

# Grammatical versus semantic gender agreement and the representation of nouns in the mental lexicon: superlative partitives in French

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## Outline of the presentation:

1. Introduction
2. Previous study
3. Methodology & results
4. Theoretical analysis
5. Conclusion & outlook
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## **1. Introduction**

- In French, all nouns marked for grammatical gender, in general grammatical gender agreement.
- With animate nouns, grammatical gender usually – though not always – corresponds to the sex of the referent.

(1a) *Françoise Hardy est une chanteuse fameuse.*  
Françoise Hardy is a.F singer.F famous.F  
'Françoise Hardy is a famous singer.'

(1b) *Julien Clerc est un chanteur fameux.*  
Julien Clerc is a.M singer.M famous.M  
'Julien Clerc is a famous singer.'

## The partitive puzzle:

⇒ Can we have a gender mismatch in superlative partitives in French?

(2a) ??*Le plus jeune des nouveaux étudiants s'appelle Marie.*  
the.M most young of.the new.M.PL student.M.PL REFL.call.3SG Marie

(2b) ??*La plus jeune des nouveaux étudiants s'appelle Marie.*  
the.F most young of.the new.M.PL student.M.PL REFL.call.3SG Marie  
'The youngest of the new students is called Marie.'

General question: Can grammatical gender be overridden in superlative partitives?

⇒ How can we account for grammatical and semantic agreement?

⇒ If there is variation, how can we account for it?

## 2. Previous study

Sleeman & Ihsane (2016)

⇒ Acceptance of mismatch depends on type of animate noun.

(3) *La plus grande*/\**Le plus grand de ces sentinelles*  
 the.F most tall.F the.M most tall.M of these guard.F.PL  
 ‘The tallest of these guards’

(4) *La plus intelligente de mes anciens élèves*  
 the.F most intelligent.F of my.PL former.M.PL pupil.M.PL  
 ‘The most intelligent of my former students’

(5) \*?*La plus intelligente de mes anciens étudiants*  
 the.F most intelligent.F of my.PL former.M.PL student.M.PL  
 ‘The most intelligent of my former students’

Classification of French animate nouns:

Table 1 – Noun classification of Sleeman & Ihsane (2016)

