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Abstract: The causes of the psychological disorder of Virginia Woolf and their possible effects on her life and on her literary career as well as the role they played in her death have been the subject of much literary research (Coates 2000; DeSalvo 1989). This paper analyses Virginia Woolf's suicide letters from a linguistic perspective and compares them with the suicide letters of six ordinary women in order to discover if the language used can cast some light on the reasons, thoughts and beliefs that might have pushed her into committing suicide (cf. Black 1993). In order to do so, two main linguistic perspectives will be used: first, the perspective of forensic linguistics, and, more specifically, the common characteristics of suicide letters listed by Olsson (2008), which have been adapted and applied to Virginia Woolf's suicide letters to examine whether they are really suicide letters or whether she is just expressing her inner feelings through words; second, the pragmatic perspective, which applies Searle's taxonomy of speech acts (1969, 1975) to the analysis of her last words in relation to context, focusing on the speech acts of 'explaining reasons' and 'blaming'.

Keywords: Forensic linguistics, pragmatics, Speech Act Theory, Virginia Woolf, suicide letters.

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A Study of the Linguistic Features of Female Suicide Letters: from the Writings of Ordinary Women to the Writings of Virginia Woolf

0. Introduction

Death, in opposition to life, is one of the major questions that has been raised throughout human history. And while studied for centuries by philosophers, historians, doctors and scientists, it has not been fully understood as yet. The mystery of death is even more powerful when it is openly pursued, when it refers to suicide. Examining what lies in a suicidal person's mind before ending his/her life is one of the most haunting questions. From a linguistic perspective, these final words, in the form of a suicide note or letter, are also worthy of study as they can cast some light on the reasons, the thoughts and beliefs that pushed these people into committing suicide (Black 1993). From a literary perspective, suicide letters are considered a genre, even part of the literary corpus when written by professional writers, and thus an essential piece of the research as well.

In an attempt to combine linguistic analysis and a literary perspective, this study will firstly analyse, using Speech Act Theory (Austin 1962), the genuine suicide letters of six ordinary women to identify a shared pattern of the language used in their written texts. Secondly, this pattern will be compared to the three so-called suicide letters written by the British writer Virginia Woolf. Finally, conclusions on the typical linguistics features and speech acts used in women suicide letters will be displayed. In this vein, two main research questions are formulated to guide the study:

1. What language patterns, and more specifically speech acts, generally characterise female suicide letters?
2. Do Virginia Woolf's so-called suicide letters share the same linguistic patterns and speech acts as the other female suicide letters under scrutiny?

Taking these questions into consideration, the aim of this study is to discover, by applying linguistic analysis to literary data, what language can reveal about suicidal women's minds. This work is original in that it addresses a topic that is often largely underexplored (Shapero 2011) and uses a combined set of data (literary and non-literary) to illustrate this sensitive issue.

1. Theoretical Frameworks

In order to support the language analysis of the suicide letters, two main theoretical frameworks will be followed: forensic linguistics and Speech Act Theory.

1.1. Forensic Linguistics

Forensic linguistics could be briefly defined as the application of linguistics to legal issues (Olsson 2014). Despite existing from ancient Greece, the term forensic linguistics was not actually used until 1968 when a linguistics professor called Jan Svartvik recorded a now famous analysis of statements that was given to police officers. In this recording, he firstly mentioned *forensic linguistics*. Nowadays, it is a growing field and known worldwide thanks to the International Association of Forensic Linguists (Taylor 2014). The areas covered and the methods used in forensic linguistics vary substantially depending on the context. For a better understanding, a more extended and modern explanation is provided below:

Forensic linguists have been called upon to consider the differences between institutional language and the language of defendants and witness in criminal and civil cases; between language which originated as speech and language which originated as

writing, and between language which was contemporaneous with an event, and language which recorded that event at a later time. (Olsson & Luchjenbroers 21)

1.2. Speech Act Theory

Pragmatics, and more specifically Speech Act Theory, is the main theoretical framework used for the analysis of these letters as it links language with its context; with real life (Yule 1996). However, the relationship between language and context has been discussed by many scholars since Frege, to recent authors (Speaks 2008). They state that the literal meaning of a sentence is a context free notion, this is called the "null context", or the "zero context". This means that the literary meaning would not vary in any context. Nevertheless, ambiguity is the key to prove the importance of context, because it is absolutely necessary to understand the literary meaning of any sentence. The conclusion is that this axiom needs to be abandoned. "The literal meaning of a sentence only determines a set of truth conditions given a set of background practices and assumptions" (Searle 227). This set is known as "the background" and makes the interpretation possible.

Since this study deals with letters, it is previously assumed that it is a communicative situation supposed to be read. A situation, in this case a letter, becomes a communicative situation depending on the intention of the writer to influence the mind(s) of the reader(s) by means of an utterance. The writer, in this case a woman, plans a language action in order to convey her intention to the mind of the reader. This means that it is assumed that the reader is using the same kind of knowledge, so the writer makes assumptions about the ability of the reader to specify the situation. In an ideal case the writer only supplies the information in her utterance which the hearer is expected to be unable to gain from the situation. In many cases, though not in all, this will be information about the writer's intention and attitudes (Motsch, 1980).

