The case of the missing agreement marker and what it tells us about concord

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Goals

– I will show that we need one extra feature when adjectives are used as direct modifiers.

– This extra feature explains a typologically rare situation: three Spanish adjectives lose any agreement marker in that context, but not in others.

– I will use the existence of this feature to discuss a possible way to go about agreement in general.

1. Introduction

– Spanish can use adjectives in three contexts. As modifiers (I will assume <<e,t>,<e,t>>), they can be pre-nominal or post-nominal, sometimes with subtle meaning differences.

(1) a. un error pequeño
a mistake small
b. un pequeño error
a small mistake
'a small mistake'

– Adjectives can also be VP-internal, in which case they act as predicates (<e,t>)

(2) Tu error es pequeño.
your mistake is small
'Your mistake is small'

– Normally the agreement pattern and the shape of the stem are identical in the three contexts.

	Pre-nominal	Post-nominal	Predicative
m.sg.	pequeñ-o	pequeñ-o	pequeñ-o
f.sg.	pequeñ-a	pequeñ-a	pequeñ-a
m.pl.	pequeñ-o-s	pequeñ-o-s	pequeñ-o-s
f.pl.	pequeñ-a-s	pequeñ-a-s	pequeñ-a-s

– The same goes for gender-invariable adjectives.

(3) a. un error leve
a mistake slight
b. un leve error
a slight mistake
'a slight mistake'

(4) Tu error es leve.
your mistake is slight
'Your mistake is slight'

	Pre-nominal	Post-nominal	Predicative
m.sg.	leve	leve	leve
f.sg.	leve	leve	leve
m.pl.	leve-s	leve-s	leve-s
f.pl.	leve-s	leve-s	leve-s

– It is important to keep these facts in mind, because they apply to all adjectives in Spanish except for three.

Generalisation 1

Spanish adjectives keep the same morphological form used as predicates, used as post-nominal modifiers and used as prenominal modifiers.

Subgeneralisation 1
The set of agreement markers is the same when used as predicates and when used as modifiers.

Subgeneralisation 2
No adjective changes class (for instance, from *-o/-a* to *-e*) when used as a modifier.

– In addition to this, there is a second generalisation, which any analysis has to keep in mind: adjectives and nouns use exactly the same set of class markers, without any exception (to my knowledge) where adjectives use a marker that nouns do not use or vice versa.

(5)

	N		A	
-o,-a	perr-o, perr-a	'dog'	alt-o, alt-a	'tall'
-a (m/f)	-ist-a	'ist'	idiot-a	'idiot'
-e	clas-e	'class'	suav-e	'soft'
-C (ø)	papel	'paper'	fácil	'easy'
-V (ø)	mamá	'mom'	gagá	'senile'

2. The problem

– Three adjectives stand out in their agreement pattern. Their masculine singular form is non-agreeing in prenominal position.

(6) a. un error buen-o
a mistake good
b. un buen error
a good mistake
'a good mistake'

(7) a. un error mal-o
a mistake bad
b. un mal error
a bad mistake
'a bad mistake'

(8) a. un error grand-e
a mistake big
b. un gran error
a big mistake
'a big mistake'

– The agreement gender and number morphemes are otherwise compulsory in the feminine and masculine plural.

(9) a. un-o-s buen-o-s dí-a-s
a-m-pl good-m-pl day-m-pl
'some good days'
b. un-o-s mal-o-s dí-a-s
a-m-pl bad-m-pl day-m-pl
'some bad days'
a. un-o-s grand-e-s dí-a-s
a-m-pl good-f-pl idea-f-pl
'some big days'

(10) a. un-a-s buen-a-s ide-a-s
a-f-pl good-f-pl idea-f-pl
'some good ideas'
b. un-a-s mal-a-s ide-a-s
a-f-pl bad-f-pl idea-f-pl
'some bad ideas'
a. un-a-s grand-e-s ide-a-s
a-f-pl good-f-pl idea-f-pl
'some big ideas'

– *bueno* and *malo* also display agreement in the feminine singular.

(11) a. un-a buen-a ide-a
a-f good-f idea-f
'a good idea'
b. un-a mal-a ide-a
a-f bad-f idea-f
'a bad idea'

– Additionally, *grande* 'big' also uses the shortened form in the feminine singular. The general intuition in the literature is that this is because *-e* can be invariable in gender.

(12) un-a gran ide-a
a-f big idea-f

– The agreement-less form is restricted to pre-nominal modifier position. Predicative position must show the agreement markers.

(13) Tu idea es {buen-a / mal-a / grand-e}.
your idea is good-f bad-f big-E
'Your idea is {good / bad / big}'

– Hence:

	Pre-nominal	Post-nominal	Predicative
m.sg.	buen / mal	buen-o / mal-o	buen-o / mal-o
f.sg.	buen-a / mal-a	buen-a / mal-a	buen-a / mal-a
m.pl.	buen-o-s / mal-o-s	buen-o-s / mal-o-s	buen-o-s / mal-o-s
f.pl.	buen-a-s / mal-a-s	buen-a-s / mal-a-s	buen-a-s / mal-a-s

	Pre-nominal	Post-nominal	Predicative
m.sg.	gran	grand-e	grand-e
f.sg.	gran	grand-e	grand-e
m.pl.	grand-e-s	grand-e-s	grand-e-s
f.pl.	grand-e-s	grand-e-s	grand-e-s

3. A quick theoretical background.

I assume Nanosyntax.

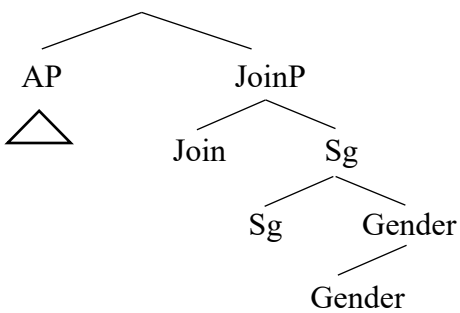
(14) Matching Principle (Caha et al. 2025)
A lexically stored constituent L matches a syntactic phrase S iff S is identical to L.

(15) Elsewhere Principle (Kiparsky 1973)
In cases of competition, the more specific form wins.

(16) Lexicalization algorithm (Caha et al. 2025)
a. Merge F and lexicalise.
b. If fail, evacuate the closest labelled non-remnant constituent and lexicalise
c. If fail, evacuate the immediately dominating constituent and lexicalise (recursive)
d. If fail, go back to the previous cycle and try the next option for that cycle (recursive).

– Core idea. These adjectives are special because they have an exponent with a shape like this:

(17)



– This allows the stem to lexicalise the whole structure provided that (i) the right gender is there, (ii) singular is there, (iii) Join is there and (iv) No other feature is there.

– No adjective in predicative position does it because then Join is not there.

– This Join feature (from Truswell's 2006 JOIN) is the head that turns a predicate into a modifier. This assumes (i) that adjectives are basically predicates, (ii) that semantic types matter in syntac and (iii) that modification cannot be characterised by intersection, and hence theta-role identification (Higginbotham 1985) or Predicate Modification (Heim & Kratzer 1998) are insufficient to turn predicates into modifiers. I will not have time to motivate these three assumptions.

– The initial plausibility of this feature to build modifiers in the syntax (and not just as a semantic operator added at LF, for instance) is Vikner's Generalisation (Vikner 2009).

(18) No language has adjectives that display agreement in predicate position and not in modifier position.

(19) German
a. ein-e weiss-e Tasse
a-f white-f cup
b. Die Tasse ist weiss.
the cup is white

(20) Reverse German (unattested)
a. ein weiss Tasse
b. Die Tasse ist weiss-e.

– (Remember also all ezafe phenomena)

– Cross-linguistically, modifiers increase or preserve the (inflectional) material that they have as predicates. Languages do not reduce the inflectional material in modifier position.

– The 3 Spanish adjectives seem to contradict this. I will show that the existence of Join as a feature provides a natural analysis of this which relies on the special entries for the three adjectival exponents.

4. Let me first show that it cannot be (morpho)phonology

(21) a. Un error es buen-o
a mistake is good-m
'A mistake is good'
b. un buen error
a good mistake
'a good mistake'

– Alternative: these three pre-nominal adjectives undergo a morphophonological operation that erases the final vowel in front of a noun.

– No matter how you define it, the rule would automatically predict that predicative position will exhibit full agreement, because there (by definition) the adjective is not followed by N.

– The plural /s/ blocks the rule, because then the vowel is not final, so no adjective does it in the plural.

– The morphophonological domain where the rule happens is not easy to characterise, though. Adjacency is not the right way to characterise it.

(22) a. un buen gran fenómeno viral
a good big phenomenon viral
'a good big viral phenomenon'
b. *un buen-o gran fenómeno viral
a good-m big phenomenon viral
'a good big viral phenomenon'

(23) a. un-a gran y famos-a cantante
a-f big and famous-f singer
b. *una grand-e y famos-a cantante
a-f big and famous-f singer
'a big and famous singer'

– These adjectives, provided they are pre-nominal modifiers, lack agreement. Adjacency to an N does not play a direct role.

– If adjacency does not play a role, any (morpho)phonological account is dubious.

– To the best of my knowledge, all accounts where prenominal inflection disappears or gets weakened must introduce some morphosyntactic operation like impoverishment or something equivalent in its effects, and eventual markedness / faithfulness phonological constraints explicitly referring to syntactic categories (cf. Álvarez de Miranda 1993, Ambadiang 1993, Eddington & Hualde 2008, Bonet, Lloret & Mascaró 2015, Bonet 2018, for instance).

