Lexis of a Suicidal

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Abstract

This article presents a lexical analysis of the writings of a suicidal individual to identify the linguistic choices. It also discusses content analysis as a valuable research tool.

Introduction

Language is not only the source of sharing our beliefs, ideas and desires with others but it also reflects our unconscious. As fingerprints provide evidence in detecting law related issues, for linguists, linguistic style is a fingerprint through which a person's mental state is reflected.

The words that reflect linguistic styles are those that are high in usage e.g. function words- particles, articles, prepositions, pronouns, auxiliary verbs and conjunctions. According to Pennebaker (2002), the particular words a person uses (e.g. pronouns, emotion-related words, cognitive words or time-oriented words) reveal rich information about his/her mood, social class, personality, and status.

Pronouns

The role of function words is evident by an understanding of pronouns. Pronouns require shared understanding of their referents between the listener and speaker, e.g. "Does he know that it is her bag?" This sentence can only be meaningful if one knows who "he", "it" and "her" are. In order to understand a message with plenty of pronouns we need social knowledge.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com   385
10 : 11 November 2010
Samina A. Khan, M.Phil.
Lexis of a Suicidal

Similar is the case with articles and prepositions, e.g.

It is unbelievable that he presented her a car.
It is unbelievable that he presented her the car.

Though both the sentences are the same with the exception of the articles "a" and "the," the differences in listener's/reader's and speaker's shared knowledge and interpersonal skills is evident. Thus, mature social skills are required to use function words.

The ways people refer to themselves and others is highly reflective of their mental state. The use of 1st person singular (I, me, my) versus 1st person plural (we, us, our) provides insight into one's social identity and "ownership" of their speaking or writing topic; references to other people suggests an awareness and integration with others (Argamon & Levitan, 2004; Argamon, Koppel & Schler 2005).

Farberow & Marmor (1996), and Prezant & Neimeyer (1988) suggest that suicidal individuals withdraw from social relationships, and while they try to detach from the sources of their pain, become more self-absorbed.

Suicidal Individuals and Language

Emotion Words

Languages differ in the size and range of their emotion vocabularies. Study on emotion lexicons show different number of emotion words in different languages. Russell (1991) reported 2000 emotion words in English (Wallace & Carson, 1973), 1501 in Dutch (Hoekstra, 1986), and 750 emotion words in Taiwanese Chinese (Boucher, 1979). According to Church and associates (1998), in Tagalog (Filipino) there are 256 emotion words. This type of study requires careful specification of what constitutes an emotion word (Clore, et al., 1987).

Content Analysis - A Text Analysis Research Tool

Content analysis is a technique to find words or ideas in texts - essays, books, speeches, conversations, newspaper, conversations, etc. that is, in any incidence of communicative language. Once the presence is determined, the researchers analyze the words in relation to meaning and associations, culture, etc.

The kinds of occurrences may vary in a text. For example, Palmquist (1990) studied two composition classes by analyzing student and teacher interviews, classroom discussions and lectures, and out-of-class interaction sheets.

The procedure of conducting content analysis is to code the text - break it into categories, on different levels such as theme, word sense, word, phrase, sentence, and further analyze by content or conceptual analysis.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com 386
10 : 11 November 2010
Samina A. Khan, M.Phil.
Lexis of a Suicidal

Two Categories of Content Analysis

There are two general categories of content analysis: conceptual analysis and relational analysis.

Conceptual analysis refers to ascertain the presence and frequency of ideas/concepts that are often represented by words of phrases in a text. For example, through conceptual analysis one can determine how many times words relating to hunger such as *hungry*, *famished*, or *starving* are used in a volume of poems written by a particular poet.

Relational analysis helps to examine the relationships among concepts in a text. Considering the example of the word *hunger*, one could identify what other words or phrases - *hungry/famished* appear next, and conclude what different meanings emerge as a result of these groupings.

The Process of Content Analysis

In the past, the process of content analysis was a lengthy one as it was conducted manually or by using data punched by humans on cards, run on slow computers. Numerous cards were required for each study. Furthermore, due to the possibility of human error, during the process and time constraints, use of this method was virtually impossible for large texts. Nevertheless, by 1940 content analysis was used as research method mostly for studies that analyzed texts for frequency count of words. Later researchers also started to analyze concepts and relationships related to meaning too (de Sola Pool 1959). Presently, through content analysis method studies on mental state with reference to linguistic, social, cognitive significance are carried out.

