Sexless animates? Gender agreement in superlative partitives in French

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1. Introduction

Sexless animates?

Noun classes (adapted from Ihsane & Sleeman 2016)	
Class A	Suppletive forms: two distinct forms *la soeur*[F] 'the sister' – *le frère*[M] 'the brother'
Class B/C	Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change *la chanteuse*[F] – *le chanteur*[M] 'the singer' *la*[F]/*le*[M] *ministre* 'the minister'
Class D	Fixed-gender nouns *la*[F] *sentinelle* – 'the guard' *le*[M] *génie* – 'the genius'

⇒ Class D nouns can refer to both females and males!

Gender agreement in superlative partitives:

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

⇒ **Grammatical** or **semantic** gender agreement?
⇒ Previously investigated by Sleeman & Ihsane (2016)

2. Sleeman & Ihsane (2016)

Gender agreement in (superlative) partitives in French:
- 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)

How do they explain these agreement patterns?
⇒ Distinction between grammatical and semantic gender
⇒ Class B/C nouns underlined unmarked for grammatical gender
⇒ Valuation through insertion of semantic gender value on Gend
⇒ No semantic gender value = Failed Agree (Preminger 2011)
⇒ Spell-out of default masculine gender

	Encoded where?	Interpretable?
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

Two-noun analysis of superlative partitives: noun of inner DP (set) copied onto outer DP (subset), remains unpronounced
- If present, gender value copied together with noun (5)
- Second Gender Phrase in outer DP
- If Failed Agree has taken place in inner DP, second chance to insert semantic gender value in outer DP (6)

(5) [DP *La* [DegP *plus jeune* [GENDP F [FP *sentinelle* [PP *de ces* [GENDP F [NP *sentinelles*]]]]]]]   Class D *sentinelle* 'guard'
    feminine   feminine

(6) [DP *La* [DegP *plus jeune* [GENDP F [FP *ministre* [PP *des* [GENDP _ [NP *nouveaux ministres*]]]]]]]   Class C *ministre* 'minister'
    feminine   default masculine

