



Abstract. This research investigates the impact of the adjective ‘former’ on the interpretation of the gendered features of words such as ‘daughter’ through the syntactic distance created by the modifier. In the context of trans* individuals, the modifier has the potential to create polysemy due to ambiguities around whether the former is applying to gender or other semantic content in the noun (Hunter 2025; Kramer 2014, 2020, 2024; Steriopolo 2023). This work builds on that of Partee who examined ‘former’ modifying professions (Partee 1981: 111-128) and ‘former’ as applied to genitive relations (Partee & Borschev 1998: 10-12). Partee & Borschev (1998) argue that there is a three-way ambiguity with the phrase ‘Mary’s former mansion.’ I utilize Distributed Morphology to propose an analysis of ways that the word ‘former’ can apply to only the gendered content of a noun, rather than the entirety of the semantic or syntactic content. As such, this piece showcases not only the preliminary work on the varied positions of a gendered feature beneath a Distributed Morphology lens and in relation to the interaction of that feature across a phrase, but also the importance of varying perspectives in theoretical study.

Keywords. gender, morphosyntax, distributed morphology, trans* linguistics, transgender linguistics, non-binary, lavender linguistics

1. Introduction. Previously there has been a significant conversation in semantics surrounding the function of certain modifiers, particularly adjectives, and how they apply to some nouns. There have been proposals about what classes of nouns and what special types of adjectives may interact in different ways. This is work that dominated portions of the lexical semantics conversations from the 1980s through the late 1990s, and largely led by Partee and Borschev, whose work forms the foundations of this analysis. This work will address and discuss the details of this literature in the Background section. One of the adjectives examined in this particular set of explorations was ‘former’ (Partee 1981; Partee & Borschev 1999; Partee and Borschev 2003). It is this adjective that is the basis of this paper.

Recent years have also seen the rise of linguistics that investigates the play between gender and language. It would be absurd, and factually incorrect, to claim that people who existed underneath of the trans* umbrella did not exist until the (relatively young itself) field of linguistics chose to turn a research eye in their direction. However, trans* linguistics as a sub-field of the larger discipline is relatively young itself and there is plentiful room for explorations of the types of questions which may have been addressed by previous subfields. It is here that the impetus of this paper developed.

When discussing a person whose gender identity or outward presentation has not been static over some period, there may arise a need to refer to that individual’s past gender. In English, this is particularly salient when it refers to kinship terms, as those are the cases wherein the language tends to express gender outside of the pronominal system. As such, there is a new layer of the implications for the class of adjectives including ‘former.’ These adjectives take on a new role

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beyond the exploration of ‘former’ as it related to possession or to specific aspects of an object as discussed by Partee & Borschev (2003). To limit the scope of this paper, the following examples of ‘former’ in relation to gendered nominals will be analyzed and discussed.

- (1) a. former sister
- b. former daughter-in-law
- c. former wife
- d. former actress

With the above examples, there are ambiguities which arise as to what portion of the semantic content of the noun ‘former’ is applied to. Beginning with ‘former daughter-in-law’ as it is the originator of these questions, there are three potential interpretations. The person in question could have been divorced, which would lead to the descriptor ‘former’ modifying the referent to imply that the person could have passed away, or there is potential that the person in question transitioned and is now referred to as some other variant of child-in-law. Additionally, any number of these interpretations can stack. One can imagine a scenario where the ‘former daughter-in-law’ is someone who transitioned, got a divorce, and passed away. This paper utilizes a Distributed Morphology lens to examine the syntactic and semantic interfaces that can lead to these ambiguities.

2. Background

2.1. POSITIONALITY AND TIMING. It would be disingenuous to embark on the whole of this exploration, even in a proceedings context without some amount of contextualization as to the place and time it exists in as it has been developed and written. The same can be said for some of the positionality and situation of me as the author. The analysis presented at the Linguistic Society of America meeting was given within the same week that genocide scholars were discussing changing the definition of genocide to encompass the treatment of trans* individuals (Bragman 2026). The first drafts of this piece are being composed on the tails of the state of Kansas revoking the identification of all trans* people without any notice (ACLU of Kansas 2026). The annual meeting from whence this paper comes had two plenary sessions that dealt with the role of linguists in the present tumultuous political time. It is the belief of the author that no linguistic work is an apolitical act, and even if there are those who disagree with this on a broader level, there is no argument that this work in particular is apolitical. The analysis presented here builds from self-reflection and study of my identity as a trans* individual – an identity that is being actively threatened in official capacities nationwide. For the purposes of this work, that is the only positionality that is necessary.

