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ABSTRACT

Language samples of 15 young normal children actively engaged in learning base syntax were compared with samples of 15 linguistically deviant children of a comparable linguistic level. Mean number of morphemes per utterance was used to determine linguistic level. The two groups were matched according to five linguistic levels previously established and grammars were written for the language sample of each child. Five aspects of syntactic development were chosen as the basis of comparison between the two groups: phrase structure rules, transformations, construction (or sentence) types, inflectional morphology, and minor lexical categories. While few significant differences were found for the more general aspects of syntax, such as phrase structure rules, frequently occurring transformations, inflectional morphology, and the development of minor lexical categories, significant differences were found for the less general aspects of syntax. For example, significant differences were found between the two groups for infrequently occurring transformations and the number of major syntactic categories per construction type. In addition, the deviant group also showed a marked delay in the onset and acquisition time for learning base syntax. These results are discussed according to translational and cognitive developmental theory. (Author/JSRR)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF BASE SYNTAX IN
NORMAL AND LINGUISTICALLY DEVIANT CHILDREN

Donald M. Morehead and David Ingram

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INTRODUCTION

Recent research evidence suggests that early onset of first language impairment is difficult to impede, save extensive brain dysfunction. Even with serious brain dysfunction, the prognosis for acquiring a functional language system is good due to the plasticity of the developing brain (Leopold, 1965). Despite this apparent strong biological component to language development, some children, including those without any detectable brain dysfunction - experience extreme difficulty in acquiring language. Children with language learning deficits are generally thought to demonstrate a linguistic system which is, in certain important respects, quite different from that of the normal child. The "qualitative" difference has become the central focus of research into linguistically deviant children (Menyuk, 1964; Lee, 1965).

Menyuk (1964) early work represents the first systematic attempt to compare normal and deviant children using descriptive techniques based on the concept of syntactic transformational grammar. She matched both groups according to the criteria of age, IQ, and socio-economic level and found that the utterances sampled from linguistically deviant children were qualitatively different from those of normal children. The deviant group used fewer transformations and produced more restricted syntactical forms than did the normal group. More forms were generated by the deviant group in constructions representing the syntactic, transformational and morphological levels of the program. These few statistically significant differences were found, but the results were projected to indicate possible trends of differences between normal and deviant children. Menyuk (1964) did include a comparison between a normal two-year-old and a deviant three-year-old child. The dissimilarities were again found to be more predominant than the similarities. Unfortunately, only two subjects were compared and the deviant child was not matched on any specific criteria.

Lee (1965) has developed four levels of developmental sentence types, for describing syntactic development in normal and deviant children. He is following the sentence types which postulate different linguistic levels. He followed closely the review of early work in syntactic development by McNeill (1966). As a pilot test of the utility of the sentence types and linguistic levels, a language sample of a normal three-year-old was compared with that of a deviant four-and-one-half-year-old. The normal child's utterances more closely approximated the sentence types of all four levels than did the utterances of the deviant child. The deviant child also omitted constructions that were not omitted by the normal child. From these findings, Lee concluded that there were qualitative differences between the two children.

Research involving rule-based behavior indicates that all levels of development appear to be qualitative (Piaget, 1970; Kohlberg, 1968). Therefore, unless subjects are matched according to criteria which reflect a specific level or stage of development, qualitative differences can be predicted on the basis that each level or stage of development is radically different from the preceding or following level of development. Moreover, recent work in language acquisition

suggests that finding qualitative differences may not be unique to deviant and normal subjects, but may reflect linguistic level differences. Judging individual differences in cognitive function and linguistic experience (Bloom, 1970; Brown, Carden, and Bellugi, 1968).

More recently, Carrow (1968) and Lee (1970) have reported preliminary development of syntactic testing procedures using the experimental methods of Frazer, Brown and Bellugi (1968). Carrow's testing procedures are confined to comprehension tasks while Lee has included both comprehension and production tasks. Both tests were developed to measure certain aspects of syntactic development between three and eight years of age. Application of diagnostic tests based on higher age level language presents serious problems since aside from Carol Chomsky's (1965) recent research, little work has been done with normal children over four years of age.

In the research that has been carried out with children younger than four years of age, syntax has received by far the greatest attention. It appears that the most active period for learning base syntax is between eighteen months and four years. Thus, it is of considerable heuristic value to compare linguistically deviant children with normal children actively engaged in acquiring syntax. In addition, recent methods for writing children's grammars vary considerably from the early notions of "pivot" grammars which do not include the important distinction between deep (semantic) and surface (phonetic) structure (Bloom, 1970; Brown, 1970). Moreover, if deep and surface structure relations are to be adequately described, it is necessary to collect contextual information for each utterance in a language sample. For example, noun + noun constructions, such as Daddy bike, may require two or more deep or semantic interpretations to separate the possessive form from such forms as the subject-object. Grammar writing for young children now includes analysis of both aspects of grammatical relations (Bloom, 1970; Brown, 1970).

The purpose of the present study was to compare language samples which include contextual information of young normal children (18 to 36 months of age) actively engaged in learning syntax with those of deviant children of a comparable linguistic level. Linguistic level was determined by a mean number of morphemes per utterance, which appears to be a reliable measure for normal children up to three years of age (Menyuk, 1969; Bloom, 1970; Brown, 1970). An attempt was also made to establish mean morpheme per utterance count as a reliable measure for establishing linguistic level in deviant children, since it can be easily used by linguistically unsophisticated persons. An adaptation of Chomsky's (1965) transformational grammar by Rosenbaum (1967) was modified (Ingram, 1970) for writing grammars for each child. The two groups representing five linguistic levels were compared according to 1) phrase structure rules; 2) transformations; 3) construction types or surface realization of major syntactic categories and their relations; 4) inflectional morphology; and 5) select lexical items representing minor syntactic categories.