3. Aims & methods

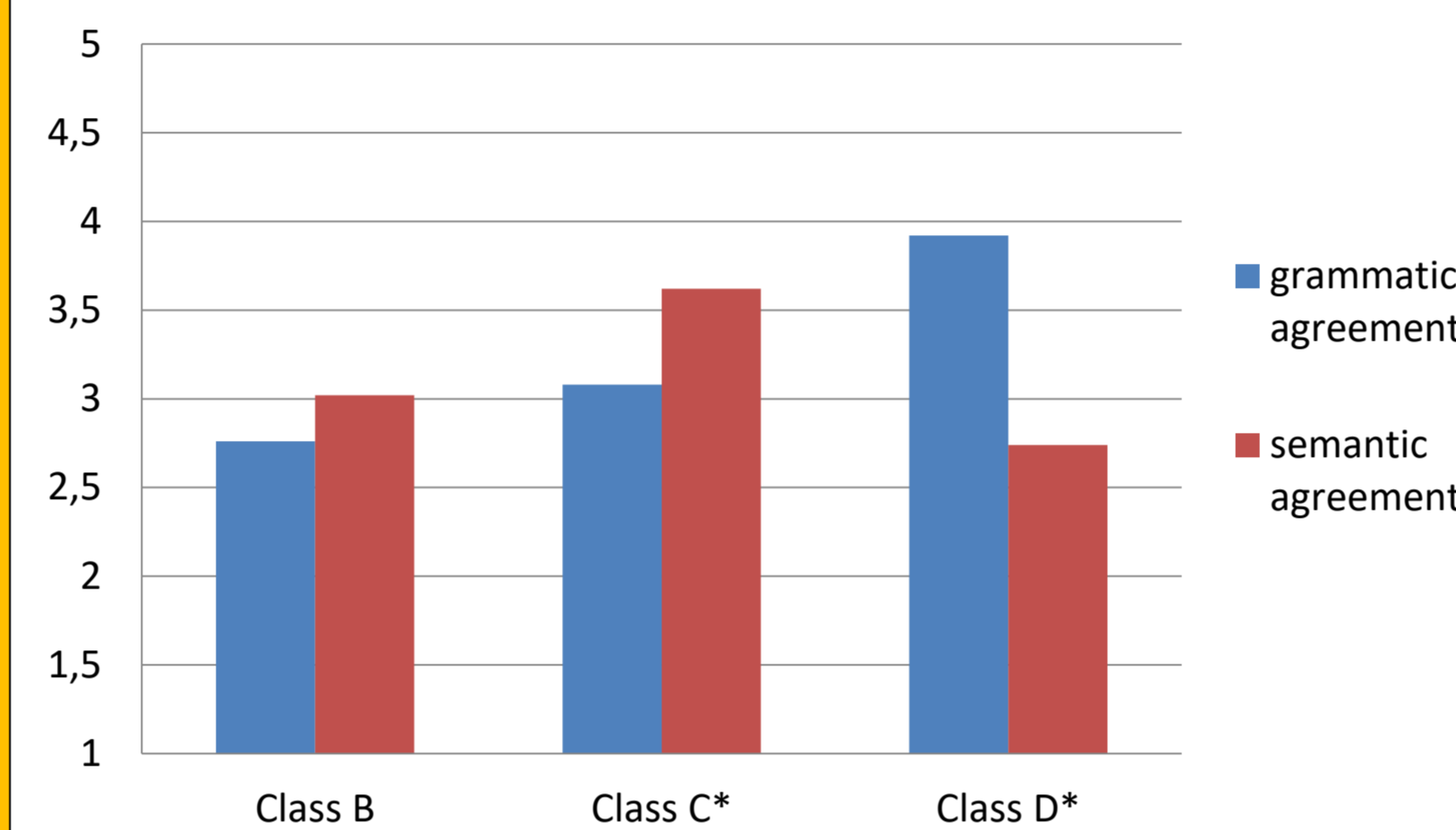Sleeman & Ihsane's results only based on a limited number of informants' judgements
⇒ Replicate Sleeman & Ihsane's experiment on a larger scale and in a more systematic way
⇒ Provide a theoretical explanation for the agreement patterns we observe
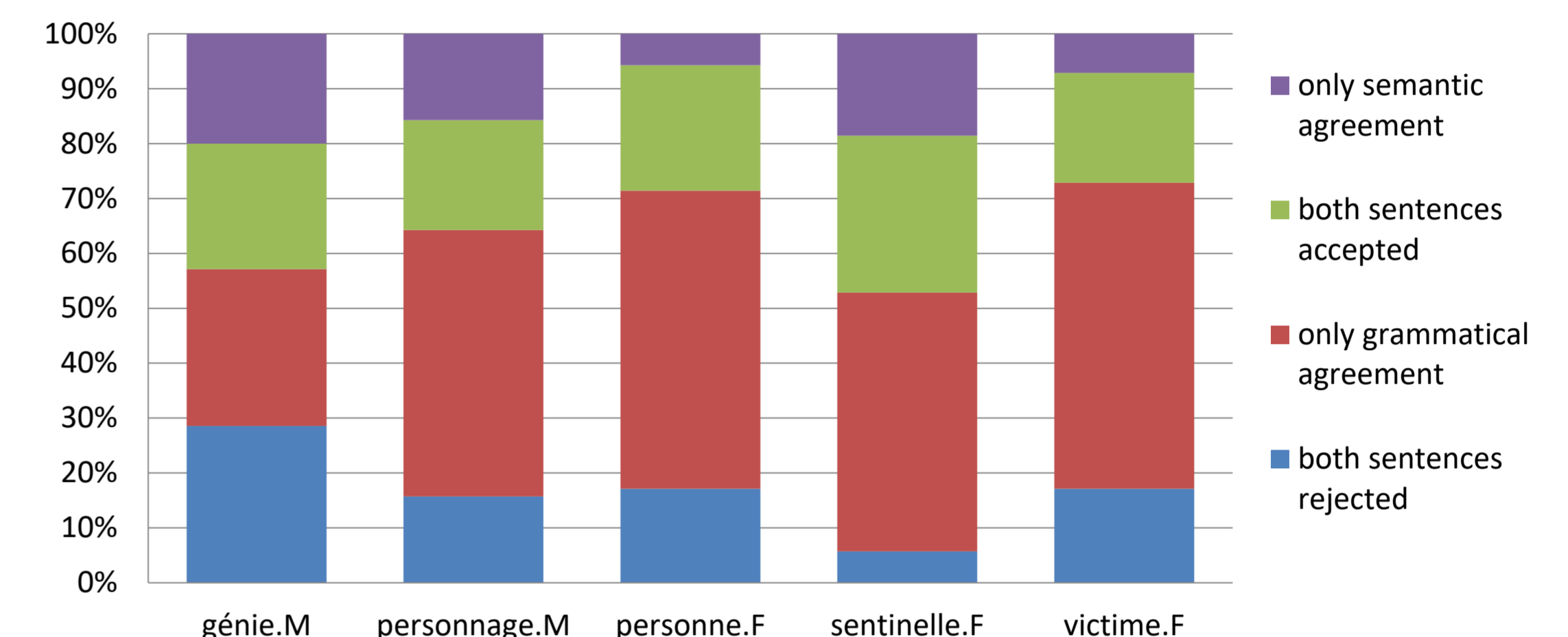
Methodology:
- Grammaticality Judgement Task with 70 native speakers of French
- Online task using Google Forms
- 80 sentences judged on a 5-point scale, presented in random order
- 13 different nouns of noun classes B, C and D included
- Sentences with semantic and grammatical agreement
- Control sentences
- Background questionnaire

