

Thought Process and Discourse Strategies in Selected Suicide Notes in Online Media

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Abstract

Suicides and attempted suicides are criminal offences in Nigeria as stipulated in section 326 and 327 of the Criminal Code of the Federal Republic of Nigeria CAP 'C38'. Thus, there is no justification for committing nor attempting to commit suicide in the eyes of the Nigeria legal system. Leaving suicide notes to justify suicide actions have often been frowned at without due recourse to the inherent linguistic features they are composed of. Though extant studies define suicide note as a message left behind by a person who intends to commit suicide, very little seem to have been done regarding the features comprised in such notes. While it is generally agreed that the decision to commit suicide is a bold and difficult one, an in-depth examination of suicide notes will reveal that, thought processes of suicide victims play crucial roles in understanding the reasons for their actions. The aim of this study therefore is to identify relevant facets of linguistic features in discourses represented in suicide notes. Data for this study was collected from online media such as online newspapers, Facebook and Instagram between 2017 and 2020. Out of thirty-eight (38) suicide cases examined with detailed information on the circumstances that led to their actions, using Thora Tenbrink's Cognitive Discourse Analysis (CODA), findings showed that six (6) died by using a poisonous substance popularly called "snipers" while one (1) died by hanging himself. The study evinces from the suicide notes that there is always a powerful thought process or idea behind the bold step taken by suicide victims.

Keywords: *Suicide, Cognitive Discourse, Thought Process, Online Media*

1.0 Introduction

Suicide is the act of intentionally taking one's life. It is, when people direct violence at themselves with the intent to end their lives and die as a result of their actions. It is fatal and constitutes a problem for close relatives and friends throughout their life span. Suicide is a worldwide phenomenon and a leading cause of death in Nigeria. According to World Health Organization (2018) in a published statistical report on global suicide rates, Nigeria ranks 72nd on the table with an estimated suicide rate of 9.5 persons per 100,000 people. It adds that suicide is the second leading cause of death for people aged 15-29 worldwide and 90% of those who died by suicide had an underlying mental illness.

In recent years, there has been a trend in which young people tend to publish their suicide notes or express their suicidal feelings online (Desmet and Hoste, 2013). These show that suicide or suicidal behavior is prevalent among adolescents and young adults, and is a significant social and psychological problem. Suicide accounts for 51% of the nearly 1.6 million intentional deaths reported globally in 2004 (World Health Organization, 2009). Leenaars (2010) outlines ten plausible and relevant reasons for suicide known as Shneidman's commonalities, otherwise known as suicide commandments:

- a. The common purpose of suicide is to seek a solution.
- b. The common goal of suicide is cessation of consciousness.
- c. The common stimulus in suicide is intolerable psychological pain.

- d. The common stressor in suicide is frustrated psychological needs.
- e. The common emotion in suicide is hopelessness-helplessness.
- f. The common cognitive state in suicide is ambivalence.
- g. The common perceptual state in suicide is constriction.
- h. The common action in suicide is egression.
- i. The common interpersonal act in suicide is communication of intention.
- j. The common consistency in suicide is with lifelong coping patterns.

These ten commonalities are in atandem with this research that suicide is not a disease but a psychological pain that works with the flow of the mind, which assessment is preferred to diagnosis.

A suicide note or death note is a message left behind when a person dies by suicide or intends to die by suicide. It can be in written form, typed message, audio message or video posted on an online media like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. to Mallikarjun et al (2014) observes that reasons for writing suicide note may be diverse, the most common of which is to dissipate guilt in the survivors. A person may write the terminal note to increase the pain of survivors. Suicide notes may give out valuable information about the reasons for suicide and expose the psyche of the person, which would have led to fatality (Darbonne, 1969; Mohanty et al, 2007). It may reveal the possible loneliness, rejection, alienation, isolation or exclusion of the victim.

A study of suicide notes reveals the thought process or mental synthesis of victims. The thought process may result in cognitive biases and cognitive biases to suicidal ideations, which can lead to suboptimal results like suicide. Before a suicide victims will write any note that he will leave behind, he would have undergone a thought process that will manifest through the language(s) used either spoken or written. Suicide notes serve as the golden road to the understanding of suicide and if a suicide victim would be capable of penning a full and explanatory psychological note, that person would probably have the wits to resist the inner suicidal impulses (Leenaars, 2010). Cummings and Renshaw (1979) state that there is a shift in people's linguistic expression due to the aroused cognitive state of the suicidal individual's experience.