– Hence a structural account is inescapable. I will show how to do it without impoverishment.

5. How to analyse it.

– In order to show that we need a feature that is used only in modifier contexts, I will adopt ideas of orthodox / hardcore Nanosyntax.

– I assume the gender area as represented in Caha (2021); I leave the role of classifiers aside.

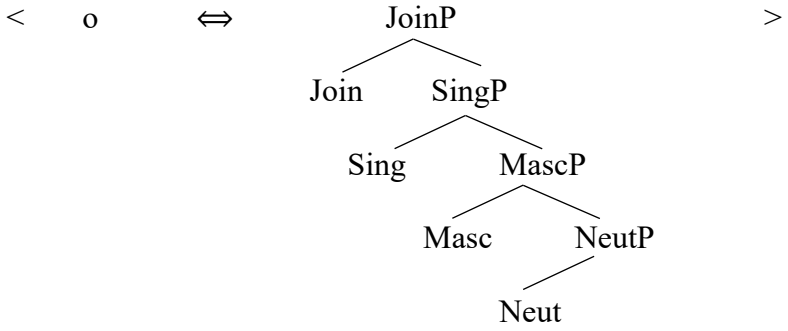
(24) [Fem [Masc [Neut]]]

– For number, I will assume a structure where singular is projected as a distinct head. IO use the label Sg instead of # (Caha 2021, 2025a, 2025b).

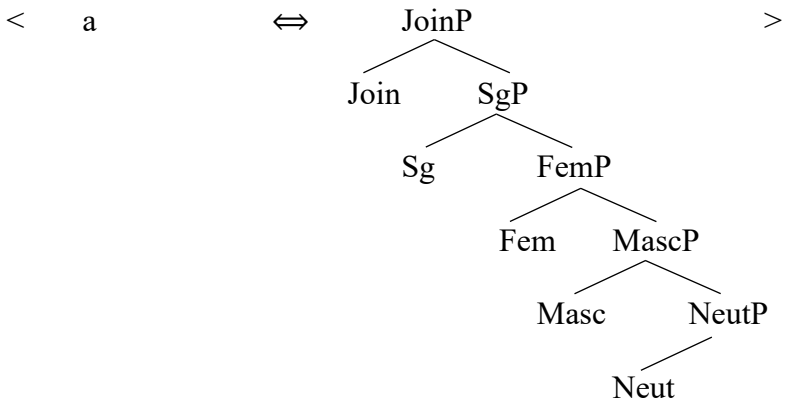
(25) [Pl [Sg]]]

– Here are the lexical items that I propose for this fragment of Spanish, starting with the *-o / -a* adjectives.

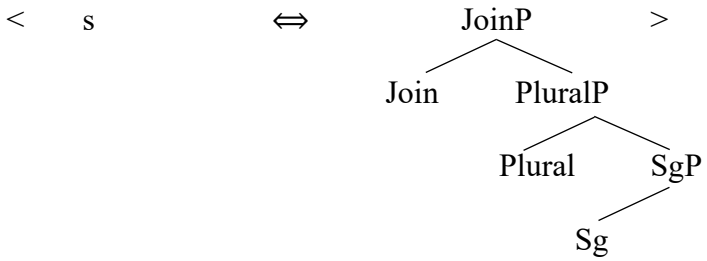
(26) a. Masculine / Neuter marker *-o*



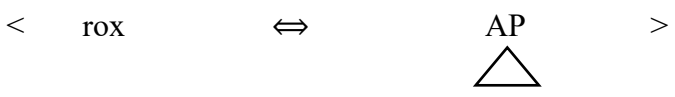
b. Feminine marker *-a*



c. Number *-s*



d. Adjectives that take *-o/-a* (eg., *roj-o*, 'red')



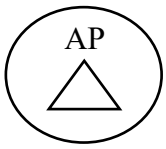
– Note that I am adding the Join feature as the top-most feature in the entry of the inflectional markers. This is to capture the first subgeneralisation, namely that Spanish uses the same set of inflectional markers in predicate and in modifier position. If these markers

lacked the feature, we would expect a difference in shape (unless zero, which I take to be a dispreferred analytical option if other options are available). If the feature was at the foot of the markers, then we would also expect different sets of inflectional morphemes (unless homophony, which I also take to be methodologically dispreferred provided there are other possible alternatives).

– Let me derive a Spanish adjective in modifier position.

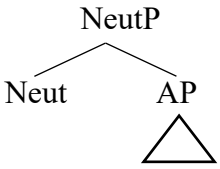
(27) roj-a-s
red-f-pl

– Assume that we have already merged the relevant adjectival structure (its internal structure is irrelevant for the time being), and lexicalised with *roj-*:

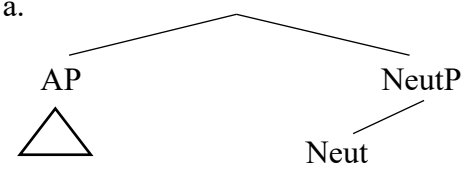
(28) 

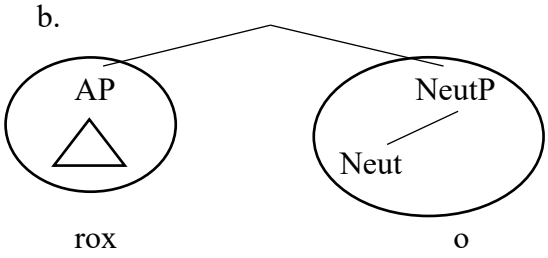
⇐ rox

– We start building the gender area with Neuter.

(29) 

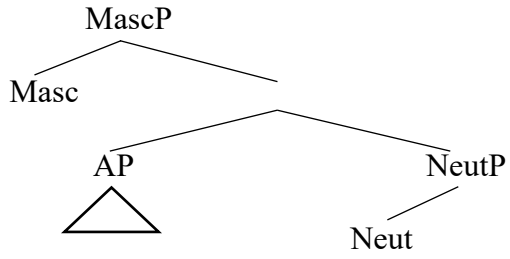
– The first step of LA fails, because no lexical entry in Spanish matches the tree. The next step requires evacuation movement of the closest non-remnant constituent, which is JoinP. This works, because the left branch is spelled out by the adjective and the right one, by *-o*.

(30) a. 

b. 

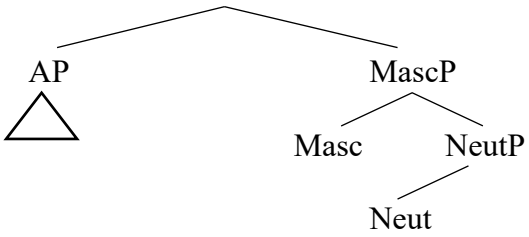
– Next we merge Masculine.

(31)



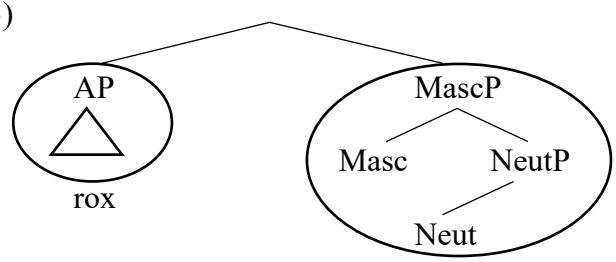
– No Lexical entry matches the tree. Movement of the closest non-remnant is again attempted (JoinP):

(32)



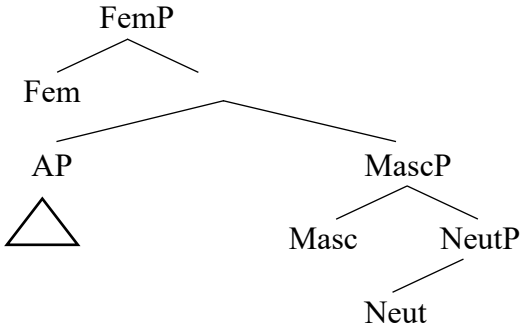
– This movement makes it possible to lexicalise the structure: the left branch remains with the adjective, the right one matches *-o*.

(33)



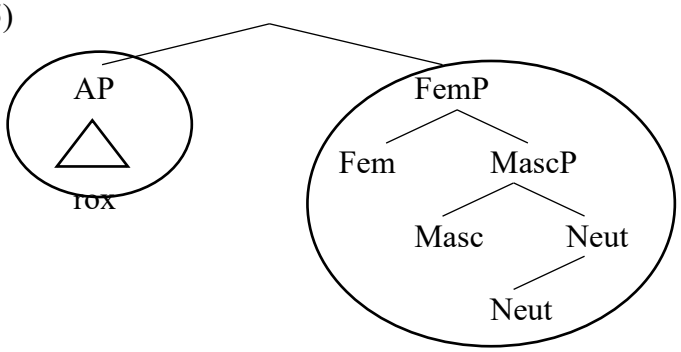
– Now feminine is added.

(34)



– The procedure is repeated: the tree does not match any lexical entry; movement of JoinP is attempted, as the closest labeled non-remnant, and lexicalisation is succesfull. The right side matches the entry for *-a*.

