

THE QUALITIES OF FORENSIC STYLISTICS ENFOLDED IN SUICIDE NOTES

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Abstract

Suicide notes are messages left by people who have committed suicide or plan to commit suicide. These written messages express the victims' thoughts and emotions that they could not assert since they were alive. As a result, the purpose of this descriptive study is to investigate the characteristics of linguistic features of suicide notes written by eleven well-known male individuals. The method used in this study is qualitative content analysis. The data came from suicide notes written by eleven well-known males. These notes were available online. The researchers read, categorized, and explained the data consisting of five linguistic features of suicide notes: clear reasoning, expressing emotion, structure text, grammar, and punctuation. The findings revealed that all of the linguistic items were present in the suicide notes of very well individuals. The characteristics of clear reasoning were the most frequently observed because it informs readers of the victims' point of view about the reasons that led to their suicide. While the absence of hesitation and form of location occurred on an odd event. Finally, the findings of this study may aid future research into the study of suicide notes in forensic linguistics, the use of linguistics in data analysis, or legal issues

Keywords :suicide notes; characteristics; linguistic features; forensic linguistics

1. Introduction

Some of the primary areas of research in forensic stylistics are the interpretation of words, phrases, sentences, texts, ambiguity in text and laws, and the interpretation of meaning in discourse (McMenamin, 2002). Forensic linguistics is a branch of linguistics that analyzes data or legal issues. The term was coined in 1968 by linguistics professor Jan Starvik (Olsson, 2008). Starvik had investigated Timothy John Evan's statements in 1968. Evan was

charged with the murder of his wife and child. Nonetheless, Starvik discovered two styles in Evan's statements to the police, and he set about enumerating the differences. Evan could not have committed the murder, as claimed at his trial, according to Starvik's investigation. Despite the fact that Evan was wrongfully convicted, later, the actual murderer, John Christie, was apprehended and hanged. Forensic linguistics has emerged as a new scientific field as a result of this stance. It is used to determine guilt and innocence,

and linguists can use this research to more accurately correspond (Coulthard & Johnson, 2010; Olsson, 2009).

A language can deliver various meanings, including positive and negative connotations (Manan, Safrizal & Fadhilah, 2019; Sumarti, Sahayu & Triyono, 2020). Language features play a great role in investigating forensic linguistics. Here, semantics takes the grip because it discerns with truth conditions, sense and reference, and the general metaphoric associations between words (Capone et al., 2017). A study by Herat (2014) investigated how gravestone inscriptions are valuable in providing stances toward death, faith, and conviction to the afterlife. A language can convey a wide range of meanings, including both positive and negative connotations (Manan, Safrizal & Fadhilah, 2019; Sumarti, Sahayu & Triyono, 2020). Language characteristics are important in forensic linguistics research. Semantics takes control here because it distinguishes between truth conditions, sense and reference, and general metaphoric associations between words (Capone et al., 2017). Herat (2014) investigated how gravestone inscriptions can provide perspectives on death, faith, and belief in the afterlife.

Meanwhile, this study focuses on suicide notes left by victims who had committed suicide. Suicide here is not perpetrators, those who carry out harmful, illegal, or immoral acts that can cause death to others, but the act of intentionally causing one's own death. These victims are eleven well-known individuals at their time. These notes were prepared before their death and

contain messages that led to their deaths. This study emphasized the characteristics of linguistic features uncovered in the victims' notes. All whilst, this research focuses on suicide notes left by suicide victims. Suicide in this context does not refer to perpetrators, those who commit harmful, illegal, or immoral acts that may result in the death of others, but to the act of intentionally causing one's own death. These victims were eleven well-known people at the time. These notes were written prior to their deaths and contain messages that contributed to their deaths. This study focused on the linguistic features discovered in the victims' notes.

Several previous studies on the linguistic analysis of suicide notes exist. Sudjana and Fitri (2013), for example, studied the content of Kurt Cobain's suicide note to determine the reason for his suicide using forensic linguistic profiling analysis. According to the findings of their study, Cobain was depressed about his life. He felt he had too many minor problems, and they were a burden to him. Another study, conducted by Prokofyeva (2013), looked at the linguistic differences and similarities found in suicide notes and suicide posts

by her own analysis showed that if more feature characteristics of genuine suicide notes are discovered in the suicide post, it is possible for a suicide post written by a prospective victim to later develop into a suicide note. This implies that the author of the notes is likely to commit suicide in the future.

