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A Rhetorical Move Analysis of Men's and Women's Suicide Notes

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Abstract

Research on suicide notes has always focused on proving whether the notes are genuine or simulated. There are still very few studies on suicide notes that focus on the genders of the writer and the influence of genders in this type of letter. This research aims to examine the suicide notes in two corpora—one corpus written by males and the other by females—using two different theories. Swales' move-structure theory was used to see the pattern of occurrence of the rhetorical moves to establish a generic structure of the notes in the two corpora, and Bhatia's communicative purpose theory was used to see what purposes of communication were dominant in the notes. The notes were analyzed based on the gender of the writers also to examine whether gender plays a role in the use of language, especially for personal communication. The study used a descriptive qualitative approach, in which a corpus software AntConc was used to gather more comprehensive data, and linguistic theories were used in the interpretation of the data. The analysis showed that the most dominant communicative purpose in men's notes was giving instruction while women's notes were high on the expressing feelings move; this suggests the role of gender in determining language use in personal communication. The result of this study is hoped to add to the literature of the study of gender as well as in the broader area of discourse analysis and sociolinguistics.

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Introduction

The discussion on the purposes of communication is deemed of high importance in genre study, especially in the perspective of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) study. This is due to the fact that the texts of the same genre commonly share similar communicative purposes, which are understood by the community as serving certain public goals (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010). When faced with an unknown text, or what Swales (1990) termed as "occluded," one can decide whether the text belongs to a certain genre based on the text's

purpose(s)—to express feelings or tell stories for instance. Therefore, from the ESP perspective, it is very important first to identify the purpose of a text.

Before an individual commits an act of suicide, some would leave a personal text—a suicide note—to communicate their last thoughts (O'Connor & Leenars, 2004). These notes are commonly used as a source of data to understand more about an individual's psychological state in the cases of suicide by the field of Psychology. For the field of Linguistics, these notes are no less valuable as they can help linguists in revealing different things, such as distinguishing between a genuine or simulated note to help in police investigations (e.g., Ioannou & Debowska, 2014; Jones & Bennel, 2007; Lester, 2008) or seeing the main linguistics features used (e.g., Shapero & Blackwell, 2012; Schoene & Dethlefs, 2016; Tanusy, 2017).

Every text aims to communicate something, and this communicative purpose is essential in determining what genre a text belongs to in the perspective of ESP (Parodi, 2014). Swales (1990) argues that a different purpose of communication will result in different rhetorical actions, which results in a different genre. The analysis of the communicative purpose of a text is done by analyzing the moves present in the text and building the structure of the text. A 'Move' itself is a term coined by Swales (1990) to refer to a single unit in the text with a specific function of communication; for example, "Good morning" can be labeled as the move 'greetings'. According to Swales (1990), a move can be realized in different ways but still serve the same communicative purpose; these are called the steps. For instance, we can label "Hello" and "Goodbye" in the same move 'greetings,' but the steps are different—the first being 'opening greeting' and the latter being 'farewell greeting'. Labeling the moves and steps is subjective to the researchers, especially when the texts analyzed are occluded or not readily defined.

A text consists of several different moves and steps with the same communicative purpose; however, these moves can be realized differently depending on the individual writing the text (Swales, 1996). This is supported by Bawarshi and Reiff (2010), who stated that "a text's genre membership is not defined by 'either/or' essential properties but rather along a spectrum of family resemblances" (p. 45). This notion regarding how a text is considered to have the membership of a certain genre is believed to also apply to suicide notes; the purpose may be the same, but the way one structure it will be different from one another. The differences in structure and purpose may be influenced by many things, one of which is by the gender of the writer. Many people believe that men and women use language differently, and this issue has been a subject of study by many people; two of the most well-known ones are Robin Lakoff's (1975) research on the characteristics of the female language in conversation (e.g., using very specific sets of words, seeking approval by rising their intonation at the end of a declarative sentence, etc.), and Deborah Tannen's (1990) study on how men and women use language differently because they are raised differently (e.g., men are raised to lead others while women are raised to build networks).