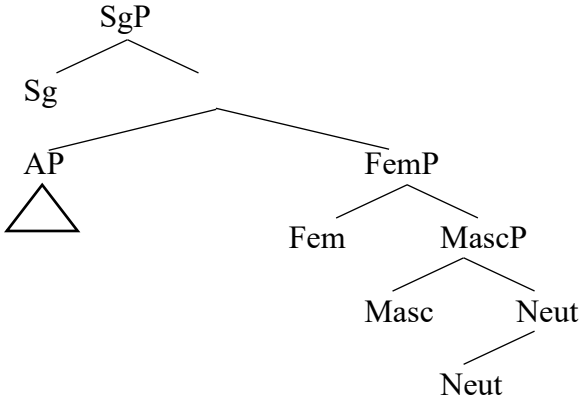
(35)



a

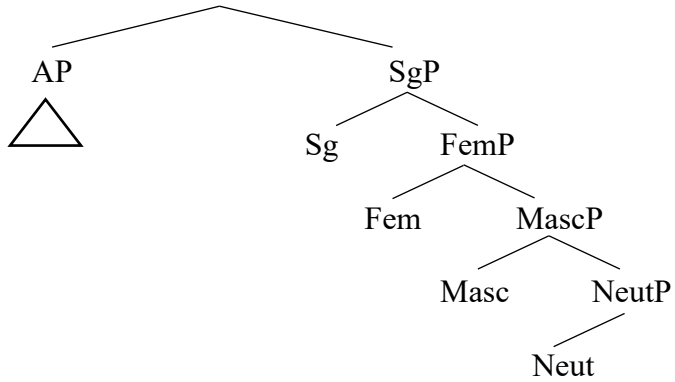
– Now number is built. We start with the Singular feature.

(36)



– The tree does not match any lexical entry. Movement of the closest non-remnant labelled constituent is attempted, and is successful because *-a* (and *-o*) have SgP.

(37)



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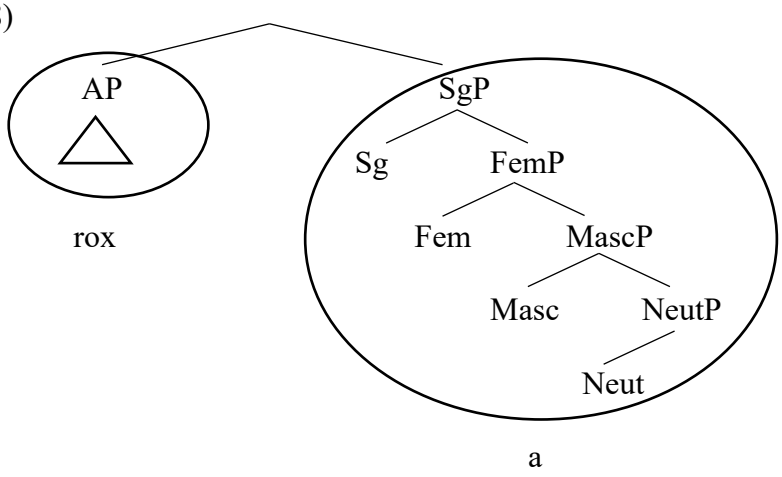
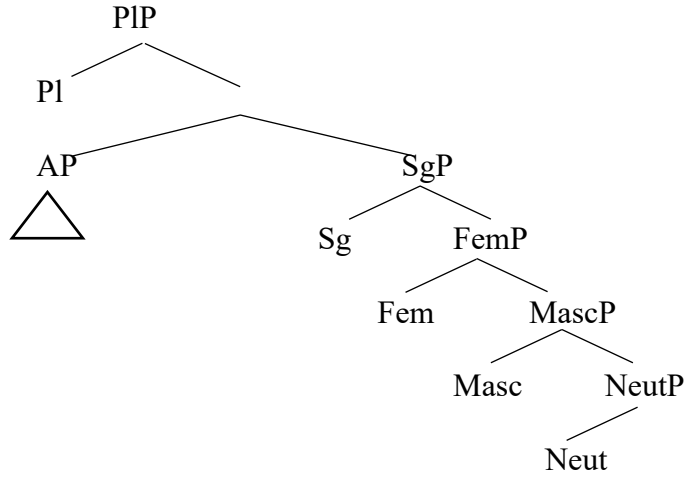


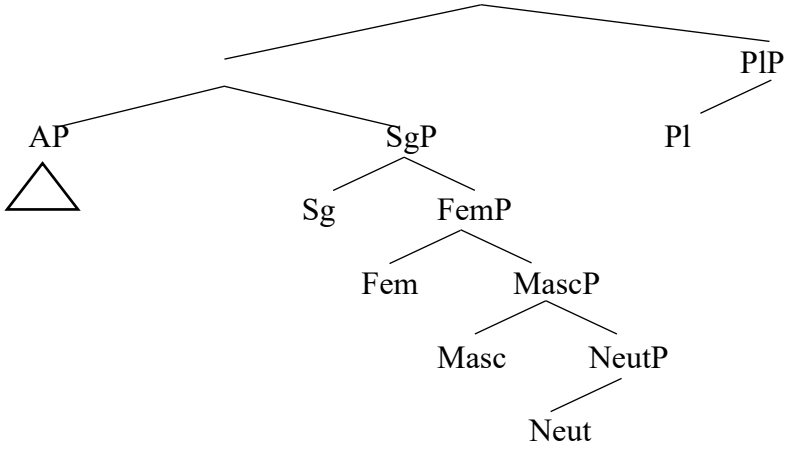
– Now we start building plural with the head that creates a semi-lattice.

(39)



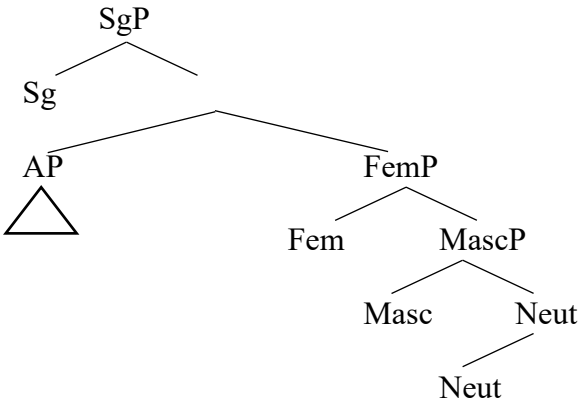
– The tree does not match any entry. Movement of the closest labelled non-remnant does not match either, because no lexical item in Spanish bottoms at Neut and contains NumP. Thus, the following step of the LA is attempted: instead of moving JoinP, the immediate dominating node is moved.

(40)



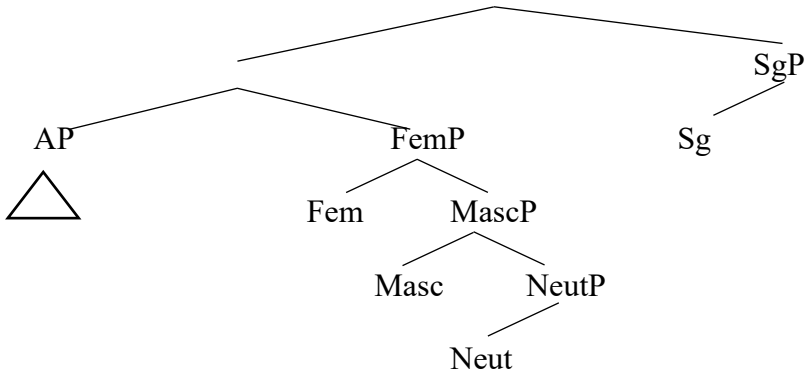
- However, in Spanish no lexical entry bottoms at Num. Backtracking is applied, going back to this step:

(41)



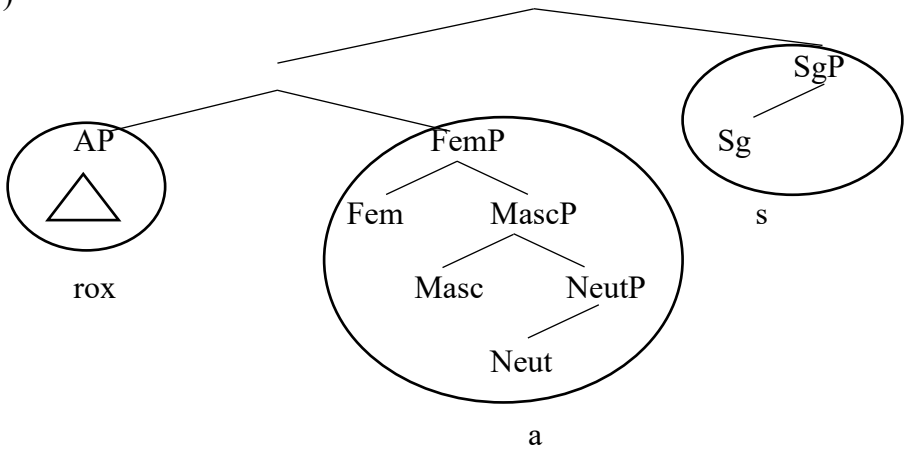
– In the previous attempt, movement of only AP was attempted. Now, movement of the immediate dominating node is attemped.

