







The characteristics of linguistic features enfolded in suicide notes

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APA Citation:

Fata, I.A., Yusuf, Y.Q., & Kamal, R., Namaziandost, E. (2021). The characteristics of linguistic features enfolded in suicide notes. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(2), 720-735. Doi: 10.52462/jlls.50

Submission Date:19/02/2021

Acceptance Date:20/05/2021

Abstract

Suicide notes are messages left by individuals who commit suicide or who intend to commit suicide. These written messages express the victims' feelings that were not expressed when they were alive. And thus, this qualitative study intends to investigate the characteristics of linguistic features of suicide notes written by eleven male well-known individuals. The approach to this study is qualitative content analysis. Data were obtained from suicide notes written by eleven male well-known individuals. These notes were retrievable online. The researchers read, classified, and described the data based on the five characteristics of linguistic features of suicide notes, they are clear reasoning, expressing emotion, structure text, grammar, punctuation. The results showed that all of the characteristics of linguistic features were found in the well-known individuals' suicide notes. The characteristics of clear reasoning took place as the most frequent one to occur since it tells the readers of the victims' point of view about the problems that they were facing that led them to suicide. While the absence of doubt and form of address took place as rare. In the end, the result of this research can provide more information in research regarding the study of suicide notes in forensic linguistics, an application of linguistic on analyzing data or legal issues.

Keywords: suicide notes; characteristics; linguistic features; forensic linguistics; victims' views

1. Introduction

In forensic linguistics, the interpretation of words, phrases, sentences, texts, ambiguity in text and laws, and interpretation of meaning in discourse are some of the primary areas of research (McMenamin, 2002). Forensic linguistics is an application of linguistic on analyzing data or legal issues where the term was starting to be used in 1968 by linguistics professor Jan Starvik (Olsson, 2008). In 1968, Starvik had investigated the statements made by Timothy John Evan. Evan was indicted to have killed his wife and baby. Nevertheless, Starvik found that Evan's statements to the police contained two styles and he set about enumerating the differences. Starvik's investigation showed that Evan could not, as had been claimed at his trial, have conducted the murder. Despite Evan was falsely convicted and hanged, later the actual murderer, John Christie, was caught. From this

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stance, forensic linguistics has become an emerging field of science. It is used to evaluate questions of guilt and innocence, and linguists can apply this research to correspond with greater accuracy (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. 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.

There are several previous studies related to the linguistic analysis of suicide notes. Among them is Sudjana and Fitri (2013), who studied the content of Kurt Cobain's suicide note by identifying the motive of his suicide through forensic linguistic profiling analysis. The result of their study showed that Cobain felt depressed about his life. He believed he underwent too many unimportant problems and they were a burden to him. Another study by Prokofyeva (2013) also investigated the linguistic differences and similarities that are found amongst suicide notes and suicide posts. The results of her research showed that it is possible for a suicide post written by a prospective victim to later develop into a suicide note if more feature characteristics of genuine suicide notes are uncovered in the suicide post. This implies that it is probable that the writer of the notes may commit suicide in the future.

1.1. Research objective

Hence, previous studies on linguistic analysis of suicide notes have not dealt with comparing several suicide notes and the messages that they contained; they have largely focused on one or two-letter notes. Therefore, this study intends to fill in this gap. Moreover, this study concentrates on suicide notes written by several individuals, specifically by eleven male well-known individuals who died with controversial outcomes. It is expected that the findings from this study can add knowledge to the study of suicide notes in forensic linguistics.

1.2. Literature review

Suicide notes are messages left by individuals who commit suicide or who intend to commit suicide. The messages left by victims can be in the form of written or otherwise recorded forms, such as notes, letters, notebooks, diaries, and transcribed audio tapes (Shapero, 2011). Out of all suicide cases, about 25%-30% of suicide notes left as pieces of evidence are in the written form (Rany et al., 2015). In addition, the contents of a suicide note can be a complaint or motive on why the victim committed suicide. The victim's complaint could be either pleading with someone to do something or blaming someone for disturbing his life that leads him to end his life. According to Olsson (2004), suicide notes generally have a phrase that refers to the act of self-killing. It can be said that the person who writes a note may try to express his or her feelings which were not expressed when he or she alive.

