What 'emic' and 'etic' really mean

It has become standard, in cross-cultural business studies, to invoke the 'emic/etic' distinction to mean this:

> 'emic' means something that is culture-specific
>
> 'etic' means something that is universal

The terms are derived from the linguistic analogies of 'phonemic' and 'phonetic' analysis. Their route into modern business studies goes through Pike (1954, 1955, 1960), through social psychology (for example, Triandis and Berry, eds, 1980), and into the very extensive domain of North American business studies which is influenced by social psychology (see *Academy of Management Review*, passim; *Journal of International Business Studies*, Fall 1983, special edition on culture).

Berry, in a characteristic and influential statement, says:

> By dropping the root (phon), the two suffixes (emics, etics) become terms which are applicable to this local versus universal distinction in any discipline. By analogy, emics apply in only a particular society; etics are culture-free or universal aspects of the world (or if not entirely universal, operate in more than one society). (Berry, p.11)

Berry continues (and long citation is necessary to make the essential points):

Our major problem is how to describe behaviour in terms which are meaningful to members of a particular culture (an emic approach) while at the same time to compare validly behaviour in that culture with behaviour in another or all other cultures (the etic aim). The proposed solution (Berry, 1969, p.124) involves the initial application of extant hypotheses concerning behaviour. A research problem must be tackled from some point of view; the conventional one has been termed an imposed etic approach. The researcher must recognize the culturally specific (perhaps even ethnocentric) origins of our approach, and deliberately remain open to new and even contrary kinds of data variation. If he enters into the behaviour system of another culture, knowing that his point of entry (imposed etic) is probably only a poor approximation to an understanding of behaviour in that system, then the first major hurdle is passed. Modification of external categories must be made in the direction of the behavioural system under study; eventually a truly emic description of behaviour within that culture will be achieved. That is, an emic description can be made by progressively altering the imposed etic until it matches a purely emic point of view; if this can be done without destroying the etic character of the entry categories, then the next step can be taken. If some of the etic is left, it is possible to note the categories or concepts that are shared by the behaviour system previously known and the one just understood emically. Now a derived etic that is valid for making comparisons between two behaviour

settings can be set up; thus the problem of obtaining a descriptive framework

which is valid for comparing behaviour across behaviour settings has been

resolved. This new derived etic can then be transported to another behaviour

setting (again as an imposed etic), be modified emically, and thence form the basis

of a new derived etic which is valid in three behaviour settings. When all systems

which may be compared (limited by the initial functional equivalence

requirement) have been included, then a universal for that particular behaviour

will be achieved. (Berry, pp.12-13)

Adler (1983, p.36) echoes Berry, using the terms to differentiate 'the universal from the

particular', and defines them as follows:

Emic: sounds which are specific to a particular language

Etic: sounds which are similar in all languages

Berry correctly cites Pike as the origin of the abbreviations 'emic' and 'etic', from their

linguistic origin as 'phonemic' and 'phonetic'. Pike conceived these abbreviations, as

Berry notes, as generalisable beyond language into 'a unified theory of human behaviour'

(see Pike, 1954, 1955, 1960).

The emic/etic distinction, as initiated by Pike, and as used by Berry and Adler, is no more

than a paraphrase of the specific/universal distinction; as such, it bears only a vague

family resemblance to the intellectually rich exemplar - the phonemic/phonetic

opposition. Even in their impoverished and simplified form, as the decapitated suffixes

etic and etic, standing for 'universal' and 'particular', Jahoda (1977) has argued that they

are too complex for use (see Berry, 1980, p.13); one might almost despair, if that is so, of

trying to go back to the true nature of the problem, considerably more complex as it is.

Nevertheless, a good deal turns upon the matter, and some attempt must be made.

A phoneme is a range of sound possibilities, produced and perceived within any one

language (or dialect), as if it were a single significant sound. It is easiest to exemplify this

with vowels. The human possibility for producing vowel sounds is complex and

multidimensional. The major dimensions of distinction, however, tongue position and lip

position, are continuously variable; there are no discontinuities given in the sound-

producing systems. In spite of this, however, languages divide these continuous

dimensions up into discrete units, making systems of a limited number of vowel

phonemes, commonly between about 5 and 12. Artificial, arbitrary divisions are imposed

upon a continuous physical reality, dividing it up into discrete units. We can imagine a

