

LINGUISTIC MANIFESTATIONS OF POWER IN SUICIDE NOTES: AN INVESTIGATION OF PERSONAL PRONOUNS

By Susan M. Roubidoux

The characteristics of the decision to commit suicide suggest that it is a powerful one: it is active, finite, and, studies have shown, actually improves the individual's mood upon making the decision (Barnes, Lawal-Solarin and Lester; Handelman; Lester). However, while there have been studies on the characteristics of powerful people and studies on suicide, existing studies have not linked power and suicide. One way to do this is to look at the ways in which power manifests in the language of individuals intending to commit suicide—most often found in the form of a suicide note. Stemming from the relative lack of linguistic research on suicide notes, this study asks how individuals who intend to commit suicide display linguistic manifestations of power in suicide notes and whether the linguistic manifestations of power found in the notes can be used as indicators of genuine intent to commit suicide. One common way that people have been found to linguistically demonstrate power is through various uses of personal pronouns (i.e. more first-person active pronouns than first-person passive pronouns, more singular pronouns than plural pronouns, and more exclusive than inclusive pronouns). Thus, the first phase of the study, based on the hypothesis that those intending to commit suicide are empowered by their decision and demonstrate such power in their suicide notes through their heightened use of first-person active pronouns and decreased use of inclusive pronouns, examines both the presence and functionality of first/third and singular/plural personal pronouns. The second phase of the study, based on the hypothesis that linguistic manifestations of power provide patterns that could become indicators of genuine intent to commit suicide, compares the linguistic manifestations of power through the use of pronouns in suicide notes of completed suicides to the linguistic manifestations of power in simulated suicide notes to determine if the various use of personal pronouns may be indicators of genuine suicidal intent. By connecting the established psychological studies of powerful personality traits and the established linguistic studies of language and power, this study opens up a previously unstudied area of suicide notes, benefiting not only the study of suicide prediction and prevention, but also adding to the study of language and power.

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Introduction

The decision to commit suicide is a powerful one. The characteristics are similar to those seen in other situations of power: it is an active decision in that it requires the decision makers to act on their desires, not just passively let something happen. The decision, for those with the genuine intent to successfully carry out their intended actions, is also finite. It is not something they can decide to try to see what happens. Studies have shown that the decision to commit suicide actually improves the individual's mood upon making up their mind to take their own life (Barnes, Lawal-Solarin and Lester; Handelman; Lester). However, while previous studies have outlined the characteristics of powerful people (by looking at the language use of people in powerful positions) and other studies have analyzed many different aspects of suicide, existing studies have not yet linked power and suicide.

Studies about linguistic manifestations of power have revealed many ways in which speakers and writers can manipulate language for purposes of influencing their audience or demonstrating and/or maintaining their power. Many previous studies on the linguistic manifestations of power have focused on one common feature: the use of personal pronouns. There are two ways in which pronouns can show power. Powell and Yu both show how the use of active pronouns (i.e. the subjective forms of *I*, *we*) over the use of passive pronouns (i.e. the objective forms of *me*, *us*) demonstrates power. They also explore the functionality of the first-person plural pronoun and show the power implications of inclusive, imposing-inclusive, and exclusive use of *we* and *us* (exclusive and imposing inclusive forms being more powerful than inclusive forms because they set

the writer or speaker apart from the recipient). These studies and their findings have not been explicitly linked to the act of suicide. When pronouns have been discussed in connection with suicide, researchers have returned contradictory and non-functionality-based results; i.e., the studies do not connect pronoun use with the power associated with suicide.

Because many studies of powerful people look at how they use language, one way to link power and suicide is to look at the ways in which power manifests in the language of individuals intending to commit suicide. This language can be found in the form of suicide notes. Stemming from the relative lack of linguistic research on suicide notes, this study analyzes two corpora of suicide notes: a corpus of 60 genuine suicide notes gathered from the 1957 study by Shneidman and Farberow and from the Forensic Linguistic Institute and the corpus of 33 simulated suicide notes from Shneidman and Farberow. (The simulated notes were commissioned by Shneidman and Farberow to be written by non-suicidal men in the same socio-economic context as the authors of their genuine notes.) Specifically, the present study investigates the following questions: In what ways do people who have a genuine intent to commit suicide use pronouns to demonstrate power? Can the functions of pronouns be used as indicators of genuine intent to commit suicide?

Based on previous findings of linguistic manifestations of power and of suicide, this study first hypothesizes that those with a genuine intent to commit suicide will use more first-person active pronouns (*I, we*) than first-person passive pronouns (*me, us*), more singular pronouns (*I, me*) than plural pronouns (*we, us*), and more exclusive or

imposing-inclusive forms (*we, us*) than inclusive forms (*we, us*) in their suicide notes. Because the English language does not have distinct words for each type of pronoun, intended meaning and context are used to determine which form of the personal pronoun is being used.

The second part of this study hypothesizes that the functional uses of pronouns can be used as indicators of genuine intent to commit suicide. In particular, this study hypothesizes that the genuine suicide notes will have fewer instances of passive first-person pronouns and more instances of exclusive first-person plural pronouns than the simulated suicide notes, making them potential indicators of genuine intent to commit suicide.

In the literature review section, this paper first examines both psychological studies of powerful personalities and language and the use of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to uncover linguistic manifestations of power, focusing on previous research on the functionality of personal pronouns in relation to power; then, the literature review looks at previous studies of language in suicide notes. The methodology section outlines corpus analysis as a method of study and also describes the corpora being analyzed in this study. The data and discussion section presents the data and discusses the findings, first discussing the findings of the genuine notes and then discussing the findings of the simulated notes. Finally, the conclusion section ties the current findings back to previous studies of suicide notes and discusses the implications of the findings.

Review of Literature

While the study of suicide is not new, the study of suicide notes is a relatively young area of research. The one aspect of suicide notes that is rarely disputed is that they are often the last glimpse into the mind of a suicide completer: solving the mystery of the significance and underlying meanings of suicide notes could potentially open doors in suicide prediction and prevention. This study hypothesizes that those intending to commit suicide display linguistic manifestations of power in their suicide notes and that there are linguistic manifestations of power that appear more often in notes of completed suicide (versus in simulated suicide notes) that can be used as indicators of genuine intent to commit suicide. The present study draws on previous studies of language and power and on studies performed on suicide notes, both of which are described more fully below.

Power and Language

Linking language use and language style with power has been a common topic of study in areas other than the study of suicide, specifically in psychological approaches that look at the personality traits of leaders (i.e. powerful personalities and how these personalities use language) and linguistic approaches that look at how power is manifested in texts (spoken or written). These studies have shed light on the use of power as it is connected to the personalities of the people involved.

In order to relate these characteristics to language use, Hermann outlines how leaders (i.e. powerful people) use language to express their personality in “Assessing Leadership Style” (2003) and Weintraub outlines his studies of language use in “Verbal

Behavior and Personality Assessment” , where they show how different personality types use different grammatical structures to express power. Based on studies of the language of powerful people, Hermann and Weintraub have demonstrated that linguistic manifestations of power include the following examples:

Active and Passive Verbs. Active verbs are assertive. People who avoid use of active verbs are often inactive or helpless (Weintraub). Additionally, Hermann explains that people who need power propose forceful actions such as “a verbal threat, an accusation or a reprimand” (190).

Qualifiers. Qualifiers include “expressions of uncertainty... modifiers that weaken statements without adding information... and phrases that contribute a sense of vagueness or looseness to a statement” (Weintraub 143). Examples include *some, sometimes, occasionally, I think, I guess, ought, must, and possibly*. Studies suggest that qualifier use increases as anxiety increases and frequent use of qualifiers show indecisiveness and a lack of commitment. The use of few or no qualifiers offer a “dogmatic flavor to speech” (Weintraub 143).

Discourse Connectors. Discourse connectors include words such as *but, however,* and *nevertheless*. They show impulsivity, a difficulty of sticking with their decisions. Someone who uses many retractors would show less confident, less powerful traits than someone who does not use them.

Conjunctions. Conjunctions include *because, therefore, and since*. High frequency of conjunctions show an apologetic or rationalizing personality trait while low frequency of conjunctions display definite and firm personality traits (Weintraub).

Deictics and Referents. Deictics and referents are linguistic features of language that allow the listener/reader to understand what the speaker/writer is referencing. Examples include *here, there, yesterday, now, I, me, we, they, he, and she*. Specific referents looked at within Hermann's and Weintraub's studies of powerful personalities are first-person pronouns: *I, we, me, and us*. Grammatically, *me* is the "recipient of action" and "tends to be used most by passive speakers" (Weintraub 145). In other words, *I/we* are active personal pronouns and *me/us* are passive personal pronouns. Additionally, Hermann suggests other ways to interpret personal pronouns. High frequency of the subjective personal pronoun, for example, can indicate a show of self-confidence (as in "instigating an activity," inserting self as an "authority figure" or as the "recipient of a positive response from another person or group") (Hermann 194).

Furthermore, the differences between plural/singular first-person pronouns help identify group alliances or individuality. According to Weintraub, the frequent use of *I* (instead of *we*) shows a need to be shown as an individual and the frequent use of *we* (instead of *I*) shows a need to be shown as a representative of a group. Hermann explains further:

Leaders with high scores for in-group bias tend to see the world in *we* and *them* (friends and enemies) terms and to be quick to view others as challenging the status of the group. They are prone to perceive only the good aspects of their group and to deny or rationalize away any weaknesses (202).

Other characteristics of leaders with high in-group bias include using external scapegoats “as the cause for all of the group’s...problems” (Hermann 202). Pronoun use is the indicator as to which type of leader the speaker/writer is and to how they view others within and outside of the group to which they are referring.

From a linguistic perspective, researchers have similarly found particular linguistic markers to be linked to demonstrations of power. In this case, researchers have frequently focused on the systematic use of personal pronouns as manifestations of power. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a method used to locate linguistic manifestations of power, has helped researchers reveal which “structures, strategies or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events play a role” in the reproduction of power (van Dijk). CDA operates on the proposition that no language is neutral. Power, according to van Dijk, “involves *control*, namely by (members of) one group over (those of) other groups. Such control may pertain to *action* or *cognition*: that is, a powerful group may limit the freedom of action of others, but also influence their minds” (254). In other words, all language has underlying meaning within its particular context that relates back to the power (or lack of power) of those involved based on whose interest is being served through the language used.