4. Results

Comparison noun classes

Judgements of class D nouns

5. Towards an analysis

The theoretical analysis should explain:
- General differences between the noun classes
- Variation within the results

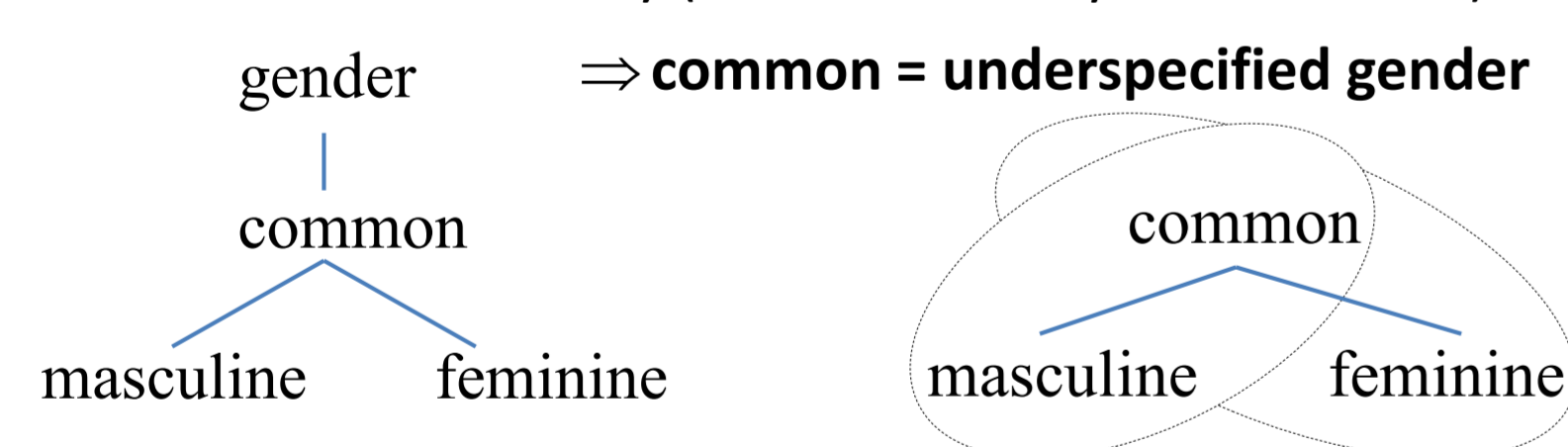Gender agreement competition, the outer DP can agree with:
1. **The gender of the noun in the inner DP**
2. **The gender of the predicate**

