

European Journal of Linguistics

(EJL)

**Investigating the Language of Suicide Letters and Notes in Northern
Namibia: A Forensic Linguistic Study**



CARI

Investigating the Language of Suicide Letters and Notes in Northern Namibia: A Forensic Linguistic Study

 ^{1*}Jason Kanyama, ²Haileleul Zeleke Woldemariam, ³Dr. Pilisano Masake

¹Eenhana Vocational Training Centre

²Associate Professor, Department of Communication and Languages, Namibia University of Science and Technology

³Associate Dean, School of Human Sciences and Education, Namibia University of Science and Technology

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6269-6961>

Accepted: 23rd Mar 2025 Received in Revised Form: 23rd Apr, 2025 Published: 26th May, 2025

Abstract

Purpose: Since there is no decline in the suicide rate in Namibia today, this paper aimed to establish the authenticity and genuineness of suicide letters and notes by exploring the language used by the authors from a forensic linguistics perspective. It is assumed that, if suicide letters and notes are only treated as such in Namibia, suicide could be faked to conceal serious crime acts in order to obstruct the course of justice.

Methodology: The investigation adopted the exploratory research design, the quantitative research approach and the principles of the interpretivist research paradigm. As a forensic linguistics study of written suicide messages, it drew from the Codal Variation Theory.

Findings: The study established that the language used in the suicide letters and notes was characterised by positive lexical items and negative emotions. There were ineptitudes in the rules of well-formedness in grammar. In the content, the authors revealed the motives for taking their own lives. Some references regarding family members and other relatives were made by the authors. The authors also gave directives to the addressees.

Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy: This investigation makes a significant contribution to the forensic linguistics field by sensitising the public that language could be manipulated to commit crime by faking suicide letters and notes. The findings also bring to light a different perspective into what the suicides experience before the suicide act.

Key Words: *Forensic linguistics, Suicide letters/notes, Authenticity, Suicide, Investigation*

Introduction

The suicide rates are contemporarily unprecedented in Namibia. In the two northern regions, Oshikoto and Oshana, a sizeable number of suicide cases are recoded every month. (Shneidman 1996) defines suicide as the purposeful self-inflicted demise by an individual who imagines death as the only meaningful way to escape prolonged physical and psychological tension. (Girthar, Murty & Rani 2015) assert that about 25% to 30% of suicide deaths are accompanied by suicide letters and notes. However, (Douglas, Lazarides & Seketa 2019) establish that it is between 10% to 43% of persons who commit suicide that leave behind suicide letters and notes.

(Ballur, Sudha & Viveka 2014) define a suicide letter, or a suicide note as a message left behind by someone who has committed suicide. The most common and preferred surface on which suicide messages are written is paper. However, (Tarranum, Vaibhav & Vinay 2015) argue that in some rather peculiar circumstances, suicidal people sometimes opt for unconventional surfaces and unconventional writing implements to pen suicide messages. In some such cases, suicide letters and notes were discovered to have been authored on unusual surfaces such as the body parts of suicides themselves, mirrors, walls and photographs, whereas unusual writing implements such as lipstick and liquid vermillion have been used to author suicide messages. (Ballur, *et al.* 2014) have also argued that suicide letters and notes do not only come in the most common handwritten form, but may also be typed and sent through mail or recorded as audio messages/voice notes or video messages.

Unnatural deaths in Namibia are investigated under the Inquests Act 6 of 1993 of the Republic of Namibia. Death by suicide is categorised as unnatural in Namibia. Considering that deceased persons or suicide victims, cannot be charged with murder, since the act is self-inflicted, the Act thus stipulates that suicide and attempted suicide are non-criminal acts. As such, no person who attempts to commit suicide and fails, or succeeds in taking his/her own life by any means shall stand trial, or get prosecuted in Namibia.

In view of the contemporary escalation of suicide cases in the country, and the provisions made by the Inquests Act, it is significant that all suicide letters and notes are critically investigated from a forensic linguistics perspective as there is potential that such letters and notes could be forged and manipulated to conceal crimes such as murder and homicide, and in the process, defeat the ends of justice. Forensic Linguistics is a discipline whose scope extends to the investigation of authorship identification e.g., (a) *authorship verification* (b) *authorship profiling* and (c) *authorship attribution*.

The data presented in this article was obtained from actual suicide letters and notes that were authored by persons who have succeeded in taking their own lives between 2021 and 2022 in Oshikoto and Oshana regions in Northern Namibia. In Oshikoto region, the suicide letters and notes were obtained from Oshivelo and Omuthiya Police Stations' Criminal Investigation Units,

while in Oshana region, the suicide letters and notes were obtained from Oshakati Police Station's Criminal Investigation Unit.