(42)



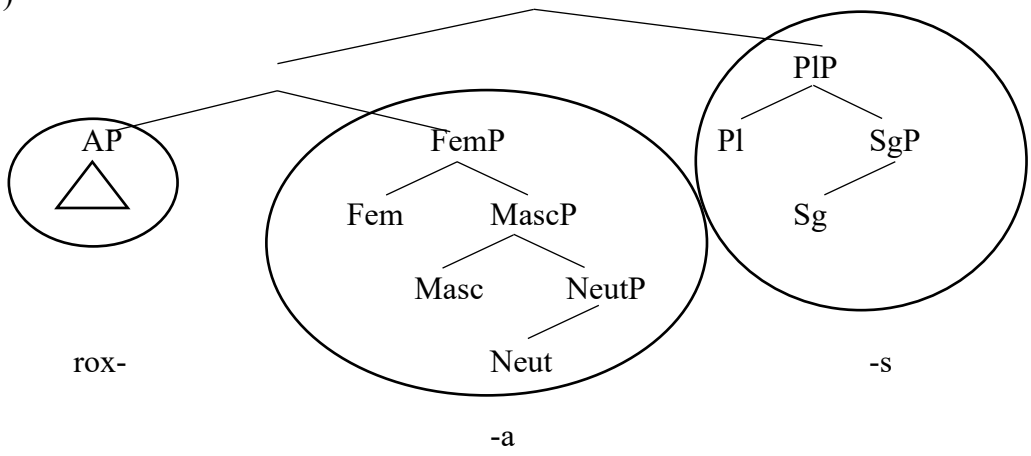
– This matches the entry of *-s* for the rigthmost member.

(43)



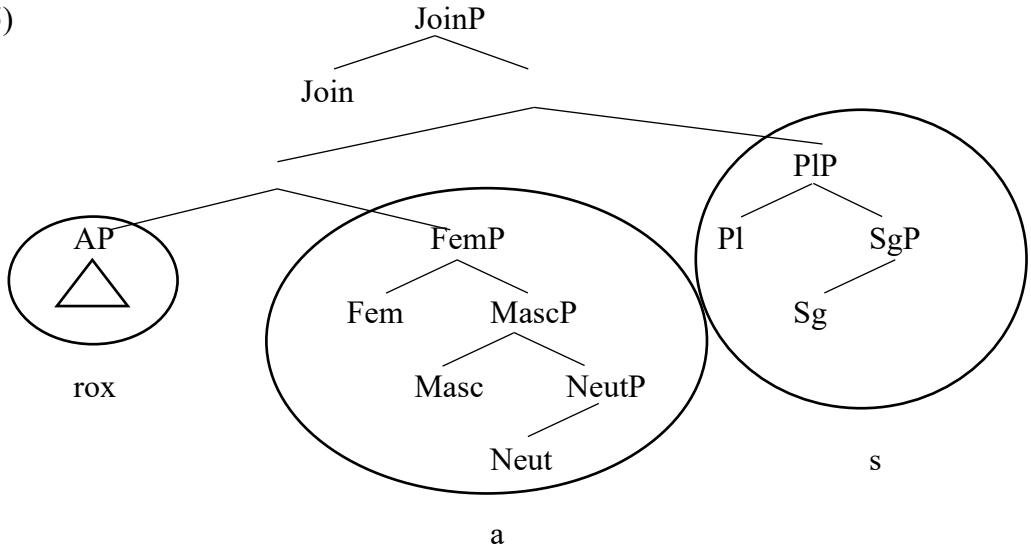
– The derivation continues moving the big left branch (after attempting to lexicalise without movement and moving only AP).

(44)



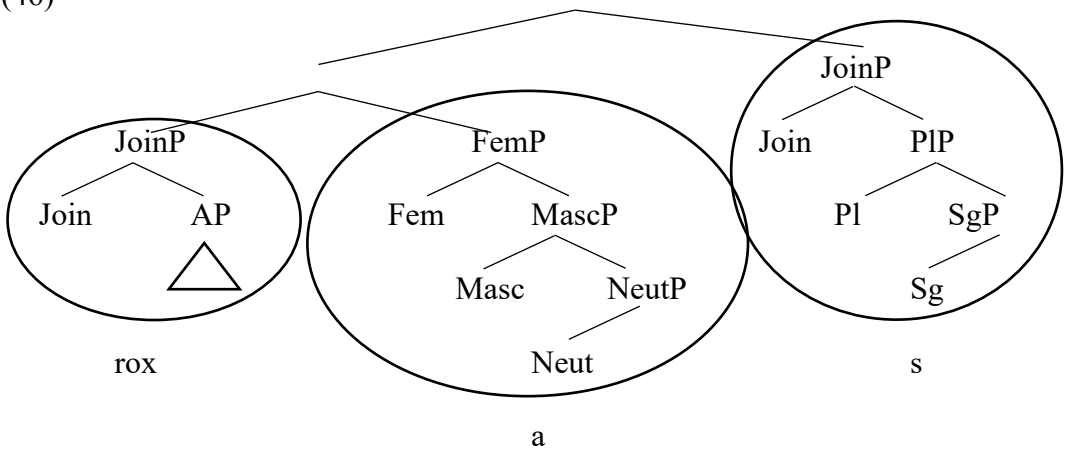
– This gives a complete predicative adjective, but we are using it as a modifier. Hence we add Join.

(45)



– Join is the highest node in the inflectional markers (see the entries). Movement of AP does not work, movement of the immediately dominating node does work.

(46)

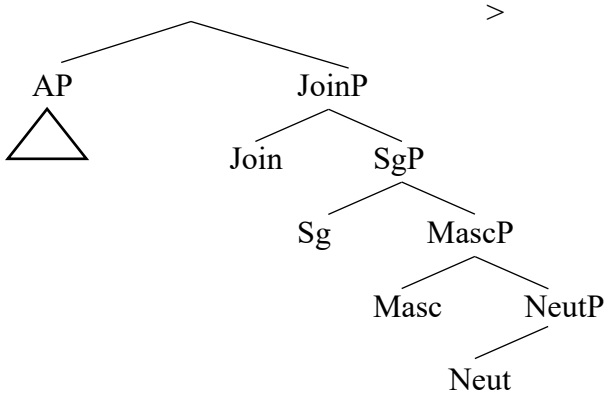


6. Good and evil

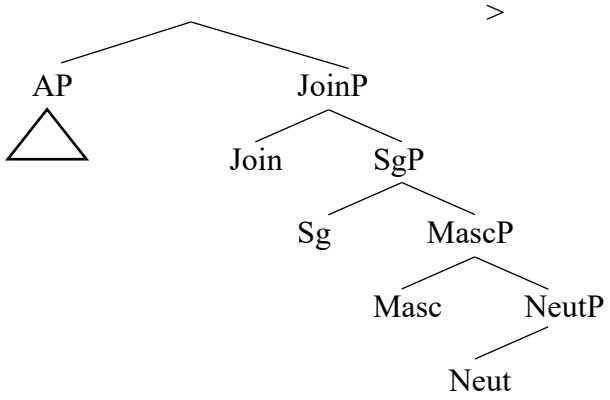
– The lexical entry of the adjectives that do not display (at least) masculine singular agreement as modifiers is special because it has the following shape.

– Here are the full entries of *buen-* 'good' and *mal-* 'bad'. They are identical, except for the root I assume within AP.

(47) a. < buen ⇔ >

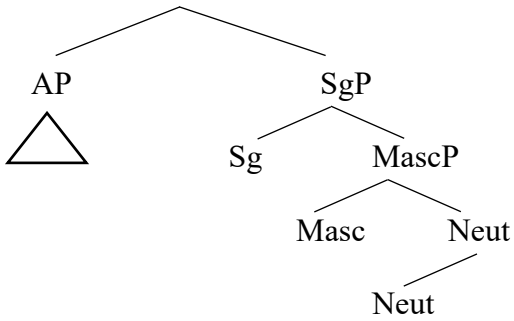


b. < mal ⇔ >



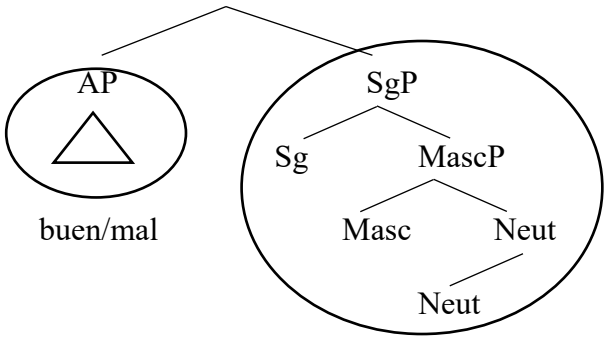
– Let us derive *mal / buen (amigo)*. The derivation will proceed identically to *rojo* up to the point where JoinP is added to the singular.

(48)



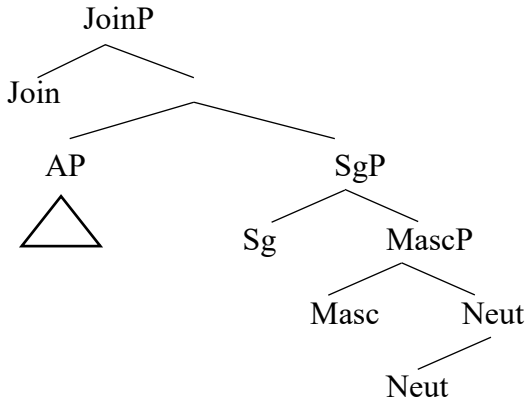
– Left branch matches the entry for the root –only the left branch, as the right branch does not contain Join at this point–. The right branch matches *-o*.

(49) a.



