International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature
E-ISSN: 2200-3592 & P-ISSN: 2200-3452
www.ijalel.aiac.org.au

An Investigation of Suicide Notes: An ESP Genre Analysis

Atekah Abaalkhail*

School of Linguistics and Language Studies, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel by Drive, Ottawa K1S 5B6, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding Author: Atekah Abaalkhail, E-mail: atekahabaalkhail@cmail.carleton.ca

ARTICLE INFO

Article history
Received: February 11, 2020
Accepted: April 25, 2020
Published: May 31, 2020
Volume: 9 Issue: 3
Advance access: May 2020

Conflicts of interest: None
Funding: The research is financed by a scholarship granted from the Ministry of Higher Education, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

ABSTRACT

Suicide notes are considered important texts used to understand the suicidal act. Most studies focused on these notes psychologically to test hypothesis. Less research has been done discursively from the perspective of language studies. The purpose of this study is to investigate suicide notes, written by English speaking males and females between the years 1945-1954 and 1983-1984, from the perspective of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) genre approach. Specifically, the study examines the communicative purpose(s) and the rhetorical move/step structure in a corpus of 86 suicide notes. The findings suggest that suicide notes share common communicative purposes and rhetorical structure, and, therefore, constitute a genre from the ESP perspective. By examining the rhetorical move structure of suicide notes, this study proposes a model of suicide notes structure, the moves writers use and suggests that suicide notes do constitute a genre without a visible discourse community. The study adds to the existing body of knowledge in genre theory and makes a theoretically based contribution to the fields of genre studies, suicidology, and, potentially, forensic linguistics.

Key words: Suicide Notes, ESP, Genre, Move Analysis, Occluded Genre, Communicative Purpose

INTRODUCTION

Suicide notes are texts usually written minutes before the suicide act (Leenaars, 1988; O'Connor & Leenaars, 2004) and considered as a source of data that researchers use to gain insights into the phenomenon of suicide. For that reason, many researchers (e.g., Coster & Lester, 2013; Leenaars, 1988; Shapero, 2011) have analysed suicide notes to better understand the final thoughts of the suicidal individual (Leenaars, 1999). The majority of suicide note studies examined the notes from a psychological perspective (e.g., Black, 1993; Leenaars, 1988), with the focus of such examinations on testing theories developed in the field of psychology or on the application of predetermined psychological categories to the language in suicide notes. Fewer studies analysed the language of suicide notes discursively (e.g., Galasiński, 2017; Giles, 2007; Shapero, 2011).

A handful of more recent studies that examined the linguistic expressions in suicide notes (e.g., Prokofyeva, 2013; Shapero, 2011) suggested that suicide notes might be viewed as a genre. The notion of genre in these studies is used casually without a clear definition or a theoretical perspective described. Only recently have researchers (e.g. Samraj & Gawron, 2015) approached the study of suicide notes from theoretically informed genre perspectives. Genre is considered from a rhetorical perspective, in which genres are seen as "abstract, socially recognized ways of using language" (Hyland, 2002, p.114). Moreover, Shapero (2011) referred to Swales (1996) by suggesting that suicide notes may constitute an *occluded* or *hidden* genre, examples of which are not available for individuals who write in it. Even though more studies of suicide notes have recently linked suicide notes to the concept of genre (e.g., Prokofyeva, 2013; Samraj & Gawron, 2015; Shapero, 2011), it does not appear that, except for Samraj and Gawron's most recent research (2015), there have been investigations if suicide notes constitute a genre or if they share a common rhetorical structure.

Given the research gap of research indicated above, this study aims to investigate suicide notes by applying the ESP genre analysis. It examines the communicative purpose(s) and the rhetorical structure (if any) of suicide notes, that is, the moves and the steps that may be present. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the moves and steps that are present in suicide notes and how consistent the moves/steps are across the selected corpus of suicide notes?
2. Is there a shared communicative purpose (s) in suicide notes and, consequently, do suicide notes constitute a genre as defined within the ESP framework?
3. If suicide notes do constitute a genre, what kind of genre is it?

Published by Australian International Academic Centre PTY.LTD.

http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.9n.3p.1

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the approaches to genre studies was developed within the field of *English for Specific Purposes* (ESP). The term *genre* in the ESP field refers to "communicative events" (Swales, 1990, p. 45) that serve a *communicative purpose*, that is, a function that can be achieved through language (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990, 2004). This communicative goal is recognized by the *discourse community* that consists of members who use the genre and establish the conventions of how generic texts are written or spoken (Paltridge, 2013).

One of the most influential analytical frameworks for genre analysis is the *move analysis* developed by Swales (1990), wherein Swales defines rhetoric as "the use of language to accomplish something" (Swales, 1990, p. 6). Texts belonging to one specific genre (e.g., research article introduction, abstracts) are characterized by "a sequence of moves" (Upton & Cohen, 2009, p. 588) with each move serving a specific communicative function. Swales (1990) argues that texts are divided into units or moves depending on the communicative purpose each unit serves. A move is defined as "a discoursal or rhetorical unit that performs a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken discourse" (Swales, 2004, p. 228). Swales also adds that a move in the ESP genre analysis is identified by recognizing the functional role of the move in a text. The identification of a move does not only involve the boundaries of a sentence or a paragraph. Each move may consist of several sentences or paragraphs, which, considered together, serve a specific communicative purpose. The sub-purposes of the moves ultimately shape the overall communicative purpose and the rhetorical structure of the genre (e.g., Kanoksilapatham, 2015; Sadeghi & Samuel, 2013). The combination of the moves and steps is referred to as rhetorical structure (Kanoksilapatham, 2015; Swales, 1990). The structure represents all the possible moves and steps that can occur in a specific genre.

