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# 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 <i>la soeur</i> <sub>[f]</sub> 'the sister' – <i>le frère</i> <sub>[m]</sub> 'the brother'
Class B/C	Related forms: suffix (B)/determiner (C) change <i>la chanteuse</i> <sub>[f]</sub> – <i>le chanteur</i> <sub>[m]</sub> 'the singer' <i>la</i> <sub>[f]</sub> / <i>le</i> <sub>[m]</sub> <i>ministre</i> 'the minister'
Class D	Fixed-gender nouns <i>la</i> <sub>[f]</sub> <i>sentinelle</i> – 'the guard' <i>le</i> <sub>[m]</sub> <i>génie</i> – '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 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) <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), 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)  $[_{DP} \text{La}_{[DEGP, \text{feminine}] } \text{plus jeune}_{[GENDP, F]} \text{sentinelle}_{[FP, \text{feminine}] } [_{PP} \text{de ces}_{[GENDP, F]} [_{NP} \text{sentinelles}]]]]]$  Class D *sentinelle* 'guard'

(6)  $[_{DP} \text{La}_{[DEGP, \text{feminine}] } \text{plus jeune}_{[GENDP, F]} \text{ministre}_{[FP, \text{default masculine}] } [_{PP} \text{des}_{[GENDP, -]} [_{NP} \text{nouveaux ministres}]]]]]$  Class C *ministre* 'minister'

## 3. Aims & methods

Sleeman & Ihsane's results only based on a limited number of informants' judgements

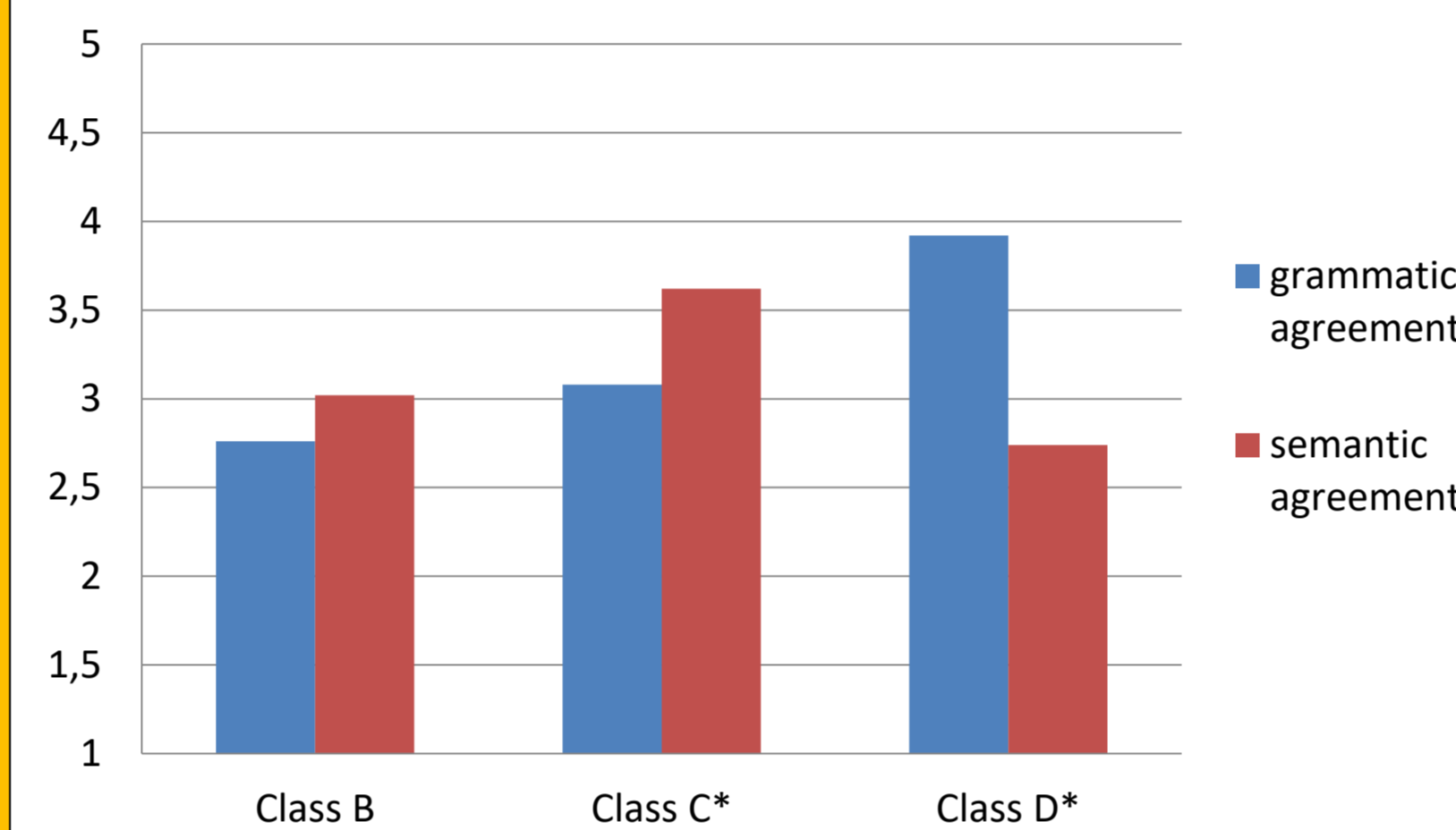
- ⇒ Replicate Sleeman & Ihsane's experiment on a larger scale and in a more systematic way
- ⇒ Provide a theoretical explanation for the agreement patterns we observe