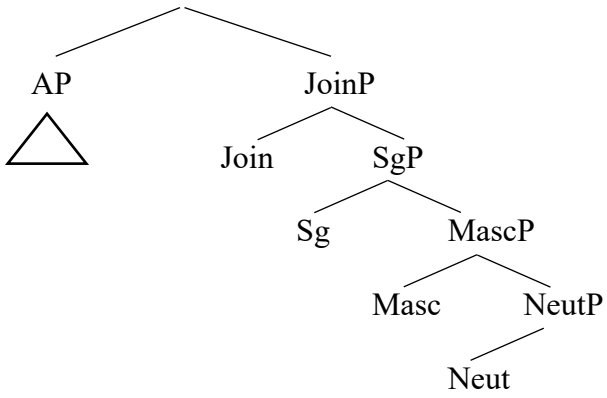
o

b.



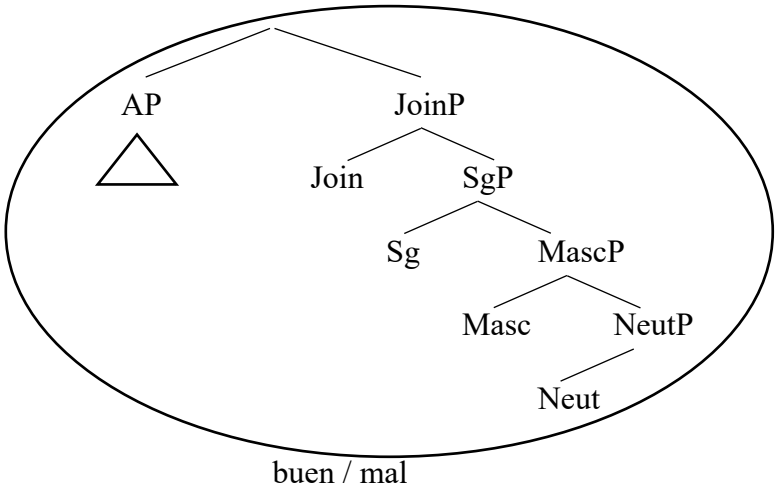
– No match for this configuration, so movement of the closest labelled non-remnant (AP) is attempted.

(50)



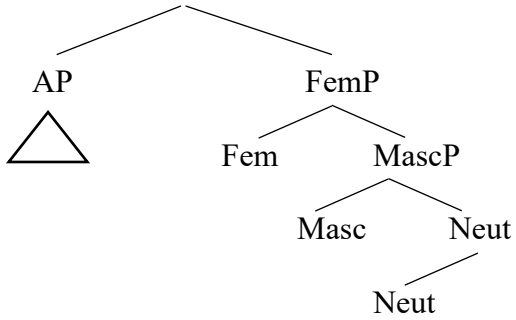
– And now, the configuration matches the whole lexical entry of the adjectival stem.

(51)



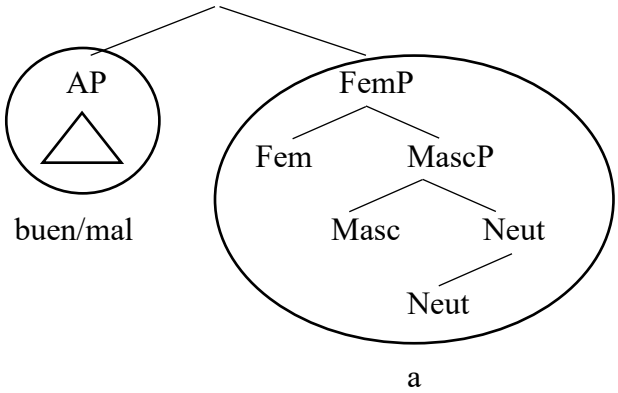
– See why the feminine shows the inflection. The difference is that FemP appears between Sg and Masc.

(52)



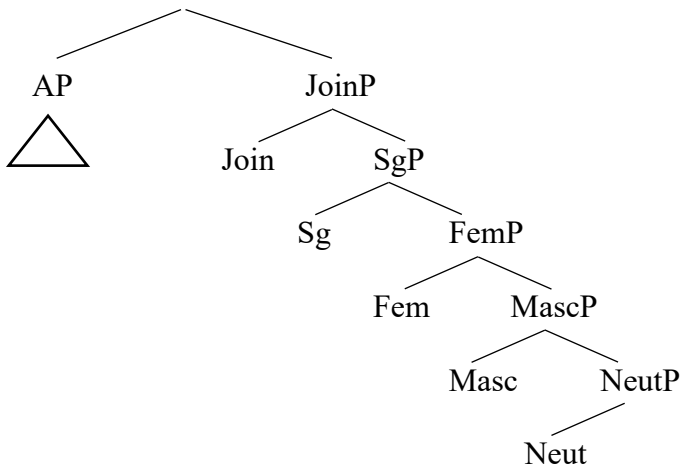
– The right branch matches -*a*.

(53)



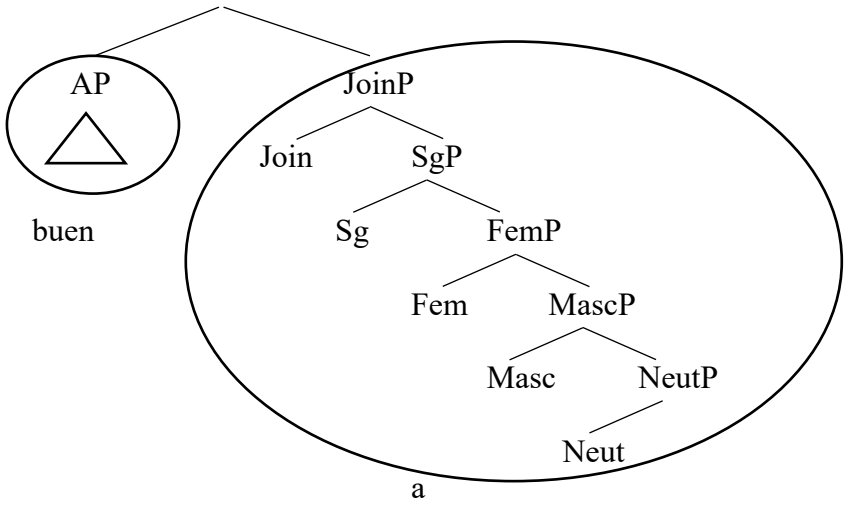
– Next singular will be merged, and -*a* will also match. Join is merged again, and we arrive to the following configuration.

(54)



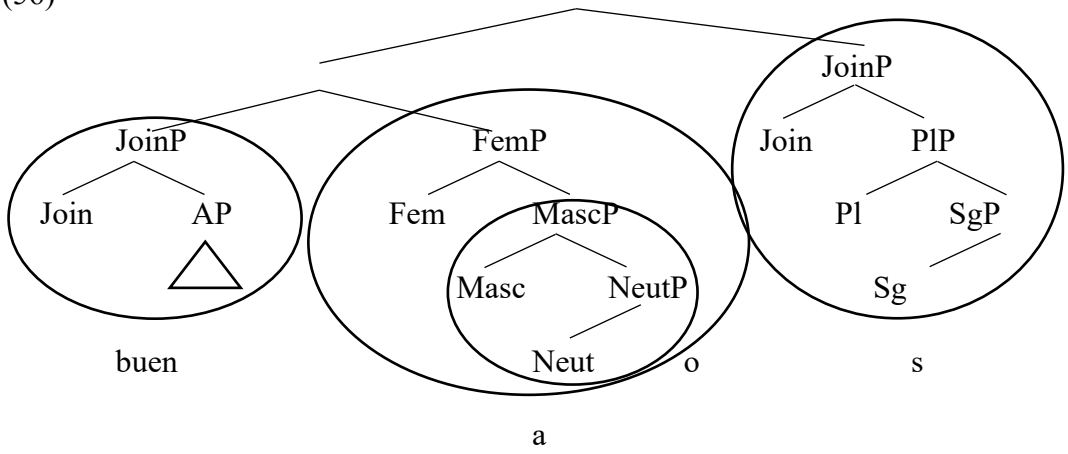
– Now the whole tree does not match the lexical entry of buen/mal, because AP does not form a constituent with Join in the absence of the feminine feature, which is not there. However, the entry of -a matches the right branch.

(55)



– The emergence of the inflection marker in the plural follows the same logic. The entry of the adjective roots does not include Plural, so this feature breaks the right branch constituent and the adjectival root only matches the left branch. Backtracking to the singular is necessary again, as in the other adjectives, forcing (56):

(56)

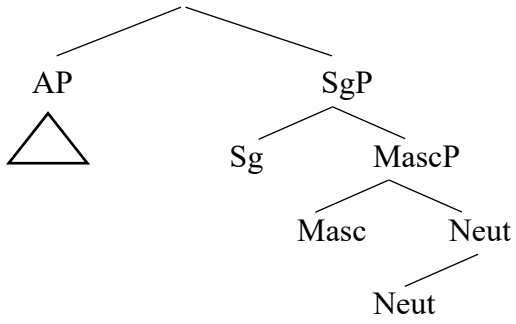


– Let us now show why the predicative position also requires presence of the inflectional markers.

(57) Un error es buen-o.
a mistake is good-m
'A mistake is good'

The relevant stage is the following.

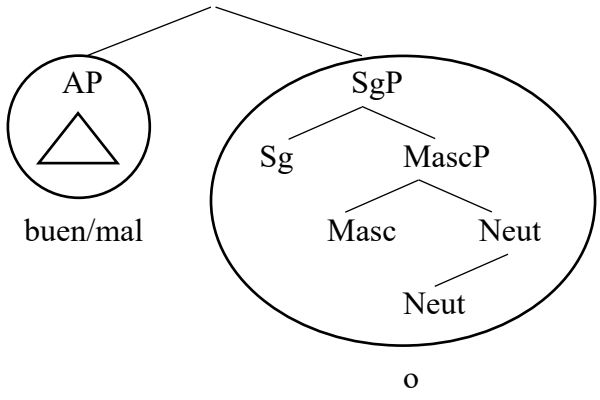
(58)



– Join is not added, because the adjective stays as an <e,t> constituent.

