Whereas in English there are no gender distinctions for the noun, in Romance languages masculine and feminine nouns can be distinguished, both for animate and inanimate nouns. Although for inanimate nouns gender is always completely arbitrary, for animate nouns morphological gender does not always correspond to natural semantic gender, as illustrated by French (la sentinelle (f.) ‘the sentinel’ and le médecin (m.) ‘the doctor’, le professeur (m.) ‘the professor’, le mannequin ‘the model’: all refer to men and women).

To account for this dual behavior of nouns (arbitrary or natural gender), it has been proposed in recent literature (Kramer 2009; Atkinson 2012) that gender is expressed in two positions within the DP, and not in one (either the root or n, as in Alexiadou 2004 or in Lowenstamm 2008, resp.): as an uninterpretable feature on the root (accounting for arbitrary gender: le magasin (m.) ‘the shop’; la sentinelle (f.) ‘the sentinel’) or as an interpretable feature on the head of the functional projection nP (accounting for natural/semantic gender: un homme (m.) ‘a man’; une chatte (f.) ‘a (female) cat’; une enfant (f.) ‘a (female) child’; un enfant (m.) ‘a (male) child’). Determiners and adjectives agree with the ±masc. feature on n (une chatte (f.) blanche ‘a white cat’), or with the gender feature that is specified on the root (un vieux magasin (m.) ‘an old shop’, la malheureuse sentinelle (f.) ‘the poor sentinel’). In the case of the non-specified noun un enfant ‘a (male or female) child’ / un chat ‘a (male or female) cat’, the determiner and the adjective agree with the root, which gets default masculine gender.

This analysis seems to account quite nicely for the local agreement between D, adjectives, and the noun in D-A-N or D-N-A configurations. In this paper we put this analysis, however, under scrutiny by investigating whether it can also account for less local agreement between the noun and the adjective/quantifier and/or determiner in French. Among the examples that we analyse are the following:

(1) Le plus jeune /La plus jeune de mes chers enfants (j’ai deux fils et une fille) s’appelle Nina.

‘The name of the youngest of my sweet children (I have two sons and a daughter) is Nina.’

(2) Mon ancien professeur de français était toujours content de mon travail. Elle vient de partir à la retraite.

‘My former French teacher was always satisfied with my work. She just retired.’

(3) La sentinelle arriva. Elle/Il avait une longue barbe.

We propose an account for the data within a phase theory of agreement (Moscati & Rizzi 2011). The analysis of agreement within the (French) DP put forth by Atkinson (2012) seems to be limited to local agreement within the strict DP phase. We argue that if agreement takes place with an element outside the strict DP phase, gender on the root can (1), must (2) or cannot (3) be overridden by a supplementary interpretable gender feature on n. We base our
account on valuation and the interpretable/uninterpretable character of the gender feature (Pesetsky & Torrego 2007).