

KENNETH L. PIKE, *Etic and Emic Standpoints for the Description of Behavior*



It proves convenient—though partially arbitrary—to describe behavior from two different standpoints, which lead to results which shade into one another. The etic viewpoint studies behavior as from outside of a particular system, and as an essential initial approach to an alien system. The emic viewpoint results from studying behavior as from inside the system. (I coined the words etic and emic from the words phonetic and phonemic, following the conventional linguistic usage of these latter terms. The short terms are used in an analogous manner, but for more general purposes.)

Characteristics of the Two Standpoints

The principal differences between the etic and emic approaches to language and culture can be summarized as follows:

Cross-Cultural versus Specific

The etic approach treats all cultures or languages—or a selected group of them—at one time. It might well be called “comparative” in the anthropological sense (cf. Mead 1952: 344)¹ were it not for the fact that the phrase “comparative linguistics” has a quite different usage already current in linguistic circles, in reference to comparing related languages with a view to reconstructing parent forms. The emic approach is, on the contrary, culturally specific, applied to one language or culture at a time.

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units and classifications, based on prior broad sampling or surveys (and studied in training courses) may be available before one begins the analysis of a further particular language or culture. Regardless of how much training one has however, emic units of a language must be determined during the analysis of that language; they must be discovered, not predicted—even though the range of kinds of components of language has restrictions placed upon it by the physiology of the human organism, and these restrictions are to some degree reflected in the events of the observed range of language phenomena.

Creation versus discovery of a system: The etic organization of a world-wide cross-cultural scheme may be created by the analyst. The emic structure of a particular system must, I hold, be discovered. (But here I am assuming a philosophy of science which grants that in the universe some structures occur other than in the mind of the analyst himself. If one adopts a view that no structure of language or culture is present in the universe, except as a theoretical construct created by the analyst, then the paragraph must be restated in a different way, to preserve its usefulness in such a context. Specifically, the linguist who denies structure to a naive sentence or to a sonnet must settle for having his own statements, descriptions, or rules about these phenomena as also being without a publicly available structure or ordering. Linguistic statement comprises a subvariety of language utterance, and hence can have no structure if language has no structure.)

External versus internal view: Descriptions or analyses from the etic standpoint are "alien" in view, with criteria external to the system. Emic descriptions provide an internal view, with criteria chosen from within the system. They represent to us the view of one familiar with the system and who knows how to function within it himself.

External versus internal plan: An etic system may be set up by criteria or "logical" plan whose relevance is external to the system being studied. The discovery or setting up of the emic system requires the inclusion of criteria relevant to the internal functioning of the system itself.

Absolute versus relative criteria: The etic criteria may often be considered absolute, or measurable directly. Emic criteria are relative to the internal characteristics of the system, and can be usefully described or measured relative to each other.

Non-integration versus integration: The etic view does not require that every unit be viewed as part of a larger setting. The emic view, however, insists that every unit be seen as somehow distributed and functioning within a larger structural unit or setting, in a hierarchy of units and hierarchy of settings as units.

Sameness and difference as measured versus systemic: Two units are different etically when instrumental measurements can show them to be so. Units are different emically only when they elicit different responses from people acting within the system.

Partial versus total data: Etic data are obtainable early in analysis with partial information. In principle, on the contrary, emic criteria require knowledge of the total system to which they are relative and from which they ultimately draw their significance.

Preliminary versus final presentation: Hence, etic data provide access into the system—the starting point of analysis. They give tentative results, tentative units. The final analysis or presentation, however, would be in emic units. In the total analysis, the initial etic description gradually is refined, and is ultimately—in principle, but probably never in practice—replaced by one which is totally emic.

If, furthermore, it is desired to present the emic—structural—units not only as algebraic points relative to a system, but also as elements physically described, the emic notation must be supplemented by etic, physical description.

