



RoLinC  
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# Null Objects in Old French

Scoping out syntactic and semantic restrictions



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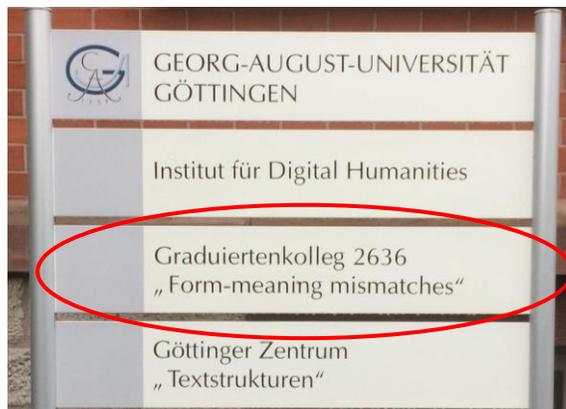


# Overview

- ▶ Setting the scene
  - ❖ What are null objects
  - ❖ The types of null objects in Old French
- ▶ Semantic properties of null objects
  - ❖ The distribution of the properties
  - ❖ The semantic profile of null objects
- ▶ Syntactic properties
  - ❖ The distribution of properties
  - ❖ Syntactic profile of null objects
- ▶ Conclusions

# Context of research

- ▶ PhD research started in September 2021
- ▶ Part of the larger research program RTG 2636: Form-Meaning Mismatches
  - ❖ Georg-August Universität, Göttingen
  - ❖ Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Guido Mensching and apl. Prof. Dr. Götz Keydana (University of Göttingen)
  - ❖ In collaboration with Prof. Adam Ledgeway (University of Cambridge)



18/10/2022

# Setting the scene

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## Null objects

- ▶ “A phonologically null element in the complement position of the verb.”(Roberge and Cummins, 2005); “For a null object to be licit, its identity must be readily ascertainable and understandable to the interlocutor” (Donaldson, 2013: 4)
- ▶ Most often a pronominal element salient in the discourse because it has an antecedent nearby > anaphoric null objects

(1) Et quant il voit venir Galaad si li vet a l' encontre et le salue (OF)  
and when he sees come.INF Galahad thus to.him goes to the=encounter and him greets  
'And when he<sub>i</sub> sees Galahad<sub>j</sub> coming, he<sub>i</sub> goes to meet him<sub>j</sub> and greets him<sub>j</sub>' (*Queste del Saint Graal*, II, 43)

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# Setting the scene

## Null objects in Old French

- ▶ Old French lasts from the 9th century to the 14th century.
  - ❖ In this presentation: only texts in prose from the 13th century
- ▶ Three main types of null objects in Old French, (depending on how they relate to their antecedents):
  - ❖ Coordination: the object in the non-initial conjunct(s) is omitted
  - ❖ Argument sharing: the antecedent and the null objects are not in the same clause
  - ❖ Argument ellipsis: the null object does not have an antecedent in the text, it is recovered through world knowledge and pragmatic strategies

# Setting the scene

## Null objects in Old French

### Null objects in coordination (43%)

- ▶ Conjuncts in a coordination structure can be reduced by omission of the repeated material in the second conjunct (Wilder, 2018)

(2) e mercierent **Nostre Seignor** e loerent des l' ore  
and thanked.3PL our Lord and praised from the=hour  
'and they thanked Our Lord and praised from then on' (*Vie de Saint Eustache*, XXXIII)

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## Null objects in Old French

### Null objects in argument sharing (AS) (56%)

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# Setting the scene

## Null objects in Old French

### Null objects in argument sharing (AS) (56%)

- ▶ AS encompasses several structures highlighted in the literature (Donaldson, 2013; GGHF, 2020) to display object omission:
  1. Adjunct participle: *Il monta sor son ceval et prent s'amie devant lui, - baisant et acolant* 'He got on his horse and took his beloved in front of him, kissing and embracing' (*Aucassin & Nicolette*, XXVI)
  2. Prepositional infinitives: *il les conquist sanz - occirre* 'he defeated them without killing' (*Queste del Saint Graal*, IV, 72)
  3. Resumptive *faire*: *non - fera il* 'he will not do' (GGHF)
  4. Parenthetical verbs: *car tart sera, je - sai de voir* 'because it will be too late, I know well' (GGHF)
  5. Speech verbs: *Quant Perceval ot les paroles que la damoisele li dist si - respont* 'when Percival heard the words the young woman said to him, he replies' (*Queste del Saint Graal*, VII, 132)

# Setting the scene

## Null objects in Old French

### Null objects with argument ellipsis (AE) (1%)

- ▶ Contexts in which the referent of the object is not mentioned in the linguistic context and must therefore be recovered from general world knowledge.
- ▶ Examples of argument ellipsis mostly restricted to very specific verbs, e.g. *donner* ‘give’, *ferir des esperons* ‘to hit with the spur / to spur on’.

(4) *cant il l' espir de prophetie a la foiz donet*  
when he the=spirit of prophecy at the time gave

‘when he at the same time gave the spirit of prophecy’ (*Vie de Saint Benoit*, II, 22, 87)

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## Null objects in Old French

### Null objects with argument ellipsis (AE) (1%)

▶ AE encompasses several contexts which have been highlighted in the literature:

1. Arbitrary human objects (Rizzi, 1986; Donaldson, 2013, a.o.)

*He gave (people) the ability to think*

2. Null cognate objects: prototypical object of the verb (Roberge and Cummins, 2005)

*He drinks (a drink)*

3. Fixed or conventional expressions: objects in conventional expressions may be dropped without having previously been mentioned.

*Il feri des esperons* ‘he struck with the spurs’ (Donaldson, 2013, example 40)

# Setting the scene

## Null objects in Old French

### Null objects with argument ellipsis (AE)

- ▶ Rare in the corpus: only 3 tokens.
- ▶ One example of argument ellipsis in the corpus that does not seem to be a frequent instance of AE with *demander* ‘to ask’

(5) et puis demande, en non de sainte Marie  
and then asks in name of saint Mary

‘and then he asks for ... in the name of Saint Mary’ (*Queste del Saint Graal*, IV, 71)



hospitality  
shelter  
accommodation  
lodging

# Setting the scene

## Null objects in Old French

- ▶ Previous research on null objects in Old French: Arteaga, 1997; Donaldson, 2013; GGHF, 2020
- ▶ Arteaga (1997) and Donaldson (2013) mostly interested in the type of null objects encountered in the different contexts of omission (null object as a *pro* or a variable).
  - ❖ *pro* for AS contexts and coordination contexts
  - ❖ variable for AE contexts
- ▶ *Grande Grammaire Historique du Français* focused on the different contexts in which we can find omission
- ▶ None have focused on the semantic and syntactic properties of NO, or their potential triggers.