Taking all these points into account, the approach used for this analysis has been Speech Act Theory (Austin 1962) that states that words do not have meaning in and of themselves; they are affected by the situation and the participants. Following this theory, Searle's taxonomy (1969, 1975) has been utilized for this study, and its five types of illocutionary acts, adapted to the corpus of this case study (Maíz-Arévalo 2016):

- Representatives: the writer states what she believes to be the case.
- Directives: the writer wants the reader to do something.
- Commissive: the writer commits herself to future action.
- Expressives: the writer states what she feels.
- Declaratives: the writer changes the world by the very utterance of the words.

All in all, it must be said that language is not just about classifying words into boxes, the linguistic boundaries are not clear because of the wide variation of contexts. This means that there is no a strict classification of speech acts. Austin's, Searle's and anyone's attempts are not really convincing because there are many open questions and problems yet. Bearing this in mind, Wunderlich (301-302) summarized the main problems found in a language specific investigation of speech acts:

- a) *The demarcation problem*: One has to delimit individual speech acts from the continuous flow of speech.
- b) *The identification problem*: One has to identify the delimited speech acts as belonging to one or another speech act type.
- c) *The classification problem*: One has to establish a workable classificatory scheme for speech acts which can be found in a certain kind of discourse.
- d) *The specification problem*: For each class of speech acts, one has to deal with a whole range of subtypes that may differ in various respects.
- e) *The (de)composition problem*: One has to distinguish between simple and more complex speech acts which may be composed of simple speech acts.
- f) *The projection problem*: One has to relate the verbal means, words and constructions, with the sentence meaning, described in terms of possible speech acts performed by the utterance of that sentence.

There have been attempts to create a unique formula that should be followed in order to classify speech acts. Nevertheless, language is not a mathematical issue because it deals with real life and people. In order to understand completely speech acts verbs, it is necessary to add something to the formula; it must be completed for each individual. The list of relations is the following (Verschuren 58-60):

- I. *The relation with the language (L)*. Many types of speech acts impose conditions on the structure of the utterance that can be used to perform them.
- II. *The relation with the world (W)*. Most speech acts can be expected to reflect characteristics of their cultural setting.
- III. *The relation with the speaker (S)*. Every speech act is the expression of an attitude, a psychological state, on the part of the speaker.
- IV. *The relation with the hearer (H)*. Whereas I to III describes the speech act, here we want to capture 'ACCEPT (y, SA); i.e., the effect typically intended by the speaker.

As it is known that all the suicidal women were English native speakers, and the cultural context is not given, the analysis will be related to the personal situation that surrounds them, suicide, which at the same time is the message that needs to be transmitted. This is the branch of speech acts which involves "the situational features of the task or communicative context, such as location of the interaction, age and social status of the interlocutor, and level of familiarity with the interlocutor" (Kuriscak 23-24). All these factors will be taken into consideration while completing the analysis.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Data Gathering Process

Six suicide letters written by ordinary women were carefully searched and selected from a vast range available on the Internet. The starting point of my research was the article written by Art Kleiner entitled "How not to commit suicide." Despite being in many different web pages, the site that contains all the data set of this study is "Suicide Notes" (Hu 2002). All these letters were found at different coroners¹ offices and selected by a professional psychiatrist. Hence, the validity of the genuineness of this corpus.

Virginia Woolf's suicide letters can be also found on the same web page. The physical letters are at the British Library and they are also part of the book edited by Sylvie Crinquand entitled *Last Letters* (Crinquand 54-55).

2.2. Description of the Data Set

These six genuine letters from ordinary women will be analysed in order to identify a linguistic pattern and then be compared with Virginia Woolf's suicide letters. These genuine letters have been selected for several reasons. They are different women of different ages and different marital status, therefore their contexts vary widely. The order in which these letters are presented below ranges from what could be deemed the 'closest' to Virginia Woolf's personal characteristics (letter 1) to the most different (letter 6):

- The first letter was written by Anita R., a 37-year-old divorced woman. The main reason for choosing this letter was that she believes she is becoming insane, as Virginia Woolf did.
- The second letter was written by a 59-year-old married woman of unknown name. She was the same age as Virginia when she decided to commit suicide.
- The third letter was written by a 50-year-old woman of unknown name. The reason for committing suicide is related to her husband and his family, as she expresses in a very explicit way.
- The fourth letter was written by a 52-year-old woman called Louise. The reason of her suicide seems to be the loss of her husband, and consequently, her loneliness.
- The fifth letter was written by a 61-year-old divorced woman. This letter was selected because of the poetic way in which it is written.
- The sixth letter was written by a 31-year-old woman called Elizabeth. The main reasons to be chosen are the age and the postscript, which is the astonishing part of this letter. As it will be examined, it reveals the actual intentions of the ordinary young woman, disparate from the rest of the women.

Virginia Woolf's suicide letters are classified by the addressee; the first two are addressed to Leonard, her husband, and the third one to her sister Vanessa.