Move analysis is one example of a top-down approach (Biber, Upton, & Connor, 2007) of genre analysis. A top-down approach is an analytical approach in which moves are first assigned based on content, meaning, and function of the parts in a text. This analytical approach is different from a bottom-up analysis which refers to identifying segments of texts based on specific linguistic clues such as using *to sum up* to indicate the goal of providing a conclusion in, for example, a research article. The linguistically identified segments are grouped together, and then the communicative purpose of the linguistically similar segments is determined. What differentiates these two analytical approaches is the role of the communicative purpose or the function each segment serves in a text. In a top-down approach, the communicative purpose is the first step while in a bottom-up approach, the function of the linguistic segments is determined as a final step in the analysis (Biber et al., 2007).

Swales (1996) also described *occluded* genres. Such genres are "typically hidden, 'out of sight' or 'occluded' from the public gaze" (p. 46) and function to support the research process. Swales argues that such genres are not public, written for particular individuals, and writers do not often have access to examples of the genre, compared to *open* genres such as research articles, textbooks or dissertations (Swales & Feak, 2011).

It is worth noting that the ESP genre approach has been mainly used to investigate the linguistic features of academic and professional genres. In addition, some non-academic genres have been explored using this approach, as it has proved useful in investigating the communicative purpose(s) and the rhetorical structure of a group of texts. Some examples are genre analyses of birthmother letters (letters to expectant mothers which are written by parents who want to adopt a child asking to be considered for adopting the unborn child) (e.g., Upton & Cohen, 2009), scam/fraud emails (e.g., Freiermuth, 2011), and transcripts of chatroom grooming in the field of Forensic Linguistics (e.g., Chiang & Grant, 2017). The present study also utilizes the ESP genre framework to examine suicide notes, a non-academic genre, to explore its discourse structure and communicative purpose(s).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of suicide notes lies in that they are the texts written by individuals who committed (completers) or attempted to commit suicide (attempters) (Black, 1993). The notes are considered as a valuable source of information that might contribute to understanding the completer's (or attempter's) mind and his/her final thoughts (Darbonne, 1969; Leenaars, 1999; Shneidman & Farberow, 1957) and sometimes provide information on the motives behind the act (B. Chia, A. Chia, & Tai, 2008; Olson, 2005). Suicide notes are also crucial pieces of evidence used in investigation of death and in courts (Bennell, Jones, & Taylor, 2011; Leenaars, 1999) to confirm the cause of death, whether it being a true suicide or a homicide accompanied by a fake note (i.e., not a real suicide note produced by the decedent but rather a note produced by another individual). Additionally, analysing and understanding suicide notes can be important in decreasing suicide attempts through developing appropriate prevention programs (Olson, 2005).

Researchers believe that suicide notes offer true motivations and reasons for the act of suicide (e.g., Ho, Yip, Chiu, & Halliday, 1998). However, it is argued that the reasons for the act of suicide provided by the suicidal individual in the note might not be as simple or as true as they appear (Giles, 2007; Leenaars, 1999; McClelland, Reicher, & Booth, 2000). Viewing suicide notes as "acts of communication" (McClelland et al., 2000, p. 227; Sanger & Veach, 2008, p. 356) rather than true accounts of what motivated suicide, it is possible to assume that suicide notes function to show that the act the individual is about to commit is justifiable. McClelland et al. (2000) asserted that the act of suicide, that is, annihilating one's self, is in itself an unacceptable social act; therefore, the individuals who leave a suicide note could be seen as trying to defend and justify this socially unacceptable act they have chosen by providing reasons and explanations that might or might not be true.

The literature on the analysis of suicide notes suggests that the notes exhibit similarities. For example, Osgood and Walker (1959) examined suicide notes and compared them to ordinary letters to relatives. The authors concluded that

suicide notes shared more common language compared to ordinary letters; as well, their analysis revealed that suicide notes did not exhibit greater disorganization than letters, meaning that suicide notes are indeed organized and share a rhetorical structure. Moreover, Samraj and Gawron (2015) concluded their ESP analysis of a suicide notes corpus by stating that similarities were present in suicide notes despite the lack of both an apparent discourse community and 100% occurrence of the moves in the corpus. In addition, Giles asserted that suicide notes share commonalities and are considered "purposeful written acts" (Giles, 2007, p. 116).

Given the importance of suicide notes, several researchers have investigated the linguistic expressions using different approaches and various tools including manual and computerized methods. The methods of analysis of suicide notes utilized content analysis and theoretical classification analysis (e.g., Darbonne, 1969; Leenaars, 1988; Osgood & Walker, 1959) to examine the recurrent topics (i.e., themes) and use the information to explore the relationship between the content in the notes and the act of suicide (Olson, 2005). Research was also undertaken to compare between genuine and simulated suicide notes (e.g., Ioannou & Debowska, 2014; Osgood & Walker, 1959; Roubidoux, 2012); suicide notes written by completers and those written by attempters (e.g., Handelman & Lester, 2007) and suicide notes written by different age groups and different genders (e.g., Black & Lester, 2003; Darbonne, 1969; Linn & Lester, 1996). Most of these studies used suicide notes to validate psychological theories or examine emotional themes and did not pay much attention to the discourse structure of these notes. This study investigates suicide notes from genre perspective and aims to explore whether suicide notes could be categorized as a distinct genre by applying the move analysis method (Swales, 1990).

METHODS

Data

The data comprises 86 real suicide notes: (a) the "classic" Shneidman and Farberow (1957) corpus of 33 published suicide notes (referred to as *SandF* corpus), written between 1945 and 1954 by white males who were born in the USA and whose age ranged between 25 and 59 years old; (b) a published corpus of 53 suicide notes (Leenaars, 1988) from the archives of the Coroner's office in Los Angeles County, with 33 suicide notes written by males (referred to as *LM* corpus) and 20 suicide notes written by females (referred to as *LF* corpus) between 1983 and 1984. The length of the notes varied between 7 to 899 words. Table 1 includes the breakdown of the corpus of this study.

