Semantic Universal in Written Suicidal Ideation Through the Lens of Camusian Absurd

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Abstract: This exploratory study focuses on linguistic markers of existential distress in written suicidal ideation, examining suicide notes through the philosophical lens of the Camusian Absurd and proposing that suicidal communication reflects the existential tension between a search for meaning and an indifferent reality. By identifying recurring themes of despair, alienation, repetition and cognitive dissonance, the research suggests that the Camusian Absurd could be considered as a semantic universal in written suicidal ideation. Qualitative discourse analysis and quantitative semantic coding are combined to investigate three suicide notes from culturally diverse backgrounds: a young Chinese girl, an Urdu-speaking son, and an English-speaking woman. This study also lays the groundwork for developing the Camusian Absurd in Suicidal Communication Analyzer (CASCA), a proposed tool to analyze existential despair in written suicidal ideation. Future research may extend this approach with natural language processing to explore larger datasets, treating suicidal ideation as a genre to deepen interdisciplinary understanding of existential distress in suicidal communication.

Keywords: Suicide, Suicidal Ideation, Camus, Absurdity, Semantic Universal.

1. Introduction

Suicidal ideation is a broad term used to describe a range of contemplation, wishes, and preoccupations with death and suicide, and it still remains a challenging issue because there is no universally accepted definition of suicidal ideation [1]. However, it is important to note that suicidal ideation is closely associated with both suicidal attempts and deaths, indicating a significant risk factor for future suicide attempts [2]; [3]; [4]. In this regard, linguistic analysis of suicidal ideation aims to find the missing piece in the investigation of suicidal minds.

In written forms of suicidal ideation, certain recurring themes have been observed in earlier research works:

1. Hopelessness.
"There is no way I can continue like this" [5].
2. Guilt.
"I have let everyone down" [6].
3. Burden on others.
"Everyone will be better off without me" [7].
4. Desire for peace.

"I just want to stop the pain" [8].

5. Finality and preparation.

"I've made up my mind; it's time to go" [9].

6. Apologies.

 "I'm sorry for all the hurt I've caused" [10].

7. Rationalizations or justifications.

"This is the only way I can find peace" [11].

Besides thematic observation, linguistic analyses also examine word choice, sentence structure, and emotional tone in written suicidal ideation because they reveal underlying cognitive and emotional states of individuals. Lester and Leenaars [12] explored differences in content and structure between fatal and non-fatal suicide notes, and it turns out that fatal notes often had a more rigid narrative and presented fewer requests for help or acknowledgment of alternative solutions. This aligns with Schnyder et al. [13], in which they compared the language of completed suicide notes with attempted ones and found that completed suicides were characterized by less variability in emotional expression and a stronger focus on hopelessness. Meanwhile, modal verbs and pronouns also play a crucial role in examining written suicidal ideation. An increased use of epistemic modal verbs such as "might," "could," and "may" expressing uncertainty can indicate a disconnection from reality or a sense of powerlessness, while an overuse of circumstantial modal verbs such as "must" and "should" indicating obligation might reflect an overwhelming sense of pressure or expectation [14]. Similarly, a decrease in deontic modal verbs expressing ability or permission such as "can" and "may" could suggest a perceived lack of agency or freedom [15]. In addition, linguistic markers of disconnection, i.e., fewer first-person pronouns, can reflect emotional distancing or dissociation, a feature often more prevalent in written suicidal communication by individuals who completed suicidal attempts [16].

In more recent research, Cohen [17] studied farewell notes of Palestinian suicide bombers, identifying themes related to explication, persuasion, social concerns, positive emotions, and religious statements, noting the prevalence of extremizers and superlatives. Lester and Leenaars [12] compared suicide notes based on gender differences, observing that notes written by women contained more negations, cognitive mechanism-related words, present tense verbs, and indications of hopelessness and defeat. Glenn et al. [18] conducted a pilot study on text messages before suicide attempts, finding more words expressing anger and fewer expressing positive emotions. Teixeira et al. [19] examined 139 suicide notes, revealing a mix of pleasant concepts and negative semantic associations, indicating cognitive dissonance.

Current linguistic analyses of written suicidal ideation have mainly focused on quantitative metrics, and many endeavours strive to capture the depth and complexity of suicidal ideation expressed across different languages and cultures, attempting an explanation through linguistic relativity [20]; [21]. However, these approaches limit the potential for identifying universal semantic features in suicidal ideation. With this regard, this paper intends to present a novel theoretical framework in which linguistics meets philosophy, serving to explore the semantic universals of written suicidal ideation through the philosophical concept of Camusian Absurd. This approach posits that the fundamental characteristic of suicidal ideation is rooted in the universal human experience of searching for meaning. By analyzing written suicidal ideation through the lens of absurdity, it can capture the cognitive dissonance between an individual's search for meaning and the lack of it.