2.3. Linguistic Analysis of the Corpus of Suicide Letters

¹ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, an official who holds inquests into violent, sudden, or suspicious deaths, and –in Britain– inquiries into cases of treasure trove ("Coroner").

The analysis of the ordinary women's letters has shown several similarities despite seeming very different at first sight. For this reason, applying the little context given by every woman, the connection between them has been found through language.

Olsson (2008) listed several common characteristics of suicide notes. These characteristics have been adapted to and exemplified by the corpus of this case study by covering the features of both suicide notes and letters:

- A suicide letter/note should contain an unequivocal proposition and it is normally to do with the act of suicide itself and/or with the communication, e.g. #1: "I am taking this way out".
- The proposition needs to be simply phrased: it should be thematic (i.e. the first clause of the sentence/clause complex); it should be direct; it should be directed at the addressee, and relevant to the writer's relationship with the addressee, e.g. #2: "I am said that I must go just a few days before your birthday".
- Where mention is made as to the necessity for (or even 'desirability' of) the act of suicide, the suicide note should be unequivocal about the writer's view that this is not just the best course of action, but the only course of action, e.g. #4: "I can't go on, I'm afraid I would break down".
- Genuine suicide letters tend to be short, mostly fewer than 300 words in length, while suicide notes are normally less than 100 words. In both cases, there is usually little or no extraneous material.²
- The situational context is not always obvious and usually the reader has to deduce it. It is rarely stated directly. Even where it is stated directly, the reader cannot necessarily take the context for granted, e.g. #6: "As much as it hurts me, I cannot make it this Friday".

The analysis of Virginia Woolf's suicide letters has been conditioned by the necessary background knowledge³ and context previously given about her. The different era and social status (Bell 1972) have been also taken into account while analysing language. Notwithstanding, the results prove common features and also differences between the British writer and other women.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Ordinary Women's Letters

A) Explaining Reasons

One of the main features that all the ordinary women's suicide notes share is their stating of explicit reasons. From the very beginning, all six letters give reasons to justify the action that they are about to take. The most frequent speech act used to express this is a representative, often preceded by the conjunction 'because' since they state what they

² The longest letter of this corpus contains 733 words and the shortest contains 64 words.

³ *Moments of Being* (1985) is a collection of autobiographical essays that were published after Virginia Woolf's death. In this book, she confesses that she was raped by her half-brother, among other facts which affected her throughout her whole life.

believe to be the truth. It must be mentioned that most of the examples of sentences that contain *I can't* state not just facts but feelings. These women felt that they could not continue living, therefore they would be expressives. However, the difference is that they actually committed suicide, thus their feelings became real facts. This is the reason because they have been finally classified as representatives. These examples are:

➤ Representatives:

1. #1⁴: "Because of a growing conviction that a hereditary insanity is manifesting itself beyond my control"
2. #1: "Because I am an agnostic and believe funeral fanfare to be nonsense"
3. #2: "I can't remain at the hospital for the winter months and a prolonged stay at a rest home is out of the question"
4. #2: "I can't bleed my family for any such amount of money"
5. #2: "It's a vicious circle from which there seems no escape"
6. #2: "I am now convinced that my condition is too chronic and therefore a cure doubtful"
7. #2: "All of a sudden all will and determination to fight on has left me."
8. #2: "I have long ago prepared myself for the time when I reached the end of the trail"
9. #2: "I am defeated and exhausted physically and emotionally"
10. #2: "with my passing all menace to their wellbeing will have disappeared"
11. #2: "I see no good in incurring the expense and misery of the bronchoscopy"
12. #2: "I am at least free from the misery of the bronchoscopy"
13. #2: "I am at least free from the miseries and loneliness I have endured for so long"
14. #3: "When a "man" doesn't know where to take his wife – then she isn't a wife any more"
15. #3: "I'm sure you will not have any trouble as to places"
16. #4: "Everyone seems so happy and I am so alone"
17. #4: "And my head aches so much any more my nerves are ready to break"
18. #4: "You will say I am crazy and I can't go on this way just half living"
19. #4: "[I] Am so nervous all the time"
20. #4: "with him gone I have nothing"
21. #4: "I have the girls and family but they don't fill the vacant spot left in my heart"
22. #4: "Xmas is coming I can't go on"
23. #4: "I can't be one of you any more"
24. #4: "that wasn't anything"
25. #4: "I've lost every thing"
26. #4: "I worshipped Ron and when he went I lost my whole world and everything"

⁴ The numbers refer to the order in which the suicide letters have been analysed, as they are ordered in the appendix section.