... linguistic categories were chosen because they reflect a broad range of syntactic development. Phrase structure and transformations analysis, presumably characterizes some important aspects of the child's knowledge or competence about the organization and interpretation of sentences. From the characterization of the child's competence or grammar, certain criterion measures were developed for the type and occurrence of phrase structures and transformations. In addition, construction types, inflectional morphology, and minor lexical items were selected to represent important aspects of the child's knowledge of sentences; i.e., performance. These criteria, when paired with linguistic level, provide a useful data for developing language programs for the linguistically delayed child.

METHOD

Subjects. Fifteen young normal subjects representing the range of normal children acquire a base syntactic system were selected from the Stanford community and Bing nursery school at Stanford University. The normal children were matched, using mean number of morphemes per utterance as the criterion, with fifteen linguistically deviant children currently seen at the Institute for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Stanford University School of Medicine. The two groups were divided into five linguistic levels of development with three subjects at each level: The age range for the normal group was 1;0-2;0 years, seven months-three years, one month) with a mean age of two years, four months. The deviant group had an age range of 1;0-3;0 years, six months-nine years, six months) with a mean age of 1;10 years, seven months (Table 1). The normal group was screened for speech and hearing pathologies. The linguistically deviant group was restricted to children who lack sufficient intellectual or physiological impairment to account for their difficulties in acquiring language.

Language Samples. The language samples were collected under three conditions: 1) free play with the experimenter or parent, 2) self initiation while playing with toys, and 3) elicitation while viewing a standard children's book. It was generally possible to collect samples under all three conditions, except for the younger normal children and the lower level deviant children. In cases where it was not possible to collect samples under all three conditions, samples were collected only under the first two conditions.

A high fidelity tape recorder was used to record the linguistic interaction between the adult and the child. In addition, an observer recorded the initial adult utterance, if any, the child's utterance, and the adult expansion of that utterance. In this way, the child's intended grammatical relations were more closely approximated than by the recordings or by observations alone. The utterances were then transcribed from the tapes and compared with the observer's records for a final decision.

The mean number of utterances for the normal group was 175.5, while the mean number of utterances for the deviant group was 148.7 (Table I). These utterances were not included in the samples of either group in order that each utterance would involve base syntactic relations. In addition, each linguistic structure had to occur four times or more and be present at all successive linguistic levels to be considered a part of the child's productive system (Bloom, 1970). Grammars were written for each language sample, using a modified version of Rose/baum's (1967) program. Rose/baum's system was selected because it incorporates many of the recent advances on Chomsky's (1965) transformational grammar.

RESULTS

The phrase structure grammars necessary to account for the utterances of the normal and deviant groups were nearly identical for most of the five linguistic levels. Minor differences did appear in the grammars for the two groups at the five levels but these differences were greater than the differences between subjects within the same group at a given level.

The two groups also did not differ significantly in the proportion of utterances reflecting only phrase structure relations across the five linguistic levels. However, the proportion of phrase structure or transformation utterances decreased with linguistic level for the normal and the deviant group. Nearly half the utterances at level II were without transformations while less than ten percent of the utterances were without transformations at level III. This rather dramatic change in phrase-structure-transformations ratio between level II and III held for both groups. Despite these similarities when chronological age rather than linguistic level was considered, the deviant group showed a marked delay as compared to normals in both onset and acquisition time. The delay for the beginning of level I functioning was three and one-half years while the acquisition period for reaching level V was delayed two years, five months. This delay in onset and acquisition time also held for transformations, construction types, inflections and minor lexical categories. It appears that deviant children take on the average three times as long to initiate and acquire base syntax.

Forty different transformations were identified in the language samples of both groups. The transformations of each group were assigned absolute ranks based on their frequency of occurrence. A Spearman rank order correlation was significant ($r = .96$, $t = 21.30$, $p < .01$) indicating a high degree of similarity between the two groups (Figure I). In addition, the forty transformations were compared individually for the two groups using the Mann-Whitney U Test (Siegel, 1956). Four of the forty transformations showed significantly greater occurrence for the normal group (question "do" segment, locative, demonstrative, noun deletion) while two showed significantly greater occurrence for the deviant group (progressive affix, plural affix).

To determine any differences between the two groups on infrequently occurring transformations, the forty transformations were divided into twenty frequently occurring transformations and twenty infrequently

transformations. A sign test revealed no significant difference for the frequent transformations ($p < .01$) while the infrequent transformations revealed a significant difference ($p < .06$), (Siegel, 1957). This finding suggests that while no overall significance exists between the two groups, an frequency of occurrence of transformation type, the least frequent transformations, and presumably more difficult transformations, were used significantly less by the deviant group (Figure III).

An additional test was made to determine if more specific differential use of transformations could be found between the two groups. The transformations were divided into four general categories: 1) sentence transformations, 2) noun transformations, 3) verb transformations, and 4) question transformations. Significant linguistic level effects were found for sentence transformations ($F = 8.70$, $df = 4/20$, $p < .01$), noun transformations ($F = 48.62$, $df = 4/20$, $p < .01$), and question transformations ($F = 5.32$, $df = 4/20$, $p < .01$). However, significant group differences were only found for question transformations ($F = 10.50$, $df = 4/20$, $p < .05$). In addition, a significant interaction was found between linguistic level and the two groups ($F = 3.12$, $df = 4/20$, $p < .05$) as a result of the deviant group having more question transformations at level I; namely, signaling a question by intonation. The normal group had significantly more of the transformations at the four remaining linguistic levels (Figure III).

Finally, the mean number of transformations used per utterance was compared across the five linguistic levels for the two groups. No significant group differences were found. However, a significant level effect was found ($F = 56.12$, $df = 4/20$, $p < .001$) and the differences were significant for both groups across all five levels (Figure IV). When the mean number of transformations per utterance were correlated with age, the normal group had a high positive correlation ($r = .90$, $p < .01$) while the deviant group did not ($r = .161$). (Again, a major finding is the marked delay in onset time and acquisition period for question transformations.)