2.   Camusian Absurd: Linguistic Markers of Existential Distress in Suicidal Ideation

Absurdity occurs in various domains of human experience and understanding. In logic, it presents as a departure from expected reasoning patterns [22]; [23]; [24]. In existentialism, it is viewed as the conflict between the search for life's meaning and the apparent lack thereof [25]. Cognitively,

absurdity creates dissonance when individuals encounter ideas that clash with their established beliefs [26]; [27]. In language, it appears as a breakdown in the coherent relationship between words, meanings, and context [28].

Among these investigations of absurdity, Albert Camus' concept of absurdity, which was articulated in his work "*The Myth of Sisyphus*" [22], provides a profound philosophical framework for understanding existential distress and its relation with suicidal ideation. Camusian Absurd emerges from the tension between humanity's inherent desire for meaning and the apparent meaninglessness of the universe. This confrontation leads to a sense of alienation and despair, which can make the idea of suicide seem like a logical response to the absurdity of existence. Camus attributes suicide to "repudiation," representing a form of acceptance of and surrender to the Absurd, and it involves a finality that denies the possibility of revolt against it [22], and this coincides with empirical findings in suicide research, which have shown that individuals experiencing a sense of meaninglessness or existential crisis are at a higher risk of suicidal ideation [29]. A recent analysis of absurdism in modern society highlights how the confrontation with life's lack of inherent meaning can lead to psychological distress [30], and this again aligns with Camus' assertion that the absurd arises from the tension between our search for meaning and the universe's silence [22].

While Camusian Absurd is inherently subjective, it can be operationalized by identifying specific, measurable linguistic patterns that are representative of existential distress. The following linguistic markers can be used to quantify the otherwise subjective nature of existential despair.

1. Language of Despair and Hopelessness (DH): Camusian Absurd is rooted in a sense of hopelessness, where individuals fail to find a purpose in life. This despair may appear linguistically through words expressing futility, pointlessness, and worthlessness [19]. Negative adjectives and adverbs, such as "useless" or "hopeless," and phrases like "there's no way out" often signify despair, indicating the writer's overwhelming sense of purposelessness.

2. Repetition and Extremity (RE): Camus describes the repetitive nature of human efforts to find meaning as akin to Sisyphus' endless task of pushing a boulder uphill [22]. Linguistically, this manifests through repetitive words or phrases that suggest a cycle of inescapability, like "over and over" or "always the same." Extreme language, with absolute terms like "never" or "forever," highlights the feeling of being trapped [17].

3. Alienation and Detachment (AD): Camusian Absurd highlights the isolation that arises when expectations clash with a meaningless world. In language, this appears as expressions of detachment from others, such as the use of "alone," "no one understands," or "nothing connects." Alienation is also marked by third-person references to oneself or language that distances the speaker from their surroundings, symbolizing their perceived disconnection [29].

4. Cognitive Dissonance and Paradoxical Statements (CDP): Cognitive dissonance appears when beliefs conflict with reality, causing internal tension. This manifests as paradoxical statements in suicidal ideation, where a writer might express love for life alongside feelings of resignation, using phrases like "I want to live but can't bear to go on." Such language shows the dissonance between the desire to find meaning and the acceptance of life's perceived futility [31].

3. Methodology

To examine the possibility whether Camusian Absurd could be treated as a semantic universal across written suicidal ideation, case studies serve as a good starting point because they provide a closer look at the manifestation of Camusian Absurd in personal texts. This supports the research objective by providing qualitative insights into how despair, alienation, repetition and cognitive dissonance appear linguistically. By focusing on specific cases, researchers can identify and categorize linguistic markers of the Camusian Absurd, laying the groundwork for cross-linguistic or cross-cultural studies that might reveal its broader applicability as a potential semantic universal.

This study integrates qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative semantic coding to examine written suicidal ideation through the lens of Camusian Absurd. By identifying linguistic markers related to Camusian Absurdity, the study can validate qualitative observations with measurable data. The primary data consists of three suicide letters written by individuals from distinct cultural backgrounds: a 14-year-old Chinese girl, an Urdu-speaking son, and an English-speaking woman named Iris.

Original languages were preserved to maintain cultural nuances, and translation was used to ensure accuracy in tone and content. Each letter was divided into semantic units. These units were then coded according to specific emotional and existential themes, following these categories: 1) Despair and Hopelessnes, 2) Repetition and Extremity, 3) Alienation and Detachment and 4) Cognitive Dissonance

Similarities and differences across the letters were identified and analyzed, noting how each writer's cultural environment shaped their experience of despair and alienation.