# Setting the scene

## Aims

- ▶ Offer a preliminary study of the semantic and syntactic profiles of null objects in Old French, which is something that has not been considered at all in the previous literature on the language.
- ▶ Properties annotated:
  - ❖ Semantic properties: animacy, humanity, specificity
  - ❖ Syntactic properties: properties of the objects themselves: person, number, gender, case  
properties of the surrounding context: narration, embeddedness, finiteness
- ▶ Determine if we can find any restrictions or strong tendencies in terms of these properties which may later on be considered as potential triggers of objects omission.

# Setting the scene

## The Corpus

Title	Manuscript	Date	Variety	Length	Source	Type	Number of Tokens
<i>Aucassin et Nicolette (A&amp;N)</i>	N. A. (end 13th C)	End 12th-beg. 13th C	Picard	ca. 10.000 words	BFM, ed. M. Roques, Paris: Champion, 1929	Prose and verse	21
<i>Vie de Saint Benoît (S.Ben)</i>	BnF Fr 24764	Beg. 13 <sup>th</sup> C	Wallon	ca. 17.000 words	BFM, ed. W. Foerster, Paris: Champion, 1876	Prose	29
<i>Vie de Saint Eustache (S.Eus)</i>	Bnf fr. 2464	13 <sup>th</sup> C	N.A.	ca. 7.500	BFM, ed. J. Murray, Paris: Champion, 1929	Prose	26
<i>Dialogue de l'âme de Saint Isidore (S.Isi)</i>	Epinal, BM 181	13 <sup>th</sup> C	lorrain	ca. 10.000 words	BFM, ed. F. Bonnardot, Paris: Société des amis de la Romania, 1876	Prose	12
<i>Queste del Saint Graal (Queste)</i>	Lyon, BM, p.a. 77	Beg. 13 <sup>th</sup> C	N.A.	ca. 107.700 words (excerpt length: ca. 50.000 words)	BFM, ed. C. Marchello-Nizia & A. Lavrentiev, Lyon : ENS Lyon, 2019	Prose	76

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Length:  
94,500 words

Total: 164

# Semantic Properties

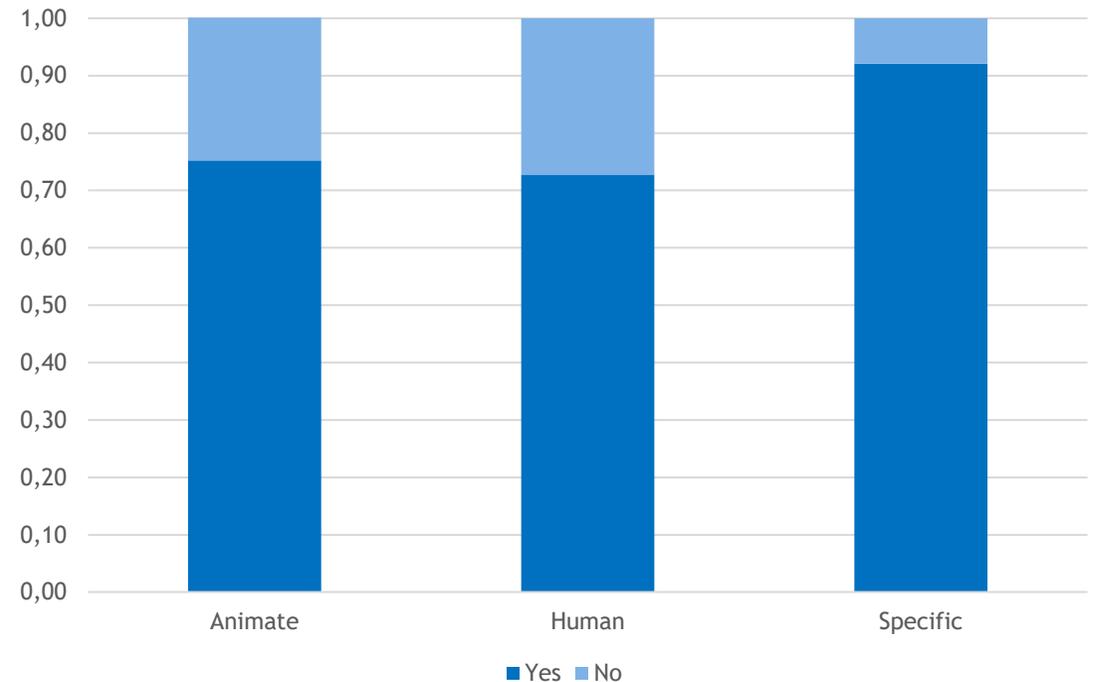
# Semantic properties

- ▶ Annotated the tokens with regards to animacy, humanity and specificity.
  - ❖ [+animate] vs [-animate]
  - ❖ [+human] vs [-human]
  - ❖ [+specific] vs [-specific]
- ▶ Inspired by work by Schwenter (2006) and Schwenter and Silva (2002) on null objects in Brazilian Portuguese.
  - ❖ Observation for BP: conjunction of [animate; specific] regulates occurrences of null objects in BP > [-animate; -specific] objects are nearly obligatorily null in BP whereas [+animate; + specific] objects are realised as pronouns.

# Semantic properties Distribution in the corpus

- ▶ Distribution in the number of the tokens
  - ❖ [+ani]: 123 vs [-ani]: 41
  - ❖ [+hum]: 119 vs [-hum]: 45
  - ❖ [+spec]: 151 vs [-spec]: 13
- ▶ One observation we can make already is that null objects are overwhelmingly specific, with more than 90% of the tokens having a specific null object.

