

## FORENSIC LINGUISTICS ANALYSIS OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S SUICIDE NOTES

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### Abstract

Virginia Woolf was a British writer. She committed suicide in 1941, leaving suicide notes for her sister and her husband. Her suicide note was made public and was misquoted under the misleading headline in newspapers' articles. This made people at that time misinterpret her suicide notes. This analysis aims to prove the genuineness of Virginia Woolf's suicide notes, reveal the intention behind her suicide notes, and investigate the real motive of her suicide with Linguistics Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) program and semantic forensic analysis in forensic linguistics perspective. In conclusion, Virginia Woolf's suicide notes are considered genuine and have positive emotional tone. The result of this analysis supports the statement of another psychologist that her suicide was triggered by Bipolar disorder.

**Keywords:** Forensic linguistics, suicide note, genuineness

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### INTRODUCTION

The phrase *forensic linguistics* first appeared in 1968 when Jan Svartvik, a professor of linguistics, used it in an analysis of statements by Timothy John Evans. Olsson (2004) stated that "Forensic Linguistics is the application of linguistics knowledge to a particular social setting, namely the legal forum (from which the word forensic is derived.) In its broadest sense we may say that Forensic Linguistics is the interface between language, crime and law." The range of topics within forensic linguistics is diverse. One of forensic linguistics areas is the language of legal text that includes the study of text types and form of analysis. Olsson (2008, p. 1) stated that "literally any text or item of spoken language has the potential of being a forensic text. If a text is somehow implicated in a legal or criminal context then it is a forensic text." These kinds of texts can be a book, thesis, phone text messages, ransom demands, or other threat messages, or even a suicide note. Olsson (2004) said, "Suicide notes generally have sentences alluding to the act of killing oneself, or the method of suicide that was undertaken" (p. 1).

Olsson (2008, p. 2) also explained, "Forensic linguistics have also been asked to analyse text purporting to be suicide notes. Even though the police in such cases may not suspect foul play, it could be important to attempt to establish whether the questioned text can throw any light on the cause or circumstances of death." The application of linguistics in the analysis of suicide note plays an important role in investigating the genuineness and the intention of the suicide note. The scope of this study is the semantic forensic analysis, whether it is from the lexical choice, the phrase, or the sentences' meaning by Virginia Woolf in her suicide notes to her husband and her sister.

Adeline Virginia Woolf (25 January 1882 – 28 March 1941) was a British writer and one of the foremost modernists of the twentieth century. Her

famous works include the novels *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), and the book-length essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Woolf was known as an unstable woman. Her breakdowns and depressive periods were caused by the deaths of her mother, her half-sister, and father, and also influenced by the sexual abuse by her half-brothers. Virginia Woolf married the writer Leonard Woolf on 10 August 1912. Throughout her life, Woolf suffered from periodic mood-swing and nervousness. On 28 March 1941, she went for a walk, leaving notes behind, and was reported missing. Her body was found on 18 April 1941 in the River Ouse near her home. She was believed to have committed suicide by filling her overcoat's pockets with stones and drowned herself. Her suicide note to her husband was published and misquoted in several newspapers, which made the local coroner suggested that the onset of World War II and the destruction of her houses that had been bombed twice during *the Blitz* as the main reasons of her suicide. But later on, some psychologists suggested that her suicide might be triggered by bipolar disorder. The aims of this study are to prove the genuineness of Virginia Woolf's suicide notes, reveal the intention behind her suicide notes, and investigate the real motive of her suicide.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature review is one of the important aspects in this study in order to know how far similar studies have developed. The first literature review for this analysis is an article, "Analysis of the O.J. Simpson Suicide Letter", taken from LSI Laboratory for Scientific Interrogation. Inc. The suicide letter was analyzed with the SCAN (Scientific Content Analysis) Technique. The first study elaborated on the language analysis only, but lacked in psychological side.

The second article was written by Aydin and Dilbilim (2015) entitled "An Analysis of Adjectives Used in Suicide Notes in Terms of Positivity/Negativity/Neutrality." In the study, ten suicide notes were selected and the adjectives were classified as positive, negative, and neutral adjectives to find out whether there are mostly positive, negative, or neutral adjectives.

