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# Gender agreement and mismatches: the syntactic structure of quantified and superlative partitives

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## 1. Introduction

The problem: acceptability of gender mismatches in partitive constructions

**Superlative partitives: German = French**

- (1) a. *?Der/Die jüngste der Student-en ist Irene.* mismatch  
 the.M/the.F young-SUP the.GEN.PL student.M-PL is Irene  
 b. *?Le/La plus jeune des étudiant-s est Irene.* mismatch  
 the.M/the.F SUP young of.the.PL student.M-PL is Irene  
 'The youngest of the students is Irene.'

**Quantified partitives: German <> French**

- (2) a. *?Ein-er/Ein-e der Student-en ist Irene.* mismatch  
 one-M/one-F the.GEN.PL student.M-PL is Irene  
 b. *?Une/Un des étudiant-s est Irene.* no mismatch  
 one.F/one.M of.the.PL student.M-PL is Irene  
 'One of the students is Irene.'

→ How to explain this contrast?

## 2. Theoretical background

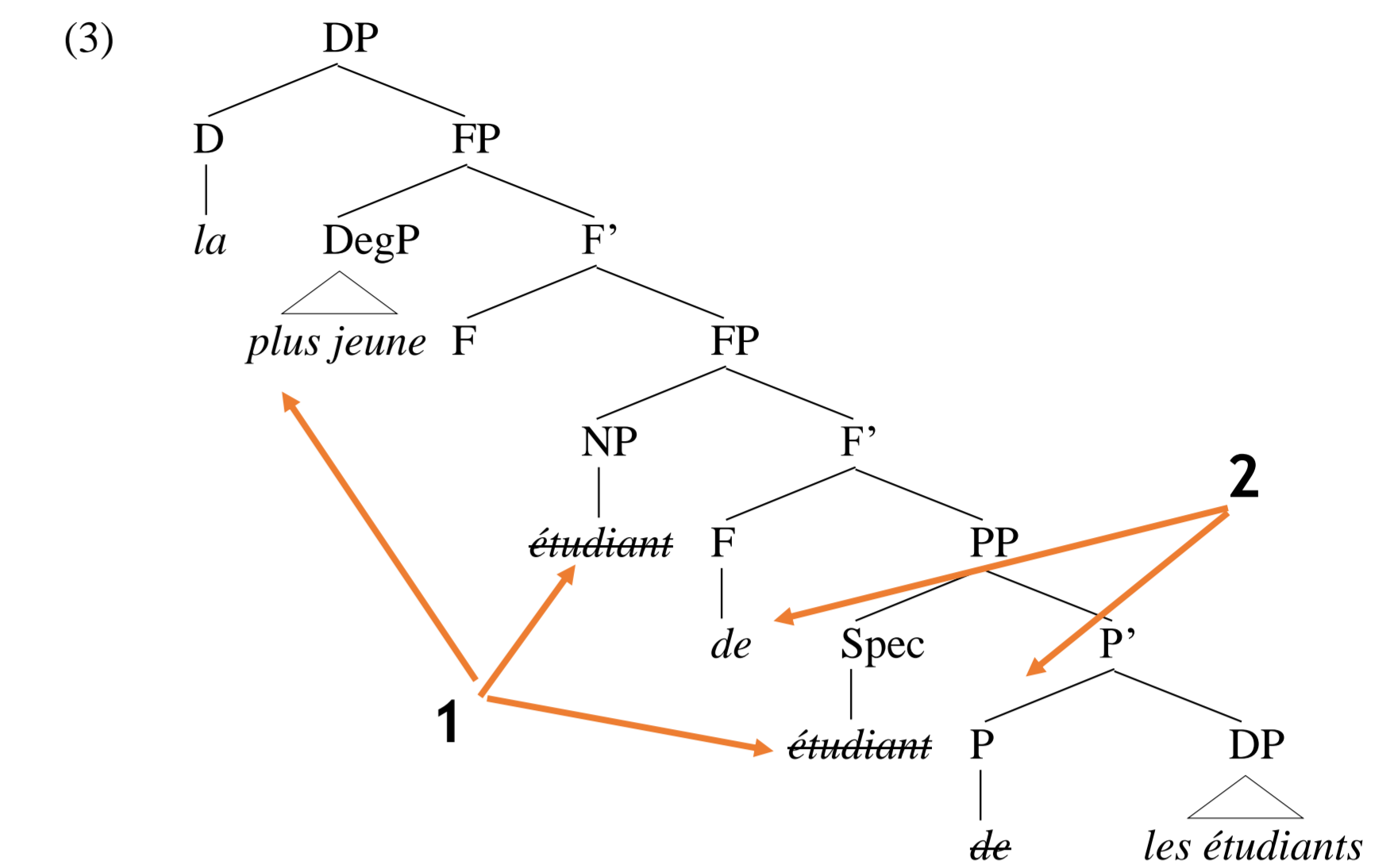
Existing studies on the syntactic structure of partitives (e.g. Jackendoff, 1977; Sleeman & Kester, 2002; Falco & Zamparelli, 2019)