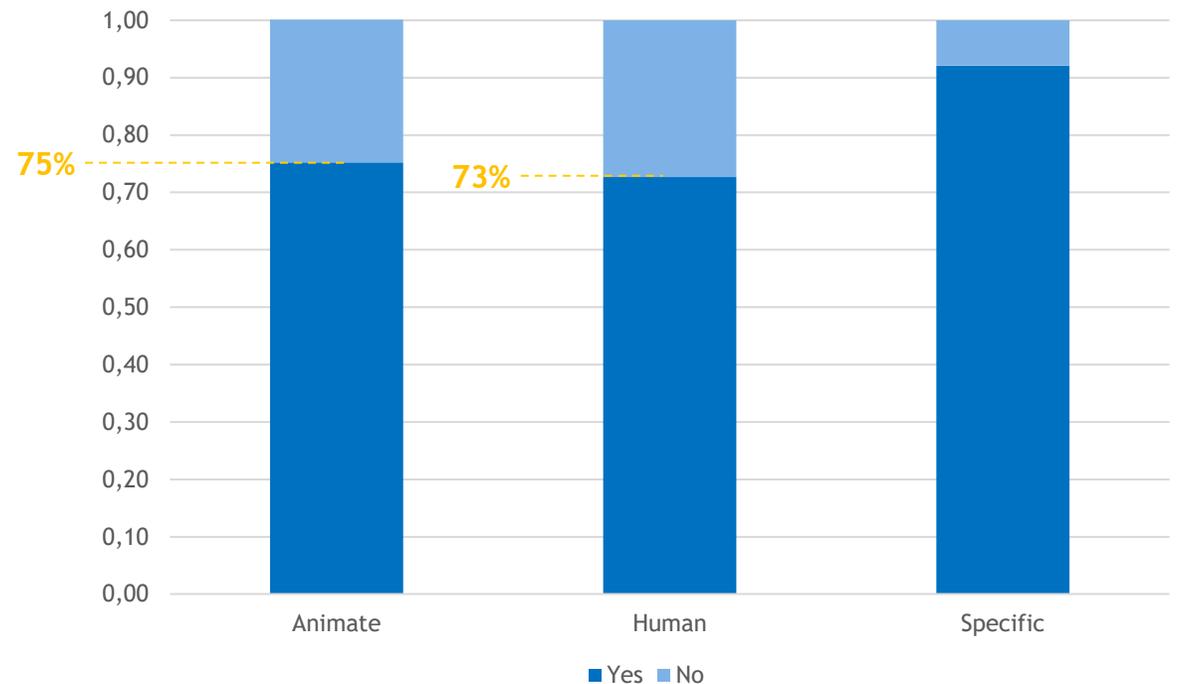
Distribution of the semantic properties  
of null objects  
(Frequency)



# Semantic properties Distribution in the corpus

- ▶ It is not surprising to see human objects being less frequent than animate ones as all human objects are animate. However, this distribution means that not all animate null objects are human, we have a few that are not (and refer mostly to animals such as horses and dogs).
- ▶ There is barely any difference between the animate and the human objects (4 tokens (2%) are animate but not human) so it seems that humanity is also a strong contender for null objects.

Distribution of the semantic properties  
of null objects  
(Frequency)



# Semantic properties

## Distribution in the corpus

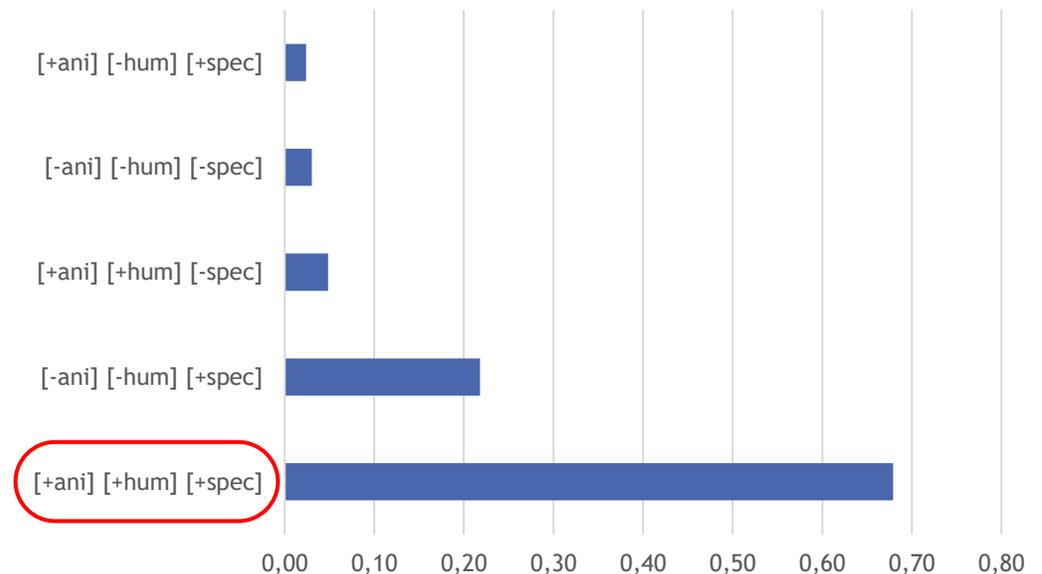
- ▶ Unsurprisingly, given the distribution of the features independently, the most frequent semantic profiles for null objects is: [+ani], [+hum] and [+spec] (68%, 111 tokens)
- ▶ The second most frequent profile is [-ani], [-hum] but [+spec] (22%, 36 tokens)

(6) Il retrait s' espee a soi et met ou  
he pulls.back his=sword to himself and puts to.the  
ferre  
scabbard

'he removes his sword to himself and puts in the  
scabbard' (*Queste*, VII, 146)

- ▶ Looks like specificity is the most important semantic feature for null objects, over animacy or humanity.