Despite the much research on the subject of suicide notes in the field of linguistics, it can be noted that there are few that focused on the genders of the writers. For instance, Samraj and Gawron's (2015) study only focused on the main structure of the notes without mentioning any differences in the language between male and female writers even though their data include both genders as note writers. This is similar to Roubidoux (2012), whose master's thesis examined the use of pronouns in suicide notes; in her study, Roubidoux does not use gender as one of the analysis variables. Tadros and McGrath (2004) emphasize their analysis in findings the difference between the notes written by people of different generations without taking into account their genders. This being said, there is also some research that has attempted to bring up the issue of gender in suicide notes. Delgado (2012), for instance, did research on the role of relationships in suicides. The emphasis of this research, however, is more on the differences in the causes of suicides in males and females, not on the language or linguistic features on the notes themselves. In

the late 1980s, a study by Leenars showed no significant difference between the notes written by men and women, a finding which is supported by Lester and Heim (1992); meanwhile, Ho *et al*. (1998) suggested that gender and age create differences in the notes—the one left by younger females are more full of emotions and expressions of feelings while older people tend to give more instructions and the note structures are simpler.

The research mainly employs the notion of communicative events proposed by Bhatia (1993) and the analysis of rhetorical moves (Swales, 2004) in the area of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), especially in analyzing an occluded genre (Swales, 1996), a type of genre which examples are not readily available in public as they are mainly used for private communications.

Therefore, this present study aims to add to the literature of the studies on suicide notes by examining the rhetorical moves in the notes to find the similarities and/or differences in the way men and women express themselves in their last personal communications.

The present study would like to address the following questions:

1. What are the rhetorical moves in men's and women's suicide notes?
2. How does gender play a role in determining the dominant communicative purpose(s) in the suicide notes?

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach focusing on content analysis whose purpose is to identify and analyze the occurrences of certain message characteristics in a text (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999). The data were collected with the help of the computer software generally used in Corpus Linguistics research, AntConc. This was done in order that a more accurate number of occurrences of each move could be obtained, which, in turn, helped in finding a more generalized idea of how males and females use language for personal communication.

An existing corpus of suicide notes with a total number of 216 notes was used in this research. The corpus was obtained through personal communication with two fellow researchers who had also obtained permission to use the notes for educational and non-profit purposes. The corpus was then divided into two smaller corpora based on the genders of the writers to get a more accurate analysis of the language use. There were 93 notes written by females and 123 notes written by males, and they were of various lengths (See Table 1). The use of two corpora allowed me to explore the repetitive occurrence of a certain pattern of communication across the two genders more accurately, which helped a lot in determining the similarities and/or differences in the structure of notes written by males and females.

Table 1. Total Numbers of Words in the Male and Female Corpora

Gender	Longest Text (words)	Shortest Text (words)	Total Word Type	Total Word Token
Female	662	6	2,248	15,102
Male	866	10	3,158	23,176

In order to protect the identities of the families left behind and to ensure anonymity, full names of writers were blotted out and changed with the word '[Name]', and specific locations and names of places were coded 'XX'. Common first names of the addressees, such as 'John' and 'Mary', and terms of endearments like 'My Love' or 'Darling' were left as it was to preserve the context of the notes since some notes contain smaller notes addressed specifically to more than one person—usually different family members and/or friends. In addition, each note in the corpora was coded differently; for instance, #10FA was a code referring to the tenth note in the female corpus, while #120MA referred to the note number 120 in the male corpus.

Due to the number of notes in the corpora, the collection of the data was conducted with

the help of a corpus software called AntConc. The software would first generate the total number of word types (i.e., each unique word in the corpus excluding their repetition) and word tokens (i.e., all the words including their repetitions which appear in the corpus). This was done with the purpose of identifying the average length of each corpus. Table 1 above shows that the male corpus was far larger than the female's.

Before conducting the main identification process of the data, first, determine the keywords to use in the software. This was a necessary step as it set the boundary of each move and communicative purpose(s) (Abaalkhail, 2015; Connor, 2000). The keywords and terms were taken from existing lists of terms and examples used in the moves categories of personal letters (Swales, 1990) and suicide notes (Samraj & Gawron, 2015; Tanusy, 2017), for example, the word "Dear" or the phrase "To Whom It May Concern" as the keyword to search within the move of "Salutations" and "Addressing Recipient". Afterward, the keywords were put in the software to find the moves, ranging from a phrase to a paragraph depending on the communicative purpose(s) they serve.