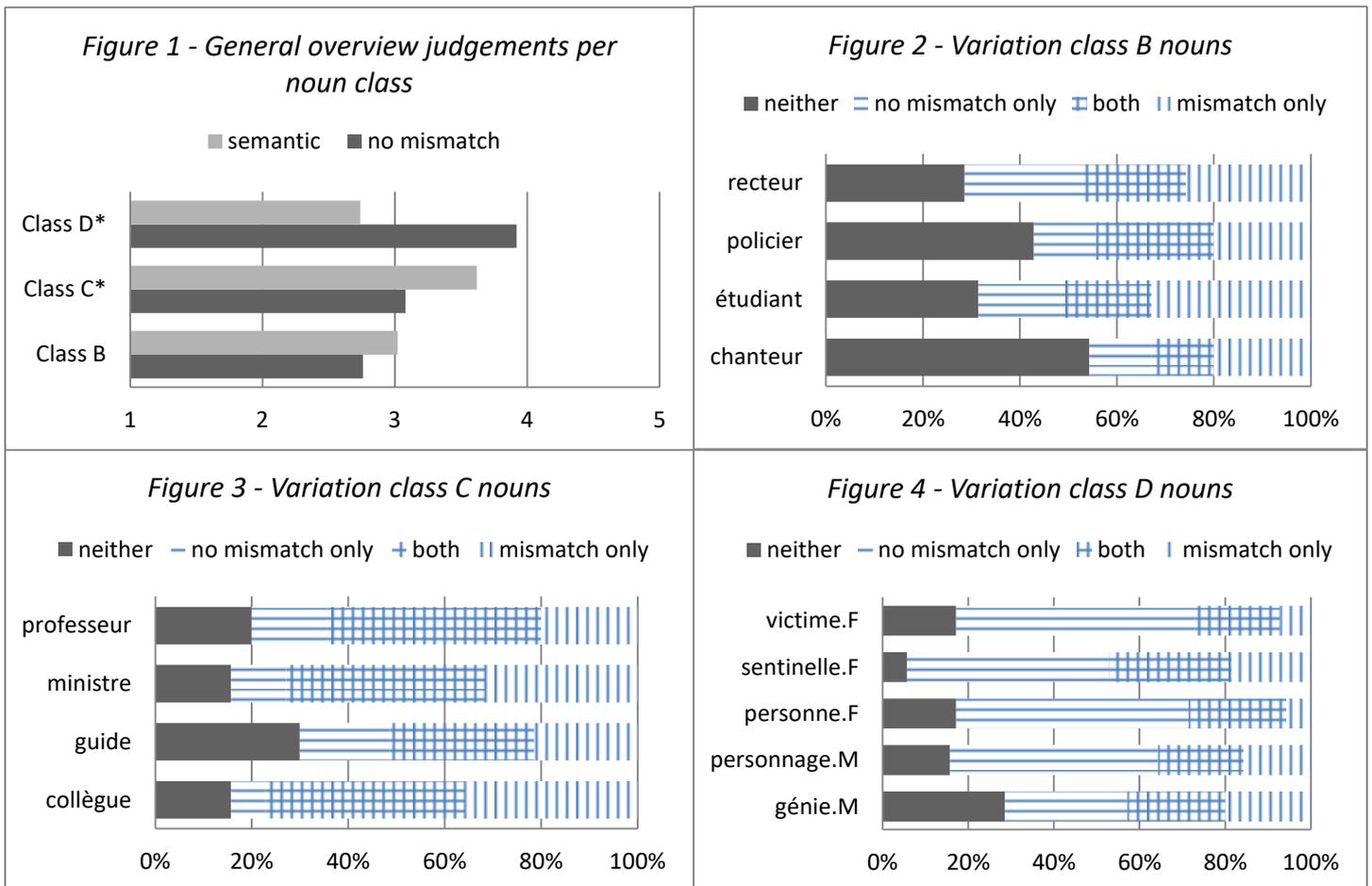
<b>Noun class</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Mismatch in partitives</b>
Class A	<u>Suppletive forms:</u> <i>le frère</i> <i>la soeur</i> ‘the brother’                      ‘the sister’	No (not tested)
Class B	<u>Stem/Suffix change:</u> <i>le chanteur</i> <i>la chanteuse</i> ‘the.M singer.M’                      ‘the.F singer.F’ <i>un étudiant</i> <i>une étudiante</i> ‘a.M student.M’                      ‘a.F student.F’	Sometimes (accepted by some informants)
Class C	<u>Determiner change:</u> <i>le ministre</i> <i>la ministre</i> the.M minister’                      ‘the.F. minister’	Accepted by informants
Class D	<u>Fixed-gender forms:</u> <i>la sentinelle</i> <i>le génie</i> ‘the.F guard’                      ‘the.M genius’	No (not tested)

- Judgements based on a limited number of (Swiss) French informants.
  - Only limited number of nouns (classes B & C) checked.
- ⇒ More systematic investigation needed: does the theoretical analysis still hold?

### 3. Methodology & results

#### Methodology: Grammaticality Judgement Task.

- Online task, submitted to 70 native speakers of French (from France).
- 80 sentences judged on a 5-point scale (5 = grammatical).
- 41 superlative partitives; 13 different animate nouns of classes B, C and D.
- Sentence pairs with/without gender mismatch (13/13) and control sentences (15), presented in random order.



#### Results:

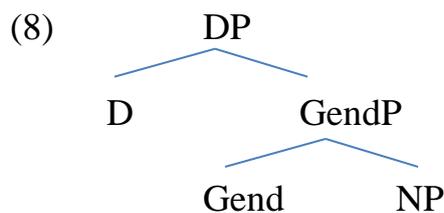
Average judgements for sentence pairs with semantic and grammatical agreement for each of the noun classes (*figure 1*):

- Class D: sentences without mismatch judged significantly better than sentences with mismatch.
  - Class C: sentences with mismatch judged significantly better than sentences without mismatch.
  - Class B: no significant difference between sentences with and without mismatch, although sentences with mismatch judged slightly better.
- ⇒ Corresponds to agreement patterns reported by Sleeman & Ihsane (2016).



Theoretical assumptions, building forth on Sleeman & Ihsane (2016):

- With animate nouns, distinguish grammatical and semantic gender.
- Grammatical gender is stored on the noun in the mental lexicon and is uninterpretable.
- Semantic gender is encoded on a Gender Phrase (only with animate nouns)
- Semantic gender is interpretable with class A, class B and class C nouns, but uninterpretable with class D nouns.
  - The operation Agree only deals with valuation, not with interpretability, the presence of uninterpretable features does not cause the derivation to crash (following Legate 2002).
  - Interpretability and valuation of features are two distinct things: uninterpretable features are not necessarily unvalued and vice versa (following Pesetsky & Torrego 2007).



