

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the general issues related to the present study, including the background of the study, research questions, purpose of the study, significance of the study, clarification of terms, scope of the study, and organisation of the thesis.

1.1 Background of the Study

Throughout history, suicide has always been a controversial subject and it has been considered taboo by a lot of cultures. Religions forbid their followers to end their own lives—for instance, the Holy Quran of Islam mentions in Surah An-Nisa 4:29 (Sahih International Version), “you who have believed, do not consume one another's wealth unjustly but only [in lawful] business by mutual consent. And do not kill yourselves [or one another]. Indeed, Allah is to you ever Merciful.” Some countries, like the United States, Australia, North Korea and Singapore even make it unlawful for their citizens to attempt suicide. Yet, it does not stop people from attempting to terminate their own lives; the statistics released by the World Health Organization (2016) suggest a global suicide mortality rate of 11.4 per 100,000 populations—and the number is increasing.

Defining the meaning of ‘suicide’ is not as simple as it seems in spite of people’s familiarity with the general term. Stincelli (as cited in Shapero, 2011) defines suicide as “the intentional act of taking one’s own life, with a conscious awareness of both the effect and finality of the act.” This definition is supported by the description provided by *Black’s Law Dictionary* (What is Suicide, n.d.), which explains suicide as “the willful and voluntary act of a person who understands the physical nature of the act.” Durkheim (1951) gave another definition of suicide, in which he stated “the term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result” (p. 44).

Most studies and analyses in the phenomenon of suicide have been focusing on getting an insight into the minds of people with suicidal thoughts; therefore, it is unsurprising that the field of Psychology becomes the biggest contributor on the study of this phenomenon (e.g. Leenaars, 1988; Linn & Lester, 1996; Durkheim, 1951; Garza & Petiti, 2010). It is not until a few decades ago—when the field of Forensic Linguistics began to grow—did linguists start to have interest in studying suicide phenomenon from the perspective of linguistics, which means studying the language use in suicide notes.

Suicide notes are texts usually written minutes before the suicide act (Leenaars, 1988; O'Connor & Leenaars, 2004), and they are considered to be a source of data to understand more about the phenomenon of suicide. In the field of Forensic Linguistics, one of the main concerns in the study of suicide notes is to discern whether a note is a genuine or simulated note (e.g. Shneidman & Farberow, 1957; Black, 1993; Lester, 2008; Jones & Bennel, 2007) on the grounds that the findings of the research are generally used for the purpose of police investigation. This is one of the reasons why at first there were few studies that analyzed suicide notes purely from the linguistic perspective.

Nowadays, the focus of suicide note studies from linguistic perspective seems to have shifted as more and more studies of suicide notes are conducted not for the purpose of forensic investigation but for academic purposes. Researchers have put their focus on the content and other linguistic features of suicide notes (e.g. Giles, 2007; Shapero & Blackwell, 2012; Shcoene & Dethlefs, 2016; Gottschalk & Gleser, 1960; Osgood & Walker, 1959). Some of the more recent studies such as Prokofyeva (2013), whose work focused on distinguishing the different structures of suicide notes and suicide posts, and Shapero (2011), who studied the oddities and typicality of genuine and simulated suicide notes, suggested that there might be a generic structure underlying a genuine suicide note as the results of their analyses showed a common pattern in genuine suicide notes; therefore, it might be possible to analyze suicide notes as a genre.

Despite the mention of suicide notes as a genre in some studies (e.g. Shapero, 2011; Artemeva, Gulli & Bennell, 2014), only a few other studies have been conducted specifically for analyzing suicide notes (see Samraj & Gawron, 2015; Abaalkhail, 2015). The two studies, in spite of having been conducted only two years prior to the writing of the present thesis, did not use data from this time period but rather chose to analyze suicide notes collected by other researchers such as John Olsson and Edwin Shneidman in early to mid 1950s. Since it is believed that time period may have influence the use of language, it is urgent that a genre study of suicide notes with data from a newer time period is conducted.

In addition, there is also a lack of genre of suicide notes studies in which the genders of the note writers are taken into account. Samraj and Gawron (2015) did not differentiate between notes written by males and females, and while Abaalkhail (2015) did mention about gender, her analysis did not particularly put any attention to it. Thus, the present researcher deems it important to use gender as one of the main variables in this thesis to examine how gender may influence the communicative purpose(s) of suicide notes, especially since it has been known that gender plays a role in one's use of language.

This thesis attempts to address the pressing issues above by determining the communicative purpose(s) of suicide notes to help establishing the structural characteristics of genuine suicide notes—characteristics that will clearly distinguish it from fake or simulated suicide notes as well as establishing whether time period and gender may affect the communicative purpose(s) of suicide notes. This is done by observing the *moves* (units reflecting the communicative purpose(s) of a text) and *steps* (smaller units within a single move which support it) in suicide notes written by male and female in different time period.