Analysis

This study commenced in September 2014 and lasted until April 2015. The unit of analysis in this study is a move defined as a meaningful segment of text (Connor, 2000; Connor & Mauranen, 1999) which expresses a single communicative purpose that contributes to the overall purpose of the text (Bhatia, 1993; Sadeghi & Samuel, 2013). Moves were coded in this analysis by examining the texts closely and asking the following question: what does the move do, that is, what is its communicative purpose? Steps, in turn, are those smaller units that build a move.

I examined each text in the 86 genuine suicide notes and identified the communicative purpose that each move serves. For example, *Dearest Mary* is communicating to whom the note is addressed, and the name *Bill* at the end of the note is functioning to close the note. Each stretch that expressed a specific communicative function was classified as a move and the building elements of each move were identified as the steps used to realize its communicative function. I calculated the percentage of occurrence (Swales, 1990) of each move across the three corpora (I use percentage of occurrence to refer to the number of times a move occurred across the corpus). Calculating the percentage of occurrence allows for the identification of *obligatory* moves that occur in all the texts, expected, or *quasi-obligatory,* moves that occur in most of the texts, and *optional* moves that occur in less than half of the texts (Joseph, Lim, & Nor, 2014; Swales, 1990). The moves were categorized based on the percentage of occurrence in the corpus.

Following Joseph et al. (2014), the percentage of occurrence of a move determines if the move is *obligatory*, *quasi-obligatory* or *optional*. More specifically, an *obligatory* move would appear in 100% of the examined texts while a *quasi-obligatory* move would appear in the examined texts with a percentage of occurrence that ranges between 51% and 99%. An *optional* move occurs in half or less of the examined texts.

A common reliability check in move analysis is checking the coded moves with other researchers. To calculate inter-coder reliability of assigned moves and steps in suicide notes, i.e., the consistency of assigned codes when multiple coders analyse a set of data, randomly selected samples of each corpus were coded separately by two coders (14% of the whole corpus). An average of pairwise agreement (Conger, 1980) was computed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 22. The achieved level of agreement was ($\kappa = .90$).

FINDINGS

Most Frequent Moves in Suicide Notes

Table 2 shows the recurrent moves that were identified in more than half of the texts. These moves were identified in more than 51% of the texts, which suggests that they are *quasi-obligatory* (Joseph et al., 2014).

Five quasi-obligatory moves, including *addressing a recipient*, *giving instructions to others about what to do after the writer's death, justifying suicide*, *expressing love*, and *signing off*, and 16 steps have been identified. These moves and steps are explained below.

Table 3 provides the percentage of occurrence of the five *quasi-obligatory* moves across the three corpora and the total percentage of occurrence in the 86 suicide notes. It should be noted that the order of the moves presented in the findings

Table 1. Breakdown of the suicide notes corpora

Source	Notes	No. of words	Gender	Time frame	Age range
SandF (1957)	33	3,513	Male	1945-1954	25-59
LM (1988)	33	4,541	Male	1983-1984	25-59
LF (1988)	20	3,607	Female	1983-1984	25-59
Total	86	11,661			

Table 2. Definitions and examples of the quasi-obligatory moves in the corpus of 86 suicide notes

Move	Definition	Examples
Addressing a recipient	Indicating the audience of the note	Dear Mary Dearest Darling
Giving instructions to others about what to do after the writer's death	Providing information for others to instruct them what to do after the writer is dead	Call police please take care of my bills
Justifying suicide	Giving reasons for the act	I can't find my place in life I commit suicide because I want to be with my father forever
Expressing love	Communicating love and affection	I love you very much darling
Signing off	Closing/ending the note	John W. Smith

Table 3. Percentage and number of occurrences of quasi-obligatory moves across the three corpora and the total percentage of occurrence

Move	SandF Corpus (n=33)		LM Corpus (n=33)		LF Corpus (n=20)		Total %
	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	
Addressing a recipient	90.9	30	60.6	20	55	11	70.9%
Giving instructions to others about what to do after the writer's death	81.8	28	87.8	29	95	19	88.3%
Justifying suicide	93.9	31	84.8	28	75	15	86%
Expressing love	54.5	18	42.4	14	45	9	47.6%
Signing off	78.7	26	69.6	23	80	16	75.5%

does not represent the order of occurrence of the moves in the texts.

"Addressing a Recipient" Move

The *addressing a recipient* move is used to indicate the audience for whom the suicide note is written. Suicide notes are usually written for an audience of a friend, parents, children or a partner to read (McClelland et al., 2000). In the 86 suicide notes, 70.9% of the notes (see Table 3) included the move. The move is manifested by three main steps in suicide notes:

1. Providing the name(s) of the recipient
   - *To Mary Johns* (#12 SandF)
   - *To Tom, Betty, John* (#16 SandF)
2. Providing salutation
   - *Honey* (#5, SandF)
   - *Dearest darling* (#11, SandF)
3. Providing the name(s) of the recipient and salutation
   - *Dearest Mary* (#3, SandF)
   - *Dear Mom and Dad* (#28, LM)

Shneidman and Farberow (1960) and Darbonne (1969) included "addressee of suicide note" in their list of content categories that they used to investigate suicide notes written by individuals from different socio-economic levels.

The identified move *addressing a recipient* can be compared to the finding of Prokofyeva's (2013) study, in which she indicates that the structure of suicide notes includes a "component" of addressee. The addressee can be explicitly identified by the writer of the note by providing a name(s) or can be implied or generalized, such as *to whom it may concern*.

