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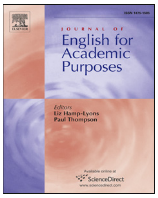

The suicide note as a genre: Implications for genre theory

Betty Samraj*, Jean Mark Gawron [1]

San Diego State University, Department of Linguistics and Asian/Middle Eastern Languages, 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182, USA

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ABSTRACT

Although most of the work on genre analysis has attended to academic and professional genres, we attempt to explore and extend key issues in genre theory through a move structure analysis of suicide notes, a non-academic, non-professional genre, which has been the focus of interdisciplinary research. These studies, however, have not considered the suicide note as a genre.

We propose a move-based account of this genre despite a variety of challenges these texts pose for the framework, including the lack of a discourse community, great variety in length, and the lack of any identifiable obligatory moves or fixed ordering of moves. The results show that not all genres can be characterized in terms of obligatory and optional moves, and we discuss an alternative way for capturing genre membership. We also show that a genre can exhibit patterns of co-occurrence for moves and steps even when it lacks an identifiable linear order.

A computational analysis of a set of lexico-grammatical features of the texts shows that these features found in previous research on suicide notes are actually concentrated in particular moves. This paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of this study for genre theory.

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1. Introduction

Swales (1990: 1) states in the first paragraph of his seminal monograph, *Genre Analysis*, that he is seeking to develop three concepts, “discourse community, genre and language-learning,” as an approach to “the teaching of academic and research English.” *Genre Analysis* was followed by a large number of studies of academic genres, particularly the research article, with many focusing on the introduction and applying the Create-A-Research-Space (CARS) framework to research article introductions in different disciplines and different languages (see Swales, 2004). Departing from this core set of genre analyses, some relatively recent studies have considered other academic genres such as grant proposals and PhD dissertations (Bunton, 2005; Halleck & Connor, 2006). Genre analysis has also been applied to professional genres, for example, barristers' opinions (Hafner, 2010) and company brochures (Cheng, 2011). The appeal of Swales' framework for describing a genre in terms of functional moves and steps, in addition to the lexico-grammatical features characterizing those moves and steps, has extended to more marginal academic and professional genres, such as letters of appeal to a university (Sadeghi & Samuel, 2013), and recruitment ads (Gillaerts, 2012).

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 619 594 5882; fax: +1 619 594 4877.
E-mail addresses: bsamraj@mail.sdsu.edu (B. Samraj), gawron@mail.sdsu.edu (J.M. Gawron).

[1] Tel.: +1 619 594 0252; fax: +1 619 594 4877.

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The rich variety of these genre studies has revealed the utility of approaching writing, and also spoken language (see, for example, Orr, 2007), in academic, professional, and a variety of other social contexts in terms of genres, that is, groups of texts fulfilling one or more communicative purposes, characterized by a similarity in discourse organization in terms of functional moves and their constituent steps, produced and consumed by members of a discourse community. These studies in the last 25 years have enhanced our understanding of some of the key aspects of genre theory, such as the complexity of linear and hierarchical ordering of move structure (e.g. Yang & Allison, 2003), the flexibility of some genres (Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005; Sadeghi & Samuel, 2013), the dynamism of genres (Gillaerts, 2012), problematic aspects of privileging communicative purpose in genre categorization (Askehave & Swales, 2001; Swales 2004; Tardy & Swales, 2014), and the occluded nature of some genres (Samraj & Monk, 2008; Swales, 1996).

Given that the voluminous research that has followed from Swales (1990) has primarily attended to academic writing, specifically to published academic writing, it might be somewhat surprising that this paper will focus on a definitively non-academic genre, the suicide note, to explore, question, and, hopefully, extend Swalesian genre theory. It might be worth recalling Miller's (1984: 155) observation that considering “homely discourse” such as the ransom note and the letter of recommendation as potential genres “is not to trivialize the study of genre.” Suicide notes contain many properties that make the application of genre analysis, especially move analysis, problematic. In brief, suicide notes are not associated with a particular discourse community, are semi-occluded, include a wide range in length, and may not have an easily identifiable set of obligatory moves or linear order; as such, they might seem to be an outlier genre. Despite (and because of) these limitations, we aim to show what genre analysis can offer in a study of these important but perplexing texts that have received attention from the disciplines of psychology, forensic linguistics, and computational linguistics.