I engage with linguistics under a presupposition of an I-language view. This assumes that within the head of every fluent speaker of any given language there is a complete generative system for that language. This system is different from any other person’s system, but is all the same complete and perfect in its own right (Isaac & Reiss 2013). The work done here represents my own I-language but is not generalizable to E-language at large.

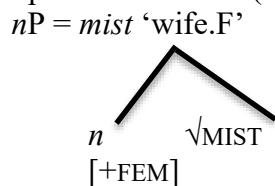
2.2. THE SYNTAX/SEMANTICS INTERFACE AND DM This analysis builds off of the previously established theoretical implications of Distributed Morphology. The most critical assumption being made in accordance with this theoretical lens for the purpose of this analysis is the Y-model of language processing. The Y model of language posits that there are separate processing systems for the phonological, semantic, and syntactic parts of language production and understanding

which are at least at some points ignorant¹ of the goings-on of other portions of the system (Siddiqi & Nishiyama 2010 and Harley 2014). Language production thus starts at the top of the system with the syntax (the Y is inverted) and the structure of the meaning is first created. The structure is bare with only some categories and syntactic features present at this point. This is referred to as List 1. Following the syntactic derivation, the articulatory/auditory representations, which are List 2, and the meanings, which are List 3, are inserted and thus an utterance is formed. At the List 1 level there are roots, which are lexemes that do not yet have any sound or meaning (Harley 2014). Roots are represented in the literature with the root symbol $\sqrt{\quad}$ followed by either an arbitrary number such as $\sqrt{146}$ or with the form that will follow in all caps to emphasize its abstraction such as $\sqrt{\text{CAT}}$.

The other critical detail about a Distributed Morphology lens on this problem is the assumptions that morphology operates in the same way as syntax does, particularly coming from a minimalist framework (Halle & Marantz 1993). As such, roots affix to their syntactic categories and to their affixes through the same process that phrases are built. This is often referred to in shorthand as ‘syntax all the way down.’

Utilizing these assumptions, a few scholars have previously developed frameworks for the ways that gender functions in such structures. Most prolific in this space currently is Kramer, who has well over a decade of publications examining the presence and the introduction of gendered features in Aramaic. Kramer (2024) most clearly brings together this body of work by suggesting that gendered features may originate in the nominalizing head, n^0 . An example of this is shown in (2) from Kramer (2024).

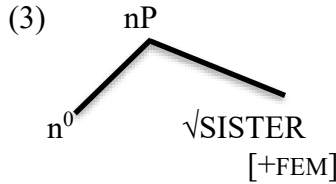
(2) Example from Kramer (2024:80)



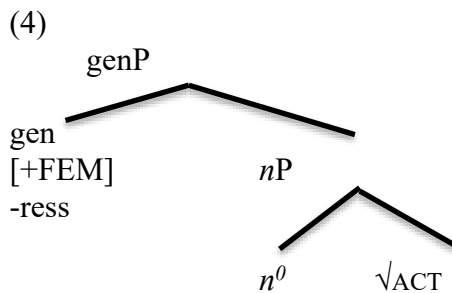
Other scholars have given various interpretations of the locus of gender in this lens on morphology including debates as to the position of various heads and the location of the gender features (Burkholder 2018; Steriopo 2024). For the purposes of this analysis, I am building from my own perspective previously established in Hunter (2025). In that paper I posited that there are three different forms of gender in English: inalienable, morphological, and masculine default gender. Only the former two are relevant to the polysemy created by ‘former’ adjectives.

In the case of inalienable gender, I have argued that there are some English words which have gender attached to the root of the word. This is particularly the case for kinship terms, which have seemingly no morphological relation to their opposite gendered counterparts. These terms are represented with the feature on the root as shown in (3).