Studies using CDA have found that the use of singular and plural personal pronouns may be more complicated than Weintraub indicated. Iñigo-Mora explains that “the scope of reference of pronouns can vary depending on the speaker’s purpose, and this turns out to be one of the major tools of persuasion used by politicians” (37). For example, Yu looks at how George W. Bush used pronouns in his March 18, 2003

televised ultimatum to Saddam Hussein. Yu discusses how Bush uses first-person pronouns (*we*, *I*, and *our*) more than 20 times in this speech, but focuses on his use of *we* and its various functions from a pragmatic viewpoint:

One is exclusive use which means the exclusion of the listener; the other is inclusive which covers the listener. That latter reduces the distance between the producer and the recipient and successfully makes the recipient feel amiable, equal and participant. However, sometimes the inclusive use may be used by the power elites...to impose their own will on others. (342)

Yu argues, since the speech was televised, it was addressed to the American people. Therefore, “the speech delivered from such a standpoint hinted that the decision of an ultimatum and even of military action against Iraq was not only made by Bush’s government, but by the people of the whole country” (342). In this instance, Bush “succeeded in transferring his own ideology to the people” and made it seem as though he and the army were “just the executor of the will of the Americans” (342). In this instance, Bush’s use of *we* is a powerful tool to help convey the exact message he wants to send; he used power to impose inclusion with his use of *we*.

Similarly, Powell examined the texts of Miami University President James Garland in response to a 1998 break-in and vandalism of the campus’ Center for Black Culture and Learning. Powell looks at Garland’s use of plural versus singular pronouns. The study finds that generally Garland uses plural first-person pronouns to create a shared position (27 times in the analyzed texts). The use of the singular first-person

pronoun “myself” is used in the statement: “These unfortunate episodes caught many of *us, myself* included, by surprise.” Powell argues that this use “situates Garland at the center of the ‘we’ that dominates the text, justifying his role as speaker for that identity” (447). The effects here “of these stylistic choices is that readers of Garland’s text have two options: either identify with the ‘we’ he constructs or assume an oppositional identity” (449) which, in this instance is the group responsible for the break-in and vandalism.

In both studies, then, power is manifested in the use of personal pronouns, specifically when leaders used the active first-person pronouns *I* and *we* in a functional way of imposing inclusion or specifying exclusion and creating a persuasive message (i.e. sending the message that the reader/listener is either part of that *we* or considered the “enemy” as defined in the text). Inigo-Mora further explains, “Exclusive ‘we’ represents a way of distancing, both from the hearer and from what the speaker is saying, and it is normally associated with power” (Inigo-Mora 34).e

Suicide Notes

While most of the current studies of suicide notes are psychological in nature, many do include the mention of or focus on language use in general—some of which even discuss the general use of pronouns. They do not, however, do so from a position of power. One such study of language in suicide notes has become a seminal component to the study of suicide and suicide notes. Shneidman and Farberow’s *Clues to Suicide* compares 33 genuine suicide notes and 33 simulated suicide notes to test the Discomfort-

Relief Quotient (DRQ), which compares how often people use words that signify discomfort, words that signify relief or neither. By looking at the various types of statements in the notes, Shneidman and Farberow found that the genuine notes tend to contain more thought units—a “discrete idea, regardless of number of words” (7)—in general than the simulated notes and that the genuine notes tend to have stronger discomfort emotions—illustrated by statements of “guilt, blame, tension, aggression and the like” (7)—than the simulated notes. Their study has raised many questions for further study of suicide notes and their corpora have become basis for future studies in various disciplines.

Edelman and Renshaw used the Shneidman and Farberow study as a basis for their Syntactic Language Computer Analysis (SLCA-III). This program uses “language markers” that measure eight different qualities: social perception (e.g. the person’s ability to perceive characteristics of objects, found in the use of proper nouns, pronouns and referents), sensation (e.g. perceptions of what is concrete and what is abstract), existence (e.g. what the person perceives to exist or not exist—refers to the “use or non-use of not”), motion (e.g. the classification of verbs used as either an action or a state), disposition (e.g. refers to verbs and whether they represent an assertion or condition—*I could* or *I would*), time (e.g. verb tense), symmetry (e.g. “the intentionality of language”) and definition (e.g. whether or not nouns and verbs are modified) in an attempt to create a profile of an individual who would write a suicide note. They concluded that suicidal individuals are likely to display an increased state of cognitive energy (106-7).

Looking at the study of suicide notes slightly differently, Leenaars et al. compared notes from completed suicides to notes from attempted suicides (instead of simulated suicide notes) and found no statistical differences. Handelman and Lester, however, did find statistical differences. The comparisons included the use of the word *you*; positive emotions (e.g. happy, good); words related to hearing (e.g. listen, heard), social themes (e.g. friend, us), time (e.g. day, hour), school (e.g. student, class), religion (e.g. church, God), the metaphysical (e.g. coffin, heaven), and inclusion (e.g. with, include); references to people (e.g. specific names); and the future tense (103). The results of this study show that suicide completers tend to use fewer words of inclusion and fewer references to metaphysical concepts, but more words relating to positive emotions in this study. There were no significant differences in the other aspects studied. Additionally, Stirrman and Pennebaker did not find a significant difference in the use of positive and negative emotions in suicidal and non-suicidal poets and Baddeley, Daniel and Pennebaker found an increase in negative emotion words in Henry Hellyer's writings in the years leading up to his suicide. Similarly, Neuringer found greater instances of self-loathing (e.g. "describing themselves as less valuable, more passive and weaker than other people" (102)).

Taking into consideration some of the downfalls of studying suicide notes (the brevity and lack of a control group, for example), some researchers have taken a different route. Researchers such as Barnes, Lawal-Solarin and Lester have looked at the evolution of language use in writings that occur in a longer period of time prior to the suicide to try to determine patterns in language use and have found that "the proportion

of negative emotion words declined...and the proportion of question marks increased” in the 23 letters over the period of 24 months to 15 days before the suicide (674). Similarly, Stirman and Pennebaker studied the poetry of suicidal and non-suicidal poets using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) text analysis program. They found that suicidal poets tended to use more first-person singular self-references (e.g. *I, me*) and fewer first-person plural references (e.g. *we, us*), indicating an isolation or lack of social relationships.

While these studies have been extensive and varied in terms of their general findings related to pronoun use, Tuckman & Ziegler (also using the Shneidman and Farberow notes) studied the use of referential pronouns (self, self-other, and other) in relation to social maturity, hypothesizing that those with a genuine intent to commit suicide will “reflect social immaturity: i.e., a greater emphasis on self-reference than on other-reference pronouns” (140). However, their findings revealed no difference in this type of pronoun use between the genuine and simulated suicide notes. While these results provide the most insight into the use of pronouns in suicidal writing thus far, they do not provide an analysis of how the words were used in context and what that might tell us about a person with a genuine intent to commit suicide.

Thus, even when previous psychological studies have examined language use in suicide notes, they have primarily focused on the emotions and psychodynamics expressed therein. Additionally, while some have even looked at the use of personal pronouns, they have not done so from a functional linguistic perspective. Since studies in both linguistics and psychology have linked powerful personalities with the linguistic use

of personal pronouns, further linguistic study of these markers of power and how they are used in suicide notes can provide even more insight into theories of suicide. Therefore, the present study looks further than a word count of the different types of personal pronouns and focuses on the pronouns' functionality within the texts. Since suicide is a powerful act, this study hypothesizes that people with a genuine intent to commit suicide exhibit their power by using more first-person active pronouns than first-person passive pronouns and fewer inclusive first-person plural pronouns than first-person imposing inclusive or exclusive pronouns. The study further hypothesizes that simulated notes will have fewer active and more inclusive first-person pronouns than the genuine notes, thereby illustrating patterns common to a genuine intent to commit suicide. By connecting the established psychological studies of powerful personality traits and the established linguistic studies of language and power, this study expands upon a previously understudied area of suicide notes and contributes to the study of suicide prediction and prevention and to the study of language and power.

Methodology

In order to investigate how individuals who intend to commit suicide use pronouns to display linguistic manifestations of power in their suicide notes, this study will perform a corpus analysis on two separate corpora, which are structured compilations of texts—in this case, compilations of suicide notes. The first part of the corpus analysis will focus on the writers' use of first-person pronouns and how they function (i.e. inclusion versus exclusion) in a corpus of genuine suicide notes. Based on the findings of pronoun use and function in genuine suicide notes, these linguistic manifestations of power will be further compared against a corpus of simulated suicide notes to determine whether these instances of power are unique to those with a genuine intent to commit suicide.

Corpus Analysis

Corpus analysis allows the study of “naturally occurring texts” and allows researchers to explore how “speakers and writers exploit the resources of their language” (Biber 1). Furthermore, corpus analysis allows for studies to “focus on the language of a text or a group of speakers and writers” (2). Related to the present study, corpus analysis will allow for the exploration of patterns of personal pronoun use within many suicide notes as well as the comparison of many genuine notes to many simulated notes. This comparison of larger numbers of notes allows for the study of potential indicators of genuine suicidal intent in a wider range of texts than would be possible without corpus analysis.

Overall, according to Biber, Conrad and Reppen, “a corpus-based approach allows researchers to identify and analyze complex ‘association patterns’: the systematic ways in which linguistic features are used in association with other linguistic and non-linguistic features” (5); an example of this is how personal pronouns function in relation to other metalinguistic features of a text (such as content, context, purpose, audience, etc.). Basically, by using corpora, studies can “show that there are strong, systematic patterns in the way language is used” (Biber 233) and identify which features appear in particular socially-defined genres such as suicide notes. (Reppen).

The Corpora

The data used in this study consist of two corpora. The first corpus, Genuine Suicide Notes (GSN), is comprised of the 33 Shneidman and Farberow genuine notes and 27 notes from the Forensic Linguistics Institute. The Shneidman and Farberow notes, which can be found in Shneidman and Farberow’s *Clues to Suicide*, were collected from the files of the Office of the Coroner, Los Angeles County and narrowed down to “Caucasian, Protestant, native-born males between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-nine” (199). The Forensic Linguistics Institute suicide notes originally contained 119 notes written by men and women of all ages from around the world. The notes from the Forensic Linguistic Institute were narrowed to notes written by males in the United States, consistent with the existing and thus far often studied corpora of notes from Shneidman and Farberow. As a whole, the corpus consists of 60 notes for a total of 10255 words.

The second corpus consists of the Shneidman and Farberow simulated (SFS) notes that were written by males matched “*man-for-man*, with a genuine-note writer who was not only of a similar chronological age (within five years) but also of the same occupational level” (199). Therefore, this corpus consists of 33 notes and has a total of 2784 words. See Tables 1 and 2, below.

