

Emic and Etic in Qualitative Research

NUMA MARKEE

The origins of the emic/etic distinction in linguistics are to be found in Pike (1967), who distinguished between *phonemic* and *phonetic* accounts of the sounds of language. As originally formulated, *phonemic* accounts are *member-relevant* rules about the sound contrasts of language that native speakers have inside their heads, while *phonetic* accounts are *researcher-relevant* distinctions about how these sounds are observably realized by native speakers. In modern ethnographic and conversation analytic interpretations of the emic/etic distinction (though not in Pike's original formulation: see Pike, 1967, pp. 38 & 39), emic, qualitative research precedes etic, quantitative research. As Watson-Gegeo (1988) puts it: "Ethnographic analysis is not exclusively emic. Rather, a carefully done emic analysis precedes and forms the basis for etic extensions that allow for cross-cultural or cross-setting comparisons" (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, pp. 580–1).

Unlike quantitative research, which is relatively unified in terms of its goals and procedures, qualitative research is comparatively heterogeneous in its aims and methodologies. For example, the guidelines for quantitative and qualitative research published in *TESOL Quarterly* (2003, pp. 157–78) contain a single entry for quantitative research, and three separate entries for *case study research*, *conversation analysis* (CA), and (*critical*) *ethnography* under the general rubric of qualitative research (see each entry for useful references pertaining to each of these subfields of qualitative research). Furthermore, note that these three examples constitute a very conservative list of bona fide qualitative methodologies: arguably, there should also be entries for, say, *ethnomethodology*, *hermeneutics*, *life histories*, *diary studies*, *content analysis*, and *survey research*, among other potential candidates.

While these examples of qualitative research are emic in the broad sense that they all invoke a participant's perspective as their point of analytic departure, it is important to realize that there are subtle differences in how this point of view is interpreted, particularly by ethnographers and conversation analysts. So, for example, Watson-Gegeo (1988, p. 576) notes that ethnography derives from anthropology and defines ethnography as "the study of people's behavior in naturally occurring settings, with a focus on the cultural interpretation of behavior." Furthermore, she identifies four principles of ethnographic research (pp. 577–9). More specifically, ethnography: a) focuses on the culturally contextualized behavior of groups of individuals; b) seeks to link the microcontext of, for example, classroom talk, to the macrocontext of a school, district, and society; c) is guided by a theoretical framework which frames the kinds of situations and research questions that researchers ask themselves; and d) seeks to understand a situation in its own terms as a means of generating grounded (i.e., emic) theory.

In contrast, CA is derived from a radical form of sociology founded by Garfinkel (1974). As Roger and Bull (1988) explain, Garfinkel coined the neologism "ethnomethodology" by combining the words "ethno" and "methodology" based on terms such as "ethnobotany" and "ethnomedicine," which refer to folk systems of botanical and medical analysis, respectively. More specifically, the term "ethnomethodology" "refers to the study of the ways in which everyday commonsense activities are analyzed by participants, and of the ways in which these analyses are incorporated into courses of action" (Roger & Bull, 1988, p. 3). These authors then go on to point out that CA has emerged as the most influential

development within ethnomethodology, and that CA has also made important contributions to psychology, linguistics, and anthropology. On this reading, CA seeks to explain how, during the course of naturally occurring “talk-in-interaction” (i.e., ordinary conversation and institutional talk: see Schegloff, 1987) participants orient to the practices of turn taking, repair, and conversational sequencing, and also to the preference organization of adjacency pairs and repair sequences, as resources for the co-construction of talk in real time (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008). Thus, as I have already noted, ethnography and CA both share an interest in explicating how participants understand naturally occurring courses of action. However, there are major differences between these two disciplines in terms of how they handle culture, context, and the role of theory in emic knowledge construction.