In determining whether each part of the texts in the corpus belongs to a particular move and not the other, I had conducted several discussions with a colleague and some students who study in the department at my institution. They were first given the texts and a checklist of moves taken from the schematic structure of personal letters by Swales (1990) and suicide notes by Samraj and Gawron (2015). The colleague and students worked independently, and then the results were discussed together in an informal forum to reach an agreement regarding the differences in perspective in classifying some parts of the texts. For instance, there was an initial disagreement on whether to put "Please don't think of me as a coward" (#24MA) into the Expressing Feelings move or Giving Directions move; half of the discussion participants regarded it as the former due to the pragmatic meaning of the sentence, while the others considered it the latter as they saw the sentence was written in the imperative form.

Having found the clusters corresponding to each move, the data were further classified into more specific steps in order to see how each move was actually realized in the text. For instance, the move Signing Off was realized into three different steps: writing names and/or initials (e.g., Anita R. or J. M.); writing valedictions without names (e.g., "Love always," "See you on the other side"); and writing valedictions and names (e.g., "Yours, Brandon"). This was very useful to see the realizations of the moves in their environmental context so that a more comprehensive understanding of the generic structure of the notes as a whole can be determined.

The number of occurrences of the moves and steps was calculated and put in different categories. Swales (1996) suggested that the frequency of occurrence of the moves in a corpus determines whether the moves are an essential part of a genre. In other words, the number of times a move appears in the corpus helps researchers to establish the generic structure of a genre. There are three categories of moves based on the frequency of appearance in the corpus. Moves appearing in all the texts in the corpus are considered "obligatory moves," or the main structure of that particular genre (Joseph, Lim, & Nor, 2014). The moves appearing in about 75% of the text are termed "quasi-obligatory." And Samraj and Gawron (2015) mentioned the third category, "optional moves," which refer to moves that appear only in 50% or less in the corpus; this means that the presence of these moves are not determinant of a genre (for example, the moral of the story is sometimes present in a narrative, but even without it, a text is still considered a narrative when it has other necessary elements). This present study adopted those three categories with the main purpose of examining if men and women share the same communicative purpose in their notes; the two corpora are compared in terms of the occurrence of the moves.

Results and Discussion

The discussion part is divided into two sub-headings, each of which answers the research question above for ease of reading.

Rhetorical Moves of the Suicide Notes

The classification of the data suggests that there are at least five moves that occur repetitively across the corpus (see Table 2), two of which (Addressing Recipient and Signing-Off moves) are typical moves found in other types of letters, both personal and business (Swales, 1990).

The move Addressing Recipient has the highest percentage of occurrence (81.48%) across the two corpora; this suggests that the writers of the note want their letters to reach certain people in the way a common personal letter does. The addressees of the notes are sometimes written in terms of endearments only (e.g., "My Darling"), but most often, they include names and other types of salutations (e.g., "Hello Jackie" (#54MA)). Meanwhile, a lesser percentage is shown for the Signing-Off move (77.31%), indicating that while most notes were signed with the writer's name and/or some types of farewell phrases, some notes end without any signatures.

The move Providing Explanations is found in both the males' and the females' corpora, with the frequency of occurrence of 77.31%. This move includes smaller steps such as explaining the background behind their decision (e.g., "My husband found out yesterday about me owing money" (#19FA)) and justifying their action (e.g., "I have had enough" (#25MA)). This finding is in line with Samraj and Gawron's (2015) study, which listed this move as having a high frequency of occurrence across the corpus they used.

Another move with a high frequency of occurrence is Giving Directions, which serves the communication purpose of leaving instructions to the addressee(s) of the note in regards to various things (not) to do or what possessions and belongings should (not) be given to/ taken by whom. In this present study, this particular move consists of only two different steps; this is quite different from the study of Abaalkhail (2015), which divided the move into five smaller steps. On the other hand, Samraj and Gawron's (2015) also showed two different steps, yet, it is different from the present study's division as this study considers the steps from the perspective of action (do or not do something) and possession giving while they divided it based on the duration of the instructions (short-term instructions and long-term instructions).