Overlaps in the semantic features of null objects (Frequency)



# Semantic properties

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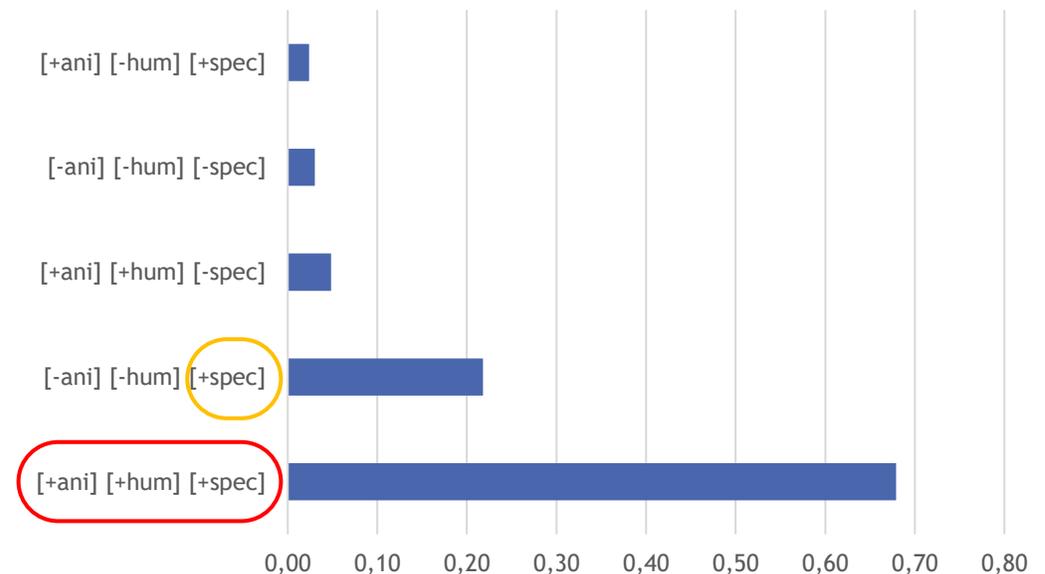
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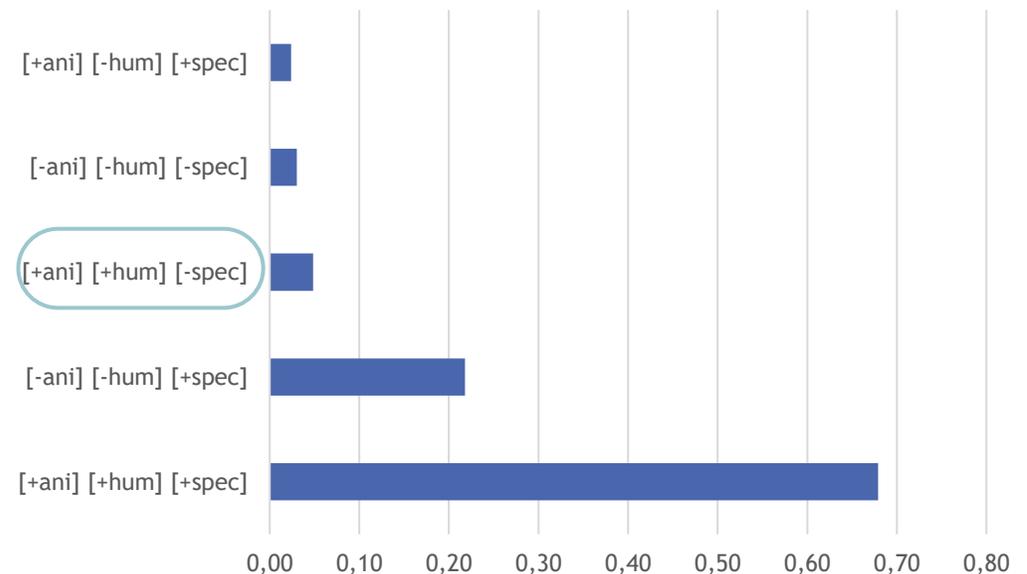
# Semantic properties Distribution in the corpus

- ▶ 5% of the tokens are human (and animate) but non-specific (9 tokens overall)
- ▶ 2 tokens of human but non-specific objects are arbitrary human objects in AE contexts.
- ▶ 6 tokens in sentence from example (7)

(7) Li chastés ajoste l' omme au ciel ... et  
the chastity nears the=man to.the sky and  
done l' iritage del ciel  
gives the=inheritance of.the sky

‘Chastity brings mankind closer to heaven and gives the inheritance of the sky’ (*S. Isi*, XXX)

Overlaps in the semantic features of null objects (Frequency)



# Semantic properties Distribution in the corpus

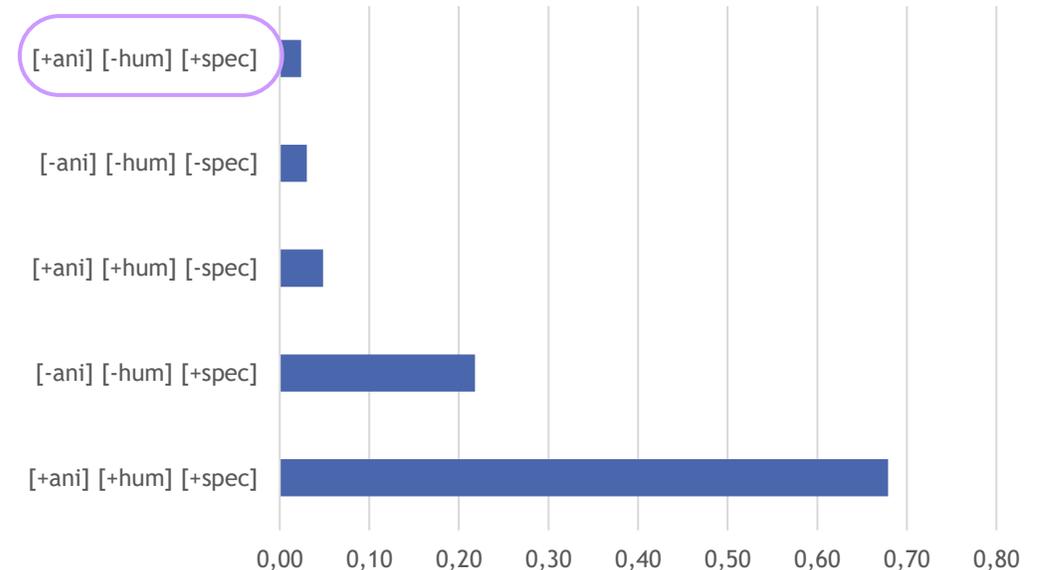
- ▶ Might be surprising to see [+ani] and [+spec], as it seems to be the winning combination for null objects.
- ▶ However, as mentioned previously, animate objects that are not human are quite rare (only 4 instances) which is why they are the least frequent.

