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Making sense of one other for another: Ethnography as translation

Michael Agar*

Ethknoworks, 7 Avenida Vista Grande B7, #465, Santa Fe, NM 87508, United States

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ABSTRACT

The tension between “etic” and “emic,” between outsider and insider descriptions of language and culture, has been a leitmotif of anthropology since its beginning. This article revisits Goodenough’s original discussion of emic and etic as a bridge into translation studies, emphasizing recent anthropological and sociological contributions. Translation illuminates the relationship between local specifics and human universals in just the way that emic and etic were meant to do based on the original model of phonetics and phonemics. Still missing, though, is a theory of the universal etic space that makes a connection across emics possible. Discussions of recent complexity-based work with multiagent systems serves as a thought experiment to see if an etic framework that generalizes intentionality might be possible. The conclusion calls for use of the etic concept to develop an anthropological theory of what it means to be human.

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1. Introduction

It’s odd to look back and decide you’ve been thinking about a problem for decades and didn’t know it. It’s also suspicious, as Charlotte Linde showed in her studies of how people tailor their life story to suit the moment of telling (1993). But still, I remember the problem starting in 1964, in Bernie Siegel’s introduction to anthropology class. He’d talk 1 day about “cultural relativism” and the next day about what was then called the “psychic unity of mankind.” And he’d talk about the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, “the limits of my language are the limits of my world,” as Wittgenstein put it. But he explained Hopi verb tenses to us in English, so, he asked, how was that possible? (As it turns out, the translation was wrong anyway (Malotki, 1983).)

Ward Goodenough tried to work out the apparent contradiction in his book, *Description and Comparison in Cultural Anthropology* (1970), and his work provides the motive for this venture into translation. Goodenough was a linguist, and he borrowed the work of another linguist, Kenneth Pike, who had proposed what he called the emic/etic distinction. A full-blown overview of the origins and uses of *that* distinction would take too long to summarize here (Pike, 1967). I wrote an article for an encyclopedia of sociology describing it (Agar, 2007). Emic and etic—as readers involved in linguistics will already know—are based on the relationship between *phonetics* and *phonemics* in traditional phonology.

Phonetics is an orthography for most of the possible sounds that a human can produce given their articulatory equipment. Phonemics, in turn, uses that notation to figure out the subset of those possible sounds that signal a difference to speakers of a particular language. For instance, post-vocalic aspiration—a puff of air after a vowel—is distributed in different ways in different languages. In some it signals a different word; in others it doesn’t. But *any* human can be trained to hear it and transcribe it using phonetic notation. Phonetics is universal; phonemics is specific to a language among some group at some point in time.

* Tel.: +1 505 920 5174.

E-mail address: magar@anth.umd.edu

Pike shortened phonetic and phonemic to *etic* and *emic* and applied them to ethnography in general, not just to the audible products of the human articulatory system. Unfortunately, the *etic/emic* distinction turned into an argument over which kind of ethnography was the *right* kind—*etic* on the one hand or *emic* on the other (Harris, 1976). But Goodenough stayed clear on the concept as he put it to work. He kept his eye on how phonetics and phonemics worked *together* in the study of language, and he argued that emics and etics should do the same thing in the many other domains that ethnographers investigated. The problem was—and still is—what kind of *etic/emic* framework would allow ethnographers to describe and compare at the same time, not just for phonology, but for *all* of society and culture.

We still haven't figured out the answer, at least in theory. In practice, on the ground, ethnographers for years have made sense out of human differences in terms of human similarities. *Etic* and *emic*, the universal and the historical particular, are not *separate* kinds of understanding when one person makes sense of another. They are both part of *any* understanding.

In this article, I'd like to look at *translation*, a kindred process that can help show how *etic* and *emic* always work together when one human tries to make sense out of a second human for the benefit of a third. The universal human connections that make it possible to achieve that result lie implicit in the background. They need to be made explicit. They are part of the missing anthropological theory of what, back in the day, anthropology called the psychic unity of humanity.

2. Emic and etic in translation

The translation metaphor is not alien to anthropology. For years many anthropologists have said that one way to think about ethnography is as *translation writ large*, the “large” meaning the cultural background required to understand the details of social action.

Although the term has been in play for decades, it has not been systematically developed as part and parcel of ethnographic work. Asad, in his chapter in *Writing Culture* (1986), notes that the concept flourished in British social anthropology starting around the 1950s. Werner discussed translation in an American anthropological context in a classic methodological handbook some time ago (Werner and Campbell, 1970). But, as Asad said:

Yet despite the general agreement with which this notion has been accepted as part of the self-definition of British social anthropology, it has received little systematic examination from within the profession (1986:143).

In two recent edited books on translation in anthropology, the same point is made. Rubel and Rossman write in their introduction to *Translating Cultures: Perspectives on Translation and Anthropology*:

However, curiously, the role that translation has played in anthropology has not been systematically addressed by practitioners, even though translation has been so central to data-gathering procedures, and to the search for meanings and understandings (2003:1).

And Maranhão, editor of another recent volume, *Translation and Ethnography: The Anthropological Challenge of Intercultural Understanding*, simply writes that “Many disciplines, such as anthropology, belong to the science of translation” (2003:xi), the implication being that the field has not developed that relationship.

