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Interest Section: Cultural aspects of specialized communication

Proposal Title: **On viewing culture as situation: a perspective for technical communicators**

Practicing technical communicators deal with culture as an integral part of language and communication practices. Yet, etic models of culture based on dimensions of culture related to values (i.e. Hofstede, Trompenaars, Edward T. Hall, Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck) are so abstract that they are difficult to operationalize for technical communication and translation. One of the issues inherent in these models goes back to Pike's coining of the notions of emic and etic stemming from phonemics and phonetics in linguistic theory. He makes the distinction between etic tools which apply across cultures as the phonetic alphabet can be used across languages, and emic tools which are specific to context of a single culture as phonemic rules can explain the sound system in a given language. In linguistics, phonetics describe articulation behaviours of a single sound—a micro unit which is then combined with other phonetic or micro-behaviours and arranged into emic patterns in a given context. Thus in phonetics, the units are small, observable behaviours which can then be combined into phonemic patterns. In other words, phonetics are a subset of norms in pronunciation which build phonemic patterns. In the translation to anthropology as emics and etics, the relationship between emic and etic was reversed so that emic patterns build up etic categories across cultural contexts. This reversal of scope has led to abstract notions of culture which are problematic when applied to understanding a single cultural context. For example, the cultural dimension of power distance from Hofstede helps technical communicators approach the notion of context, but cannot be directly operationalized in design decisions for translating a product manual.

To undo the reversal of scope which renders etic dimensions of cultures difficult to operationalize, I propose that we focus on culture as situation. Using a situational frame, we can then approach culture as a series of observable behaviours in the interaction between audiences and communicators—behaviours which crystallize in genres, yet change dynamically as communicators and their audiences participate in social action (Bazerman 1988 & Miller 1984, 1994).

To begin to define culture as situation, I will engage the cultural systems perspective (Kampf & Kastberg 2005). This perspective is based on the interaction between norms of behaviour and context in which Hofstede situated his dimensions of culture and focuses on the interaction between origins, norms, & their consequences as a means of defining the situation in which instances of technical communication occur. In addition, I will give examples of cultural norms built into genres in terms of categorization, logic patterns, conventions and well as cultural consequences in terms of formats and standards. Looking underneath the forms of genre through the cultural systems perspective offers technical communicators a systematic method for combining cultural, rhetorical and linguistics approaches to produce effective documents for different cultural contexts.

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