27. #4: "I'm so tired and lonely"
28. #5: "I lived 61 years too many"
29. #5: "People have always put obstacles in my way"
30. #5: "[I] have nothing to live for"
31. #5: "I am not insane"
32. #5: "My mind was never more clear"
33. #5: "It has been a long day"
34. #5: "The motor got so hot it would not run so I just had to sit here and wait"
35. #5: "The breaks were against me to the last"
36. #6: "My boss, Kenneth J., seduced me and made me pregnant"
37. #6: "He refuses to help me"
38. #6: "He says that I will have to suffer through it by myself"
39. #6: "I have always been such a good girl"
40. #6: "I have always been a very good person, but it looks like I really got in a mess, through no real fault of my own"
41. #6: "I must have been born to suffer"

Expressives are also found as means to explain reasons, since the reasons that women give are not only related to facts but to feelings as well:

➤ Expressives:

42. #2: "I feel calm and at peace and grateful that I can go to sleep painlessly"
43. #2: "I feel justified in terminating a life which no longer holds any hope of having the essentials which make it worth living"
44. #3: "I hope you will be "free" to take anyone any place"
45. #3: "[I] hope they are satisfied"
46. #4: "I loved this house once but now it is so full of memories I can't stay here"
47. #4: "I loved Ron too much but is that a sin"

Main Findings on "Explaining Reasons"

All these women want to convince the readers that they are completely sure about committing suicide; #2: "I am now convinced". They use their explanations to avoid blame. Suicide seems to be the only solution for most of them, death is the only possibility, this is their reasoning; #1: "I am taking this way out" (a commissive), #2: "I must go". Some of them use opposite strategies as: #1: "a hereditary insanity is manifesting itself beyond my control" versus #5: "I am not insane. My mind was never more clear". Loneliness seems to be a common reason; #4: "Everyone seems so happy and I am so alone", #6: "I will have to suffer through it by myself". The formula I can't is widely used by all these women to show the main reason to commit suicide; the incapability to continue living; #2: "I can't remain at the hospital for the winter months", #2: "I can't bleed my family for any such amount of money", #4: "I can't go on this way just half living", #4: "Xmas is coming I can't go on", #4: "I can't be one of you any more", #4: "I can't stay here".

There are some particular features that must be mentioned. Letter number five is written as it was an oral speech because of the use of a vocative *cops* and the lack of

connectors. Her arguments are organized, but as they come to her mind, as she was speaking. The word *cops* is quite informal, without the pragmatic information, it would have been difficult to determine the age of this woman.

In letter number six, she tells her reasons as a story telling; firstly, in past tense (#6: "seduced me"), then in present tense (#6: "he refuses"), and finally in future tense (#6: "I will have to suffer"). She also uses the strongest modal verb must to show absolute certainty #6: "I must have been born to suffer". It seems as if she had suffered a lot and she cannot live with fear anymore, it is not worthy. The most striking part of this letter that is not found in the other ones is the postscript that reveals the truth. She asks her father to call her if he can; she is not sure about what she is doing at all. She has future plans, in such a way, maybe she just wanted to confess her pregnancy, she just needed attention, but she did not want to die.

B) Blaming

In the letters under scrutiny, blame can be divided into two types. On the one hand, self-blame; when someone feels guilty for something he or she has done or is going to do. On the other hand, other-blame, that is, when the writer wants someone else to feel guilty, whether intentionally or not (Parrott 2001). Blame is expressed through:

- Self-blame
 - Representatives:
 - 48. #2: "I can't bleed my family for any such amount of money"
 - 49. #2: "It was mostly my fault"
 - 50. #2: "I am said that I must go just a few days before your birthday"
 - Expressives:
 - 51. #2: "I grieve that I could not have had the joy of being close to our babies"
 - 52. #2: "I wish I could have made a happier life for you"
 - 53. #2: "I wish with all my heart that they might have been better rewarded"
 - 54. #2: "I wish I could spare you the ordeal you have ahead"
 - 55. #2: "I wish I could spare you the ordeal you have ahead"
 - 56. #4: "I only hope this is fatal then I can rest and no more trouble to any one"
 - 57. #4: "[I know she has been a lot of worry to mama and] I'm sorry"
 - Directives:
 - 58. #2: "please forgive me"
 - 59. #2: "forgive me for the many mistakes I have made"
 - 60. #4: "Please tell Ron's folks I love them very much"
 - 61. #4: "Forgive me for not seeing them"
 - 62. #4: "Please think kindly of me and forgive me"
- Other-blame
 - Representatives:
 - 63. #3: "your whole tribe is partly responsible for this – from your mother on down"

- 64. #5: "People have always put obstacles in my way"
- 65. #6: "My boss, Kenneth J., seduced me and made me pregnant"
- 66. #6: "He refuses to help me"
- 67. #6: "He says that I will have to suffer through it by myself"
- 68. #6: "Several people know about this – my doctor, Dr. James R., and Pete M., who works at Williams"
- 69. #6: "Also, Dr. Arnold W. knows about it"

➤ Declaratives:

- 70. #1: "To my father, Vincent M., [I hereby bequeath] the sum of one dollar (1\$)"

Main Findings on "Blaming"

Most of these women blame someone in their letters. Some of them do it intentionally and directly: #3: "your whole tribe is partly responsible for this – from your mother on down", #6: "My boss, Kenneth J., seduced me and made me pregnant". And others unintentionally and indirectly: #2: "I can't bleed my family for any such amount of money". However, the most typical feeling is self-blame: #2: "I wish I could spare you the ordeal you have ahead". Some aspects among these letters must be highlighted. In letter number one, it is found the only example of a declarative #1: "I hereby bequeath". In this case, the felicity conditions would not be fulfilled since this is a suicide letter and not a legal will, in which a lawyer is necessary to actually change something through her words.