It is obvious that social/cultural anthropology *translates* various *emic* “cultures” into a shared *etic* framework, the “description” and “comparison” of Goodenough's book title. But some authors in these recent volumes on translation describe problems with the anthropological version of the *etic*. The gentlest criticism comes from Yengoyan's chapter:

Translation of culture through the evoking of consciousness in consultants minimizes the influence of these *etic* interpretations, since the final product of the translation is a mental exercise in the minds of cultural participants, and not solely within the terms of the anthropological *etic* (2003:36–7).

Note that the *etic* of anthropology here is part of the ethnographic problem, not part of the solution. Silverstein, writing in the same volume, is more critical of the field:

Scientifically unsystematic practices of generations of anthropologists-as-ethnographic-‘translators’ have turned source language/culture material willy-nilly into signs of the structures of power and influence of the professional and scholarly worlds in which the discourse of ethnography is carried on as a central social practice (2003:91).

Saddest of all, when it comes to translation inadequacies of the anthropological *etic*, is a story told in the introduction to the Rubel and Rossman volume. In the quote that follows, assertions are attributed to “Ortiz,” no doubt Alfonso Ortiz, both an anthropologist and a Native American from San Juan Pueblo in New Mexico. The conference was held in late 1998 and he died in 1997, so obviously he wasn't there, and he is not cited in the bibliography:

Some Native Americans may resist translation, feeling that anthropologists ‘don't translate but they impose’ (Ortiz). Anthropologists are seen as interfering (fucking around) with people's souls and with reality (Ortiz). One Native American expressed the feeling that even Native American anthropologists themselves are ‘torn apart’ in the context of their anthropological research with their own people, in terms of what they do or do not reveal and translate (2003:19).

The editors then offer a general comment about the disciplinary jargon and how it distorts translation from field to professional text.

At the worst-case end of the scale, here is a quote from a linguistically and anthropologically sophisticated author from the second language-learning field, a person who supports the use of ethnography to give students grounded experience to accompany language learning, in the tradition of Roberts' innovative work (2001):

'Cultural translation' is one of the many terms in anthropology that have become so thick with inappropriate and incriminating meanings that we have to slough off these layers like dead skin every time we want to use them (Jordan, 2002, p. 97).

The news from this sample of quotes isn't good. Recent writings by anthropologists argue that the field hasn't paid much attention to translation beyond naming it. And worse, that etic frameworks born of anthropology haven't worked well to accomplish it. The relationship between etic and emic here is a problem, not a solution.

As one step in what I hope is the right direction away from this problem, let me use a basic bit of translation jargon. The translation field speaks of the "source language" or SL and the "target language" or TL. I am going to use SLC and TLC for "source languaculture" and "target languaculture" to be consistent with my own writings about language/culture (1995) as well as to honor where I learned it, in Friedrich's concept of "linguaculture" (1989). One translates from a source LC into a target LC. A bilanguacultural translator can work in either direction, so the "S" and the "T" can trade places from one time to another.

No one that I've read, from any field, thinks that translation involves a simple transfer from SLC to TLC. In the jargon of translation studies, "equivalence" between the two is simply not possible. Since equivalence is not possible, either SLC, or TLC, or both, have to be bent and molded and shaped to accommodate each other. If SLC is shaped to better fit the TLC, then the translation is said to be "domesticated." On the other hand, if TLC is shaped to accommodate the SLC, then the translation is said to be "foreignized." (see (Venuti, 1995), though the terms are widely used).

The problem is this: The TLC community is usually paying the translator, and that same TLC world probably dominates the global symbolic marketplace politically and linguistically. So the tendency is to *domesticate* the translation in the direction of the TLC. There is a complicated sociological story to tell here about history and power relations shaping the moment when a translator or ethnographer does his or her work, as a recent edited volume shows, *Constructing a Sociology of Translation* (Wolf and Fukari, 2007).

As we saw earlier in this section, the hegemony can be as true of a TLC called "anthropologese" as it can be of dominant global languages like World English. The critical comments of anthropologists in this section show us that anthropologese isn't an etic at all; it's just another emic, and a dominant TLC to boot that requires domestication when ethnographic particulars are reported to professional colleagues.

If equivalence is impossible, if domesticating or foreignizing are the only possible ways to get from a SLC to a TLC, then by definition no particular LC can serve as an etic, be it language in the usual sense, like English, or a particular restricted code within that language, like a disciplinary jargon. But *something* makes the translation possible, or else none would be possible at all. Some kind of universal etic is in play, so what is it?

Laura Bohannon wrote a famous article about telling the story of Hamlet to the Tiv during her fieldwork in the 1950s. It is great fun to read and you can find it on the web at http://www.naturalhistorymag.com/editors_pick/1966_08-09_pick.html. The point for now is, there were of course many LC differences that her Tiv audience felt they had to "correct" to make Hamlet's story make sense. That is the major point of her essay. But another way to read her article is to look at the etic basis for the exchange: How could it be possible that much of what a 16th century Elizabethan playwright wrote, narrated by a 20th century American anthropologist, did in fact make perfect sense to senior members of a—at the time—fairly isolated Nigerian tribe. (Now of course the Tiv have their own web pages.) Bohannon wrote to display emic differences. But emic and etic actually mix in her article, as they always must, or else the story couldn't have been told and re-interpreted and argued over and then conveyed to us readers at all. How was this possible without an etic, without human universals, to forge a connection? And, if that etic isn't in the anthropologese of anthropological theory, then where is it?