The construction types depict major lexical categories (i.e., noun, verb, etc.) and their syntactic frames or possible relations. Two means were derived from the construction types and compared for the two groups. The mean number of major lexical categories per construction type was used to determine the occurrence of major categories in a variety of contexts for language samples of both groups. Significant differences were obtained between the two groups ($F = 3.12$, $df = 1/20$, $p < .05$) and across linguistic levels ($F = 23.81$, $df = 4/20$, $p < .01$), (Figure V). In addition, each syntactic relation or construction type was compared for the two groups on the basis of frequency of occurrence. A low positive correlation was found when the construction types were compared across the two groups ($r = .22$). When age was correlated with mean number of lexical categories per construction type, the normals showed a high correlation with age ($r = .82$, $p < .01$) while the deviant group showed a low

...with age (r = .45). The deviant group again manifested the kind of delay in onset and acquisition time.

In determining the relative increase in the occurrence of inflection, such as plurals, past tense, possessives, etc., across the five linguistic levels, word-morpheme ratios were computed for the two groups. Utterances either had one inflection (i.e., two words, three morphemes) or two inflections (i.e., five words, seven morphemes). The findings were not significant for the two groups, although a significant level effect was found ($F = 71.81$, $df = 4/20$, $p < .01$). The deviant group did, however, have more inflections at the first three linguistic levels than did the normal group (figure VI).

Lexical items that represent minor lexical categories were also compared for the two groups. The lexical items used for comparison were nouns, demonstratives, wh forms, prepositions, and modals. The primary concern in this comparison was to determine at what level and in what order the various items appeared for the two groups. With the exception of pronouns, only minor variance was found in the level or order of appearance of the lexical items. The deviant group by level III had sixteen pronouns while the normal group had nine pronouns (table II).

DISCUSSION

Clearly, the major differences between normal and linguistically deviant children of comparable linguistic level were not in the organization or occurrence of specific subcomponents of their base syntactic systems. Rather, the significant differences were found in the onset and acquisition time necessary for learning base syntax and the utilization of an aspect of that system, once acquired, for producing major lexical items in a variety of utterances.

Phrase structure development showed similar rule systems as well as similar occurrences of zero-transformation (phrase structure) utterances for both groups across five distinct levels of linguistic development. No overall differences were found in the frequency or type of transformational rules produced in the language samples of the two groups. Of the forty transformations compared, only six transformations were significantly different in their frequency of occurrence. Four occurred more frequently in the normal group while two occurred more frequently in the deviant group. Moreover, the mean number of transformations used by the two groups across the five levels were not significantly different indicating no severe limitation in the deviant group in the number of transformations used in a particular utterance.

The two groups were also compared on frequently occurring and infrequently occurring transformations and four general categories of transformations. Significant differences were found between the two groups on infrequently occurring transformations and the general category of questions. The findings for differences in infrequently occurring transformations are similar to those of Menyuk (1964). Of

transformations compared, she found that sixteen were used by the deviant group. However, only one of the sixteen transformations used significantly more often by the deviant group. The relative number of questions in the language samples of the deviant group may reflect either a general sampling problem inherent to child language studies or a general socio-linguistic problem which is antithetical to seeking information by linguistic code. It would be difficult to assume that question transformations are especially more difficult than many of the transformations used by the deviant group.

The development of inflections and minor lexical items (pronouns, demonstratives, articles, prepositions, and modals) was also compared between the groups. In the case of minor lexical items only minor differences were found in the level or the order of appearance of these items between the groups. The deviant group at level III had sixteen prepositions compared to nine for the normal group at the same level. The delay in the deviant group depends between levels II and III seem to reflect a failure to make some distinctions between self and others and for the distinction to be linguistically marked.

There were no significant differences in the development of inflections or in the word-morpheme ratio. The deviant group, however, did not use inflections at the first three levels of linguistic development as did the normal group. This difference was also reflected in the number of transformation types where both the progressive and plural forms were used significantly more often by the deviant group. These differences may reflect both the increased time the deviant group spent at each linguistic level and the fact that since inflections are not introduced by major transformations, they are easily detected in the surface structure. Where cognitive distinctions, such as self and other, are linguistically marked, as in the case of plural forms, deviant children appear to be somewhat less delayed in acquiring these forms.

There were no differences were found in phrase structure or transformational development, save infrequently occurring transformations and questions, including the mean number of transformations used per utterance. Significant differences were found in the number of major lexical categories per construction type. Since the two groups were matched on the total number of major lexical categories per utterance, the finding is due to a restriction in the variety of construction types produced by the deviant group. This finding is further supported by the low correlation found when types of constructions were compared between the two groups. Transformations also affect the variety of construction types produced and a significant difference was found on the number of transformations used per utterance.

The results suggest that deviant children, when studied at their particular level of linguistic development, are not seriously deficient in the acquisition of phrase structure rules, types of transformations, or the mean number of transformations used in a given utterance. However, deviant children appear to be significantly restricted in their ability

to describe and select grammatical and semantic features which allow
inflection and major lexical categories to be assigned to larger set
of relational context.

In Chomsky's (1965) system, the base component of transformational
grammar is composed of a categorical component and a lexicon. The cate-
gorical component handles general properties of the deep structure, such
as defining grammatical relations and determining base syntactic order.
The lexicon handles less general properties, including 1) properties
relevant to the function of transformational rules, 2) information
regarding the varied placement of lexical items in a sentence, and
3) properties relevant to semantic interpretation. Thus, grammatical
relations and order are determined by the categorical component, while
contextual restrictions are determined by the lexicon.