– Without Join, the entry of the adjectival stem does not match the whole syntactic tree: the AP does not form a constituent with SgP in the absence of Join, so the stem is confined to AP, and the right branch matches *-o*.

(59)



7. Big

– *Grande* 'big' requires some initial clarifications.

– There is a controversy with respect to whether final *-e* is an epenthetic vowel (Harris 1969) or a noun class marker (Bermúdez-Otero 2006, Bonet 2006, Colina 2009).

– If it is an epenthetic vowel, the alternation between *gran* and *grande* could be phonological.

(60) a. grand
big

b. d ----> ø / C__#

c. grand > gran
d. grand+e > grande

– But we have already seen that the alternation between the short and the long form of these adjectives does not comply with phonological adjacency, which makes that type of analysis dubious.

– This suggests that (at least for this case) the *-e* should be treated as a class marker (other cases, like *pobr-e* 'poor' or *trist-e* 'sad', where there is no alternation, could be still treated as an epenthetic vowel).

– The same extends to *-s* and *-es* as possible plural number allomorphs. Traditionally it is said that the plural morpheme in Spanish has two allomorphs, *-es* and *-s*. The first one is mainly added to words that end in consonant.

(61) a. papel ~ papel-es
paper paper-s
b. reloj ~ reloj-es
clock clock-s

– The controversy is whether this is phonologically or structurally determined. The words mentioned so far both end in a consonant and lack one of the gender markers, so it is difficult to decide based on them. The following V-ending words that take *-es* settle the issue in favour of the structural account.

(62) a. rubí-es (rubí-s)
b. bantú-es (bantú-s)

– Thus, the /e/ is not phonological, but the gender morpheme, at least in some cases.

– I take this to mean that some adjectives (and nouns) take *-e* instead of *-o/-a*, as class markers (NB: in other cases an epenthetic vowel may be more adequate). I will follow the general size-account in Nanosyntax where this reflects differences in root-size covering some syntactic space that all members of the class project.

– I will propose that, while *-o/-a* have the normal size for adjectival stems, *-e* adjectives are shorter. Let me call 'X' the highest head within AP and its complement, $A^{-X}P$.

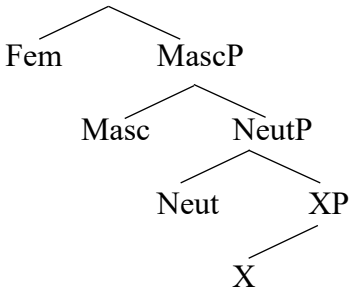
– The *-e* marker can be both masculine and feminine (adjectives ending in *-e* are gender-invariable).

(63) a. el error lev-e
the.m mistake slight-E
b. la equivocación lev-e
the.f mistake slight-E

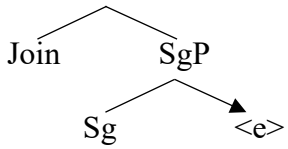
– Here are the relevant lexical items.

(64) a. < adjectives in *-e* ⇔ $A^{-X}P$ >

b. < e ⇔ FemP >



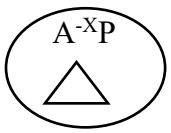
c. < e ⇔ JoinP >



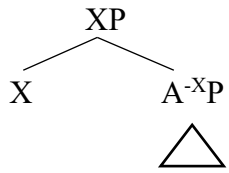
– The entry in (64c) is my attempt at avoiding zero morphemes, obtaining the same result as if a zero was used [ask me about this if you are interested]. This is a 'transparent' entry that bottoms at Sg and introduces a pointer to (64b). My reason to do so is that (i) once *-e* is analysed as a morpheme, it combines with the same *-s* morpheme as other nouns in the plural and (ii) if I propose that *-e* spells out singular, I would predict that the singular should never be the same in masculine and feminine, because Sg would either contain a complement with feminine or without it.

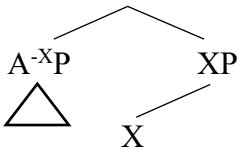
(65) lev-e-s
slight-E-pl

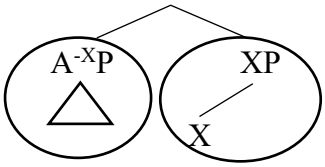
(66) a. $A^{-X}P$

b. 

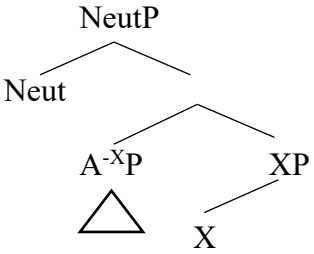
⇐ lev-

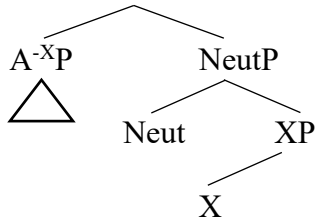
c. 

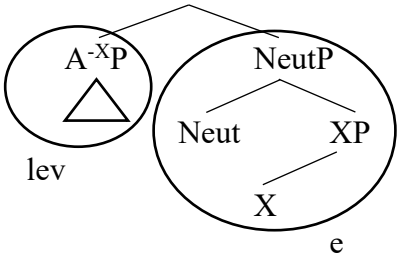
d. 

e. 

lev e

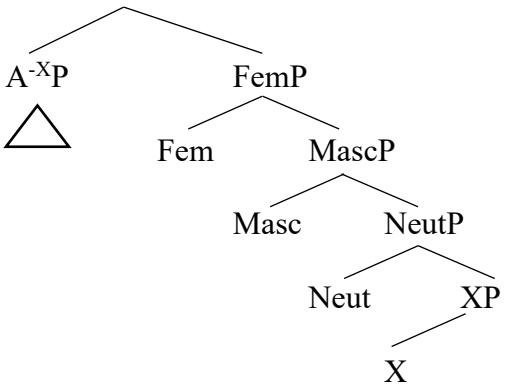
f. 

g. 

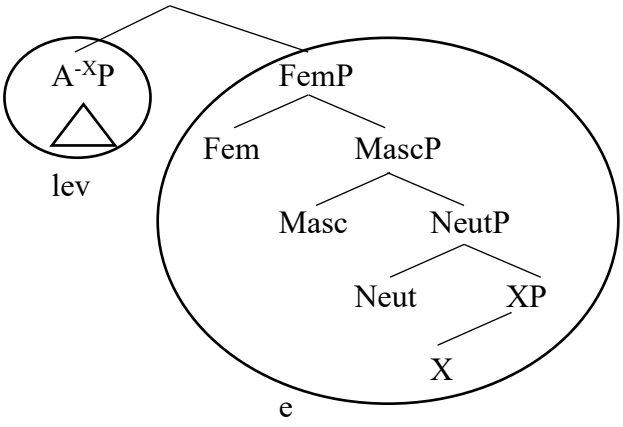
h. 

– Fast-forward to feminine.

i.

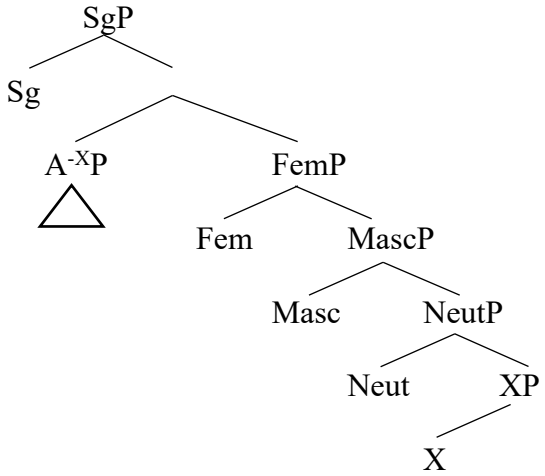

A-XP
FemP
Fem
MascP
Masc
NeutP
Neut
XP
X

j.

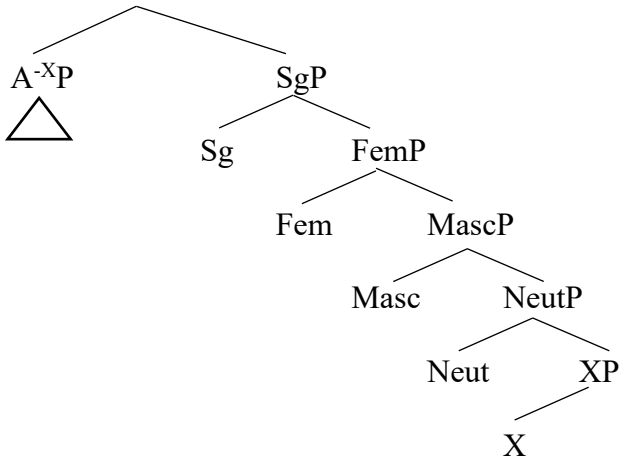

A-XP
lev
FemP
Fem
MascP
Masc
NeutP
Neut
XP
X
e

– Plural

k.

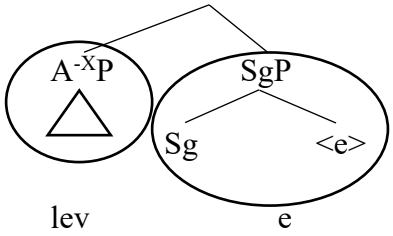

SgP
Sg
A-XP
FemP
Fem
MascP
Masc
NeutP
Neut
XP
X

l.