The linguistic and social norms of a society govern the way its speakers use particular linguistic expressions to carry out certain speech functions (Banikalef, 2021). Strategies are used to express the meanings of intended messages among speakers (Hassouneh & Zibin, 2021). Accordingly, in suicide

notes, Chaski (2012) proposes six elements of texts that can be found in them, which are apology, love, anger, complaint, business, and trauma. Based on the work of Prokofyeva (2013), she suggests that there are five characteristic features of genuine suicide notes, namely clear reasoning, expressing emotions, text structure, grammar, punctuation.

1.2.1. Clear reasoning

Clear reasoning is one of the characteristic features of genuine suicide notes that link the deed of suicide grounded from the information given in the suicide notes. The statements of this feature are typically represented by the answer to the question “why?” (Prokofyeva, 2013). This denotes that the common and apparent reason for a victim to end his or her life is echoed by the conjunction sentence, phrase, and clause of “because”.

Prokofyeva (2013) divides the characteristics of clear reasoning into three categories of reasons for committing suicide; they are disease, offended by something, and blaming someone in despair. Once a disease is identified as the motive to commit suicide, then physical pain comes to be the description in the note. For example, Orbach (1994) identified physical pain as the cause of a 59-year-old married female to commit suicide, in which she wrote: “After six weeks of streptomycin shots. We have conclusive proof that the ulcers in my bronchial tubes have not healed. I can’t bleed my family for any such amount of money” (Orbach, 1994, p. 68). This conveys that physical and even mental pain can affect a victim to perform an act of self-destruction.

Chesney et al. (2014) stated that diseases, such as mental disorders; cause the risk of death more than death in general. They presented an example in a suicide note by a 52-year-old married man, who wrote: “You remember when I returned from the hospital I broke down. That was the beginning of my illness”. Pompili et al. (2008) further informed that people who suffer from mental disorders are highly vulnerable to commit suicide. This suffering is more frequent in women than men. In linguistics, the presentation of this suffering is usually represented by conjunction words of ‘because’, ‘since’, ‘until’, ‘after’, and ‘when’ in the victims’ notes.

1.2.2. Expressing emotions

Another way to identify a genuine suicide note is by looking at the emotions that are expressed by the writer in the suicide note. There are several emotions that are expressed through the suicide notes, namely: fear of living, relief, hopelessness, and absence of doubt (Prokofyeva, 2013). The expression of fear of living is the most frequent emotion found in suicide notes, whether it is stated explicitly or implicitly. This expression exists because of an expression that comes from the inner state of a person against something. Therefore, from the perspective of humans, existence is created that appears non-existent (Shariatnia, 2015). For example, “I cannot go on longer in these terrible times”. It shows that the writer fears to live any longer. It is reasonable that the person who ends his/her own life has a certain fear towards his/her life.

The relief feeling is also sometimes shown in a suicide note. According to Heidegger, in Shariatnia (2015), the victims believe that death is the only way that can free human beings from feeling fear of existence. The writer who expresses this kind of emotion feels that he/she could die in peace because he/she had already accomplished something that he wanted to accomplish in this world. For instance, “I feel calm and at peace and grateful that I can go to sleep painlessly”. It means that the writer felt relieved and could die peacefully even though through 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 absence of doubt is also a common emotion shown in suicide notes. Heidegger (2014) stated that he had met someone who felt safe in front of death; the person faced death with peace of mind rather than with fear. A genuine suicide note can be seen from the expression of doubtless emotion shown by the writer. For instance, “I hereby bequeath my body to medics for dissection”. The example shows that the writer had no doubt about ending his/her own lives and even giving his/her dead body to be analyzed for medical purposes.

1.2.3. *Text structure*

Typically, victims usually consider their decision to commit suicide for some time before making the ultimate decision to do so, and thus, when the time comes, they already know what they want to write as their last words in their suicide notes (Prokofyeva, 2013). Onu and Solomon-Etefia (2019, p. 101) write that “through death, the life that one has lived is revealed”, hence, concerning suicide notes, where the person takes their life before their time, the notes implicitly elucidate the life that they had gone through to finally decide suicide.