Let us now investigate how these three notions are understood in ethnography and CA: First, as we have already seen, Watson-Gegeo’s third emic principle of ethnography is that ethnographers are guided by a theoretical framework which frames the kinds of situations and research questions that they ask themselves. In contrast, CA adopts a perspective on what constitutes emic research which is epistemologically much more radical. For example, conversation analysts are not only “ethnomethodologically indifferent” (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970, p. 63) toward a priori theories of social science (such as, for example, SLA), but they also regard theory as a *by-product* of empirical analysis (Markee, 2008).

Second, the role of context—which is probably one of the most contentious concepts in linguistics, anthropology, and sociology—is understood quite differently by ethnographers and conversation analysts. Part of the difficulty here is that, as Goodwin and Duranti (1992) point out, there is no widely accepted consensus regarding how to conceptualize context. However, by and large, ethnographers tend to invoke a broad range of macro- and micro-sociocultural factors (which, in descending order, might include the economic, political, social, educational, institutional, and classroom context of, say, gendered pedagogical talk) in order to understand a particular course of action. In contrast, conversation analysts tend to argue that talk functions as its own context. So, for example, Heritage (1988) argues that social order is to be found in the minutest details of talk-in-interaction and goes on to make the case that conversation analyses are simultaneously (and without contradiction) both context *shaped* and context *renewing*. That is, current talk is not only *shaped* by the talk that immediately precedes it, it also sets up a new sequential context through which speakers *renew* (i.e., maintain, adjust, or alter) their understandings of what happens in the next turn. This highly localized understanding of talk-as-its-own-context is obviously controversial from an ethnographic perspective and has given rise to the so-called “cultural critique” of CA (see Maynard, 2003, pp. 68–70), which, in brief, criticizes this notion of context as being far too limited (see, for example, Moerman, 1988). But in his counter-critique of ethnographic notions of context, Schegloff (1987, 1991) strongly argues that any appeals to ethnographic context to explicate talk-in-interaction must be grounded in the observable *relevance* that a particular piece of information has for *those* participants engaged in *that* piece of talk. In addition, Schegloff further suggests that analysts must be able to demonstrate the *procedural consequences* that these pieces of information have for the way in which the details of talk-in-interaction are analyzed. Given these respective positions, it is not surprising to find that whereas ethnographers routinely seek to show how different concentric circles of context are intertwined with each other, conversation analysts are wary of making any such macro/micro interconnections.

Finally, discussions regarding the role of culture in the two disciplines are beset by similar problems of definition and by arguments about what the scope of culture is. So, for example, Duranti (1997) reviews no less than six different perspectives on what culture is (these perspectives include formulations of culture as: a) distinct from nature; b) knowledge; c) communication; d) a system of mediation; e) a system of practices; and f) a system of participation). However, he refrains from providing a definition of his own

that synthesizes core characteristics from these different viewpoints. In contrast, culture in ethnomethodological CA is treated in a way that is reminiscent of the way in which context is treated in this discipline. So, for example, Benson and Hughes (1991) propose that any analysis of talk-in-interaction “in terms of the ‘mechanism’ by which that talk was produced *there* and *then*, is an explication of some part of culture” (Benson & Hughes, 1991, p. 130; emphasis in the original).

Thus, conversation analysts not only avoid invoking a priori etic theory as a means of framing their analytic interests, they also subscribe to the limited versions of context and culture discussed above. This has the further consequence that conversation analysts and ethnographers tend to have qualitatively quite different understandings of what constitutes an emic perspective on research. More specifically, while ethnographers often equate the use of an emic approach with *developing empathy with*, and *giving voice to*, participants, CA typically approaches the task of developing an emic account of language behavior in a more *technical* fashion. This stance famously prompted Moerman (1988, pp. x–xi) to rebuke CA for its preoccupation with the “dry bones” of talk, and for its “bloodless” and “impersonal” approach to “richly experienced human reality.” As we have already seen, however, the ethnographic position on context and culture is vulnerable to the charge that, in their quest to capture the essence of richly experienced human reality, ethnographers ultimately have to rely on a methodologically unspecifiable notion of privileged access to what fundamentally constitutes our everyday humanity. Clearly, this debate is unlikely to end any time soon.

