

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

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In German and French the gender of an animate noun usually corresponds to the biological sex of its referent. However, in both languages there exist animate nouns – referring to both females and males – that have a fixed gender, as in (1-2):

- (1) a. *die* *Person*  
the.F.SG person.F  
b. *das* *Kind*  
the.N.SG child.N

- (2) *la* *victime*  
the.F.SG victim.F

These nouns are either masculine, feminine or neuter (German (1)), or masculine or feminine (French (2)). When referring to an animate of a specific sex, these nouns may give rise to gender mismatches, if the noun's gender and the referent's sex do not match.

What factors determine whether a gender mismatch is possible or not? By means of a Grammaticality Judgment Task we aimed to investigate when native speakers accept gender mismatches in superlative partitive constructions, as in (3-4):

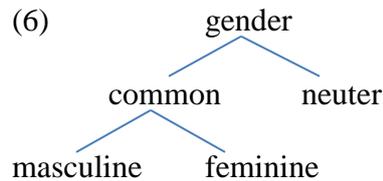
- (3) *Das/\*Die* *jüngste* *der* *Kinder* *heißt* *Maria.*  
the.N.SG/.F.SG youngest of.the child.N.PL is.called Mary  
'The youngest of the children is called Mary.'

- (4) *Die/ ?Der* *jüngste* *der* *Personen* *heißt* *Peter.*  
the.F.SG/.M.SG youngest of.the person.F.PL is.called Peter  
'The youngest of the persons presents is called Peter.'

The results indicate differences between these fixed-gender nouns, gender mismatches being accepted in German with feminine (4), but not with neuter nouns (3). In French, gender mismatches are usually not accepted with fixed-gender nouns (5):

- (5) *La/\*Le* *plus* *jeune* *des* *victimes* *est* *Pierre.*  
the.F.SG/M.SG most young of.the victim.F.PL is Peter  
'The youngest of the victims is Peter.'

Many studies have discussed agreement relations in the DP in relation to the representation of gender or number features in the derivation (e.g. Alexiadou 2004; Matushansky 2013; Fathi & Lowenstamm 2016; Sleeman & Ihsane 2016). Some studies have proposed a feature geometry to account for the hierarchical ordering of different types of nominal features within the DP (e.g. Noyer 1992; Hanson et al. 2002). Building on the concept of feature geometry, we will argue that gender features may be hierarchically ordered as represented in (6):



This gender feature hierarchy can account for the observation that gender mismatches are possible with German feminine fixed-gender nouns, but not with French feminine or German neuter ones. We assume that both feminine and neuter fixed-gender nouns are marked for a specific grammatical gender in the lexicon, but that feminine gender is headed by the common gender node, whereas neuter gender is not, as is represented in (6). Based on this difference in structural position, we will present an analysis that covers the agreement patterns we observed in the results of the Grammaticality Judgment Task.

### *References*

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