Statement of the Problem

The study sought to establish documentary evidence, that is, evidence of the authenticity and genuineness of suicide letters and notes. For this particular study, documentary evidence was sought by analysing original documents alleged to be suicide letters and notes collected from and around scenes of purported suicide deaths. Unnatural deaths, of which suicide deaths are part, are investigated under the Inquests Act of 1993 of the Republic of Namibia. However, this Act stipulates that suicide and suicide attempts are not criminal acts in Namibia. Given the escalation of suicide deaths in Namibia today, and the provision in the Inquests Act, suicide could be faked to obstruct the course of justice. Lexical features, general language usage and the discourse in the suicide letters and notes could be fabricated to deceive if not critically investigated from a forensic linguistics perspective. It is in light of this observation that the current study was conducted to dis/prove the authenticity and genuineness of suicide letters and notes.

Objectives of the study

This study sought to conduct an analysis of the linguistic features and patterns of suicide letters and notes of purported suicide deaths committed in the Oshikoto and Oshana regions of Northern Namibia. Specifically, the study sought:

- To determine the authenticity of suicide letters and notes through a lexical forensic analysis;
- To describe the authors of suicide letters and notes in line with a syntactic forensic framework; and
- To evaluate the genuineness of suicide letters and notes through a discursual forensic perspective analysis.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The review of the related literature was laid out in manners that were responding to the set objectives of the study.

Determining the authenticity of suicide letters and notes through a lexical forensic analysis

The practice of verifying and authenticating documents suspected to be dubious must be enforced to ensure that such documents and texts are not used to commit crime and other unethical activities. (Joh & Lee 2019) argue that establishing the authenticity of suicide letters and suicide notes is significant because texts and documents could be manipulated for various reasons, for example, to commit crime. (Coulthard 2019) proposes the notion of 'Idiolect and Uniqueness of encoding'. This implies that individual human beings use language distinctively. He argues that though it is possible in principle, for any speaker or writer to use any word at any time, speakers

and writers make typical and individuating co-selections of preferred words. (Malini & Tan 2016) make use of the LIWC software to undertake a forensic linguistics analysis of the linguistic items found in Virginia Wolf's suicide notes (number not provided by the researchers) to prove their authenticity and genuineness. The words were grouped according to meaning e.g., (a) *I-words* (*I, my*) (b) *social words* (c) *positive emotions* (d) *negative emotions* and (e) *cognitive processes*.

Describing the authors of suicide letters and notes in line with a syntactic forensic framework

The linguistic features and syntactic preferences in a suicide message in a suicide letter or suicide note may range from few lexical items only, simple, compound to complex syntactical structures. (Linn-Gust, Matykiewicz & Pestian 2012) conduct a study on suicide letters and notes content, focusing on the emotion features and latent semantic features observed in the contents of suicide letters and suicide notes. The study sought to distinguish suicide letters and suicide notes from ordinary writings. This was achieved by examining the linguistic features selected by the author e.g. the average sentence length in the suicide letter or suicide note. (Rani 2021) insists that utmost importance should be given to the suicide scene for the recovery of a suicide letter or a suicide note, as the linguistic features forming the content of the letter or note serve as a window to the psyche of the author. The writing style, length and structure of sentences used by the author of the suicide letter or suicide note are a gateway to the author's mind. A longer suicide letter or suicide note is an indication that an author had carefully planned the act of committing suicide. (Byard & Roger 2016) conducted a similar study on skin messages in suicide and assert that skin messages represented an unusual form of suicide letters and suicide notes that could suggest that the deceased had not planned the fateful act as he/she chose the nearest surface to write on. The study evinces that instance of writing on the skin, or skin messages as it is sometimes referred to, is unconventional.

Evaluating the genuineness of suicide letters and notes through a discursal forensic perspective

The genuineness of suicide letters and suicide notes is one of the key aspects that fall within the scope forensic linguistics/stylistics analysis. (Artinopoulou *et. al.* 2020) examine the narrative roles in suicide letters and notes. Their examination specifically focused on the suicide letters and notes' content. The examination identified four suicide letters and notes authors. Below are four types of suicide letters and notes' authors as revealed from the discourses thereof:

- Egotistic victim
- Anomic hero
- Altruistic professional
- Fatalistic revenger

(Mahfudurido 2019) asserts that a suicide note is one of the interesting pieces of evidence in forensic linguistics which may shed light on the suicidal behaviour of the note writer. He points

out to linguistics aspects in suicide letters and notes such as the emotional aspects, messages, expectations and motives. (Cai *et. al.* 2020) investigate suicide letters and notes from Shanghai and Wuhan in China focusing on “putting the blame on others in suicide letters and suicide notes”. The content/discourses in suicide letters and notes investigated during this study evinced how the authors of suicide letters and notes blame other people for their deaths.