It should be established here that language use is an expression of thoughts. Whatever we say or write, in one way or the other, must have gone through our minds, superficially or in depth. It is the thought that is interpreted into spoken words. This accounts for why people will often ask: "What are you thinking?" and expect a meaningful response They may not even realize that the answer will be indirect and communicated through a medium, typically *language*. However, there is no direct way of accessing someone's thought, and the language used to express such thought may not be commensurate or be equivalent with their thoughts structure. Hence, the relationship between language and thought is not simple, but undoubtedly it is systematic (Miller, 1951) and the systematic principles and patterns can be identified and exploited for accessing what goes on in people's minds.

Since researchers who are interested in human thought and behavior frequently aim to access cognition and language, it is a widely used medium across various research purposes and procedural steps. In other words, we must not expect everything from suicide notes without giving due consideration to the context of the act, which will contribute in the interpretation of the circumstances not contained in the suicide note.

Suicide reports in online (social) media are known to induce copycat suicides, an effect frequently called the Werther effect (Stack, 2003). People who are already depressed see new ways they can kill themselves. For example, *Sniper*, a lethal pesticide, is now one widely known to be the go-to-suicide material

in Nigeria. People with suicidal tendencies, tend to express their thoughts, desires and intentions in pro-suicide forums and share with other people, feelings and intentions (Gea and Sanchez, 2012). These are warning signals that are hardly being understood by people. Suicide notes definitely can have a great deal of meaning and give a great deal of information especially when they are put in the context of the life history of the individual who wrote the suicide note and committed the act.

In Nigeria, suicide is a criminal offence under Section 327 of the Criminal Code Act with a penalty of about one (1) year imprisonment. Furthermore, Section 326 of the Criminal Code states that:

a person will be charged with a felony and liable to life imprisonment if she or he aids, counsels, procures another person to kill himself (Criminal Code Act, 2004).

Omilana (2019) in Guardian Newspaper states that these laws are holdovers from when Nigeria was a British colony. Recent persistent deaths in different parts of the country within a few years is a reminder that suicide is a complex and growing crisis in the country. The Daily Trust Editorial (2019) reports that, the horrors of the grave closed-in on no fewer than 42 Nigerians, among them 11 students, who committed suicide within the first and second quarters of the year 2019, alone; and that majority of the victims ended their lives by consuming the deadly insecticide called sniper while others either drank acid or set selves afire. Some people commit suicide without leaving a note. Some teenagers and young adult who write notes do so in diaries, while many catch in on information communication technology (ICT) to post such notes on their social media handles before committing the act,. Studies indicate that online media can influence suicidal behavior, where Internet forums and websites dedicated to suicide may actively encourage forum users to commit suicide (Alao, Sodaberg, Pohl, & Alao, 2006). The Internet has provided a way for people to obtain how-to descriptions of suicide as well as lethal means to kill themselves. Other researches have shown that such sites can serve a preventive role (Baker and Fortune, 2008). For instance, Facebook recently developed an online feature known as *Report Suicidal Content* which relies on users reporting other users if they feel that they are at risk of committing suicide (Morese, 2016). Recent updates in the social media platform, Twitter also has a similar feature known as *Report Self Harm*. These new features in social media platforms are undoubtedly important in suicide prevention as suicide is not only the result of mental health issues, but of various socio-cultural factors and especially individual crisis (WHO, 2016). The online features are automatic procedures that enable online media teams spot suicidal messages and allow stakeholders to quickly react to online suicidal behaviors. This paper seeks to investigate the linguistic features that are represented in the suicide notes and identify the thought processes involved in them. An attempt is made to review some related literatures by examining how suicide notes or suicide victims relate to suicidal ideation and behavior. It is worth noting that suicidal thoughts or ideation and behavior are a powerful ideologies, which include plans, attempts, degree of suicidal intent, medical severity of attempt, repeat versus first lifetime attempt status, and death by suicide. Posting suicide notes in online social networks like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram among others is a recent phenomenon. To date, it is unclear if the overall effect of the notes will, in fact, lead to greater encouragement of suicide or to greater opportunities for suicide prevention. Careful evaluation of these competing factors is necessary in the future, given the widespread use of online social networks. This is owing to the high number of suicide victims in recent times. Obinna and Olawale (2019) in Vanguard Newspaper (May 21) report that “Nigeria ranked 15th in the world for suicide – but Lesotho tops African list”.