The woman who wrote letter number three states that she is committing suicide to liberate her husband from herself, but the word free is between quotation marks. Therefore, she does not believe that his freedom is going to start after her death. Perhaps, guilt is what is going to make him feel worse. She blames not just her husband but his whole family. There is no self-blame, she does not regret. Nevertheless, it seems a kind of revenge; by saying that she wants their satisfaction she is going to achieve another very different thing: blame.

The writer of letter number six must be also mentioned because she accuses directly several men of provoking her suicide. Firstly, her boss, Kenneth J. for making her pregnant and leaving her alone, without any help. She mentions more men who could have avoided this situation: her doctor, Dr. James R., Pete M. and Dr. Arnold W. There is no an apparent motive to mention all these names. Hence, the only reason seems to blame them, to make them feel guilty. Eventually, she mentions her father, her feelings of blame could make him feel guilty as well.

3.2. Virginia Woolf's So-Called Suicide Letters

A) Explaining Reasons

➤ Representatives:

- 71. #7: "I shan't recover this time"
- 72. #7: "I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate"
- 73. #7: "I am doing what seems the best thing to do"

- 74. #7: "I can't fight any longer"
- 75. #7: "I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work"
- 76. #7: "I can't even write this properly"
- 77. #7: "I can't read"
- 78. #7: "Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness"
- 79. #7: "I can't go on spoiling your life any longer"
- 80. #8: "I shall never get over this: and I am wasting your life"
- 81. #8: "It is this madness"
- 82. #8: "Nothing anyone says can persuade me"
- 83. #8: "You can work, and you will be much better without me"
- 84. #8: "I can't write this even, which shows I am right"
- 85. #9: "I am certain now that I am going mad again"
- 86. #9: "I am always hearing voices"
- 87. #9: "I shan't get over it now"
- 88. #9: "I can hardly think clearly anymore"
- 89. #9: "I have fought against it, but I can't any longer"

➤ Expressives:

- 90. #7: "I feel certain I am going mad again"
- 91. #7: "I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times"
- 92. #9: "I feel I have gone too far this time to come back again"
- 93. #9: "I feel he has so much to do that he will go on, better without me"

Main Findings on "Explaining Reasons"

Virginia Woolf's reasoning is very clear from the very beginning. She was diagnosed with mental problems, she suffered several breakdowns throughout her life and the people close to her knew about this. Hence, she does not have to give a context, people are aware of her situation. Virginia is afraid of suffering a depression again. She is older now and she thinks she cannot fight this time. How could she be so sure that she decided to make this fatal decision? As it is well known, Virginia was an internationally recognized writer. She had the love of her friends, her family and her husband. Notwithstanding, these words show that nothing was enough to overcome the trauma that she suffered during her childhood: she was raped by her half-brother. It is important to mention the personal pronoun we #7: "we can't go through [...]". It could be referred to her husband and her, or even more people, as her sister; she does not want to be an impediment in anybody's life. She also mentions that she cannot concentrate any longer because of the voices.

To explain the reasons for committing suicide, she says that this is #7: "the best thing to do", but the best thing for whom? She repeats throughout the three letters that she does not want to continue disturbing her husband. The formula *I can't* previously analysed in the ordinary women's letters is found many times for the same feeling; weakness against life: #7: "I can't fight any longer", #7: "I can't even write this properly", #7: "I can't go on spoiling your life any longer".

She dedicates most of her last words to thank her husband for the happiness that he had given her. It is appreciated that she is a professional writer, despite saying that she cannot write, she uses several tools to make the letter more literal and fluent. #7: "Nothing anyone says can persuade me": this statement implies that someone tried to persuade her before; her husband, her sister and psychiatrists most probably. She wants to make clear, as the rest of women, that she has made the best decision, she is willing to kill herself, and she is not going to regret her acts. Nonetheless, she writes three letters in total. If she was so sure, she would not have needed so many explanations.

The ninth letter, addressed to her sister Vanessa, must be compared with the previous ones. She starts explaining her reasons, firstly by a metaphor #9: "I feel I have gone too far this time to come back again". Suicide is seen as a trip; life is a journey, and death is the end of it; she cannot go back from there, it is #9: "too far". She emphasises the same idea written to Leonard, but in a different way: she changes from #7: "I feel certain" to #9: "I am certain"; from an expressive to a representative, i.e. from a feeling to a fact. As she is writing, she is more convinced of her decision. It is also important to mention the shift of addressee; when writing to her sister she is more honest. She changes from #7: "I begin to hear voices" to #9: "I am always hearing voices". She gives more information, as it is as a confession to her sister, Vanessa, who knows more than Leonard about this, since they spent their whole life together. In the letters to Leonard, she gives one version that differs from Vanessa. #9: "And I shan't get over it now": she does not mention *we* any longer, now it is *I*. She feels alone, although she has said the opposite to Leonard. Nevertheless, this reveals more things about the reasons of her suicide; not just her mental problems but loneliness. Life was not easy for her and she had gone through it alone. Vanessa had a family, Leonard had the press and she felt alone with her voices. She mentioned before that she is right, but in this letter she maintains the same idea of madness and fuzziness. She and Leonard left London to make her feel better and healthier; she tried, but nothing worked with her. Her last definitely words are #9: "I can't any longer". These words summarize a life of fighting. Life can seem easy if you belong to the upper class, if you have a partner, friends and family around you. Nevertheless, all those material things could not fulfil a broken heart, a mind full of questions without answers, a person who did not feel embedded in her country, her time or even her world.