Theoretical Framework

The central focus of the study is Authorship Attribution i.e. the investigation the of suicide letters and notes for authenticity and genuineness. In view of this focal goal, the Codal Variation Theory (Nini 2012) was considered suitable in addressing the set objectives. The Codal Variation Theory is central to the variations that exist in the language patterns and other linguistic features in relation to social groups/classes, dialects, gender, etc. (Nini 2012) elucidates the usefulness of the Codal Variation theoretical framework when applied to studies in forensic contexts e.g., (1) *forged documents* (2) *conspiracy* (3) *perjury*, etc. Nini further postulates that the Codal Variation theoretical framework is concerned with the variation of meaning in relation to social groups when the texts considered are produced in a comparable context.

As a forensic linguistics study focusing on the analysis of text materials i.e., suicide letters and notes that were authored by people of different genders, age, etc. and who came from different ethnic groups and social backgrounds, the Codal Variation theoretical framework provided grounding from which the researcher could conceptualise the principles of forensic linguistics. Such was critical to gaining insight into the variations that exist in the usage of language e.g., (1) *idiolects* (2) *encoding* by individuals of different genders, ages, as well as from different ethnic backgrounds.

In the language usage context, idiolect can be defined as the uniqueness in the use of certain lexical items and patterns which may be adopted by people from a given ethnic or social background. This can as such be manifested through the adoption of lexical items such as (1) *COZ* (2) *U* (3) *Y* by young people for communicative purposes among themselves, or to suit a specific occasion. Another example can be manifest through the regional variations of the frequent usage of certain lexical items such as (4) *southand* instead of (5) *thousand* or (6) *aks* in the place of the correct version (7) *ask*. Unconscious and common usages of structures or patterns such as (1) *I use to jog every morning*, instead of the correct structure/pattern (2) *I jog every morning*, or (3) *I used to jog every morning* also falls within the scope of the Codal Variation theoretical framework as this appears to be common among people of average and low education levels.

Research Methods

The study sought to explore the linguistic features and patterns of sensitive text materials in the form of suicide letters and notes, and as such adopted the exploratory research design. This was

viewed suitable for the study as it is considered flexible and can address questions of all types. The study was guided by the interpretivist research paradigm which, according to (Alharthi & Rehman 2016), is based on multiple knowledge and realities that are socially constructed and not discovered. A qualitative research approach was used for the study. In this case, a detailed textual analysis of the suicide letters and notes was conducted to obtain qualitative data.

A total of 12 suicide letters and notes that were authored by people who were purported to have committed suicide between 2021 and 2022 formed the primary data. Considering the number of the alleged suicide deaths accompanied by suicide letters and notes in the two regions, and on the basis of convenience, the study opted for a different and unusual approach in determining the sample size. So, to ensure depth and validity of the study, the sample is purposefully parallel to the population of the study.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings and discussions of the analysis of the linguistic features and patterns of suicide letters and notes. The findings were presented in table and paragraph format.

Presentation of the findings of the study

Table 1. The total number of suicide letters and notes analysed in the two regions:

Region	CIU	Dockets& Letter/s	Suicide	Dockets & Note/s	Suicide
Oshikoto	Omuthiya	three		three	
	Oshivelo	one		none	
Oshana	Oshakati	three		two	
Total		Seven		Five	

Determining the Authenticity of Suicide Letters and Notes Following a Lexical Forensic Analysis

Each suicide letter and note was analysed at the lexical level to determine its authenticity. Through a critical analysis of the lexical features and patterns of the alleged suicide letters and notes, it was established that purported suicides depicted two sets of minds before the act i.e. happiness and unhappiness/anger, evinced through the usage of lexical items that denote positive and/ or negative thinking and emotions towards both the self and other people.

Table 2. Lexical items (parts of speech) denoting positive emotions in the alleged suicide letters and notes:

Part of speech Author	Verb	Noun	Adverb	Adjective
Young	safe	freedom		careful
Old	safe	eternity		peaceful
Male	safe	flower		
Female	safe	flower, love, eternity		caring, peaceful, safe

It can be observed from the use of positive lexical items above in the alleged suicide messages that good relationships existed between purported suicides and the addressees. Such positive lexical items are critical in the authentication of suicide letters and notes.

Apart from the use of positive and negative lexical items presented in the table above, it was believed that 90% of these purported suicide letters and notes were authored by people who may have only acquired low levels of education, as significant incompetence in general language usage was observed in the purported suicide letters and notes. It was also established that the formality level of the lexical items that were opted for in many of the suicide letters and notes ranged from average to below average e.g. (1) *a lower case 'g'* appeared quite often in the writing of the noun 'God' as in 'god' in most, if not all, suicide letters and notes in which God was mentioned. Another noticeable informality observed was the ineptitude in distinguishing between proper nouns from other parts of speech. For example, (2) *names of people and places*, and (3) *days of the week* were written using a lower case at the beginning e.g., (4) '*maria*', (4) '*tuesday*', (5) '*omuntele*', etc.

