RESEARCH NOTE

Some Reflections on African Male Suicide

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Abstract

Suicide notes not only reveal overt mental states but can also be regarded as data that can be analysed to reveal deeper meanings through approaches such as forensic linguistics. This note examines three suicide notes written by three African males to investigate the overt and covert meanings in these texts. Reflections from this analysis introduce a few ways in which males portray the masculine/male face in their suicide texts. The study argues that suicide completers use deliberate semantic and pragmatic resources to negotiate different masculine representations in their suicide texts. The present reflection concludes that suicide notes are instances of language use with multiple layers of meanings.

Introduction

Suicide notes are forensic texts with sociological and psychological implications and thus worthy of (forensic) linguistic explorations to uncover inherent linguistic and extra-linguistic meanings. Suicide is not just a bane in developed countries but also a crisis in developing countries as evident in some African countries.

The 'tabooing' of suicide in Africa (Eshun, 2003; Lester & Akande, 1994) explains why many religious practices and systems condemn the act. It also might explain the 'cleansing rituals' performed in some African homes whenever suicide occurs (Knizek, Akotia & Hjelmeland, 2010). Not only is suicide viewed as a cowardly act in many African communities, but the belief that 'precipitated murder is considered more acceptable than suicide' (Gibbs, 1988) has relatively wider acceptance in the African society. These reasons and more might explain why Africa in addition to countries in the Middle East, Central, and South America conceal suicidal acts and fail to report (or present accurate reports) to authorities such as the World Health Organisation

(Lester, 2013). Sometimes, suicide in Africa is described as 'death by natural causes' (BBC, 2019). However, Kootbodien, Naicker, Wilson, Ramesar, & London (2020) note that southern sub-Saharan Africa had the 'third-highest suicide mortality rate' in the globe in 2016. Recently, social media has become one of the recent platforms (African) suicide completers and attempters use to express their suicidal thoughts and ideations (Schoene & Dethlef 2016; Sanni 2021; Sanni 2022).

The present study considers the use of antonyms, how victimhood is constructed in suicide texts, and how local context influences the construction of meaning in suicide studies. Hence, the present study leans towards the semantic relations and pragmatic nuances in suicide notes specifically as it relates to the portrayer of self and others in this specific discourse type-suicide text.

Data

The present reflection is from three suicide notes derived online primarily from virtual African newspapers. The suicide notes were selected based on the reputation of the newspapers that reported it. Furthermore, there were many of cross-references of these reported suicide notes across different newspapers to see what was included and excluded in the suicide notes. The reported suicide notes are the exact words of the deceased, though some newspapers might decide to shorten some suicide notes (as that was the case of text C, with the full suicide note reported in another newspaper). The suicide notes are recent suicides, from 2018 and 2019, and thus show current masculine portrayers and representations in suicide discourse. The suicide notes were written by two Nigerians and one Kenyan suicide completer, all male. The choice of male suicide completers is to examine the phenomenon of male suicide particularly in Africa. This is hinged on the perception that there are more male completers and more female attempters when it comes to suicide. For instance, one Center for Disease Control and Prevention study notes (CDCP 2024) that the ratio between male to female suicide is 4:1, which explains the shocking statistic of suicide being the seventh leading cause of death in man and sixteenth leading cause of death in women.

Each of the suicide notes (that is, their short extracts/excerpts) are shown below and labelled text A, B and C. Text A revolves around the theme of fatherhood; text B about plagiarism with suicide the aftermath; text C about the betrayal of trust with regards to faithfulness and loyalty. What is similar in the three texts is the notion of the 'male face' which each strives to preserve despite being smeared either by self or by others. It foregrounds how

175

these three males convey the protection, compensation, and redemption of their masculine dignity and identity which seems not to align with mainstream conception of masculinity (as it is sometimes hinged on masculine achievement metrics like macho and traditional masculinity). Texts B and C echo the pragmatic construction of victimhood, as there are conspicuous instances of self-loathing due to perceived social isolation. Text A depicts the right portrayer of others within the confines of positive masculinity and societal approved masculinity.

The current analysis is inductive, qualitative, and exploratory. It is inductive as the data guides the analysis's direction without any premeditated bias from the researcher. It is qualitative because it represents a non-numeric analysis aimed at exploring the implied and explicit meanings in the suicide texts. It is exploratory because it examines issues and themes beyond the sentence level.