The third article was written by Sudjana and Fitri (2013), entitled "Kurt Cobain's Suicide Note Case: Forensic Linguistics Profiling Analysis". In the study, Kurt Cobain's note was analyzed in terms of genuineness, and an authorship profiling of Kurt Cobain was made. In the third study, the analysis was mostly focused on the lexical choice which contains negative meanings that are related to Cobain's psychology.

This analysis of Virginia Woolf's suicide notes will take the third study as its model by using forensic semantics theory, but with different data and more elaboration by adding linguistic inquiry and word count analysis.

Forensic semantics is an analysis of an expert opinion on the meaning of words, phrases, clauses, paragraphs, etc., in legal, personal, and commercial communication (e.g., contracts, wills, cases of copyright infringement or plagiarism), whether in paper, oral, or electronic form. McMenamin (2002, p. 92) stated, "Primary areas of research in forensic semantics are the interpretation of words, phrases, sentences, texts, ambiguity in text and laws, and interpretation of meaning in spoken discourse." In this case, forensic semantics can be used to interpret the suicide notes so they can be understood easily. It can be said that Semantic is the element of linguistics that is really helpful in investigating crimes. For instance: the sexual abuse case described in Felton Rosulek (2008) as cited in Coulthard (2010, p. 221), the prosecution includes many explicit details about the abuse:

- (1) He did not sexually abuse this young girl.
- (2) She testified a few days ago that my client sexually touched her.

By using sexual abuse and sexual touch even in their denials, the defense silences the potentially more upsetting or off-putting details of the alleged crime. In another sexual abuse case, the prosecution describes the victim's sexual actions as well as his violent behaviors that occurred in the same time frame in detail. The defense, on the other hand, ignores the sexual abuse in their argument, referring to it only as incidents. In this paper, the analysis of the text involving the semantic point of view. (Sudjana and Fitri, 2013)

Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) is a new standard in text analysis, The LIWC program includes the main text analysis module along with a group of built-in dictionaries which are created in the

Java programming language and run identically on computers. The program uses languages dimension from the words we use in everyday language to reveal our thoughts, feelings, personality, and motivations. Pennebaker (1999, p. ) stated, "Focusing on specific words or classes of words, the program has been used in numerous research studies, including studies of emotional, cognitive, structural, and process components of individuals' verbal and written language." Based on the sample words in LIWC 2015, it will be easier to determine the genuineness and the emotional tone of Virginia Woolf's suicide notes.

### METHOD

The data in this analysis were taken from *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters: An Autobiography of the Years 1939 to 1969* by Leonard Woolf and *Virginia Woolf's Handwritten Suicide Note: A Painful and Poignant Farewell (1941)* by Josh Jones. The autobiography contains Woolf's suicide notes. The steps taken for this analysis were as follows. Firstly, to determine the genuineness and the emotional tone of the suicide notes, the texts were put into the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) Program. The program read the given texts and counted the percentage of words that reflect different emotions, thinking styles, and social concern. Next, the suicide notes were read several times; the clauses, phrases, and sentences were highlighted and analyzed with semantic forensic theory. Lastly, the results from the LIWC analysis and semantic analysis were linked to Olsson's suicide note theory and other psychological theories.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Traditional LIWC dimensions reflect the percentage of total words within the text. I-words is the percentage of first person pronoun used (I, me, my). *Social words* indicate the percentage of words that show social relation and activity. *Positive emotions* stand for the percentage of words that show positive emotions. *Negative emotions* show the percentage of words that show negative emotions. *Cognitive processes* show the percentage of words that show cognitive processes and cognitive complexity.

The Summary Variables are research-based composites that have been converted to 100-point scales, where 0 = very low along the dimension and 100 = very high. *Analytic* refers to analytical or formal thinking. *Clout* taps writing that is authoritative, confident, and exhibits leadership. *Authenticity* refers to writing that is personal and honest. Emotional tone is scored higher when considered more positive than negative.

