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MIXED EMOJI

Is a picture worth a thousand words? Words by Okechukwu Nzelu. Photograph by Bea De Giacomo.



Emoji are an established part of digital life. Still, few of us think about them in terms of linguistics. “As a system of communication, they leave English, the world’s global language, in the dust,” says Dr. Vyvyan Evans, language expert and digital communication technologist. Evans, who wrote *The Emoji Code* in 2017, insists that there is much to learn from eggplant and “crying-laughing” emoji about the way humans communicate.

OKECHUKWU NZELU: Is emoji a language?

VYVYAN EVANS: No. A language functions meaningfully in two directions. The first is a “words-to-world” fit. That means the words represent ideas in the world, either concrete (a physical thing, like a cat) or abstract (like feminism). And the second is a “word-to-word” fit: basically, a grammar. Emoji only does one part of the words-to-world fit: It is only able to signify concrete meanings. An emoji is good at representing a cat; it’s less good at symbolizing feminism. And emoji cannot be used in a word-to-word direction—it can’t be used as a grammatical system. So it falls foul, from that perspective, of being a language. It’s what I call a code.

ON: I gather there are examples of the use of emoji being scrutinized in court. How do linguistics operate in that context?

VE: In 2015, I was contacted by *The Guardian* because there was a big story which related to a 17-year-old from New York, who had posted [on social media] an emoji of a police officer, and three handgun emoji pointing at the officer. This led to a report by the New York Police Department to the district attorney, who issued an arrest warrant. The 17-year-old was then arraigned before a grand jury, on the basis of anti-terrorist statutes introduced following 9/11. But there was no indictment, and this got me thinking about the similarities and differences between emoji and language. The jury effectively decided that the defendant intended to convey, through emoji’s symbolic function, that guns should be aimed at police—but he didn’t mean to incite violence against them through the use of emoji’s performative function.

ON: Does our use of emoji mirror other linguistic principles?

VE: One example is from Lizzo, the American rapper and singer. When Donald Trump was about to be impeached the first time, Lizzo went viral with her impeachment tweet, where she wrote IM, then the peach emoji, then MENT. This is an instance of what linguists call the Rebus principle, which was used in the early development of the world’s first writing system. Basically, this is the idea that, to have concrete symbols to represent something abstract, you take the sound of something that is concrete (“peach”) that resembles the abstract thing. Lizzo didn’t know she was using something that’s been around for five and a half thousand years, but it just shows how inventive we all are.

ON: In 2015, the Oxford English Dictionary chose the crying-laughing emoji as its word of the year. What are the implications of this?

VE: There was a huge outcry, with some writers saying that it’s ridiculous for an emoji to be a word. I think a lot of people still assume that an emoji is the equivalent of an adolescent grunt, but that’s absolutely not the case. Use of emoji makes people better communicators in the digital space. For example, according to surveys conducted by Match.com, people who frequently use emoji get more dates. They have more sex. They claim to have better quality sex. And it’s not because if you use an emoji, you get more sex—if only it were. It’s because using emoji makes us more effective communicators and, by using them, we build emotional resonance in an online space. When you use these kinds of tools, you’re replicating the body language you would otherwise use in a real dating context.

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