3. Translation in the field

Let me put the missing etic aside for a while, not too hard to do since it isn't there in the first place. Let's look at what most of us know, that translation is possible, come what may, and at what most ethnographers know, that somehow it works out in practice to get the fieldwork done. If there isn't an explicit theory, there certainly is a *tacit* one. Learning an SLC is *not* the same as translating between that SLC and a TLC, but it is a prerequisite for it.

Jones, in his chapter in the book *Translating Cultures*, returns to Malinowski's theory of language, summarized in another famous phrase, "context of situation" (2003:61). Lutz's work on Ifaluk emotion terms is the example Jones uses to show how ethnographic translation works (Lutz, 1988). Rather than looking for English translations, she introduces and then continues to use key native terms. "These native terms are then explicated by carefully describing the typical perceptual situations that lead to this state, the other mental states it tends to lead to, and the behaviors it tends to cause," writes Jones. She describes a "series of rich contextualized examples" by which we "slowly build up a sense of how the Ifaluk use emotion concepts" (Jones, 2003, pp. 59–60).

Lutz uses English, the TLC in which she is writing, to give an orientation to an Ifaluk concept, but also—more importantly—to show the English-speaking reader how the English term is related but at the same time doesn't really fit. Jones notes that

she writes things like X (in Ifaluk) is sort of a mix of A, B and C (in English). So we—the English-speaking readers—get a rough idea of where the translation of an Ifaluk term is located, but also a sense of why our available terms are different. Then we learn what the term does mean as she shows us case after case of Ifaluk using the term in different contexts until we “get” it.

This is a classic ethnographic way of “foreignizing” the TLC, where TLC in this case means an assumed languaculture of American English speakers, probably with anthropological colleagues mostly in mind. It is a classic ethnographic strategy. Silverstein worries that what he calls this “native concept” technique serves more to establish ethnographic authority and to prosper professionally (2003). Some might want to “own” an exotic concept so that it becomes an identity tag that brands them. In anthropology, the “kula ring” among the Trobriand Islanders will forever be identified with Malinowski, and the “potlatch” of the Kwakiutl Indians with Boas. This native concept method is certainly one I use all the time, the Viennese Austrian concept of “Schmäh” being a recent example (Agar, 1995). I don’t think I was looking for a branding strategy, though. It was a critical concept to learn. But then I did obsess about it in later writings for professional colleagues.

And how does an ethnographer, or anyone else immersed in a different languaculture, evaluate when a field translation is adequate? Anthropologists emphasize participant observation. “Being there” makes a difference. Being there makes possible the “context of situation” so central to Malinowski’s theory of language. We know how we’re doing because we *participate* in situations with SLC native speakers. We use *paraphrase* all the time, a learning technique advocated by Quintilian in the first century AD. As Bassnett—a founder of the “cultural turn” in translation studies—describes it:

Quintilian stresses the usefulness of paraphrasing a given text as a means of assisting the student both to analyse the structures of a text and to experiment in turn with forms of embellishment or abridgement (1980:51).

He describes two styles of paraphrase, one emphasizing closeness to the original, the other allowing more experimentation and variation and establishment of personal style.

Ethnographers don’t just paraphrase. They also *interact* in an SLC world of semiotic systems and communicative practices that they learn as they go, systems and practices that change the original LC they brought with them, sometimes in incremental ways, sometimes in ways that are transformational, even with the occasional epiphany. This real-time discourse/conversational/pragmatic analysis—in a simultaneous participant and observer role—produces the periodic exhaustion that will be familiar to any ethnographer, especially at the beginning of a project with a previously unknown SLC.

Paraphrase and real-time discourse analysis are two examples of how ethnographers *acquire* SLC. There are many others. This is why anthropology is especially interesting to the second language-learning field, weary as it is of literary texts and grammar drills. Ethnographers do know how to become *communicatively competent* in an LC different from their native language, in practice anyway (Moore, 2009). We know how to become *bilanguacultural*, though the quiet scandal is that goal isn’t always—or maybe even usually—reached (Borchgrevink, 2003).

Learning a second LC—what anthropology is good at—isn’t the same thing as a theory of the etic human universals that make that learning possible, even though the etic universals had to bridge the LCs or no second LC learning could ever occur. *Bilanguacultural competence* is obviously a prerequisite to do a translation. And ethnography-style learning is one good way to acquire that competence. But traditional ethnography doesn’t really worry about the etic connection that makes the learning possible, because SLC acquisition is aimed from the beginning at a TLC of similarly trained colleagues and their narrowly-focused academically-based discourse. The dissertation committee and then, later in life, the grant and journal peer reviews, are the primary TLC audience. True, a few key “foreignized” concepts should be brought back from the field. But mostly the etic works away, unexamined in the background, until an ethnographer sees that he/she has re-shaped enough of his/her original emic so that he/she can interpret and use SLC in the field. I think that is why the recent books on translation in anthropology and sociology wonder at the frequent mention but lack of development of the translation metaphor *within* their disciplines. We’ve always known the etic was important, but we’ve mostly taken it for granted as one human living with some others. The important part was to come home and address colleagues in anthropologese.