(7) *La*/*Le*   *plus   jeune   des   nouveaux ministres   est   Hélène.*
    the.F/.M most   young of.the   new.M.PL   minister.M.PL is   Hélène

Main theoretical assumptions:
- A two-noun analysis of partitives (cf. Sleeman & Ihsane 2016)
- Inner DP's noun copied onto outer DP, but remains unpronounced
- There is a phase boundary between inner and outer DP

Gender feature hierarchy (based on Harley & Ritter 2002):

gender   ⇒ **common = underspecified gender**

common

masculine   feminine   masculine   feminine
                          common

Feature marking in the mental lexicon:
- [m] masculine only   - [c, m] masculine + common
- [f] feminine only   - [c, f] feminine + common

⇒ Some nouns marked as either feminine [f] or masculine [m]
⇒ Some nouns marked with a hybrid feature [c, f] or [c, m]

This follows the ongoing process of feminisation in French
⇒ Compare the entries for the nouns *ministre*, *professeur* and *sentinelle* in different editions of the French *Petit Robert* dictionary:

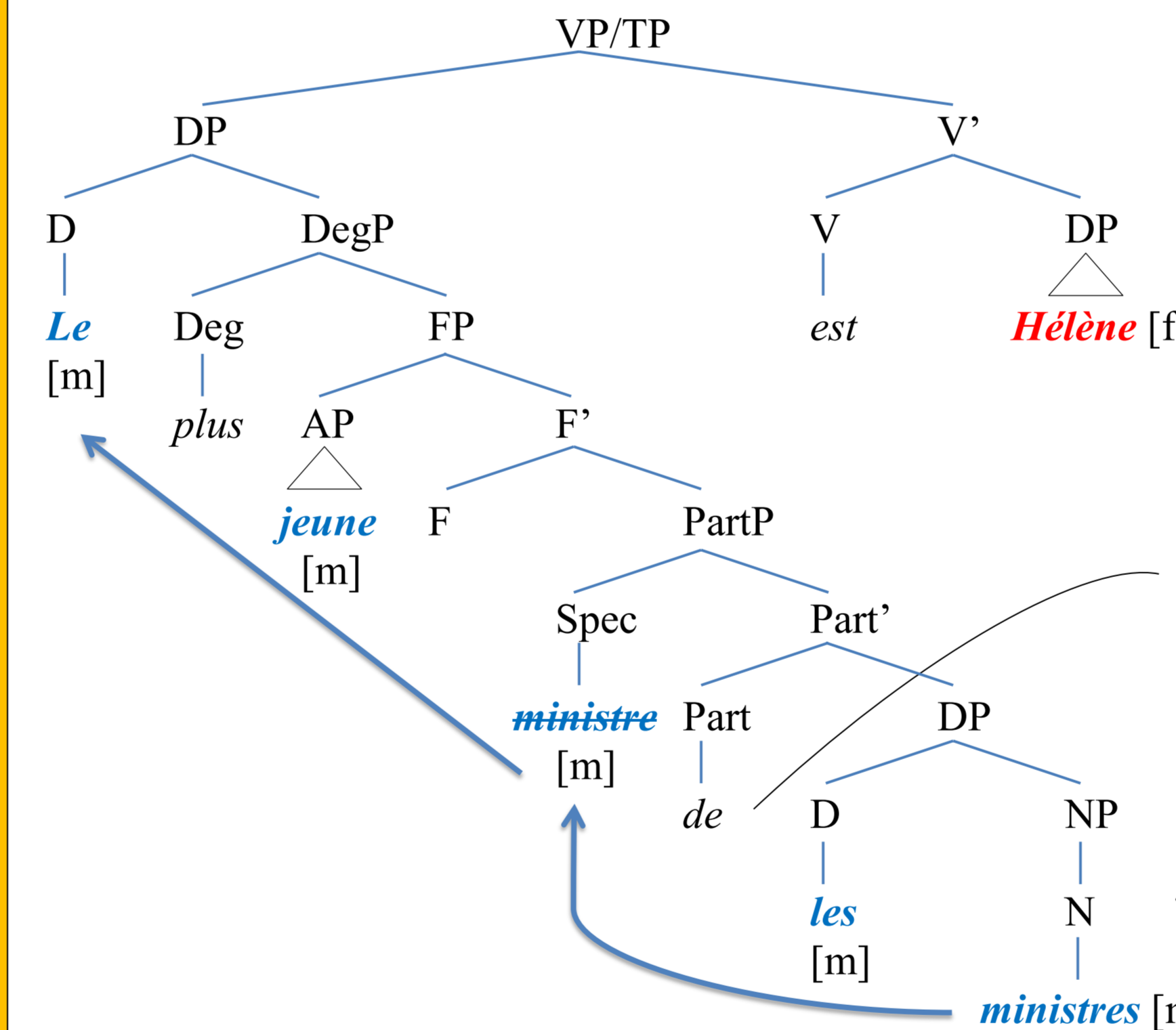| *Petit Robert* (1977)	*Petit Robert* (2016)
ministre > masculine noun	*ministre* > noun
professeur > masculine noun	*professeur* > noun
sentinelle > feminine noun	*sentinelle* > feminine noun