B) Blaming

- Self-blame
 - Expressives:
 - 94. #9: "[You can't think how] I loved your letter"
 - 95. #9: "If I could I would tell you what you and the children have meant to me"
 - Directives:
 - 96. #8: "Please believe that"
- Other-blame
 - Representatives:

97. #7: "I know that I am spoiling your life: and without me you could work"
 98. #7: "If anybody could have saved me it would have been you"
 99. #7: "I can't go on spoiling your life any longer"
 100. #8: "I am wasting your life"
 101. #8: "You can work, and you will be much better without me"
 102. #8: "It was all due to you"

➤ Expressives:

103. #9: "I feel he has so much to do that he will go on, better without me"

Main Findings on "Blaming"

Virginia Woolf seems to be mainly blaming her husband throughout these letters: #7: "I know that I am spoiling your life [...] without me you could work", #7: "If anybody could have saved me it would have been you", #8: "I am wasting your life". She feels like a hindrance, just an obstacle in his life. This sensation had made her make this final decision. Even though she had overcome several depressions throughout her life, she had always found an aim to endure, but at that point she surrendered. It is a way to say: if I die you live. She also writes about the future by saying: #8: "You can work, and you will be much better without me". Leonard just wrote two novels, one about Virginia's family and another one about Virginia's death. How could he be better without her? This statement implies that Virginia believes that she was the reason why Leonard did not become a better writer. Vanessa's letter is a mere copy of the other ones, but talking in third person #9: "I feel he has so much to do that he will go on, better without me [...]". All these words must have made Leonard feel guilty. She barely dedicated a few words to her sister or even herself; they all talk about Leonard.

3.3. Comparing Ordinary Women's Letters and Virginia Woolf's Letters

On the one hand, the strategies used by all these women to explain their reasons to commit suicide are very variable. Nonetheless, the formula *I can't* is widely used by all of them since it conveys fear; the fear of living versus the fear of dying. Fear of living wins, as they actually killed themselves. In contrast, Virginia uses different stylistic mechanisms to express this fear, confirming that she does not belong to the same era as the rest of them. It is remarkable how Virginia contradicts herself at some points by saying that she is #7: "going mad" but she ensures she is #8: "right". It seems as she was a different person, but it is just an evolution. She was the writer, the narrator, and the main character of these last pieces of literature at the same time. She develops and changes throughout the progress of her last writings.

On the other hand, the pattern of ordinary women created in this study demonstrates that one of the main topics is *blame*, of both types; own-blame, and other-blame. However, Virginia Woolf's suicide letters were apparently written to avoid her husband feeling guilty.

From a psychological perspective, Anita⁵ and Virginia could be compared because of their similar reasons and mental situation. Linguistically speaking, their mechanisms are quite contrasting. Anita says clearly that madness is the reason of her decision, and she is very decided to do it, she just makes a list and implements her plan. Nonetheless, Virginia writes three letters explaining the same ideas three times. If someone is completely purposeful to do something, she would not need many explanations, as most of these ordinary women demonstrate.

Anonymous A, the writer of letter number two, was the same age as Virginia. She writes a very long letter that could be correlated to the three ones written by Virginia. Nevertheless, Anonymous A addresses many people, not just her husband. She explains her difficult situation, even though the basis of her final decision is the same as Virginia; *I can't*.

Letter number three shows the opposite view to Virginia by saying #3: "My mind was never more clear". It is also remarkable the metaphor used by this woman. Virginia, being a genius of literature, does not use many literary devices as she did during her career.

Letter number four is addressed to Anonymous C's husband, but exactly on the other way around; she blames him for her suicide instead of saying how happy he made her feel, as Virginia does. After all, the intention is the same; to make their husbands free. The difference is that Anonymous C clearly wants him to feel guilty, while Virginia apparently wants to liberate him from this feeling, but she most probably achieved the opposite.

In letter number five, loneliness is indicated as the main reason. Loneliness could also be a reason for Virginia because, despite the fact that her husband was alive, he was so focused on his work that she even preferred to die instead of talking to him about her problem. In both cases, loneliness is caused due to the lack of concern of their husbands; in the case of Louise it is a physical loss, but in Virginia's case this loss is more transcendental. Neither of them could advance in such situation.

The most surprising aspect of letter number six is *regret*. Drawing on the postscript, it is understood that she finally committed suicide by accident. Both cases, despite seeming very distant, have things in common. Elizabeth's reason to commit suicide was fear because all these men left her alone. Virginia was raped by her half-brother and this changed her life completely, causing her all those mental problems, and he was most probably in her mind while making this final decision (DeSalvo 1989).