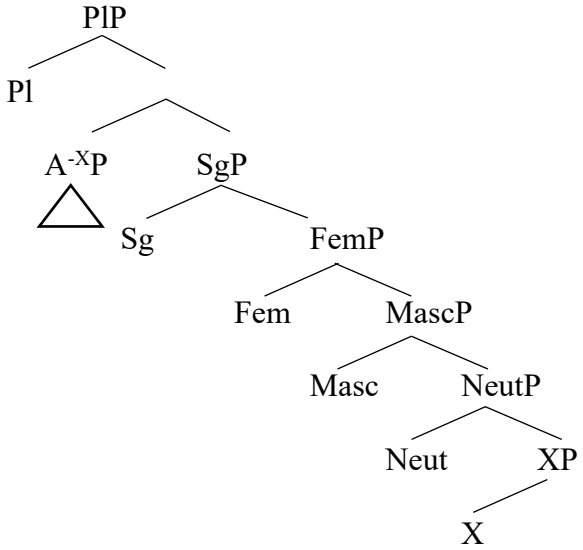
– Which becomes

m.

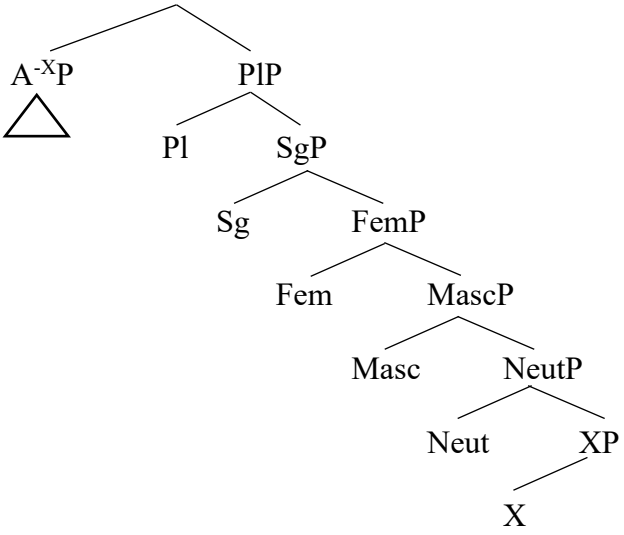


- The derivation continues

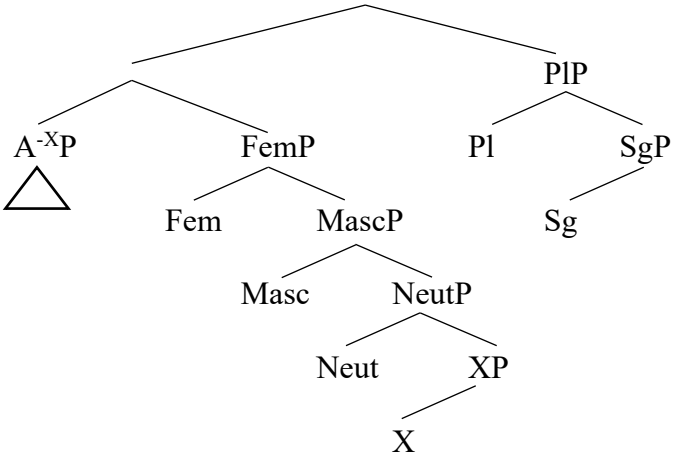
(67)



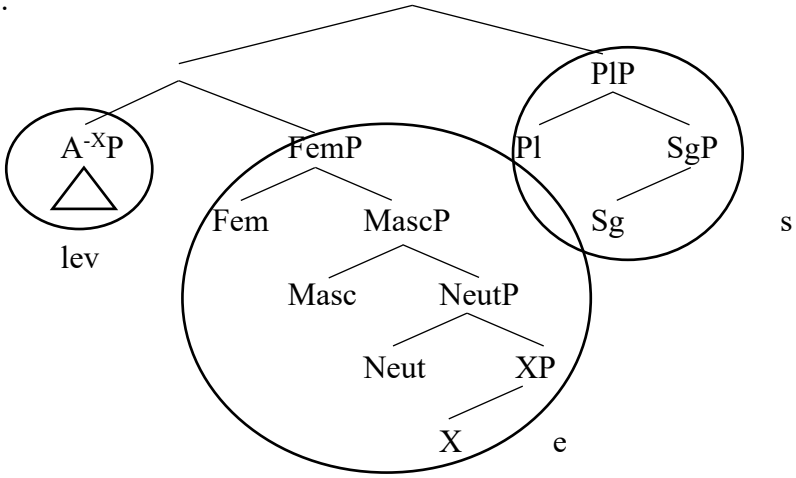
(68)


A-XP
PlP
Pl
SgP
Sg
FemP
Fem
MascP
Masc
NeutP
Neut
XP
X

(69) a.

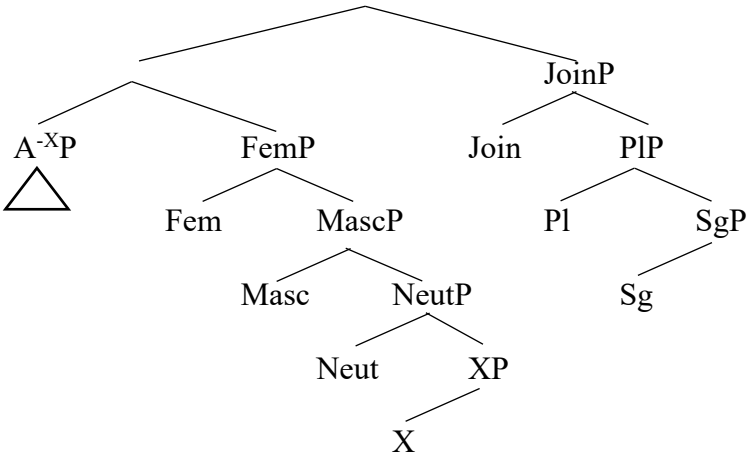

PlP
A-XP
FemP
Pl
SgP
Fem
MascP
Sg
Masc
NeutP
Neut
XP
X

b.

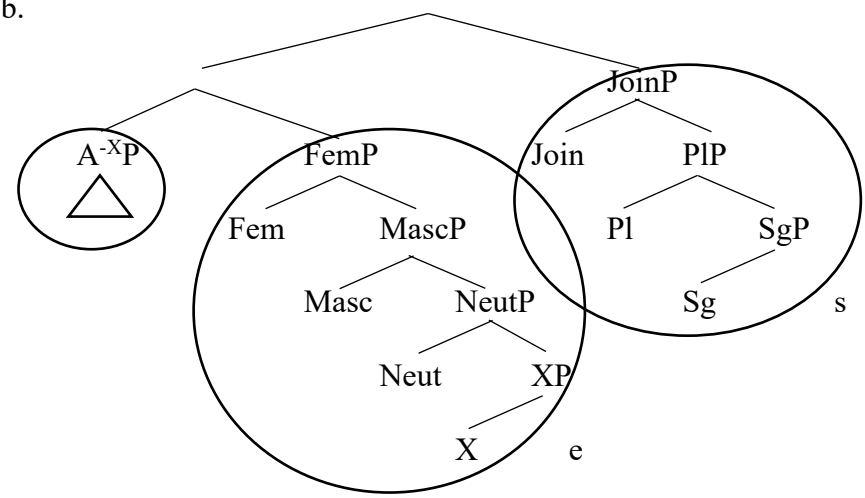

PlP
A-XP
FemP
Pl
SgP
Fem
MascP
Sg
s
lev
Masc
NeutP
Neut
XP
X
e

– As modifier:

(70) a.

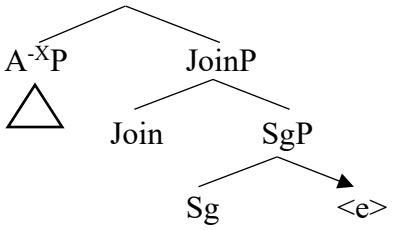


b.



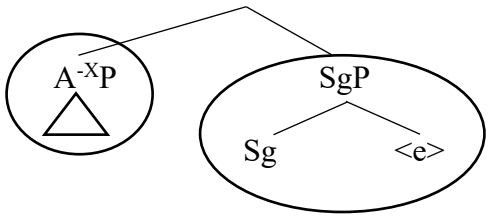
– Now, what is special about *grande*.

(71) < gran(d) ⇔ >

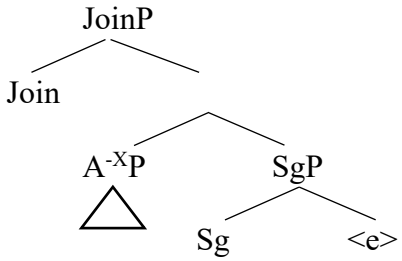


– Again, $A^{-X}P$ only forms a constituent with SgP through JoinP. If the following step is followed by adding Join (because one creates a singular modifier), the adjectival root will be a match for the whole tree.