"Giving Instructions to Others about What to do after the Writer's Death" Move

The writers of the notes provided different instructions to the survivors as to what to do after they die or in the future. The move was found to occur in 88.3% of the notes (see Table 3). Five steps are used to realize this move:

1. Notifying or calling someone
   - *Notify – Anne M. Jones, 100 Main St., Los Angeles, tel. BA 00000* (#1, SandF)
   - *call Sherrif* [sic] (#30, LM)
2. Asking to take care of someone or of business matters
   - *Please be good to little Betty, our daughter* (#7, SandF)
   - *Take Care of Yourself* (#5, LF)
3. Asking not to notify someone about the suicide or not to allow others to see the decedent's body after the suicide has taken place

- *Please don't let my brother know how or why I died. To her* [sic] *it must be an acident* [sic] (#4, SandF)
- *no news papers* [sic] (#30, LM)
- *Don't let the kids in the bedroom.* (#9, LF)

4. Giving instructions concerning the body or funeral
   - *My last request is not to be put 6ft. under but burned and my ashes scattered over the mountains.* (#4, SandF)
   - *don't want Sue to attend my funeral* (#27, LM)
   - *Cremate me* (#13, LF)
5. Assigning belongings to specific individuals
   - *I leave everything which has all been acquired since we were married to you* (#5, SandF)
   - *give all of my possessions to Mary* (#27, LM)

In previous studies, it was found that instructions for survivors were present in genuine suicide notes. Prokofyeva (2013) included instructions for survivors under the component "culmination", which also encompassed other expressions such as *asking for forgiveness* or *assigning blame*. Shneidman and Farberow (1960) also pointed out that suicide notes written by less economically advantaged individuals contained instructions to survivors which are mostly concerned with notifying others, disposing the body of the decedent, or taking care of possessions and finishing business matters. Similarly, McClelland et al. (2000) reported that some suicide notes contained instructions for survivors explaining what to do after the writer's death. Also, the *assigning belongings to specific individuals* step within the move "*giving instructions to others about what to do after the writer's death*" was usually included under the *will* or *instructions* category (e.g., Giles, 2007; Samraj & Gawron, 2015; Sanger & Veach, 2008; Shneidman & Farberow, 1960).

"Justifying Suicide" Move

In *justifying suicide* move, the writer of the note provides some of the reasons for the act. The move was identified in 86% of the notes (see Table 3). Five steps have been found to constitute this move, including:

1. Perceiving suicide as the only/best way out
   - *so I am taking the only way out* (#5, SandF)
   - *it seems to be the only way* (#26, LM)
2. Being unable to continue living or cope with life
   - *I can't find my place in life.* (#1, SandF)
   - *Can't Take much more* (#18, LM)
3. Presenting relationship failure or problems as reasons for suicide
   - *I can't stand being without her.* (#12, SandF)
4. Having health problems/issues
   - *I am so tired of feeling sick* (#14, LF)
5. Suggesting that others will be better off after suicide
   - *I think this is best for all concerned* (#3, SandF)

Giles (2007) found that some suicide notes contained more than one reason (explanation/justification) for suicide. Several suicide notes in her corpus used a combination of reasons (referred to as steps in the current analysis) to justify the suicidal act.

The existence of the *justifying suicide* move is further supported by Shneidman's (1985) observation that suicide is seen as the best solution by the writer of the note. The current analysis reveals that one of the steps used to realize the *justifying suicide* move is that suicide is the only/best way out. Similarly, Samraj and Gawron (2015) found that genuine suicide notes contain explanation of the suicidal act. They concluded that the most frequent move, i.e., 'providing explanation', occurs at a percentage of 81.6.

The step *being unable to continue living or cope with life* has also been found in previous studies on the linguistic expressions in suicide notes. For example, Shneidman and Farberow (1960) examined the reasons for suicide explicitly stated in suicide notes and found that most economically advantaged individuals stated in their suicide notes the reasons for the act such as expressions of the inability to go on or being tired of life.

The *presenting relationship failure/problems as reasons for suicide* step can be best compared to the theme *failed relationship* in Ioannou and Debowska's (2014) analysis of suicide notes. This theme was found to characterize genuine suicide notes, in which the reason for suicide is stated as having troubles in a relationship.

Several content analyses studies of the language of suicide notes (Olson, 2005; Shneidman & Farberow, 1960) also found that suicide notes might contain illness or health problems expressions stated as reasons for suicide.

McClelland et al. (2000) also confirmed that some of the expressions used in suicide notes referred to the reasons for the act. The authors observed that the note writers justified the suicidal act by perceiving it as the best solution, having an illness, being unable to continue living, and losing or breaking up a relationship. The themes that have emerged in McClelland et al.'s (2000) findings can be clearly linked to the steps identified in this analysis as used to constitute the *justifying suicide* move.

"Expressing Love" Move

This move was identified in the first corpus (Shneidman & Farberow, 1957) as a *quasi-obligatory* move with a percentage of occurrence of 54.5% (see Table 3). However, it was not identified in the other two corpora (Leenaars's 1988 corpus of males and females suicide notes) as a *quasi-obligatory* move because the percentage of this occurrence indicated that it occurred in less than half of the texts. Therefore, it can be considered as an *optional* move that the writer chooses to include in the suicide note. The *expressing love* move was mainly realized through one step: using the expression, *I love you*. This expression was used to realize the move, with conveying varying degrees of love such as *with all my heart*, *very much*, *so much*, and *forever*. Some examples are:

- *I love you very much darling* (#3, SandF)
- *Boys I love you* (#8, LM)
- *I love you so much* (#2, LF).