Those of us who work outside anthropology departments and on applied projects spend much of our time translating for a non-anthropological TLC audience based on an SLC competence that we acquire. Often the TLC is the same as the SLC, same as far as much of syntax and lexicon, but different in terms of languaculture. An organization sometimes even asks me to help them translate themselves to themselves, the “intralingual” translation that is one of Jakobson’s three types (1959), the kind of work that Steiner describes as well (1975). In organizational development they call this “clinical ethnography” (Schein, 1987). Anthropological theoretical discourse plays little if any explicit role. Anthropologese is not helpful to translate to a non-anthropological TLC. It’s not an etic; it’s another emic. This is why applied anthropology looks so peculiar to academics, I think. Its primary TLC audience doesn’t speak anthropologese.

But if anthropological theory—the field that concerns itself with the psychic unity of humanity—isn’t where the etic is, then where is it? It is implicit in the fieldwork we do and presupposed in the things we write. It is a tacit theory of what it means to be human.

4. The post-structural elephant in the room

Something makes translation possible, some kind of etic. Recall Goodenough’s original description of emic and etic. In traditional phonology, the etic is the universal space of possible sounds that any human with normal articulatory equipment can make. Emic is the selection of sounds from that space that are significant for speakers of a particular language. *Both* etic

and emic play a role in any translation of any particular human symbolic system. Both have to. SL and TL phonology will be different, but each of them can be understood, compared, learned, and taught to speakers who use the other system in terms of universal human phonological possibilities.

How are we to think about this etic space in terms of all of ethnography? With phonology—or grammar for that matter, pragmatics to some extent—universals are well-established. Aspirated or unaspirated, pro-drop or not, positive or negative politeness – it's got to be one or the other. Politeness got more complicated with later work on relational politeness, but it still looks easy compared with languacultural *content*.

Still, content universals do exist. Brown wrote a book that lists several (1991). I like to say that ethnography is about making sense out of human differences in terms of human similarities. I can always build a translation because I can always find some connection with anyone, to start, and then other connections that appear as a translation is developed. I call it the *soap-opera principle*, because anywhere I've gone in the world I can turn on the TV in a hotel room and recognize a soap and know a fair amount of what's going on.

Goodenough, when he laid out the emic/etic distinction in his book so many years ago, already had this connection in mind. Emic meant looking at the important *local* distinctions in some *universal* etic domain marked by its functional role in everyday life. He emphasized *behavior*, not in the sense of behaviorist psychology, but in the sense of looking at people as creatures who had to get certain things done in a context-of-situation kind of way.

He used the example of property on the island of Truk to show how a general etic might be developed out of many emics. "Distinctions do not cut the pie of property as Anglo-American distinctions do," he wrote. Once those Trukese distinctions were learned by an ethnographer—or by anyone else for that matter—they could be added to the "etic kit of possibilities" in a universal human domain he called "transactions and forms of entitlement." As he summed the strategy up:

In time, we shall be able to give order to the ideas we have had to develop to describe the elementary emic forms in a large sample of the world's cultures. In ordering these ideas, we shall isolate the considerations with which human beings tend to organize their property relations and shall lay the foundation for a general theory of property that will account for the variance among cultures in the way they employ these considerations. Such theory, it is now clear, depends on the development of a satisfactory etics of property relations, and this latter development depends on our doing many good emic descriptions of particular property systems (1970:110).

Emic and etic are linked, not just in the phonetics and phonemics of a sound system, but in the specifics and generalities of universal human intentionality. Consciousness is about something. What it is about, to some extent, must cover some universal human domains.

People everywhere have to solve the problem of property ownership in one form or another. (People aren't the only ones; with animals it's called territoriality.) Different human groups load the universal domain with their local meanings and practices. They all do it differently, but they all do it within a universal system of constraints. So let's get to work, said Goodenough, and look at the variations on this universal human domain and develop an etic space out of the comparisons.

Goodenough wrote his book 40 years ago, in 1970. So hasn't there been substantial development in the universal human "etic kit" that he called for? No, not really. Does the translation field help us think about what such a kit might look like? Yes, the literature around that concept worries about that kit a good bit.

The structure of that etic space and the process of moving from SLC to TLC is an area where concepts have sprouted like tropical plants in a rain forest. Consider some descriptions from a few readings I did: Associative fields (Bassnet-McGuire, 1980, p. 15), semiotic transformation (Bassnet-McGuire, 1980, p. 18) interlingual transposition (Jakobson, 1959), alien belief ascription (Jones, 2003, p. 45), reading the implicit in alien cultures (Asad, 1986, p. 160), provisional sense-making (Jordan, 2002, p. 162), the Third Space ((Bhabha, 1994), cited in several sources), clash of epistemologies (Maranhão, 2003, p. xx), re-codification and transformation (Rubel and Rosman, 2003, p. 11), transduction and transformation (Silverstein, 2003), resonating "phrase regimens" (Yengoyan, 2003, p. 30), and translation as a social practice constrained by contextual factors ranging from the local to the global (Wolf and Fukari, 2007).