The penalty for ignoring the etic/emic distinction, and of attempting to utilize (without knowing it) an etic description when an emic one is needed, is best stated in the words of Sapir, who anticipated this position years ago:

It is impossible to say what an individual is doing unless we have tacitly accepted the essentially arbitrary modes of interpretation that social tradition is constantly suggesting to us from the very moment of our birth. Let anyone who doubts this try the experiment of making a painstaking report [i.e., an etic one] of the actions of a group of natives engaged in some activity, say religious, to which he has not the cultural key [i.e., a knowledge of the emic system]. If he is a skillful writer, he may succeed in giving a picturesque account of what he sees and hears, or thinks he sees and hears, but the chances of his being able to give a relation of what happens, in terms that would be intelligible and acceptable to the natives themselves, are practically nil. He will be guilty of all manner of distortion; his emphasis will be constantly askew. He will find interesting what the natives take for granted as a casual kind of behavior worthy of no particular comment, and he will utterly fail to observe the crucial turning points in the course of action that give formal significance to the whole in the minds of those who do possess the key to its understanding (1927, in his *Selected Writings*, 546–547).²

An illustration remote from human behavior may be helpful: in an emic approach, the analyst might describe the structural functioning of a particular car as a whole, and might include charts showing the parts of the whole car as they function in relation one to another; in an etic approach he might describe the elements one at a time as they are found in a stock room, where bolts, screws, rims, fenders and complex parts, such as generators and motors from various models and makes of cars, have been systematically “filed” according to general criteria.

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Physical Nature, Response, and Distribution

Certain physical events must be kept in mind for an emic analysis of verbal materials. They include at least two types, neither of which, in the view presented here, can be ignored at any level of language structure without ultimate loss of some relevant data, or distortion of the system being studied. These two types of events are (a) linguistic—i.e., verbal, and (b) extralinguistic—i.e., nonverbal. Every emic unit of language behavior must be studied in reference to its distribution—distribution in reference to verbal behavior, and distribution in reference to nonverbal cultural behavior. Within the study of the distribution of language units in nonverbal contexts is included the consideration of the nonverbal responses of individuals to speech addressed to them. Just as the verbal replies of a speaker help one determine meanings of elements of communication, so the nonverbal ones do likewise. To attempt to analyze or describe language without reference to its function in eliciting responses—verbal and nonverbal—is to ignore one of the crucial kinds of evidence which is essential if the emic structure of language is to be determined, whether one is dealing with the larger units of that structure, such as the sentence, or smaller ones, such as some of the emic units of the sound system.

This analytical dependence can be in part ignored at the presentation of the material after the language structure has been analyzed. But this theory maintains that in the analytical process there is tacit or explicit reference to cultural distribution, nonverbal as well as verbal. If one is working through a second language, by interpretation, it is easy to succumb to the illusion that there is no such dependence, since one may appear to be using 'words,' only, to get data and to determine its function and structure. With a monolingual approach the direct dependence upon nonverbal contexts is more easily seen. In either case, once the analyst notes his ultimate reliance upon cultural distribution of nonverbal as well as verbal types, he is ready to appreciate, in further detail . . . that a theory of language is needed which is not discontinuous with a theory of other phases of human activity.

Value of Standpoints

Both etic and emic approaches are of great value for special phases of behavioral analysis. The etic approach to behavior is of especial value, first, in giving to a beginning student a broad training as to the kinds of behavior occurring around the world, so that he may be the more prepared to recognize quickly the different kinds of events observed, and to help him see slight differences between similar events. Second, during this process he may obtain a technique and symbolism (say a phonetic alphabet) for recording the events of a culture. Third, even the specialist, coming from one culture to a sharply

different one, has no other way to begin its analysis than by starting with a rough, tentative (and inaccurate) etic description of it. No matter how skillful an emicist he may be, he can complete his emic description only after the analysis is complete—not before—and that analysis must be begun by recording data etically in terms of his prior experience (systematic training or unclassified knowledge gained in terms of his own culture). Fourth, in studies of the geographical occurrence or diffusion of single kinds of activity, or of a pre-selected list of activities within an area, the analyst may not choose (because of financial limitations, pressure of time, and so on) to make a complete emic study of each local culture or dialect; under such circumstances an etic comparison may be used—or, better, a widespread etic sampling of many local areas with additional intensive emic studies of a few strategically located areas.