figurative three-vowel system:


```
        |    1    |    2    |    3    |

        ---------------------------------

        |         |         |         |

        a         b         c         d
```
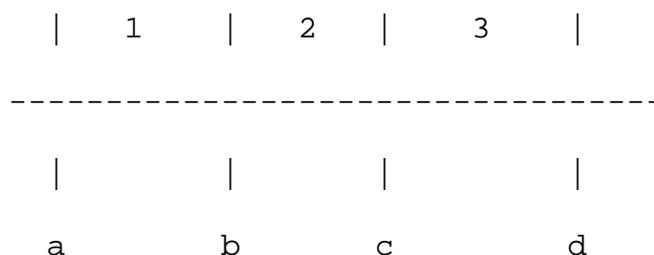
The horizontal line is a continuous physical range of sound possibilities (it does not matter which range, for the moment); the three vertical lines beneath are boundaries between the three phonemes. For the purposes of discussion, the notional phonemes are given numbers, 1, 2 and 3, and the notional boundaries between them are given letters, a, b, c, and d.

Crudely put, all sounds between the boundaries a and b will be perceived, by the speakers of this language, as phoneme 1. Within this range, they will not perceive any difference, and their sound production will reflect this. Sounds beyond the boundary b will be perceived, however close they are to the boundary, as phoneme 2; and so on. The phonemes, the significant sounds, do not exist in themselves, but in their opposition to adjoining phonemes; they exist in an artificial system of boundaries and oppositions -- a system which is arbitrary, arbitrarily imposed upon physical reality. Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1916) is usually cited as the source of this insight, elaborated in the structural linguistics of the Prague school (see Trubetzkoy, 1969).

The particular phonemic structure with which we are familiar dominates our perception and our production of sounds, and thereby our understanding of language. It is not the physical reality of sound which has significance for us, but the system we impose upon it. As O'Connor says, in trying to give explanatory examples in this area: 'Our thinking is tied so very much to phonemes rather than to sounds that it is easier to see the relationship between the two in foreign languages than in our own' (O'Connor, 1973, p.66).

The full implications of this, of the existential nature of the phoneme and its analogical possibilities, take some time to sink in. To be fully believed, even in the restricted linguistic sphere, they need to be given flesh through detailed examples, and through foreign language learning. For their possibilities outside the linguistic sphere to be fully realised, a period of reflection of some years seems to be necessary.