The tables below show Virginia Woolf's suicide notes percentages and compares it with the average for personal writing.

Table 1. LIWC analysis result of suicide note 1 (written for her sister, Vanessa Bell)

Traditional LIWC Dimension	Your Data	Average for Personal Writing	Summary Variables	
I words (I, me, my)	9.2	8.70	Analytic	1.0 44.88
Social words	13.5	8.69	Clout	42.7 37.02
Positive emotions	4.3	2.57	Authenticity	96.5 76.01
Negative emotions	1.8	2.12	Emotional tone	71.8 38.60
Cognitive processes	20.2	12.52		

The total word count is 167 words. I-words (I, me, my) percentage is 9.2, higher than the average, which is 8.70. The percentage of social words, as can be seen by the words used in "If I could I would **tell** you what you and the **children** have meant to me," is 13.5, higher than the average, which is 8.69. Cognitive processes can be seen by the words used in "I **think** you **know**", and the use of exclusive words (e.g., *but*), is in the percentage of 20.2, higher than the average, which is 12.52. The text shows high positive emotions based on the verbs, nouns, and adjectives used, like "*happy*", "*loved*" and "*good*" with a percentage of 4.3, higher than the average (2.57). On the other hand, the small percentage of negative emotions (1.8) can be seen in

the words "mad" and "horror", which is lower than the average (2.12). Analytic can be seen in the words used in "I **think** you **know**." The percentage is 1.0, lower than the average (44.88). Clout taps writing percentage is 42.7, higher than the average (37.02). Authenticity percentage is 96.5, higher than the average (76.01). Emotional tone is scored higher when considered more positive than negative; in this table the percentage is 71.8. This shows that the positive emotions are more dominant than negative emotions. The emotional percentage also shows higher percentage than the average (38.60). Both Clout taps writing and Authenticity can be observed in the frequency of the first personal pronoun and word count.

Table 2. LIWC analysis result of suicide note 2 (written for her husband, Leonard Woolf)

Traditional LIWC Dimension	Your Data	Average for Personal Writing	Summary Variables	
I words (I, me, my)	9.8	8.70	Analytic	3.1 44.88
Social words	11.9	8.69	Clout	32.1 37.02
Positive emotions	5.2	2.57	Authenticity	79.3 76.01
Negative emotions	2.1	2.12	Emotional tone	81.7 38.60
Cognitive processes	20.7	12.52		

The total word count is 193 words. I-words (I, me, my) percentage is 9.8, higher than the average (8.70). Social words (e.g., *people*, *everybody*) percentage is 11.9, higher than the average, which is 8.69. Cognitive processes can be seen in the words used in "I don't **think** two people...", where the percentage is 20.7, higher than the average (12.52). The text shows high positive emotions based on the verbs, nouns, and adjectives used, like "*good*", "*happiness*" and "*greatest*" with a percentage of 5.2, higher than the average (2.57). On the other hand, negative emotions can be seen in the words "mad" and "terrible", the percentage is 2.1, lower than the average (2.12). Analytic refers to analytical or formal thinking, e.g.: "everybody **knows** it." with a percentage of 3.1, which is lower than the average (44.88). Clout taps writing percentage is 32.1, lower than the average (37.02). Authenticity percentage is 79.3, higher than the average (76.01). Emotional tone is scored higher when considered more positive than negative; in this table the percentage is 81.7. This shows that the positive emotions are more dominant than negative emotions. The emotional percentage also shows higher percentage than the average, which is 38.60. Both Clout taps writing and Authenticity can be seen in the frequency of the first personal pronoun and word count.

Suicide note 1: Sunday  
Suicide note 2: Tuesday

### Greetings

The writer used salutation "Dearest" in both notes. Suicide note 1 is addressed to her sister, Vanessa Bell, and suicide note 2 is addressed to her husband, Leonard Woolf.