(8) il est a tel home qui me honiroit dou cors

se je ne li rendoie

‘he (the horse) belongs to a man who will curse me if I do not give back to him’ (*Queste*, VII, 118)

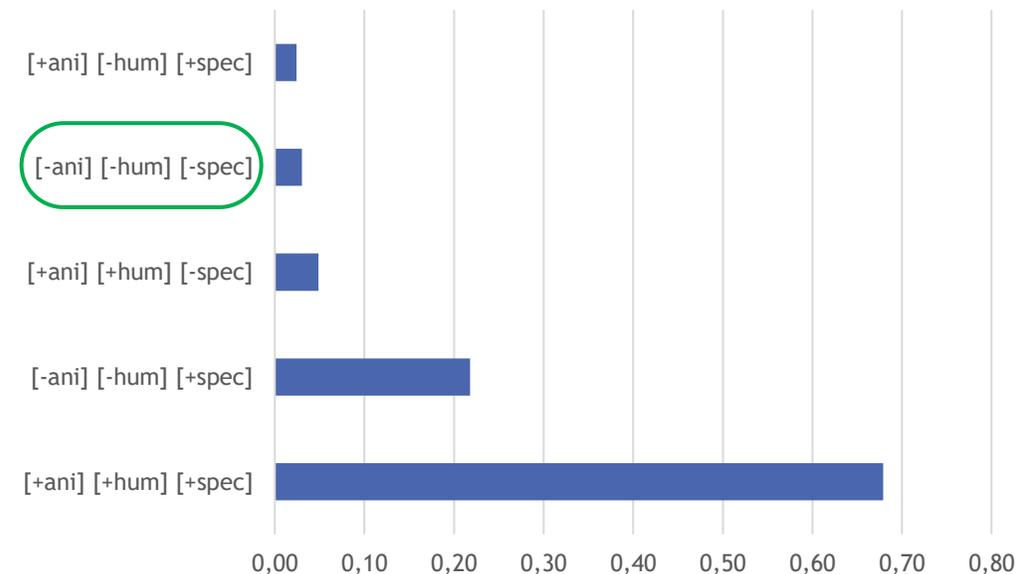
Overlaps in the semantic features of null objects (Frequency)



# Semantic properties Distribution in the corpus

- ▶ ‘True’ least frequent profile of null objects: inanimate, non-human, non-specific.
- ▶ 5 instances in the corpus:  
(9) se j'ai or perdu, je gaaigenerai une autre fois  
‘if I have lost gold, I shall win another time’  
(A&N, XXIV)
- ▶ It does look like specificity, animacy, and humanity are important for an object to be null in Old French.

Overlaps in the semantic features of null objects (Frequency)



# Semantic properties

## Interim conclusions

- ▶ A preliminary dive into the distribution of semantic features in null objects in Old French does not show absolute restrictions with respect to their semantic profiles but some strong tendencies.
- ▶ Null objects strongly tend to be [+animate], [+human] and [+specific] in Old French
- ▶ Findings show a completely different distribution as that of null objects in BP
  - ❖ BP: null objects are inanimate and non-specific vs Old French: null objects are animate, human and specific
- ▶ While BP use null objects as the least marked option for prototypical objects (inanimate and non-specific); Old French seems to drop the objects that are the most topical (the texts all revolve around human characters) > many of the null objects actually refer back to the main characters.

# Syntactic Properties

# Syntactic properties

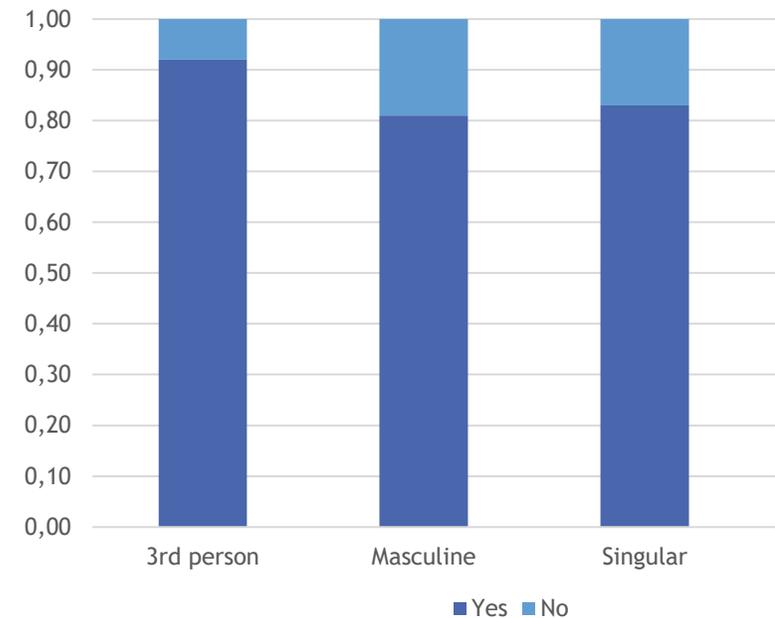
- ▶ Tokens in the corpus have been annotated according to different types of syntactic properties:
  - ❖ **Properties of null objects:**
    - Person: 3rd, 2d, 1st
    - Number: singular vs plural
    - Gender: masculine vs feminine
    - Function: DO vs IO
  - ❖ **Properties of the surrounding context:**
    - Narration vs DS
    - Embeddedness: root vs embedded,
    - Finiteness: finite vs non-finite

# Syntactic properties

## Null objects

- ▶ Already, we see a tendency for objects to be 3rd person (not surprising as they tend to be the canonical person for objects).
- ▶ We also see that the tendency is to have singular and masculine objects. Associated with 3rd person, it appears that null objects in Old French are the least syntactically marked (would not trigger agreement).