2. Method

This study is qualitative in nature. Ary et al. (2006) explained that qualitative studies focus on understanding the phenomena from the human perspective. Furthermore, to conduct analysis it used qualitative content analysis in which Williamson and Johanson (2018) explained that it focuses on interpreting and describing, meaningfully, the topics and themes that are evident in the contents of communications when framed against the research objectives of the study. This means that the research objective can be answered by studying the content of communications. Accordingly, this study intends to show the linguistic characteristics of suicide notes and to describe the messages explicitly or implicitly delivered by the victims. 2.2. Data collection The instrument used to collect data is documentation.

Documentation here refers to the data which are retrieved from the internet (the well-known individuals' suicide notes that have been made available to the public).

They are retrieved from:

- <https://www.documentingreality.com/forum/f240/famous-suicide-notes-121051/>

- <http://www.ranker.com/list/last-words-written-by-famous-people-in-their-suicidenotes/notable-quotables>

- <https://lastwordslastmoments.tumblr.com/post/49851228916/james-whale-date-of-death-may29-1957-cause-of>

- <https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/The-pain-is-overwhelming-Police-release-note2852864.php>

- <https://fionahelmsley.com/post/165444585956>

- <https://lonesomebeehive.com/2012/03/05/rock-n-roll-suicide-pete-ham-tom-evans-ofbadfinger-cant-take-it-anymore>

- <http://reelreviews.com/shorttakes/prinze.htm>

- <https://www.punkmetalrap.com/2016/10/sid-vicious-suicide-note.html>

- <https://medium.com/@sarakanza-ri/the-suicide-note-of-sergei-esenin-c3b9ac7abb4c>

On the first website, suicide notes of R. Budd Dwyer and Kurt Cobain were retrieved. Meanwhile, from the second website, two suicide notes by Kevin Carter and Hunter S. Thompson were retrieved. The suicide note by James Whale was retrieved from the third link, Clifford Baxter was retrieved from 725 Fata et al. / Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 17(2) (2021) 720–735 © 2021 Cognizance Research Associates - Published by JLLS. the fourth link, George Sanders was retrieved from the fifth link, Pete Ham was retrieved from the sixth link, Freddie Prinze was retrieved from the seventh link, Sid Vicious was retrieved from the eighth link and, finally, Sergei Esenin was retrieved from the ninth link.

Data analysis

After the data are collected, the writer used the steps of data analysis proposed by Gay et al. (2006) that consist

of three steps namely reading, describing, and classifying. Thus, the suicide notes were carefully read and noted down the characteristics of linguistic features of these notes based on the framework of Prokofyeva (2013), which are (1) clear reasoning, (2) expressing emotion, (3) text structure, (4) grammar, (5) punctuation

3. Findings and Discussion

Previous studies on linguistic analysis of suicide notes did not compare multiple suicide notes and the messages they contained; instead, they primarily focused on one or two-letter notes. As a result, the purpose of this research is to fill that void. Furthermore, this study focuses on suicide notes written by a number of people, specifically eleven male well-known individuals who died with controversial outcomes. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the study of suicide notes in forensic linguistics.

Suicide notes are messages left by people who have committed suicide or intend to commit suicide. Victims' messages can take the form of written or recorded forms, such as notes, letters, notebooks, diaries, and transcribed audio tapes (Shapero, 2011). In approximately 25% -30% of all suicide cases, suicide notes left as evidence are in written form (Rany et al., 2015). Furthermore, the contents of a suicide note can be a complaint or motive for the victim's suicide. The victim's complaint could be pleading with someone to do something or blaming someone for disrupting his life and causing him to commit suicide. Olsson claims that (2004), Suicide notes

typically include a phrase referring to the act of self-harm. It is possible that the person who writes a note is attempting to express feelings that were not voiced when he or she was alive.

A society's linguistic and social norms govern how its speakers use specific linguistic expressions to perform certain speech functions (Banikalef, 2021). Among speakers, strategies are used to express the meanings of intended messages (Hassouneh & Zibin, 2021). As a result, Chaski (2012) proposes six textual elements that can be found in suicide notes: apology, love, anger, complaint, business, and trauma. According to Prokofyeva (2013), genuine suicide notes have five distinguishing features: clear reasoning, expressing emotions, text structure, grammar, and punctuation.