### Content

#### 1. The first sentence

Suicide note 1: *You can't think how I loved your letter.*  
Suicide note 2: *I feel certain that I am going mad again.*

In suicide note 1, the writer started the letter with a friendly pleasantry, which shows that the writer and the addressee exchanged letters regularly. On the other hand, in suicide note 2, the writer started the notes with a statement. The first sentence in a statement is a very important one. It is usually the point where the writer decides to start the statement, including the reason for writing the text or for the events that follow.

#### 2. The body

In personal letter, the writer usually writes about what events that have occurred and what emotions they feel.

Suicide note 1: *But I feel I have gone too far this time to come back again. I am certain now that I am going mad again. It is just as it was the first time, I am always hearing voices, and I shan't get over it now. We have been perfectly happy until these last few weeks, when this horror began.*

Suicide note 2: *I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier till this terrible disease came. I can't fight any longer. I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could*

Based on Newman, Pennebaker, Berry, and Richard's investigation on lying behavior (2003), when the participants were lying, they used more negative emotions and fewer first-person singulars. They also used higher total word count. Cognitive processes can be seen by the use of exclusive words. Exclusive words are used at higher rates among people telling the truth (Newman et al., 2003). Based on these percentages, Virginia Woolf's suicide notes are considered genuine and have a positive emotional tone.

### The structure of Virginia Woolf's suicide notes:

#### Date

The writer did not write the date, only the day of the letter.

work. And you will I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read.

In both suicide notes, the writer wrote about what was happening at that time. The writer seems aware that she was suffering from a mental illness, and it was not the first time she was in that state. Both notes also show the writer's hopeless state and depression which was caused by her worsened mental condition. In suicide note 2, the writer shows guilt, she blamed herself and considered herself a burden, believing that her husband could work and live better without her. Olsson (2008, p. 149) noted that "suicide note is brief, concise, and highly propositional yet there seems to be a degree of evasiveness"; in this case, her notes contain "evasiveness" because the writer did not explicitly state her intention to take her own life to the person she loved. The sentence, "I can't fight any longer." shows her exhaustion and hopelessness. The strongest sentence is "So I am doing what seems the best thing to do." She was clear she had made the best decision (to end her life).

### 3. Purpose

In personal letters, people also write about what plans they have for the future or the purpose of writing a letter.

Suicide note 1: *All I want to say is that Leonard has been so astonishingly good, every day, always; I can't imagine that anyone could have done more for me than he has. We have been perfectly happy until these last few weeks, when this horror began. Will you assure him of this? I feel he has so much to do that he will go on, better without me, and you will help him.*

Suicide note 2: *What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that — everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer.*

In suicide note 1, the writer wrote "Will you assure him of this? I feel he has so much to do that he will go on, better without me, and you will help him." This part of the note is very interesting, because it is more of a request to her sister to help Leonard after her suicide. "I feel he has so much to do that he will go on, better without me..." can be seen as a signal of hope for her husband after her death. Meanwhile, in suicide note 2 we can see that most of her note shows her gratitude and other positive feelings towards her husband. Note the way the writer seems to stress the word "everybody knows it" as if she was asking people to accept or agree with her next statement which is, "If anybody could have saved me it would have been you." This sentence shows the trust she had in her husband. But then, the writer used a repetition "I can't go spoiling your life any longer" which shows her guilt was bigger than all those positive feelings.

### 4. Final

Suicide note 1: *I can hardly think clearly anymore. If I could I would tell you what you and the children have*

*meant to me. I think you know. I have fought against it, but I can't any longer.*

Suicide note 2: *I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been.*

In suicide note 1, "I have fought against it," shows her struggle, yet then met with the strong rebuttal of "but I can't any longer." This is the strong indicator that she was serious about ending her life. In suicide note 2, note the repetition of "**I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been.**" It seems the writer wanted to emphasize it, showing that she was genuinely happy.

### Closings

Suicide note 1: the writer ended her note with her name, Virginia.

Suicide note 2: the writer ended her note with her initial, V.

### Forensic semantics analysis

In this part of analysis, some interesting parts of Virginia Woolf's suicide notes were analyzed to investigate the real motives behind her suicide.