¹ Typically this is referred to as being “blind” to the other portions of the system, though I have shifted my language after a reviewer for a publication brought to my attention the insensitivity of the term towards those with visual disabilities.



In contrast, for morphological gender, there is a variable gender that is added at a different point in the morphological processing. This is more like the gender that Kramer (2014; 2020; 2024) suggests that is realized underneath the n^0 head. In cases where potentially there are multiple genders stacked onto one word as Steriopolo (2024) examines in regards to diminutive genders, then there may be multiple n heads. In Hunter (2025) I argued for an additional head, $genP$, where gender is added. This is in opposition to some of Kramer’s (2024) positions, though more in line with those of Steriopolo (2024). As I will showcase later, the modifier ‘former’ is far more attracted to a terminal node, and this would explain some of the different readings. Thus, (4) shows the type of structure we may expect in a case of morphological gender.



In the case of (4), the form is actualized by the suffix ‘-ress’ where as if it were a masculine form, it would be actualized by [-FEM] ‘-or.’ Additionally, if the form were a verb then it would be actualized by a null affix ‘-∅’ and v^0 head. In these forms, however, it is clearer how the gendered features of the form could be removed from their other meanings, as opposed to those forms which I have proposed have the gender is inherently tied to the root itself. The gender feature here, I argue is inextricably linked in both List 1 that it must force a feminine semantic interpretation in List 3.

In taking the conclusions explained in this section, it becomes clearer how the semantic and syntactic implications of ‘former’ may impact its interpretation in constructions with these gendered words. The different readings one may get from the examples put forth in (1) are heavily influenced by the structures of (3) and (4) as they allow for variation in the scope of ‘former.’

2.3 FORMER While all the gender and syntax interface discourse mentioned above was happening, different and concurrent debates were being held in the world of semantics. One such debate was the conversation surrounding the word ‘former,’ beginning (I believe) with a discussion of the ways that the construction ‘former professor’ violated the Well-Formedness Constraint because ‘the professor who was former’ is not a viable relative clause (Partee 1981). This issue was discussed with relative frequency until it seems to have been somewhat settled, once again with Partee & Borshev (2003). For somewhat self-evident space reasons, there is no need to dissect everything said about the semantic function of the word ‘former’ in this twenty-two year explo-

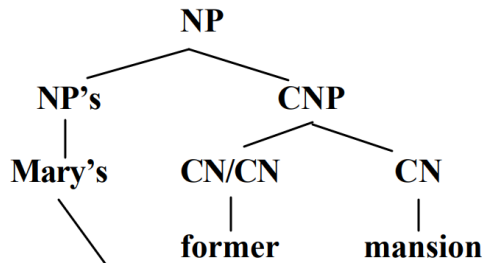
ration, nor everything since. Rather, like the previous section, the most critical details and examples that are necessary for grasping the project at hand will be explained here.

Over the course of the debates about ‘former’ many different examples were discussed. There was, of course, the ‘former professor’ that really started off the conversation. Partee additionally expanded the work and included the critical discussion of genitives which begin to present their own points of interest. With the addition of some form of possession, there is yet another place for polysemy between expressions utilizing the ‘former N’ construction, even before the introduction of the gendered aspect which is crucial to this investigation. For example, ‘former professor’ and ‘my former professor’ have potentially different implications for whether the professor is still in their professorial role, or just someone to whom you are no longer a student.

In 1999 the most common example illustrating the varied nature of the application of ‘former’ is introduced with ‘Mary’s former mansion.’ Partee & Borschev (2003) note that ‘Mary’s former mansion’ has two readings: Reading A: “a former mansion (perhaps now just a ruin) that is (now) Mary’s”, and Reading B: “something that was formerly Mary’s mansion; it may still be a mansion, but it’s no longer Mary’s” pp. 9