Methodology:

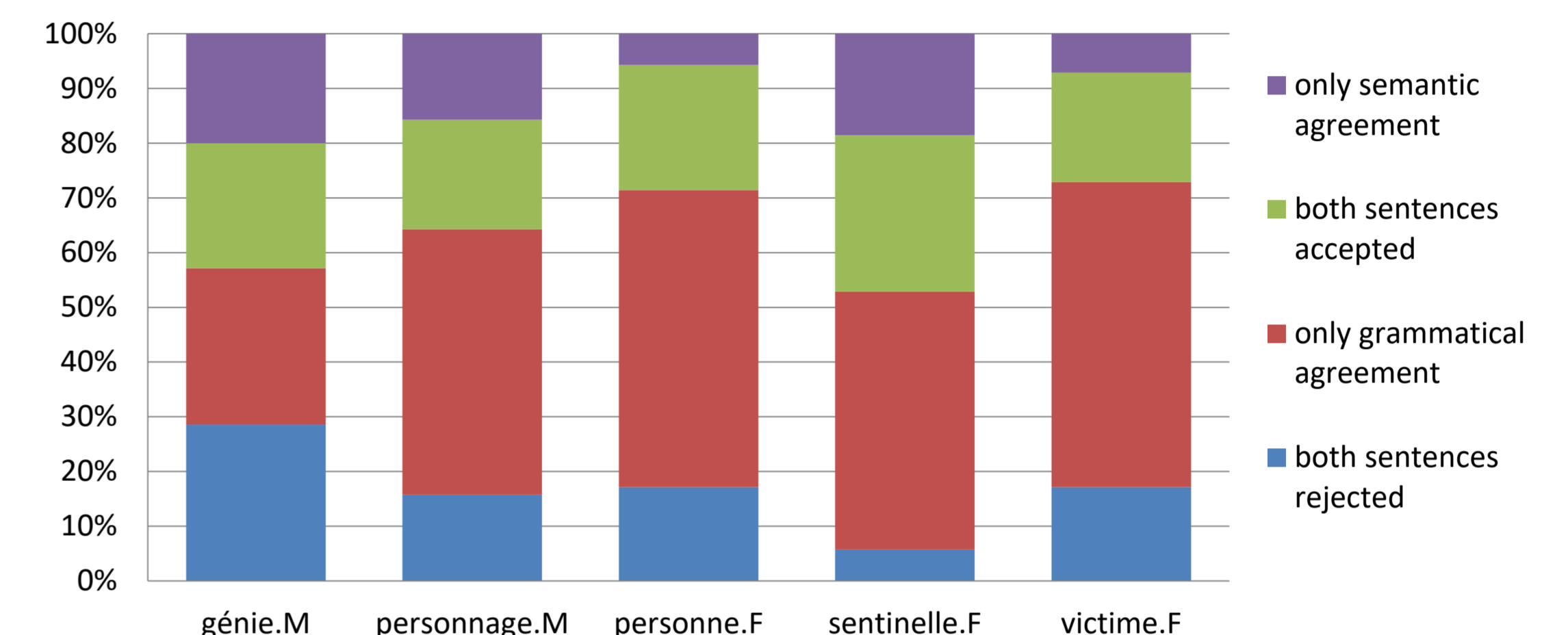
- Grammaticality Judgement Task with 70 native speakers of French
- Online task using Google Forms
- 80 sentences judged on a 5-point scale, presented in random order
- 13 different nouns of noun classes B, C and D included
- Sentences with semantic and grammatical agreement
- Control sentences
- Background 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:

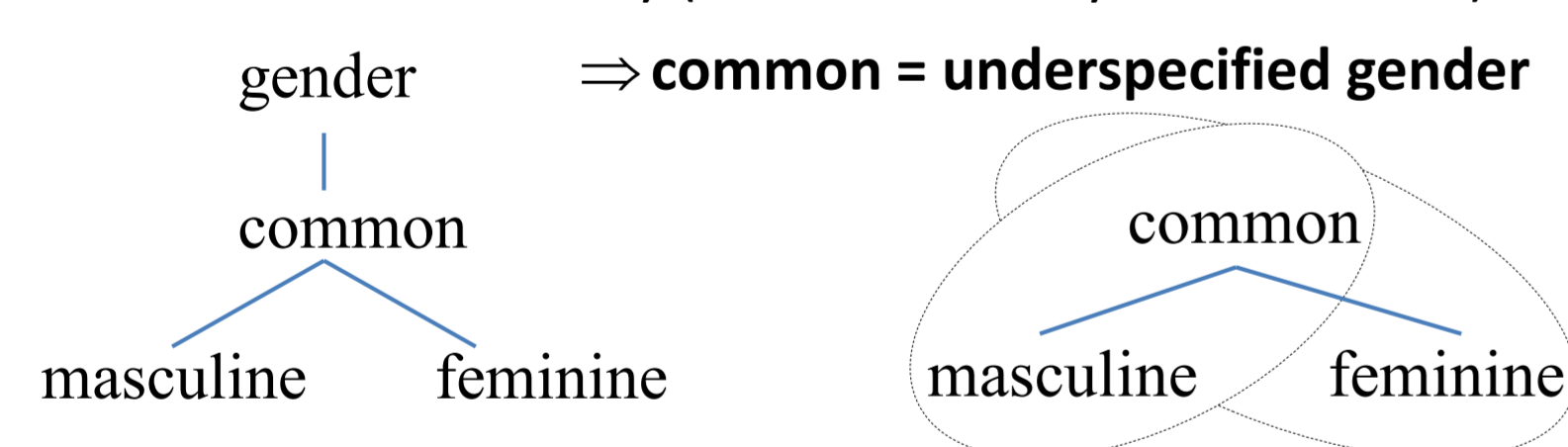
- The gender of the noun in the inner DP
- The gender of the predicate

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

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):



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)
<i>ministre</i> > masculine noun	<i>ministre</i> > noun
<i>professeur</i> > masculine noun	<i>professeur</i> > noun
<i>sentinelle</i> > feminine noun	<i>sentinelle</i> > feminine noun

⇒ Westveer, Sleeman & Aboh (2018)