Table 1

Size and Variety of Corpora

Corpus	Total Texts	Total Words	Average Words/ Text	Longest Text	Shortest Text
GSN	60	10255	171	1771	6
SFS	33	2784	84	235	12

Table 2

Demographics of Writers

Corpus	Age	Gender	Location	Occupation
GSN	Teens-74	Male	United States	Not Specified
SFS	25-59	Male	Los Angeles County	Not Specified

When compiling a corpus, the size and variety of texts included must be considered. For example, when there are not enough items in a corpus, one text may have a larger than normal effect on the results of the study. Specifically, Reppen and Simpson-

Vlack explain that “there are many different ways to conceive of and justify representativeness” and Biber et al., explain that the corpus must be representative of the language it is meant to represent. Also important to note in this study, which uses only notes written by males, is how masculine and feminine language types affect the power representations of language. According to Nishimura, communication is established based on social power (or perceived social power). American culture often attributes this power to the masculine characteristics of language: “strong, aggressive, virile, and assertive.” Nishimura also explains, that we often associate assertive strength with masculine language and it “translates into a code of control or dominance” within communicative events.” In other words, it is important to remember in studies of suicide notes, because language, power and gender are intimately connected, masculine and feminine language types express power differently. While outwardly it may seem to be a limitation, only using notes written by males provides consistency and comparability with previous studies on language in suicide notes that use the Shneidman and Farberow corpora and can serve as a basis for studying the linguistic manifestations of power through the use of personal pronouns in a wider set of data or as a base-line or comparison of corpora with similarly narrowed demographics. Future studies may also want to consider how the displays of power in these notes compare to masculine displays of power in general language use.

Two other potential limitations of this study relate to the issue of studying suicide notes in general. In the case of this study, these corpora are not representative of all males who commit suicide since it covers only a specific age group of males in the United

States and because not all suicide completers leave a note. Another limitation is the size difference between the two corpora; ideally, corpora should contain balanced text samples. However, while these two issues do provide limitations to the study and the interpretation of the results, they cannot presently be overcome due to the sensitive nature of suicide notes. It is recommended that future studies increase the size of both corpora to achieve more generalizability and to increase the simulated note corpus to achieve better balance. However, despite these limitations, researchers have begun acknowledging the value of analyzing specialized corpora as they can lead to further understanding of these genres.

In order to analyze the data, this study will use the AntConc concordancing program (Anthony), which makes word lists, performs word counts, and more easily locates words for easier analysis of each features' functionality within the electronic texts.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This study hypothesizes that those with a genuine intent to commit suicide will use more first-person active pronouns (*I, we*) than first-person passive pronouns (*me, us*) and that those with a genuine intent to commit suicide also will use more exclusive personal pronouns (*we, us*) than inclusive personal pronouns (*we, us*). The first step of this study looks at the frequency and function (in the form of requests, commands and apologies) of the first-person singular pronouns and then looks at the frequency and function (in the form of inclusive, imposing-inclusive or exclusive) of first-person plural pronouns. In order to determine the functionality of the inclusive and exclusive pronouns, the writer's intended message will be examined through the use of context. The next part of the study analyzes the frequency and function of the same areas in the simulated notes. Finally, the study compares the findings to determine if any of the linguistic patterns can be used as indicators of genuine intent to commit suicide.

Genuine Suicide Notes

Before analyzing the functionality of the personal pronouns within the text (in terms of active/passive, singular/plural and inclusive/imposing-inclusive/exclusive choices), it is important to gain an overview of the frequency of the pronouns within the corpus. The AntConc software was used to count the frequency of the first-person singular and plural pronouns in the GSN corpus as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Frequency of First-person Pronouns in GSN per 100 words

Corpus	I	Me	We	Us
GSN	5.46 (560)	1.29 (132)	0.39 (40)	0.05 (5)

Note: Normed frequency (here and throughout study unless otherwise noted) is calculated with the following formula: (raw feature count / total corpus word count) x 100. Numbers in parenthesis depict the raw frequency.

Active and passive forms.

Linguistically, *I/we* are subjective pronouns, meaning they do the action, and *me/us* are the objective pronouns meaning the action is done to them. Weintraub and Hermann refer to *I* and *we* as the active personal pronoun showing that, according to their psychological assessment of powerful personalities, people who use more *I* and *we* tend to be more powerful than the those who use the passive forms (*me, us*). By looking at how the writers of suicide notes use and balance their active versus passive pronouns, we can see how they exhibit linguistic manifestations of power (e.g. how they handle the interests of those involved).

Of the 60 notes in the GSN corpus, all but 16 contain the word *me* at least one time. This number alone does not illustrate the full picture, however. Looking more internally at the notes shows us a clearer picture of how the personal pronouns occur within this corpus. The word *I* appears in the GSN corpus at a frequency of 5.46 times per 100 words while *me* occurs at a frequency of 1.29 times per 100 words. Every time the word *me* occurs in a note, the note contains more instances of the word *I*. The active/passive breakdown of the plural first-person pronouns mirrors the breakdown of

the singular: In GSN *I* occurs 4.23 times more often than *me*; similarly *we* occurs 7.80 times more often than *us*.

In order to see how the different forms of the personal pronoun function, we need to examine the writing more closely. Because the singular forms are more prevalent, this section will focus on the singular forms of *I* and *me*. Looking first at four examples that do not use the word *me* (Table 4), we can see many similar linguistic features of the notes stemming from the tone set up by the choice of the active first-person pronoun.

The first common feature in all of these notes is that all of the authors write in an active voice as seen by their use of pronouns. They *wish, own, love, want, are sorry, are tired, are going, have been feeling, and might be able*. Through the use of the active personal pronouns and the lack of passive personal pronouns the sentences are assertive, therefore making the authors active (and powerful) not only in their writing but in their declaration of their decisions, reasoning and apologies (where they appear). The writers do not express situations where others do, or need to do, actions to them (i.e. the use of a passive voice, and, therefore, according to studies on powerful individuals, a demonstration of passive personalities).

Table 4

Sample Genuine Notes that Do Not Contain Me

Note	Text
GSN 3	<p>I wish for everything I own to go to my Daughter. [Signature, First Name, Last Name.]</p> <p>[Name] & [Name] I'm sorry for everything I love you and the grandkids so very much</p> <p>Dad</p>
GSN 11	<p>To whom it may concern:</p> <p>This is my last writing as I am tired of being depressed. Please make sure my kids know I love them. I know this is the coward way out but I can't take the pain any longer Call my grandma, [Name] at [Number] and let her know I love her too. Tell her its not her fault, I wanted to see my mom.</p> <p>To everyone else FUCK YOU.</p>
GSN 30	<p>Dearest Mary. This is to say goodbye. I have not told you because I did not want you to worry, but I have been feeling bad for 2 years, with my heart. I knew that if I went to a doctor I would lose my job. I think this is best for all concerned. I am in the car in the garage. Call the police but please don't come out there. I love you very much darling. Goodbye, Bill</p>
GSN 60	<p>Good by Kid. You couldn't help it. Tell that brother of yours, When he gets where I'm going. I hope I'm foreman down there. I might be able to do something for him.</p> <p>Bill</p>

Note: All notes appear as they do in their original sources. The Forensic Linguistics Institute indicates names of people and places with the form of the original in brackets. Shneidman and Farberow changed the names of people and places.

Table 5

Sample Genuine Notes that Do Contain *Me*

Note	Text
GSN 9	<p>I have acted completely alone in all actions committed.</p> <p>I knew the risk of this happening and believe taking myself out of the game is the best way to move everyone as quickly as possible past all events. All anger should be directed towards me.</p>
GSN 15	<p>[Name],</p> <p>I am so sorry for this. I feel I just can't go on. I have always tried to do the right thing but where there was once great pride now its gone. I love you and the children so much. I just can't be any good to you or myself. The pain is overwhelming.</p> <p>Please try to forgive me.</p> <p>[Name] [Initial. Name Surname].</p>
GSN 35	<p>Dear Mary. You have been the best wife a man could want and I still love you after fifteen years.</p> <p>Don't think too badly of me for taking this way out but I can't take much more pain and sickness also I may get to much pain or so weak that I can't go this easy way.</p> <p>With all my love forever—</p> <p>Bill</p>
GSN 44	<p>Dearest Mary—I just can't go on without Tom, John and you. I hope some day you can forgive me. I know you will find someone better for you and the boys. God bless you all.</p> <p>Love, Bill</p>

Of the letters in the GSN corpus that contain the word *me* there are still more instances of the word *I* (i.e. use of active pronouns). Just because a letter may use the word *me*, therefore, does not mean that the overall voice of the letter is passive (see Table 5 for examples of letters that do use the word *me*). In these examples, similar to the notes in Table 4, the writers use active voice for most of the statements in the notes. Written this way, the writers also present themselves as people who *have acted, knew, are sorry, feel, can't go, love, can't be, can't take, may get, and hope*. They are people who are not afraid to articulate themselves as doing the action being expressed instead of a more passive communication (e.g. "I love you" versus "You have been loved").

There is one instance in each note in Table 5 where the writer chose the passive form of the first-person pronoun (*me*). In each instance, the writers of the notes gave up the power associated with the active voice. For example GSN 9 contains the line, "All anger should be directed towards me." Here, the writer has taken a very passive approach to the anger associated with his decision. An active response would be one that makes him directly accountable for the anger, not a passive receiver of it (e.g. I take responsibility for all anger).

The use of the passive pronoun in GSN 15, "Please try to forgive me," and GSN 44, "I hope someday you can forgive me," functions as the speech act of apology. Instead of the writers directly apologizing for their decision to commit suicide, they put the responsibility of forgiveness on the letter's recipient and make the recipients the actors, not the receivers.

The final instance of the passive personal pronoun in the examples provided is “Don’t think too badly of me for taking this way out...” (GSN 35). Again, the writer is putting the responsibility of how the recipient should think about him on the recipient, not asserting how he feels he should be regarded. All of these instances show a shift in voice from one of assertion to one of passive acceptance, momentarily shifting the power from the writer to the reader, by requiring the reader to complete an action or hold a specific belief for the writer’s wishes to be fulfilled. They all do, however, shift back to the active, powerful voice as seen in the letters that do not contain the passive first-person pronoun.

As seen in the examples in Table 4 and Table 5, the sentence types are also very similar in all eight letters. For example, most of the sentences are straightforward, declarative, short, and to the point, leaving little room for misunderstanding or disagreement. There is one difference between the two groups of letters, however, in terms of sentence structure. The groups have different ways of asking the recipient to do something, showing strong differences in the balance of power between the writer and the recipient with the choice of personal pronoun.