Purported suicides and the addressee/s could be traced to their places of origin through the identification of names of people and places in the suicide letters and notes. Such names are traditionally and predominantly known to be for places and people from specific regions such as (6) *Ohangwena* and (7) *Omusati* in Northern Namibia, which were not regions in which the current study was conducted.

The use of certain letters in some specific lexical items e.g., (8) *the letter 'H'* in the place of the letter (9) '*A*' was also crucial in the tracing of the authors to the areas they originated from. For instance, (10) *the letter 'H'* is mostly used in lexical items and names of people who mainly hail from Ohangwena and Kavango regions, and some parts of Southern Angola. Names and lexical items in which the letter '*H*' has been used can therefore point to purported suicide letters/notes as having

been authored by suicides from these regions, rather than by suicides who hailed from the other regions of Namibia.

Finally, habitual inconsistency in the usage of the first person singular 'I' was also observed. A lower case 'i' appeared quite frequently in place of the correct first-person singular version, the capital letter 'I', throughout the content of the alleged suicide letters and notes authored by both male and female authors. Also observed in the suicide letters and notes were the authors' incompetency (both male and female), in the use of a capital letter at the beginning of sentences. From a forensic linguistics perspective, such information in suicide messages is critical in determining authenticity.

Describing the Authors of Suicide Letters and Notes in Line with a Syntactic Forensic Framework

Under this subheading, focus was put on the authors' usage of language *i.e.*, general language usage e.g. (1) *sentence construction* (2) *spelling* (3) *concord* (4) *paragraphing* (5) *language use differences between young* (6) *older/elderly authors as well as language use differences between men and women*. Generally, the investigation established that about 58% of the authors were incompetent in grammatical well-formedness, as the alleged suicide letters and notes reflected numerous flaws in grammar e.g. (1) *the construction of sentences* (2) *concord* (3) *paragraphing by most of the authors* (4) *other ineptitudes related to basic language usage*.

For example, in most cases, the authors used sentences of relatively longer and ambiguous length, whereas in some cases, the subject of the sentence did not agree with the verb. The use of punctuation marks was inconsistent, and, in some instances, there were overt absence of punctuations. In some cases, words appeared to have been clustered together instead of being written individually.

Differences between suicide letters and notes authored by purported young and older/elderly authors were also noted. Elderly authors tended to author suicide notes instead of suicide letters compared to young authors. Young authors appeared to have preferred suicide letters. Elderly suicides tended to cluster words together. Another difference noted was that elder suicides also appeared to be direct and explicit in writing, whereas young suicides, in some instances, they appeared ambiguous in their writing. Some young people used language and drawings that evinced that they may have been mentally challenged or possessed by certain external forces. The analysis further established that suicide letters and notes authored by men and women alike, differed in terms of language use. Suicide letters and notes authored by women featured lexical items that bear feminist characteristics *i.e.*, emotional, and compassionate in nature. They expressed love and care towards the authors themselves and for the addressee/s. Also, instances from the texts depicted expression of softheartedness and compassion. Such is typical of the nature of women.

On the contrary, men differed from women as they reflected their masculinity in the way they used language. Male authors used language that showed less or no compassion and kindness. The content featured phrases reflecting aggression and the issuing of directives to the addressee/s or certain members of the family.

Table 3. Phrases demonstrating language use by men and women as evinced in the suicide letters and notes

Phrases	Affection/care (women)	Sympathy (women)	Aggression (men)
	*I love you	* do not be afraid	*silent assassin
	* my flower	*have faith	*hell you
	*goodbye mother and father	*been good to me	*curse upon you
		*be blessed	*shall see
		*meet in eternity	*despicable
		*appreciate you	

Such textual evidence above reveals that women tend to use emotive language in their dying declarations. Men on the other hand are unemotional toward others and are preoccupied by negativity and hatred towards those whom they apportion blame for their action. With such evidence at hand, conclusions can be drawn with regards to the authenticity of the suicide letters and notes as they featured traits naturally associated with each gender.

Evaluating the genuineness of suicide letters and notes through a discursal forensic perspective

Focus under this objective was centred on the discourses of the alleged suicide letters and notes. The investigation established that approximately 97% of the content of the purported suicide letters and notes' made reference to other people (the addressee/s). Specifically, the authors stated the name/s of such people in the content. The authors signed off the message at the end of the alleged suicide letters/notes with phrases such as (1) '*goodbye*' (2) '*meeting in eternity*' (3) '*time has arrived*' (4) '*going home*' (5) '*miss your kindness*' (6) '*don't panic*' (7) '*I love you*', etc.