Our approach: All nouns are marked for grammatical gender in the lexicon:

- ⇒ Not only as masculine [u: m] or feminine [u: f]...
- ⇒ ... but also as common masculine [u: c, m] or common feminine [u: c, f].
- ⇒ The latter ([u: c, m] and [u: c, f]) present less specified grammatical gender.

Based on the concept of a gender feature hierarchy (cf. Harley & Ritter 2002):

- common = underspecified gender
- masculine + feminine = specified gender

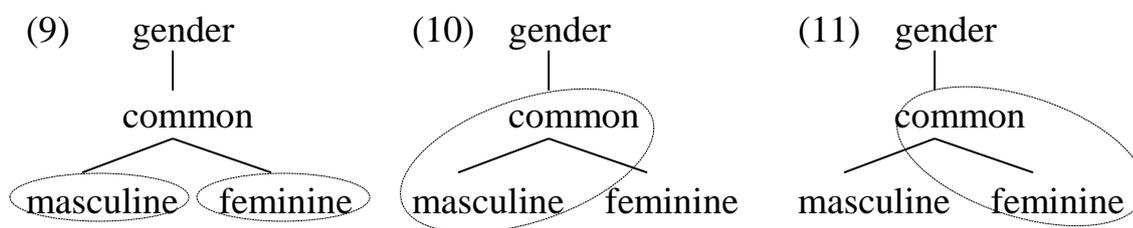


Table 2 – Extended noun classification

Noun class	Example	Grammatical gender	Remarks
Class A	<i>frère</i> 'brother.M'	[u: m]	Grammatical agreement
	<i>soeur</i> 'sister.F'	[u: f]	

Class B	<i>étudiant</i> 'student'	[u: c, m]	If speaker does not allow semantic agreement, noun marked as [u: m] Always [u: f], since the feminine form can only refer to females
	<i>étudiante</i> 'student.F'	[u: f]	
Class C	<i>ministre</i> 'minister'	[u: c, m]	If speaker does not allow semantic agreement, noun marked as [u: m] (and/or [u: f])
Class D	<i>sentinelle</i> 'guard.F'	[u: f]	If speaker allows semantic agreement, noun marked as [u: c, f] If speaker allows semantic agreement, noun marked as [u: c, m]
	<i>personnage</i> 'character.M'	[u: m]	

⇒ There can be variation within the noun classes (i.e. nouns belonging to the same noun class can be marked for grammatical gender differently).

The idea of having underspecified gender (next to specified masculine and feminine) for our animate nouns is supported by developments in French dictionaries (cf. Westveer, Sleeman & Aboh 2018):

- ⇒ Coding of gender on nouns in different editions of the *Petit Robert*.
- ⇒ Recent editions: many nouns marked as 'noun', no gender specification.

Table 3 – Coding of grammatical gender

<i>Petit Robert</i> (1977)		<i>Petit Robert</i> (2016)	
noun	coding	noun	coding
<i>ministre</i> 'minister'	masculine noun	<i>ministre</i>	noun
<i>professeur</i> 'teacher'	masculine noun	<i>professeur</i>	noun
<i>sentinelle</i> 'guard'	feminine noun	<i>sentinelle</i>	feminine noun

Returning to the superlative partitives:

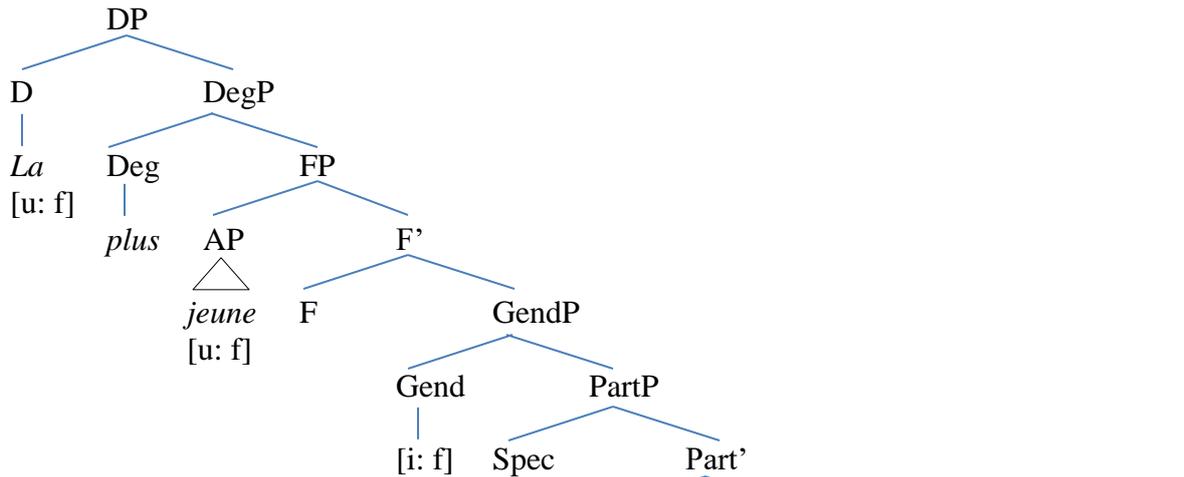
- ⇒ Noun marked as [m] or [f] in mental lexicon...  
... grammatical agreement in partitive.
- ⇒ Noun marked as [c, m] or [c, f] in mental lexicon...  
... semantic agreement in partitive.

(12) *La plus jeune des étudiants est Marie.*  
the.F most young of.the student.CM.PL is Marie

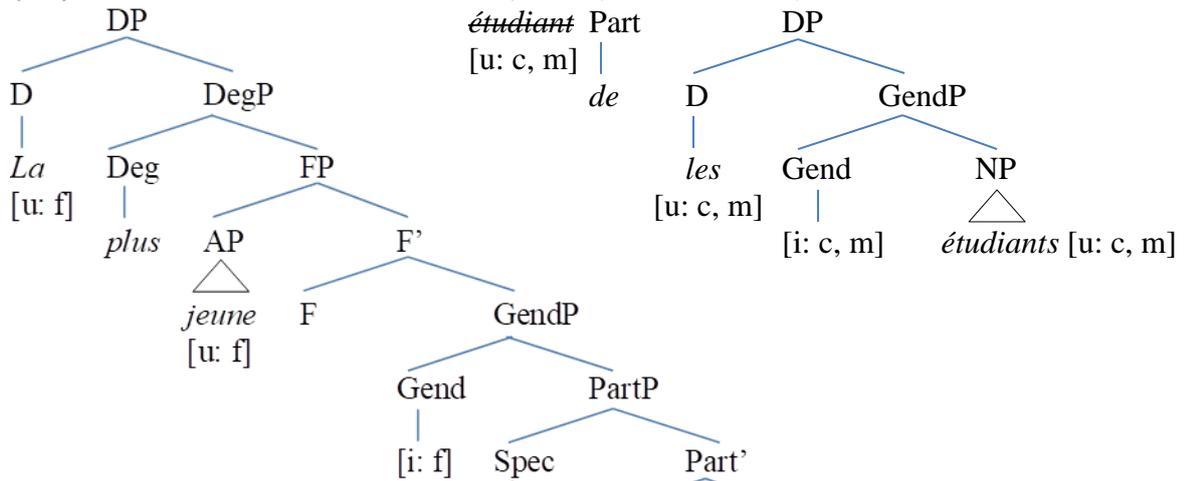
(13) *La plus jeune des étudiantes est Marie.*  
the.F most young of.the student.F.PL is Marie

(14) *Le plus jeune des étudiants est Marie.*  
the.M most young of.the student.CM.PL is Marie