⇒ Westveer, Sleeman & Aboh (2018)
⇒ Class D noun *sentinelle* still marked as feminine: gender mismatches less acceptable
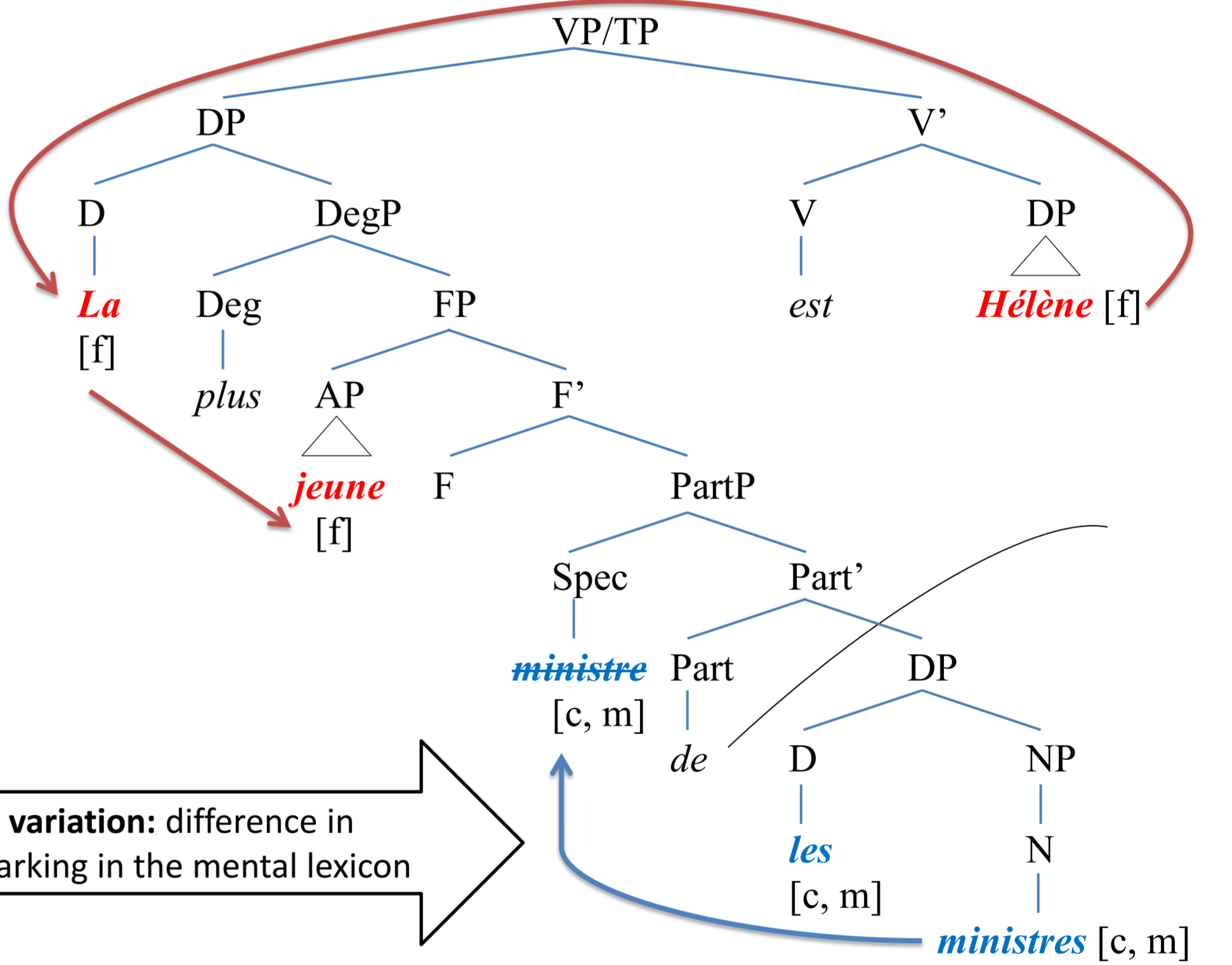
In this way, we can account for variation:
- If gender mismatches are not accepted with a noun, this noun is marked as either [f] or [m] in the mental lexicon
- If gender mismatches are accepted with a noun, this noun is marked as either [c, f] or [c, m] in the mental lexicon