The most important feature of the space is that *what goes on in there makes translation possible*. It is where the etic human universal action is. It is amazingly under-theorized, as emphasized for anthropology especially by Silverstein.

A second feature of that space is that everyone agrees—as mentioned earlier—that *exact equivalence in translation is never possible*. Etic is never the *whole* story, though sometimes, of course, translation is more etic—and therefore easier—that at other times. In fact, Silverstein limits the term "translation" itself to what he calls translation from one "denotational" language to another, anchored in the "grammaticosemantic system of the Saussurean type" (2003:94). There are counterarguments here. Silverstein describes Quine's critique as a cautionary note—basically the point that perfect equivalence in translation is not possible. Jones puts it this way: The "key problem in translation" is the fact that a belief *p* interacts in an ecology of beliefs such that even if *p* in some SLC can be translated directly into a *p* in some TLC, it still will not be equivalent since the two *p*'s interact in very different belief ecologies (2003).

So, *some things are easier to translate than others*. Of course that's true, most bilanguacultural readers of this article would say. Things that are *always* easy to translate for all (or almost all) SLC/TLC combinations are probably close to etic universals, though their functions within SLC and TLC "belief ecologies," as Jones noted, will mean they still are not equivalent. Different "connotations" is a more common way of putting it.

Bassnett, in her classic book, points out that it is an "established fact" that a dozen translators working on the same poem will produce a dozen different translations. But, quoting Popovič (1976), she then writes:

... somewhere in those dozen versions there will be what Popovič calls the 'invariant core' of the original poem. This invariant core, he claims, is represented by stable, basic and constant semantic elements in the text, whose existence can be proved by experimental semantic condensation (Bassnet-McGuire, 1980).

Whatever it is that happens in that etic space, then, more than one translation is possible, but not any translation is acceptable. In other words, *there are constraints around the space of possible translations*. Etic is never the *whole* story, but it is always *part* of every story.

Rubel and Rossman, in their introduction to the anthropological collection quoted earlier, wrote that "Given this perspective, foreign texts are seen as entities with invariants, capable of reduction to precisely defined units, levels and categories of language and textuality" (2003:7). But they also note that some anthropologists have a problem with the idea of universals, because they feel that those universals wash out local specifics and derive from hegemonic sources.

Yengoyan, in his chapter in that book, expresses the same ambivalence. On the one hand, he cites Becker (1995) to argue that, in an etic space, "the language of the powerful becomes the measure or barometer in which universality is forged" (2003:30). On the other hand, he writes:

If a subject matter which vaguely resonates with speakers of two different languages can be created, it might be easier to devise some semi-conversational modes of thinking and articulation between both languages and their speakers" (2003:33).

One reason the "resonating subject matter" would resonate is because it is in part built on universal human themes, the soap-opera principle that I mentioned earlier being just one tongue-in-cheek example.

In Bhabha's "Third Space"—a concept cited in several sources reviewed for this article—contemporary translation is seen as a meeting of cultural hybrids who are open to creating something new to accomplish a connection that originally was the original property of neither. Wolf's own chapter in her co-edited book on the sociology of translation describes Bhabha's work most thoroughly. Her description echoes in some ways the classic article on translation by Benjamin (1969). Let me quote some fragments from her chapter, separated by other text in the original, to give a sense of her take on Bhabha's approach:

In the Third Space, the relationships of those who possess certain claims and requirements clash, resulting in power struggles which entail negotiations.

(Negotiation) becomes the fundamental prerequisite for the space's existence.

(The encounter) entails the transformation of all agents involved and brings about new positions that do not allow the recurrence of already existing structures and formation.

(Agents are) not to struggle for enduring positions, but to abandon the field after concluding the interaction and to look for other areas of activity... ((Wolf, 2007, p. 113). Parenthetical expressions contain Wolf's terminology inserted for clarity of reading.)

In this "Third Space," two people, both of whom are already cultural hybrids, encounter each other in a way that estranges them from themselves—The *Verfremdungseffekt* described by Brecht, the effect of making the familiar strange. The two hybrids enter into a spirit of collaboration, and then through a detached negotiation something new is collectively created.

But even here, in this most fluid and constructivist version of translation, consider the "Verfremdungseffekt," and the "negotiation," not to mention the openness to and desire for personal change required to motivate the effort and the cooperative attitude that would make it possible. Even here we have to presuppose human universals for the Third Space to function at all. "Negotiation" is a universal speech act on a par with "conversation" and "argument." And the concept of negotiation itself labels yet another area of research and practice which could be consulted. Negotiation, mediation, conflict resolution, and the like presuppose that parties can recognize each other's interests and perceptions, topicalize them in mutually comprehensible ways, and barter their intentions in the market of personal interests, whatever their SLC might be. Even in this most egalitarian and open and fluid of translation models, etic universals still provide the underpinning that makes translation possible.