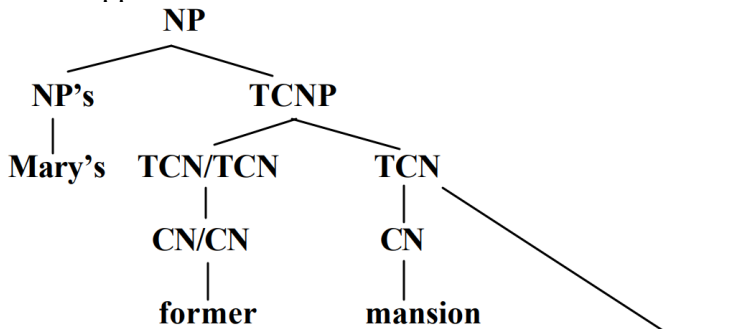
At this point in the broader semantics field, certain assumptions were being put aside, and the functions of the semantics/syntax interface became the hot topic of discussion. As such, the ambiguity in this paper is diagrammed in examples (5a) and (5b) that are taken from Partee & Borschev (2003).

(5) a. from pp. 9



free *R* introduced here

b. from pp. 10



free *R* introduced here

As seen from these trees, the ambiguity of the potential meanings of the phrases that is introduced here depends upon the application of the word ‘former’ and what is referred to by Partee

& Borschev (2003) as the free **R** relation which encodes possession. This is the same type of difference in interpretation that comes about from the potential interpretation of ‘former’ interacting with a gendered feature. Having established these potential interpretations and the syntactic structures that dictate where different interpretations arise, then the interaction of ‘former’ with gendered features in the analysis should follow logically.

2.4 GENDER: STATIC AND FLUID PERSPECTIVES. Gender is an aspect of individual experience which can showcase a wide range of experiences. It is not the goal of this paper to invalidate the experiences of anyone whose perspective is different from mine. As stated in section 2.1 this is self-reflective work and is not meant to be broadly generalized. There are still ongoing debates about the perspective of gender that I present here, and this represents the views I have during this place and time.

I see my gender as being inherently temporally bound as well as fluid. Coming from a linguistics background, as readers of this piece are likely to be, it may be useful to think about gender as either being individual or stage-level. As such, I see gender as a stage level predicate of my personhood, but there is debate that gender is an individual level predicate option instead. I think this may be different for every given person. There are plenty of people across the spectrum of trans* and cis* identities that see their gender in a more static way, and many others across that same spectrum who align with my position on this topic. There are a variety of perspectives on the concept of a past gender and these types of evolutions over time (Gill-Peterson 2024; 2018, Sweetnam 1996). In this section I am going to break down my personal take on this in a way that is a bit more casual than is typical in linguistics papers but is more genuine to my own interactions and experiences in this space.

When I was a child, I existed as an amorphous genderless being. Growing up in the context that I did, I was trussed up in all the trappings of girl-ness, but I didn’t necessarily identify that at the time. I was too busy learning to read and be a human being to fret about gender. I would use she/her pronouns to describe this iteration of myself, if for no other reason than I fit the mold aesthetically at the time. Much like my own analysis of morphological gender, femininity is something that can be added or subtracted from this version of the self without affecting the root.

Moving into my pre-teen kind of years is where things get a little off the “typical” cisgender experience. I spent this era exploring gender. I did a lot of dressing up as a boy and messing around with my friends. It is hard to conceptualize the 5th-6th grade version of myself as strictly a girl. I was an odd kid, kind of a tomboy at best alignment on a gendered spectrum. In my subsequent teen years, however, I was distinctly feminine. Although influenced by external pressures, I sincerely think of this portion of my life as being that of a girl. There’s a girl who used to be me who graduated high school, who participated heavily in the FFA, and who took some very 2017 senior photos. In college I became a more agency-affected version of myself. I was deeply exploring anything and everything related to my gender. I spent a good portion of it using she/they pronouns and elated at the relatively rare use of a they in that identity. I rarely utilize feminine pronouns or gendered terms to refer to this era of myself. Now, in graduate school and my young professional years, I am concretely non-binary. There is no ambiguity in my current gender identity.