The value of emic study is, first, that it leads to an understanding of the way in which a language or culture is constructed, not as a series of miscellaneous parts, but as a working whole. Second, it helps one to appreciate not only the culture or language as an ordered whole, but it helps one to understand the individual actors in such a life drama—their attitudes, motives, interests, responses, conflicts, and personality development. In addition, it provides the only basis upon which a predictive science of behavior can be expected to make some of its greatest progress, since even statistical predictive studies will in many instances ultimately prove invalid, except as they reflect samplings and classifications which are homogeneous—but homogeneity in behavior must for many of these purposes be emically defined.

Caution—Not a Dichotomy

A caution needs to be given at this point: in many instances, an etic and an emic description may appear to be almost alike—so much so, in fact, that the unwary reader may say that there is “no difference,” say, between the phonetic and phonemic descriptions of the system of sounds of a language, or that the difference is so slight as not to warrant the extra effort an emic description requires.

To be sure, much of the data is the same, and the general content looks much alike. Yet this is also true of the two separate pictures which go into a stereoscopic viewer; an untrained person usually sees them as identical, but the three dimensional effect evoked by seeing simultaneously through the stereoscope the two views of the same scene—taken at the same time, under the same lighting conditions, but with viewpoints scant inches apart—makes this added perception startling indeed. And so it can be with the two viewpoints of etics and emics. Through the etic “lens” the analyst views the data in tacit reference to a perspective oriented to all comparable events (whether sounds,

ceremonies, actions, etc.), the emic lens, the emic context, in reference to particular events, the result is a kind of a “flat” etic

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It must be further emphasized that etic and emic data do not constitute a rigid dichotomy of bits of data, but often present the same data from two points of view. Specifically, for example, the emic units of a language, once discovered by emic procedures, may be listed for comparative purposes with the similar emic units from other languages so studied. The moment that this has been done, however, the emic units have changed into etic units, since they are divorced from the context of the structure of the language from which they have come, and are viewed as generalized instances of abstract stereotypes, rather than as living parts of an actual sequence of behavior events within a particular culture. Similarly, if a person working in one dialect moves to a very similar neighboring dialect, his first transcription is an etic one, perforce, because he is alien to that dialect, but it may actually be very close to the final emic transcription which he will produce: many of his tentative etic units will turn out to be emic units as well.

We turn, now, to illustrations of differences in outlook on particular events where a camera recording of the physical event would not be enough—but where other data must also be used.

Illustrations of Purposive Emic Differences Within a Culture

Within a particular culture there are many events which on the surface appear to be similar or identical, but which function very differently. This difference often consists in the different purpose of the actors. This purpose is frequently obvious to the outside observer or other participants; at other times it is obscure both to the outside observer and to the participant. When the difference of purpose is easily seen, it is detected in terms of the kind of observable larger sequence of events within which the smaller event occurs (i.e., its distribution)—and in terms of the response which it immediately receives. When the purpose is temporarily hidden from the other participants, the choice of alternate responses may be delayed until after other events have made the purposive difference clear, or a response may be given which the participants may later judge to have been inappropriate.

In the United States Senate a camera and recorder on different occasions might register two speeches which were physically similar. The first, let us say, is intended to affect the attitude of listeners, such as to convince them of the necessity of the course of action being presented. The second is discussing the

same course of action, with the same words, but without any such purpose. It is a filibuster designed not to affect that irrelevant issue which happens to provide the words, but is calculated so to delay the course of business as to force the speaker's opponents to give up the attempt to pass a measure unpalatable to him. Some of the immediate reactions to a filibuster (such as inattention by the audience) may be quite different from that of the same data given as part of a different address.

A partial small-scale parallel with such an instance would be the speaking of any pair of homophones such as *pare, pair; rite, write; seal* (animal, noun), *sea* (of wax, noun), *seal* (verb). Here, too, the outward visible form may be the same, whereas the words as a whole must be considered different because of the responses which they elicit from the hearers, and the kind of verbal sequences into which they enter.