**But:** focus on quantified partitives (see examples in 2)

→ Only study that also addresses superlative partitives (see examples in 1): Sleeman & Ihsane (2016) (building on Hulk & Tellier, 2000; Sleeman & Kester, 2002)

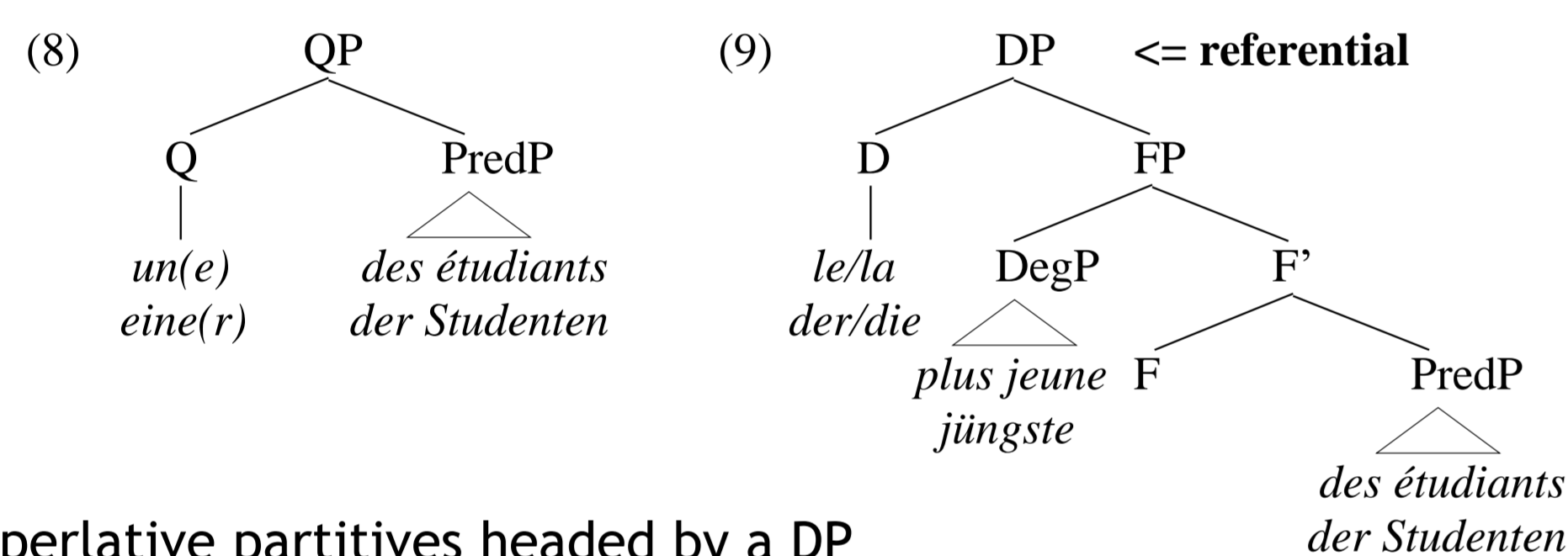
Sleeman & Ihsane's (2016) analysis raises some questions:

- Validity of copy theory of movement: gender mismatches usually not allowed under ellipsis (cf. Saab, 2010)
- Movement of preposition? What motivates this?
- How to extend the proposal to German? German = genitive case marking instead of preposition