1. "We have been perfectly happy until these last few weeks, when this horror began." Based on this sentence, we know that the writer was genuinely happy and her condition only worsened in the last few weeks before her death. It is said that before she died, she had been unproductive because her condition worsened until she was unable to work. But her last work, *Between the Acts*, was written in 1941, the year of her death. It proves that she still could write even during the Blitz, because the Blitz occurred from 7 September 1940 to 21 May 1941. Her suicide could not have been prompted by the Blitz.
2. The writer seems aware that she was suffering from mental disorder based on the sentence, "I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate." It was common to hear the cries for help caused by explosions during the Blitz bombing. But, the sentence does not seem to show her fear. Instead, it seems the said voices had disturbed her concentration. Those "voices" might be auditory hallucinations, which are one of the symptoms of Psychosis that is related to Bipolar type 1 disorder.
3. "You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read." Virginia Woolf did not suffer from blindness, so it cannot be a literal meaning. Bipolar disorder is often accompanied by changes in cognitive processes and abilities. Best (1999, p. 15) explained that "cognition is the set of all mental abilities and processes related to memory, association, concept information, pattern recognition, language." If we link this to the sentence, it is most likely that Virginia Woolf was unproductive and unable to continue her work because of the changes in her cognitive processes and abilities accompanied by her Bipolar disorder. We think this is the main reason of her depression.
4. "You have given me the greatest possible happiness." "I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been." These sentences make us curious; if she was happy,

then why would she take her own life? Most of the sentences in this note contain positive feelings, yet she still committed suicide. If we link this to the previous assumption that she was suffering from Bipolar disorder, it answers the reason behind her mood-swing. Anderson et al. (2012, n.p.) stated, "Bipolar disorder is a mental disorder characterized by periods of elevated mood and periods of depression." In this case, "...the greatest possible happiness" is related to periods of elevated mood, and "I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times" is related to the period of depression.

## CONCLUSION

From the LIWC analysis, it can be concluded that Virginia Woolf's suicide notes are genuine. The emotions expressed in the notes towards her family were positive, especially towards her husband. In both notes, Virginia Woolf shows her gratitude for her husband, Leonard.

Even though the writer did not explicitly state her intention to commit suicide to the people she loved, her sentences show she was serious about ending her life. Based on the analysis, the writer shows guilt and depression. She appears to blame herself for her suicidal act. In the note which Virginia Woolf left for her sister, we can see her request for her sister to help her husband after her death along with the hope that her husband could do better without her. It seems the intention of Virginia Woolf's notes were not to explain why she was going to kill herself, but to comfort her beloved family after her death.

Based on the forensic semantics analysis, Virginia Woolf's suicidal act was caused by her depression. But, it was not because of the onset of World War II and the effects of the Blitz like the local coroner suggested at that time. The result of this analysis supports the statement of other psychologists that her depression was caused by Bipolar disorder which was also accompanied by changes in her cognitive processes and abilities that made her unable to work, and thus, leading on to her suicide.

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## APPENDIX

### Suicide note 1 (written for her sister, Vanessa Bell)

"Sunday

Dearest, You can't think how I loved your letter. But I feel I have gone too far this time to come back again. I am certain now that I am going mad again. It is just as it was the first time, I am always hearing voices, and I shan't get over it now. All I want to say is that Leonard has been so astonishingly good, every day, always; I can't imagine that anyone could have done more for me than he has. We have been perfectly happy until these last few weeks, when this horror began. Will you assure him of this? I feel he has so much to do that he will go on, better without me, and you will help him. I can hardly think clearly anymore. If I could I would tell you what you and the children have meant to me. I think you know. I have fought against it, but I can't any longer. Virginia."

### Suicide note 2 (written for her husband, Leonard Woolf)

"Tuesday

Dearest, I feel certain that I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. You have given me the greatest possible happiness. You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier till this terrible disease came. I can't fight any longer. I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. What I want to say is I owe all

*the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that — everybody knows it. If anybody could have saved me it would have been you. Everything has*

*gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer. I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been. V."*