This etic space *constrains* but does not *determine* what a translation will look like. This isn't an etic *theory*, but it is a start into the world that such a theory has to describe and explain. Phonetics isn't a theory, either, but it gives an idea of what kinds of sounds might be humanly possible. It *points* to an etic theory that is a theory of shared humanity, of human universals, an etic space that enables a coherent reciprocal understanding of the different emic shapes that the LCs of source, target and ethnographer take.

5. An etic thought experiment

Now I'd like to experiment with a candidate universal concept that covers more ethnographic ground. Instead of a list of domains based on human purposes, as Goodenough suggested almost 40 years ago, I want to try something else. That something else is the concept is *intentionality*. It is used in several fields relevant to this article. It is foundational in phenomenology, which links it to ethnographic epistemology. It is described in the translation literature as what must be *preserved* in a translation from SLC to TLC if one is to claim that something has been translated at all. And, to anticipate what is to come in a moment, it is also used to describe computer models in artificial intelligence. It looks promising as a transdisciplinary concept that belongs in an etic space.

I'm going to veer into contemporary artificial intelligence now and I need to explain the change in direction.

As an undergraduate I worked in South India with Alan Beals. When I returned I tried to write my first ethnography, a description of life in the village I had lived in. That same year I took a computer-programming course. It fascinated me that—unlike most math, and certainly unlike the statistics we were required to take—a computer program was more like the descriptions I was writing in my senior thesis. Not the same, of course, but it had a family resemblance. Villagers got things done based on knowledge and experience and purpose in some environment. So did the anthropologist, for that matter. What we all did was a process, a *procedure* the programmers called it. Procedures varied and changed from time to time depending on circumstances. Other people and objects were also part of getting things done, people with different intentions, perhaps, depending on the task at hand.

In my senior thesis, I was writing prose *algorithms*, sort of, when I described village life. An algorithm is a process, a procedure, for doing something. Not that I thought I could write a program that did what villagers did. Far from it. But I did see that this program business looked like an etic language that I could use to translate intentions, some of them anyway.

Computer science has come a long way in 40 years. In fact, it was only recently that the computational types moved towards human social research enough to look familiar. The common framework, between them and us, is *complexity theory*, to which ethnography has an epistemological family resemblance (Agar, 2004), and from which this newer version of computer science descends. I've been working with complexity theory for some time now, since the late 1990s. For present purposes, I want to focus on recent work in what the artificial intelligentsia call *multiagent systems* as an example of what an etic of intentionality *might* look like.

I will rely on Gerhard Weiss' edited book of the same name, *Multiagent Systems* (1999), for most of this exercise, though I will translate it into informal prose. The math in his book is computational, via set theory and predicate logic, and not too bad if you're comfortable with the basics of those two formal languages. The book serves my purpose because it is a standard introductory textbook for advanced undergraduate and beginning graduate students in computer science, and I therefore assume it is both reasonably comprehensive and representative. And the concept of intentionality threads through it in ways that will become obvious in a moment.

And please understand, this is a thought experiment, *not* an argument that ethnographers should end up with a screenful of computer code or an article in AI jargon. The thought experiment asks, is an etic language possible that looks like it could generalize one emic intentionality on the way to translating it into another emic intentionality, however domesticated or foreignized the details might need to be?

Let's start with the "agent." What does the "agent" in "multiagent systems" mean? For the moment clear your mind of discussions of "agency" in anthropology, though as you'll see the concepts are related. The first chapter in the book, by Michael Wooldridge, defines an agent like this:

An *agent* is a computer system that is *situated* in some environment and that is capable of *autonomous action* in this environment in order to meet its design objectives (1999:29).

An agent has to have "sensor input" that takes information in from the environment and then "action output" where something is done to change that environment. The input/output is as usual a feedback loop over time. Agents are dynamic. Their actions change the environment which changes what is sensed which changes the next action, etc.

So say we substitute "ethnographic subject" into the definition, where "ethnographic subject" includes the ethnographer as well, in the spirit of reflexivity – The ethnographer is a member of the set of people that defines the scope of the research project. Then we might get something like:

An ethnographic subject is situated in some environment and is capable of autonomous action in this environment to meet his or her design objectives.

That doesn't sound so terrible. And it will sound better as we explore a bit more how the computational field thinks about some of the eminently deconstructable terms in that definition.

Environment for example. A programmer has to come up with what they call an "agent architecture," a way for the agent to take what it knows about the environment and what it wants to do and formulate an action. But, writes Wooldridge, citing Russell and Norwig (1995), what if an environment is:

1. Inaccessible, in the sense that "complete, accurate, up-to-date information" cannot be known;
2. Non-deterministic, in that actions have "no guaranteed effect;"
3. Non-episodic, in the sense that there is no neat template for a recurrent episode of a particular type;
4. Dynamic, in that the environment changes continuously due to other processes over which the agent has no control and probably no knowledge (Wooldridge, 1999, p. 30).

The environment, in other words, need not be a stable known world with a few simple properties. Instead, it is a dynamic context that an agent has to keep an eye on and react to and change in ways that are limited by that context itself.

That doesn't sound so peculiar to an ethnographer as a general statement either.