Beginning in the 1950s, suicidologists (Shneidman & Farberow, 1957) have analyzed suicide notes, even focusing on language features, to probe the suicidal mind, and have compared suicide notes produced in different time periods, across cultures, and by different age groups and genders. Many of these studies have analyzed suicide notes using protocol sentences that describe psychological characteristics thought to be associated with suicide, such as unbearable psychological pain (e.g., Leenaars, 1996). Other studies have tried to gain insight into the suicidal mind by gathering statistics on words of particular semantic types using computer programs. One program that has been used in a number of studies (discussed in Section 3.4) is Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count or LIWC (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010).

Forensic linguists have focused on ways of determining the authenticity of such texts (Olsson, 2009), joined by computational linguists who have applied machine learning methods to the problem, discovering a number of statistically significant differences between fake and authentic notes, including the greater number of words, past tense verbs, nouns, and personal pronouns per authentic note (Pestian, Matykiewicz, & Grupp-Phelan, 2008; Pestian, Nasrallah, Matykiewicz, Bennett, & Leenaars, 2010).

Studies focusing on the language of suicide notes, such as those exploring semantic spaces in suicide notes (Matykiewicz, Duch, & Pestian, 2009), or even those labeling themselves as discourse analyses (Edelman & Renshaw, 1982), have not discussed suicide notes as a genre or attempted an analysis of the rhetorical organization of the suicide note. For example, Edelman and Renshaw (1982) use an approach called Syntactic Language Computer Analysis, which uses a set of semantic features classifying nouns, verbs and adjectives, as well as some shallow sentence-level syntactic features, such as part of speech, transitive verb, and modified noun. They were able to discover features that differed significantly between the authentic and fake suicide notes in the Shneidman and Farberow (1957) data set. For example, both the use of negation and use of second person were higher in authentic notes than fake ones. However, the notes are essentially viewed as bags of words, extracted from their function and context, and therefore the interpretation of the features remains quite problematic. In sum, these language studies of suicide notes have revealed the thematic features of suicide notes, for example, suicide as escape and problematic interpersonal relationships, and the psycho-social meanings, such as social detachment, expressed by vocabulary choices, but they have not had much to say about rhetorical organization or communicative purpose.

In this study, we perform a genre analysis of a collection of suicide notes, focusing particularly on move structure analysis. We discuss the relationship of a genre to a discourse community using the case of suicide notes, exploring the possibility that some genres may not belong to any specific discourse community. This analysis of suicide notes is one with no opportunity for specialist interviews or observations given the contexts in which the genre is produced and consumed. However, we maintain that an analysis of suicide notes as a genre in terms of moves and steps and accompanied by a linguistic analysis of constituent moves and steps, without the augmentation of ethnographic methods (Tardy & Swales, 2014), can still illuminate and clarify this text type.

Askehave and Swales (2001) have pointed out that the communicative purpose of texts may not be immediately apparent and that a linguistic analysis of a group of texts could lead to an understanding of their communicative purpose(s). We attempt a move analysis of a collection of suicide notes in order to identify the communicative purpose(s) for this genre. The results show that not all genres can be characterized in terms of obligatory and optional moves, and we discuss an alternative way for capturing genre membership. We will also show that, although a genre may lack an identifiable linear order of moves, it can still exhibit patterns of co-occurrence for moves and steps. We will further apply the computational tool known as LIWC (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010) to perform analyses of a set of lexical and grammatical features of the texts to show that the patterns of language found in previous research on suicide notes are actually characteristic of different functional units. Moreover, our study indicates that studying the move structure can yield a finer-grained analysis of where and why certain expressions occur, underscoring the value of move structure analysis in studies of texts in other social sciences. This paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of this study for genre analysis.

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