Form of address is aimed to deliver the note to whom the suicide note is made. Sudjana and Fitri (2013) stated that victims addressed their suicide notes to someone or a group of people for several reasons. Usually, a form of address is found in the top left of the first paragraph in a suicide note. For example: “Dear David” and “You cops will want to know” (Sudjana & Fitri, 2013).

An introduction portrays an important hint in any suicide note. It is when the victims explain why or show the only option of committing suicide. Ioannou and Debowska (2014) stated that in ordinary, the author of suicide notes uses the stereotype of suicide motive as their explanation and it is frequently expressed by negative emotion. Most of the frequent introductions found in the first paragraph are such as “You cops will want to know why I did it, well, just let us say that I lived 61 years too many.”

1.2.4. *Grammar*

The analysis of tenses used in suicide notes by victims is interesting. Galasinski (2017) stated that victims of suicide notes typically write the situation from present to past, and the statements referring to present and future are fewer compared to past. Therefore, the past tense is the most frequently used tense rather than the other tenses in suicide notes (Prokofyeva, 2013). For example: “I loved you and was proud of you. I loved the children dearly and could not see them suffer so much on account of me.

1.2.5. *Punctuation*

Punctuation is the most important component in analyzing a suicide note. Schoene and Dethlef (2016) stated that the use of punctuation depends on his or her experience in life such as background, level of education, social and family status. Therefore, punctuation can be a tool to express emotion or show the condition of the victim.

Moreover, punctuation can give meaning to a sentence. The term ‘meaningful’ punctuation refers to some frequent models found in suicide notes. Eber-Schmid (2017) stated that this communication (punctuation) can solve misunderstanding and put the victim’s emotion in a text. Prokofyeva (2013) put forward some examples of frequent punctuation models found 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).

2. Method

2.1. Research design

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-suicide-notes/notable-quotables>
- <https://lastwordslastmoments.tumblr.com/post/49851228916/james-whale-date-of-death-may-29-1957-cause-of>
- <https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/The-pain-is-overwhelming-Police-release-note-2852864.php>
- <https://fionahelmsley.com/post/165444585956>
- <https://lonesomebeehive.com/2012/03/05/rock-n-roll-suicide-pete-ham-tom-evans-of-badfingercanttakeitanymore>
- <http://reelreviews.com/shorttakes/prinze.htm>
- <https://www.punkmetalrap.com/2016/10/sid-vicious-suicide-note.html>
- <https://medium.com/@sarakanzari/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

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.

2.3. 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. Results and Discussion

3.1. Clear reasoning

Clear reasoning is the most used feature in the suicide notes by the eleven well-known individuals that were analyzed. Examples from data are:

E1 “No More Games. No More Bombs. No More Walking. No More Fun. No More Swimming. 67. That is 17 years past 50. 17 more than I needed or wanted. Boring. I am always bitchy. No Fun – for anybody. 67. You are getting Greedy. Act your old age. Relax – This won’t hurt. (Thompson, 2005)

This clause is classified as the first type of clear reason, which is a disease. Thompson used “That is 17 years past 50. 17 more than I needed or wanted. Boring” to tell the readers that there was no value in his life anymore” to reveal this feature. Thompson had been diagnosed with Existential crisis which is part of mental illness. Roberts and Lamont (2014) stated that existential crisis is a consequence born by a contradictory encounter between the individual’s desire to understand the struggle with the suffering of life and the lack of a comprehensive meaning to life. In the note, Thompson also used “Boring” to refer to his life. In Thompsons’ opinion, his life had reached the limit of the real meaning of life.

In the phrase “That is 17 years past 50. 17 more than I needed or wanted”, it showed that he felt he had overstayed from being welcome to this world; he felt that he only deserved to live until the age of 50, and every year after that was the result of him being unwanted. The word “wanted” also indicated that he wanted to live only until the age of 50; that the goal in his life. This can be interpreted that he felt there was no more value in life after he hit that milestone of that age. The clause “No More Games. No More Bombs. No More Walking. No More Fun. No More Swimming. 67” showed the negative and positive events that he would leave when he committed suicide.

Another type of clear reasoning found in Dwyer’s suicide note is as follows.