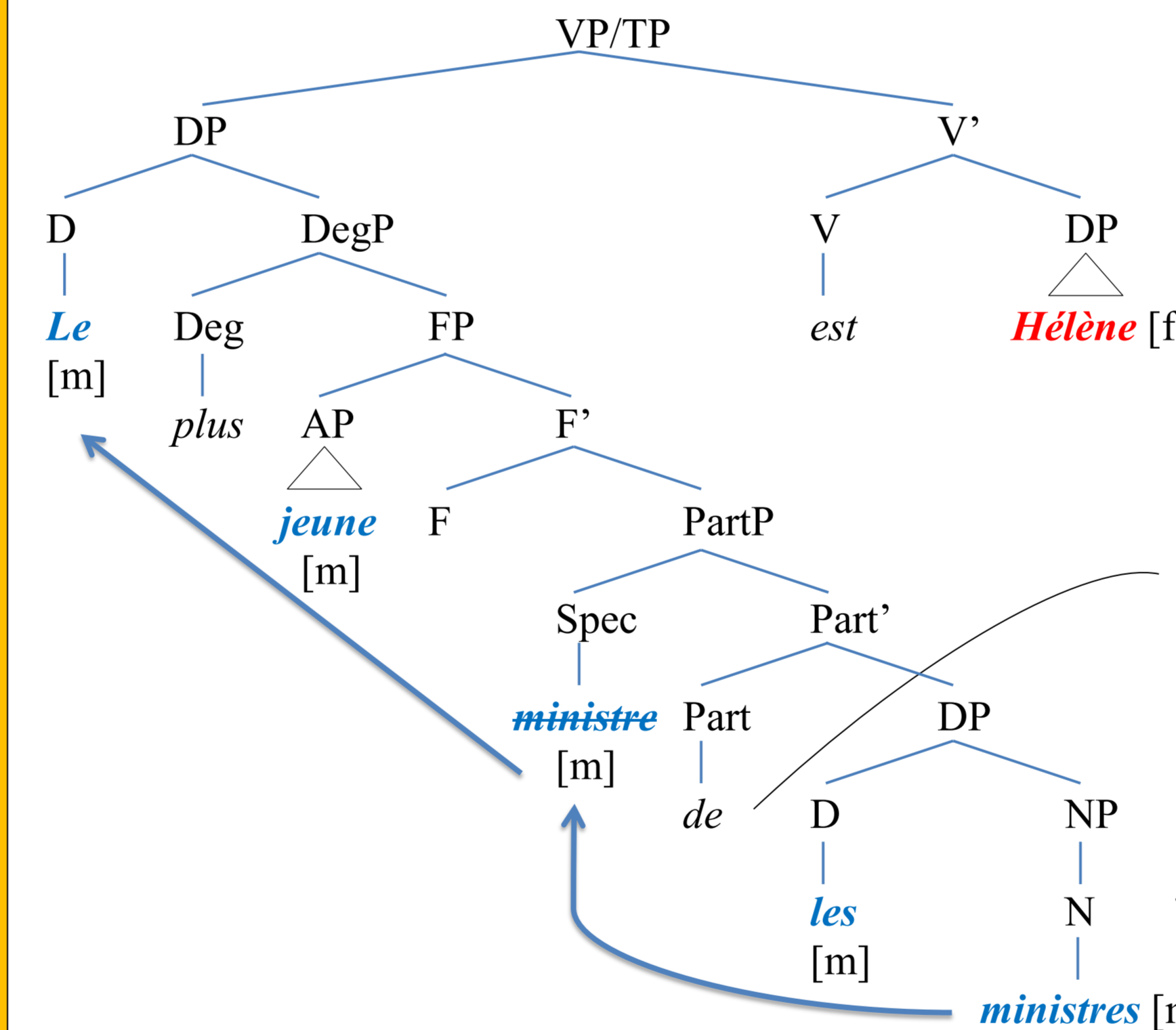
⇒ Class D noun *sentinelle* still marked as feminine: gender mismatches less acceptable

In this way, we can account for variation:

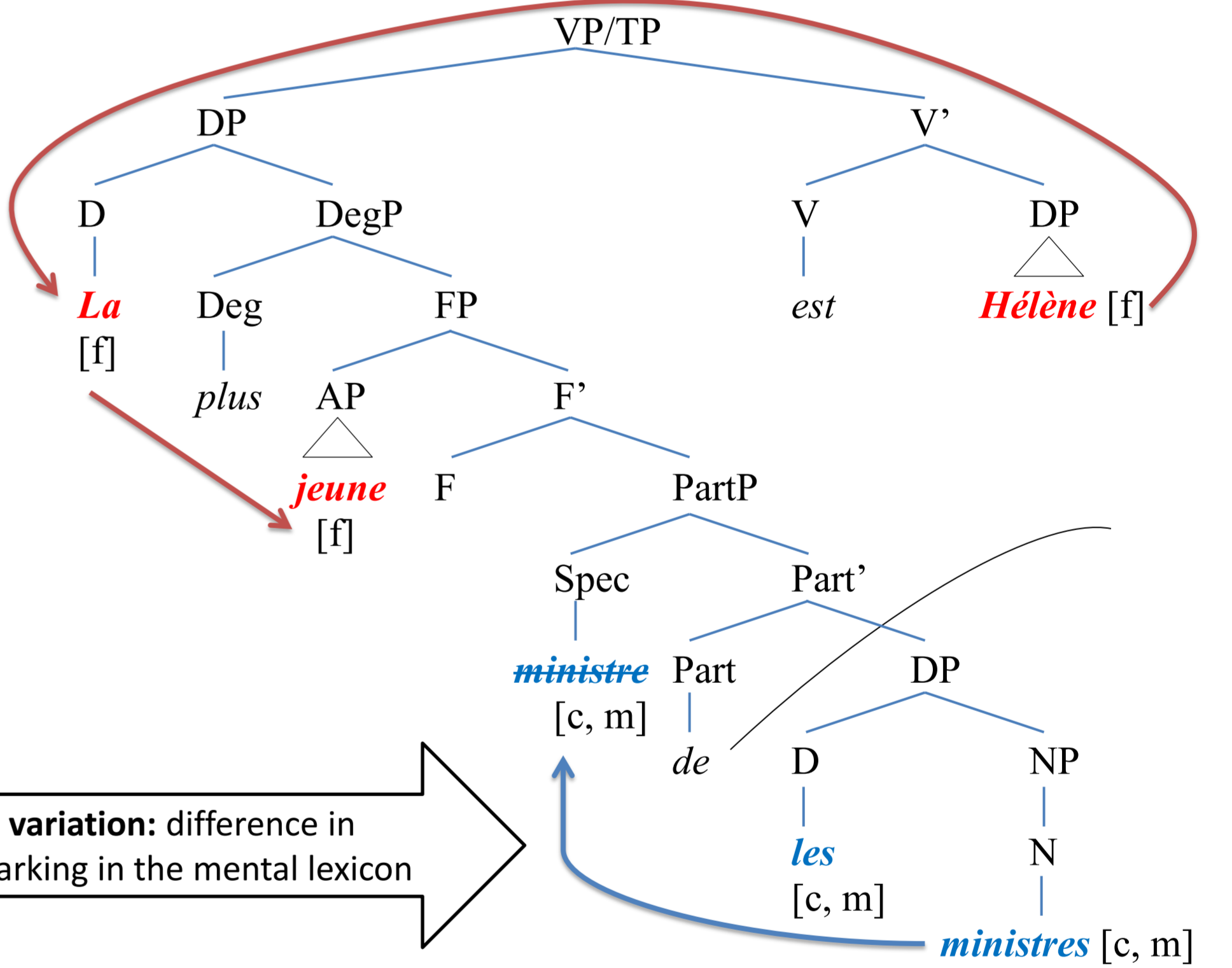
- If gender mismatches are not accepted with a noun, this noun is marked as either [f] or [m] in the mental lexicon
- If gender mismatches are accepted with a noun, this noun is marked as either [c, f] or [c, m] in the mental lexicon