This finding mirrors those of previous studies that have examined the linguistic content of suicide notes. For example, Ioannou and Debowska (2014), analysing Shneidman and Farberow's (1957) corpus of 33 genuine suicide notes, showed that genuine suicide notes are characterized by expressions of love. As well, McClelland et al. (2000) found

that the writers of suicide notes used expressions of love in order to negotiate and allocate blame. For example, the expression *I love you* showed that the authors of suicide notes "have not failed in the fundamental requirements of a relationship" (McClelland et al., 2000, p. 230). Delgado (2013) also found that 89% of the 27 suicide notes collected from the coroner's office in Ohio between the years 2000-2009, included love expressions. These findings indicate that the *expressing love* move is frequently used in genuine suicide notes.

"Signing Off" Move

The *signing off* is a move used to end the suicide note. Not all the notes in the corpora included this move, but the move was present in 75.5 % of suicide notes (see Table 3) and was the final move in 60.4% of these. Two steps were identified in this move:

1. Providing the name and/or ending salutation of the note writer
   - *J. William Smith* (#1, SandF)
   - *Bill* (#14, SandF)
   - *Dad* (#2, LM)
2. Giving love with the name of the note writer
   - *All the love I have, Bill* (#6, SandF)
   - *love Bill* (#8, LM)

Flexibility of Quasi-Obligatory Moves in Suicide Notes

Move flexibility refers to the sequence or order of the rhetorical moves in texts. It also refers to the moves the writer chooses to include from the range of the identified rhetorical moves, that is, the use of some or all of the obligatory, quasi-obligatory, or optional moves (Bhatia, 1993). After the quasi-obligatory moves had been identified, the moves were examined to observe the sequence of the moves and whether suicide notes contained all or some of the identified rhetorical quasi-obligatory moves. The sequence of the identified moves varied in the examined corpus of suicide notes. The *addressing a recipient* was the first move in 75.5% of the suicide notes. The move was sometimes preceded by other quasi-obligatory moves such as the *justifying suicide* move (4.6%) or the *giving instructions to others about what to do after the writer's death* move (3%). In one note, the *addressing a recipient* move occurred in the middle.

The *signing off* move was found to be a final move in 80% of the suicide notes that contained it. In the instances where the *signing off* move was not final; the note would end by the *giving instructions to others about what to do after the writer's death* move (12.3%). The *signing off* move occurred in the middle of one note in the current corpus.

The sequence of the moves *giving instructions to others about what to do after the writer's death* and *justifying suicide* is not fixed. The *expressing love* move is an optional move that can be used based on the communicative purpose the writer wants to achieve in the note and it occurred in different locations throughout the examined corpus.

As for the flexibility of using some or all of the identified moves in suicide notes, 37.2% (32 notes) of the 86 suicide notes contained all the quasi-obligatory moves identified in this analysis (sometimes without the optional move, *expressing love*), including moves presented in a cyclical pattern, reoccurring more than once in one note.

Less Frequent Moves in Suicide Notes

Some less frequent moves that occurred in less than half of the texts are shown in Table 4.

Twenty less frequent moves were identified in the corpus, with percentage of occurrence ranging between 27.9% and 1.1%. Given the low percentage of occurrence which falls below 50%, these moves can be considered *optional* (Joseph et al., 2014). Most of the moves are self-explanatory (the move is defined where necessary in the following discussion). Some of the moves in Table 4 were found in the investigation of the linguistic expressions in suicide notes (e.g., Black & Lester, 2003; Chia et al., 2008; Ho et al., 1998; Osgood & Walker, 1959; Sanger & Veach, 2008).

The move *establishing social relationships* in Table 4 refers to expressions used by the writer that point out the joint social relationship between him/her and the addressee. The move is mostly used to construct a positive image of the addressee and refer to issues such as *good marriage*, *being kind or wonderful*. Some examples are:

- *No man could have asked for a better wife than you have been* (#18, SandF)
- *You have been a good Son* (#20, LF).

This move can be best compared to what Giles (2007) refers to as "a gift for recipients" (p. 140) suicide notes in which the writer positively constructs his/her relationship with the addressee.

The move *providing information* includes two steps:

- Personal information such as the address of the note writer, for example, *I live at 100 Spring St., Los Angeles* (#1, SandF)
- Information related to the act of suicide such as providing the date of the note or previous attempts of suicide, for example, *Given unto my hand this ninth day of June in the year of 1943, A.D., in the city of Los Angeles, California* (#20, SandF)

In accordance with the present results, the move *apologizing to others* was also found in previous studies of suicide notes (e.g., Chia et al., 2008; Delgado, 2013; Ioannou & Debowska, 2014; Prokofyeva, 2013) as were other moves identified in this analysis, including *asking for forgiveness* (e.g., Black & Lester, 2003; Chia et al., 2008; McClelland et al., 2000), *saying goodbye* (e.g., Darbonne, 1969; Ioannou & Debowska, 2014; Shapero, 2011), and *assigning blame* including self and others blame (e.g., McClelland et al., 2000; Sanger & Veach, 2008).

DISCUSSION

Macro-structure of Suicide Notes

The first question of the study sought to determine the moves and the steps found in suicide notes. The analysis suggests that the core or typical genre of suicide notes includes the

Table 4. List of less frequent moves in suicide notes with the instances and percentage of occurrence