E2 But to those of you with depth and concern the real story will be what I hope and pray results from this morning—in the coming months and years, the development of a true Justice System here in the United States. (Dwyer, 1987)

Dwyer’s words in E2 are classified as blaming something. Dwyer used something to blame the things that happened in his life. It is in line with Ioannou and Debowska (2014) who defined blame as the conflict that becomes the direct reason behind the decision of committing suicide, here the victim refuses to take any blame for their failures. Thus, Dwyer used “the development of a true Justice System in the United States” as an object to blame. Dwyer defended himself by blaming something else for his act of committing suicide.

Dwyer felt that justice in the United States was not running well and he wanted to inform the people who would read his suicide note. Therefore, he wanted to inform readers that he was one of the victims of injustice. Ioannou and Debowska (2014) stated that in this type of clear reasoning, it is common that the victim's suicide notes fictitiously express anger and blame to others for the difficult circumstances they experienced.

Meanwhile, E3 shows the type of despair in clear reasoning in Cobain's suicide note.

E3 And that terrifies me to the point where I can barely function. I can't stand the thought of Frances becoming the miserable, self-destructive, death rocker that I've become. (Cobain, 1994)

The sentences in E3 are classified as despair; they expressed Cobain's feeling of guilt. Despair is being lost in a situation. On the other hand, an action born from despair is hope; but hope born of despair may turn to the meaning into a person's perception of an isolated act (Dorrien, 2012). Accordingly, the victims believe committing suicide is the only hope to solve their problems. In this sentence, Cobain used "I can't stand the thought of Frances becoming the miserable, self-destructive, death rocker that I've become" to show that he felt guilty if someone became like him. It was indicated by the sentence "I've become". On the other hand, he believed that his work was not a good example for the people around him. It was marked by the sentence "death rocker" because Cobain was a singer from a famous band.

Cobain further expressed his despair because he saw his daughter, "Frances", would become a rock band personnel like him. It was shown by the sentence "I can't stand the thought". He believed that to be a rock band personnel was not a good choice in life. Although rockers were famous and rich, in Cobain's opinion, it was full of frustration and was shown in the sentence "becoming the miserable, self-destructive, death rocker". This is following Manning (2011) that in despair condition, a person is more vulnerable to having a sense of guilt towards him or her, and that must be overridden.

Another type of clear reasoning that is being offended by something is shown in Kevin Carters' suicide note.

E4 I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings and corpses and anger and pain... (Carter, 1994)

This sentence is classified as being offended by something; the reason for Carter to tell readers the main reason for him to commit suicide. In Carters' opinion, he felt depressed by the experiences that happened in his life. Ben Park et al. (2011) stated that people who committed suicide must have negative feelings and attitudes toward their bodies, and these negative feelings and attitudes can facilitate the urge to commit suicide. Carter's sentence "I am haunted" explained that he could not forget some terrible incidents that he went through or caused and they were eroding his mind.

In E4, Carter further told readers that he could not forget "the vivid memories of killings" incidents. The vivid memories are referred to as a photo he took of a vulture and a little girl. With this photo, he won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography in Sudan. The photo exhibited a starving child lying on the ground, and not so far from her was a vulture standing by; as if waiting for its food. From this picture, Carter was also bullied by society for his art. They asked him, where was his humanity to let a little girl die and eaten by a vulture. Furthermore, it was not the only problem that made Carter felt depressed. Accordingly, Ritzer and Stepnisky (2017) argued that even the most individualistic acts such as suicide could also have their social aspect. Carter was a photojournalist in the area of conflict, and he must have witnessed various incidences that were common in war. As time went by, what he had seen became a burden to him and this was shown by the sentence "corpses and anger and pain..."

3.2. Expressing emotion

The second characteristic of the linguistic feature of suicide notes is expressing emotion. This is also found in all eleven of the individuals' suicide notes. As suggested by Hancock et al. (2007) we can express and accurately assess the emotional states that are important to humans. This is illustrated in Cobain's note below.