2.0 Literature Review

Uwakwe and Gureje (2011) examine the relationship between comorbid mental and substance use disorders with suicidal behaviors in the Nigerian survey of mental health and well-being. They found that persons with lifetime suicide attempts were more likely than those without attempts to have experienced lifetime mental disorders. Lifetime attempters were also more likely to have comorbid conditions. Eleven percent of persons with a lifetime history of suicidal attempt had three or more co-occurring disorders, as compared with only 0.4% of persons with no history of lifetime attempts. Controlling for the effects of comorbid conditions suggests that while mood disorders may be independently associated with suicidal outcomes, comorbidity partly explains the association of anxiety disorders and almost fully accounts for the association of substance use disorders with suicidal outcomes. The authors therefore concluded that comorbidity is an important factor in the association of mental and substance use disorders with suicidal behavior in this environment.

Nwosu and Odesanmi (2001), in a study carried out in the Teaching Hospital, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, that was based on medico-legal autopsy reports the suicide rate as 0.4 per 100,000 populations, with nearly four times as many males committing suicide when compared to females (ratio of 3.6:1). The majority of the suicides were committed by the ingestion of Gammalin 20 and use of the local dane-gun. Despite the above, there is still a paucity of research on suicide (notes) in Nigeria.

2.1 Theoretical Framework and Methodology

2.2 Cognitive Discourse Analysis

Cognitive Discourse Analysis (CODA) was introduced by Van Dijk, (2000) and popularized by Thora Tenbrink in 2014. Being one of the contemporary approaches to discourse, CODA is a tool for analyzing the language that speakers use to express thought (Tenbrink, 2014). It is an approach that proves that language plays a central role for many of the techniques used to gain insights about the human mind (Anderson, 2009). According to Van Dijk (2000), discourse analysis since many years emphasizes the relevance of the study of context for our understanding of many aspects of discourse. Relevant in such contexts are the social domain (e.g., Education, Politics), the global act partially accomplished by text or talk (e.g., legislation, teaching, etc), the participants and their various communicative, social and professional roles, the relations between participants (such as that of power), the setting (time, location) and maybe some other social or interactional properties of communicative event. Part of the context, however, is also some of the “cognitive” properties of the participants, such as their aims, beliefs, knowledge and opinions. Without taking into account cognition, we cannot understand *why* people are speaking or writing at all, or how they adapt what they say or write to the knowledge or other beliefs of the recipients. In other words, not only because of a “mentalist” aim to understand the processes of actual discourse comprehension or production, but also for important contextual reasons, a study of the cognitive aspects of communication is highly relevant.

The central idea in the methodological framework of Cognitive Discourse Analysis (CODA) is to use unconstrained natural language elicited in purposefully controlled situations as a data source; ideally combined with other modalities or representations of cognitive processes. Using discourse analysis to access cognition means doing CODA (Tenbrink, Bergmann, & Konieczny, 2011). It is worthy to note here that psycholinguistic study designs can be fairly similar to CODA, but they aim at optimal control and predictivity rather than freely produced language, since their focus is on cognitive processing rather than representation. Study designs in the tradition of cognitive linguistics, in contrast, involve examination of the repertory of a language(s) with respect to the underlying cognitive representations. Here, a basic tenet is that principles of

linguistic structure can serve to reveal principles of cognitive structure, based on the mutual influence of language and thought as just described.

The motivation for CODA is that this structural idea carries over to language in use: what we say and how we say it is systematically related to, or based on, what and how we think. This applies not only generally to what we can do with language or how the linguistic repertory represents the thought repertory within a speech community, but also specifically to what we actually do with language whenever we express our thoughts. In other words, patterns in language use reflect patterns of current thought in systematic ways.

The relevance and application of CODA to this study lies in the fact that it provides a substantial step forward by pointing to the cognitive significance of specific linguistic features such as the ones that can be found in suicide notes. The suicide victims replicate their thought processes in their suicide note, that is, expressing their thoughts in a language through writing. CODA addresses linguistic (and, relatedly, conceptual) patterns by examining how some content is expressed or structured beyond what is said (Van Dijk, 2000 & Tenbrink, Bergmann, & Konieczny, (2011).

After a careful review of research methods available for use in this research, this descriptive research design has been selected for use. The participants in this study were deceased individuals whose deaths were ruled suicides in different parts of Nigeria between 2017 and 2020. There were 20 suicide cases reviewed for this study. In 13 cases, suicide notes were not present (non-note writer sample) and in 7 cases, suicide notes were left by the deceased (note writer sample). All data obtained for this study come from online sources: online national newspaper dailies such as Vanguard Newspaper, Daily Trust Newspaper, Punch Newspaper and Facebook walls (of victims) of known suicides. The notes include age, causes and method of suicide.

