



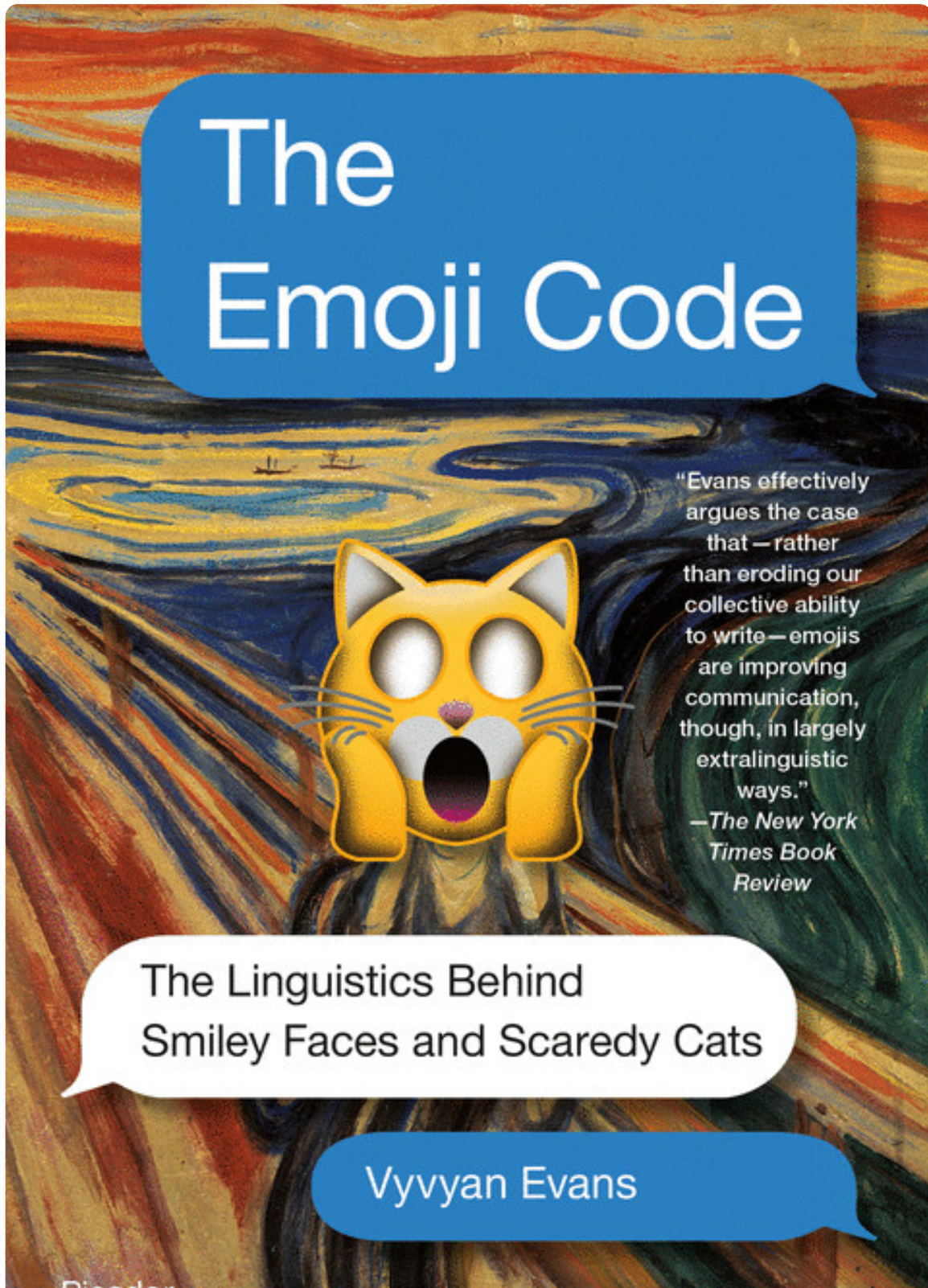
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The digital age

Today we live, indisputably, in a digital age, where 3.2 billion people—nearly half the world’s population—have regular internet access, and fifty percent of us access the web by mobile device. Estimates suggest the world has now reached the milestone of 2 billion smartphone users. Under 25s in the western world spend an average of almost 30 hours online each week, while even the over 40s spend over 20 hours connected every week. In the 21st century, we seemingly live in a global village, where the communicative reach of an individual can touch the lives of millions, at the press of a button, where pop superstars, and even a former president have over 100 million twitter followers, and where a single impulsive tweet from a Head of State can send instantaneous jitters around the world’s stock markets, and lead to a run on the dollar, euro or pound the very same day, or even spark a trade war! Never before, in human history, have we been able to communicate with such immediacy and with so many so-called friends and followers, most of whom we may never have met. Make no mistake, this amounts to a global revolution, that has ushered in not just new ways of communicating with others, whether from our sofas, desks, or even on the bus or train. It has also brought with it new systems of communication.