The last move in the present study is the move Expressing Feelings; this is also the move with a high percentage of occurrence across the two corpora. In fact, the finding shows that it has the second-highest frequency of occurrence, with 177 occurrences (79.16%). The same as the other moves, this move consists of several steps, including the expression of personal feelings (e.g., "I do not want my mother and father to think that it was anything that they did that lead me to kill myself" (#6MA)), expressing positive and/or negative feelings about others (e.g., "I love you both very much and wanted to get along with you" (#17FA); "You didn't respect me. That was the trouble" (#15MA)), expressing regrets (e.g., "I'm sorry [the therapy] didn't work out" (#100MA)), and expressing thankfulness and good wishes for others (e.g., "[…] and thank you for trying to help me" (#10FA)). This move category is different from Samraj and Gawron (2015), who classified the expression of feelings as a part of the move Giving Directions, and Abaalkhail (2015), who considered expressing love as one move on its own, not just a step as is classified in the present study.

Based on the results of the frequency of occurrence of each move, it is found that there is no move that occurs in 100% of the corpus, suggesting that the corpus does not consist of any obligatory moves. However, the moves found in the two corpora can be defined into the quasi-obligatory ones as they appear in more than 75% of the texts. It is believed that the absence of the obligatory move may be caused by the small size of the corpus, which has also been proven by several other previous studies. In comparison to this study's 216 notes, Samraj and Gawron (2015) also did not find any obligatory moves in their study using 222 suicide notes from the corpus collected by John Olsson; the same results are seen in Tanusy's (2017) study using 44 suicide notes from a corpus collected from social media, and in Albaalkhail's (2015) study which used 86 notes. Thus, it can be concluded that perhaps an obligatory move will be achieved if the size

of the corpus is larger than a mere two hundred.

Nevertheless, the absence of obligatory moves does not mean there is no typical schematic structure in suicide notes. On the contrary, it proves that suicide notes rely on the notion of 'family resemblance' that serves certain communicative purposes, which can be seen from the quasi-obligatory moves found across the corpora (Joseph et al., 2014; Abaalkhail, 2015; Tessuto, 2015).

There are several other moves that are found occurring quite repetitively in the corpora, yet they only occur in less than 50% of the texts, which makes them optional moves and thus are not included in the present analysis.

Table 2. Moves and Occurrences across the Corpora

Moves	Total Occurrence in Female Notes (93 notes)		Total Occurrence in Male Notes (123 notes)		Total Occurrence (216 notes)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Addressing recipient	83	89.24	93	75.60	176	81.48
Providing explanation	68	73.11	98	79.67	166	76.85
Giving directions	63	67.74	104	84.55	167	77.31
Expressing feelings	73	78.49	98	79.67	171	79.16
Signing off	78	83.87	89	72.35	167	77.31

Communicative Purposes and Gender

As suicide notes are a form of a personal letter, which means that it is usually directed at some individuals, it is not surprising that the first move, Addressing Recipient, has the highest percentage of occurrences in the notes written by both the males (75.60%) and females (89.24%). Interestingly, when this move is divided into smaller steps, there seems to be a difference in how men and women address the possible recipients of their notes. For instance, most women (72%) begin their notes by using terms of endearments followed by the first names (or relations) of their addressees (e.g., "To my darling sister" #29FA; "My dearest Andrew" #58FA). Meanwhile, even though some men also begin with the same step, only around 33% begin with both terms of endearments and names. The men either directly say the names of the addressees without any terms of endearments (e.g., "Mike" #10MA; "To: BNPD" #32MA) or they use a formal salutation such as "To Whom It May Concern" (e.g., #6MA, #34MA, #41MA).

The way women use a more intimate approach to the recipients of the notes, despite the morbid nature of the notes themselves, show that women use language to establish a connection with others. Adding the terms 'dear' or 'beloved' in mentioning someone creates a sense of closeness, which is one of the characteristics of female linguistic features mentioned by Lakoff (1975, as cited in Holmes, 2003). Men, on the other hand, communicate in a more direct form and usually want to show that they have more power than their addressees (Wardaugh, 2006), even on a personal level, which is clearly shown from the letters they write.