Units of size intermediate between a filibuster and single words may occur which must be similarly differentiated. Note such items as mimicry, where a child is trying to learn to speak by repeating sentences after adults; the homonymous repeated sentence is often inappropriate to normal conversation since the child may fail, for example, to change *you* to *I*, or to replace question with answer. A lie is homophonous with a parallel normal sentence, but they must be considered different emically, in spite of the identity of their internal structures. Even the immediate responses—and hence their apparent meanings—may be the same. In order to detect the essential difference between them, the observer must be prepared to notice reactions (say, a spanking) delayed for a much longer time. In lying, therefore, we have an illustration of an emic difference, where the natives themselves cannot immediately detect that difference—or it may go permanently undetected by the hearers. Here, then, there is some temporary or permanent indeterminacy of meaning.

Irony brings us a different type of homophony which includes, usually, the intention of having at least part of the audience to so detect it; if that purpose fails, the irony will be "lost on" the receiver of it—though it may cause the amusement of onlookers. Mimicry of the lisping character of someone's speech is similar to such irony—and quite different from the mimicry of an adult by a child learning to talk. An adult in learning a foreign language may be badly inhibited from adequate mimicry by reacting to his own learning process as if it were the kind of socially unacceptable mimicry rather than the other.

Nonverbal mimicry shows a similar patterning: a child utilizes small-scale implements to *do like Daddy*, in raking the lawn, digging a hole, or fishing. With his father gone from the scene, and the mimicry purpose removed, the child may not finish raking the lawn.

On an adult scale, the working activity may be quite similar, whether the regular workers or strike breakers are performing it, but the reaction to the first is one of normal community relations, whereas reaction to the second may include violent attempts by the strikers to interrupt the work of the strike

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breakers. The killing of a single fly by a Western adult might be an act of cleanliness, but by a Hindu might have implications of profound, religious significance, because of their beliefs concerning the possibility of the reincarnation of human souls into animal bodies. Tea drinking at 4.30 p.m. in some parts of the USA would imply a somewhat formal social gathering; in Australia it often means little more than quenching one's thirst. In meetings of the United Nations, the circumstances (i.e., distribution) and purpose of activities affect the reaction of people—to seeing one of, e.g., the participants "walk out" as a political measure to indicate disapproval (rather than to go to the toilet).

In our culture there are, furthermore, specific legal procedures which are used in an attempt to differentiate between events which are physically similar but emically different, with sharply different cultural penalties: Was the man carrying a pistol when he robbed the house? Did the driver run through a red light when he hit the man? Was the violence premeditated or the result of sudden anger? Was the author of it insane or was he deliberately cruel? Was the prisoner really trying to escape, or did the guard misunderstand, or pretend to do so, or even stage the event under orders? Nonlegal activity similarly attempts to apply criteria to determine such matters: Is this explanation the real reason, or is it just an excuse to mask laziness or irresponsibility or viciousness? Was the plate really cracked?

In nonverbal activity as in verbal activity there may be temporary ambiguities which can only be resolved by a study of a larger context. For example: Do the people of Country X know the issues which lead to their activity and choose that activity deliberately, or are they following the lead of someone else blindly or under compulsion?

Perhaps the illustration of such emic differences best known to linguistic circles is one given by Sapir (1925, in his *Selected Writings*, 34). A candle-blowing *wh*, though physically similar to the *wh* of *which* or *why*, in some dialects of English is, nevertheless, "entirely distinct" from it in the series of kinds of events to which it belongs. For both of them the lips are puckered up, and air is blown out of the mouth with a slight friction sound. In the first, the purpose is to blow out a candle, and the event is part of a series, such as "going to bed"; in the second, the sound becomes part of a word, and the word becomes part of a sentence, and the sentence becomes part of a conversation.

An emic approach would treat as significantly different the preceding pairs of events. One kind of etic approach—one which ignored meaning or purpose—might treat them as nearly identical pairs. In between these two approaches would be a different etic classification of these emic types, listing them in relation to differential purpose, meaning, or response, but not in relation to the full systems from which they were abstracted. . . .

Notes

1. Ed. note. Margaret Mead, "The Training of the Cultural Anthropologist" *American Anthropologist* 54 (1952): 343-346.
2. Ed. note. Edward Sapir, *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality*. David G. Mandelbaum (ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949.

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