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Emoji: The background

A case in point is Emoji. 5 billion emojis are sent everyday on the Facebook messenger app alone. And over 92% of the world's 3.2 billion internet users make regular use of emojis. Emojis—the ubiquitous smileys, winks, and eye roll glyphs that populate our digital keyboards are a recent phenomenon. They first went global in 2011, when they became standard on apple mobile operating systems. But it wasn't until 2015 that they really went mainstream, when they became a fixture in popular culture and public consciousness. That was the year Oxford Dictionaries, the world's leading arbiter of English language usage anointed an emoji, of all things, as being its word of the year: the face with tears of joy emoji. Since then, there has been an *Emoji Guinness World record*, for the most number of people in a single location dressed as emojis, books translated into emoji, including *Alice In Wonderland*, *Peter Pan* and *Moby Dick*—or *Emoji Dick* as it's known, and even a Hollywood Emoji movie.


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— maybe even dumber, too. We should stick to the language of Shakespeare, so the naysayers say. But this amounts to ill-informed cultural elitism. Moreover, it misunderstands the way that communication works. After all, emojis simply are not relevant for long-form written communication: literature, complex prose, articles in scientific journals. Emojis' relevance lies in the abbreviated digital messages of daily life — social-media quips, texted jokes or flirting, chat messages for expressing sympathy or frustration.

 To assert that emojis will make us poorer communicators is like saying facial expressions make your emotions harder to read. The idea is nonsensical. It's a false analogy to compare emojis to the language of Shakespeare — or even to language at all. Emojis don't replace language; they provide the nonverbal cues, fit-for-purpose in our digital textspeak, that help us nuance and complement what we mean by our words.

The body language of the digital age

In our everyday encounters, how we respond to others is determined by how we respond to them emotionally. Verbal cues — the words we string together in spoken utterances — are only part of the story. In our daily face-to-face interactions, up to a staggering 70 percent of our emotional meaning derives from nonverbal cues, according to one estimate. These include tone of voice, eye gaze, body language, gestures and, of course, facial expression. The human face makes use

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Take the most pithy of phrases: “I love you”. With falling intonation, said like a statement, it’s a declaration of undying love: “I love you”. But if I say it this way, with a rising pitch contour, like a question: “I love you”, it becomes an ironic counterblast that has the power to lay someone low, and best not said if you wish your nearest to actually remain your dearest. We can make words mean the opposite of what they otherwise convey by changing our intonation, or even by employing a particular body posture or facial expression. Humour, such as irony, is a case in point. The ironic effect comes from the tone of voice, grimace or shrug, to show that the words mean the opposite of what they actually say.

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offer up sympathy (“Oh, I’m sorry, hope it doesn’t hurt too bad”).



But the addition of a smiley face or a crying face helps spell out



the meaning behind my words, aiding communication in the process. Emoji is the body language of the digital age. It makes our abbreviated digital texts more effective, by plugging a gap, levelling the communicative playing field vis-à-vis our non-digital communication. And in so doing, we become better at conveying emotion, and empathy, which is what drives effective communication.

A language?

While emoji is not a language, in the way that English, Spanish, or say Japanese are languages—it doesn’t have a grammar system, for instance—it is an effective means of communication, and can sometimes even land its users in hot water. For instance, in 2015 a teenager from New York was arrested for making the world-first alleged emoji-related terror threat: gun emojis pointing at a police officer emoji on a public Facebook status update. And a year later, a man was jailed in France for three months for issuing a death threat using gun emojis. Emojis have communicative power in a similar way



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pictograms. They rely on the visual medium. And visuals form a powerful cue for our species. The adage that a picture is worth a thousand words is indeed apt. In our species, *Homo sapiens*, vision is the dominant sense, with a rich evolutionary backstory. Two thirds of the human brain's neural activity relates to vision. With our eyes open, 40% of the brain's nerve fibres are connected to the retina; and it takes just 100 milliseconds, a fraction, fraction of a second, for an adult human to recognise an object. It is no accident, therefore, that visual-based social media platforms now boast 2.7 billion monthly users globally. Indeed, the leading social media platform, Facebook has 1.9 billion active monthly users, with more than 300 million images uploaded daily on the platform. If Facebook were a country, it would be the most populous in the world, with China's 1.4. citizens a relatively distant second.