We can now attempt a notional comparison of three different vowel systems - one, the system above; a second, another three-vowel system which divides the sound range differently; and a third, a four vowel system:

```
1)              |   1   |   2   |   3   |

        -----------------------------------

                |       |       |       |

            a         b       c         d


2)              |   1   |   2   |   3   |

        -----------------------------------

                |       |       |       |

              a         b       c         d


3)      |   1   |   2   |   3   |   4   |

        -----------------------------------

        |       |       |       |       |

        a       b       c       d         e
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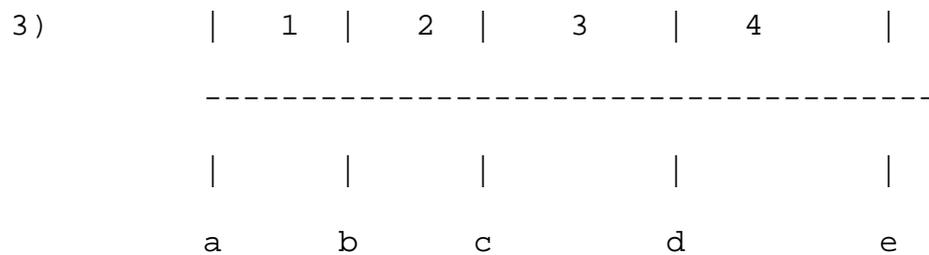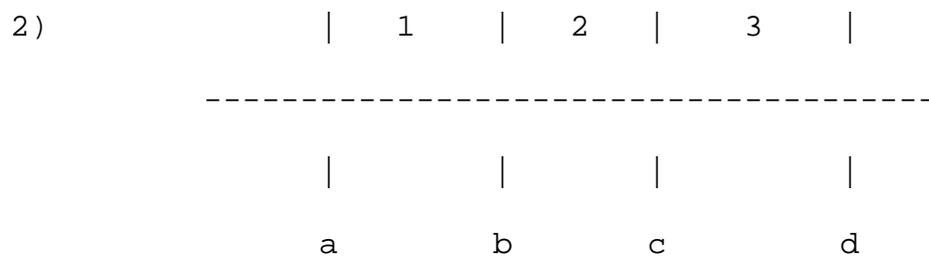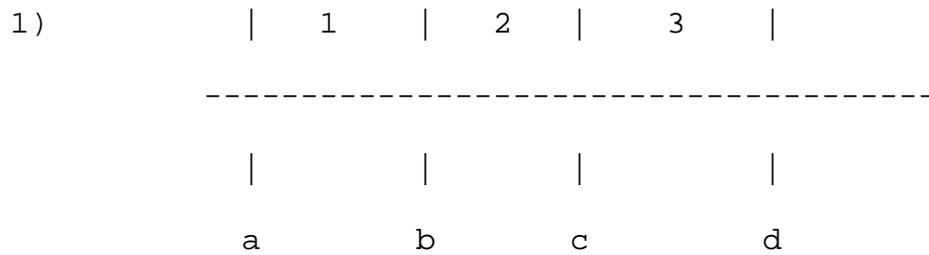
Looking at systems 1 and 2, we might well wonder what to compare with what: is vowel 1 in system 1 to be compared with vowel 1 in system 2, or is vowel 1 in system 2 best compared with vowel 2 in system 1? And so on. If one is looking for cross-linguistic generalisation, there are no good clues as to where to generalise. Still, one might wish to say that the area shared by vowel 1 in systems 1 and 2 represents, within this restricted universe, a shared feature - a 'universal'.

It is important to note, however, that if one does this, one accords to the left half of vowel 1 in system 1 an altogether different status to that of the right half; and to the right half of vowel 1 in system 2 an altogether different status to that of the left half. These major differences in status are imposed upon what are experienced, from within each individual system, as untroubled unities; the speakers in system 1 are unaware of any possibility of internal differentiation of their vowel phoneme 1, and of course are serenely indifferent to the fact that system 2 does things differently. Ditto for system 2. We might ask, therefore, what has our universal told us? What use will it be?

We can move on to comparison of the three systems. We have preserved, by graphical diktat, the slender possibility of drawing a vertical line which will establish a physical common link between phoneme 1 in all three systems, and another vertical line establishing a common link between phoneme 3 in all three systems; we have made this impossible for phonemes 2 and 4. Some might wish to find, in the vertical line indicating the common sections of the three versions of phoneme 1, a universal, an 'etic'. The implication might be that this slender section of the sound spectrum is more 'real', given in nature, fundamental to the human condition, infrastructural, or whatever, than the other surrounding parts of the three different versions of phoneme 1. The objection raised in the previous paragraph, about the differentiation by analysis of what is experienced as a unity, is relevant again here. The conclusion of a kind of universality cannot, however, within this three-language universe as graphically constructed, be simply rejected, in relation to phoneme 1; a determined seeker of universals has some evidence here, surely?

What, however, if we move on to phoneme 2? Here, we find that it has no 'universal' features. Phoneme 2 in system 3 has more in common with phoneme 1 in systems 1 and 2, than with other phoneme 2; phoneme 3 in system 3 entirely embraces phoneme 2 in system 2, as well as overlapping into phonemes 1 and 3 in system 2; and so on. Within each system, however, phoneme 2 has exactly the same reality status as phoneme 1: it is an equal part of the system, playing an equal part. Its lack of 'universality' does not, in the practical realities of its use, differentiate it in any significant way from phoneme 1.

Again, we can ask, what has the analyst discovered, in proposing an 'etic' across these languages - a sliver of sound, common to all three systems? This sliver of sound is, as already noted, irrelevant to the internal structure of phoneme 1 in each of the three systems. The suggestion of universality, moreover, implies that phoneme 1 has got something that phoneme 2 does not; within each system, within the realities of its use, this is not true. We might, therefore, suggest that the proposed 'etic' here is not 'a higher order of abstraction', or a 'universal', but rather an irrelevance, an artefact of a mode of inquiry, impertinent to the data.

The initial approach to studying and annotating spoken languages was unselfconsciously positivist: methods were sought to recognise, describe and annotate the sounds of all languages, using an objective method of observation, and a universal system of annotation. A good deal of progress was made, and the 'universal system of annotation'

came to exist, in a more or less usable and internationally recognised form, as the 'International Phonetic Alphabet' (often abbreviated to IPA; see IPA 1949). On the route to this, however, observers were obliged to notice, after much confusion, that their own linguistic apprehension of what constituted significant sound was radically challenged by that of speakers of other languages and dialects; other people persisted in grouping together large ranges of apparently disparate sounds, or differentiating between sounds that seemed to be the same: the 'phoneme' was, perforce, discovered (for a description of this process, see Robins, 1967, p.202-4).