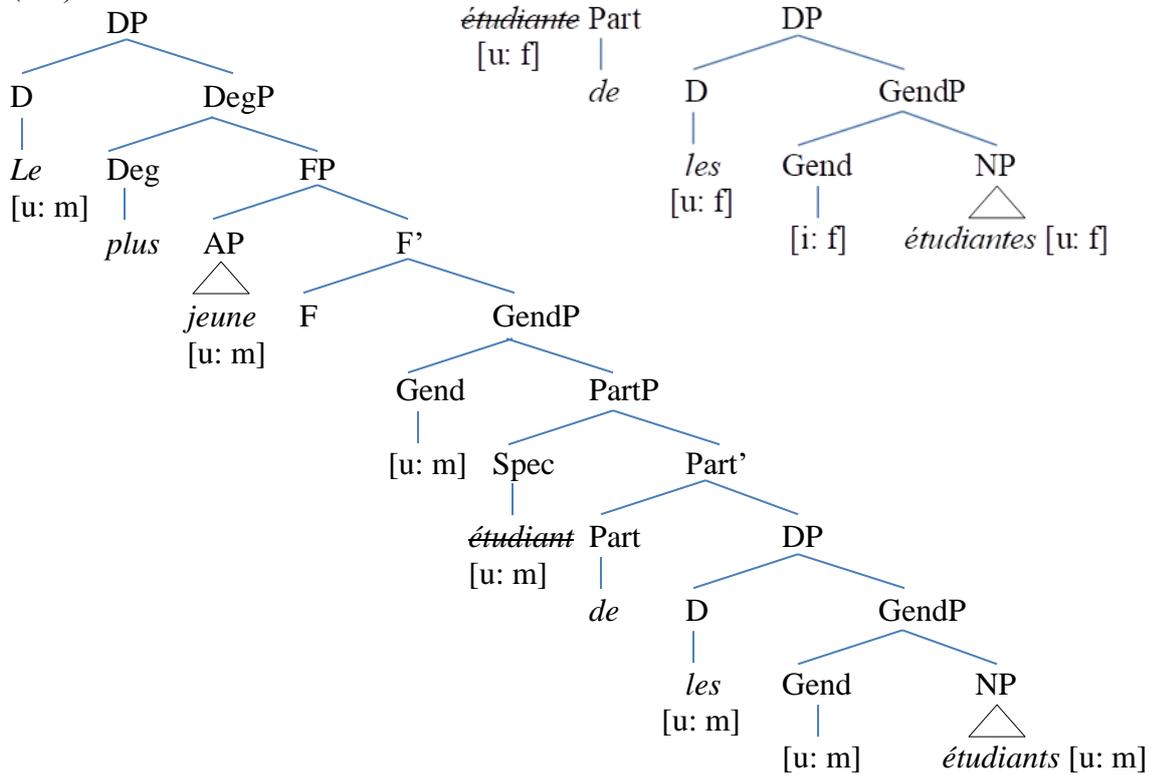
(12')



(13')