## 4. Quantified vs. superlative partitives

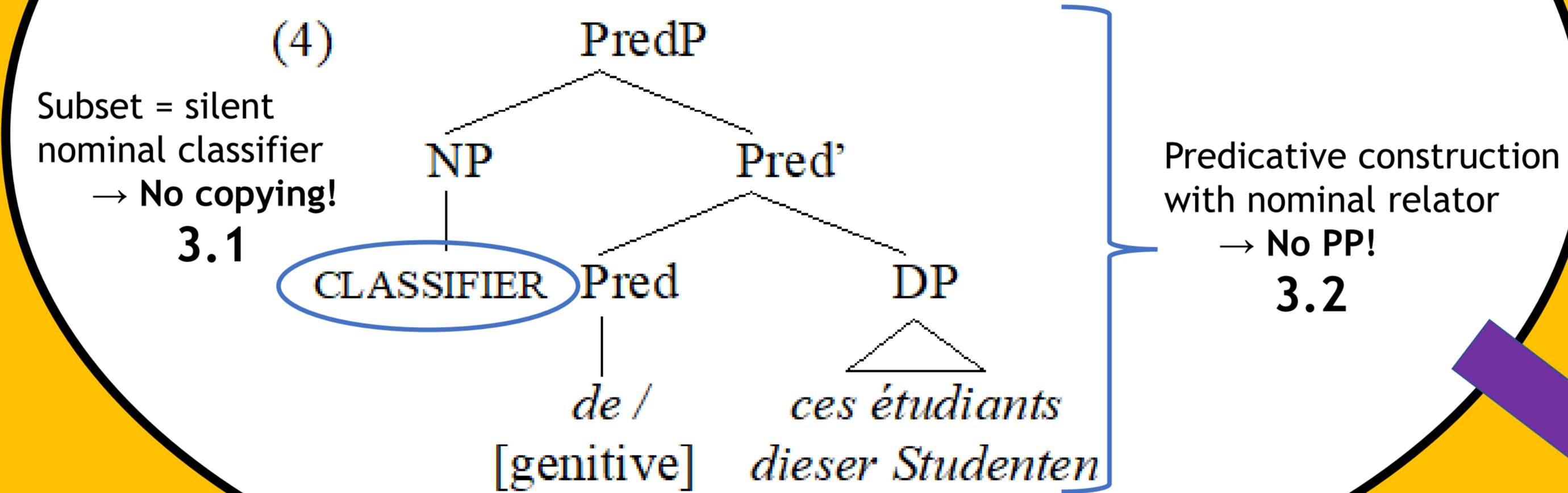
Difference between quantified (8) and superlative partitives (9):



→ Superlative partitives headed by a DP  
 → D = referential projection: links superlative to its referent in discourse

## 3. The proposal: A small clause analysis for partitives

(Cf. Sleeman & Kester, 2002)



### 3.1 Partitives involve a silent nominal classifier

Partitives may contain a classifier-like element:

- (5) a. *Ein Exemplar der Büch-er.*  
 a copy the.GEN.PL book-PL  
 b. *Un exemplaire des livre-s.*  
 a copy of.the.PL book-PL

Presence of classifier also suggested by Falco & Zamparelli (2019; classifier attested in other languages, e.g. Turkish *tane* 'item' (Von Heusinger & Kornfilt, 2017):

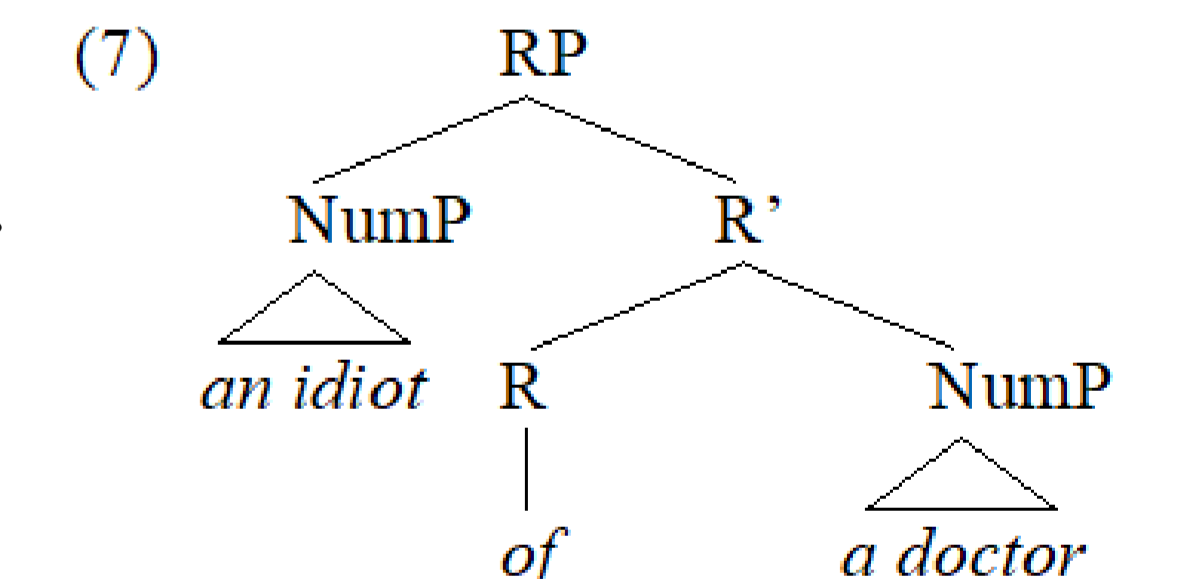
- (6) *Meyve-ler-in üç tane-sin-i ye-di-m.*  
 fruit-PL-GEN three.3SG.ACC item-3SG-ACC eat-PST-1SG  
 'I ate three (items) of the fruits.'