Any particular vowel sound is one point on a continuous range of possibilities. A totally accurate transcription of such a phenomenon would require a virtually infinite range of symbols (in default, of course, of an accurate recording). A large range of such symbols has come into being, for both vowel and consonant sounds, and allowing for subtle variation in these (see IPA 1949). Nevertheless, even the most painstaking phonetic transcription can be no more than an approximation to the acoustic reality of elementary speech acts; if normal ranges of variability in pronunciation are introduced, then the problem is even more formidable. A phonemic transcription, by contrast, is much simpler. It uses for transcription symbols which represent the phonemes of the linguistic system in question; it requires no more symbols than there are phonemes in the language: by using the categorisation of sound that is relevant to the language in question, it contrives to be both simple and relevant. Phonetic analysis is, by contrast, cumbersome; it does not render any single language with the speed or fluency of

phonemic analysis, and it only approximates to its aim of objective description of all languages.

The immediate simplicity and relevance of phonemic analysis is not without its price. For full acoustic interpretation the phonemes need to be surrounded by an extensive descriptive and analytical apparatus of allophones, phonetic environments, and the like. Moreover, in the final analysis, the only person that can read a phonemic transcription with total accuracy, is one who already has access to the phonemic system in question, probably one who already speaks the language - knowledge for those who already know.

The linguistic example, if taken further, rapidly develops intricacies of its own, which are not immediately helpful in understanding the emic/etic distinction. We can summarise the main points, however:

1. A phoneme is an arbitrary acoustic entity, imposed upon acoustic reality by a specific linguistic system
2. A phoneme exists in a system of opposition, defined by its neighbours, defined by what it is not
3. The reality status of any particular phoneme is not determined by its underlying physicality, but by the two previous features - by the relationship, that is, between elements; all elements in the system have an equal status, however various their relationship to underlying physical reality

4. A phoneme has a unitary character, in the minds and practices of those who use it, however diverse the physical realities which it embraces

These features make the phenomenon sound existentially extremely suspect, from a positivist or realist point of view. It must be stressed, therefore, in all sober earnestness, as a fifth feature, that:

5. A phoneme is experienced as real, by those who live within the system of which it is a part.

We began with some modern uses of the emic/etic distinction, by Berry and Adler, and went back to their source, in the work of Pike; the modern uses do not greatly depart from those sanctioned by Pike. Pike was an American linguist, at a time when American linguistics was 'still in the full post-Bloomfieldian phase, now highly empirical and "behaviourist"' (Ardener 1989, p.31). Bloomfield had published his major work in 1933, but his influence was still dominant in the 1950s when Pike was constructing his argument (see Bloomfield 1933; Harris, Z. 1951). Pike was anthropologically inclined, and there were influences also from the earlier work of Edward Sapir (see 1921). This did not protect Pike, however, from the behaviourist bias of the time and the place. His work was, as Ardener regretfully notes, still 'a theory of "behaviour"' (1971; republished 1989, p.35).

Those who are familiar with the critique of behaviourism will understand why there is cause here for regret. Those who are self-conscious behaviourists may justifiably be annoyed at the implied criticism. Those many, however, who are tacit behaviourists without having thought about the problem too much, may simply be puzzled. Within (for example) international management studies that are concerned with 'culture', reference to the emic/etic distinction is often the biggest concession made to non-positivist thinking; it is a concession that is often made casually, with the terms only briefly invoked. Yet Pike, as we have seen, failed to represent the most important features of the phonemic/phonetic contrast, and was essentially a positivist and behaviourist thinker himself. He offers no essential challenge to the predominant patterns of thinking of social scientific positivism, and it is perhaps not surprising that his 'emic' and 'etic' should have been incorporated into the international cookery-book of social science undergraduate programmes, as synonyms of the 'culture-specific/universal' contrast.

If we go back beyond Pike to the phonemic/phonetic contrast, and to the work of Saussure, we can find a very different path of development. In Europe, structural linguistics of the Prague school developed the ideas of 'distinguishing features' at the phonemic level. These ideas were then creatively incorporated into the mainstream of European social scientific thought by Claude Lévi-Strauss. The first few chapters of Lévi-Strauss' *Structural Anthropology* show the author struggling to grasp the relevance of Saussure and of the Prague School of structural linguistics. Ardener puts it like this:

> The phoneme was at home only in the detailed data of linguistic description. To see the early Lévi-Strauss and even Pike (who was a linguist and an anthropologist) struggling with it – Laocoön-like figures coiled up in serpents – to apply it to social phenomena is quite astonishing. The relation of the phoneme to Saussurean principles is like that of the roller-skate to the concept of the wheel – a particular and specialised application. […] In short, it was the Saussureanism of the phoneme that was transferable – not the terminology. By its 'Saussureanism' I mean its relationship to the opposition *langue/parole*, and to the notions of 'system', 'opposition' itself, 'value' and the like. (Ardener, 1971; republished 1989, p.28)

What was needed was not the phoneme, but the notion of 'opposition', and two other associated features: linguistic arbitrariness, and the imperative nature of the synchronic system. There was no necessary need for these to have been discovered through linguistics, but the field offered conjoint empirical and theoretical advances - advances which Lévi-Strauss recognised to be both of great value, and of potentially wide application.

The notion of opposition is perhaps primary. It can seem trite, but it has profound implications for our thinking about the social world. We have seen above that a phoneme does not exist in itself, but in a system of oppositions - it is defined by what it is not. It is this system of oppositions which determines the reality status of the phoneme, and not the

relationship of the phoneme to underlying physical or material structures or

manifestations. The challenge to a positivist or naively realist view of the world is clear -

if systems of opposition, socially constructed and arbitrary, are given the power to define

the world, the securities of physicality and materiality are lost, at least in the social sphere.

It is these securities which the term 'behaviour' seems to provide - behaviour, in the

understanding of those that use the term, is in the external, observable, concrete realm.

We might look back to note the remarkable insistence, on Berry's part, on 'behaviour' as

the essential focus of social scientific attention (in the paragraph quoted above, Berry uses

the word 14 times). It is no surprise, therefore, that the Saussurean notion of opposition,

as realised through the work of Lévi-Strauss, should be inimical to behaviourism, and

should have led instead to a profound critique of behaviourism (and Ardener again

provides a trenchant summary; see Ardener, 1973)

If we go back to the original linguistic analogies (see Saussure, 1916; Sweet, 1877), we

can say that these have led in two rather distinct directions. One direction was through

Pike, and it is this direction that has given us the 'emic/etic' distinction of modern cross-

cultural management research, to which reference has already been made. Another

direction was through the structural linguistic and social anthropological traditions (see,

for example, Hjelmslev, 1943, 1963; Lévi-Strauss, 1962, 1963a, 1963b; Jones, 1964;

Ardener, 1989). Levi-Strauss is the key figure in bringing the Saussurean ideas from

linguistics into social anthropology, and Ardener's discussion of this is still without

parallel (see Chapman, 1989). British social anthropology took over the Saussurean and

Lévi-Straussian inspiration, and domesticated to its own purposes (for a few key texts, see Ardener, 1971; Leach, 1961; Needham, 1962; Parkin, 1982; Douglas, 1966).

The trajectory through Pike led to 'emic' and 'etic', conceived as 'culture specific' and 'universal'.

The trajectory through Levi-Strauss and British social anthropology led to ideas of 'opposition', 'system', 'value' and the like.

The difference in perspective is profound. If we look at the 'phoneme diagrams' given above, we have seen that we are looking at systems which make sense internally, through opposition of elements within the system. When we try to compare across systems, we find that it is not clear what should be compared with what. In some cases, we preserved the physical, acoustic possibility that there would be some common feature across all the systems. This is the exact analogy of Berry, with whom we started, saying 'if some of the etic is left', as we look across different systems, 'then a universal for that particular behaviour will be achieved'. But we have argued that this cross-system element is irrelevant, in the most profound way, to how the individual systems operate within themselves. We have some 'etic left', and it does us no good at all in analysis. Through finding the 'etic that is left', we have discovered something of very little importance, and potentially obscured many things.

In a strict linguistic sense, the 'phonetic' implies an objective description, fully specified in all possible dimensions, and the 'phonemic' implies a description which is based upon the categories employed by the people under study. So, in the original linguistic examples, a 'phonetic' description of how somebody from Bradford says the vowel in 'bath' would require a complex description of tongue, teeth, mouth, lips, volume, timbre, pitch and so on. It is a hard thing to research and express. A 'phonemic' description of how somebody from Bradford says the vowel in 'bath' can be much simpler – it summarises how many vowel phonemes there are in the Bradford dialect, and writes the vowel in Bath as /a/, which means the range of sounds which people speaking this dialect will hear as the appropriate vowel for that word. Ardener says:

> Essentially, phonemes were formulaic statements for the abstraction of significant units of speech. The analyst simplified the initial 'phonetic' data by using fewer terms but at the expense of requiring a book of rules to interpret them (Ardener, 1989, p.31).

This important distinction is totally denatured by its expression as:

> Emic (culture specific) : Etic (human universal)

We perhaps need an analytical opposition of the kind 'culture specific/human universal', but if we use the 'emic/etic' distinction for this, we lose one of the most important social scientific ideas of the 20[th] century.

In the standard discourse of cross-cultural business studies, it is often implied that 'etic' studies, because they use categories that are the same across all cultures, are somehow simpler, less empirically and conceptually challenging, than 'emic' studies, which require the use of culture-specific categories. If we look at the original linguistic analogy, we see that this too is a serious misconception. The research, scientific and descriptive apparatus required to discover and express *exactly* how a person from Bradford says 'bath' is formidably complex. The use of phonemic analysis allows the infinite range of possible vowel sounds to be broken into the locally relevant categories.

If we are going to take the linguistic analogy seriously in management research, then we must accept the difficulties and opportunities that the analogy offers. The 'emic/etic' contrast, as a synonym for the 'culture specific / universal' contrast, does not allow us to do this. It obscures important issues.

Looked at in this way, it is clear that we are necessarily dependent upon 'emic' accounts in a great deal of our social scientific research. Every time we ask someone a question, we get an 'emic' answer. We cannot reduce the variety of 'emic' answers to 'etic'

universals, without falling into the traps already described. The 'etic' perspective is not somehow easier or more scientific – it is often quite simply unavailable.

Many things flow from this.

One concerns the search for 'equivalence' in cross-cultural research (see Usunier, 2009, for a recent discussion). In a profound sense, we can sustain the argument that from a strictly Saussurean point of view, 'equivalence' is a chimaera; if we can have it, it is not interesting, and if it is interesting, we can't have it. We have no choice but to look carefully from one 'emic' to another. If we keep looking for equivalence, however hard and however often we try, we will always be looking for the 'some of the etic that is left' to which Berry referred, and which is so misleading and unhelpful in the diagrams given above. Ardener puts it this way:

> The paradox of total translation shows both that we do not want it, and that in life rather than in text (and here is our crucial break with high structuralism) we cannot have it (Ardener, 1989, p.185).

A second issue concerns translation and back-translation. Usunier (2009) refers to this as a 'band-aid' applied across the problem of equivalence. Certainly, from a Saussurean perspective, back translation does nothing to solve the fundamental incongruity of categories between systems.

A third issue concerns the inventory of 'human universals' apparently offered through the

existence of the Human Relations Area Files. This is an attempt to bring together

evidence from all available ethnographies, begun by George Murdock, and to demonstrate

the attributes that all or most societies have. This work is usually taken entirely seriously

within cross-cultural management studies (see Murdock, G. 1965; Berry, 1980; Ferraro,

1990; Usunier, 2009). Attention was drawn some time ago to the outright rejection of the

Murdockian approach by many of the leading ethnographers that provided the information

upon which Murdock relied (see Chapman, 1996/7, p.17). Needham, one of the leading

social anthropologists of the Oxford school, cited Murdock to this effect: "In

anthropology, the initial classificatory task has now been substantially accomplished in

the field of social structure" (Murdock, 1955, p.361). He then commented, with

characteristic forensic brutality:

> Well, I do not wish to disparage Murdock's decades of industrious application to
>
> these matters, but I am bound to say that I think these statements are mistaken in
>
> every particular. The notion of a finite and total classification is logically
>
> indefensible; and this methodological ambition has achieved no results which
>
> might give it a pragmatic justification (Needham, 1974, pp.60-61, citing Murdock,
>
> 1955, p.361).

Ardener, echoing this dismissal, said in 1976 that "Murdock [1965]…speaks with the voice of another age" (Ardener, 1989, p.157). This, once again, is a North American scholar, Murdock, inhabiting the 'etic' aspiration as formulated by Pike, and this aspiration being dismissed as fundamentally incoherent and wrong-headed by those who draw their inspiration from Saussure via (among others) Lévi-Strauss.

Of course we can use the words 'emic' and 'etic' to mean what we want. But we return to a form of words already used above. If we use 'emic' and 'etic' to mean 'culture-specific' and 'human universal', then we are closing our access to one of the best ideas of the 20[th] century (and, as far as management studies go, to one of the best ideas of the 21[st] century as well).

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