E5 I'm too much of an erratic, moody baby! I don't have the passion anymore, and so remember, it's better to burn out than to fade away. (Cobain, 1994)

The sentence "I don't have the passion anymore, and so remember, it's better to burn out than to fade away" is classified as a fear of living. He believed that there was no reason or something that made him excited to live. Therefore, Cobain saw his life as meaningless and his existence was only to face problems. It is in line with what Shariatinia (2015), who stated that this expression exists because an expression that comes from the inner state of a person toward something; from the perspective of human, existence is created by something that appears non-existent. Here, Cobain informed he had been patient with all the problems that he faced until he had come to the point where he believed this life was terrible and enough and shown in this sentence "I don't have the passion anymore".

Additionally, Cobain's desire to end his life was not only affected by the fear of living, but by the motto of his life. The sentence was "and so remember, it's better to burn out than to fade away". From this phrase "and so remember" inferred that that was the motto of his life and was reminding the readers of it. The phrase continues "it's better to burn out than to fade away". This phrase suggests that he would prefer to end his life rather than to pass away or die of old age. Shariatinia (2015) continued to say that through death, a person becomes aware of his actions and limitations.

E6 I've repeatedly said that I'm not going to resign as State Treasurer. After many hours of thought and meditation, I've made a decision that should not be an example to anyone because it is unique to my situation. (Dwyer, 1987)

In E6, the sentence is classified as a relief, where Dwyer used the sentence "After many hours of thought and meditation I've made a decision that should not be an example to anyone because it is unique to my situation" to show that he would not regret his decision to commit suicide. It was because Dwyer believed that death was a better way to maintain his name, dignity, and self-esteem. The victims believed that death is the only way that human beings can be freed from their fear (Shariatinia, 2015).

Furthermore, in E6, the relief sentence was signified by "I've made a decision". Dwyer had thought about the effect of what would happen when he committed suicide. The sentence "After many hours of thought and meditation" means that he had carefully thought over his action before he undertook it. Here, Dwyer used a gun as the weapon to blow out his head in front of many journalists when he committed suicide. In his last sentence "that should not be an example to anyone" meant that even though he committed suicide to defend his rights, he did not justify his way of doing it. In his opinion, the circumstances that he experienced in his life made him an exception, it was indicated by the sentence "it is unique to my situation". In other words, the victims who commit suicide have realized the effect that would happen to his/her surroundings after he/she died (Stincelli, 2004).

E7 But as we've discussed our plans to expose the warts of our legal system, people have said, 'Why bother? No one cares, you'll look foolish, 60 Minutes, 20-20, the American Civil Liberties Union, Jack Anderson, and others have been publicizing cases like yours for years and it doesn't bother anyone.' (Dwyer, 1987)

This sentence is classified as hopeless emotion. Huen et al. (2015) stated that hopelessness is a negative expectation of something to be done in the future without prior consideration of the purpose

for pursuing it. It can be said that this emotion is frequently used to show how the victim felt disappointed about something that makes him or her have no desire to live. In the sentence “and others have been publicizing cases like yours for years and it doesn’t bother anyone”. Dwyer put hopelessness sentence to show that even though other people had done something like his efforts and the results were futile, he still believed in the hope that would bring him to the right justice.

Another statement in E7, “people have said, ‘Why bother? No one cares, you’ll look foolish”. Here, Dwyer had put his opinion, or maybe this was really someone else’s opinion, of the public views toward his press conference. He wanted to put this negative sentence to show to the public his establishment which would not be destroyed even if he had gotten scorn from anyone to fight the justice system in his country. In his letter, Dwyer also put the name of media that recorded him in press conferences, they were “60 Minutes, 20-20, the American Civil Liberties Union, Jack Anderson”. All the media that he mentioned in his letter were the famous media in the United States. His case was quite controversial news at the time, and he intended to have his suicide broadcasted during the press conference.

E8 I am going to die in office in an effort to...see if the shameful facts, spread out in all their shame. (Dwyer, 1987)

The sentence in E8 is an absence of doubt. When Dwyer used this kind of emotion, he wanted to tell the reader that death was not a hindrance to him. The emotions were associated with high confidence. The victim believed he can commit suicide anytime and anywhere as he wished. Pridmore (2012) stated that mental disorders make someone has an absence of doubt to choose suicide as an escape from an unacceptable situation. And to commit suicide, Dwyer had chosen his office to be the place to do so without a doubt. This is apparent by his sentence “I am going to die in office”. Dwyer was accused of accepting bribes from private companies for winning contracts. He believed that choosing his office as a place to commit suicide could avenge the embarrassment he received and would cultivate a sense of guilt for all of them. This is shown by “in an effort to...see if the shameful facts, spread out in all their shame”. Victims choose their suicide places randomly or based on the particular meaning they have (Boracchi et al., 2017).