In terms of suicide notes, the study of genre is considered to be rhetorical as it shows a recurrent way of using language that is abstract and socially recognized (Hyland, as cited in Abaalkhail, 2015). One of the most influential approaches for genre analysis in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach, the rhetorical

move analysis, was introduced by Swales (1990). At the beginning of its establishment, ESP was mainly used to teach non-native speakers of English to better understand certain academic genres (Bhatia, 1993). However, Swales later developed the approach with new methodologies and theories into branches that are beyond academic settings. Swales (1990) believed that texts within a specific genre share the same sequence of *moves*, each of which serves a specific communicative function consisting of smaller *steps* which are understood by a group of *discourse community*—a group of people sharing similar goals and language codes to achieve said goals. The combination of the moves and steps is referred to as rhetorical structure that represents all the possible moves and steps that can occur in a specific genre (Swales, 1990). This thesis mainly employs the ESP approach, which defines genre as communicative events serving a communicative purpose which can be achieved through the use of language (Bhatia, 1993), on the grounds that understanding communicative purpose(s) of suicide notes is vital to help understand and—hopefully—prevent more suicides in the future.

1.2 Research Questions

The present study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How are moves and steps realized in suicide notes?
2. What are the shared communicative purposes in suicide notes?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

As has been briefly mentioned in the background of the study, the study aims:

1. To examine how the moves and steps are realized in suicide notes,
2. To find the shared communicative purposes in suicide notes.

1.4 Significance of the Study

It is hoped that the results and findings of this study are able to enrich the field of Discourse Analysis, especially in genre studies, by establishing a generic structure for texts that are considered to be *occluded*—suicide notes. This study also offers some insights to the possible differences in female and male use of language for

the field of Sociolinguistics. It is also hoped that the study provides a contribution to the field of Forensic Linguistics as an established generic structure and communicative purpose of a suicide note may play a role in determining the typical language characteristics of a genuine suicide note.

1.5 Clarification of Terms

For the purpose of clarification, the important terms used in this study have been defined. The following terms are:

1. **Suicide notes:** texts written by suicidal person, usually written minutes before the suicidal death (Leenaars, 1988).
2. **English for Specific Purposes:** a field that “focuses on studying and teaching specialized varieties of English, most often to non-native speakers of English, in advanced academic and professional settings” (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010).
3. **Genre:** is a type of discourse occurring in a particular setting with a pattern of organisation which serves different communicative functions; a social, goal-oriented and staged way of interaction (Paltridge, 2006).
4. **Occluded:** genres which examples are not readily available for public. (Swales, 1996)
5. **Communicative purpose:** goal(s) that are achieved through the use of language (Bhatia, 1993).
6. **Move:** the unit in a text that reflects the purpose of communication of a text (Swales, 1990).
7. **Step:** smaller units within a single move (Swales, 1990).
8. **Rhetorical structure:** the combination of moves and steps in a text (Swales, 1990).
9. **Obligatory move:** a move that occurs in all of the texts (Joseph Lim & Nor, 2014).
10. **Quasi-obligatory move:** a move that occurs in most of the texts (Joseph et al., 2014).
11. **Optional move:** a move that occurs in less than 50% of the texts (Samraj & Gawron, 2015).

1.6 Scope of the Study

The present study is a study of the generic structure of suicide notes. The notes that are used as data were taken from writers from three different Western countries: Australia, America, and England. This study uses document analysis on the transcripts of suicide notes to reveal the communicative functions that are used in the writings of a person before committing suicide. The texts analyzed were a corpus of suicide notes written by female and male ranging from year 1970 to year 2016. There are a total of 346 notes collected originally, but the population was later downsized through a series of classification and sampling processes which will be discussed further in Chapter Three, Research Methodology, along with the analysis framework and steps taken to do the analysis.

1.7 Research Report Organization

This study will be organised into five chapters.

1. Chapter one is the introduction to the study. It consists of Background of the Study, Research Questions, Purpose of the Study, Significance of the Study, Definitions of Key Terms, Scope of the Study, and Research Report Organization.
2. Chapter two presents some literature reviews on some previous studies of suicide notes as well as some theoretical framework about genre analysis in ESP approach which is the base of the present study.
3. Chapter three discusses the research methodology such as research design, data collection techniques, sampling methods, framework for analysis and data analysis.
4. Chapter four explains findings and discussions from the document analysis.
5. Chapter five provides conclusions, limitations, and recommendation derived from the study.

This thesis ends with Bibliography and Appendices.