3.1 Clear reasoning

Clear reasoning is one of the distinguishing features of genuine suicide notes that link the act of suicide to the information provided in the suicide notes. This feature's statements are typically represented by the answer to the question "why?" Prokofyeva (2013) This indicates that the conjunction sentence, phrase, and clause of "because" echoes the important and frequent reason for a victim to end his or her life.

Prokofyeva (2013) categorizes clear reasoning characteristics into three categories of reasons for suicides: ailment, being offended with something, and trying to blame somebody in hopelessness. When a disease is identified as the cause of suicide, physical pain becomes the description in

the note. Orbach (1994), for example, identified physical pain as the cause of a 59-year-old married female's suicide, writing: "After six weeks of streptomycin shots. We have conclusive evidence that my bronchial tube ulcers have not healed. I can't bleed my family for that much money" (Orbach, 1994, p. 68). This implies that physical and even mental pain can cause a victim to commit suicide.

According to Chesney et al. (2014), diseases, such as mental disorders, increase the risk of death more than death in general. They cited a suicide note written by a 52-year-old married couple who said, "You remember when I returned from the hospital, I broke down." That was the start of my ailments." Pompili et al. (2008) went on to say that people with mental illnesses are more likely to attempt suicide. Women are more likely than men to suffer from this condition. In linguistics, the presentation of this suffering is usually represented in the victims' notes by associative words such as 'because,' 'since,' 'until,' 'after,' and 'when.'

3.2 Expressing emotions

Some other way to tell if a suicide note is genuine is to examine the emotions expressed by the writer in the suicide note. The suicide notes express several emotions, including fear of living, relief, hopelessness, and the absence of doubt (Prokofyeva, 2013). The most common emotion expressed in suicide letter is fear of living, whether stated explicitly or implicitly. This utterance exists as a result of an expression that stems from a person's internal life of opposition to something. As a result,

from the standpoint of humans, existence is created that appears non-existent (Shariatnia, 2015). "I can't go on any longer in these terrible times," for example.

It demonstrates that the writer is afraid of dying. It is understandable that a person who ends his or her own life is afraid of death. The reprieve feeling can also be seen in a suicide note. According to Heidegger, in Shariatnia (2015), the victims believe that death is the only way to be free of the fear of existence. The writer who expresses this type of emotion believes that he or she can die peacefully because he or she has already actually achieved someone in this world that he or she desired to accomplish. "I remain relaxed and at peace, and grateful that I can sleep painlessly," for example. It means that the writer felt relieved and could die peacefully despite committing suicide.

Another emotion that is usually shown in suicide notes is the expression of hopelessness. Huen et al. (2015) state that hopelessness is a negative expectation of something to be done in the future without prior consideration of the purpose for pursuing it. On the other hand, hope is an essential thing for living beings since it can grow a desire to live longer. The absence of hope makes a person has no desire to live any longer where this could lead the person to end his/her own life. For example, "The sun is leaving the hill now so hope nothing else happens". It shows that the writer implied metaphorically that he/she was hopeless. The expression of hopelessness is another emotion that is commonly seen in suicide notes.

According to Huen et al. (2015), hopelessness is a negative expectation of something being done in the future without prior consideration of the reason for continuing to pursue it. On the other hand, hope is necessary for living beings because it fosters a desire to live longer. The absence of hope causes a person to have no desire to live any longer, which may lead to the person committing suicide. "The sun is leaving the hill now, so let's hope nothing at all happens," for example. It demonstrates that the author implied metaphorically that he or she was discouraged.

The absence of doubt is another common feeling expressed in suicide notes. According to Heidegger (2014), he met anyone who felt comfortable in the face of death; the person faced death with peace of mind rather than fear. The writer's affirmation of undeniable emotion indicates an authentic suicide letter. "I hereby bequeath my body to medics for dissection," for example. The example demonstrates that the writer had no reservations about taking his or her own life and even allowing his or her dead body to be analyzed for medical purposes.

3.3 Text structure

Customarily, persons deliberate on their own willingness to pursue suicide for some time before making the final decision, and thus, when the time comes, they already know what they want to write in their suicide notes as their final words (Prokofyeva, 2013). According to Onu and Solomon-Etefia (2019, p. 101), "through death, the life that one has resided is confirmed," so when a person commits suicide before their time, the

notes implicitly elucidate the life that they had gone through to finally decide suicide.

