A Transformational Approach to Chaucer's English

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Below is an index of some of the symbols (morphemic and syntactic) used in this article.

- **Adv** = Adverb
- **Aux** = Auxiliary Verb
- **Det** = Determiner (*e.g.* Article etc.)
- **N** = Noun
- **NP** = Noun Phrase
- **Nprop** = Proper Noun
- **S** = Sentence
- **SC** = Structural Change
- **SD** = Structural Description
- **T** = Tense (Past or Present)
- **V** = Verb
- **VP** = Verb Phrase
- **Vi** = Intransitive Verb
- **Vt** = Transitive Verb
- **Z₁** = Plural marker in nouns
- **#** = Word or Sentence Boundary
- **ϕ** = "Zero" Morpheme

Chaucer wrote in the dialect of London. The attempt of this paper is to approach his dialect from the viewpoint of transformational grammar.

1. The Phrase Structure Section

A simple example of constituent analysis of a sentence from Chaucer's *The Nun's Priest's Tale* can be seen from the following:

Take the sentence "I saugh a beste" (=I saw a beast) (B. NP. 4089). We have the following rules, which are rather oversimplified:

(A)  
(i) Sentence → NP + VP  
(ii) VP → Verb + NP  
(iii) NP → Det + N or Npron  
(iv) Det → a, the, etc.  
(v) N → I, beste, etc.  
(vi) Verb → saugh, seyde, hit, etc.
The following series (B) can then be called a derivation of the sentence "I saugh a beste".

(B) Sentence Rule Applied
NP+VP (i)
NP+verb+NP (ii)
Npron+verb+Det+N (iii)
Npron+verb+a+N (iv)
I+verb+a+beste (v)
I+saugh+a+beste (vi)

An analysis of this kernel sentence is shown in the following diagram and the set of rules below:

The rules applied in the diagram above are:

(i) S → NP + Aux + VP
(ii) VP → VP1
(iii) Aux → T
(iv) T → {Past, Present}
(v) VP1 → Vt + NP
(vi) NP → {Npron + Det + N}
(vii) Npron → {Singular]
(viii) Det → a, the, etc.
(ix) N → beste, stoon, etc.
(x) Vt → see

Now let us apply phrase structure rules to a sentence which is a little more complicated: "Chauntecleer... caste up his eyen to the brighte sonne" (=Chanticleer... cast up his eyes to the bright sun.)

(B. NP. 11,4381-3). This sentence can be diagrammed as follows:

The rule applied in this diagram are the following:
Of course, the diagram above does not show how an adverb can be made up of a preposition plus a noun phrase, and there would be many more rules in a complete phrase structure section of the generative grammar for Chaucer's dialect. Chomsky lists twenty-five rules, some of which have a number of sub-rules (Cf. Chomsky's Syntactic Structure, pp. 111-4), for what he calls a "fragment of the phrase structure grammar" for modern English. When considering the various dialects of Middle English, one can see that a phrase structure grammar for any particular dialect of Middle English, unsettled and much more highly inflected than Modern English as all of those dialects were, would require even more rules.
It should also be noted here that there are a number of ways of diagramming other than the way I am doing, but Chomsky's method is as good as any and clearer than most.

11. The Transformation Section

In this section can be considered much more complicated sentences than those analyzed in the Phrase Structure Section. For example, take the sentence "Bestes and briddes coude speke and singe" (=Beasts and birds could speak and sing) (B. NP. 4071). This sentence is derived from the following sentences:

(A) Sa: Bestes coude speke.
    Sb: Bestes coude singe.
    Sc: Briddes coude speke.
    Sd: Briddes coude singe.

In order to generate the sentence, one must apply to the sentences Se and Sf the rule which Chomsky states for the generalized transformation which he calls conjunction. We can call this rule T-rule one, i.e., transformation rule number one. This rule would read: "If Se and Sf are grammatical sentences, and Se differs from Sf only in that X appears in Se where Y appears in Sf, and X and Y are constituents of the same type in Se and Sf respectively, then Sg is a grammatical sentence, where Sg is the result of replacing X by X and Y in Se." One can, however, write this rule much more simply as follows:

T-RULE 1 : Conjunction

SD: of Se: X - Z - W
    of Sf: Y - Z - W

where X and Y are minimal elements (e.g., NP, Vp, etc.) and Z, W are segments of terminal strings.

SC: (X - Z - W; Y - Z - W) → X and Y - Z - W

By changing the SD and SC slightly the same kind of rule can be applied to Sa and Sb to generate Se, and to Sc and Sd to generate Sf. The rule, in this case, could be stated as follows:

SD: of Sa or Sc : W - Z - X
    of Sb or Sd : W - Z - Y


The same type of transformational rule could, therefore, be applicable to various terminal strings in order to generate the following sentence: "Now han ye lost myn herte and al my love." (=Now you have lost my heart and my love.) (B. NP. 1.4100)

(B) Next we can choose to examine such transformations as the complementizer transformation and the identical noun phrase deletion transformation as is seen in the process of the generation of the following sentence:
I wol lette for to do my thinges. (=I will let to do my things.) (B. NP. 1.4279) (Note: the verb 'let' means here 'delay, abandon'.)

The following is the deep structure for the sentence:

![Diagram of sentence structure]

The complementizer transformation produces the following intermediate structure: *'I wol lette for me for to do my thinges.'*

Then the identical noun phrase deletion transformation is applied to delete the pronoun 'me', together with the 'for' part of the infinitive complementizer.
Notes

1. "The syntactic component of a linguistic description of a natural language must be a system of rules which enumerates the infinite set of abstract formal structures which underlie the sentences of the language. We assume that the correct form for this generative device is a transformational syntax in the sense described by Chomsky. Such a system assigns to each string of formatives generated one or more structural descriptions (SD) in the form of a finite sequence of labeled bracketings—phrase markers (P-markers)—and a transformational markers (T-marker), which indicates the configurations of transformations applied in the derivation of the string of formatives." (J. J. Katz and P. M. postal: An Integrated Theory of Linguistic Descriptions. The M. I. T. Press, 1967, P. 6)

2. In this respect, Jacobs and Rosenbaum affirm that dialects of modern English survive to this day where this transformation which deletes 'for' before 'to' does not exist and in such dialects, sentences such as 'I want for to go' are completely grammatical (Cf. English Transformational Grammar, p. 168). But I think they are wrong because they seem to confuse the two different functions of the preposition 'for'. Here we had much better distinguish them, because it is clear that originally 'for' before an infinitive indicates the object to which the activity of the faculties or feeling is directed (OED s. v. For 10), while 'for' before 'me' in this case expresses either appropriation, appointment, and fitness or the purpose or result of benefiting or gratifying (OED s. v. For 18).

By the way, the earliest known instance of 'for to do' occurs in a document dated 1066: Godes gerichtten for to setten... (cited in Middle English Syntax by Mustanoja, p. 514) and the latter use of 'for' has occurred since the 14th century (op, cit. p. 383).

The difference in their origin and meaning, I believe, serves to clarify and confirm my point.
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Mustanoja, T. F. A Middle English Syntax Part 1, Parts of Speech, Helsinki (1960)