Distribution of Person, Number and Gender (Frequency)

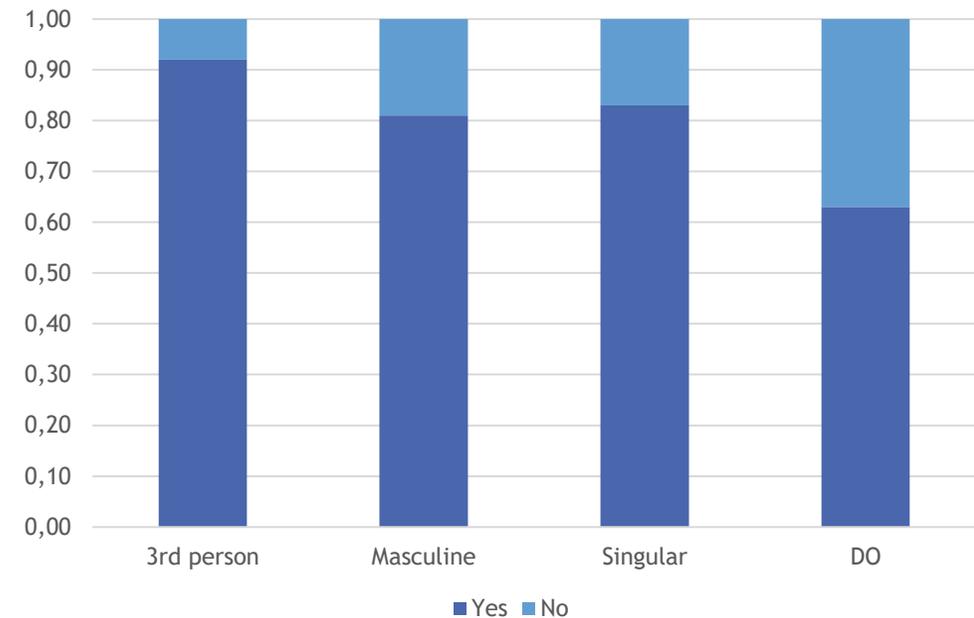


# Syntactic properties

## Null objects

- ▶ Case of the objects: preference for DO over IO (63% vs 37%) > case of object itself is not too relevant as to the licencing of object omission, both IO and DO are possible.

Distribution of Person, Number, Gender, and Function (Frequency)

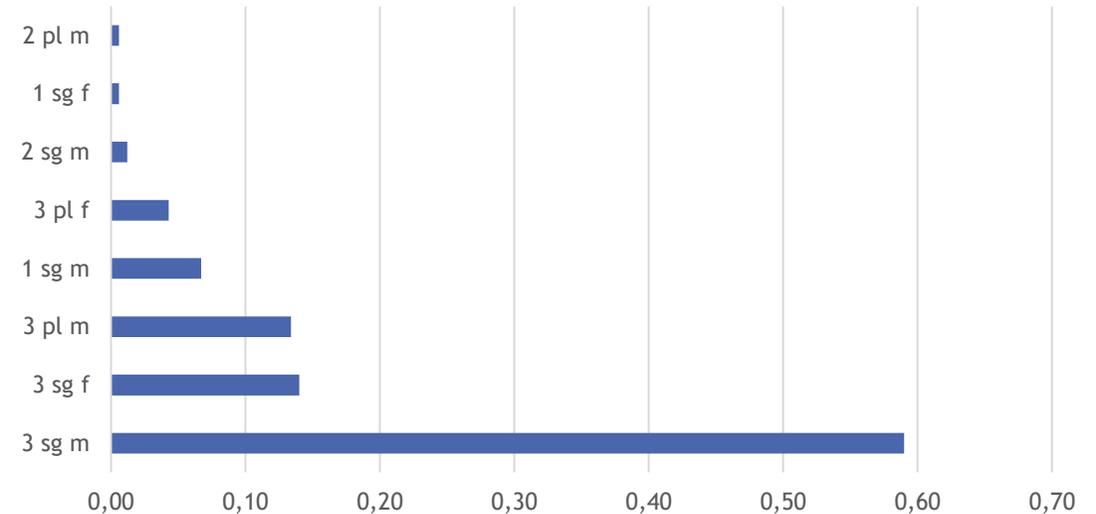


# Syntactic properties

## Null objects

- ▶ Look at overlaps of the features taken into account
- ▶ 3rd person singular masculine object most frequent, with 59% of the tokens.
- ▶ Followed by 3rd person singular feminine / 3rd person plural masculine with only 14% and 13% of tokens.
- ▶ The least marked objects are the most frequently dropped.

Overlaps of Person, Number and Gender  
(frequency)



# Syntactic properties

## Null objects

- ▶ Note: with the feminine objects, only 1 example actually in a context which triggers agreement (with past participle).

(10) car par le conseil Joseph avoit il recovree sa terre que Tholomers li toloit,  
because by the advice Joseph had he recovered his.F land.F that Tholomers to.him took  
et tolu<sup>e</sup> li eust il  
and taken.F to.him had he

‘because on Joseph’s advice he had recovered his land that Tholomers had taken from him, and he would have taken from him...’ (*Queste*, VII, 113)

- ▶ For plural examples, none of them occur in a context which could trigger agreement

