In French, all nouns are marked for grammatical gender. For animate nouns, the grammatical gender usually corresponds to the referent’s biological sex (1). Elements related to a noun, like adjectives and determiners, normally agree with the noun’s grammatical gender (2).

In superlative partitives, however, establishing gender agreement can be challenging. When the set noun refers to a group of female and male students, this noun typically bears the masculine plural form, functioning as a default (cf. des nouveaux ministres in (3-4)). If we select a female student out of this group, should the superlative referring to the subset agree with the set noun’s grammatical gender (3) or with the biological sex of the subset’s referent (4)? In the former case, there would be grammatical agreement in the entire partitive, but we would use a masculine form to refer to a female. The latter case represents semantic agreement: we use a feminine form to refer to a female, but this causes a gender mismatch between the set noun (in default masculine) and the subset partitive (in feminine). In other words: can we override grammatical gender agreement in a superlative partitive or not?

According to Sleeman & Ihsane (2016), although no clear rules exist about gender agreement in these situations, native speakers have intuitions about this. By means of a Grammaticality Judgement Task submitted to 70 native speakers of French, we probed into these intuitions. The results indicate that the possibility to have semantic agreement depends on the animate noun involved, as shows the contrast between (4) and (5). To account for this observation, we assume grammatical gender to be hierarchically ordered in the mental lexicon, represented in the gender feature hierarchy in (6): feminine and masculine gender are headed by a common gender node, representing underspecified gender.

We propose that some animate nouns are marked with specified grammatical gender – either feminine or masculine – in the mental lexicon, whereas other animate nouns are marked with underspecified common gender and thus not specified as either feminine or masculine in the mental lexicon. The specificity of the grammatical gender marked on the noun determines whether a gender mismatch in a superlative partitive is possible: if a noun is marked with specified feminine or masculine gender, a mismatch is not possible, whereas if a noun is marked with underspecified common gender, a mismatch is possible.

However, our test results also show a lot of variation between our participants with regard to which patterns they accept and which they reject. Nevertheless, we can account for this variation too if we assume that the marking of grammatical gender on a specific animate noun as either specified feminine or masculine, or as underspecified common gender may vary from one speaker to another.

The idea that some French nouns might be underspecified for grammatical gender in the speaker’s mental lexicon is supported by the developments in the gender marking of nouns in monolingual dictionaries of French over the last decades. Author et al. (2018) investigated the presence of feminine forms of profession nouns in different editions (from 1967 to 2016) of the French Petit Robert dictionary. As their study shows, whereas in the older editions of the Petit Robert profession nouns such as ministre ‘minister’ (1c) used to be marked as ‘masculine noun’, in the more recent editions more and more nouns are marked just as ‘noun’, without any indication of grammatical gender. This could also indicate that a shift to less specified grammatical gender might be taking place for some French animate nouns, a shift being accepted to various degrees by native speakers of French.

---

1 There are some exceptions to this: nouns like la sentinelle ‘the.F guard’ or le personnage ‘the.M character’ only have one fixed grammatical gender, but can nevertheless refer to both females and males.
Examples


(2) a. un frère intelligent
    a.M brother.M intelligent.M
b. une sœur intelligente
    a.F sister.F intelligent.F
‘an intelligent brother/sister’

(3) Le plus jeune des nouveaux ministres s’appelle Marie.
    the.M most young of.the new.M.PL minister.PL is.called Marie
‘The youngest of the new ministers is called Marie.’

(4) La plus jeune des nouveaux ministres s’appelle Marie.
    the.F most young of.the new.M.PL minister.PL is.called Marie
‘The youngest of the new ministers is called Marie.’

(5) La plus jeune des nouveaux chanteurs s’appelle Marie.
    the.F most young of.the new.M.PL singer.M.PL is.called Marie
‘The youngest of the new singers is called Marie.’

(6) Gender feature hierarchy French (adapted from Harley & Ritter 2002)

    gender
      /  \
    common
    |   |
  masculine  feminine

References