The location is aimed at giving the note to the person to whom the suicide note is written. According to Sudjana and Fitri (2013), victims addressed their suicide notes to someone or a group of people for a variety of reasons. A form of address is usually located in the top left corner of the first paragraph of a suicide note. "Dear David," for example, and "You cops will want to know" (Sudjana & Fitri, 2013). In any suicide note, an introduction depicts an important hint. It is when the victims explain why or demonstrate that suicide is their only choice. According to Ioannou and Debowska (2014), the person who wrote this article of suicide notes typically uses the stereotype of suicide motive as their explanation, which is frequently expressed by negative emotion. "You cops will want to know why I did it, well, but let us say that I lived 61 years too many," is a common introduction found in first passage. There is an interesting text structure in the suicide note written by Sergei Esenin, which is more like a poem.

*Goodbye, my friend, goodbye My
love, you are in my heart.*

*It was preordained we should part
And be reunited by and by.*

Goodbye: no handshake to endure.

*Let's have no sadness — furrowed
brow. There's nothing new in dying
now Though living is no newer.
(Esenin, 1925)*

The suicide note is written in the form of a poem and addressed to Esenin's "friend," who is later referred to as "my

love." The text began with an address to his "friends" and "love," followed by his emotion or disappointment in a failed relationship. The poem's middle part begins with a parting or "goodbye" and a request that there be no sadness over his death. The poem concluded with his conviction that death was the only option because his mental anguish would've been the same as if he lived.

3.4 Grammar

The examination of tenses used in victim suicide notes is fascinating. According to Galasinski (2017), victims of suicide notes typically write the situation from present to past, with fewer statements trying to refer to the present and future. As a result, the past tense is more commonly used in suicide notes than the other tenses (Prokofyeva, 2013). "I loved you and was proud of you," for example. I adored the young kids and couldn't bear the thought of companions suffering as a result of my actions.

3.5 Punctuation

The most crucial component of analyzing a suicide note is punctuation. According to Schoene and Dethlef (2016), the use of punctuation varies depending on one's life experience, such as background, level of education, social and family status. As a result, punctuation can be used to express emotion or show the victim's condition.

Furthermore, punctuation can add meaning to a sentence. The term "valuable" punctuation refers to some common patterns found in suicide notes. According to Eber-Schmid (2017), this communication (punctuation) can resolve misunderstandings and convey the

victim's emotion in a text. Prokofyeva (2013) provided the following examples of frequent punctuation normal patterns in suicide notes:

- “--” (double-dash): it is used as a sign which can function as a comma, a dash, or periods.
- “...” (three or more periods at the end of a sentence/phrase): they are used to express the idea of an 'open-ended or a continuation. This sign gives hope that what has been said is not the end.
- “!!!” (three, sometimes one, exclamation marks): they are used to strengthen the meaning of a sentence or phrase.

Consequently, the punctuation models frequently found in suicide notes are an exclamation point, semicolon, apostrophe, left and right brackets, asterisk, plus sign, emotions, ellipses, question marks (Eber-Schmid, 2017). An exclamation mark (!) means between playful and desperate. A semicolon (;) means probably trying too hard. The apostrophe (‘) can indicate details in the victim's mind. Left and right bracket (()) means probably too logical. Asterisk (*) means the readers are not as well recognized as the victim. The plus sign (+) means extreme affection. Emoticons (☹, 😊, etc.) mean bringing the communication to be alive. Ellipsis (...) indicates that there is a meaning between the lines. Question mark (?) does not always a mark for a question word; if it is used more than once, the meaning will be changed according to the sentence before (Eber-Schmid, 2017)

4. Conclusion

All of the linguistic features of suicide notes promoted by Prokofyeva (2013) were found in the suicide notes of eleven male well-known individual citizens. They are as follows: clear reasoning, emotion expression, text structure, grammar, and punctuation. Notes contain clear reasoning, such as victims facing diseases, being offended by something, blaming someone or something, and despair. Furthermore, clear reasoning can give additional information about the victims' perspectives on the problems they faced. It is then followed by expressing emotion, in which sentences reveal a fear of living, a lack of relief, hopelessness, and a lack of hesitation. In this characteristic, expressing emotion informs readers about the victims' psychological issues, which are shown adversely.

Furthermore, text structures appear in all eleven male well-known individuals' suicide notes. The text structure characteristics include an address, an introduction, a pinnacle, and a summation. Finally, there are different linguistic features that are found as the least in the suicide notes, namely grammar and punctuation. As a result, by examining the validity of the suicide notes, we may be able to determine the messages conveyed by the victims, either explicitly or implicitly, in order to reveal the motivations for attempting suicide.

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