It was also noted in the suicide letters and notes that the deceased indicated the reasons for taking their own lives. Some reasons evinced in such letters and notes include abuses and humiliation by relatives, threats, frustration because of failed relationships, betrayal, hopelessness and despair, and curses allegedly cast upon them by named persons.

Such textual evidence establishes that the physical and psychological strain experienced by the deceased prior to the alleged suicide acts culminated in the mental incapacitation to deal with the physical and spiritual world, and attendant experiences. The mental and physical exertions led to despair and hopelessness in life. Some of the deceased expressed hatred and dissent or avenged by wishing the addressee/s bad luck in life for subjecting them to abuse, humiliation, threat, physical and mental torture. Besides the hatred and dissent, purported suicides, particularly the women, also expressed love and compassion towards the addressee/s.

Discourses/themes of some of the alleged suicide letters and notes investigated:

In one of the alleged suicide notes, the author hinted at demonic spirits that kept haunting him for quite some time as the reason for committing suicide. He also narrated how these demonic spirits could start haunting his family members too if they do not act promptly and accordingly.

In another alleged suicide letter, the author detailed at length how he was deliberately infected with an incurable disease by a woman he was involved with in a romantic relationship. He narrated how he resented both her and her mother and went to the extent of issuing directives regarding them. Another suicide narrated in the purported suicide letter how he feared going to jail for alleged gender-based violence.

The narratives above establish what led the deceased to commit suicide. The narratives also establish the relationship between the authors and the addressees. These two aspects, motive for suicide and the relationship between the deceased and the addressees are very critical in determining the genuineness of the alleged suicide letters and notes.

Discussions

It has been indicated earlier that by law, suicide and attempted suicide are not considered crimes in Namibia. The implication here is that the two cannot be investigated under the Namibian law. However, as with other cases of unnatural deaths, critical investigations of the two is significant for the sake of justice in Namibia. Such investigation falls under the Criminal Investigations Unit/Division of the Namibian Police Force. As such, all documents claimed to be suicide letters and notes from which the data was collected were obtained from this particular unit/division at the police stations visited.

Based on the findings, and the number of purported suicide letters and notes that were collected by investigating officers at the three police CIUs: Oshivelo, Omuthiya and Oshakati, a statistical difference was noted in terms of the number of purported suicide letters and notes left behind by alleged suicides in the two regions. This was done in comparison to findings made by scholars

such (Girthar, Murty & Rani 2015) who assert that it is between 25% and 30% of suicide deaths that are accompanied by suicide letters and notes.

Such findings disclose that the writing of suicide letters and notes is a global phenomenon. However, putting into perspective the findings made by this study, suicide letters and notes are not common in the two Northern parts of the country in comparison to other parts of the world as established by prior scholars in the literature review section. This was also substantiated by investigators at the three CIUs. These investigators are the ones who respond, as indicated earlier, to purported suicide incidence calls at their respective CIUs in the two regions.

(Tarranum, Vaibhav & Vinay 2014) establish that pen and paper the most common instruments used for suicide messages. Interestingly, this was also the preferred medium by authors of the alleged suicide letters and notes investigated in this study. (Tarranum *et. al.* 2014) further establish that some authors opted for other unorthodox medium such as bed sheet or the authors' own body parts to write suicide letters and notes. The implication here is that, although modern technology and other surfaces could be used as platforms to author suicide letters and notes nowadays, the pen and paper remains the most common platform in most parts of the world, including the two Northern parts of Namibia as evidenced by the examination of the alleged suicide letters and notes obtained for analysis in this study. One of the reasons pen and paper is preferred could be that the purported suicides find it easy to use.

Determining the authenticity of suicide letters and notes following a lexical forensic framework

An in-depth analysis of each suicide letter and note evinced that approximately 80% of the lexical items in each suicide letter and note analysed reflected similarity e.g., in every suicide letter and note, there were lexical items which expressed (a) *anger* (b) *anxiety* (c) *hatred* (d) *curse* (e) *affection* (f) *love* (g) *kindness or compassion towards the addressee/s*. The use of lexical items reflecting negativity is an indication that prior to the alleged suicide act, the deceased people may have been agitated and psychologically unsettled for an unspecified period of time. The use of lexical items depicting positive emotion expresses affection and kindness towards both the self and addressee/s.