→ No copy theory of movement (Sleeman & Ihsane, 2016): silent nominal classifier

### 3.2 Partitives involve a nominal relator

Den Dikken (2006): nominal predicate analysis for qualitative constructions (7) (e.g. *an idiot of a doctor*):

→ *of* = nominal relator (copula)

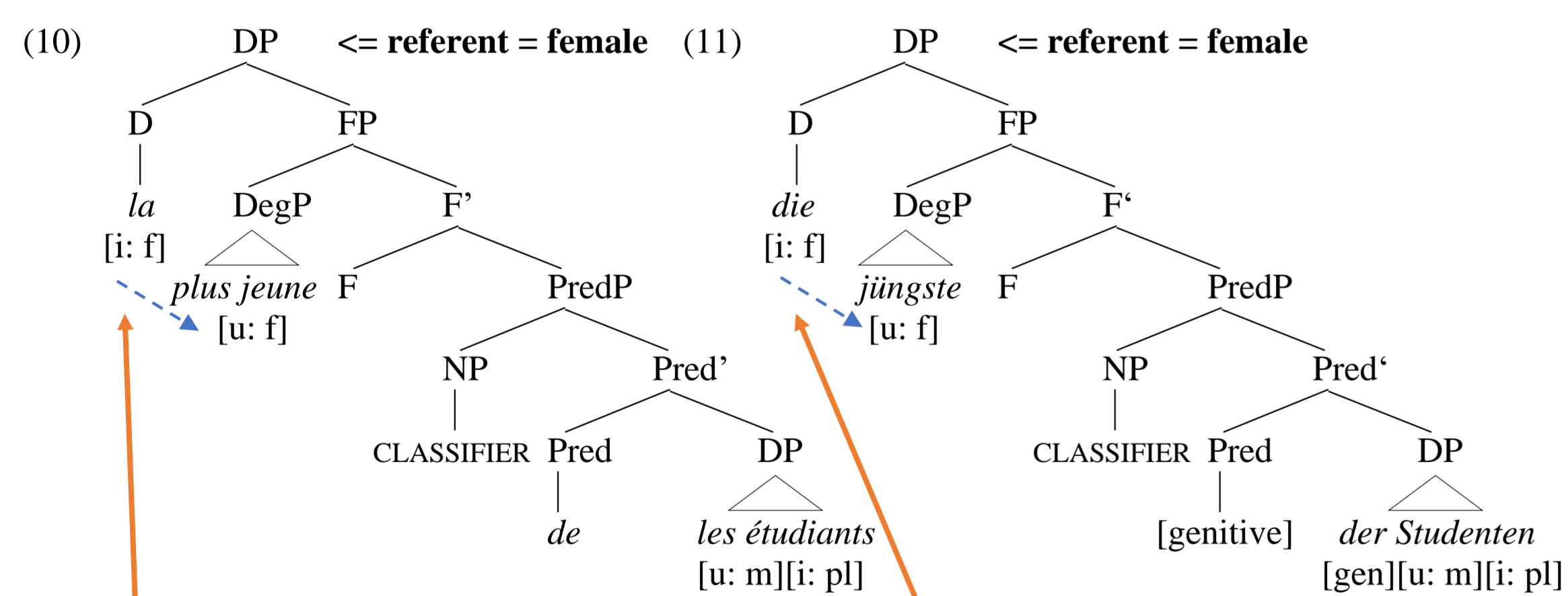


In partitive constructions, nominal relator...