Text A

"The best, that's what I used to call you. Finally, this is the end of my journey here on earth.

The evil I have been battling with has succeeded in quenching the flame. **You married a wrong man. You're a good woman and you deserve the best.** You need to be happy. You need to soar. "Please take care of our princess, XXX. Tell her that I love her so much. Be peaceable with everyone though not gonna be easy. Tell my family not to harbour any resentment against you. .

You're a blessing to us. That's the wish of a dying man. Don't cry for me but pray for me. I love you and XXX so much. Good Bye My beloved."

Text B

"… same research work. He said I did copy and paste. Ever since den, things changed from bad to worst. Am in a deep mess at @ the moment. My life don tire me. I feel like dying. I wish I can sleep and wake not wake up again".

Text C

"Nostalgia kills me when I remember all the good times we spent together. The sacrifices I made just to see you smile. We played together like little kids and I still remember your lack of talent for little games. I loved you for it. … Now that I cannot live without you. Now that you judged and gave me a command. Now that you shouted at me from inside your room with your "boyfriend" that I should "go kill yourself" and even asked for my suicide note, well here it is my love".

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis investigates antonyms, local context, and pragmatic meanings in these three suicide notes written by three African males. One salient issue with self and other portrayers is the concept of 'face' which is a pragmatic term that denotes how someone/others want to be perceived. Hence, the concept of private and private faces (real vs constructed/aligning identities) seems relevant in suicide discourse being the last acts of communication by an individual. Thus, it is important to see how these 'faces' are constructed, reconstructed, and negotiated through certain semantic and pragmatic features.

Antonymic construction

According to Lyons (1968) antonyms are used to 'polarise experience and judgment'. This is evident in suicide notes as suicide completers use evaluative constructions to achieve contrast between self and others. Usually, the antonyms used are unmarked/conventional as they rehash opposite relations between self and others. They also express some affective stances (which can be positive or negative) about self- and other portrayers in suicide notes.

In some suicide notes, the suicide completer uses antonymic construction to position a contrast of the self and the other. The use of this construction of contrast (in some suicide notes) is to highlight the positive qualities of the suicide completer/partner. This perhaps is done to project a favourable perception of their significant other (which might be tainted due to reasons like negligence among others). It can be interpreted as a redemptive strategy to absolve the other from suicide blame. This is because in some African settings suicide might be interpreted as negligence and insensitivity on the part of the deceased partner(s). An example of antonymic construction with other redemptive connotation/sub-text is:

177

You married a wrong man. You're a good woman and you deserve the best.

In this suicide note, the suicide completer is keen to protect the 'face' of his partner; he seeks to discredit himself and applaud his partner. This can be interpreted as a self-absorbing strategy of claiming full ownership for his suicidal decisions and the circumstances resulting in his suicide. This contrasting self-cum-other-positioning is needed as a redemptive strategy to protect his partner who might be liable to blame for his suicidal act. A full absorption from suicidal blame is evident in the next construction which indirectly suggest that the existence of the suicidal completer might have created hurdles in the realization of happiness and soaring heights for the partner (You need to be happy. You need to soar.). `

There is use of comparative and superlative construction (good and best) in the text. This describes the partner, to show the progression of positive qualities. It is also used to earn the partner's total acquittal from suicide blame in the court of public and community opinion.

Local Context

The textual significance of suicide notes might be vague to people outside of the discourse community of suicide completers. References and textual nuances in suicide texts might exclude those without shared linguistic repertoire, as the suicide completer might use linguistic constructions that have conventional usage in the community of use. Thus, situational and cultural contexts are vital in understanding some suicide texts (Olsson, 2004).

A particular suicide note (text B) reflects the sociolinguistic landscape of Nigeria as these expressions are inclusive of meaning to people of Nigerian nationality or those familiar with that linguistic construction - Pidgin English. The complex nominal phrasal construction 'copy and paste' means plagiarism, 'same research work' means current research work. 'I don tire' means I am fed up. 'Deep mess' means an unsanitary situation. Thus, the suicide completer appeals only to his Nigerian audience due to the use of constructions with meaning inclusivity only to Nigerians. These constructions represent an in-group affiliation or membership as it represents the use of Pidgin English/creoles which is also a means of communication of wider coverage. This type of 'lingua franca' is used by Nigerian youths for easy communication and accessibility. Hence, this might suggest that the suicide completer writes with the Nigerian youths in mind to elicit their sympathy and support.