Similarly, previous scholars have also revealed how suicides from other parts of the world vented out their anger and frustration by using strong language in their suicide messages. A number of similarities in the choice of words (negative) used by the alleged authors of suicide letters and notes analysed, and those in studies conducted by other researchers were noted. (Fitri & Sudjana 2013) conduct an analysis of the lexical items in Kurt Cobain's suicide note. The analysis established the use of different negative words and phrases such as burning, can't get over frustration, moody, too much of an erratic, coward, finished, etc. (Buschmann, Gauselmann & Tatolli 2017) reveal the use of negative lexical items and phrases in the suicide letters and notes such as fuck life, silly mistakes, inner pain, etc. Such vocabulary and phrases in suicide messages

are indicative of a fact that prior to a suicide act, a person goes through a period of inner pain and suffering such as depression and sickness, and as such, this can be evidence that indeed a suicide letter or note has not been fabricated to deceive, but authentic.

The analysis did not only establish expressions of agitation and hopelessness, but also a sense of care and humanity through the usage of lexical items/vocabulary denoting inherent affection and sympathy towards the addressee/s. Vocabulary such as (1) 'love' (2) 'flower' (3) 'appreciate' and (4) 'blessed' have been observed in alleged suicide letters and notes during the analysis. Alfian (2018) notes the use of positive lexical items and phrases such as (5) lovely people (6) *greatest father* (7) *sacrifice* (8) *thank you* (9) *your efforts* and *love you* in suicide letters and notes. Such similarities in the language choices by authors indicates a universal mentality and approach towards the authorship of suicide letters and notes.

Generally, from a forensic stylistics/linguistics point of view, a match between the choice of parts of speech and lexical items (negative) present in the suicide letters and notes, and the behaviour/mental state displayed by the deceased persons alleged to have committed suicide, is an indication that such messages are indeed genuine and authentic. Regarding the presence of positive parts of speech in suicide messages, it is common knowledge that naturally, there exists strong bonds and mutual affection between loved ones and friends. Such bonds and affection may remain eternal and may also be manifested in dying declarations such as suicide messages and wills.

Another feature that stood out in determining the authenticity of the suicide messages was the use of lexical items traditionally and predominantly known to be used by people from specific areas or regions or known to belong to a specific social group. Such lexical items significantly help in the tracing of the authors to specific areas of origin, or social group. An example evinced in the findings was the use of the letter 'H' in some lexical items that certain alleged authors have used in the suicide messages. The letter 'H' was mostly preferred (In such instances as in the writing of names) in place of the letter 'A'. As indicated earlier, the use of letter 'H' can be evidence to assume the place or area where the alleged author hailed from.

For example, letter 'H' is traditionally known to be used in some words and names of people predominantly inhabiting many areas in Ohangwena region and parts of the Kavango region in Northern Namibia. This letter is used in the place of letter 'A' e.g., (10) *the name Hangula can be Angula* in other dialects spoken in areas in Northern Namibia. It is also used by some people who inhabit some parts of southern Angola and as such, the use of letter 'H' in the place of 'A' can be traced to people from these areas. Although the free movement of people from one region/place to another today may dispute this claim, it can still be argued (from a forensic linguistics point of view) that the suicide message is authentic when the words/names used match the dialect used the deceased and the place or region that he or she hailed from. Similarly,

(Buschmann *et. al.* 2017) establishes the use of German, Arabic and English which could also be helpful in determining which countries the author hailed from.

Describing the authors of suicide letters and notes in line with a syntactic forensic framework

The analysis examined how the authors generally used language in the alleged suicide letters and notes to determine authenticity and genuineness *i.e.*, (1) *structure of the sentences used* (2) *concord* (3) *the use of punctuation marks and paragraphing* (4) *language use by men and women* (5) *as well as by young/youth and elders/elderly people*.

Generally, incompetence in the general usage of language *e.g.*, (6) *grammar* (7) *paragraphing* (8) *sentence construction and punctuation marks* can be associated with the lack of adequate formal education, or low levels of formal education, as well as old age. For instance, the formation of sentences, not knowing where to use upper and lower cases in a given sentence, differentiating proper nouns from other nouns, clustering of words together in sentences, etc. are an indication that the author may only have attained elementary education. Such could also be due to old age and poor health.

Another instance in this regard is the clustering of words together in sentences. The clustering of words together can be attributed to old age and low levels of education. Since suicide notes authored by elders/elderly people were characterised by clustered words, it can thus be assumed that such notes are indeed genuine and authentic. On the contrary, (Coulthard 2019) propounds the notion of idiolect and uniqueness of encoding. Here the emphasis is on the ability possessed by individual humans to use language distinctively.

A second observation made in the suicide notes authored by older/elderly people, which is significant in determining authenticity was the purported suicide message being too short and explicit. This may as well be attributed to old age and poor health. (Chiu, Halliday, Ho & Yip 1998) conduct a study between young and elderly people. The results showed that suicide messages authored by young people were longer, with the content indicating emotional state of mind. The results also showed that suicide messages authored by elderly people were short (suicide notes).