Move	Instances	%	Example
Establishing social relationships	24	27.9	We had a very good Marriage!
Apologizing to others	23	26.7	I'm sorry honey
Asking for forgiveness	16	18.6	Forgive if you can
Saying goodbye	15	17.4	Bye-bye Mary, Betty, and Helen
Providing information	14	16.2	I work at Ford
Expressing intent to commit suicide	13	15.1	When you read this I will be dead
Thanking	13	15.1	thanks for everything
Assigning blame	6	6.9	I blame no one but myself
Giving blessings	5	5.8	God bless you all
Offering help to others	4	4.6	I might be able to do something for him
Expressing happiness	4	4.6	I was happy
Expressing hope	4	4.6	I hope you eventually will find happiness
Suggesting that suicide will be hard on others	4	4.6	Hurting my family is the worst of it
Giving advice	3	3.4	But if I were you I would Move Back
Expressing good wishes for others	3	3.4	I wish you the best of everything
Asking to understand the decision of suicide	2	2.3	I hope you understand why I have done this
Reporting on suicide as if it already happened	2	2.3	I have committed suicide
Expressing regret	1	1.1	I wish I can turn Back time
Expressing fear	1	1.1	Am terrified
Showing anger towards others	1	1.1	If you ever take a drink I hope you drown yourself with it

following macro-structure, which consists of all the *quasi-obligatory* moves:

Addressing a recipient > Giving instructions to others about what to do after the writer's death > Justifying suicide > Expressing love > Signing off

Other examples of the genre of suicide notes which do not contain all the above moves or use different optional moves identified in this study (see Table 4) can still qualify as examples/instances of the genre as long as they serve the communicative purpose(s) of the genre (Biber et al., 2007; Paltridge, 1995). Paltridge (1995) emphasizes that categorizing examples of a genre that are not typical should be based on "sufficient similarity" (p. 396). These insights make it possible to consider typical suicide notes as containing all or some of the *quasi-obligatory* moves identified in the analysis, while other *atypical* suicide notes can be considered as examples or instances of the genre based on the shared communicative purpose and other similarities with *typical* suicide notes.

Communicative Purpose(s) of Suicide Notes

The second question concerns the existence of a shared communicative purpose(s) in suicide notes and whether suicide notes constitute a genre. The findings suggest that suicide notes share a rhetorical structure presented in the five *quasi-obligatory* moves: *addressing a recipient, giving instructions to others about what to do after the writer's death, justifying suicide, expressing love*, and *signing off*. Although the notes do not represent a genre in the traditional Swalesian sense of 100% occurrence of moves. It may be concluded that the established rhetorical structure and the communicative purposes of suicide notes in this study point to the existence of a distinctive genre, that of suicide notes.

One prevalent shared communicative purpose drawn from the analysis in this study is that suicide notes aim to give instructions concerning several issues such as business, body of the decedent, or notification of others about the suicide. This finding seems to be consistent with other research studies which found instructions to be present in suicide notes (e.g., Black, 1993; Galasiński, 2017; Osgood & Walker, 1959; Sanger & Veach, 2008; Shneidman & Farberow, 1960). In addition, other studies observed that suicide notes serve the communicative purpose of providing the final wishes, requests, directions, and commands to survivors (e.g., Ho et al., 1998; Leenaars, 1988; Prokofyeva, 2013; Roubidoux, 2012).

Another communicative purpose of the rhetorical moves found in suicide notes is to justify the act by giving reasons such as being unable to continue living, failure, or perceiving suicide as the best or only solution. It is encouraging to compare the finding with previous work that has investigated suicide notes. Shneidman (1985) asserted that suicide notes are written to communicate to others that the suicidal individual perceives suicide as the best solution for a problem, which is one of the steps found in the *justifying suicide* move. Other research studies (Olson, 2005; Prokofyeva, 2013; Roubidoux, 2012) provided further evidence in support of the communicative purpose of *justifying suicide*. They asserted that the aims, that is, the communicative purpose, of suicide notes can include, but are not limited to, one of the following: giving reasons for the act of suicide

and presenting relationship problems as reasons for suicide. More specifically, Roubidoux (2012) identified several purposes of suicide notes such as "apology, blame, explanation" (p. 34), whereby *explanation* she refers to the reasons for the act. These overall purposes of suicide notes have been identified in the current corpus as sub-purposes of the moves. The *apology* and *blame* purposes of suicide notes suggested by Roubidoux (2012) are found to occur in less than half of the texts in the current corpus, while *explanation* (in this analysis it is referred to as *justifying suicide*) is found to occur as a rhetorical move in suicide notes with a percentage of 86%. Furthermore, Samraj and Gawron's (2015) most recent analysis of suicide notes shows that the move occurs in 93 out of 114 notes and conclude that "providing an explanation for the act is a key purpose of the text." (p. 93).

The sub-purposes of the identified moves can be used to establish the main communicative purpose(s) of suicide notes (Bhatia, 1993; Sadeghi & Samuel, 2013). It can be suggested that one of the communicative purposes of suicide notes is to justify the act. The purpose is achieved through providing reasons (true or not). Some of the suicide notes included more than one purpose such as providing some instructions to the survivors or asking for forgiveness, (these are less frequent moves). As stated by Swales (1990) and Askehave and Swales (2001), having sets of communicative purposes in one genre is sometimes possible, as the move analysis conducted in this study demonstrates.

The Genre of Suicide Notes

Turning to the discussion of what kind of genre suicide notes constitute, which answers the third question in the present study, it is important to note that Shapero (2011) was the first to suggest that suicide notes might constitute an *occluded* genre (Swales, 1996) because suicidal individuals writing notes do not usually have access to samples of texts that might help them structure their writing. However, Shapero does not develop or reflect on the concept further in her analysis of suicide notes. Olson (2005) also observes that there is a lack of accessible examples to guide the writers of suicide notes. Few people have access to suicide notes left by individuals who committed suicide; suicide notes are usually accessible to a limited number of readers, such as the police, coroners' office, court, and some family members who are contacted after the suicidal act or witnesses who found the body (Shapero, 2011). Limited access to examples and the private nature of the act of suicide suggest that the suicide notes genre is indeed an *occluded* or "semi-occluded" (Samraj & Gawron, 2015, p. 89) genre and not a public or an *open* one.

