritter (2002)

- Gender feature hierarchy:
  - Common
  - Masculine
  - Feminine

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/less so with similar French nouns?

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