(72)

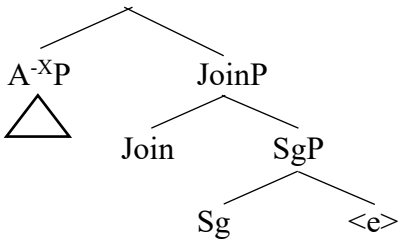


(73)



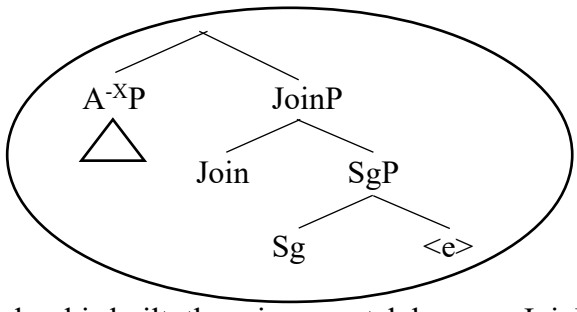
– No match, movement of the closest non-remnant labelled constituent:

(74)



– The entry is a match.

(75)



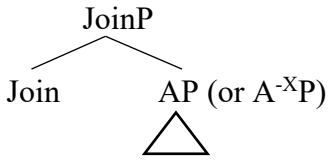
– If plural is built, there is no match because JoinP will be added above Plural; if JoinP is not built, there is no match.

– The existence of at least one adjective in *-e* that loses inflection as a modifier is an argument that Join, which we need to express the modifier / predicate distinction, is above and not below. See how.

a) We already showed that Join cannot be at the foot of inflectional markers

b) The other way of putting it low is by making the adjectival root lexicalise it.

(75)



– Remember the second subgeneralisation: no adjective changes inflectional class as a modifier.

– If Join is projected above AP or $A^{-X}P$, we expect changes in inflectional class: if it projects above AP ($X+ A^{-X}P$), *-e* adjectives should lexicalise differently as modifiers; if it projects above $A^{-X}P$, *-o/-a* adjectives should become -e adjectives as modifiers. None of these effects are documented, to the very best of my knowledge.

8. Join and agreement (1)

– If the analysis is on the right, the nature of agreement becomes more understandable.

– Both in adjectives and in nouns the phi features (nominal features) are projected in the same way, with gender and number in the same order, and without evidence that there are different features (Generalisation 2: nouns and adjectives use the same sets of exponents). Thus, there is no distinction between agreeing and nominal (non-agreeing) sequences.

- The head Join has the immediate effect of guaranteeing that the nominal features projected in adjectives are not interpreted as introducing a distinct individual variable that may end up interpreted as a different referent.

(76) <<e,t>,<e,t>>

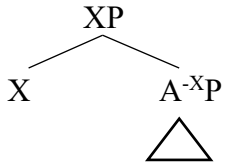
– Neither the input nor the output introduce a different <e>: the input takes a predicate (the noun) and the output produces another predicate, mapping the noun into a new predicate.

– From this perspective, the projection of nominal features in the adjective is expected to be only naturally contrained as needing to be compatible with the noun phi features in the definition of one and the same referent.

– In other words: when Join is projected, the adjective and the noun share the same individual, so their features must match. Modification is not successful if the features are not compatible, because then semantics gets contradictory instructions: make one predicate with these two elements, but keep their arguments separate.

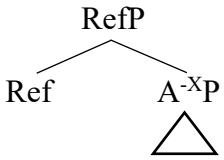
- What is the X feature that is the highest head of APs?

(77)



– Caha (2025, class notes). Adjectives, like nouns, contain a head that introduces an index of identity.

(78)



– This index of identity is the one that gets identified with the index of the noun when modification is performed (via Join). This head is what explains generalisation 2.

Generalisation 2
In Spanish, nouns and adjectives take exactly the same set of class markers (=the feet of class markers is the same in adjectives and nouns)

– Beyond Ref (possibly, with other heads) A and N will be differentiated in terms of (among other possible candidates) scales, degree and perhaps some form of aspect that substitutes countability. But the top is the same type of head.

– Then concord can be summarised as follows:

i) Adjectives contain a head Ref, like nouns, which defines an index of identity, like in nouns
ii) Phi feature sequences projected above Ref introduce restrictions on the referent of that adjective
iii) Join creates a modifier by identifying the index of identity of the two Ref heads.
iv) At that point, the phi feature sequences must be compatible.

– The surface impression will be that the phi features of one have been copied on the other, but they were generated as separate sequences, and then matched.

9. Join and agreement (II)

– So why do the adjectives behave as 'normal' adjectives in post-nominal position?

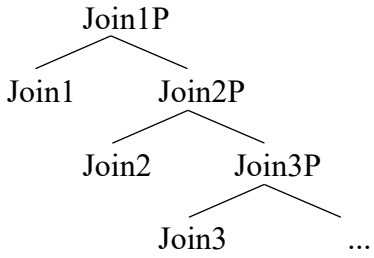
– There is one option that is readily available: follow Cinque (2010). Cinque (2010) associates post-nominal adjectives in Romance with reduced relative clauses, where instead than being modifiers the adjectives are predicates (of silent functional structure).

– This would already explain it: the post-nominal adjectives do not have Join because they are predicates. This may well be the right answer, even if for Nanosyntax that poses the problem of why the post-nominal adjectives are never different from predicative ones, even though the second need verbs to be licensed and the first act alone.

– However, there is a second answer that I would like to briefly sketch: post-nominal adjectives involve a different type of modification.

– This means proposing a hierarchy of modifier-like heads, where the Join head we have discussed in prenominal adjectives is only part of the sequence.

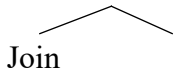
(79)



– Modification happens at different heights, and we do know that the different heights correlate with different semantic and morphological behaviours (Pesetsky 2013 on agreement of adjectives in Russian, Kucerova 2018 and Landau 2016 on semantic agreement being acceptable in the higher NP area, but not in the lower one; Svenonius 2008 on (partial) adjective ordering involving modification of different chunks of structure, etc.).

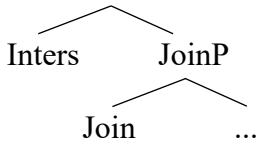
– Imagine Join is itself complex and incremental, with different semantic and syntactic properties.

(80)



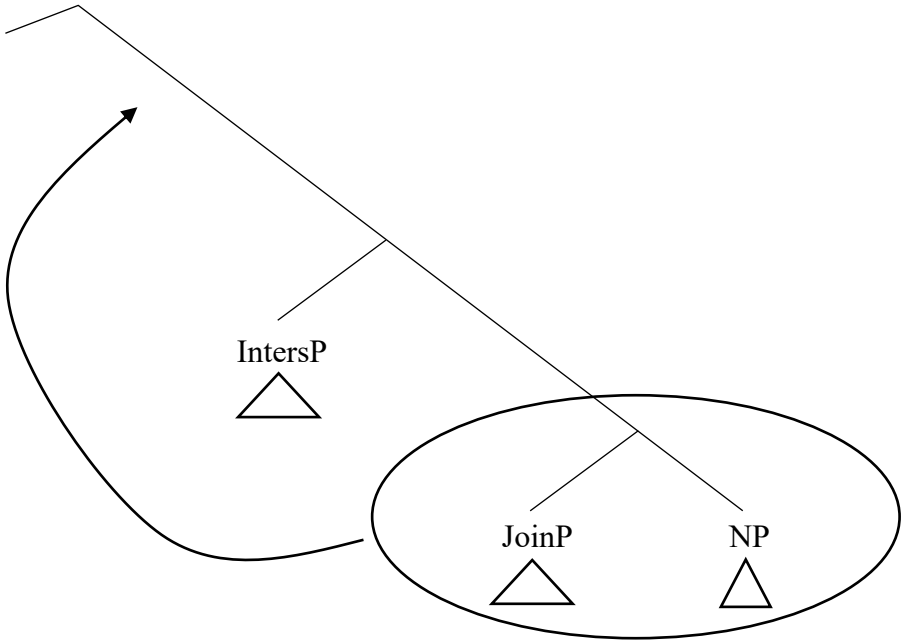
--> general modification (pre-nominal)

(81)



--> Intersective modification (post-nominal)

(82)



– Presence of Intersect is enough to break the structure that the adjectival stem matches and force separate lexicalisation of the gender and number inflectional markers.

– It seems to me that it is possible to have a correlation between syntactic height of modifiers and phi features.

(83) Root compounds are restricted to *-i*, which is not used as a class marker otherwise.

pel- i- -rroj-
hear I red-
'red hair-ed'

(84) Adjectival prefixes are restricted to invariable *-o*

pseud- o- ciencia
pseud- O science

cript- o- moneda
crypt- O coin

(85) Categorised N-N compounds exhibit the corresponding noun marker on the modifier, but there is no matching requirement (or number inflection).

perr-o policí-a
dog-O police-A
'police dog'

(86) Low modification must strictly match formal features and higher modification can match only the semantic interpretation (Kučerová 2018, Landau 2016).

– If so, this suggests:

Modifier expansion

Full gender and number projected, looser identity

Full gender and number projected, strict identity

Full gender projected, no need to match

Only low phi projected (only -o)

No phi projected (*-i* for JOIN?)

Not even *-i*?

Syntactic merge height

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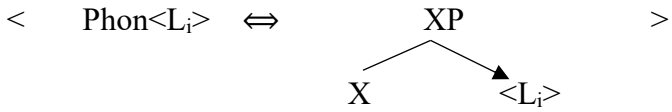
Appendix

How to avoid zeroes: phonologically transparent entries



This will allow me to avoid proposing that Join is present (just by chance) on top of any inflectional element (note also that the number of zeroes required will multiply the more 'optional' high material one associates to these exponents, such as case layers).