6. An analysis that seems to work...

(8) *Le   plus   jeune   des   (nouveaux)   ministres   est   Hélène.*
    the.M most young of.the (new.M.PL) minister.M.PL is Hélène
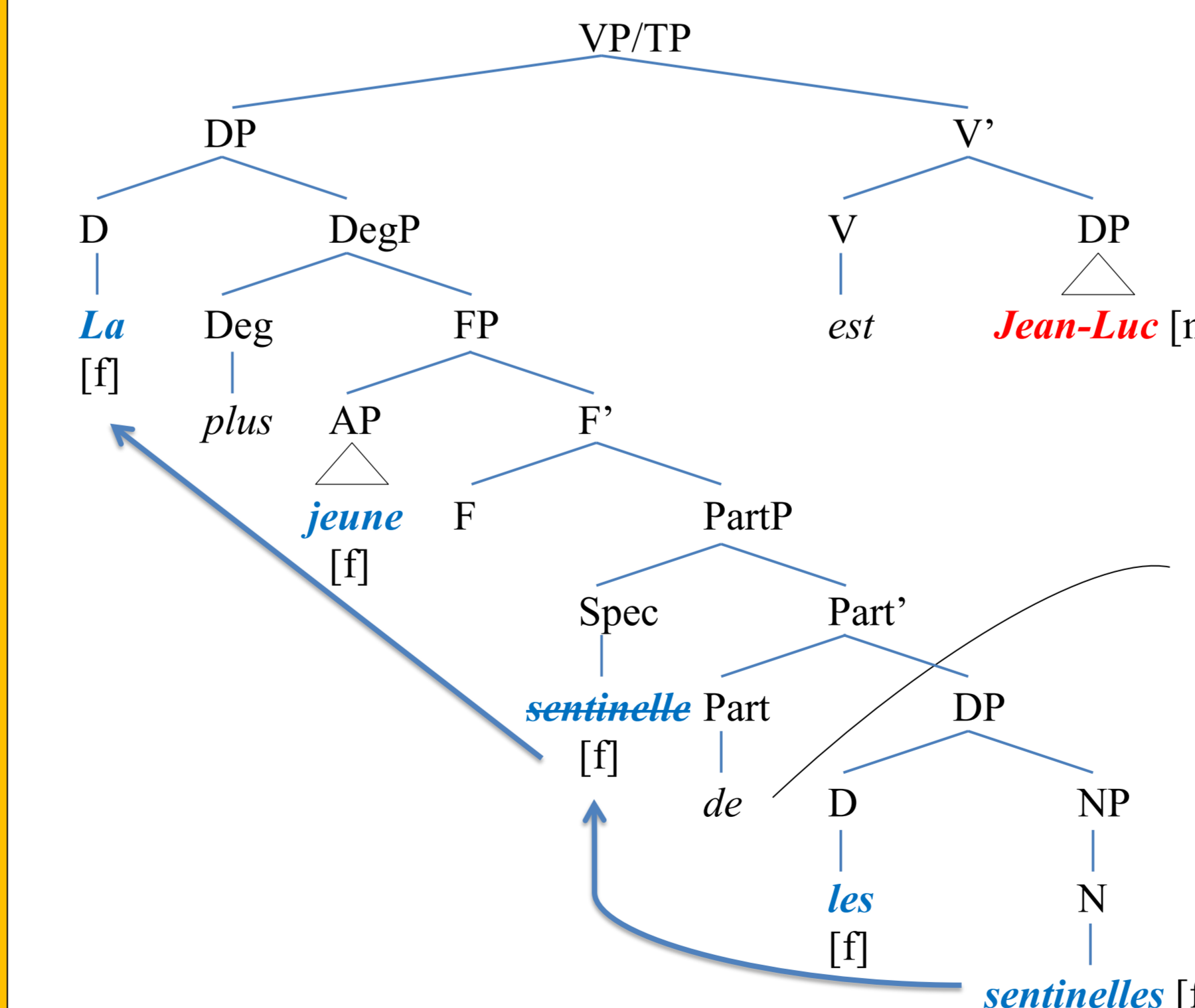   ⇒ Class C noun, no gender mismatch in partitive