178

Another type of context that seems relevant to suicide texts is the cognitive context. This is hinged on the mental state of the text writer. This is because certain assumptions are shared in their texts. These assumptions, presuppositions, and implications are best understood by the discourse community the text is meant for. In this text (Text B), cognitive context is displayed through the linguistic choice (Pidgin English) of the suicide completer. This depicts the use of shared meanings to facilitate mutual comprehension.

Constructions of victimhood

There is a loose assumption that suicide texts revolve around two identities: agency and/or victimhood (Roubidoux, 2011; Sanni, 2021). Usually, victimhood identity seems common when suicide is viewed as a form of escape from psychological or physical pain inflicted on self or by others. Hence, the suicide completer might portray the self as a victim based on the actions of others and the societal norms they are forced to live by (especially in cases of socially approved forms of masculinity), as being a victim of ill-health, unemployment, poverty, and other identities he/she inadvertently incurs due to membership of a particular society.

Victim-hood construction is an example of pragmatic meaning as pragmatics loosely deals with the 'what and how of communication'. While some suicide texts express this meaning explicitly, in some suicide texts it is presupposed or implied based on socio-cultural settings and the conventional social norms the suicide completer is expected to live by. Usually, suicide completers tend to emphasize their victim status in their suicide texts to rationalize how others' action have significant effect on their suicidal decisions.

It is important to note that passive constructions might be deployed by suicide completers to (re)position themselves as victims, a contrast to the demonstration of agency with the first person pronominal 'I' (Roubidoux, 2011). Examples of these passive-cum-victim-constructions are explicitly shown in a particular suicide text (text C) in which the suicide completer accused the partner of unfaithfulness which is the main trigger for his suicidal decision:

"Now that I cannot live without you
The sacrifices I made just to see you smile
Now that you judged and gave me a command

Now that you shouted at me from inside your room with your "boyfriend" that I should "go kill yourself" and even asked for my suicide note well here it is my love,"

reads the suicide note.

These are constructions of victimhood because the suicide completer, rather than rationalizing that his suicidal decision is because of wilful intention, bases his suicidal act on how he was treated by his partner. In this suicide text, the suicide completer resorts to suicide only because of the betrayal of trust and confidence which emasculates and dehumanizes his manliness.

Conclusion

Suicide notes, besides being forensic text, are instances of language use deployed by suicide completers as a vehicle of communication to disseminate specific information. The pieces of information conveyed in suicide texts are important as they represent the 'last words' of a person that invariably means what they want to be remembered for. Similarly, the linguistic constructions used to convey these messages are equally important as they connote deeper meanings that aid a holistic understanding of suicidal intentions and the suicidal phenomenon. Hence, suicide texts should not necessarily be perceived with negative connotations but should be seen as social texts that encode social practices and systems. These practices are usually expressed linguistically which foregrounds such intra-personal, inter-personal, and extra-personal crises as a suicide completer might have experienced. This further underscores the importance of forensic (text/discourse) linguistics to mental health.

From this reflection, it can be deduced that while antonyms might be used for to make explicit positive and/or negative (inscribed) portrayals of the self and others, pragmatic meanings are usually subtle and inferred (invoked) positive and/or negative portrayals of the self and others, usually hinged on local context interpretations. The study supports the general assumption that men (African men) are usually reluctant to seek help during their suicidal ideation stage compared to their female counterparts.

The present reflection concludes that the analysis of African suicide notes requires a more community-based interpretation. Thus, audience design, social context, and discourse pragmatics are important in understanding suicide texts. This will aid in rediscovering layers of meanings like the notions of public and private faces, roles and identities, and other

aspects of metalinguistics in suicide studies. Furthermore, while the present study represents preliminary findings based on the small sample size, a fuller analysis will explore the linguistic resources used by male suicide completers for self-portrayal, and the different narrative mechanisms and identity (re)constructions deployed by male African suicide completers as they relate to the construction of agency and victimhood. Also, a comparative analysis of African male and female suicide completers (the traditional genders) should be undertaken to foreground similar and different features. These fuller analyses will be explored in the ongoing doctoral research of the author.

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