Because of the nature of the genre, Olson (2005) suggested that there might not be shared norms or conventions that suicide note writers rely on when they compose the notes. However, writers do not usually deviate from writing conventions. Individuals leaving a suicide note "… were not outside 'normal' society and its conventions, at least not those who left behind notes. Rather they used existing conventions regarding written communication" (Fincham, Langer, Scourfield, & Shiner, 2011, p. 93).

An important issue that remains to be addressed in this discussion is the issue of discourse community, which is one of the key concepts in the ESP genre approach. The original concept was proposed by Swales (1990); however, only three years later, Swales (1993) observed that "The 'true' discourse community may be rarer and more esoteric than I once thought" (p. 695). Identifying a discourse community of the suicide notes genre is problematic. Most often, individuals who write suicide notes do not know each other and do not communicate with each other. The writers of suicide notes do not usually share a set of common texts or established conventions. In addition, a discourse community of suicide notes writers, who completed the suicidal act, if it existed, would lack experts for obvious reasons. However, as the rhetorical move/step analysis conducted here, suicide notes writers do share communicative goals. These issues serve as the rationale for viewing suicide notes as a private and *hidden* (Swales, 1996) genre. Unlike other *open* academic (Swales & Feak, 2011) and professional genres (Bhatia, 1993), the suicide note represents a one-time communication. The note-writers commit suicide after writing the note, which prevents other forms of communication to take place in response. For these reasons, a *visible* discourse community according to the criteria suggested by Swales (1990) cannot be identified. However, an alternative view of a community can be adopted. Miller (1994) introduced the theoretical construct of a "rhetorical community" (p. 62) which is "a virtual entity, a discursive projection, a rhetorical construct. It is the community as invoked, represented, presupposed, or developed in rhetorical discourse" (p. 62). Miller asserted that a rhetorical community is not unified and homogeneous compared to the Swalesian discourse community (1990). The rhetorical community "works in part through genre" (p. 62). If we look again at what Miller proposed, the writers of suicide notes might constitute a rhetorical community in which suicide notes are the way its members "operate rhetorically" (p. 62). Thus, a rhetorical community of suicide notes might exist through instantiation and engagement and not through membership (Swales, 1993).

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to investigate suicide notes from the genre perspective by exploring the moves and the communicative purposes of these notes. Although suicide notes do not have 100% occurrence of moves, the results suggest that they share a common rhetorical moves and communicative purposes. The findings of this study contribute to the current literature on genre theory and suicide notes research. It adds to a growing body of literature and knowledge of the ESP genre approach. By applying rhetorical move analysis to non-academic texts, the study developed a model of the rhetorical structure of suicide notes in a way similar to the CARS model of research articles (Swales, 1990). The study also identified the communicative purposes that this genre serve and defined the *virtual* rhetorical community that the writers of suicide notes form. We can conclude that the ESP genre analysis approach can be applied to both academic and professional genres and we can extend it to examine the rhetorical structure of non-academic genres.

This qualitative analysis of suicide notes enriches the suicidology field that mainly focuses on quantitative research of suicide notes (Hjelmeland & Knizek, 2010). It complements and balances the quantitative research that has been done in the field and can contribute to a better understanding of suicide. Most importantly, the findings of this study can be utilized by forensic linguists, who deal with various texts and need to verify their authenticity (Chaski, 2001; Cotterill, 2010). The move analysis combined with other methods of analysis and complemented with contextual information available, such as interviews (with attempters or family members) or suicide files, can provide insights for forensic linguists and help determine if a suicide note is real, that is, written by the individual who committed suicide, or faked by another individual (Chaski, 2001). The move analysis may be used to examine the macro-structure of a suicide note, that is, the organization of the text, to aid in identifying its originality.

The corpora investigated in this study belong to the times of 1945-1954 and 1983-1984. At the time, there were no examples of suicide notes accessible to people online. Nowadays, examples of suicide notes can be obtained through a search on the web. Therefore, the suicide notes are not completely an *occluded* genre as once thought, but we can rather look at them as a "semi-occluded genre" (Samraj & Gawron, 2015, p. 99) or "semi-public documents" (Galasiński, 2017, p. 50). Future studies can look at more recent suicide notes drawn from different sources to determine the move/step pattern.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Natasha Artemeva for her continuing support and her valuable insights and comments.

REFERENCES

Askehave, I., & Swales, J. M. (2001). Genre identification and communicative purpose: A problem and a possible solution. *Applied linguistics*, *22*(2), 195-212.

Bennell, C., Jones, N. J., & Taylor, A. (2011). Determining the authenticity of suicide notes: Can training improve human judgment? *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 38*(7), 669-689.

Bhatia, V. (1993). *Analysing genre: Language use in professional settings*. London: Longman.

Biber, D., Upton, T., & Connor, U. (2007). *Discourse on the move: Using corpus analysis to describe discourse structure*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.

Black, S. T. (1993). Comparing genuine and simulated suicide notes: A new perspective. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *61*(4), 699-702.

Black, S. T., & Lester, D. (2003). The content of suicide notes: Does it vary by method of suicide, sex, or age? *OMEGA, 46*(3), 241-249.

Chaski, C. (2001). Empirical evaluations of language-based author identification techniques. *Forensic Linguistics, 8*(1), 1-65.

Chia, B. H., Chia, A., & Tai, B. C. (2008). Suicide letters in Singapore. *Archives of Suicide Research*, *12*(1), 74-81.

Chiang, E., & Grant, T. (2017). Online grooming: Moves and strategies. *Language and Law, 4*(1), 103-141.

Conger, A. (1980). Integration and generalization of Kappas for multiple raters. *Psychological Bulletin, 88*(2), 322-328.

Connor, U. (2000). Variation in rhetorical moves in grant proposals of US humanists and scientists. *Text, 20*(1), 1-28.

Connor, U., & Mauranen, A. (1999). Linguistic analysis of grant proposals: European Union's research grants. *English for Specific Purposes, 18*(1), 47–62.