The deviant group manifested grammatical relations and base syntactic
order not unlike that of the normal group. The finding of similar
deep structure rules indicates that the two groups were not different
in their base organization of the categorical component. However, the
finding of difference on major lexical categories per construction
type and a low correlation on types of constructions indicates that the
deviant group was restricted in their ability to handle less general
properties specified by the lexicon. Specifically, this would involve
the function of transformational rules as indicated by the difference
found for infrequently occurring transformations and information
regarding varied placement of lexical items in a sentence, the latter
difference reflected in their restricted use of major lexical cate-
gories per construction type and the low correlation on types of
constructions. The delay in both onset and acquisition time for base
syntax is, no doubt, closely related to the deviant group's ability
to give an adequate semantic interpretation to an utterance in com-
prehension as well as production. The properties of the lexicon are
also closely related to the well-formedness of an utterance. Our
observations of the language samples and those of Menyuk (1969)
suggest that the utterances produced by deviant children are on the
whole less well-formed than those of normal children. Finally, since
semantic interpretation is closely related to cognitive functioning,
this raises the question of whether the problem is purely linguistic.

Other research has indicated that the language learning difficulties
of deviant children may not be entirely the result of a linguistic
deficit. For example, Inhelder (1966) and Ajuriaguerra (1966) have
found, using Piagetian-type tasks, that children with severe language
delay show a specific deficit in symbolic imagery. In Piaget's
cognitive-developmental theory, the child develops a general capacity
of representation and language represents only one manifestation of
this representation (1970). It is interesting to note in this regard
that Lovell, Hoyle, and Siddal (1968) found that children with language
delay are also delayed in symbolic play as compared to normals. It
seems reasonable to conclude, then, that linguistically deviant
children probably reflect a specific cognitive dysfunction, particu-
larly a dysfunction in all phases of symbolic representation. Moreover,
perceptual deficiencies have also been found in children with language

difficulties with the auditory and visual modalities (Resenthal and
Lieberman, in: McFadden, Grandstaff and Priddy, in press). The
relative difficulties with the auditory modality are more tenable than
with the visual modality in view of perceptual deficiencies that are
characteristic of the child and the serious delay in onset and acquisition
of the auditory modality.

There are other restrictions in the performance capacities of
linguistically deviant children aside from those found in this study.
For example, Whyns (1969) and Levell, et al (1968) in testing an
imitation task in which they have found that children with language
delays generally understand sentences simpler than those of normal
children when asked to imitate model sentences in an elicited imitation task.
Levell, et al (1968) found that normal children typically
understand sentences before they can comprehend or produce them.
Recently, Levell, et al (1968) have found that children with language
delays understand sentences before they imitate or produce them.
No significant difference on the comprehension task
exists between their normal and deviant groups were at a similar
stage of development and that the deviant group showed a
greater deficiency similar to the deficiency found for our group.
Such similar comprehension scores indicate that the underlying
comprehension systems were comparable for the two groups although their
productive and receptive capacities were not.

Another indication of a deficiency in productive capabilities is the
relative absence of question transformations. Since it is unlikely
that question transformations are psychologically more difficult than
other transformations acquired by the deviant group, their relative
absence may indicate atypical or delayed socio-linguistic development.
Levell (1968) has suggested for young normal children, at least, that
the absence of question transformations may be due to the
lack of development of language usage or discourse rules. Linguisti-
cally deviant children frequently manifest atypical social develop-
ment and any complete account of their productive deficiencies must
include the development of discourse rules.

TABLE I. Mean age, sample size, and percentage of normal and deviant groups in each of the five linguistic levels.

Linguistic Level	Age	Normal Sample Size	%/.	Age	Deviant Sample Size	%/.
I	20.0	76.7	2.22	62.3	70.7	2.22
II	21.0	100.7	2.72	71.3	155.3	2.72
III	33.0	223.3	3.70	72.0	161.0	3.40
IV	34.3	242.7	4.67	89.0	100.0	4.53
V	33.7	234.0	5.61	104.6	147.7	5.23

TABLE II Linguistic level and order of appearance of minor lexical categories for the normal group.