4. Conclusions and implications

This study has compared two types of suicide letters: those written by six ordinary women and those written by the English writer Virginia Woolf. Throughout the language analysis, the results prove clear differences between the emotions and thoughts that normally push women to commit suicide and the ones which Virginia Woolf wrote. As the analysis reveals, the most typical speech acts found in female suicide letters were "explaining reasons" to commit suicide and "blaming" either other people or oneself. The most used language construction across the two sets of data is the formula *I can't* and the most frequently utilized verb is *to be* in first person singular. Verbs such as *to wish*, *to live*, *to think* and *to*

⁵ Letter number 2 included, like the rest, in the appendix.

know are also widely used. In all the letters, women's reasons for committing suicide are given from the very beginning.

Notwithstanding, Virginia Woolf's letters do not follow the general linguistic pattern of typical female suicide letters. The main differences between both groups are the clear reasoning that characterizes Virginia Woolf and how it is mainly conveyed through expressives; stating her feelings. The addressee is also important in the author's letters, since the three of them are basically addressed to her husband. The credibility of facts also varies since Virginia pretends to be sure, and she perfectly knows how to use language to convince the reader through "representatives". The rest of the women try to seem sure, but language reveals different hypotheses.

Drawing a pattern of suicide letters is a difficult task, mainly due to the lack of data available. The sentimental value of these kinds of writings and the pain attached to them hinder families and addressees from making them available to a wider audience.

In conclusion, the classification of speech acts has helped to see a clear contrast between what these women wrote, and what they actually wanted to transmit. Through forensic linguistics, it has been proven that they are real suicide letters since they fulfil all the characteristics studied by the experts. All things considered, linguistic analysis is an elemental tool for the study of suicide letters because "Language always betrays us, tells the truth when we want to lie, and dissolves into formlessness when we would most like to be precise" (Winterson 100).

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Andrea Martínez Celis holds a BA degree in English Studies and a master's degree in English Linguistics from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid and has focused her academic career on the application of linguistic perspectives to literary data. During her Bachelor studies, she spent six months as an Erasmus student at University of Sussex, Brighton, where she became interested in the topic of forensic linguistics and, more specifically, on the analysis of suicide letters. Following her works in this field, she carried out a linguistic analysis on Virginia Woolf's suicide letters in her final year research project. Currently, switching to a new field of research, she is doing a PhD focused on the role of pragmatics in the internationalization of university.

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Appendix: Suicide Letters

LEGEND

- : Representatives
- : Expressives
- : Directives
- : Commissives
- : Declaratives

1. Ordinary Women

1. ANITA - DIVORCED FEMALE, AGE 37

To No-one and Everyone:

Because of a growing conviction that a hereditary insanity is manifesting itself beyond my control, I am taking this way out – before mere nuisance attacks and rages against others assume a more dangerous form.

Because I am an agnostic and believe funeral fanfare to be nonsense – I ask that it be forgotten. Instead, knowing there to be a marked shortage of cadavers for the medical profession, for which I have endless respect, I hereby bequeath 1) my body to medics for dissection; also 2) To Mark B. all personal effects – to be divided as whim decrees – with Dr. Lois J., L.A. and to each – a deep fondness and love. 3) To Joe A. the greatest devotion – the kind that “passeth all understanding.” 3a) And my life.

Anita R.

4) To my father, Vincent M., the sum of one dollar (\$1)

2. ANONYMOUS A - MARRIED FEMALE, AGE 59

Dear David,

After six weeks of streptomycin shots and a total of eleven weeks of rest in bed we have conclusive proof that the ulcers in my bronchial tubes have not healed. The short period of the streptomycin inhalations could not have brought on the results if the ulceration had even partially healed. To try further would mean many more months of bed rest – more shots and inhalations – I can't remain at the hospital for the winter months and a prolonged stay at a rest home is out of the question. I did some figuring – the weekly rate there – the amount of streptomycin for shots and inhalations plus the doctor's weekly visits would total to over \$200 a week – I can't bleed my family for any such amount of money, and that means that

as soon as the money I have in my checking account runs out I would have to return home – back to the same conditions which caused me to go downhill so steadily. **It's a vicious circle from which there seems no escape.** I could of course use up the money from the sale of our furnishings and silver as well as some I put aside for the furnishing of our home – but all it put together would be like a drop ion the bucket – besides **I am now convinced that my condition is too chronic and therefore a cure doubtful.**

All of a sudden all will and determination to fight on has left me. I have long ago prepared myself for the time when I reached the end of the trail. I feel calm and at peace and grateful that I can go to sleep painlessly. I feel justified in terminating a life which no longer holds any hope of having the essentials which make it worth living – I did desperately want to get well – I still had much to live for – hope for recovery – hope of a reunion with the children – work which I loved and which could have given me financial security and great satisfaction. But it was not to be – **I am defeated and exhausted physically and emotionally.**

Please tell the children that I loved them always and that my love has never faltered. **I grieve that I could not have had the joy of being close to our babies,** but that is no one's fault. Thank God they are well – **with my passing all menace to their wellbeing will have disappeared.**

I want you to know that I have a deep affection for you. I am deeply grateful for all your kindness. **I wish I could have made a happier life for you. It was mostly my fault, please forgive me.**

Please write to Fran and Tony and to Marilyn and Jim and tell them that my love and gratitude could not possibly be put into words. Their generosity, devotion, love and tact made it possible for me to accept their financial help over a long period of time. **I wish with all my heart that they might have been better rewarded** – All of you, my dear ones, I ask to keep my memory alive in your hearts – To live on in the hearts of our dear ones is all that I can conceive of immortality. Please think of me kindly. Remember that which was good and lovely in our relationship and **forgive me for the many mistakes I have made.** Now that it is all said I feel at peace.