Coster, D., & Lester, D. (2013). Last words: Analysis of suicide notes from an RECBT perspective: An exploratory study. *Journal of Rational-Emotive & Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, *31*(3), 136-151.

Cotterill, J. (2010). How to use corpus linguistics in forensic linguistics. In A. O'Keeffe & M. McCarthy (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of corpus linguistics* (pp. 578-590). New York, NY: Routledge.

Darbonne, A. R. (1969). Suicide and age: A suicide note analysis. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *33*(1), 46-50.

Delgado, K. J. (2013). The role of relationships in completed suicide: A gendered analysis of suicide notes. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Wright state University, Dayton, Ohio, USA.

Fincham, B., Langer, S., Scourfield, J., & Shiner, M. (2011). *Understanding suicide: A sociological autopsy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Freiermuth, M. R. (2011). Text lies and electronic bait: An analysis of email fraud and the decisions of the unsuspecting. *Discourse & Communication, 5*(2), 123-145.

Galasiński, D. (2017). *Discourses of men's suicide notes: A qualitative analysis*. London: Bloomsbury.

Giles, S. (2007). *The final farewell: Using a narrative approach to explore suicide notes as ultra-social phenomena.* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Liverpool, U.K.

Handelman, L. D., & Lester, D. (2007). The content of suicide notes from attempters and completers. *Crisis, 28*(1) 102-104.

Hjelmeland, H., & Knizek, B. L. (2010). Why we need qualitative research in suicidology. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 40*(1), 74-80.

Ho, T. P., Yip, P. S., Chiu, C. W. F., & Halliday, P. (1998). Suicide notes: What do they tell us? *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica*, *98*(6), 467-473.

Hyland, K. (2002). Genre: Language, context, and literacy. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 22*, 113-135.

Ioannou, M., & Debowska, A. (2014). Genuine and simulated suicide notes: An analysis of content. *Forensic Science International, 245*, 151-160.

Joseph, R., Lim, J. M. H., & Nor, N. A. M. (2014). Communicative moves in forestry research introductions: Implications for the design of learning materials. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *134*, 53-69.

Kanoksilapatham, B. (2015). Distinguishing textual features characterizing structural variation in research articles across three engineering sub-discipline corpora. *English for Specific Purposes, 37*, 74-86.

Leenaars, A. A. (1988). *Suicide notes: Predictive clues and patterns*. New York, NY: Human Sciences Press.

Leenaars, A. A. (1999). Suicide notes in the courtroom. *Journal of Clinical Forensic Medicine 6*(1). 39-48.

Linn, M., & Lester, D. (1996). Content differences in suicide notes by gender and age: Serendipitous findings. *Psychological Reports, 78*, 370-370.

McClelland, L., Reicher, S., & Booth, N. (2000). A last defense: The negotiation of blame within suicide notes. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, *10*, 225-240.

Miller, C. (1994). Rhetorical community: The cultural basis of genre. In A. Freedman & P. Medway (Eds.), *Genre and the new rhetoric* (pp. 57-66). London: Taylor & Francis.

O'Connor, R. C., & Leenaars, A. A. (2004). A thematic comparison of suicide notes drawn from Northern Ireland and the United States. *Current Psychology*, *22*(4), 339-347.

Olson, L. (2005). *The use of suicide notes as an aid for understanding motives in completed suicide*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University of Utah, Utah, USA.

Osgood, C. E., & Walker, E. G. (1959). Motivation and language behavior: A content analysis of suicide notes. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *59*(1), 58-67.

Paltridge, B. (1995). Working with genre: A pragmatic perspective. *Journal of Pragmatics, 24*(4), 393-406.

Paltridge, B. (2013). Genre and English for specific purposes. In B. Paltridge & S. Starfield (Eds.), *The handbook of English for specific purposes* (pp. 347-366). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Prokofyeva, T. (2013). *Language use in two types of suicide texts*. (Unpublished master's thesis). Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden.

Roubidoux, S. M. (2012). *Linguistic manifestations of power in suicide notes: An investigation of personal pronouns*. (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, WI, USA.

Sadeghi, V., & Samuel, M. (2013). Genre analysis of the letters of appeal. *Discourse Studies*, *15*(2), 229-245.

Samraj, B., & Gawron, J. M. (2015). The suicide note as a genre: Implications for genre theory. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *19*, 88-101.

Sanger, S., & Veach, P. M. (2008). The interpersonal nature of suicide: A qualitative investigation of suicide notes. *Archives of Suicide Research*, *12*(4), 352-365.

Shapero, J. J. (2011). *The language of suicide notes*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Birmingham, Birmingham, U.K.

Shneidman, E. S. (1985). *Definition of suicide*. New York, NY: Wiley.

Shneidman, E. S., & Farberow, N. L. (1957). *Clues to suicide* (Eds.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Companies.

Shneidman. E. S., & Farberow, N. L. (1960). A socio-psychological investigation of suicide. In H. P. David & J. C. Brengelmann (Eds.), *Perspectives in personality research* (pp. 270-293). New York, NY: Springer.

Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swales, J. M. (1993). Genre and engagement. *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* [Belgian journal of philosophy and history] *71*(3), 687-698.

Swales, J. M. (1996). Occluded genres in the academy: The case of the submission letter. In E. Ventola & A. Mauranen (Eds.), *Academic writing: Intercultural and textual issues* (pp. 45-58). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.

Swales, J. M. (2004). *Research genres: Explorations and applications*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swales, J. M., & Feak, C. (2011). *Navigating academia: Writing supporting genres.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Upton, T., & Cohen, M. A. (2009). An approach to corpus-based discourse analysis: The move analysis as example. *Discourse Studies*, *11*(5), 585-605.