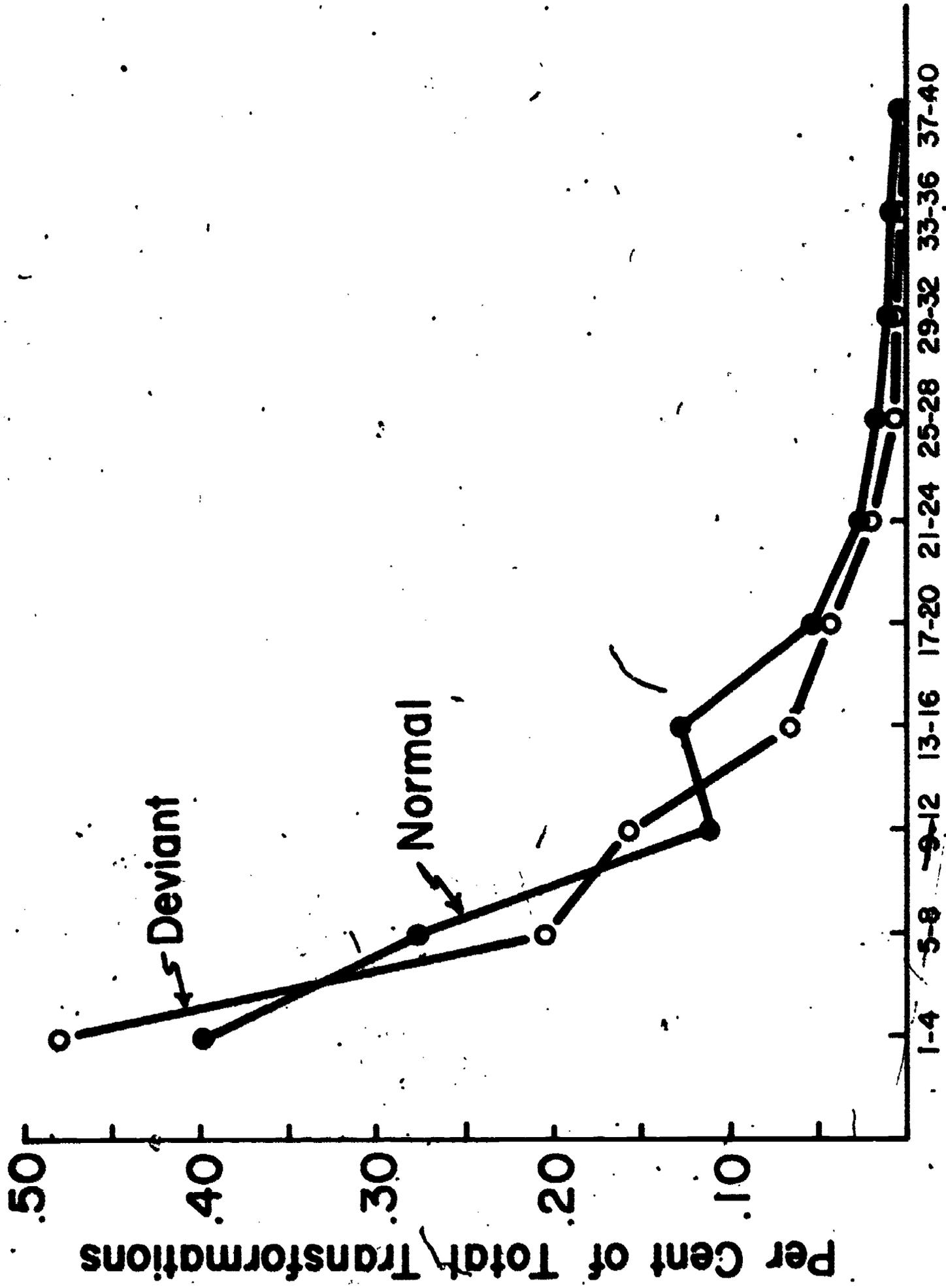
Linguistic Category Level	I	II	Normal III	IV	V
<u>Pronouns</u>	I	my it it me	you your she them	we he they us you him his	her its her our
<u>Demonstratives</u>	that	this	these	those	
<u>Adverbs</u>		where	what	why	when
<u>Prepositions</u>		in on	to with	up at for	down of off like through over by under near
<u>Modals</u>	want		gonna hafta	can will could shall	won't don't can't gotta would may might should better

TABLE II. Linguistic level and order of appearance of minor lexical categories for the deviant group.

Linguistic Category	Deviant				
	I	II	III	IV	V
<u>Pronouns</u>	it I my me	him	you it he them they she we you us your his	her their	its our her
<u>Demonstratives</u>	that	these	this	those	
<u>Wh terms</u>		what		where why	how when who
<u>Prepositions</u>	in		on at to down	with like	up of off out of for over by after into about except
<u>Modals</u>			gonna	can't can want	don't won't gotta would hadda will could didn't hafta