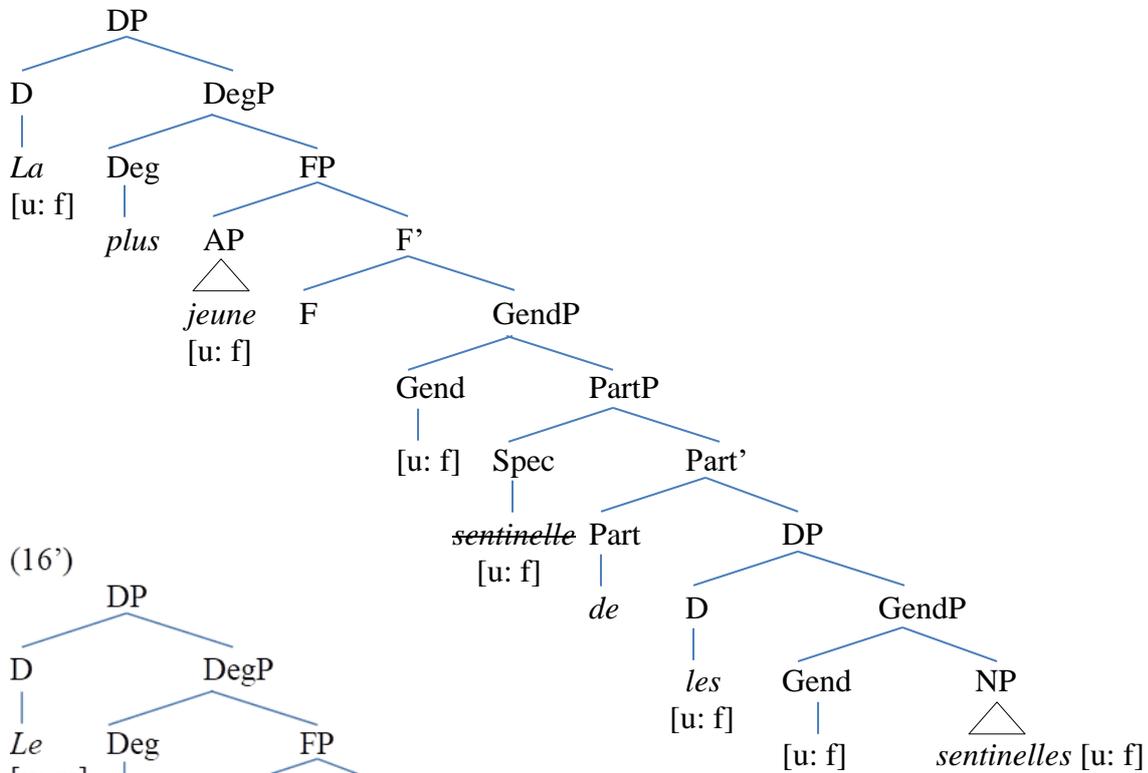
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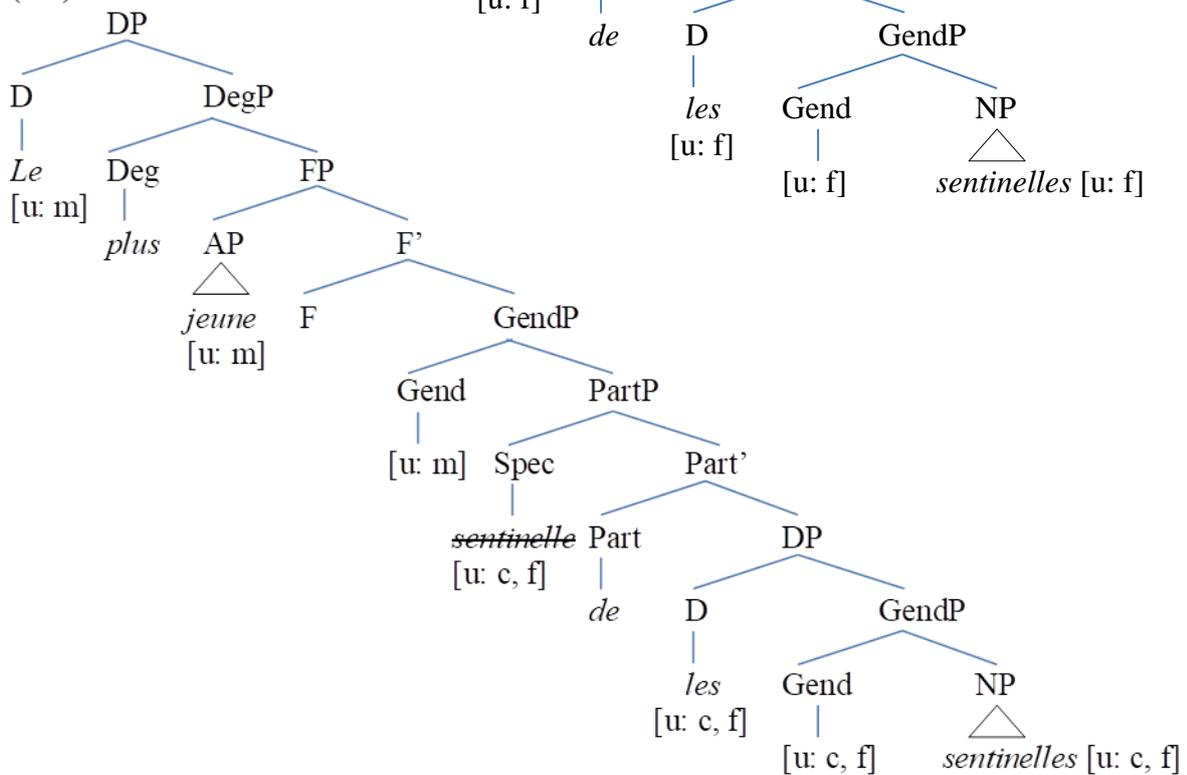
(15) *La plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc.*  
 the.F most young of.the guard.F.PL is Jean-Luc

(16) *Le plus jeune des sentinelles est Jean-Luc.*  
 the.M most young of.the guard.F.PL is. Jean-Luc

(15')



(16')



## 4. Conclusion & outlook

Can grammatical gender be overridden in superlative partitives?

⇒ Acceptance of gender mismatch depends on type of animate noun.

- Mismatch generally accepted with class C nouns, to a lesser extent (though not significant) also with class B nouns.
- Mismatch generally not accepted with class D nouns.
- Variation between nouns & between participants.

Proposal for theoretical explanation of the results:

⇒ Some nouns marked with underspecified grammatical gender feature [c, m] / [c, f], other nouns with fully specified grammatical gender feature [m] / [f] in the mental lexicon.

- If noun marked with underspecified [c, m] / [c, f] feature: mismatch possible.
- If noun marked with specified [m] / [f] feature: mismatch not possible.

In progress:

- Similar test on German.
- Mismatches in quantified partitives (e.g. *One of the students*).

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