I want Dr. B. to officiate at my funeral. I think Joe would like to have him with him at that time.

Dear David,

I am said that I must go just a few days before your birthday – but it so happened to pan out. **I see no good in incurring the expense and misery of the bronchoscopy. I wish I could spare you the ordeal you have ahead.** Try not to grieve. I ask all of you, my dear ones, not to mourn my passing. Be glad **I am at least free from the misery of the bronchoscopy. I wish I could spare you the ordeal you have ahead.** Try not to grieve. I ask all of you, my dear ones, not to mourn my passing. Be glad **I am at least free from the miseries and loneliness I have endured for so long** and that at last I'll have peace and rest...

3. ANONYMOUS C - MARRIED FEMALE, AGE 50

When a "man" doesn't know where to take his wife – then she isn't a wife any more –

I hope you will be "free" to take anyone any place and I'm sure you will not have any trouble as to places –

Please don't tell my mother the truth – your whole tribe is partly responsible for this – from your mother on down – hope they are satisfied.

4. LOUISE - WIDOWED FEMALE, AGE 52

(HER HUSBAND DIED THREE MONTHS BEFORE)

Please tell Ron's folks I love them very much but my heart breaks when I see or hear from them. Also all our friends especially Irene and Charles and Ella I love them also. Forgive me for not seeing them.

Everyone seems so happy and I am so alone. Amy. I wanted to visit you but I am going around in a dream. Alice I wanted to help you paint but how could I with a broken heart. And my head aches so much any more my nerves are ready to break and what would happen if they did.

You will say I am crazy and I can't go on this way just half living.

I loved this house once but now it is so full of memories I can't stay here. I have tried to think of some way to go on but can't. Am so nervous all the time – I loved Ron too much but is that a sin, with him gone I have nothing. Oh I have the girls and family but they don't fill the vacant spot left in my heart ...

Xmas is coming I can't go on I'm afraid I would break down. I've thought of this so many times. I love every one but I can't be one of you any more. Please think kindly of me and forgive me. I only hope this is fatal then I can rest and no more trouble to any one. Do with Lisa what's best I know she has been a lot of worry to mama and I'm sorry. I tried to keep the yard up that seemed to be the only comfort I had. I loved it but that wasn't anything. I've lost every thing so why go on. I worshipped Ron and when he went I lost my whole world and everything.

I'm so tired and lonely.

There goes a siren. Oh how can I stand being left. I need to go to a Dr. but I am afraid. I'm so cold.

Mother Love, Louise

5. ANONYMOUS B - DIVORCED FEMALE, AGE 61

You cops will want to know why I did it, well, just let us say that I lived 61 years too many.

People have always put obstacles in my way. One of the great ones is leaving this world when you want to and have nothing to live for.

I am not insane. My mind was never more clear. It has been a long day. The motor got so hot it would not run so I just had to sit here and wait. The breaks were against me to the last.

The sun is leaving the hill now so hope nothing else happens

6. ELIZABETH - SINGLE FEMALE, AGE 31

My boss, Kenneth J., seduced me and made me pregnant. He refuses to help me. I had not had intercourse in two years. He says that I will have to suffer through it by myself.

Several people know about this – my doctor, Dr. James R., and Pete M., who works at Williams. Pete and I never had a love affair, although Kenneth would like to drag Pete into it. Also, Dr. Arnold W. knows about it.

I have always been such a good girl.

Daddy dear –

As much as it hurts me, I cannot make it this Friday. I may be in very serious trouble. I have always been a very good person, but it looks like I really got in a mess, through no real fault of my own.

I must have been born to suffer.

Love - Elizabeth

P.S. Call me if you can. When will Sally be back? I may need her desperately.

2. Virginia Woolf

7. To Leonard:

Monk's House, Rodmell, Sussex

18/03/1941

Tuesday

Dearest,

I feel certain 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.

8. To Leonard:

Monk's House, Rodmell, Sussex

28/03/1941

Dearest,

I want to tell you that you have given me complete happiness. No one could have done more than you have done. Please believe that.

But I know that I shall never get over this: and I am wasting your life. It is this madness. Nothing anyone says can persuade me. You can work, and you will be much better without me. You see I can't write this even, which shows I am right. All I want to say is that until this disease came on we were perfectly happy. It was all due to you. No one could have been so good as you have been, from the very first day till now. Everyone knows that.

V.

9. To Vanessa:

Monk's House, Rodmell, Sussex

23/03/1941

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.