3.0 Methodology

This study is a qualitative research and descriptive method has been used. According to Fox & Bayat (2007), descriptive research methods are used to describe various aspects of a phenomenon. It is based on the fact of the speakers' speech in a particular area. In its popular format, descriptive research is used to describe characteristics and/or behavior of sample population. It is an effective method to get information that can be used to develop hypotheses and propose associations. For the purpose of this research the descriptive research is employed in line with CODA. This will no doubt help in the analyses of the suicide note that have been carefully selected. In what follows, we proceed to examine the texts in a bid to analyze the linguistic features that adequately interpret the thought processes of the suicides involved.

3.1 Findings and Discussions

The participants in this study are deceased individuals whose deaths were ruled suicides in different parts of Nigeria between 2017 and 2020. There were thirty-eight (38) suicide cases reviewed for this study. Among them, suicide notes were noted in seven (7) cases. The remaining 31 did not write any note. The 7 suicide notes were retrieved from online media; five (5) suicide notes from online national newspapers, while the other two (2) suicide notes were from Facebook and Instagram platforms.

It is observed that suicides with genuine intention to commit the act use more active verbs thus constructing more active structures than passive structures. Two steps are employed in analysing the notes. Firstly, the sentences containing active constructions/sentences in the form of requests, commands and apologies are analyzed and secondly, words and phrases are analyzed for their ideological associations. We adopt Shneidman's corpus term: Genuine Suicide Note (GSN). The essence is to isolate the genuine notes from

the ingenuine ones knowing that there are suicide notes that may not be genuine. However, for the purpose of this study, only genuine suicide notes are selected.

Sample of GSN used for this study

Corpus	Texts
GSN 1	<i>Forgive me. In case you are the one who found the body, I am really sorry. It had to be someone, you know. I have chosen Jo Nketaih's poem as my suicide note: "They said you came looking for me. I didn't drown; I was the water." Where do atheists go to when they die? lol. Amen.</i>
GSN 2	<i>My mental health has been on life support for a while now. Thanks to those who call. Text. Visit. Speak to me. May we always remember. We may never forget. You may have added a few hours, months or days to my time here. But you know life support is expensive right?</i>
GSN 3	<i>If I am no more, please hold my family especially my Mum and Dad responsible. I have tried to be the best I can be, stayed away from them just because they blamed me for their mistakes and they can't love, help and take care of me like their own. My mum has made life a living hell for me because she is bipolar and frustrated, accusing me of being a witch and a cursed child even though my brother is responsible for my education and upkeep. The only thing she helps me with is my feeding money. I have gone out of my way to take care of my mum by giving her food and money but I still end up being her problems. My brother can't stick to his promise anymore because he feels I am not his responsibility and I have my own family. I hope and believe that now that I am gone, it will bring them relief and happiness. I am so sorry Collins I had to leave you this way. Maryam Olayemi, you have been more than a bestie to me. I am also sorry to all my friends and well-wishers. I love to be happy but I am nothing but a broken child. I don't believe in God anymore because I can't see my purpose anymore. I love you all so much.</i>
GSN 4	<p>THE WORLD IS NOT WORTHY TO BE LIVING</p> <i>Goodbye. My dead body is inside bamboo. You as a person need people around you to make life lively. Some people are so wicked, cruel and heartless. Why? People do evil to people they ought to help. People are collecting from those they ought to be giving...human feelings are absent from human beings. Why? Is this life worth living? Although all these might not be genuine enough for a person like me to poison myself...never trace my death to someone else but me; I decided this on my own." I have thought of series of ways of committing suicide, but I found rat poison [Sniper] as the simplest and fastest way of doing so.</i>
GSN 5	<i>Psalm 121:3, God will not suffer your foot to be moved. He that keepeth you will not slumber. Amen. You and the three boys, God Almighty will keep you and prosper you. Amen. I love you.</i>

GSN 6 *I DID THIS BECAUSE I SEE NOTHING WORTH LIVING FOR IN THIS WORLD. Mummy, I love you. Daddy, I love you. Matthew and John, you guy should take care. We will meet where we will depart no more.*

GSN 7 *Okay there is a twist to this last respect ppl give to their loved ones when gone. Black as signs of sadness...but in my case rock WHITE cos I love this colour so much. To all that has made smiled and to those I have pissed off trust me I'm only being human. Enikorewa I love you so much, Eriayo u name sums it all up u are truly the reason for my joy. Omobonlale ajoke u know I care. Moradeke my mum may God heal u and to my in-laws stay blessed always.*