- ... spells out as preposition *de* in French
- ... assigns genitive case in German

→ **No PP in partitive constructions!**

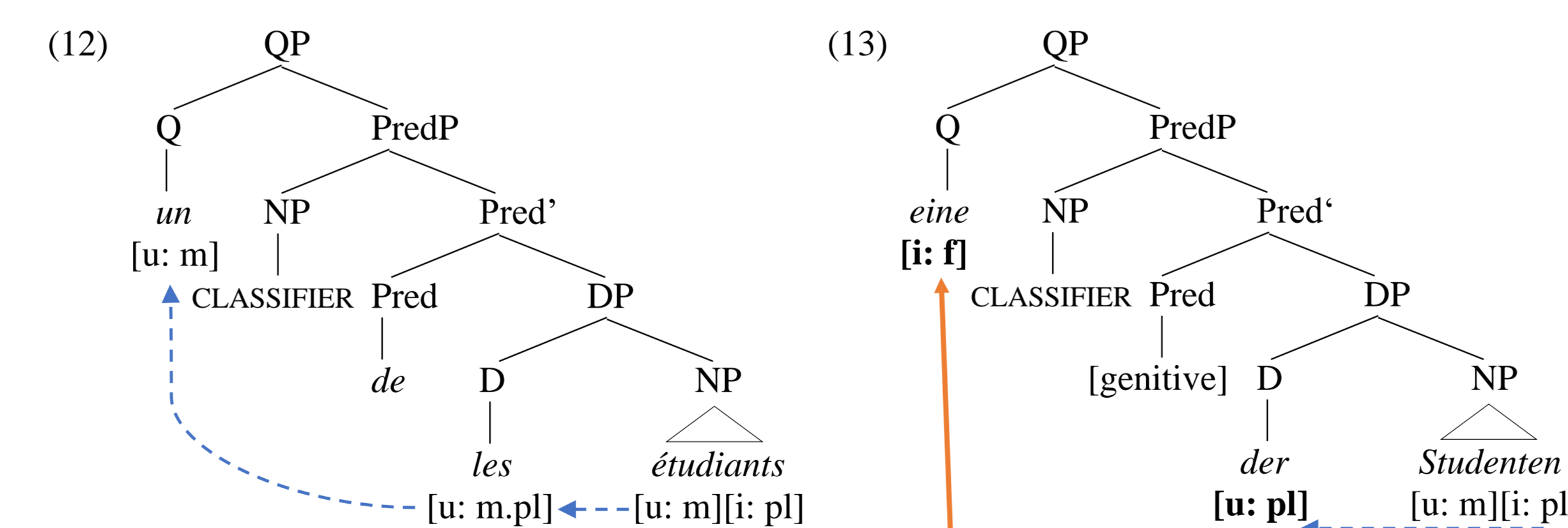
### 4.1 Superlative partitives: French = German



→ Semantic feature valuation (cf. Kučerová, 2018)  
 → Possible in superlative partitives because of referential D!

### 4.2 Quantified partitives: French <> German

Gender mismatch accepted in German (13), but not in French (12):



Why would semantic feature valuation be allowed in German?

→ Gender syncretism in the plural in German: **no gender value on lower D in (13)!**

- (14) a. *die intelligent-en Student-en* b. *les étudiant-s intelligent-s*  
 the.PL intelligent-PL student.M-PL the.PL student.M-PL intelligent.M-PL  
 b. *die intelligent-en Student-inn-en* b. *les étudiant-e-s intelligent-e-s*  
 the.PL intelligent-PL student-F-PL the.PL student-F-PL intelligent-F-PL

→ Semantic feature valuation on Q in German as **last resort option** (cf. Matushansky, 2013)

→ French: no need for semantic feature valuation; lower D bears gender value in (12)

## 5. Concluding remarks

Novel syntactic analysis of both quantified and superlative partitives:

- Small clause analysis, building on Sleeman & Kester (2002), Den Dikken (2006)
  - No PP, but nominal relator, spells out as *de* in French; assigns genitive case in German
  - Silent nominal classifier, no copying

Explanation of agreement differences between French and German

→ Semantic feature valuation applies, if...

- ... the construction is headed by a referential element = DP
  - => Mismatch accepted in superlative partitives in French and German
- ... if the lower D does not bear any gender value (= last resort)
  - => Mismatch **not** accepted in quantified partitives in French
  - => Mismatch accepted in quantified partitives in German

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