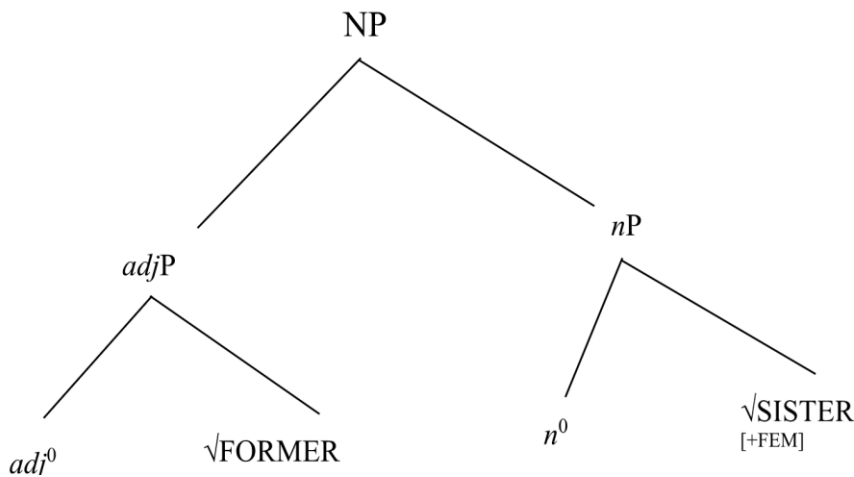
As the above timeline for my gender has a variety of different perspectives, I do not find it to be misgendering to refer to these previous iterations by different gender identities than the one that I embody. It does not inspire any dysphoric or otherwise uncomfortable feelings in me to be referred to as a ‘former woman’ or ‘former girl.’ These are accurate descriptions of what previ-

ous versions of the self were to me. As such, I am aware that the following analysis may not ring true for all readers who may be incapable of accessing a trans* reading of the given examples due to a personal or otherwise perceived misgendering context.

3. Analysis. Having centered this work in background literature and my own perspective on the evolution of my gender, it is now time to return to the core examples that I have chosen to explore. In each of these examples there are a few different potential drivers that could influence the interpretations more in one direction or another. I have chosen to explore each example fully with all of its interpretations rather than exploring each type of interpretation for every example before moving to another for ease of following the examples.

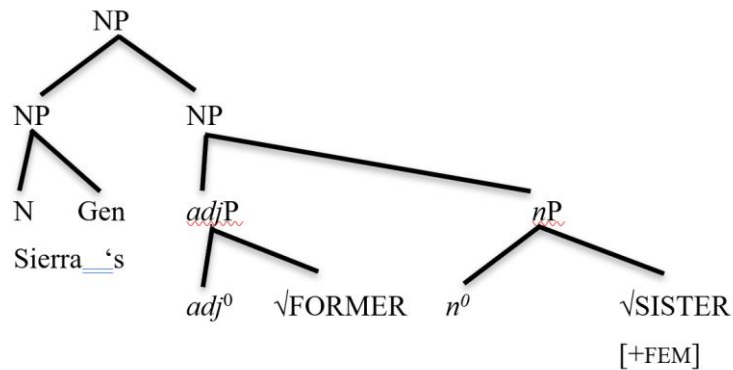
3.1. FORMER SISTER There are, as in all the examples given here three different potential interpretations of ‘former sister.’ In this example, I feel above all of the other examples the easiest reading access is that of a trans individual. This could be in part due to cultural factors that influence potential interpretations. It’s relatively unlikely that someone loses status as a sister through some form of disownment or divorce. Although it would be an appropriate although unlikely way to refer to a sibling who had passed on, I find it far easier to access a trans* reading in this context, though that could be further complicated by the fact that I have my own trans* former sister and have referred to them as such when discussing our childhoods. (6) shows a tree that corresponds to this interpretation of the phrase ‘former sister.’