Discussion: Active and passive constructions or forms

The first common feature in all the suicide notes from GSN 1 – GSN 7 is that all the writers of the notes wrote in active voice by the use of active forms. Through the use of the active verbs with personal pronouns in the sentences are assertive, therefore, making the authors of the notes active and powerful not only in their writing but in their declaration of their decisions, reasoning and apologies. It is obvious that the decision-to-act (commit suicide) had been hatched before the notes were written. either blaming their decision on themselves or others. Consider the table below for excerpts of active voice constructions from the suicide notes in table 1 below:

Table 1: Active (voice) constructions from the suicide notes

Note	Excerpts
GSN 1	<i>I am really sorry.</i>
GSN 3	<i>I have tried to be the best I can be, [I] stayed away from them just because they blamed me for their mistakes and they can't love, help and take care of me like their own. I have gone out of my way to take care of my mum by giving her food and money... I hope and believe that now that I am gone, it will bring them relief and happiness. I am so sorry Collins I had to leave you this way. I am also sorry to all my friends and well-wishers. I love to be happy... I love you all so much.</i>
GSN 4	<i>I decided this on my own. I have thought of series of ways of committing suicide, ... I found rat poison [Sniper] as the simplest and fastest way of doing so.</i>
GSN 5	<i>I love you.</i>
GSN 6	<i>Mummy, I love you. Daddy, I love you.</i>
GSN 7	<i>[Name], I love you so much, [Name] u [your] name sums it all up u are truly the reason for my joy. [Name] u [you] know I care.</i>

In Table 1, the writers used active voice for most of the constructions in the notes. Writing this way, the authors of the notes also presented themselves as people who are sorry, have tried, have stayed, have gone,

loved, decided, have thought and have cared. They are people who are not afraid to articulate themselves as doing the action being expressed instead of using a more passive voice for communicating their ideas.

Table 2: Structures demanding apologies

Notes	Text
GSN 1	<i>Forgive me. I am really sorry.</i>
GSN 2	<i>I am sorry [name] I had to leave you this way. [name], you have been more than a bestie to me. I am also sorry to all my friends and well-wishers.</i>
GSN 7	<i>To all that has made [me] smiled and to those I have pissed off trust me, I'm only being human. [name] my mum may God heal u [you].</i>

The above table uncovers the differences in the role of apology in relations to active and passive constructions and the manifestation of submission to the will power of guilt as expressed in the active construction “I am sorry...” and many others. These are instances which indicate that the writer has given up on life.

Table 3: structures issuing commands

Notes	Text
GSN 3	<i>If I am no more, please hold my family responsible.</i>
GSN 4	<i>...never trace my death to someone else but me.</i>
GSN 7	<i>Okay there is a twist to this last respect ppl [people] give to their loved ones when gone. Black as signs of sadness...but in my case rock [use] WHITE cos [because] I love this colour so much.</i>

Table 3 above contains command sentences in the suicide notes. The writers construct these imperatives as will or testament, which explicates the sense of authority that no one will question. GSN 7 appears as a request because of the politeness of the form, but it is a command because the writer/requester is not there for you to argue it out. It should be noted that not all apologies are expressed in passive voice. GSN 4: *...never trace my death to someone else but me.* Here, the writer has taken a very passive approach to command anybody who would have accused any other person of his death to desist from it.

4.0 Conclusion

This study sought to examine suicide notes collected from online platforms as well as newspapers. It has demonstrated, employing CODA theoretical framework for analyses that, speakers’ intentions or thought process in suicide notes in the context of discourse helps to identify the reasons for suicide and further express the victims’ requests. The study thus avows that suicide notes are important evidences showing the thought process of the deceased. A critical discourse analysis of the suicide notes identifies each feature has shown in the context and manner in which each feature is used. This offers understanding that power, apology and decision, of writers of the suicide notes as presented in active and passive voices is powerful. It is obvious from

the notes that most of them had suffered depression and seemed justified within themselves in committing the act.

Though not within the scope of the study, it is worthy to note that the common use of a lethal substance commonly known as *Sniper* by a good percentage of the victims whose suicide notes were analyzed may not be unconnected with easy access to online media where people learn that it is a fast and easy way to commit suicide.

It is our belief that this and other researches will spore this and other researchers on related issues on suicide notes.

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