Pronouns and Suicide

Pronouns   provide lot of information about social relationships, i.e., when a speaker uses 'we' or 'they' who is referred to, or when 'I' is used in what relationship a speaker considers himself or herself rather than concentrating on "you", the listener.

Stirman and Pennebaker (2001) conducted research on the word use in the poems of suicidal and non-suicidal poets. The result   of comparison of the first-person pronouns among the two groups of poets was interesting. Suicidal poets such as Sylvia Plath in a poem about a broken relationship writes, "…I fancied you'd return the way you said, /But I grow old and I forget your name. / (I think I made you up inside my head.)…" . Denise Levertov matched most strongly with Plath who writes of broken love, but by nonexistence of first-person pronouns: "…The ache of marriage: / thigh and tongue, beloved, / are heavy with it, / it throbs in the teeth / we look for communion / and are turned away, beloved, / each and each…"

This pattern of pronoun use was consistent throughout the study, with suicidal poets using "I" at a much greater rate than non-suicidal poets.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com   387
10 : 11 November 2010
Samina A. Khan, M.Phil.
Lexis of a Suicidal

Another study by Rude, et al. (2002) on college freshmen who were currently depressed and never-depressed showed that currently depressed students used significantly greater numbers of first-person pronouns in their essays when compared with never-depressed students.

By linguistic analysis of diaries (June 8, 1994 and ending June 20, 1995) written by Katie - a young student who committed suicide, a great amount of information can be gathered from focusing on use of pronouns and how they refer to others, Stone & Pennebaker (2002).

Excerpts of Katie's Diaries

*8/22/94 **I** refuse to eat anymore. **I** refuse to take care of **myself** anymore. **I'm** sick of it - all of the ……. heaviness on **my** heart. **I'm** ………. SICK OF ALL OF IT. **I** WANT TO GO AWAY! **I** WANT EVERYBODY TO GO AWAY. **I** WANT TO BE LEFT ALONE. **I** DON'T WANT TO BE TOUCHED - NOT **my** body, nor **my** heart! It hurts. It always hurts. It's no different this time. **I** feel like **I'm** being shut out for who **I** am. **I'm** so sick OF **MY** WRITING IN THIS JOURNAL. **I** HATE IT. **I** SOUND SO DAMN PATHETIC! **I** HATE **MYSELF**. **I** WANT TO DIE! WHAT **I** DO ISN'T GOOD ENOUGH!!*

*11/28/94 It killed **me** how much **I** hurt Mark. **I** want so badly to make him happy and make it up to him. Maybe we got the kinks out. Maybe it's better now. All **I** know, **I** hate to argue. **I** hate it. … **I** never want to hurt him again. **I** will do much better now than **I** did before. **I'll** relax and work on being **me**. **I** have had a difficult time with **my** food. **I** struggle with wanting to be thin, but **I** know what's really important in life. If **I** become a strict vegetarian, **I'll** be ok. **I'll** lose weight easily. Like **my** Mom did. **I** don't want to eat barely any fat. **I** know I'm obsessing today - understandable. A lot of things are going on inside of **me**. I'm different than **my** family. **I** know a lot more, **I** think. **I** think **I** can make it - somewhere good in life.*

*2/8/95 **I** love Mark. He told **me** that he feels trapped. How could **I** tell him that **I** was reading his diary? **I** feel so awful. **I** had to know what his intentions were with **me**. **I** can't believe **I** told him all about Chris. **I** hope he never talks about it again. **I** feel awful that **I** hurt him yesterday. So **I** made **myself** eat an incredible amount. **I** wonder if **I** spoiled his birthday. **I** didn't mean to, if **I** did. It's all so awful. **I** wish he would come here soon so **I** could make love to him. **I** do anything and everything for him because he truly deserves it. He has put up with so much crap from **me**.*