3.3. Text structure

The next characteristic of the linguistic feature of suicide notes which was found in the data is text structure. It is the basic framework in suicide notes; the annotations of suicide notes include two layers of linguistic and structural (Marcinićzuk et al., 2011). These characteristics normally occur in suicide.

E9 To Boddah

Speaking from the tongue of an experienced simpleton who obviously would rather be an emasculated, infantile complain-ee. This note should be pretty easy to understand. (Cobain, 1994)

There is a phrase in E9 that is categorized as a form of address. Cobain put “To Boddah” as the object addressed in his suicide note. Sudjana and Fitri (2013) stated that victims address their suicide notes for several reasons. Nevertheless, in the case of Cobain, he entrusted his suicide notes to Boddah, and Boddah did not exist either as a human or animal; it was his imaginary friend. Another reason Cobain might have addressed the text to Boddah was that some people believed Boddah to be his soul mate who never did anything wrong to him or others, and was a model for how everyone should be. Therefore, in his mind, Boddah is the perfect individual to him.

E10 They know I am innocent and want to help, but in this nation, the world’s greatest democracy, there is nothing they can do to prevent me from being punished for a crime they know I did not commit. (Dwyer, 1987).

This sentence is classified as an introduction. According to Ioannou and Debowska (2014), victims use the stereotype of suicide motive as their explanation and this explanation is frequently expressed by negative emotion. In E10, Dwyer wrote, “there is nothing they can do to prevent me from being punished for a crime they know I did not commit”. By this negative emotion, he wanted to explain that he was a victim of being punished for a crime that he did not commit. He was disappointed with the system of justice in his country. Even though some people still believed and defended him in this case, the defense could not be done and would not change anything. It is showed by his sentence “They know I am innocent and want to help...there is nothing they can do to prevent me from being punished...” To elaborate his disappointment, he also illustrates how he viewed his country by saying “but in this nation, the world’s greatest democracy”.

E11 Do not grieve for me. My nerves are all shot and for the last year I have been in agony day and night—except when I sleep with sleeping pills—and any peace I have by day is when I am drugged by pills.

I have had a wonderful life but it is over and my nerves get worse and I am afraid they will have to take me away. So please forgive me, all those I love, and may God forgive me too, but I cannot bear the agony and it [is] best for everyone this way.

The future is just old age and illness and pain. Goodbye and thank you for all your love. I must have peace and this is the only way.

Jimmy (Whale, 1957)

The text structure is also found in Whale’s suicide note as shown in E11, even though Whales did not put a form of address into this suicide note and there is no specific indication as to whom this note was intended for, but all parts of the text structure, i.e., introduction, culmination, and conclusion, are present in this letter. The line “Do not grieve for me” can be classified as the introduction that serves as the opening part with ambiguous words that are only known by the writer and the reader who is veiled or not veiled. He wrote a sentence type of culmination, “My nerves are all shot and for the last year I have been in agony day and night—except when I sleep with sleeping pills—and any peace I have by day is when I am drugged by pills. I have had a wonderful life but it is over and my nerves get worse and I am afraid they will have to take me away”. To explain the part of the sentence “Do not grieve for me”, it can be concluded that the negative feelings he received and the illness he suffered from became a strong reason for him to commit suicide.

Pestian et al. (2012) stated that genuine suicide notes frequently included statements or reasons for what happened in his or her life. The negative emotion was shown by “I have had a wonderful life but it is over and my nerves get worse and I am afraid they will have to take me away. So please forgive me, all those I love and may God forgive me too, but I cannot bear the agony and it [is] best for everyone this way” which means that Whale felt guilty because he had done something wrong.