## 6. An analysis that seems to work...

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

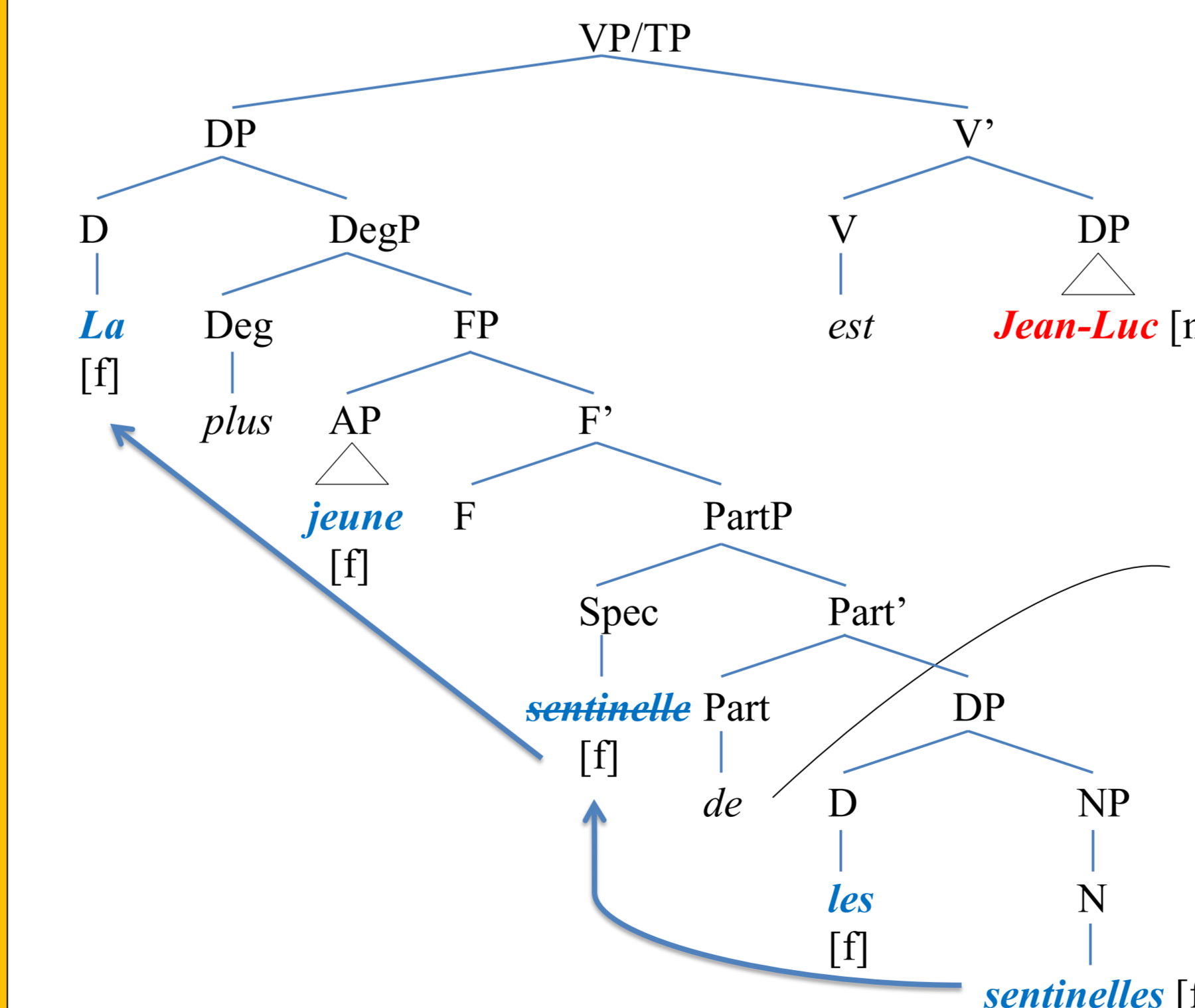


(9) *La plus jeune des (nouveaux) ministres est Héléne.*  
the.F most young of.the (new.C.PL) minister.C.PL is Héléne  
⇒ Class C noun, gender mismatch in partitive