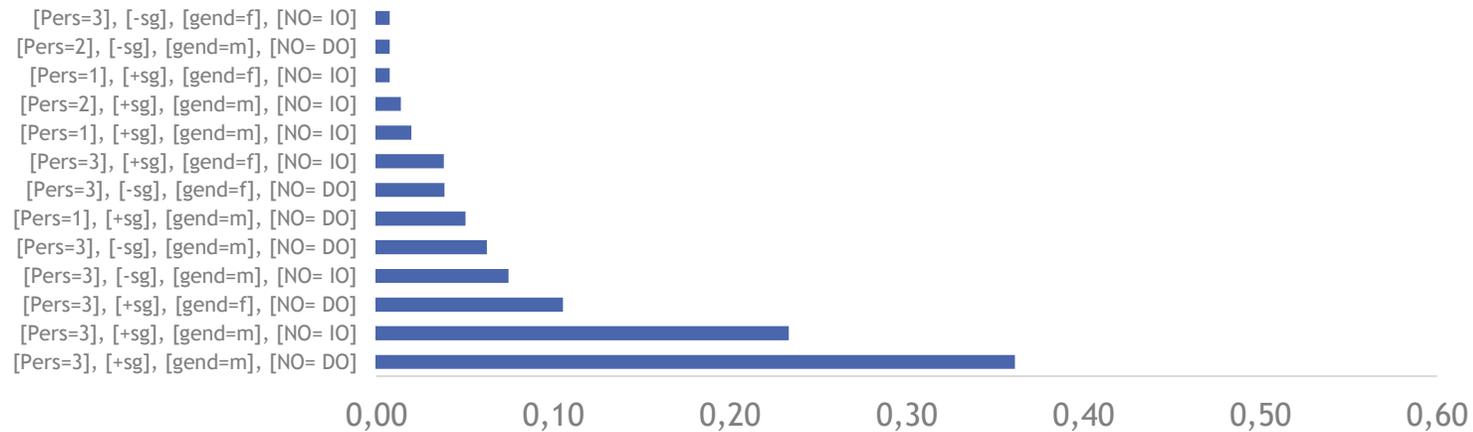
=> Absence of agreement playing a role in licencing object omission? Only example of agreement with null object in a clitic cluster (3rd pers DO + 3rd pers IO > 3rd pers IO), which follows different rules.

# Syntactic properties

## Null objects

- ▶ Frequencies a lot less than the ones observed with the semantic properties (36% vs 68%)
- ▶ More variation in their syntactic profile than their semantic profile?

### Overlap of Syntactic features (Frequency)



# Syntactic properties

## The surrounding context

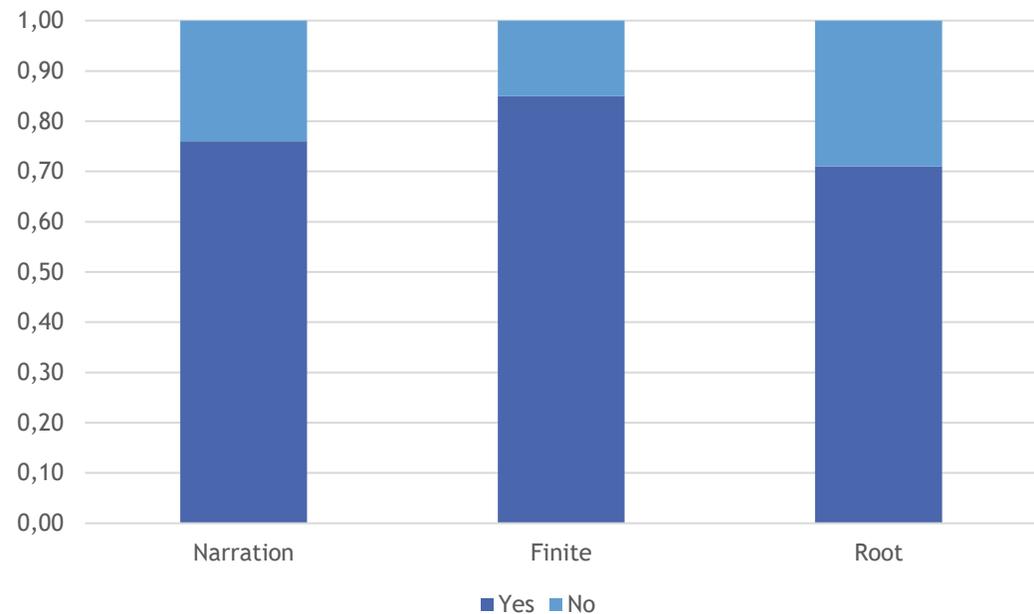
- ▶ On top of annotating properties of the null objects themselves, tokens are also annotated with respect to the context in which they occur.
- ▶ These properties include:
  - ❖ type of clause in which the null objects occur (root / embedded);
  - ❖ finiteness of the clause (finite / non-finite),
  - ❖ type of text the null objects occur in (narration vs direct speech).
- ▶ Attempt to see whether the larger context also influences the possibility to have a null object.

# Syntactic properties

## The surrounding context

- ▶ Finiteness seems to be the most important one in the sense that it is the one with the most difference between finite and non-finite (85% vs 15%)
- ▶ Then we have narrative clauses with 76% of the tokens occurring in such clauses.
- ▶ Finally, 74% of tokens occur in root clauses.

Distribution of properties of the surrounding context (frequency)

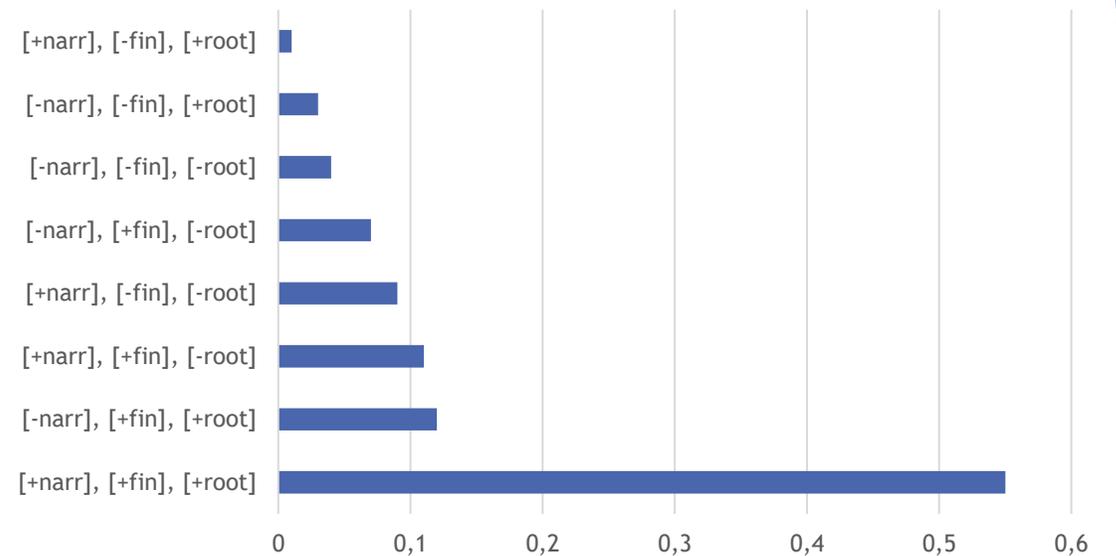


# Syntactic properties

## The surrounding context

- ▶ If we overlap the properties of the surrounding context (i.e. narrativity, finiteness, and non-embeddedness), we get the following distribution:
- ▶ What we can see is that 55% of the tokens occur in narrative, root and finite clauses.
- ▶ 2<sup>nd</sup> most frequent distribution is in DS, but it is only 12% of tokens