Each letter in Table 4 uses commands (either directly or indirectly). Direct commands include “Call my grandma,” and “Tell her it’s not her fault” (GSN 11), “Call the police...” (GSN 30) and “Tell that brother of yours...” (GSN 60). While it appears as a request because of the politeness of the form, the first line of GSN 3, “I wish for everything I own to go to my daughter,” is also a command. This is due to the context of the sentence and because of the formality surrounding it—there is no way to argue with

the requester, so it functions more as a command by default. Furthermore, the writer (here as well as those of the direct commands) has formulated this statement as a last will and testament, which produces a sense of authority.

All letters in Table 5 also have sections that ask the recipient to do something, but they are all related to the passive pronoun, making the speech acts sound more like requests than commands: “All anger should be directed towards me” (GSN 9), “Please try to forgive me” (GSN 15), “Don’t think too badly of me for taking this way out...” (GSN 35), and “I hope someday you can forgive me” (GSN 44). The passive form (also indicated by other words used in conjunction with the passive form of the pronoun: should, please, too badly, hope, etc.) of these statements makes the writer less authoritative and puts the power on the recipients to choose whether or not they want to complete the request. In the first example (GSN 9), the recipient of the letter has the option to direct his or her anger toward the letter writer. Had he instead written “I accept responsibility for all anger” or something similarly active and direct it would not matter what the recipient did with his or her anger, the writer has accepted it already. It is the same with the apologies (GSN 15 and GSN 44). If the writer had directly apologized, it would not matter if the recipients accepted the apology or not, the writer had done what he intended to do (i.e. apologize). As it is written, in order for the writers to get what they are requesting in a passive form, they need the recipients to comply and give them forgiveness, relegating the writer to a powerless position. Finally, the last request (GSN 35) asks the recipient to not think badly of the writer. Again, in order for the writer to get what he is requesting in this instance, he is relying on the recipient to give it to him,

giving the power to the recipient. In each of these examples, the note writer shifts from an active, powerful position of focusing on his own interests to a situation where he shifts the language to point at the interests of the receiver.

Table 6
Instances of *Me* as Apology in GSN

Note	Text
GSN 1	“Please forgive me all for taking my own life so early.”
GSN 11	“Forgive me”
GSN 15	“Please forgive me.”
GSN 32	“Forgive me—goodbye dear.”
GSN 32	“Tell my mother—sister I said God bless them all and forgive me— Goodbye darling and God bless you all.”
GSN 38	“please forgive me”
GSN 45	“I hope someday you can forgive me.”
GSN 49	“Mary my darling I know you did everything possible to avoid this, but please forgive me, as I think it was the only way out.”
GSN 50	“Honey, I hope you will be able to forgive me for being the way I was this AM.”
GSN 56	“God forgive me.”

Table 7

Instance of *I* as Apology in GSN

Note	Text
GSN 1	“I cannot tell you how sorry I am for ending my life the way I did.”
GSN 2	“I am sorry but some people like me have to drive to make a living if there were work permits I would not be facing so much time if any.”
GSN 3	“[Name] & [Name] I’m sorry for everything I love you and the grandkids very much”
GSN 10	“sorry to do this to my family & friends. I love you.”
GSN 13	“I’m sorry to let you down girls I love you”
GSN 14	“I’m sorry”
GSN 14	“I’m sorry”
GSN 15	“I’m so sorry for this.”
GSN 18	“Sorry for not being perfect enough for you you stupid cunt.”
GSN 18	“I’m sorry God, I wish I know a better answer than the religion I am now.”
GSN 19	“I apologize for what we have done to you.”
GSN 25	“I’m sorry it had to end this way but it was my fate.”
GSN 25	“I’m painfully sorry you all had to deal with this but I couldn’t deal with it.”
GSN 37	“Dear Mother and Mary, I am sorry to tell you this but Jo told you that I was drinking again.”
GSN 40	“I’m sorry for all the trouble Ive caused you.”

GSN 41	“This is only a sample of how sorry I am.”
GSN 50	“Sorry to end things this way now to you—I wish you the best of everything.”
GSN 51	“This is not an easy thing I’m about to do, but when a person makes a few mistakes and later tried to say in his own small way with a small vocabulary that he is sorry for what has happened and promises to remember what has happened and will try to make the old Bill come home again...”
GSN 51	“I’m sorry honey, but please believe me this is the only way out for me as long as you feel the way you do.”
GSN 53	“I am very sorry I got you in the shape we are in but I did...”
GSN 54	“Im sorry for everything I did please don’t be angry at me my sweet wife.”
GSN 55	“Sorry it had to be this way.”
GSN 56	“Sorry it had to be this way.”
GSN 57	“I am sorry this is the only way I know.”
GSN 59	“I am very sorry but it is just too hard to breathe.”

The analysis of this sampling of letters has uncovered a dichotomy in the role of apology in relation to the active or passive pronoun and the manifestation of power in suicide notes. Illustrated in Table 6 are the instances of the passive pronoun *me* as apology in in GSN (10 total, 0.10 times per 100 words) and in Table 7 the instances the active pronoun *I* as apology in GSN (26 total, 0.25 times per 100 words). Within this

corpus, the suicide note writer is two and a half times more likely to assert an apology using the active pronoun (a powerful voice) than the passive pronoun (a passive voice). It is also interesting to note that even though notes GSN 1, GSN 15, GSN 50 and GSN 56 display passive requests for forgiveness, they also contain active apologies as well, downplaying the role of the passive apology examples in these notes. For example, while GSN 1 contains three apologies, two of them use the passive pronoun: "Please forgive me all for taking my own life so early," and "Forgive me." In this case, the apology with the active pronoun ("I cannot tell you how sorry I am for ending my life the way I did") appears first in the note and the other two function as a follow up to the active apology. Furthermore, the lines between the apologies, leading up to the uses of the passive pronouns are filled with strong active statements ("I am finally at rest..." "I have reached out..." "I believe..." "I did..." "I am..." "I know..." "I love..."). Because of the strong, active pronoun use between the instances of the passive pronoun use, the note does not have an overall passive tone, lending further strength and power to the writer, who is overall focused on his interests, actions, emotions and decisions, not those of the note's recipient.

Overall, in the GSN corpus, suicide note writers with a genuine intent to commit suicide are more likely to use the active personal pronouns *I/we* than the passive personal pronouns *me/us*. This is illustrated through the writers' greater use of active pronouns than passive pronouns. This sets up the writer as being an active participant in not only his writing of his final words but also in his declaration of decisions and commands and his ownership of responsibility for his actions. Even when there are occurrences of

passive pronouns in the notes, the writers still articulate themselves actively in other aspects of their letters.

Perhaps the most illustrative of the differences in active and passive pronoun choice are how they occur within apologies in the notes. Twenty-six of the note writers included at least one apology in their note. Eighteen writers chose to use strictly active pronouns in the apology, giving them control of the apology regardless of what the recipient of the letter chose to do, a very powerful action. Four of the note writers included more than one apology and used both the active and passive pronouns in the apologies, shifting the control of the apology between himself and his recipient, consequently shifting the power off of himself in parts of his note and allowing the reader to decide whether or not to participate in his last wishes and comply with his requests. Finally, four of the note writers used strictly passive pronouns for their apologies, but still were able to include more active pronoun choices in other parts of their notes.

Singular and plural personal pronouns.

According to structural linguists, singular pronouns refer to one person and plural pronouns refer to more than one person; however, Weintraub (2003) and Hermann (2003) also note that those who tend to use more singular first-person pronouns than plural first-person pronouns want to set themselves apart by standing out as individuals, not as part of a group. They view this use as a demonstration of individuality, a powerful trait. In the corpus, 45 writers use only singular first-person pronouns (*I/me*), which situates them as individuals, not as part of a group. Instead of referring to their spouses, children and themselves as a family, or a group, for example, the writers frame their letters and

thoughts as if they were alone by not saying “we” or “us”. In these cases, they are acting individually in making their decision, not placing blame on other members of their groups or even bringing them into the decision process at all, which gives them, again, a sense of authority.

However, the plural forms do appear in the remaining notes in the corpus. Fifteen notes contain the active first-person pronoun *we* (41 total instances, .40 times per 100 words) and 4 notes contain the passive first-person pronoun *us* (5 total instances, .05 times per 100 words). (See Table 8 a breakdown of occurrences in the notes.) Similar to the active/passive breakdown, any note that contains a plural form of the personal pronoun contains more instances of the singular, giving the writer an overall sense of individuality, independence, and, therefore, power.

Table 8

We/Us Occurrences in GSN

Note	WE	US
GSN 1	0.16 (1)	0 (0)
GSN 2	0.11 (1)	0 (0)
GSN 5	1.89 (2)	0.94 (1)
GSN 17	0.53 (3)	0.18 (1)
GSN 19	1.19 (21)	0.11 (2)
GSN 22	0.27 (1)	0 (0)
GSN 23	2.27 (1)	0 (0)
GSN 24	0.38 (1)	0 (0)
GSN 32	0.64 (1)	0 (0)
GSN 33	0.29 (1)	0.29 (1)
GSN 43	1.67 (3)	0 (0)
GSN 46	0.92 (1)	0 (0)
GSN 50	2.17 (3)	0 (0)
GSN 51	0.33 (1)	0 (0)
GSN 53	1.27 (1)	0 (0)

Note: Normed frequency here is calculated with the following formula: (raw feature count / total note word count) x 100. Numbers in parenthesis depict the raw frequency.

Inclusive and exclusive personal pronouns.

Perhaps even more illustrative of linguistic manifestations of power, however, are the ways in which the first-person plural pronouns are used. Just as the use of singular pronouns suggests independence and power for the recipient, the use of exclusive or imposing-inclusive pronouns also suggest that the note writer has power over the note's recipient because the note writer is situating himself in opposition to his intended recipient. Exclusive forms of personal pronouns exclude the listener or the reader while inclusive forms include the listener or writer. Imposing-inclusive forms of personal pronouns actually function similar to the exclusive forms; they include the listener or reader in a manner that forces them to be a part of the "included" group or to admit they are one of the outsiders or "enemies" as referred to in the context of what is being said or written.

This part of the study will examine the intended audience and purpose of the uses of *we* and *us* in the corpora to see which use is more prevalent, thereby determining if people with a genuine intent to commit suicide use the exclusive or imposing-inclusive form to assert power in their notes. Analysis consisted of looking at the context and the intended meaning of the note by examining the positionality of the writer (how he places himself within the situation presented in the note), the overall tone and the purpose of the letter (e.g. apology, blame, explanation, relationship development or deconstruction—often determined through the use of speech acts) in order to determine whether the overall purpose of the plural pronoun usage is inclusive or exclusive.