Conclusions

In summary, I have tried to demonstrate in this entry that while etic (quantitative) research is relatively homogeneous, emic (qualitative) research is much more heterogeneous in its ontological and epistemological assumptions. I have illustrated this idea by concentrating on the different meanings that the concept of “emicness” hold for ethnographers and conversation analysts. From the perspective of somebody who has carried out both ethnographic and conversation analytic research (see Markee, 1997, 2000, respectively), I am very comfortable saying that ethnographers and conversation analysts are clearly on the same side of the epistemological divide vis-à-vis the uniformly etic notions of experimental research. However, it is important to understand that there are also important differences within the broad church of qualitative research. Ultimately, ethnographers are interested in developing broad, integrated answers to “Why” type questions about the ways in which we live our lives. In contrast, conversation analysts ask “How” type questions about the ways in which we make sense of everyday courses of action. Both these quests are “emic” in nature, but it is important for applied linguists to understand that different questions lead to potentially quite different answers.

SEE ALSO: Analysis of Discourse and Interaction: Overview; Conversation Analysis: Overview; Culture and Context: Overview

References

- Benson, D., & Hughes, J. (1991). Method: Evidence and inference for ethnomethodology. In G. Button (Ed.), *Ethnomethodology and the human sciences* (pp. 109–36). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Duranti, A. (1997). *Linguistic anthropology*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

4 EMIC AND ETIC IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

- Garfinkel, H. (1974). The origins of the term "ethnomethodology." In R. Turner (Ed.), *Ethnomethodology*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books.
- Garfinkel, H., & Sacks, H. (1970). On formal structures of practical actions. In J. C. McKinney & E. A. Tyriakian (Eds.), *Theoretical sociology* (pp. 338–66). New York, NY: Appleton Century Crofts.
- Goodwin, C., & Duranti, A. (1992). Rethinking context: An introduction. In A. Duranti and C. Goodwin (Eds.), *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon* (pp. 1–42). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Heritage, J. (1988). Current developments in conversation analysis. In D. Roger & P. Bull (Eds.), *Conversation* (pp. 21–47). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Hutchby, I., & Wooffitt, R. (2008). *Conversation analysis* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, England: Polity.
- Markee, N. (1997). *Managing curricular innovation*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Markee, N. (2000). *Conversation analysis*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Markee, N. (2008). Toward a learning behavior tracking methodology for CA-for-SLA. *Applied Linguistics*, 29, 404–27.
- Maynard, D. (2003). *Bad news, good news: Conversational order in everyday talk and clinical settings*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Moerman, M. (1988). *Talking culture: Ethnography and conversation analysis*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Pike, K. L. (1967). *Language in relation to a unified theory of the structures of human behavior* (2nd ed.). The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton.
- Roger, D., & Bull, P. (1988). Section 1: Concepts of interpersonal communication. In D. Roger & P. Bull (Eds.), *Conversation* (pp. 1–8). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1987). Between macro and micro: Contexts and other connections. In J. Alexander, B. Giesen, R. Munch, & N. Smelser (Eds.), *The micro-macro link* (pp. 207–34). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1991). Reflections on talk and social culture. In D. Boden, & D. Zimmerman (Eds.), *Talk and social structure* (pp. 44–70). Cambridge, England: Polity.
- Watson-Gegeo, K. A. (1988). Ethnography in ESL: Defining the essentials. *TESOL Quarterly*, 22, 575–92.

Suggested Readings

- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (2nd ed.). London, England: Routledge.
- Schegloff, E. A. (2007). *Sequence organization in interaction*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Young, R. F. (2008). *Language and interaction: An advanced resource book*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Young, R. F. (2009). *Discursive practice in language learning and teaching*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.