Overlaps of syntactic properties of the surrounding context (frequencies)



# Syntactic properties

## The surrounding context

- ▶ What about the difference between narration and direct speech?
- ▶ *Dialogue de l'ame de Saint Isidore*: dialogue and all tokens of null objects are from direct speech context
  - ❖ Approx. 10,000 words; 12 tokens of NO
- ▶ *Vie de Saint Eustache*: hagiography, narrative text mostly, all but 2 tokens of null objects are from narrative context
  - ❖ Approx. 7,500 words; 26 tokens of NO
- ▶ Looks like direct speech vs narration may play a role in object drop > direct speech text has a lot less NO than the narrative text (more NO and shorter text). This may be due to the nature of DS, which displays a lot more 1st and 2<sup>nd</sup> persons which are not preferred for object omission.

# Syntactic properties

## Interim conclusion

- ▶ We can also observe some tendencies in the syntactic properties of null objects in Old French.
- ▶ In terms of the null objects themselves, the most unmarked objects syntactically tend to be dropped (i.e. 3rd person singular masc, DO).
- ▶ In terms of the surrounding context, null objects seem to preferably occur in narration contexts, and in finite root clauses.

# Bringing it all together

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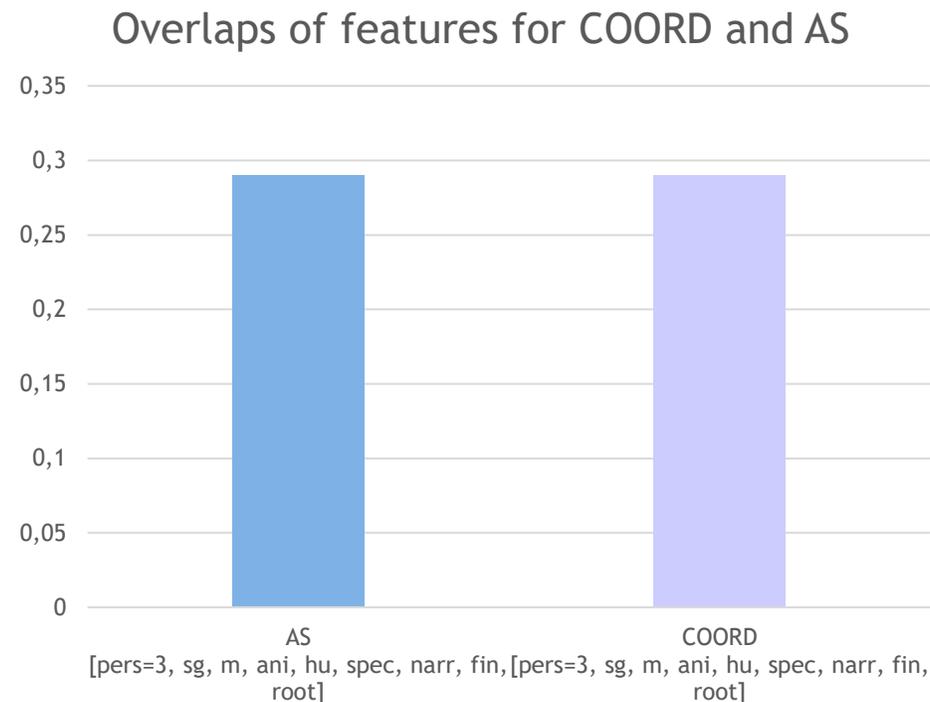
## Highest frequencies of overlaps

- ▶ Highest frequencies of overlaps for the different properties:
  - ❖ Semantic properties: [+spec], [+ani], [+hu] = 68%
  - ❖ Syntactic properties (object): [Pers=3], [+sg], [gend=m], [NO=DO] = 36%
  - ❖ Syntactic properties (context): [+narr], [+fin], [+root] = 55%
- ▶ More overlaps in terms of semantic features than the syntactic properties.
- ▶ Semantic properties are more restrictive than the syntactic properties for null objects?

# Bringing it all together

## Null objects in Old French

- ▶ Most frequent feature overlaps for each type of null object, both semantic and syntactic, for AS and COORD as AE is only 3 tokens.
- ▶ Highest frequency for each context: 29%
- ▶ Both AS and COORD have the exact same distribution of features, which are representative of the tendencies we have seen already.
- ▶ In terms of function of object: COORD prefers DO (79%) whereas AS has a more equal distribution (50-50 split).



# Conclusions

# Conclusions

- ▶ This is a preliminary attempt at drawing out a profile of null objects which could potentially help with identifying triggers for object omission.
- ▶ There seem to be very strong tendencies with the profile of null objects, both in terms of their semantic features and their syntactic profiles.
  - ❖ [+animate], [+human], [+specific]
  - ❖ 3rd person, singular, masculine NO
  - ❖ In narration, root finite clauses
- ▶ Strongest tendencies regard semantic properties of the objects (69% overlaps vs 58% for syntactic properties), and individually: specificity for semantic and 3rd person for syntactic properties.

# Conclusions

## Further research

- ▶ As no work has been done comparing overt and null objects yet, these tendencies should be taken with a grain of salt. They may be properties of the null objects themselves, but they may also simply be due to the type of text studied.
- ▶ In order to make stronger claims, overt objects in these texts should also be considered.
- ▶ Overt objects may display the same properties of the null objects; but they may also have more diverse profiles which may reinforce the relevance of some of the properties and tendencies observed here.

E.g. the gender difference between feminine and masculine objects may be due to the fact that the texts focus on male subjects (lives of saint, chivalry epics) where most of the characters are men.

As most frequent null objects are human, it would stand to reason that null objects would tend to be 3rd person masculine, and to a certain extent, singular.

Thank you very much  
for your attention!

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