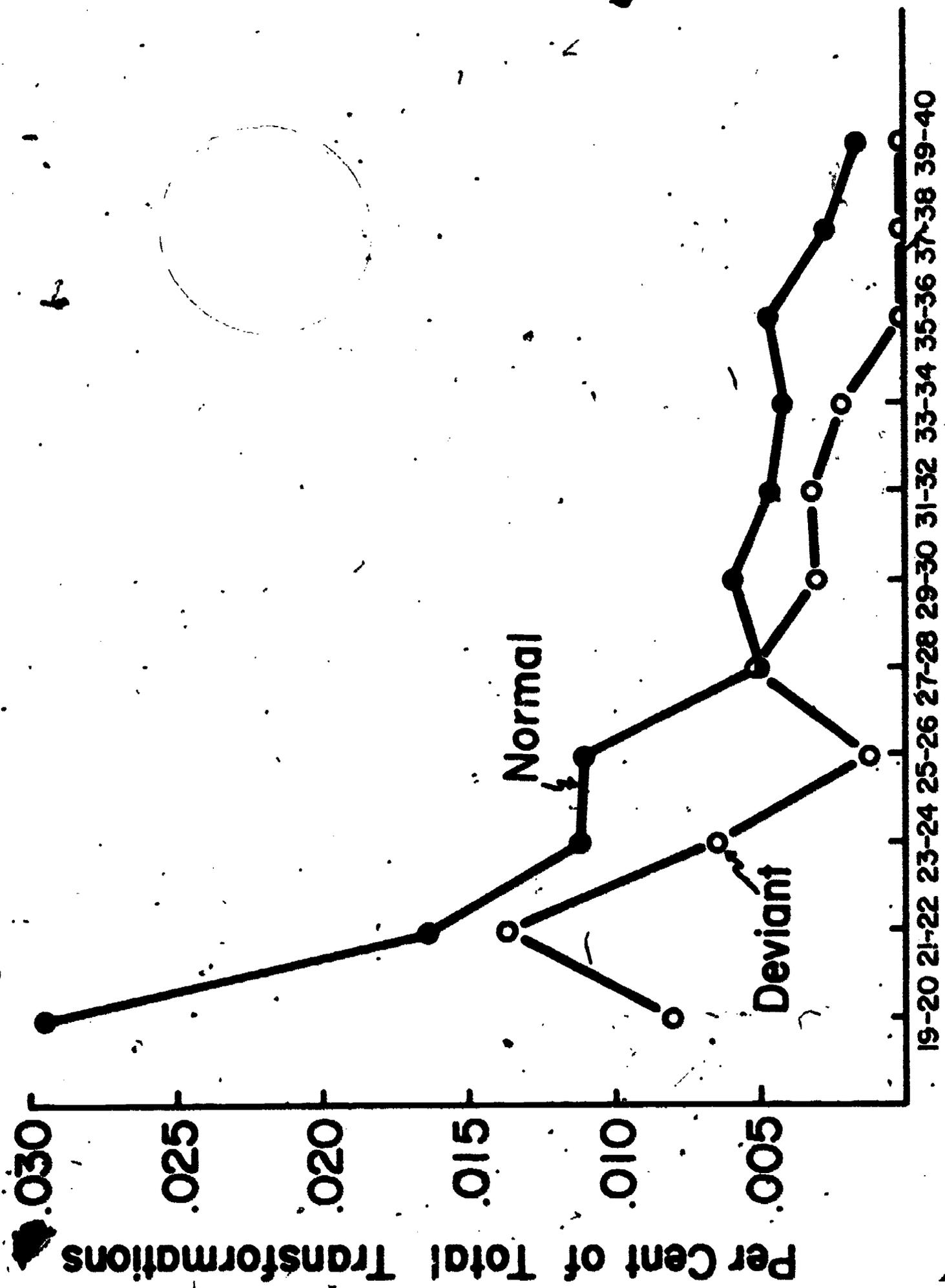
LEGENDS FOR FIGURES 1 - 6

- Figure 1 - The average rank of the forty transformations and their frequency of occurrence for the normal and deviant groups.
- Figure 2 - The average rank of the infrequently occurring transformations and their frequency of occurrence for the normal and deviant groups.
- Figure 3 - The mean number of question transformations per corpus plotted across five linguistic levels for the normal and deviant groups.
- Figure 4 - The mean number of transformations per utterance plotted across five linguistic levels for the normal and deviant groups.
- Figure 5 - The mean number of lexical categories per construction type plotted across five linguistic levels for the normal and deviant groups.
- Figure 6 - The mean number of inflections plotted across five linguistic levels for normal and deviant groups.