As such, alleged suicide messages featuring the two traits stated above, message being short and direct, can be said to be authentic from a forensic linguistics perspective as such traits fit in well with the natural features of elderly people.

Another observation made during the investigation which is of great significance in proving authenticity was the differences observed between suicide letters and notes authored by men and women. The analysis notes that suicide letters and notes alleged to have been authored by women are emotional and sympathetic towards both the self and the addressee/s, whereas those purported to have been authored by men contain strong and unsympathetic language towards the addressee/s. Naturally, women tend to be caring, embracing, sympathetic and compassionate

towards the self and others. (Lester & Hokans 2009) asserts that men tend to leave suicide messages that are characterised by internal anger in comparison to suicide messages left by women.

In addition, men are physical, uncompromising, and intolerant by nature. Apart from such attributes manifested in the general conduct and behaviour of men, such may also be manifested in writing. From a forensic stylistics/linguistics perspective, the analysis assumes that such suicide letters and notes are authentic as their contents reflect/match the traits and features that are naturally associated with the two respective genders.

To substantiate the claim made above, men tend to use language that reflects anger, aggression and issue directives more than women do in general. In one instance in the analysis, the purported author made a declaration and provided directives that had to be complied with by certain people. Such a declaration included the distribution of his wealth such as cattle (address where such could be found provided), house and car among others, custody for the children and rituals to be performed. A warning was also given as to what might befall upon those who failed to comply with the directives. However, prior research reviewed established that instructions in the suicide letters and notes are not associated with age or gender. (Lester 2009) further establishes that there was a tendency for more suicide messages by men and such notes included instructions to those left behind and a mention of financial difficulties.

In suicide messages purported to have been authored by women, expressions such as (9) '*I love you*' (10) '*take care*' and (11) '*goodbye*' were observed. Such expressions are indicative of softheartedness and kindness of the nature of women in general. As such, from a forensic linguistics point of view, a suicide letter or note alleged to have been authored by a woman and containing such phrases can be assumed to be real or authentic as such features and attributes of language are typical of, or match those associated with femininity.

In this study, it was noted that older authors of suicide notes used language that expressed their feelings and emotions. For instance, they cite their unhappiness about the treatment they received from those they expected to take care of them. (Foster 2003) establishes that older suicides expressed fewer feelings of inadequacy and indicated signs of illness, grief and loneliness as a result of widowhood. In essence, older authors across the globe commonly use language that expresses their concerns such as unhappiness, vulnerability, and loneliness. (Bauer, Bernard, Bibb, Dixon, Lenaars & Jobes 1997) establish that elderly people write both suicide letters and notes in which they reflect ill-health related to old age and lack of care by loved ones.

Evaluating the genuineness of suicide letters and notes through a discoursal forensic perspective

Five key elements were critical in determining genuineness. These were: the addressee/s, places, the relationship between the deceased and the addressee/s, motive/s for the alleged suicide and

the deceased's status. References to other people made in the purported suicide letters and notes was critical as it holds much needed probative value in the analysis of these messages for genuineness. Similarly, (Cai, Jia, Li, Lu, Yip & Zeng 2020) investigate suicide letters and notes from Shanghai and Wuhan in China in which the suicides directly blamed others for their deaths.

When the names provided in the suicide letters or notes match those of people referred to, which is usually the case, there should be no doubt that such suicide messages are genuine. When there is a match of places, there can be no doubt that the message is genuine.

Another aspect investigated to prove genuineness was the motive for the suicide act. Like with the first aspect under this objective, the motive for committing suicide is key in establishing the genuineness of a purported suicide message. This reveals what exactly transpired or what led to the act of self-killing.

The discourse analysis revealed the following as some of the motives for the suicide act: curse by evil spirits, humiliation by relatives, frustration, enemies, accusation and fear of going to jail, infection with a deadly disease, hopelessness/life too much to bear and dysfunction of manhood as a result of bewitching.

The motives for the alleged suicide acts above hold highly crucial probative value in terms of establishing their genuineness. (Chaudhuri, Paul, Paul & Pratihari 2020) assert that failure in examination, torture by in-laws, unbearable life problems/incurable disease, failure in crop farming and poor economic conditions were some of the reasons for committing suicide.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the analysis of the lexical items of the suicide letters and notes for authenticity and genuineness, the study established that the twelve deceased persons appeared to have been the genuine authors of those texts. This can be evidenced by the use of lexical items in the suicide messages (positive and negative) that hold significant probative value. Such items were found to be matching both the physical and psychological make-up of people whose lives generally appear to be compounded by insurmountable challenges in life.