(6)



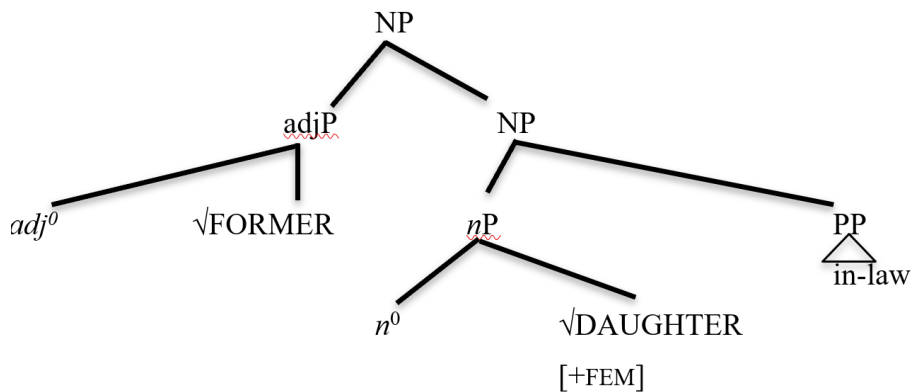
In the above tree there are a few factors at play. The semantic information contained in the relational aspect of ‘sister’ is somewhat separate from that of ‘former’, while the feminine feature is floating and ready to be assigned. If the feature were to be attached to the nominalizing head, then ‘former’ could more easily access it, but as it is, the easier interpretation necessitates that the adjective applies to its sister and the most available interpretation of the ‘former’ idea comes from here. Even with a genitive as in (7), the non-trans* interpretations are more difficult to access.

(7)



3.2. FORMER DAUGHTER-IN-LAW In the phrase ‘former daughter-in-law’ the analysis begins to take on a slightly different form. The ‘in-law’ portion of the phrase is one that carries a lot of semantic meaning that may make it easier for the ‘former’ interpretation to apply in the relational sense. Syntactically, the prepositional phrase represented by the ‘in-law’ part of the phrasing would allow for the adjective to apply in that context more readily than it would to the parent head with the gender feature. This structure is shown in (8).

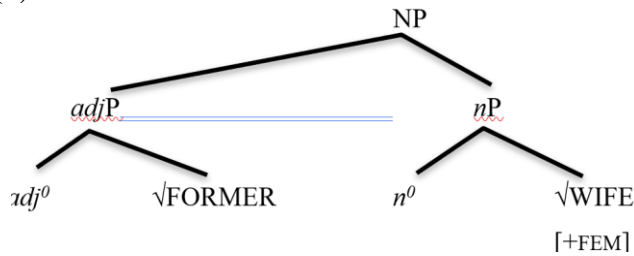
(8)



Here, the √FORMER includes the prepositional phrase expressing the ‘in-law’ relationship in its scope. Depending upon whether or not you think of ‘daughter-in-law’ and a singular unit that potentially has one root, or as a phrase which is how I have drawn it, readings of one form or another may be easier to access. In the case where √FORMER takes scope over the prepositional phrase; it may more easily introduce that variation rather than applying to the feminizing feature on √DAUGHTER.

3.3. FORMER WIFE When discussing the phrase ‘former wife’, I find it is somewhat difficult to get the trans* reading. I think this may be because the gender of the word may be more inextricably tied to the form than for words like ‘sister’ or ‘daughter-in-law.’ It could be possible that there is an analysis that the move from sibling + feminine is more tenuous of a connection than spouse + feminine and that on some level in the mind spousal roles and gender are more clearly linked. Certainly this could be said to at least be culturally true for me. It could also be the more likely prevalence of an ex-wife as a more culturally salient entity. Figure (9) shows this structure.

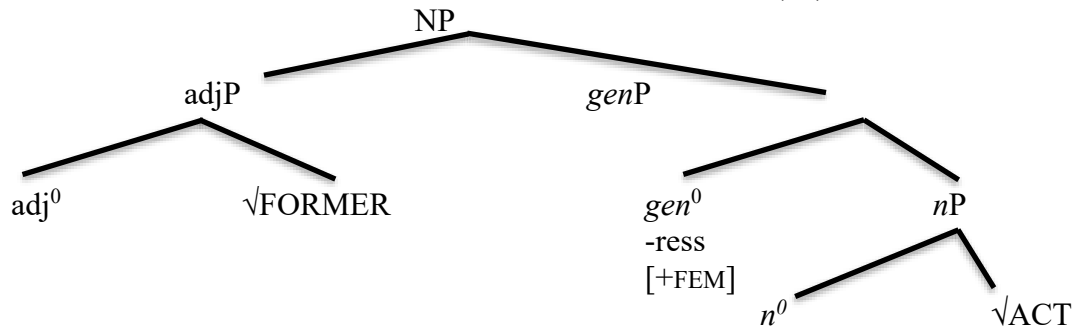
(9)