The sentences “I cannot bear the agony and it [is] best for everyone this way” showed that he believed the mistakes he made were enormous and influenced other people. The next line “Goodbye and thank you for all your love. I must have peace and this is the only way. Jimmy” explains how he felt and what the victim conveyed for the last time can be classified as the conclusion of the note. The conclusion is marked by sentences containing excuse, apology, love, or anger, and in this letter, Whale showed love with the expression of “thank you” to the reader.

E12 Carol,

I am so sorry for this. I feel I just can't go on. I have always tried to do the right thing but where there was once great pride now it's gone. I love you and the children so much. I just can't be any good to you or myself. The pain is overwhelming. Please try to forgive me.

Cliff (Baxter, 2002)

In E12, the word “Carol” is classified as the type of text structure, that is the form of address. It indicates that this note has an intended reader which could have been to someone he loved or hated. In this note, Baxter wrote it to the person he loved, namely his wife. It can be classified as an introduction because this word contains ambiguous meaning and is only known by the victim. The phrase “I just can't go on” in this case looks like something was blocking him from living his life fully. The line “I have always tried to do the right thing but where there was once great pride now it's gone”, can be classified as the culmination. Baxter claimed he had done something right according to him but the results did not satisfy him. “Please try to forgive me” is identified as a conclusion. He used the excuse sentence to end his life.

Another interesting text structure is the suicide note written by Sergei Esenin, which is more like a poem.

E13 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 structure of the suicide note of E13 is in the form of a poem, addressed to Esenin's “friend”, which later is mentioned as “my love”. The text started with an address to his “friend” and “love”, then his emotion or disappointment in a relationship that did not work out. The middle part of the poem starts with parting or “goodbye” and a request of no sadness over his passing. The poem ended with his thought that death was the only option because he was convinced that his pain would be the same as living anyway.

3.4. Grammar

Another characteristic of the linguistic feature of the suicide note is grammar. Galasinski (2017) explained that motivationally, the characteristic of suicide might interest the victim to make the situation from present to past. In most content, references to the present and future are few, and more references are to the past. Hence, in data, we found various forms of tenses used by the victims in writing their suicide notes.

E14 I must end it. There's no hope left. I'll be at peace. No one had anything to do with this. My decision totally. (Prinze, 1977)

E15 We had a death pact, and I have to keep my half of the bargain. Please bury me next to my baby. Bury me in my leather jacket, jeans, and motorcycle boots. Goodbye (Vicious, 1979)

In E14, the single use of grammar simple present tense in the sentence “I'll be at peace” shows Prinze's belief about death as a place where peace can be found after leaving his worldly problems. In

some religions or beliefs in this world, death denotes ‘end of the body’ or going to the other world’ (Sahoo, 2014, p. 31). Then in E15, Vicious also mostly used grammar simple present tense in his suicide note, and the content of his message further detailed some instructions for his burial, which shows that he thought he was already halfway to his death.

Likewise, Whale, refer to E11, and Baxter, refer to E12, also used simple present tense for grammar in their suicide notes. In Whale’s note, it shows that while he was stating the reasons for his decision to commit suicide, he was still reliving the pain at the time. In the meantime, for Baxter, this seems to be related to the way he was sorrowfully asking for forgiveness from his wife, and forgiveness can only be asked when one is alive.

E16 I have gone to join Ken if I am that lucky. (Carter, 1994)

In E16, it is clear that the sentence Carter used was past tense. The suicide note was written before someone committed suicide. He used the past tense as if to show that he had died already. Prokofyeva (2013) stated that the use of past tense in suicide notes is to show that the victim has felt as if he is dead and is ready to die before committing suicide. In the sentence “I have gone”, Carter motioned the name of his friend “to join Ken”. Ken was the name of his partner when he worked as a photojournalist in a conflict country. Carter believed Ken was a good man and is resting in peace, so he hoped that after his act, he could also be like Ken as said in the sentence “if I am that lucky”.

Moreover, the suicide notes by George Sanders had used present continuous tense, as shown in E17.

E17 Dear World, I am leaving because I am bored. I feel I have lived long enough. I am leaving you with your worries in this sweet cesspool. Good luck. (Sanders, 1972)

In E17, Sanders’ first line can be classified as an absence of doubt about committing suicide. The sentence “I am leaving because I am bored” shows an extreme indifference to his future. Added with the line “I feel like I have lived long enough” shows that he thought his life was not worth living anymore. Thus, despite the cold tone of the message, it can be classified as the hopelessness of the future. The use of grammar present continuously in this note shows that it was written in the mental state of someone in the process of dying, and have no doubt about it.