Average Rank

Figure 1



Average Rank

Figure 2

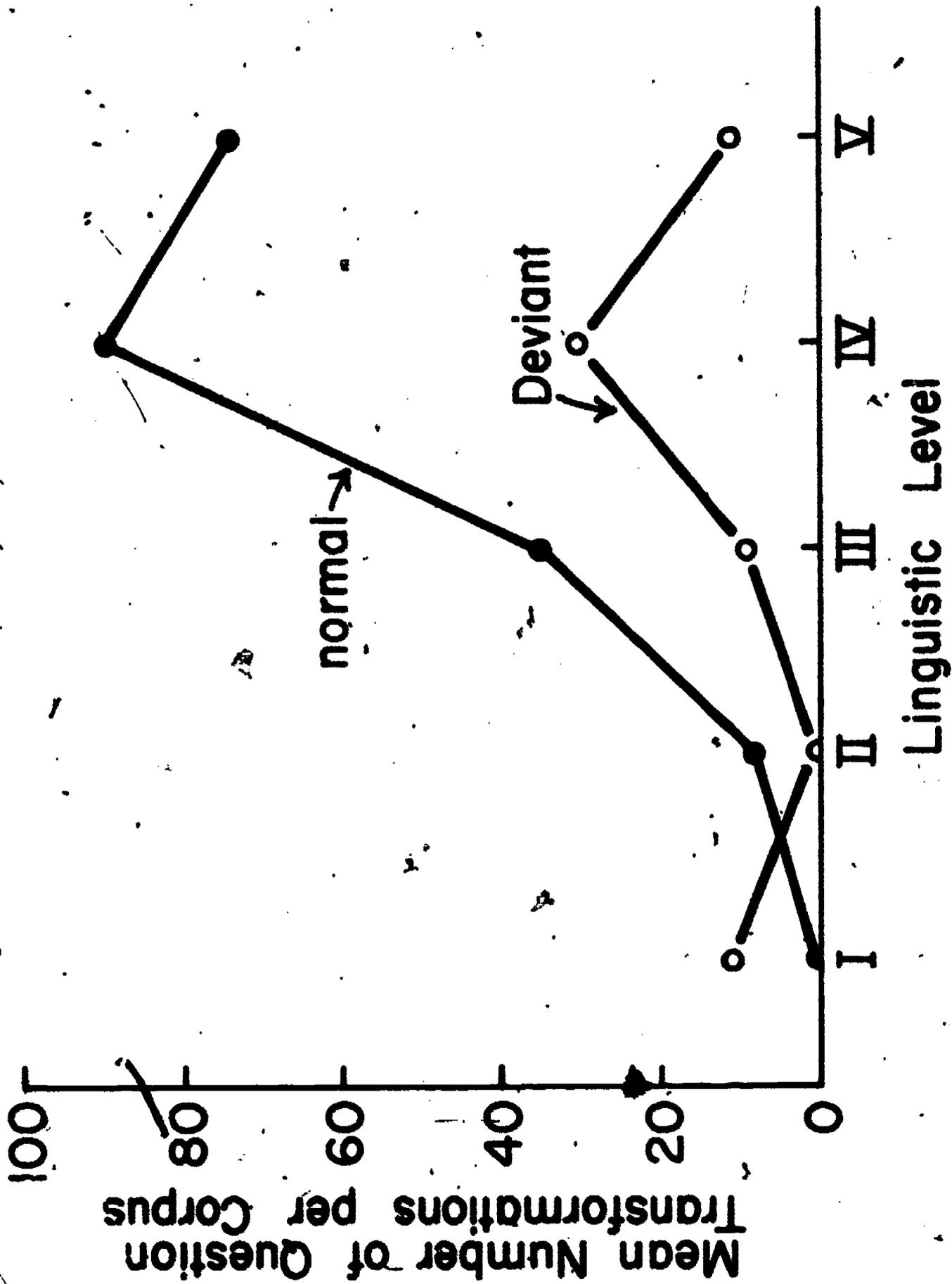


Figure 3

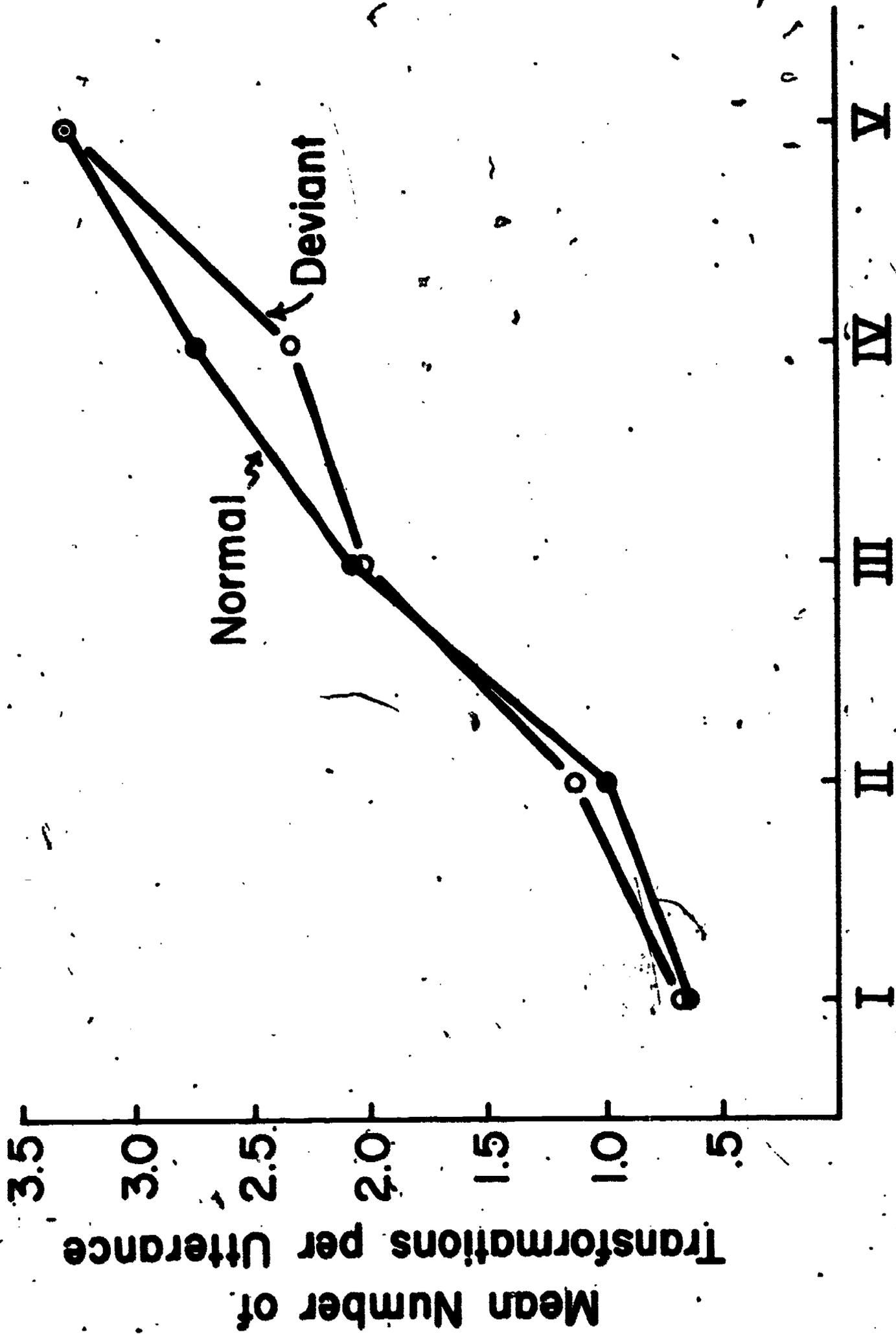


Figure 4
Linguistic Level