The move Expressing Feelings is found to be the move that occurs the second highest across the two corpora with the percentage of occurrence of 79.16%. Overall, there is only less than one percent difference between the male-female corpus. However, on a closer look at the steps of the said move, we can see that there are, indeed, some differences in the way the females and the males express their feelings, albeit only slightly. There are four steps found in the Expressing Feelings move; they are the expression of personal emotions, gratitude towards others, blame, and the expression of farewell and wishes for the addressees.

Male notes are seen to focus on explaining how they feel at the time of the writing (e.g., #2MA saying that he feels "unworthy of love") and laying the blame—either on themselves or other things (e.g. #15MA blames his significant other for not respecting him; #31MA blames

the school authorities for not stopping his bullies; #90MA and several others suggest economy problems). On the other hand, while most female notes also consist of the expression of personal feelings, the highest step is the expression of gratitude towards other people (90.02%), followed closely by expressing farewell and well-wishes for others. This difference may be attributed to the way men and women use language in society. As is suggested by Tannen (1990), women always try to build a network when they communicate; instead of trying to assert their dominance in a group, they want to be accepted. This communicative characteristic also seems to influence how they express themselves, even in the most intimate and personal form of communication, such as a suicide note.

The third most dominantly occurring move across the corpora is the Giving Directions and the Signing Off move (both have the percentage of 77.31%). However, since the latter move can be considered a common move found in other types of letters to signify the end of it and has shown no major differences in terms of language use, this move will not be discussed further in this paper.

As shown in Table 2 above, the move Giving Directions occurs far more frequently in the male notes (104 times out of 123 notes, or 84. 55%) than in the female notes (less than 70%). This discrepancy indicates a major difference in the essence of communication of the suicide notes written by males and females. Like the other moves discussed previously, the move itself consists of different steps that communicate the same move purpose. One of the steps that bear the most striking difference in the realization is the step in which the writers leave some instructions to the possible recipients of the notes to do (or not do) something.

Both corpora show high percentages of occurrences in this step, with the male corpus showing over 90% occurrence and the female corpus showing around 87% occurrence. The difference is the content of the instructions itself. Using the word "please" as the node in the male corpus produces a list of results that, after sorting out those expressing feelings and apologies, shows instructions regarding practical things and material possessions, as can be seen from the examples below:

> "Please contact the police to come to [XX] immediately" (#81MA)
> "Please have me cremated – no funeral" (#16MA)

On the contrary, when the same node word is used in the module of concord in the female corpus, the instructions are very closely similar to the move Expressing Feelings, such as the note #29FA, which says, "Please never forget me, and remember that I am happy now […]". Another note leaving an instruction regarding a material possession is also shown to add a personal feeling, "Keep my ring in remembrance of me and … please look after it" (#40FA). It is worth noting that despite the examples from the female notes looking like they belong to the Expressing Feelings category, they are still classified as the Giving Directions move due to the nature of the sentence structure's an imperative—indicating request.

A similar result is found when the two corpora are run through the module of concord in the software using a different node, "don't" and "do not". The male corpus results in a list of sentences resulting in instructions regarding material possessions and such (e.g., "I do not wish any insurance or assets of mine to go to [Name]" #6MA), and the female ones are still more personal in nature (e.g., "Make sure you don't work yourself to death" #2FA). These findings may suggest that men and women have a different purpose in writing their last form of communication. To take it further, it can be said that these findings show how men use language differently from women. As has been mentioned previously in this article, women tend to focus on creating intimacy when communicating (Tannen, 1990). On the contrary, men focus on asserting dominance and power in communication; they state their thoughts directly so as to be heard (Crawford, 1997, as cited in Simaremare, Murni, and Saragih, 2017). In line with the findings on this research is Lakoff's (19??) observation regarding men's and women's styles in requesting, which states that men tend to use commands when asking for

something to (not) be done while women usually state a request.

