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Q4(b)

Explain the difference between emic and etic, and how does the difference derive from the study of language?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · Anthropology GS 1 · 10 marks · Religion

5. Religion: Anthropological approaches to the study of religion (evolutionary, psychological and functional); monotheism and polytheism; sacred and profane; myths and rituals; forms of religion in tribal and peasant Societies (animism, animatism, fetishism, naturism and totemism); religion, magic and science distinguished; magico-religious functionaries (priest, shaman, medicine man, sorcerer and witch).

Core demand of the question

- Explain the difference between emic and etic, and how does the difference derive from the study of language?
- Keep the note to a 10-mark length of about 150 words

Revision summary

Pike drew emic/etic from phonemic versus phonetic.

Emic is insider meaning; etic is outsider comparison.

A **phoneme** is a local contrast; a phonetic chart is a global kit.

Harris and **Goodenough** split on which side science should privilege.

Fieldwork needs both standpoints.

Introduction

Emic and etic name two standpoints on culture. The words were borrowed from linguistics, from phonemic and phonetic.

Body

The linguistic root

- **Pike** coined the pair. A **phonetic** account lists all sounds. A **phonemic** account lists the sounds that make meaning in one language.
- Hindi speakers hear /p/ and /ph/ as different; some languages do not. That is an emic contrast.

In anthropology

- **Emic** is the insider's meaningful categories: a Nuer ox-name, a Hindu jati rule.
- **Etic** is the observer's comparative grid: calories, lineage diagrams, blood pressure.
- **Harris** used etic for material measurement. **Goodenough** kept emic as the culture the native uses to interpret.

Use

- **Good ethnography needs both:** hear the terms, then compare. Neither is a moral high ground.

Flow diagram

Linguistics -> Phonetic etic
Linguistics -> Phonemic emic
Phonemic emic -> Insider categories
Phonetic etic -> Observer grid

Conclusion

Emic is the inside contrast that matters locally, on the model of the **phoneme**. Etic is the outside measuring kit, on the model of phonetics.

Facts & figures

Pike

Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior coined emic and etic.

Phoneme

A sound difference that changes meaning in a given language; the model for emic.

Harris

Cultural materialism favoured etic measurement of behaviour and environment.

Goodenough

Culture as the knowledge needed to behave as a native; an emic programme.

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