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Iconicity

Emoji's strength, as a powerful, and relatively intuitive system of communication comes from its iconic nature: emojis look like what they represent. A shark emoji is a picture of a shark: it looks like what it conveys. And this also means that emojis can be flexible tools for communication: an emoji shark can be used to denote a shark; or, it can be used as a visual metaphor to call to mind other entities that exhibit shark-like behaviours: such as hucksters, scam-artists, or stereotyped professions that are perceived as behaving in unethical ways. A case in point is the hackneyed expression: my lawyer is a shark.

But this visual flexibility also restricts the semantic range of emoji. By virtue of being iconic in nature, emojis cannot readily represent abstract ideas and concepts. After all, how would we represent less concrete, physical ideas using emoji, like feminism, entropy, or iconoclastic? Emoji lacks the semantic range of language. While, today there a little over 2,500 official emojis in total, native speakers of the

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Unicode

One of the interesting things about Emoji, which is today, the world's global system of communication, is that it's carefully controlled and regulated. Neither you nor I can just come up with an emoji and it accepted by your smartphone producer of choice. Emojis are carefully vetted and approved by Unicode, a Californian based consortium.

Unicode was established in 1988 in order to set the international standard for unifying computer fonts and scripts. Eight of the eleven members of Unicode are North American tech giants. And Unicode's emoji technical subcommittee applies various rules and tests before approving a new emoji: the whole vetting process for a single candidate emoji normally takes around 18 months.

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2016, by replacing the pictogram of the gun emoji with an image of a water pistol: a harmless child's toy. But the question this poses, is whether it's right for a company to privilege its PR, revenue and shareholders, by restricting what its users can deploy emoji to convey and express, on its platform. Is this a quasi-Orwellian step, an attempt to restrict what people can think by limiting what their emojis can convey? Does this amount to a step onto the slippery slope towards censorship?

Conclusion

Digital communication provides us with an important channel in our increasingly connected social and professional lives. But the rich context available in face-to-face encounters is largely absent. Digital text alone is impoverished and, on occasion, emotionally arid.



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Dr. **Vyvyan Evans** is a language and communication expert. His writing has been featured in *Aeon*, *CNN Style*, *The New York Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Conversation*, *Nautilus Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *New Scientist*, and *Psychology Today*, among other publications.

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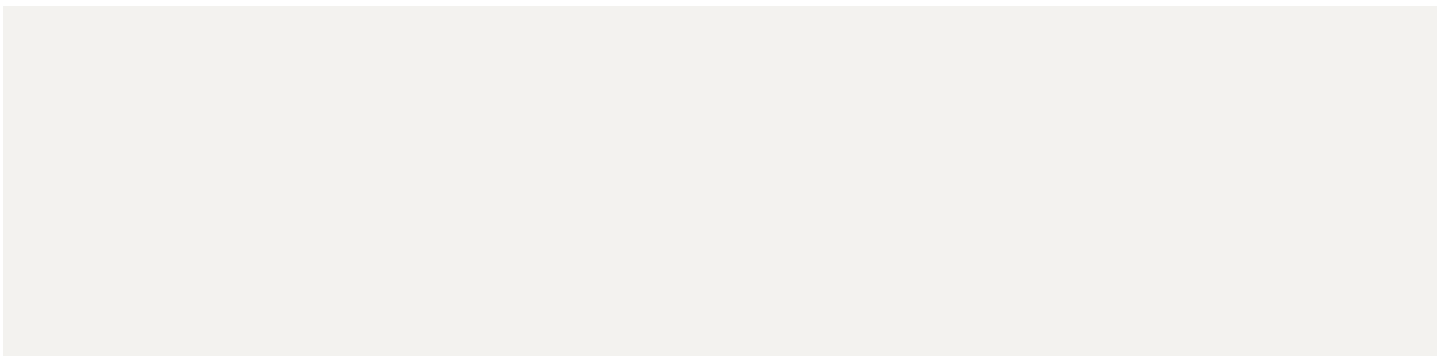
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**Emoji is the new universal language.
And it's making us better communicators.**

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