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

Thom Westveer, Petra Sleeman & Enoch O. Aboh – Universiteit van Amsterdam
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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

- (1) *la sentinelle*.F ‘the guard’ – *le génie*.M ‘the genius’
- (2) *das Opfer*.N ‘the victim’ – *die Waise*.F ‘the orphan’ – *der Star*.M ‘the star’

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

Gender agreement in superlative partitive constructions (i-iii):

- For French: Sleeman & Ihsane (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 Ihsane & Sleeman 2016)

Class A	Suppletive forms: two distinct forms <i>die Schwester</i> .F ‘the sister’ – <i>der Bruder</i> .M ‘the brother’
Class B/C	Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change <i>die Studentin</i> .F – <i>der Student</i> .M ‘the student’ <i>die</i> .F/ <i>der</i> .M <i>Studierende</i> ‘the student’
Class D	Fixed-gender nouns <i>das Kind</i> .N ‘the child’

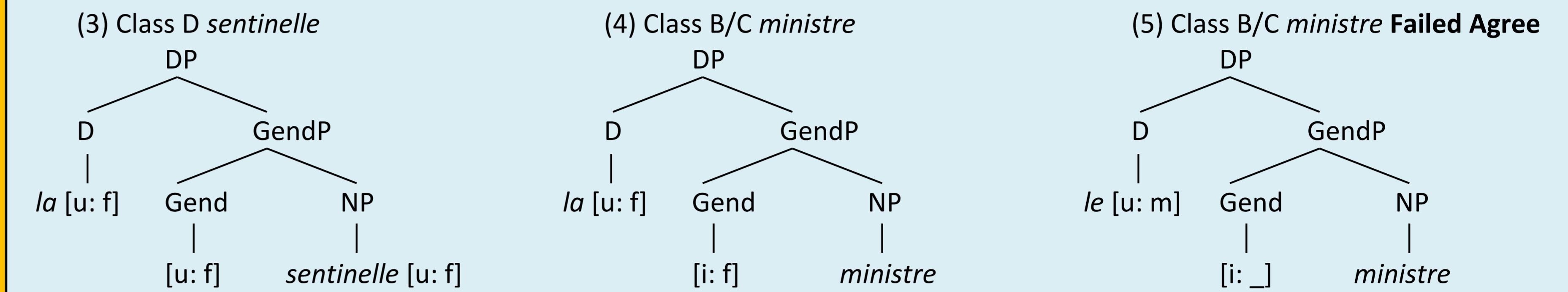
2. Sleeman & Ihsane’s analysis for French

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

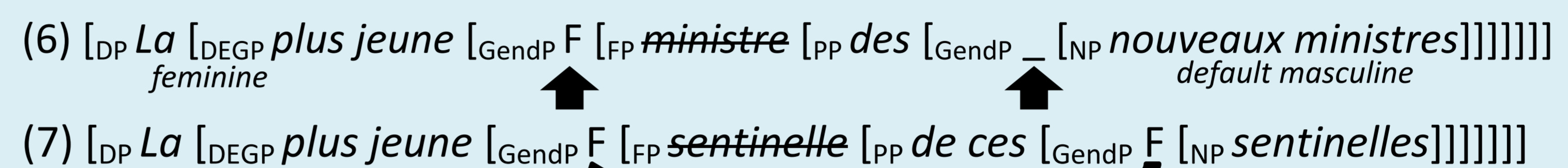
	Encoded where?	Interpretable?
Grammatical gender	Mental lexicon (in principle)	No
Semantic gender	Functional projection Gender Phrase (GendP) <i>only present for animate nouns</i>	With class B/C: yes With class D: no

- 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 & Ihsane: class B/C nouns unmarked for grammatical gender in lexicon, valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on Gend



- 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)



3. Research questions

Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French and German:

- 1) Do we observe the same patterns as Sleeman & Ihsane (2016) in both German and French?
- 2) Can Sleeman & Ihsane’s analysis also account for German?

4. Methodology: Grammaticality 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

5. Results

(... simplified representation, results show a lot of variation)

		Gender	Grammatical agreement	Semantic agreement
German	<i>Opfer</i>	N	✓	✗
	<i>Kind</i>	N	✓	✗
	<i>Person</i>	F	?	?
	<i>Waise</i>	F	✗	✓
	<i>Star</i>	M	✗	✓
	<i>Flüchtling</i>	M	✗	✓
	Class B/C	M/F	✗	✓
French	<i>personne</i>	F	✓	✗
	<i>victime</i>	F	✓	✗
	<i>sentinelle</i>	F	✓	✗
	<i>personnage</i>	M	✓	✗
	<i>génie</i>	M	?	?
	Class B/C	M/F	✗	✓

- (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

Interim conclusion:

- Sleeman & Ihsane’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

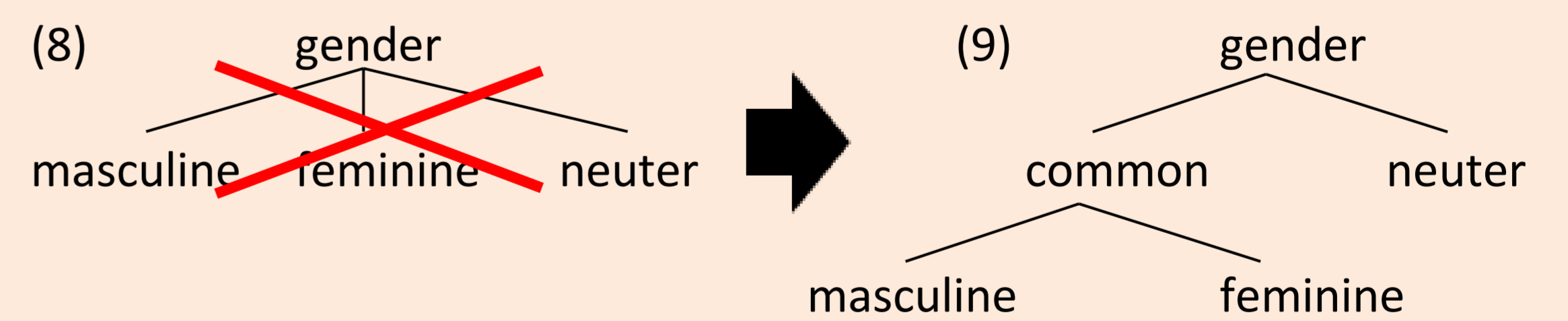
Comparison with Dutch gender system:

- Originally three genders: masculine & feminine & neuter
- Conflation 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:



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) $[_{DP} \text{Das} [_{DEGP} \text{jüngste} [_{GendP} \text{N} [_{FP} \text{Kind} [_{PP} \text{der} [_{GendP} \text{N} [_{NP} \text{Kinder}]]]]]]]]]]]$

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

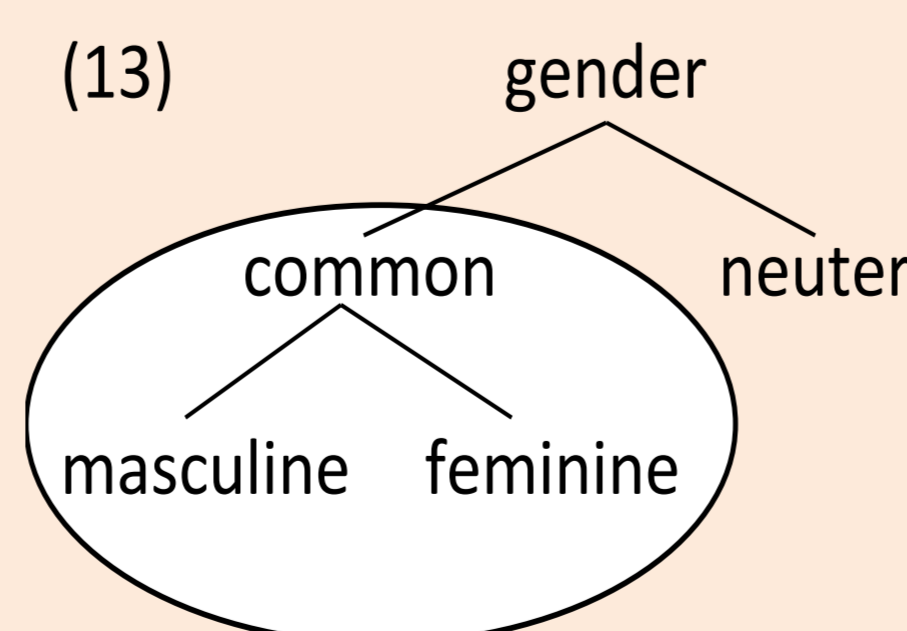
(11) $[_{DP} \text{La} [_{DEGP} \text{plus jeune} [_{GendP} \text{F} [_{FP} \text{ministre} [_{PP} \text{des} [_{GendP} \text{C} [_{NP} \text{nouveaux ministres}]]]]]]]]]]]$

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

- Competition in agreement, caused by **interfering common gender feature**:

(12) *?Der/?Die jüngste der Personen ist Heinz.*
the.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



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 Lehrer.C.PL ...*
‘The youngest of the teachers ...’

(15) **Das.N jüngste der anwesenden Personen.F.PL ...*
‘The youngest of the persons present...’

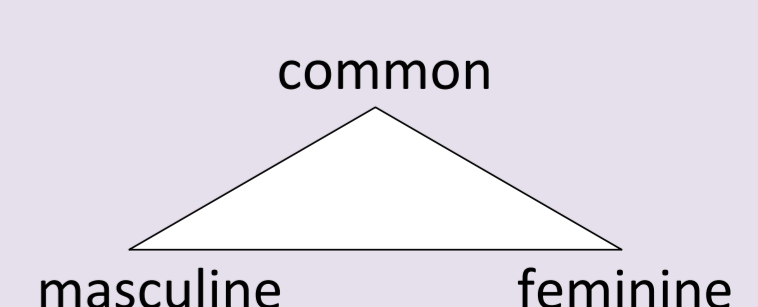
7. Conclusion & outlook

- 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

Unsolved 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...



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