For the study of the first-person plural pronouns, a sub-corpus (Plural Pronoun Notes, PPN) will be used. Because of its exceptional length (1771 words), setting it apart from what is a “typical” length, GSN 19 was excluded from the sub-corpus. Therefore, to control for potential discrepancies based on the unusual text length by the one writer, PPN contains GSN 1, GSN 2, GSN 5, GSN 17, GSN 22, GSN 23, GSN 24, GSN 32, GSN 33, GSN 43, GSN 50, GSN 51 and GSN 53. The results show that of the 24 instances of *we/us* in the sub-corpus of notes that includes instances of these pronouns (Plural Pronoun Notes, PPN), 8 of them use the inclusive forms, 9 use imposing-inclusive form, 6 use the exclusive form, and one functions as an idiomatic expression, as seen in Table 9.

Table 9

Frequency of Plural Pronouns by Type

Corpus	Inclusive We/Us	Imposing-Inclusive We/Us	Exclusive We/Us
GSN	0.19 (8)	0.21 (9)	0.14 (6)

Note: Normed frequency here is calculated with the following formula: (raw feature count / total word count of PPN – here, 4229) x 100. Numbers in parenthesis depict the raw frequency.

Inclusive first-person plural pronouns.

Inclusive forms of the first-person plural pronoun do not depict power. As previously shown, people who use the inclusive first-person plural forms of *we/us* are aligning themselves with others in the referenced group, therefore not showing power in relation to those who are referenced in the note.

Table 10

All Instances of Inclusive *We/Us* in GSN

Note	Text
Inclusive <i>We</i>	
GSN 5	“We had so many good memories together as well as the tragedy with [Name].”
GSN 5	“I am filled with so much hate, hate toward myself hate toward God and unimaginable emptiness it seems like everytime we do something fun I think about how [Name] wasn’t here to share it with us and I go right back to anger.”
GSN 17	“For example when we’re back stage and the lights go out and the manic roar of the crowd begins., it doesn’t affect me the way in which it did for Freddie Mercury, who seemed to love, relish in the the love and adoration from the crowd which is something I totally admire and envy.”
GSN 32	“Honey I got you into this thing and it was no fault of yours—so I am taking the only way out and I leave everything which has all been acquired since we were married to you my darling wife—Mary Smith—and God Bless you Darling.”
GSN 33	“When we quarrel over other and younger men it was silly but you would have been hurt too.”
GSN 51	“As you know, like we’ve talked over before our situation, I’ll always love you with all my heart and soul.”
Inclusive <i>Us</i>	
GSN 5	“I am filled with so much hate, hate toward myself hate toward God and unimaginable emptiness it seems like everytime we do something fun I think about how [Name] wasn’t here to share it with us and I go right back to anger.”
GSN 17	“There’s good in all of us and I think I simply love people too much, so much that it makes me feel too fucking sad.”

The instances of *we/us* that exhibit the inclusive form show similarities in positionality and overall tone. In these instances, the writer has either directly addressed the letter to the person included in the referent *we* or indirectly with the use of *you* to reference the other member of the plural first-person pronoun. However, this can be the case in many of the letters, even the exclusive, so tone (which helps determine positionality) is a better indicator of how the pronoun is intended.

In GSN 5 and GSN 32, the inclusive *we* and *us* occurs when the writer uses positive language and emotions to describe the referenced relationship (i.e. a positive relationship). This is seen in several different ways: when the writer specifically directs his note to someone and referring to that person in the statement, when the writer evidences no animosity or other negative relationship characteristics and/or when the tone is overall neutral. The use of the inclusive *we* in each example demonstrates that, in the writer's viewpoint, neither person in the relationship (as referred to in the instance of the use of *we*) has power over the other.

For example, in GSN 5, the writer expresses frustration stemming from a situation: "the tragedy with [Name]". This frustration is not directed towards the letter's recipient, though—it instead shows an admiration for her. This admiration is apparent when the writer later says "I am not worthy of you, you are the perfect wife you deserve so much better." The writer also refers to hate: "I am filled with so much hate, hate toward myself towards God and unimaginable emptiness it seems like every time we do something fun I think about how [Name] wasn't here to share it with us and I go right back to anger." This hate, however, is not towards the recipient of the letter; it is more of

an explanation of how he is feeling. The letter contains no apology, blame or relationship building or deconstruction. It functions as an explanation of events, keeping both the writer and the recipient neutral in terms of the relationship, an indicator that the plural pronouns are inclusive. There are no indications in this letter of animosity in the relationship, more so the situation of what happened to their loved one, another indicator of an inclusive plural pronoun.

In GSN 32, there are similar instances of relationship building. The *we* in this instance, “I leave everything which has all been acquired since we were married to you my darling wife,” includes the recipient of the letter because it is depicting a fact that they were married, including both of them. Furthermore, there is no blame or ill emotion towards the letter’s recipient—again the letter functions as an explanation of why he made this decision and also serves as a means for him to blame himself.

Finally, GSN 51 also contains an inclusive *we*, but the overall tone of the letter is not as neutral as seen in the previous two examples. This letter is also addressed to the writer’s wife and he places himself in a situation of desperation and directs blame towards his wife (and others). The beginning of the second paragraph shows this when he says, “This is not an easy thing I’m about to do, but when a person makes a few mistakes and later tried to say in his own small way...” He is giving an explanation and then continuing into a justification of his choice. The end of the letter shows how he is making sure his wife is in good shape and asks for help in keeping his good name with his daughter. The *we* occurs at the beginning of the letter, “As you know, like we’ve talked over before our situation, I’ll always love you with all my heart and soul.” Similar to

GSN 33, this instance of *we* is also coupled with the use of the pronoun *you* in the same thought, showing that it is inclusive as well in this part of the letter even if other parts of the note show more of a power dynamic through the blame (“It could have been so simple if you had given me the help that you alone knew I needed” and “...and will try to make the old Bill come home again, and do his best to start all over again, and make things at home much better for all concerned, you still refuse to have me when you as well as I know that I can’t do it by myself”) and desperation (“...there’s only one think to do” and “This is not an easy thing I’m about to do...”). GSN 51 displays more of a power differential, putting the writer in power, even if the plural pronoun is inclusive.

GSN 17 and GSN 33 will be discussed later in the section because they also contain imposing-inclusive and/or exclusive forms of the plural pronoun.

Imposing-inclusive first-person plural pronouns.

Imposing-inclusive forms of personal pronouns function more similarly to the exclusive forms than the inclusive forms. They include the listener or reader in a manner that forces them to be a part of the “included” group or to admit they are one of the outsiders or “enemies” as referred to in the context of what is being said or written, thereby imposing power on the letter’s recipient.

Imposing-inclusive *we* and *us* occurs when the pronoun is inclusive, but it is an inclusion that commands the referents to accept that they are part of the group referred to or else they have to admit they are one of the “others” (i.e. a negative option) as indicated in the context of the reference.

Table 11

All Instances of Imposing-Inclusive *We/Us* in GSN

Note	Text
Imposing-Inclusive <i>We</i>	
GSN 1	“I love you all and will forever live within the memories we created.”
GSN 2	“that is what we spend millions of dollars building prisons for.”
GSN 17	“I appreciate the fact that I and we have affected and entertained a lot of people.”
GSN 46	“We would have had a happy life together if you had wanted to help yourself.”
GSN 50	“I honestly love you with all my heart and I though we would understand things together.”
GSN 50	“I really though we were the ‘happily married couple.’”
GSN 50	“I had hopes that you would forget your feelings and we would be happy together.”
GSN 53	“Everything is kind of mixed up with me and what I am doing is the only way out I guess I can think of no other I am very sorry I got you in the shape we are in but I did love you very much.”

There are no instances of imposing-inclusive us in GSN.

For example, in GSN 1, the note writer says, “I love you all and will forever live within the memories we created.” This is an imposing-inclusive use of the plural pronoun for several reasons. First of all, the writer addresses the note “To Whom It May Concern.” There is not a specific recipient of the letter, but just whoever may find it (the letter indicates that it was saved on his computer). Because of this, the reader may be

anyone. The purpose of this letter is to explain and apologize for his choice. He does not blame others. In fact, he says that he has forgiven those who have hurt him. Because of the purpose and the way the letter is written, it is very matter of fact, but it is also relationship building in the sense that he clearly states that he does not blame them or have any ill feelings toward them, however, other comments imply blame even if indirectly and also put those that he says he as forgiven in line with his decision. For example, he writes, “I am in love with a girl and I know that I am not good enough for her,” “My father had such high expectations for me and tried to give me every opportunity to improve upon myself. I let him down” and “I am tired of people always telling me that they do not like me,” so while he says that he has forgiven and does not cast blame, he chooses to write about the various reason why he has come to this decision.

When he uses *we*, he is pulling in everyone in his life that he says are not to blame but then goes on to say the things they have done to lead him to this decision. In this case, he is creating a situation that if the recipients of this note choose to be accepted into this *we* of people that he loves and that loves him, they are also choosing to be a part of the group that has hurt him and ultimately, in his eyes, led him to his decision to commit suicide. While the group is a positive group in the sense that it is not one that people would probably be ashamed to be associated with him, it still gives power to the note writer because they then are also simultaneously the people who hurt him. In this instance, he tells the readers that if they are with him, then they are also against him, leaving little or no room for the recipient to redeem him or herself in this situation.

The writer of GSN 2 also uses a more general reference in his use of *we*. He writes, “that is what we spend millions of dollars building prisons for.” In this case, the bulk of the letter refers to the problems associated with driving laws and drug sentencing, including how difficult the laws make it for people who have had drug convictions and lose their license to make a living because they cannot drive. Here, his statements about building prisons is ironic, because he is saying that the American public spends all this money to convict people who are driving without a license to make a living end up going to prison for “1-20 yrs.” The use of *we* is imposing inclusive, because without the context, it looks like it simply includes the American public. With the context, it shows that this inclusion has negative ramifications. Either people are going to be a part of the group trying to better the status quo or they are going to be part of the group that is not trying to better the status quo. The writer automatically places everyone in a group that is building prisons for the wrong reasons, the only way the readers would be able to exclude themselves from this grouping would be if they are actively trying to better the laws and situation for people like the writer. The writer places himself in a position of power in this instance because he effectively makes the recipients (also a general audience as noted by the salutation of “To whom this may concern”) decide where they fall—either as one of the “good” guys or one of the “bad” guys.