4.   Case Studies

4.1.   Letter 1

The original letter, written in Mandarin Chinese and translated into English, reveals the painful reflections of a 14-year-old Chinese girl, likely completed before her suicide. She expressed profound distress due to emotional abuse, intense academic pressures from her parents, and physical punishment. Describing herself as a "punching bag", being dehumanized and objectified, and reduced to a mere instrument of parental pride rather than as a person deserving of love and understanding. She critiques her parents' authoritarian approach to discipline and emotional neglect, which she perceives as part of an abusive generational cycle. Despite her suffering, she expresses concern for her brother and grandparents. Her letter concludes with practical instructions about her belongings and a plea for her parents to end this cycle of abuse.

The letter was divided into 77 semantic units. Of these, 11 units reflect despair and hopelessness (14.29%), 17 reflect alienation and detachment (22.07%), 16 reflect themes of repetition and extremity (20.78%), and 9 reflect cognitive dissonance (11.69%). Alienation and detachment appear dominantly, with a gradual increase toward the end.

4.2.   Letter 2

Originally written in Urdu and later translated into English, this letter is addressed with warmth and affection from a son to his parents, expressing love and hoping for their well-being. He describes his decision to end his life as stemming from deep fatigue with the monotony of life. He holds no grievances toward family or friends, though he feels undeserving of the love he has received. Extending forgiveness to others and asking for forgiveness for himself, he donates his eyes, hoping this act will bring him peace. He requests prayers in his memory but discourages excessive ritual spending, signing off as their "unworthy son." In Urdu-speaking contexts, the concepts of forgiveness, duty, and humility hold profound cultural significance, deeply rooted in both Islamic teachings and South Asian social values [32]. The sentiment of forgiveness can be seen as a way to alleviate the burden of resentment and promote emotional healing, aligning with cultural norms that prioritize communal ties and relationships over individual grievances [33].

The letter was divided into 15 semantic units: 2 units convey despair and hopelessness (13.33%), 4 reflect alienation and detachment (26.67%), 1 reflects repetition and extremity (6.67%), and 3 reflect cognitive dissonance (20%). Notably, 20% of the letter also expresses love and peace, but still it doesn't outweigh the repetitive monotony as the major cause of his suicidal ideation.

4.3. Letter 3

In this deeply personal and emotional suicide letter from Iris to Sam, Iris expresses her profound regret and guilt over an unspecified incident that occurred six years ago involving Sam. The letter conveys her belief that her life no longer has purpose. Iris describes her struggle with persistent painful memories and her decision to end her life, viewing it as a necessary action. She mentions using a gun and expresses hope of reuniting with Sam in the afterlife.

The letter was divided into 62 semantic units: 15 reflect despair and hopelessness (24.19%), 6 reflect alienation and detachment (9.68%), 11 reflect repetition and extremity (17.74%), and 11 reflect cognitive dissonance (17.74%). Love for Sam emerges as a theme (1.61%) and serves as a final note, while despair and hopelessness, repetition, and cognitive dissonance comprise the majority. Here, the writer's love and the repetition of dwelling on past trauma contribute significantly to her feelings of alienation and dissonance.

4.4. Similarities Across the Three Letters

All three letters convey a sense of being trapped and a desire for escape, along with complex emotional relationships connected to the writers' suicidal ideation. Past experiences heavily influence each writer's current emotional state, and feelings of guilt are evident as they reflect on their perceived burdens to others. Themes of life, death, and the afterlife surface in each letter, with each writer hoping for peace or improvement through death and expressing a deep acceptance of their decision.

In the meantime, all of these letters reflect culturally specific references that deepen the writers' experiences of alienation and despair. Letter 1 reflects the pressures associated with Chinese academic expectations, while Letter 2 addresses the importance of filial respect in Urdu-speaking cultures. Letter 3 is more personalized, focusing on trauma and the hope for a after-life reunion.

Camusian Absurd is evident through these writers' struggle with an unresolvable tension between their desire for meaning and their perception of a meaningless and cruel reality.

5. Conclusion

The previous case studies provide the potential for considering Camusian Absurd as a semantic universal in written suicidal ideation which transcends cultural boundaries. However, although this study provides a new lens to examine suicidal ideation, its limited sample size affects its generalizability. Future research endeavour may focus on more diverse corpus of suicidal letters across languages and cultures. Furthermore, natural language processing (NLP) may contribute to this study as it processes large datasets more efficiently and reveals patterns that manual coding may overlook. Affective and cognitive linguistic tools may also assist quantitative cross-comparisons across a more extensive dataset.

Building upon the framework introduced in this research, I propose developing a tool called the Camusian Absurd in Suicidal Communication Analyzer (CASCA). CASCA would analyze existential despair and cognitive dissonance in written suicidal ideation by assessing linguistic markers of Camusian Absurd, and measure despair, alienation, and repetition at scale.

It would also be an insightful approach to treat suicidal ideation as a literary genre, because this opens up possibilities for comparative studies across cultures and contexts, allowing for the examination of how different societal narratives shape suicidal expressions. Framing suicidal ideation as a genre could bridge psychology, linguistics, philosophy and literary studies, offering a deeper understanding of how suicidal minds communicate existential struggles.

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