In mid-1994, Katie's use "I," "me," or "my," correlated with high usage of present tense verbs, complex language, and more sanguine and sad words. This type of cognitively complex language design indicates that use Katie was preoccupied with herself. This trend of by being focused on the present continued during fall with use of negative emotion words. Her sentences became shorter as well the words which were of common vocabulary that does not indicate cognitive

Language in India www.languageinindia.com   388
10 : 11 November 2010
Samina A. Khan, M.Phil.
Lexis of a Suicidal

complexity. Her cognitive direction reverted in initial months of 1995. The pronoun correlation shows that she was thinking about others as well as herself. The language about her indicates negative emotions. Katie's language in March is about the past and present as well as use of words like "understand, know, wonder", that fall in the category of insight language. This indicates retreat into herself for as she increased the use of first-person pronouns she refrained from referring to others. The above given extracts of her diaries reveal:

- Extensive use of first person pronoun and absence of rest of the pronouns (we, they etc).
- While writing to Mark (him, his) & use of less male pronouns it is inferred that while Katie was referring to him her main focus was on herself as to how *she* behaved with Mark.
- Her use of pronouns particularly, abundant use of first person pronouns indicate self absorption that validates findings of previous research.
- The reader/analyst is presented with the picture of a young person who is emotionally struggling with herself and her life.

Social Lexis

The lexis Katie used is indicative that she felt socially isolated e.g. "Alienation and isolation are my dearest friends" is a major theme in her writings.

> *(8/12/94) I hate people. I don't need anyone – or anything anymore. They treat me like I'm a …… disease or something … I hate them all. I know factually that it is harder for me to reach out then for them because I don't have anyone who loves me. No one has proven to me that they love me – only that they'll put up with me.*

> *6/18/95)…Is it so wrong to want to have a family? It's always been such a big dream for me. But my old family life seems to come up now, being alone, abandoned, rejected and neglected. … It has affected my life with people. It's alienated me from simply [sic] honesty, open personality. … I'm scared, but I have to tell myself I'll be all right because I've always been by myself….*

Rare use of social words, *discuss*, etc., and lack of use of pronoun "we", indicate her social detachment. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies.

Positive and Negative Emotion Lexis

This is consistent with the research of Pennebaker (2001), in which no significant difference was detected in the use of negative and positive emotion words by the suicidal and non-suicidal poets. However, interestingly the use of question marks rose in the final period of her life which could be attributed to shift in viewpoint -a sign of isolation leading to depression.

Other Aspects

Language in India www.languageinindia.com   389
10 : 11 November 2010
Samina A. Khan, M.Phil.
Lexis of a Suicidal

6/15/95 It **kills** me inside - not a friend in the world. I feel no connection with anyone, and it scares me so much. The world seems so cold, dark and scary.

No matter what Mrs. W says, I'm alone, alone and left to myself. ... I want to **kill** myself. **Bullet** though my heart - the only way I'll ever stop caring about people. .... I did try reaching out again for the last time. People are so mean and selfish. I want to **kill** myself on my birthday. I have to.

Though Katie decreased the use of death themed words as compared to the entire entry of her diaries, she increased the use of religious lexis in the final months of her life. The final entry in her diary is in the form of a prayer:

*Please, dear **God**, let me get an A on that test today. It would mean so very much to me. It would help lift my **spirits** higher. It truly would, and please let everything work out wonderfully the rest of the summer and let me accomplish a lot of good things for myself and be healthy and disciplined. Please, dear **God**, bring some wonderful encouraging, unbiased, loving, respecting people in my life….Please, dear **God**, let things pick up in my life beautifully. I want to feel whole inside, instead of being severed in hundreds of little pieces from my own and others' actions. ...Please help me through this and next week, especially things are so hard right now.*

By tracking changes in the language of an individual one can take a peep into the mind. While reading the diaries, the content words reveal her experiences but the slight changes are detectable by focusing on the function words- for they reveal her mental state over the period. Thus, linguistic analyses can prove to be linguistic fingerprint for identification of disturbed individuals, which is vital to curb a tragedy.

A sample of content analysis of a suicidal letter appears as Appendix.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com   390
10 : 11 November 2010
Samina A. Khan, M.Phil.
Lexis of a Suicidal

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com   391
10 : 11 November 2010
Samina A. Khan, M.Phil.
Lexis of a Suicidal