GSN 46 and GSN 50 also show power disparity, this time within a marriage. The writers exhibit this power through their details about the relationship, through blaming and through overall tone. The writer of GSN 46 addresses his letter directly to his wife. This letter, however, begins by immediately blaming her for a myriad of problems

including not taking care of herself and of loving someone else. The tone is adversarial indicating deep issues within the marriage. This leads up to the reason why the plural pronoun in this instance is imposing-inclusive. The writer says, “We would have had a happy life together if you had wanted to help yourself.” In this case, because of the conflict and blame apparent in the note, the writer refers to himself and his wife as *we* but it is imposing because he then blames her for their unhappiness. He indicates that he does not think she is an active participant in the marriage, so the reference of the two of them together is more ironic than literal. Put together with the tone of the letter, the writer has set himself in a position of power showing that he was ready and willing to make the marriage work, but she was not for various reasons. He puts her at fault and takes blame away from himself, showing that, in this instance, he has the power in the situation.

The writer of GSN 50 refers to himself and his wife with the plural first-person pronoun three times in the note. All of them are the imposing-inclusive form. Similar to GSN 46, the note sets up an argumentative situation with the wife where the writer blames the wife for issues in the relationship—in this case, she did not communicate her feelings to him. He explains, “[t]oo bad you just keep everything inside you.” In all instances of the word *we*, the writer has set up the reference as part of a conflict in how they are feeling—he views the marriage as perfect, happy, loving; she views it as the opposite (according to the note writer). Because of this, the *we* references (“I honestly love you with all my heart and I thought we would understand things together,” “The really thought we were the ‘happily married couple,’” and “I had hopes that you would forget your feelings and we would be happy together”) are imposing-inclusive. In this

case, the letter recipient is either a member of a happy marriage or she is against it. He says “we”, but the rest of the letter indicates that perhaps she has long since pulled apart from that union, making the reference imposing; consequently, the plural pronoun succeeds in setting up a power dynamic of right and wrong in terms of relationship building putting the letter recipient as either part of the marriage or the one who has worked at the breakdown of the relationship.

GSN 53 is also addressed to the writer’s wife or significant other, but instead of blaming her for a breakdown in the relationship, he blames himself and apologizes for his action. What indicates the imposing aspect of the plural pronoun in this instance is that at the end of the note he writes, “It is going to hurt my mother and Dad to and also you I think.” The letter’s recipient is tagged on as an afterthought, as someone who *may* be hurt by the writer’s actions. While some of the effect of this last statement may be due to the somewhat awkward sentence structure, the tone of the rest of the letter helps align this statement as an afterthought. The overall tone of the letter is more matter of fact and slightly cold compared to other letters written to loved ones. For example, he writes, “I hope you all the luck in the world.” This sounds like something a person would say to an acquaintance, instead of a significant other because of its generic, non-specific wording, suggesting that the couple may not always function as a “we” and that the inclusiveness is, therefore, imposing. Either the letter recipient accepts that she is part of the relationship referenced by the use of *we* or she is part of the problem illustrated by the tone and content of the letter.

Determining whether the plural personal pronoun is inclusive or imposing-inclusive relies on the determination of tone, relationship and purpose of the context in which it is used. In these examples, we can see that imposing-inclusive is strongly related to the relationship and how it is portrayed, but it also shows how the user is exhibiting power over the recipient by telling them that they need to either accept that they are part of the group referenced in the pronoun or admit that they are part of the problem referred to in the context of the note.

Exclusive first-person plural pronouns.

Exclusive first-person plural pronouns, those that exclude the letter's recipient from the referenced group, are more clearly exemplified based on the notes' addressee, informational content, and overall context (see Table 12).

For example, GSN 22 is not addressed to a specific person, but in the second paragraph the writer says, "We walked around in gowns, smoking cigarettes and watching TV." The writer is specifically referring to a group of people at the free clinic he was brought to after a previous suicide attempt, not necessarily the recipient of the letter. Here, the note writer has power over the recipient because he is setting himself up as someone that the reader probably will not be able to relate to, someone who has attempted suicide before and knows what it is like to be rescued. The recipient can try to understand, but unless he or she has been there (like the others in the free clinic) they will not fully understand.

Table 12

All instances of exclusive *We/Us* in GSN

Note	Text	Referent	Recipient
<i>Exclusive We</i>			
GSN 22	“We walked around in gowns, smoking cigarettes and watching TV.”	Fellow hospital patients	Not indicated
GSN 23	“We have plenty of money to give me a decent burial.”	His wife	The undertaker
GSN 24	“Judge [Name] has already told the press that he, quote, “felt invigorated” when we were found guilty, and that he plans to imprison me as a deterrent to other public officials.”	Public Officials Charged with a Crime	Not indicated
GSN 43	“Remember when we worked in the yard and you asked to see a cadaver at the College?”	Tom	Tom, Betty and John
GSN 43	“Little did we know that I would be the first deceased for you to encounter.”	Tom	Tom, Betty and John
GSN 43	“Betty—We have been very close to each other.”	Betty	Tom, Betty and John
<i>Exclusive Us</i>			
GSN 33	“I hope you find someone who doesn’t ‘hurt’ you as you said 3 of us did.”	People in a relationship with Mary	Mary

GSN 23 is addressed to the undertaker. The writer uses the plural pronoun to refer himself and his wife, not himself and the undertaker (the intended recipient of the letter), making *we* exclusive because it does not include the letter's recipient. He says, "We have got plenty of money to give me a decent burial. Don't let my wife kid you by saying she has not got any money." In this instance, the writer uses *we* to preempt any potential responses from his wife and to assert power to help guarantee, at least this is his purpose of writing the letter, a proper funeral and burial. He is not including the undertaker in the reference because he wants to illustrate a connection with his wife, who will have control over the money and decision after he is gone, thereby giving power to his last request.

The writer of GSN 24 does not specifically address his letter to anyone, but uses the letter as an explanation of his decision, a request of support for his family, and a final plea of innocence. In the note, he places himself within a group of people (public officials) who have been found guilty of some crime, likely not the reader(s) of the note: "Judge [Name] has already told the press that he, quote, 'felt invigorated' when we were found guilty, and that he plans to imprison me as a deterrent to other public officials." The writer uses the plural pronoun to set himself in a group of people and then continues to talk about his own innocence and persecution in relation to the event. The use of the plural pronoun sets up an interesting dichotomy. He does not ever mention the innocence or guilt of the other parties, just his own; he places himself steadily within this group (something that appears to be public knowledge) and then continues to explain his innocence and why he should not be punished in this way for this matter. The power

stems from the writer's ability to build upon accepted knowledge (the group he has been associated with) through the use of the exclusive *we* and then use it to his benefit, showing that the common belief about the incident is not accurate and that he holds unknown information. This gives him power over those that do not know the information he can provide.

The notes that have not yet been discussed show unique features either by containing multiple forms of the plural first-person pronoun or by containing instances of the pronoun that function in two different ways. GSN 43 illustrates how *we* can function as both inclusive and exclusive at the same time. This note is addressed to the writer's children. He begins the letter by talking to all three of them, then addresses them individually for a quick note to them and ends the note with a message addressed to their mother. The first two instances of *we*, "Remember when we worked in the yard and you asked to see a cadaver at the College?" and "Little did we know that I would be the first deceased for you to encounter," are in the section of the letter addressed to the first son. It functions here as inclusive and exclusive because it includes this son but excludes the other two children and their mother. The same is true of the third instance, "Betty—we have been very close to each other." *We* includes the daughter but not the sons or their mother. The writer does not include instances of *we* for the mother or other son. These instances of a dual-purpose plural pronoun functionally build one relationship while deconstructing others, causing the powerful effects of an exclusive *we* versus the non-powerful effects of an inclusive *we*. By placing himself in relationship with the two children, he is setting up a closer relationship between himself and them (respectively)

than he has with the other son and their mother. It indicates that perhaps they do not have as close of a relationship. This gives power to the writer because he clearly indicated a hierarchy of relationships within this short letter.

Even though GSN 33 does have one inclusive plural pronoun, it also has one exclusive plural pronoun. Even with the one inclusive instance of *we*, the power is more uneven than in the other strictly inclusive letters—the positionality, tone and purpose are different from GSN 5 and GSN 32. GSN 33 is also addressed to the wife of the note writer, but the overall tone of this letter is more cold and straightforward about marriage problems than the previous two. For example, the entire first paragraph puts blame on the letter’s recipient for a variety of issues relating to the marriage. Still, though, the sentence that contains *we*, “When we quarrel over other and younger men it was silly but you would have been hurt too,” is inclusive because it is directly referring to the recipient of the letter, as indicated by the later use of *you* in the same thought. However, even though this one statement is inclusive, other parts of the letter display more power dynamics than those that indicate a relationship outwardly free of conflict. The final paragraph uses an exclusive form of *us*. He writes, “I hope you find someone who doesn’t ‘hurt’ you as you said 3 of us did.” This sentence is exclusive because he is putting himself in a group of people who she has blamed for hurting her, further highlighting the boundaries between the two of them. The note writer is not using this letter to apologize or build a relationship but to instead place blame and set himself apart from the relationship.

Finally, GSN 17 is also unique because it contains four instances of the plural first-person pronouns: two inclusive, one idiomatic expression and one imposing-

inclusive. It is not clear to whom exactly the letter is addressed, but perhaps one of his fellow band members. In the first instance of *we*, “All the warnings from the punk rock 101 courses over the years, since my first introduction to the, shall we say, ethics involved with independence and the embracement of your community has proven to be very true,” the writer is using *we* not as an inclusive, relationship building or exhibiting mode, but as an idiomatic expression, that does not function as a pronoun.

The next instance shows an inclusive form of *we*:

For example when we’re back stage and the lights go out and the manic roar of the crowd begins., it doesn’t affect me the way in which it did for Freddie Mercury, who seemed to love, relish in the the love and adoration from the crowd which is something I totally admire and envy.

The writer brings the band together into one group and refers back to when they were performing and includes them together at an event that actually happened, not so much as pulling them together as part of a relationship. He uses this event to show that he is thinking back to the good times, but then also uses the group to indicate how he was different and how that event, which should have been a positive experience, no longer was for him.

The third instance of *we*, “I appreciate the fact that I and we have affected and entertained a lot of people,” is imposing-inclusive. Here, the note writer makes the recipients either accept that they are part of the group that has “affected and entertained” or not. If they choose to not be part of that group that has done those things, i.e. a group

that has the purpose of affecting and entertaining others (as opposed to other purposes such as gaining fame, making money, etc.), then they are in the job for the wrong reasons (as indicated by the writer's struggles with doing a job that he feels like he is faking his way through). He says, "The worst crime I can think of would be to rip people off by faking it and pretending as if I'm having 100% fun. Sometimes I feel as if I should have a punch-in time clock before I walk out on stage." He effectively forces those that choose to be included in the *we* to only be the ones that are in the job for the reasons the writer feels are the right ones.