Apart from the use of positive and negative lexical items in the suicide messages, the analysis revealed that most of the authors may not have received formal education as most of them demonstrated significant ineptitude in the general usage of language. Differences in the usage of language between men and women, young and elder authors, etc. were also noted which are significant in determining authenticity.

Other important information that helped in establishing the authenticity and genuineness of the suicide message were the motive/s behind the suicide act, the addressee/s, the relationship between the author and the addressee, feelings of guilt for committing the suicide act, directives given, etc.

Recommendations

Despite the evidence that all the twelve authors were the actual authors of the suicide letters and notes investigated, it is indispensable to always analyse all suicide letters and notes collected from and around suicide scenes from a forensic linguistics perspective. This will help to ensure that the outcomes of all the investigations conducted are authentic and genuine as they will be based on evidence.

Acknowledgements

Suicide letters and notes are highly sensitive text materials, and unlike in some parts of the world, accessing them for study purposes is very difficult in Namibia. I am therefore indebted to the three Criminal Investigation Units of the Namibian Police Force for granting me permission to conduct an investigation on these materials. I am also indebted to Professor Haileleul Zeleke Woldemariam, and Dr. Pilisano Masake for their support and guidance when I was writing this article.

References

- Alharthi, K. & Rehman, A.A. (2016). An introduction to research paradigms: *International journal of educational investigations*, 3 (8), 51-59.
- Alfian, R. (2018). Meanings in a suicide note: *An analysis of linguistics pragmatics in Nusadi's suicide note*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323150837>
- Ballur, M., Murgod, P., Mujathan, P., Sudha, M. & Viveka, S. (2014). Strategic evaluation of suicide notes. *Int J Cur Res Rev*, 6 (17), 21-24.
- Bauer, N., Bernard, N., Bibb, J., Dixon, J., Lenaars, A. & Jobes, D. (1997). Late adulthood suicide: A life-span analysis of suicide notes. *Archives of suicide research*. 3 (2), 91-108. doi:10.1080/13811119708258261
- Buschmann, T., Gauselmann, H. & Tattoli, L. (2017). A rebus to say goodbye: A suicide note on a bedsheet. *Forensic science, medicine and pathology*, 13(4),500-503. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12024-017-9895-0>
- Cai, Z., Jia, H., Li, F., Lu, X., Yip, P. & Zeng, X (2020). Putting the blame on others in suicide notes from Shanghai and Wuhan, China: *Crisis*, 41(6), 469-474. <https://doi.org/10.2027/0227-5910/a000677>
- Chaudhuri, S., Paul, G., Paul, M. & Pratihari, H. (2020). Study on a few suicide notes a forensic approach: *Journal of forensic science and criminal investigation*, 14(2), 555-881. doi:0.19080/JFSCI.2020.14.555881
- Chiu, C., Halliday, P., Ho, T. and Yip, P. (1998). Suicide notes: *What do they tell us?* *Acta psychiatrica Scandinavica*, 98 (6), 467-473. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0447.1998.tb10121.x>

- Coulthard, M. (2009). Author identification, idiolect and linguistic uniqueness. *Applied linguistics*, 25(4), 431–447. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/25.4.431>
- Douglas, R., Lazarides, A. & Seketa, T. (2019). A Thematic content analysis of suicide notes from South Africa: *South African journal of psychology*, 49(1), 148-159. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246318780144>
- Foster, T. (2003). Suicide note themes and suicide prevention. *International journal of psychiatry in medicine*, 33 (4), 323-331. <https://doi.org/10.2190/T210-E2V5-A5M0-QLJU>
- Fitri, N. & Sudjana, E.T. S. (2013). Kurt Cobain's suicide note case: Forensic linguistic profiling analysis. *An international journal of criminology and sociological theory*, 6 (4), 217- 227. <https://ijest.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/ijest/article/view/37943/34410>
- Girthar, S., Murty, O.P. & Rani, M. (2015). *Suicide note: The last words*. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305280412>
- Lester, D. & Hokans, K.D. (2009). *Anger and hopelessness in suicide notes: A preliminary study*. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26678220>
- Imam, M. (2019). *An evaluation of the linguistic aspects of Turnitin*. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348163029>
- Nini, A. (2012). *Codal variation theory as a forensic tool*. *IAFL Porto 2012 Proceedings*. <http://ler.letras.up.pt/uploads/ficheiros/13615.pdf>
- Shneidman, E.S. (1996). *The suicidal mind*. Oxford University Press: Oxford
- Tarannum, A., Vaibhav, S. & Vinay, S. (2015). *Suicide notes on unconventional surface: A trending challenge*. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360286220>
- The Inquests Act 6 of 1993 of the Republic of Namibia



©2025 by the Authors. This Article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)