There is also a case to be made that with the other examples there is an option to place focus on just the gendered part of the word because potentially the prototypical version of any given form does not need to be gendered. This analysis would follow from works like that on contrastive reduplication (Ghomeshi et al. 2004) such that the argument may be that a ‘wife wife’ would have to be inherently gendered but that potentially a ‘sister sister’ would not. This concept was raised to me in the process of the writeup for this paper and more work is to be done on the topic of focus as it is related to gender.

3.4. FORMER ACTRESS This is the example which pulls upon the previously mentioned morphological gender that my previous work (Hunter 2025) posits. It is here that the evidence for the adjective ‘former’ to apply to the root on its own really starts to come into play. When considering the idea of a ‘former actress’ it is hard to think of a trans* individual. The most immediately available interpretation is that of someone who used to act and no longer does. This also would make sense if adjectives like ‘former’ attach to the roots and the features of roots before attaching to other nodes and features in the syntax, thus taking scope over the core root meaning regardless of gender. As the gendered feature here is in the n^0 head, it is harder to access than those features attached to the root. The structure for this is shown in (10).

(10)



4. Conclusion and Future Directions. The analyses above exist to present some good examples of how gender can interact as its own content-bearing feature within the structure of a phrase. A model which treats the words ‘actress’ and ‘wife’ as having the exact same attachment to gender fails to account for the differences in potential interpretations which are highlighted through the previously discovered endocentric modifier such as ‘former’ (Partee & Borschev 2003). Models which assume the gender is wholly tied to a singular form also do not have a good way of parsing the varied interpretations. The gendered feature of a word needs to be inherently separable if one can access an interpretation wherein the gender is the only portion of the meaning that is modified by the content of ‘former’. If a ‘former sister’ is only former in the gendered sense and not in the relational one, then there is necessarily a hidden structure to ‘sister.’

There are, however, still several questions that are unanswered by this type of analysis. ‘Former’ seems to be more easily applied to a root than it does to a *genP*. If this is the case, where does *genP* live in the structure of a word? Furthermore, there is a need for a broader reach-

ing study that looks at multiple perspectives on these features. If others do not, in a controlled environment, get the same readings as I have, then further study becomes necessary. How do cis* and trans* judgments on what is and isn't applicable in the space possible differ? This future direction could combine with the follow-up study to Hunter (2025) which dealt with my varying levels of discomfort with terminology like 'actress' or 'wife'. In conclusion, a further delve into the perceived potential misgendering in the case of these 'former' constructions could provide an in-depth understanding of the structural features of gender.

There are also several other adjectives that may apply differently in this context. In section 3.3 I mentioned the modifiers 'late' and 'ex' as they may impact potential interpretations. Though slightly stricter in their application, these constructions also hold some potential for other interpretations. When discussing 'former' there is also occasionally the reading of a further leveled relationship such as someone who refers to a current spouse as a 'former boyfriend/girlfriend/partner.' I similarly have hopes of looking at the use of 'then-' as a descriptor that could apply in both a trans* and relationship escalation scenario, as in expressions like 'my then-girlfriend' or 'my then-wife'. I appreciate the person who emailed me after my presentation to pose the question of the context of that modifier.

Finally, there is an aspect of this work that I had originally proposed that simply would not fit within the scope of a presentation or a proceedings paper alongside the other things discussed here and that is the function of a temporal scope over gender as a feature. Utilizing the framework that showcased that some nouns introduce temporal licensing developed by Musan (1997, 1999) there is additional analysis to be done showing that gender features may have a similar function.

Trans* linguistics is a subfield which is opening new questions and categories of exploration that seemingly were solved years ago. As linguists do the work of solving some of the big problems associated with language, there are aspects of these solutions that benefit from the diverse lenses that different groups have to offer. This exploration of gender features is one small piece that has potential to realign the systematic understanding of where that exists and how it interacts in production and processing.

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