What kind of agent architecture can handle this kind of environment? We've come a long way from the old model of a thermostat that most people think of when they think of "systems" theory or "cybernetics"—Below this temperature, turn furnace on, at that temperature or above, turn furnace off.

An agent will have a “see” function, shorthand for a component that tells it what kinds of information about its environment it should gather. It will not “see” everything, and what it “sees” will vary from one agent to another. Then it will take action. The action it takes will also vary. It will vary for a number of reasons. Let me look at a few of them by way of continuing to introduce this fascinating area.

First, an agent has a model of the state of its environment at every time-step. Every time it “sees,” it will update that model. Every agent, then, has a *history* of see/action/change environment sequences, then see again and take action again and change environment again, and so on. These chains of state and action and state and action over time build a different *biography* for each agent, a different *trajectory* through the world of possibilities. What an agent does will depend in part on a difference in the current “see” state, and the nature of those differences will depend on the agent’s history.

A second reason why agents vary: An agent is up to something. Several architectures have been proposed to represent the “up to” part. One is called “belief-desire-intention” architecture, or BDI for short. It is based on the philosophy of “practical reason—the process of deciding, moment by moment, which action to perform in the furtherance of our goals” (Wooldridge, 1999, p. 54).

The BDI model is beyond the scope of this article to describe, and in fact, Wooldridge says its details are also beyond the scope of the chapter he wrote. For now it doesn’t matter, since I have no intention (or belief or desire for that matter) to advocate it as some kind of magic solution. For now I’m simply using it as another concept from the computational world as an example of a possible etic framework.

Intentions—the “I” in the “BDI” – are the centerpiece. Unfortunately, the concept is also one of the more historically elusive and now contentious in philosophy. It means, on the one hand, that consciousness has an object, and that no objects have meaning separate from consciousness. But it also means teleology, purpose, goal, one of Aristotle’s neglected causes—things happen because of some future state that a person is trying to bring about.

The artificial intelligentsia blur the meanings, and in the BDI model intentionality leans towards the teleological, since it shapes future action based on beliefs and desires. Beliefs are more about the agent’s model of the environment, revised at every step, and desires are about the values the agent places on beliefs and intentions. Let me abbreviate the list of why intentions are so important in this multi-agent framework (Wooldridge, 1999, p. 56):

1. Intentions drive means-ends reasoning.
2. Intentions constrain future deliberation.
3. Intentions persist.
4. Intentions influence beliefs upon which future practical reasoning is based.

I know this reeks of rational choice theory, but be patient for a few more paragraphs. One interesting issue that Wooldridge raises is the trade-off between how often and under what conditions agents *reconsider* intentions. At one extreme an agent plunges blindly on in a changing world with poor results. At the other extreme an agent reconsiders at every moment in a relatively stable world. The contrast reminds me of the difference between George W. Bush and Jacques Derrida. Wooldridge describes experiments conducted by Kinny and Georgeff (1991). They show that the type of agent who does best depends on what they called the “rate of world change” (1999:57). Agents who reconsider more do best in rapidly changing worlds, and vice versa.

A third reason agents vary brings in the sociality part of computational models: Agents operate in a network of other agents. Remember that the title of the book I am using here is *Multiagent Systems*. A chapter by Huhns and Sephens (1999) elaborates on just what this means. One thing it means is, agents communicate with each other, whether in a cooperative or competitive mode, or both in some mixture. They communicate to share knowledge and negotiate plans for action, or to compete in an environment of scarce resources.

At this point the computer types and ethnography intersect in Ed Hutchins’ pioneering ethnography with the crew of a ship at sea, *Cognition in the Wild* (1995). Recall the nature of some environments described earlier and how they set limits on what a particular agent might know about them—inaccessible, non-deterministic, non-episodic, and dynamic. Hutchins showed how the key to handling a ship in an ocean, just that sort of environment, is *distributed cognition*. So it will come as no surprise to learn that the book on multiagent systems I’m relying on here is dedicated to what they call *distributed artificial intelligence*. But, to benefit from the different parts of this distributed intelligence, agents obviously need to *communicate*.

The computational models of agent communication, like much else summarized here, goes well beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, much of it approaches and overlaps familiar territory to linguistic anthropologists. As with the use of Hutchins’ ethnographic work in this article, I just mean to show that we are to some extent on the same turf. Here’s a sample quote:

Communication protocols are typically specified at several levels. The lowest level of the protocol specifies the method of interconnection; the middle level specifies the format, or syntax, of the information being transferred; the top level specifies the meaning, or semantics, of the information. The semantics refers not only to the substance of the message, but also to the type of the message (Huhns and Sephens, 1999, p. 86).

Speech acts play a major role, particularly whether a message is an assertion or a query, the two main types of interest, which are then subdivided into more subtle categories.

There is more than I am summarizing here, and more in the field than is in the textbook. But multiagent modeling includes characteristics I think we need in an etic theory. Those characteristics include intentionality, to be sure, but also learning, communication, indeterminacy, emergence, structure and agency, and dynamics. An ethnographic etic to go with the emic worlds we research wouldn't look like a simple computational multiagent system. But the computational field aims in the right direction and at minimum can serve as an inspiring and interesting mistake that challenges us to do better. It at least exemplifies how an emic/etic dialectic grounded in the human universal of intentionality might be possible.