Finally, when the writer uses *us*, "[t]here's good in all of us and I think I simply love people too much, so much that it makes me too fucking sad," he includes the recipient in the referenced group. The statement confirms that there is good in everyone, including the reader, forming an inclusive pronoun. However, the overall effect of the statement is very different from other inclusive pronouns because of his purpose in discussing the good in everyone. The writer places himself morally and ethically above the recipient by showing that he has accepted this "goodness" and indicating that it cannot coexist with the lifestyle created by the band, implying that those who have not made similar decisions are in the wrong and give the writer power over the recipient.

Hypothesis 1 conclusions.

As the study's first hypothesis suggests, people with a genuine intent to commit suicide use more active first-person pronouns than passive first-person pronouns, more singular first-person pronouns than plural first-person pronouns and more imposing-

inclusive or exclusive first-person plural pronouns than inclusive pronouns. While these findings are noteworthy, the functional analyses of their use in the notes tell us more about the linguistic manifestation of power displayed by their use.

The use of subjective pronouns sets up the notes' writers as active participants not only in their writing, but also in the actions surrounding their decisions. Even when the passive forms appear, there are more active forms that overpower the slight shift in power associated with the appearance of the passive forms. A more specific illustration of this effect can be seen in how the first-person pronoun functions within the speech act of apology. The subjective/active first-person pronouns, the most prevalent type of pronoun in the apologies, again demonstrate a manifestation of the writers' power in this situation.

Forty-five (75 percent) of the writers use only singular first-person pronouns, setting themselves apart from groups and relationships and, therefore, showing a higher preference for their own interests versus those of the letters' recipients, which is a display of power. The remaining notes do use plural forms of the first-person pronoun, which also have their ways of demonstrating power. Within all the instances of we/us, only two letters (GSN 5 and GSN 32, discussed at the beginning of this section) did not display an evident displacement of power based on the positionality, tone and purpose of the letters. The rest of the letters demonstrated personal power, which was manifested through the overarching effects of imposing-inclusive or exclusive first-person plural pronouns, even when an inclusive form may have been present.

Simulated Suicide Notes

This section investigates the study's second hypothesis: that patterns of personal pronoun use are indicators of genuine intent to commit suicide. These patterns are examined by comparing patterns of pronoun use in genuine notes to those in simulated notes. Specifically, the previous section demonstrated that power manifested in genuine suicide notes through the use of active forms of personal pronouns and by imposing-inclusive or exclusive means of addressing the letter's recipient. This section will examine the simulated notes in the same manner and then compare the results.

Active and passive forms

The active and passive forms of the first-person pronoun, in comparison with the notes in the genuine corpora, are highlighted in Table 13. This shows the usage in comparable numbers and helps highlight the need for further examination of functionality within the text. While the normed results do not look significantly different, it is necessary to look at the functionality of the personal pronouns to determine if differences in the manifestation of power exist in the genuine versus simulated suicide notes.

Table 13

Comparison of First-person Pronoun Frequency in GSN and SFS

Corpus	I	Me	We	Us
GSN	5.46 (560)	1.29 (132)	0.39 (40)	0.05 (5)
SFS	3.88 (108)	1.29 (36)	0.36 (10)	0.18 (5)

Table 14

Sample Simulated Notes that Do Not Contain *Me*

Note	Text
SFS 3	I am tired of living so I decided to end it all, hope this will not distress anybody.
SFS 7	Dear Mary. I don't know why I am doing this unless my reasoning has gone all to pot. Something must have slipped. Bill
SFS 8	Goodbye dear wife. I cannot stand the suffering any longer. I am doing this by my own free will. You will be well taken care of. Love and goodbye.
SFS 10	This is the end. I've had enough. Cant take anymore.
SFS 11	I am sorry Mary But I just Can't Stand Life Any Longer. William Smith

Similar to the study of the genuine notes, looking at the functionality of personal pronouns within the letters offers a better picture of the manifestation of power within the notes. For comparison purposes, this study also focuses on the first-person pronouns *I* and *me*. Fifteen of the 33 simulated notes do not contain the passive *me* and/or *us* as seen in Table 14; the remaining 18 notes do contain instances of the passive personal pronoun, as seen in Table 15, at least one time.

Table 15

Sample Simulated Notes that Do Contain *Me*

Note	Text
SFS 4	Dear Mary. I regret that things have reached such a state that this is the only way out for me and my family. I apologize for the trouble I've caused.
SFS 9	My Darling: I'm sorry to leave you this way, but it looks like the only way out for me. Things have become so uncertain and unbearable, that I believe it will be better this way. Have the kids remember me, and don't be grievous because I took this way out. Never forget that I love you with all my heart and soul.
SFS 13	Darling: It's been great but I just can't go on for reasons you may know but I can't explain. There's enough insurance for all of you. Be happy and all my love always to you and our three. Remember me as your adoring Bill
SFS 19	Dearest Wife. I am writing to explain why I am going to end it all. I know that this is a cowardly way and I am sorry but I haven't the will to do otherwise. Please forgive me if you can and believe that I loved you to the end. Bill
SFS 29	Mary—I know this is a terrible thing to do but believe me, dear, it is for the best. The events of the last few months have left me at my wit's end and I see no other way out. I am sorry I was such a trial to you and the children, please forgive me. Bill

While the genuine notes show an overall demonstration of power in all of the notes, and especially in the notes that do not contain the word *me*, the simulated notes are less direct and contain shifts in power, even in the notes that do not contain the passive personal pronoun (i.e., SFS 3, SFS 5, SFS 7, SFS 8, SFS 10, SFS 11, SFS 14, SFS 15, SFS 20, SFS 22, SFS 25, SFS 26, SFS 30, SFS 32, and SFS 33). Except for note SFS 33, the purpose of all of the notes that do not contain a passive personal pronoun is to explain their choice. SFS 33 reads, “To the police, please tell family that I love them why say more.” In this instance, the writer still uses the imperative form of *tell* to create his command, as seen in the commands in the genuine notes. However, it functions differently here. Similar to the instances of passive language in the genuine notes, this note requires the letter’s recipient to complete a task for the purpose of the letter to be complete, giving the power to the recipient, not to the writer.

Others (SFS 5, SFS 10, SFS 11, SFS 14, SFS 15, SFS 22, SFS 26 and SFS 32) are similar to the genuine notes in that they express power through the use of the personal pronouns. The writer actively *have decided, have had enough, are sorry, can’t take, can’t stand, have taken care of, have looked upon, honestly believe* and more. They use the word *I* to take responsibility for their actions, decisions and apologies, leaving nothing up to the reader to satisfy their needs or requests.

The remaining notes that do not contain the passive *me* (SFS 2, SFS 7, SFS 8, SFS 20, SFS 25, and SFS 30) exhibit a more passive and less direct approach than seen in the genuine notes, but this powerlessness is manifested through linguistic means other than personal pronouns; While discussion of these examples extend past the scope of this

study, it is important to mention the differences to understand the overall context of the notes. Examples include vagueness through use of demonstrative or indefinite pronouns (SFS 3, SFS 7) and passive voice (SFS 8, SFS 20, SFS 25, SFS 30). While these notes do not exhibit a lack of power through their use of passive personal pronouns, they also do not predominantly display power through their use of active pronouns either, making them different from the genuine suicide notes in the GSN corpus that do not contain the passive personal pronoun.

Similar to the genuine notes, those in SFS that do contain the word *me* also show a shift in power as designated by the use of the passive pronoun. The main differences are that 24% of the notes (8 total) in the SFS corpus that show an overall expression of power versus 100% of the notes (60 total) in the GSN corpus.

Table 16

Frequency of Apology by Type

Corpus	Total Apologies	I as Apology	Me as Apology
GSN	0.35 (36)	0.25 (26)	0.10 (10)
SFS	0.61 (17)	0.36 (10)	0.25 (7)

Another area where pronouns are part of a linguistic manifestation of power is apology. SFS has a total of 17 first-person pronouns used in apology; 10 occurrences of *I* as apology (.36 times per 100 words) and 7 occurrences of *me* as apology (.25 times per 100 words). Table 16 illustrates the comparison of the frequencies of each type of

apology. Even though the instances of active and passive apologies are more similar in the simulated notes, it is still important to examine how they are used in context in order to make a comparison. Table 17 and Table 18 illustrate the instances of personal pronouns as apology in SFS.

Table 17

Instances of *I* as Apology in SFS

Note	Text
SFS 4	“I apologize for the trouble I’ve caused.”
SFS 6	“I am sorry to cause you a lot of trouble and grief but I think this is best for all of us.”
SFS 9	“I’m sorry to leave you this way, but it looks like the only way out for me.”
SFS 11	“I am sorry Mary But I just Can’t Stand Life Any Longer.”
SFS 14	“Sorry.”
SFS 17	“I am sorry to cause you this embarrassment but I can’t seem to stand life this way.”
SFS 19	“I know that this is a cowardly way and I am sorry but I haven’t the will to do otherwise.”
SFS 22	“I’m sorry that I had to do this but I know you will be happier as a result.”
SFS 29	“I’m sorry I was such a trial to you and the children, please forgive me
SFS 30	“Sorry to leave in this manner but feel that it is best for all concerned.”

I does not actually appear SFS 14 and SFS 30. The pronoun is implied in these examples, however, and they are being counted as such.

Table 18
Instances of *Me* as Apology in SFS

Note	Text
SFS 2	“Please forgive me for leaving you with all the responsibilities that this is certain to bring on you.”
SFS 16	“Continue with your will to live, fill any emptiness with your love for our children, find a new life for yourself and forgive me for whatever results to you from this.”
SFS 19	“Please forgive me if you can and believe that I loved you to the end.”
SFS 23	“Forgive, Dearest, but since I was very young, everyone considered me a failure and over the years it has proven to be so.”
SFS 23	“Forgive me for not being what you expected.”
SFS 29	“I’m sorry I was such a trial to you and the children, please forgive me.”
SFS 31	“So I hope you will forgive me all or partly for what I am about to do.”

The simulated notes are two times more likely to contain a passive apology than the genuine notes in the corpora studied. The simulated notes that contain a passive apology, like the simulated notes, require the letter’s recipient to do something to fulfill what the writer wants. In the genuine notes, an overall active, powerful letter offsets the shift in power seen in the passive apology. In the simulated notes, however, the power is less active throughout the notes. For example, in SFS 2, the writer has many occurrences of passive statements, not just in the apology, but again these statements are not related to

the active or passive personal pronoun. The author uses other linguistic indicators of passivity. He says,

Please forgive me for leaving you with all the responsibility that this is certain to bring on you. If there is anything of me that can be used in any medical or scientific way please dont refuse them as my last request. I am very proud of our son, and his high potential in his chosen field for which he has real talent. Bye for the last time, and never forget that you were the best thing that ever happened to me. Have my brother help you, I know he will want to very much.