(9) *La   plus   jeune   des   (nouveaux)   ministres   est   Hélène.*
    the.F most young of.the (new.C.PL) minister.C.PL is Hélène
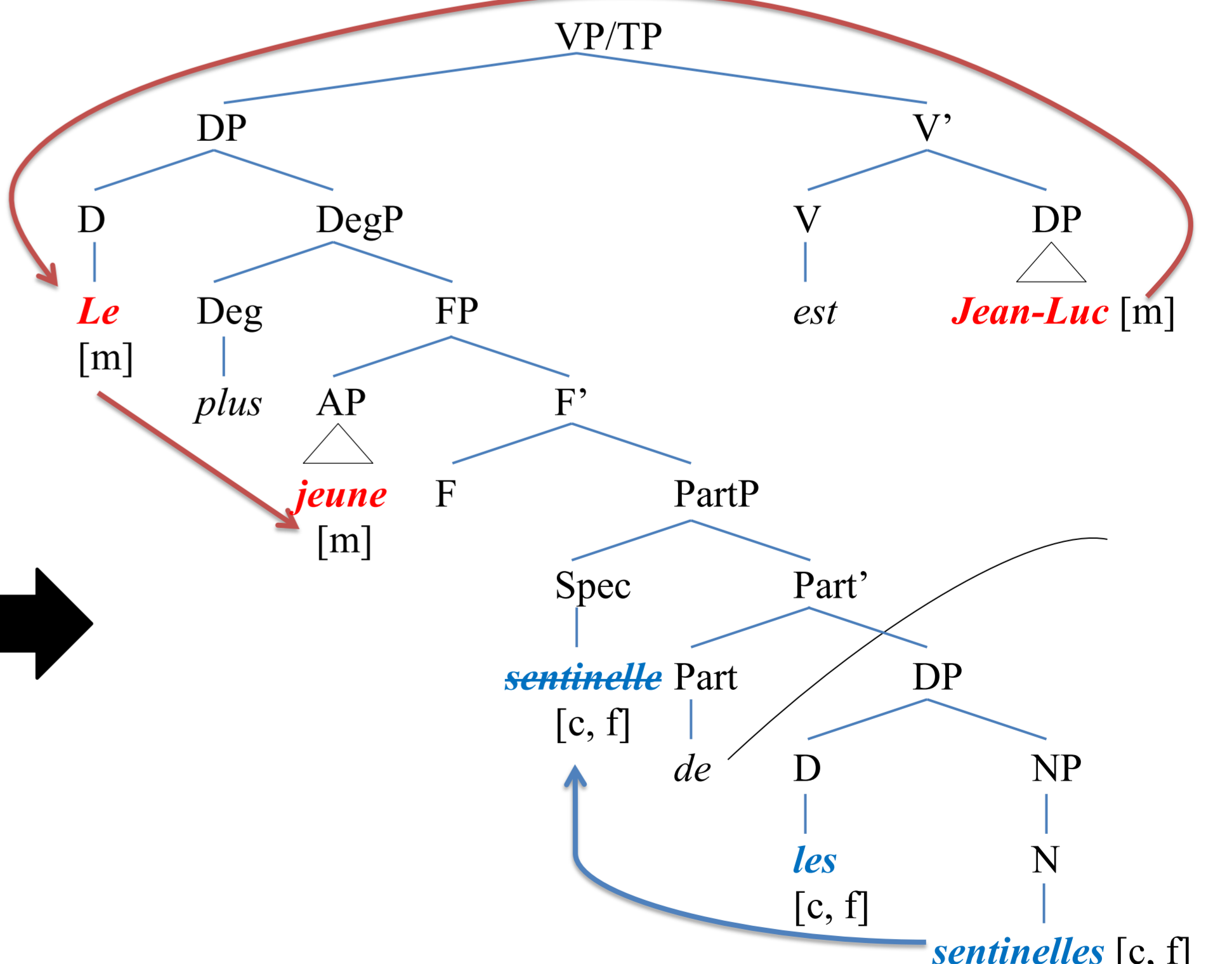   ⇒ Class C noun, gender mismatch in partitive

Individual variation: difference in feature marking in the mental lexicon

(10) *La   plus   jeune   des   (nouvelles)   sentinelles est   Jean-Luc.*
     the.F most young of.the (new.F.PL) guard.F.PL is Jean-Luc
     ⇒ Class D noun, no gender mismatch in partitive

(11) *Le   plus   jeune   des   (nouvelles)   sentinelles est   Jean-Luc.*
     the.M most young of.the (new.F.PL) guard.F.PL is Jean-Luc
     ⇒ Class D noun, gender mismatch in partitive

⇒ Nouns marked as [m] or [f] in lexicon: agreement with inner DP   ⇒ Nouns marked as [c, m] or [c, f] in lexicon: agreement with predicate

7. Conclusion

1. Replication of Sleeman & Ihsane's experiment on a larger scale:
- Semantic agreement is preferred with class B and class C nous
- Grammatical agreement is preferred with class D nouns
2. We have proposed a theoretical analysis that explains the agreement patterns observed

Future research: (i) investigate quantified partitives (*one of the* X) & (ii) investigate same phenomena in German

References
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- Ihsane, Tabea and Petra Sleeman. 2016. Gender agreement with animate nouns in French. *Selected Proceedings of the 43rd Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages* ed. by C. Tortora, M. den Dikken, I. Montoya, & T. O'Neill. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Sleeman, Petra & Tabea Ihsane. 2016. Gender mismatches in partitive constructions with superlatives in French. *Glossa* 1 (1) 35, 1-25.
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