Finally, the tense used by Pete Ham was simple future tense, as shown in E18.

E18 Anne
I love you
Blair, I love you
I will not be allowed to
Love and trust everybody
This is better
PS Stan Polley is a soulless bastard
I will take him with me. (Ham, 1975)

Ham’s use of simple future tense in sentences “I will not be allowed to...” and “I will take him with me” in E18 shows different visions of the future. In the former sentence, he was talking like he would still be alive and be engaged in situations where he could not “love and trust everybody”. However, near the end of his note, he told the readers that the person responsible for his death was “Stan Polley”, his manager. He believed Polley was the main cause of his ruined career.

3.5. Punctuation

The last characteristic of the linguistic feature of suicide notes as proposed by Prokofyeva (2013) is punctuation. Its characteristics are to give meaning to the sentence. Some illustrations from data are in E19 and E20 below.

E19 ...Do not grieve for me. My nerves are all shot and for the last year I have been in agony day and night—except when I sleep with sleeping pills—and any peace I have by day is when I am drugged by pills.

I have had a wonderful life but it is over and my nerves get worse and I am afraid they will have to take me away. So please forgive me, all those I love, and may God forgive me too, but I cannot bear the agony and it [is] best for everyone this way. ... (Whale, 1957)

In E19, the focus is on Whale's use of long hyphens (—) and square brackets [is] in his note. He used the long hyphen (—) to make a separation of meaning between the first phrase to the third phase of the sentence, where the second phrase is not connected to the phrase before it. Another punctuation that occurred in the note is the square brackets [is]; the term is used by the victim as the purpose of reinforcing the meaning of the sentence. Here, Whale just wanted to strengthen his sentence to show the readers that the only way to fix his mistakes was by committing suicide.

E20 The pain of life overrides the joy to the point that joy does not exist...I am depressed...without a phone...money for rent...money for child support...money for debts...money!!!...I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings and corpses and anger and pain...of starving or wounded children, of trigger-happy madmen, often police, of killer executioners...I have gone to join Ken if I am that lucky. (Carter, 1994)

Let us focus on the three periods (...) that occur quite often in the note of E20. Prokofyeva (2013) stated that "..." (three more periods at the end of a sentence/phrase) are used to express the idea of an 'open-end or a continuation. Thus, Carter used this mark to make a continuation of the next sentences that are related to each other. Another example of punctuation that occurs in the note is "am depressed...without phone...money for rent...money for child support...money for debts...money!!!" The three exclamation marks (!!!) are used to strengthen the meaning of his previous words. He wanted to show the readers the major problems he faced in his life. From this note, it can be concluded that money was one of the reasons for him to end his life.

4. Conclusion

All of the characteristics of linguistic features of suicide notes promoted by Prokofyeva (2013) occurred in eleven male well-known individuals' suicide notes. They are clear reasoning, expressing emotion, text structure, grammar, and punctuation. Clear reasoning found in notes is such as the victims facing diseases, being offended by something, blaming someone or something, and despair. Besides, clear reasoning may tell the readers of the victims' point of view about the problems they faced. Then, it is followed by expressing emotion, wherein sentences reveal a fear of living, having no relief, hopelessness, and absence of doubt. In this characteristic, expressing emotion tells the readers the psychological problems of the victims that are shown negatively or positively.

Besides, text structures also occur in all of the eleven male well-known individuals' suicide notes. The text structure characteristics exhibit the form of address, introduction, culmination, and conclusion. Finally, there are two characteristics of linguistic features found as the least characteristics in the suicide notes, namely grammar, and punctuation. Therefore, by examining the authenticity of the suicide notes we might know the messages conveyed by the victims, either explicitly or implicitly, to identify the motives of committing suicide.

This study was conducted not without limitations. Despite that it has accomplished the aim of this study, thus future research should focus on more suicide notes and analyze them based on different frameworks of experts. By doing so, a more comprehensive conclusion can be made to complement the results found in this study.

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