However, there are instances of powerlessness demonstrated through the use of the passive pronoun, as well. When he writes, “you were the best thing that ever happened to me,” he also is giving the power to the recipient because, once again, he portrays her as responsible for his decision and feelings, not him. The only two active statements in the letter occur when he is talking about their son and his brother.

Another note that shows an overall passive expression is SFS 23. This note contains two examples of passive apologies, but, similar to SFS 2, they are not offset by otherwise active (i.e. powerful) statements as seen in the simulated letters. The letter reads:

Dearest one, This world is too cruel for me. I am in search of peace—
eternal peace where I will not be a burden to you and all the world.
This world was not meant for me. I was never wanted or able to place
myself in any good position. I am only a handicap to you and your life will

be better without me. I love you but my love has brought you nothing but sadness and despair.

Forgive, Dearest, but since I was very young, everyone considered me a failure and over the years it has proven to be so. I have done nothing to make life seem worthwhile. Mother meant good, but she drove me to my grave. Forgive me for not being what you expected. I do love you. Do not think badly of me. I am better off dead, no one will miss me. Until later, when we can be happy.

Your Desperate Husband,

Bill Smith

Similar to the other instances of powerlessness in the simulated notes, there are again instances of passive voice shown through other linguistic means, but some are related to the passive first-person pronoun as well. He says, “I do love you. Do not think badly of me.” He actively professes his love for her, but then the next sentence gives her the power again. In order for him to get what he wants (i.e. a positive legacy), she has to comply with his request. Throughout this letter, many others have the power over the writer: the world, the recipient, and his mother.

Finally, even though SFS 29 contains one active apology, a passive one immediately follows it (“I am sorry I was such a trial to you and the children, please forgive me”) and the rest of the letter further exhibits little power by the recipient, by the same means as the other simulated notes. He asks the recipient to believe him and forgive

him. He also puts the blame of his decision of “the events of the last few months” which have left him “at his wit’s end,” putting the decision to commit suicide out of his control and into the control of external events.

Overall, even though the frequencies of active and passive pronouns are similar in the genuine and simulated notes, the context tells a different story. The active pronouns carry less weight when surrounded by a primarily passive context as seen in the simulated notes.

Inclusive and exclusive forms

As in the genuine notes, the simulated notes have limited occurrences of the first-person plural pronouns. Even though the frequency is low, however, their use in context demonstrates much about the differences between genuine and simulated suicide notes. The first aspect that stands out is that the simulated notes were more than twice as likely to use the inclusive forms of the first-person plural pronouns than the genuine notes and the simulated notes did not contain the exclusive pronouns at all (see Table 19).

Table 19
Comparison of Plural Pronouns by Type

Corpus	Inclusive We/Us	Imposing-Inclusive We/Us	Exclusive We/Us
GSN	0.07 (7)	0.09 (9)	0.08 (8)
SFS	0.36 (10)	0.18 (5)	0.0 (0)

Table 20

All Instances of Inclusive *We/Us* in SFS

Note	Text
<i>Inclusive We</i>	
SFS 12	“...although the years we have been together have been the happiest of my life, I want it to stop here.”
SFS 27	“...as we worked out your small problems...”
SFS 28	“Possibly we will all meet again sometime...”
SFS 28	“...where we will be able to live ...”
SFS 31	“Goodby dear I hope we will meet again in some other place...”
SFS 31	“...where we can be as happy as I have been since I have been married to you.”
<i>Inclusive Us</i>	
SFS 5	“I am sorry to cause you a lot of trouble and grief but I think this is best for all of us.”
SFS 18	“Please tell them I’m doing this because I think it is best for all of us.”
SFS 28	“All at once it appears that I can no longer face the problems and responsibility of trying to get ahead only to see us struggle along in poverty.”
SFS 28	“With money from our Life Insurance program you will be able to give the children and yourself the things you have always wanted for us all.”

Also similar to the genuine notes, the type of first-person plural pronoun used in each instance can be determined by looking at the positionality of the writer and the overall tone and purpose of the letter. For example, inclusive pronouns occur when the writer directly addresses the recipient as the referent in the pronoun. All of the instances of inclusive pronouns in SFS fall under this category (Table 20). The uses of *we* and *us* are straightforward indicators of a referent group earlier introduced in the letter. While GSN 5 and GSN 32 also show that a strong, positively portrayed relationship also indicates an inclusive occurrence of a first-person plural pronoun, the examples in SFS do too. These letters do not illustrate the animosity, blame and other relationship issues often seen in many of the genuine suicide notes as illustrated by the function of the plural first-person pronoun.

In this group of simulated notes, perhaps the biggest indicator of an imposing-inclusive pronoun is the juxtaposition of the relationship referred to (with the pronoun) and the imposed agreement with an opinion, emotion or otherwise questionable statement. Each of the examples of imposing-inclusive pronouns in the SFS corpus fall into this category (see Table 21 for examples): SFS 16 refers to the “right way to solve any situation”; SFS 23 refers to being happy, SFS 27 refers to enjoying life and that the decision makes for a better situation for everyone, and SFS 28 refers to those involved deserving a peaceful life. In each of these situations, for the letter’s recipient to be included as a referent in the pronoun (and, therefore, part of the “group”), he or she has to agree with these sentiments. Otherwise, they are considered an outsider, not part of the relationship being referred to. Perhaps the biggest difference here between the genuine

and simulated notes, however, is there is not the reference to animosity or poor relationships. Because of this, in the case of imposing-inclusive, there is not an option of being “the bad guy” or one of the “others,” just simply not being part of a seemingly positive relationship. Often in the genuine notes, the “bad guy” or “others” are apparent through the portrayal of the type of relationship, making the imposing-inclusive pronoun a method of putting those being forced into inclusion on a lower level of power than the notes’ writers.

Table 21

All Instances of Imposing-Inclusive *We/Us* in SFS

Note	Text
Imposing-Inclusive <i>We</i>	
SFS 16	“As we both might reasonably recognize this is not the right way to solve any situation.”
SFS 23	“Until later, when we can be happy.”
SFS 27	“...as we enjoyed life together...”
SFS 28	“...in the peaceful way we all deserved so much here on earth.”
Imposing-Inclusive <i>Us</i>	
SFS 27	“It’s better for us all that the burden of caring for me be lifted...”

While the frequency of the different types of pronouns in the simulated notes is different than in the genuine notes, examining these pronouns also uncovered a distinct

difference in tone and how relationships are portrayed in the genuine suicide notes and the simulated suicide notes, changing the demonstration of power in the notes.

Potential indicators of genuine intent to commit suicide

There are three main areas illustrated in the two studied corpora that could potentially, with further research, act as indicators or predictors of genuine intent to commit suicide. The first is the overall tone as presented by the active/passive voice. While the genuine notes, even with the presence of passive personal pronouns, are overall active in tone indicating the power displayed by the note's writer, only 2.42 out of 10 simulated notes display this overall active tone, or an overall appearance of power. The rest show a shift of power to the note's recipients indicating that people who use active pronouns to create an overall active tone in their language are more likely to have a genuine intent to commit suicide than those who use the passive pronouns to create a less active, more passive overall tone.

The next potential indicator of a genuine intent to commit suicide is the role and type of personal pronoun as apology. Similar to overall tone, in the genuine notes, even if the writer used a passive pronoun as apology, he quickly shifted the power back to himself. In the simulated notes, the shift back into the powerful role is less obvious and less readily apparent, if it exists at all. Because of the overall tone of most of the letters in the simulated corpus, the passive apologies portray a less powerful writer because he was unable or unwilling to shift the power back to himself around the passive apology.

Finally, the use of the exclusive *we/us* could act as a strong indicator of genuine intent to commit suicide because it did not appear in the simulated notes at all. However, because the simulated corpus is half the size of the genuine corpus, further study would be needed to corroborate these findings. Interestingly, the study of the plural first-person pronouns also uncovered an overall difference in the themes (as did the other two potential indicators). The representation of the relationship between the writer and the recipient showed an overwhelmingly positive reflection and representation versus the genuine notes, which tended towards relationship issues, blame and animosity.

Conclusion

This study hypothesized that people with a genuine intent to commit suicide will use more first-person active pronouns than first-person passive pronouns, more singular than plural first-person pronouns and more exclusive and imposing-inclusive pronouns than inclusive forms. The findings proved the hypotheses correct, but perhaps do not tell the whole story. A further discourse analysis of the letters illustrating each feature shows that the context and manner in which each feature is used offers a better sense of the tone and indication of the writer's presented power, further illustrating that the decision to commit suicide is a powerful one. By comparing both the frequencies and the context in which each type of pronoun is used, the study uncovered three potential indicators or predictors of genuine intent to commit suicide: subjective personal pronoun functioning in an active context, active personal pronoun as apology and exclusive first-person plural pronouns.

The findings of this study have established a connection between previous findings of suicide research and linguistic manifestations of power. Two previous studies of suicide notes focused on the roles of pronouns: Tuckman and Ziegler's (1966) conclusion that there are no differences in the study of pronouns between simulated and genuine notes when it comes to expression of "social-maturity" through the use of referential (self, self-other, and other) pronouns and Stirman and Pennebaker's suggestion that suicidal poets tended to use more first-person singular than first-person plural pronouns to indicate social isolation. The current study suggests that an

examination of the frequency and the use of singular and plural first-person pronouns can provide a different conclusion, suggesting that first-person pronouns help set a tone that illustrates linguistic manifestations of power in genuine suicides notes.

Further Study

Because the corpora were relatively small, there are several possibilities for further study. First, a larger corpus of simulated notes could further illustrate the differences between genuine and simulated intent to commit suicide as well as further define the three potential indicators and predictors. Second, this study only examined suicide notes written by men in the United States. Further studies can broaden the scope to examine notes written by men and women or men from other countries, or they could also narrow the scope to investigate if there are differences in pronoun use based on age within these gendered categories. Additionally, this study of active and passive pronouns uncovered differences in the use of speech acts. Commands, requests and apologies were examined in the present study, but future studies could consider additional speech acts more in depth. Finally, while this study compared genuine notes to simulated notes, further studies may look at the role of pronouns in notes of attempted but not completed suicides. While there have been numerous studies on suicide, its unique nature has made it difficult for researchers to unlock its mysteries. By looking at language use, specifically the manifestation of power, this study begins to outline the linguistic patterns present in situations of genuine intent to commit suicide, an avenue that has not yet been studied.

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