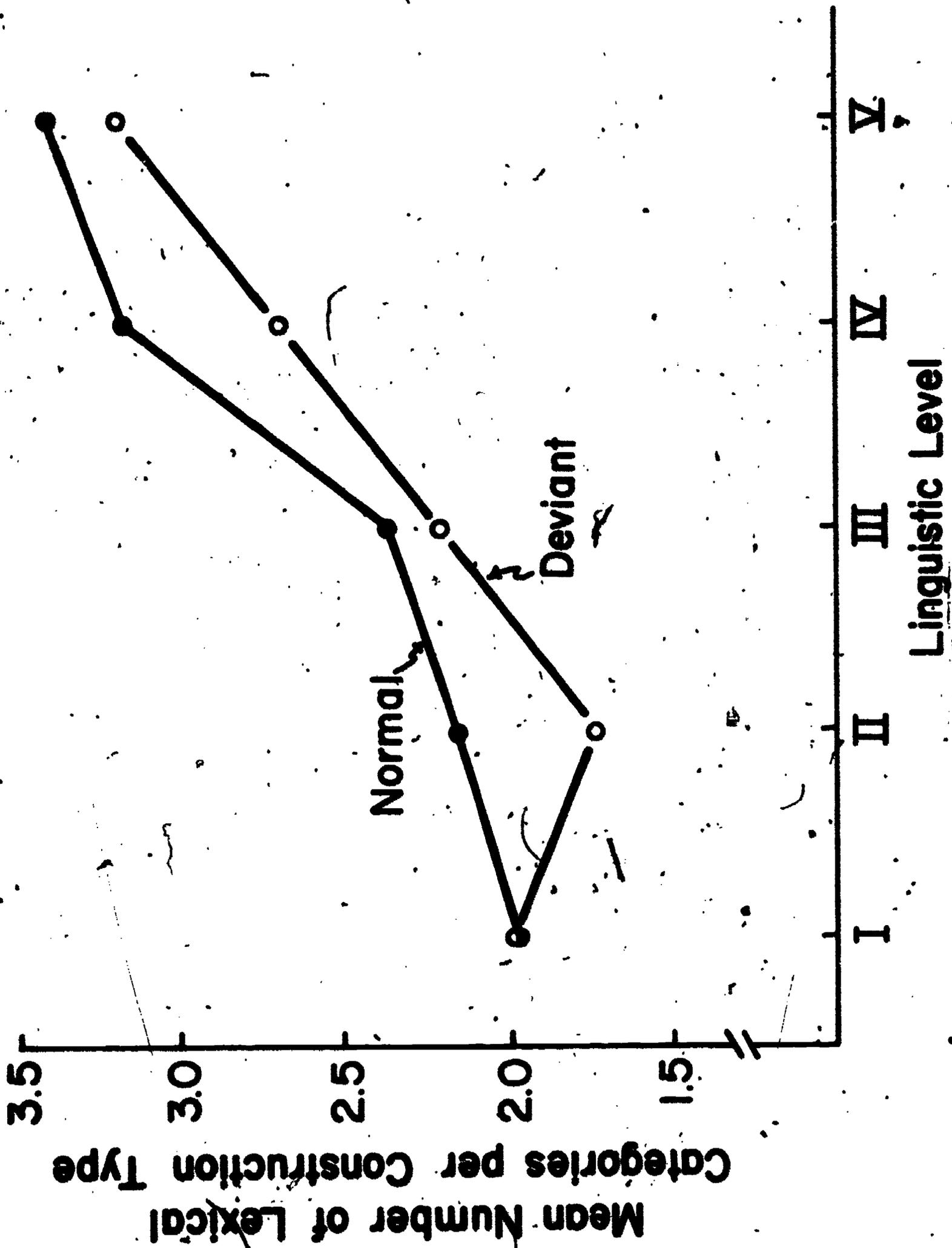


Figure 5

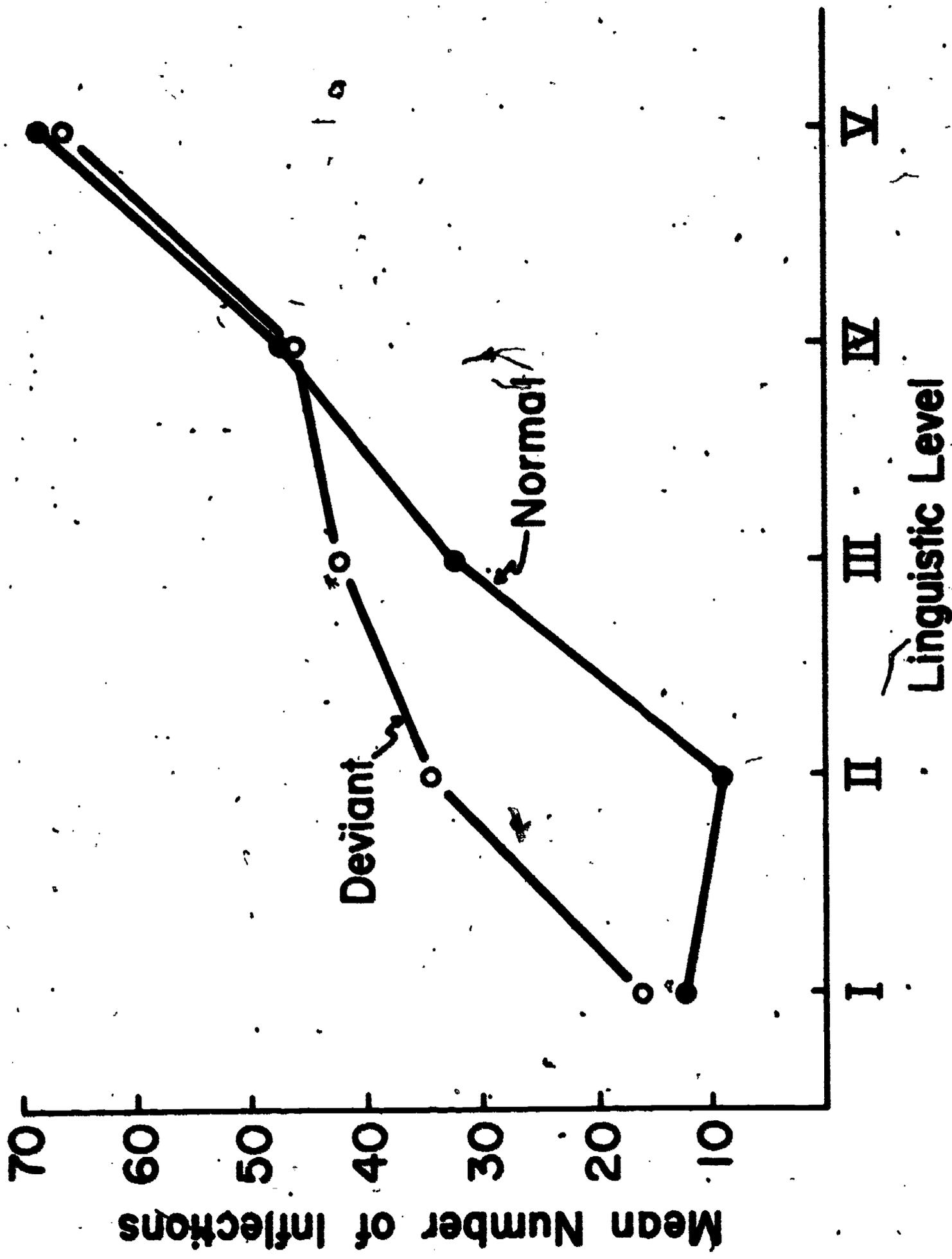


Figure 6

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