So what is the point of all this? Certainly not that ethnography and translation studies and second languaculture learning are branches of computer science. Certainly not that we should all become software developers, though I have to admit the idea of an ethnography as a computer game isn't as far-fetched as I used to think it was, especially given the "serious games" developments over the last few years (<http://www.gamesforchange.org/>), like a recent game I looked at that teaches what it is like to be an undocumented immigrant in the US (<http://www.icedgame.com/>). No, the point is, this is what a representation of an etic that handles human intentionality might look like. It isn't a solution, but it points to the possibility of one.

6. The end

I return to Bernie Siegel's classroom, the scene with which this article began, to the story of his introductory lecture. He talked about psychic unity and cultural relativism, in the same breath. My new field of study, cultural anthropology, took both as true, both as part and parcel of what it set out to understand and explain—the human condition, both in general and in the many shapes it takes. But the relativism part, as it turned out, was the main theme of the era. Anthropology was more about the differences than the similarities.

It still is, mainly, for the work I do. The social psychologists call us humans "naïve realists" (Moskowitz, 2005), creatures who roam their territory convinced that their mental models of the world are equivalent to "objective reality" and that different mental models are distorted and deficient copies. In other words, we humans tend to think we're all etic and those others are all some distantly related and inaccurate emic. This is the problem that my ethnographic work has always addressed, starting when I worked as a commissioned officer in the Public Health Service at a treatment center for heroin addicts in 1968. And it describes most of the work I've done since then, with addicts or with anyone else, in the US or internationally. I'm always showing one group of others—usually a non-anthropological TLC—how what some other group of others said and did made sense. So, early on, I started using the metaphor of *translation* to describe my work.

Over the years since that first anthropology course, the "psychic unity" part of Bernie's introductory lectures kept me wondering about that vast taken-for-granted shared humanity in terms of which cultural differences could be identified and connected and compared and understood and explained and taught. So 1 day, not so long ago, I reread Goodenough's old model of etic and emic. As usual, anything I get interested in turns out to have interested a lot of other people as well, in anthropology, translation studies, second-language learning, among other places. And across those literatures, some interesting patterns developed:

1. Several people wrote about how the translation metaphor was widely used but not well developed.
2. Several anthropologists wrote about how their theory wasn't an etic for translation; instead, it was another languaculture that had to be translated into.
3. Ethnography, under the name of "fieldwork," had developed effective ways to learn and "foreignize" a SLC, using paraphrase and real-time discourse analysis during participant observation, but that ability wasn't the same as the ability to translate into any TLC, except the anthropologese that ethnographers start with and return to and write and talk in terms of.
4. The human universal etic basis for the work in #3 was mostly *tacit* knowledge, unarticulated and under-theorized, yet it contained an implicit etic theory of shared humanity.

I concluded that an etic space, that equivalent of phonetics for human life in general that Goodenough aspired to, the space of shared human possibility in universal domains of human life—that is what anthropological theory could be about. And that might be where a lot of it is going now, what with the globalization of the field and the resurgence of interest in human universals. That kind of theory would put the psychic unity part of Bernie's lecture on an equal footing with the cultural relativism part and provide the ethnographic etic that Goodenough sought.

At the end of this article, I tried an etic thought experiment born of my own cyclical addiction to computer science. I took the concept of intentionality as a candidate etic universal of human life, since the concept appears in human research and translation studies and computer science. Then I looked at multiagent systems to see if their abstract language about intentionality had potential as an etic for translation. I hedged the experiment to death, rightly so, because there is no example, though Ed Hutchins' ethnography was cited for its family resemblance in terms of distributed cognition, ethnographically uncovered and semi-formally modeled.

But if not that kind of etic, then something else. The etic is critical to our work, always has been—we couldn't translate from one other to another and explain the differences to still others if there weren't human connections in terms of which to translate differences. That ground for the ethnographic figure is a neglected part of our century-plus old tradition. It is an important part, particularly in a global era where the trend is towards *more* similarities and fewer differences between any two emics. In fact, in this day and age the best training in "intercultural communication" might well be a course in

the shared etic, rather than trying to nail a post-structural jello-like emic to the research wall for the benefit of an equally wobbly hybrid.

But anthropology always will—and should always—maintain its charming and annoying contrariness. While it does need to develop the etic, it also brings to the table the simple fact that the emic is *always* part of any translation as well and, after that, that “domestication” isn’t the only possible translation strategy. We are the antidote to naïve realism. In anthropology, emic and etic go together like—pick your favorite cliché—bread and butter, a horse and carriage, or maybe, considering our entertainment value to both SLC and TLC audiences, like Lucy and Rickie.

What we’re missing though, is an etic theory, a theory of universal human connections, the kind of theory Ward Goodenough called for many years ago. It is already a century old in tacit form. We need to make it more explicit.

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Michael Agar is a professor emeritus in linguistics and anthropology from the University of Maryland who works independently as Ethnknoworks (www.ethknoworks.com). He is the author of *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation* and articles on languaculture, intercultural communication, and translation. Among his current projects is the integration of cultural background knowledge into computer-based language learning.