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Exploring the possibility of using appraisal theory to determine the legitimacy of suicide notes

L. Grundlingh

Department of Afrikaans and Theory of Literature, The University of South Africa, Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, Pretoria 0003, South Africa

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Abstract

Suicide as a mental state has fascinated psychologists and psychiatrists for many years. Although there are different theories surrounding the suicidal state of mind, some believe that a suicide note could provide insights when determining whether the suicide was genuine or staged. Linguistic analyses since the 1950s on both fabricated and authentic suicide notes have shown that, to some extent, it is possible to determine the characteristics of suicide notes. The current study is influenced by previous linguistic research on suicide notes but approaches the analysis from a slightly different perspective. The argument is that using appraisal theory categories as the main method of analysing both authentic and fabricated suicide notes provides another way of distinguishing between these two sets of notes. Two corpora of suicide notes are analysed. The first corpus represents authentic suicide notes and consists of 33 suicide notes. The second corpus consists of 66 fabricated suicide notes. The analysis indicates that even with limited corpora there is a possibility of using appraisal theory to distinguish between authentic and fabricated suicide notes. Since only small corpora are used in this study, drawing definite conclusions are not possible. Nonetheless, it appears that appraisal theory has potential.

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1. Introduction

On 12 November 2002 Johannes Kerkerrel (Ralph Rabie), a well-known South African singer-songwriter, was found hanging from a tree outside Kleinmond. An apparent suicide note addressed to his mother was found. In it Kerkerrel stated that he committed suicide because he had no option and was suffering from severe depression. In the years since Kerkerrel's death, many have come to believe he did not die by suicide, but was murdered.

In a story posted on the News24 website (Pienaar, 2005), Kerkerrel's wife Anne Grobler and son alleged that the size of Kerkerrel's estate proved he had not died by suicide due to financial problems. Grobler stated that although they had provided the police with enough evidence that Kerkerrel had not died by suicide, no follow-up investigation was conducted.

In a case such as this, evidence found at the scene of the death or crime as well as evidence gathered during the investigation is used to conclude whether a death was a suicide or a murder. According to the article (Pienaar, 2005), the suicide note had not been written on Kerkerrel's computer but had been transferred to it after his death. Blood was found on the two front seats of his car and a cross had been cut onto his chest. The report further states that “[e]ven the medical

E-mail address: thiarl@unisa.ac.za.

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examiner found it strange that Kerkorrel stumbled through the bushes, fainted because of loss of blood, got up again and managed to hang himself in a way that left his knees only 2 cm off the ground” (Pienaar, 2005).

From this report it is clear that at least some of the evidence could point to foul play. The suicide note in this case is a key piece of evidence. In theory there could be some way of analysing a suicide note to determine whether or not it is genuine. A linguistic analysis such as this falls under forensic linguistics, a discipline of applied linguistics “which draws on the scientific study of language to solve forensic problems” (McMenamin, 2002:56). If there is a dispute about the authenticity of a suicide note, a linguistic analysis of the text from the perspective of forensic linguistics could provide additional evidence in an investigation. It is important to note that such a linguistic analysis is never a hundred percent accurate. At best, such evidence is speculative but can still be used to some extent.

The aim of the current study is threefold: firstly, to determine whether there is a difference between the linguistic characteristics of authentic suicide notes (i.e. written by suicidal individuals who have committed themselves to the suicidal act) and fabricated suicide notes¹ (i.e. written by individuals who have not committed themselves to the suicidal act); secondly, to determine whether appraisal theory can be used to distinguish an authentic suicide note from a fabricated note; and, thirdly, to determine whether the appraisal theory categories present in suicide notes can be used as legitimacy markers to identify an authentic suicide note.

Although studies on the linguistic characteristics of authentic suicide notes, and the distinctions between authentic and fabricated notes have been attempted in the past (Shneidman and Farberow, 1957; Osgood and Walker, 1959; Gottschalk and Gleser, 1960; Leenaars, 1988; Black, 1993; Gregory, 1999), no analysis has been done from mainly an appraisal theory perspective using the categories suggested in the current study. Although affect has been mentioned as a possible characteristic of suicide notes in previous studies, the concept of affect has not been investigated in detail. Appraisal theory allows one to consider the sub-categories of affect, introducing a more complete exploration of this characteristic. In previous studies, affect has simply been labelled “positive” or “negative”, but no attempt has been made to identify the other sub-categories of appraisal that could be present in suicide notes. Analysing suicide notes from an appraisal perspective also allows one to consider alternative characteristics such as judgement or engagement that has not been extensively researched in suicide notes before. The aim of this study is not to claim that appraisal theory is the best way to analyse suicide notes, but rather to investigate the options that appraisal theory could provide in terms of a linguistic analysis of this genre.

Appraisal theory is based on the claim that “emotions are elicited and differentiated on the basis of a person’s subjective evaluation or appraisal of the personal significance of a situation, object, or event on a number of dimensions or criteria” (Scherer, 1999:637). It was originally used to explain the elicitation of differentiated emotions (Arnold, 1960; Scherer, 1999), but in 1966 Richard Lazarus reconceptualised the theory by arguing for a two-stage process of appraisal that elicits both stress and emotion.

According to Scherer (1999:638), the pioneering work of various scholars ultimately led to a classic approach where appraisal theory is based on a fixed set of dimensions and criteria categorised into four major categories: (1) the intrinsic characteristics of objects or events, (2) the significance of the event for the individual’s needs or goals, (3) the individual’s ability to influence or cope with the consequences of the event and (4) the compatibility of the event with social or personal standards, norms, or values.

Appraisal theory has been reconceptualised many times and it is the approach by Martin and Rose (2003) that is the focus of this study. Their theory includes various categories and sub-categories that is appropriate for a linguistic analysis such as the one attempted in this study.

Although this author agrees that using computer software to annotate emotions and distinguish between suicide notes is more accurate in determining the percentage of a certain emotion in a suicide note or suicide note corpus, such a method should be approached with caution in the case of suicide notes. In many cases a word that would be identified as a positive emotion is, in fact, used to express a negative mind set. For example, the word “happy” would be annotated as a positive emotion, which it is. However, in a sentence such as “I used to be happy” the word is used in a negative context and expresses a negative emotional state. For this reason, appraisal categories were manually identified in every text in the corpora.

To further illustrate the contribution of the current study, a discussion of four recent linguistic studies on suicide notes is necessary.

2. Recent research on suicide notes

Given spatial constraints, only four previous linguistic studies on suicide notes are discussed in some detail. Existing studies of a similar nature support the argument that an analysis of suicide notes based on appraisal theory categories could lead to useful insights.

¹ In a real-life situation, a fabricated suicide notes can be written by either the person who committed the murder, the victim (if the victim is forced by the murderer to write his/her own suicide note) or it can be written by someone who wants to fake his or her own suicide in order to disappear.

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