In saying this, I do not mean to say that all notes written by men focus only on telling others what to do with their material possessions and such, and the ones by women only include personal feelings. While not that many, some of the male notes also include a request for the recipients of letters to tell their other loved ones about their feelings (e.g., "Tell [Name] that I love her, and it's not her fault" #36MA) and some of the female notes tell the recipients directly what to do with their material possessions (e.g., "I would like [XX] to have my organs. My son to have all my tools and gardening machinery." #76FA; "Everything to be sold and equally dived among my sons [Name], [Name], [Name] and [Name]." #88FA).

Providing Explanation is the last quasi-obligatory move in the schematic structure of the suicide notes which also shows some differences in the number of occurrences between the male and female corpora, although the gap is not as big as the Giving Directions move. As is indicated by the term used to describe the move, Providing Explanation refers to the parts of the notes which explain things to the recipients; included in them are explaining the background on why the note writers decided to commit suicide and justifying their decision to end their lives. The majority of the female notes include a detailed explanation why committing suicide is the right decision for them to end their suffering (e.g., "This will solve all our problems" #90FA; "I just couldn't do it anymore […] this is for the best" #1FA) while most of the male notes provide more background context on the reason why they finally decide to commit the act (e.g., "I have got too much money trouble and have lost my shack" #57MA; "When [Name] and I split up I didn't want to go on my own" #98MA).

To say the truth, this result is quite surprising; Holmes (1998) states that it is more natural for women than for men to talk about their problems because it is one of their ways to maintain solidarity in their circle. Therefore, the fact that more men choose to explain the reasons for their suicide in their last communication is considered out of the ordinary of their nature to be seen as powerful. The high occurrence of this step in the male corpus may also suggest the instability of their mental health, which is not going to be discussed further in this paper as it is not the area of my expertise. Conversely, the occurrence of the justification step in the female notes proves that women communicate to show support (Hartman, 1976), in this case, supporting themselves. As Priyadi and Setiawan (2015) state in their research, women think of the world as a place where they can find support instead of an arena of competition. The reasoning they provide on why suicide is the right choice can be seen as a form of self-convincing that they do not make the wrong decision as they are unable to talk about this issue with other people to gain support.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, there are at least two things that can be drawn. The first thing is that the notes in the corpora mainly share similar moves with the same communicative purposes. This is despite the lack of available "examples" most people can access. It can be argued that perhaps these people get ideas or examples from the media like television or the Internet. This establishes an understanding that a genuine suicide note has its structure and purpose. In this analysis, the notes share three similar purposes: giving reasons and justifications, voicing thoughts and emotions, and leaving instructions to the recipients of the notes.

Lastly, the analysis proves that there are indeed some differences in the way males and females communicate, as can be seen in the difference of the highest occurrence of moves. Even in their last attempt at communication, men still attempt to display their authority by assigning roles to the people they leave behind and instructing them to do things for them. They want to ensure that all their affairs are sorted out the way they want them to be. Meanwhile, the move with the highest percentage of occurrences in the female notes is the Expressing Feelings move. I believe that this is in line with the findings from previous research on the characteristics of women's

language, in which women are believed to be more expressive and in touch with their emotions. Despite the findings of this research that can be said only to confirm what has been established before, I am of the opinion that this research still provides new insight into how language is used in personal communication across gender.

Nevertheless, the study is not free from some limitations. The number of data used in this study is believed to influence the determination of the generic structure of the notes, especially the obligatory moves. Another limitation is the difficulty in collecting the data since suicide notes are usually private properties of the families and/or are still used by law enforcement in ongoing investigations. My analysis focuses heavily on the language of the notes without really taking into account the psychological aspects of the writers as it is not my expertise; this may also influence the result of this analysis.

It is highly recommended that future research should use a new corpus with updated data instead of recycling older corpora as has been done by some previous studies; new corpus and new notes may provide new insights on the nature of suicide notes because I believe that aside from gender, the time period also has an influence in the way people communicate with one another. It is also helpful to deepen the analysis by combining the analysis of language with some theories in Psychology to understand more about the nature of mental health and possible warning signs of suicidal tendencies in people in the hope of preventing more suicides in the future.

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