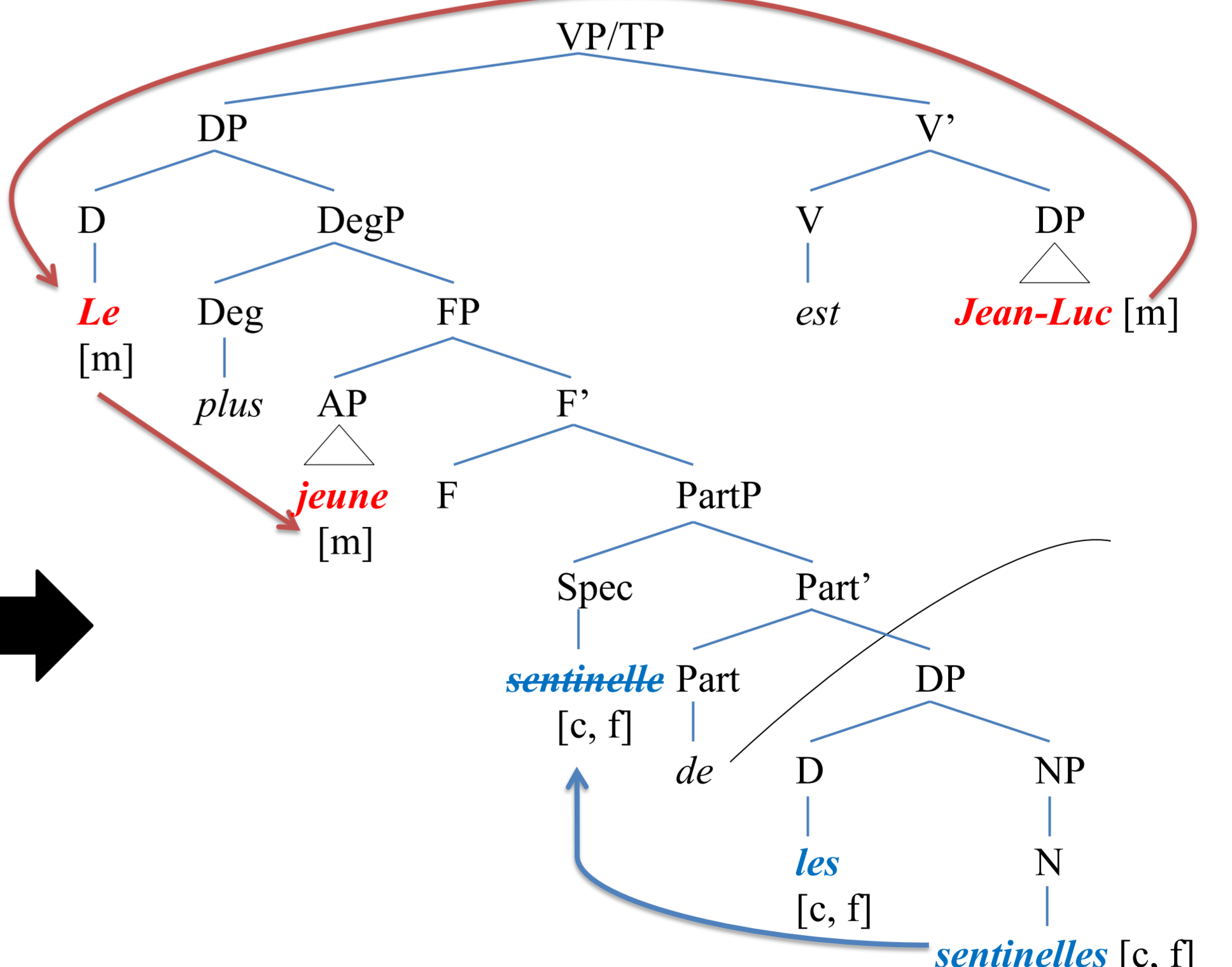


Individual variation: difference in feature marking in the mental lexicon

(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

- Replication of Sleeman & Ihsane's experiment on a larger scale:
  - Semantic agreement is preferred with class B and class C nouns
  - Grammatical agreement is preferred with class D nouns
- 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

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