

The Serious Business of Emojis

Philip Seargeant has just written a book about emojis. Here he argues that there is nothing to scorn or lament about this significant new way of communicating in online and digital contexts.

As I sit here writing this, the world outside seems to be spiralling ever more out of control. Wildfires are laying waste to the Amazon, populist politicians are laying siege to democracy, and a rising tide of extremism is threatening to swamp huge parts of society. In the midst of all this, why should we worry about something as trivial as emojis? Surely there are far more important issues to confront than a bunch of brightly-coloured cartoon-like faces and the role they've come to play in human interaction?

For a lot of people, emojis are seen as a rather superficial, if not childish, form of communication. Those who enjoy whipping up moral panics often complain that emojis are a lamentable step backwards for civilisation. They're incontrovertible evidence of the dumbing down of culture, ruining language as we know it. Five and a half thousand years after the Egyptians invented hieroglyphics, so the criticism goes, are we really resorting once again to writing to each other via crude little pictures?

In fact, the study of emojis can be an excellent way of understanding not just human communication, but culture more generally. They may not help us combat the political apathy towards climate change, or resolve the divisions over Brexit, or restore trust in the importance of truth in an increasingly sceptical world. But there's a great deal more to them than merely being cheerful symbols used to punctuate text messages. Emojis are a serious business. And the way they're used can tell us a great deal about the current state of the world – and the important part that language plays in shaping the way we see this world.

The Myths about Emojis

Let's start by dispelling some of the well-worn myths. The idea that emojis are 'ruining' language is based on the belief that they're replacing verbal language, and that people are becoming lazy about expressing themselves. Instead of formulating well-turned phrases when they want to communicate their inner thoughts, people today are simply resorting to the odd upside-down face or look of incredulous disbelief. The breadth and subtlety of several millennia of literate culture is being replaced by a cartoon cat with hearts in its eyes.

The truth, however, is that emojis aren't supplanting written language at all; in fact they're adding to it. By far the most common way in which people use emojis is in association with verbal text, and they do this to add a bit of emotional colour to a message. On social media, we write to each other in much the same way that we talk. The style we use is rapid, fluid and conversational. We rarely linger over every sentence, editing ideas until we've found the perfect balance between style and substance. Instead we swap hastily typed messages back and forth, with the same informality and rhythm as chatting face-to-face. But whereas speech allows us to express emotion and mood in a number of simple and direct ways, writing doesn't. Things such as facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice are all stripped away in writing.

With emojis we can reinstate these. Emojis are an excellent solution to the challenges of modern digital communication because they offer an easy way of adding a layer of emotional character to text-based conversations.

Flagging up Irony

Take, for example, the use of irony. For centuries people have worried that irony is all too easily lost in written texts. If I make a sardonic comment, but you take it at face-value, we can quickly find ourselves

awkwardly floundering in is a sea of miscommunication ?????. Back in the seventeenth century, John Wilkins, one of the founders of the Royal Society, suggested that the English language needed an entirely new punctuation mark to specifically flag up the fact that a statement was meant to be ironic. He decided he'd use an upside-down exclamation mark. If you were being sarcastic in what you wrote, you simply ended the sentence like this ¡ The idea was that the upside-down exclamation mark looks a bit like an i, thus indicating 'irony', and that it also symbolises that the meaning of the sentence has been inverted. Unfortunately, Wilkins's idea never caught on, and the issue of people inadvertently confusing or insulting each other over ironic comments continued for several more centuries.

Emojis have pretty much solved this problem (at least in as far as it can be solved). These days, if you want to imply that you're not being entirely serious, you've got a host of possible alternatives. Emojis, then, can add nuance to a message – and in a world in which debate is becoming ever more fractious and partisan, the ability to inject an extra bit of nuance into communication is a very welcome thing.

The emojis that people use most often tend to be those related to emotions: the smiley faces, the heart symbols, and so on. But there are hundreds of other categories which span everything from phases of the moon to obsolete technology like the compact disc. And it's among these that we can get a sense of how culture more generally is evolving.

There are well over two thousand different emojis these days, which is a lot when you're searching for the one you want on your phone. But compared to the vocabulary of natural languages, it's minute. For instance, the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary included over 400,000 words and phrases, and this has been growing ever since. Relatively speaking, emojis offer a decidedly limited way of representing the world.

Creating New Emojis

One of the interesting things about emojis as compared to other forms of language is that new symbols are specifically created by a small group of people in the tech industry (the Emoji Subcommittee of the Unicode Consortium). In a natural language such as English, new words evolve organically. Someone will coin a word because they think it's useful or sounds attractive, and then people in their community may or may not pick up on it – and only if they do does the word then begin to spread. Word-formation like this is a type of natural selection. Take the word 'Brexit', for example. This was dreamt up by a journalist in 2012 because he wanted a shorthand term for Britain's possible exit from the European Union. Other journalists writing about the same topic at the same time were toying with different invented terms, such as 'Brixit'. Somewhere along the line though 'Brexit' won out, and we've been doomed to live under its dark shadow ever since.

With emojis, on the other hand, word creation isn't nearly so arbitrary. New symbols are the product of specific deliberations by the small committee mentioned above, who then release their choices into the wild. The new set of emojis that come out each year are what this small group of people think will be both popular and best reflect the interests of society.

It's because of this that emojis tend to shadow discussions about culture and identity that are happening in society more broadly. In recent years, for instance, new emojis have been released to try to better reflect the identity politics of society as a whole, especially around issues such as gender, race and disability. In 2012, for instance, Apple first introduced symbols representing same-sex couples; in 2014 they added more black characters; in 2015 they included the option for different skin tones; in 2016 there was more gender diversity among the professions and occupations; and in 2017 they included a few gender-non-specific people. Each year has brought further attempts to create a communication system which is inclusive in terms of the make-up of society in general.

Representing and Understanding Our World

What this illustrates very clearly is the hugely important relationship that exists between the way we represent the world and the way we understand the world, between the language or symbols we use, and the image these create of the environment in which we live. And this relationship is no less

influential when we're using emojis, however playful and whimsical they may superficially appear, as it is when we're using any other means of communication.

Further Reading

- The Emoji Subcommittee of the Unicode Committee (the people who do the approving): <https://home.unicode.org/emoji/>
- The selection criteria: http://unicode.org/emoji/proposals.html#selection_factors
- A group who will help you submit your emoji: <http://www.emojination.org/>
- Real-time emoji use on Twitter: <http://emojitracker.com/>