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Emojis actually make our language better

By [Vyvyan Evans](#)

August 12, 2017 | 4:24pm | Updated



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♥ 'em or 😡 'em, emojis are embedded in our 21st century culture.

Over 90 percent of the world's 3.2 billion Internet users regularly send these "picture characters," as the word means in Japanese, with over 5 billion being transmitted everyday on Facebook's Messenger app alone.



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Since originating in Japan, that land that worships all things tooth-achingly cute, in the late 1990s and going global in 2010, emojis have spread beyond our phones and into all corners of life.



The original set of 176 emojis in 1999.

MoMA

Finland became the world's first country to brand itself with bespoke emojis in 2015 — the same year that Oxford Dictionaries, the world's leading arbiter of English-language usage, declared 😂 a word. New York's public radio station, WYNC, even got in on the act, launching a subway agony index online, using emojis to update long-suffering commuters on transit state of play. You can't blame Hollywood for jumping on the bandwagon with July's "The Emoji Movie," even if the reviews were 🤢.

But for many language experts and social commentators, this form of communication is often given short shrift. A common prejudice is that an emoji is the equivalent of an adolescent grunt, a step back to the dark ages of illiteracy, making us poorer communicators in the process — maybe even dumber, too.

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, 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



compare emojis to the language of Shakespeare — or even to language at all. Emojis don't replace language; they're a new tool for a new purpose in our digital textspeak, that helps us nuance and complement what we mean by our words.



The emoji's primary function is not to usurp language but to fill in the emotional cues otherwise missing from typed conversations.

Without an emoji, what I mean by the following text message would be inscrutable: “Hey, so I tripped and banged my head on the kitchen cupboard.” The challenge, for my addressee, is to figure out whether they should laugh at my buffoonery (“You’re such a klutz”) or offer up sympathy (“Oh, I’m sorry, hope it doesn’t hurt too bad”) But the addition of 😞 or 😊 helps spell out the meaning behind our words, aiding communication in the process.

In the realm of textspeak, without ready access to the nonverbal cues we draw upon to signal our humorous intent, miscommunication is an omnipresent danger. In fact, the lack of nuancing in textspeak has even been given its own name, Poe’s law. In 2005, someone with the user name “Nathan Poe” posted as part of a creationism debate in an Internet forum, “Without a winking smiley or other blatant display of humor, it is utterly impossible to parody a Creationist in such a way that someone won’t mistake for the genuine article.”







The idea is this: You can’t really convey parody without a 😊 or 😞.

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 of 43 muscles to produce in excess of 10,000 distinguishable gestures — all reflexes of our inner emotional selves.

The reason for emojis’ global appeal is this: It is to textspeak what body language is to spoken communication. The emoji’s primary function is not to usurp language but to fill in the emotional cues otherwise missing from typed conversations. It allows us to be more effective communicators. And this is no mean feat.



A telling example comes from research commissioned by the dating site Match.com and released earlier this year.       A survey of over 5,600 singles, found that the more emojis a singleton uses in their texts, the more dates they go on — and the more sex they have.

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As any scientist worth their salt will tell you, correlation doesn't entail causation. It's not the fact that using more emojis leads to a greater number of sexual conquests. If only! Rather, using these word pictures makes it easier for your potential date to gauge your message. Emojis facilitate a better calibration and expression of our emotions in digital communication. In essence, it is not emoji use per se, that gets you more dates; emoji users are more effective communicators.

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. Textspeak sometimes seemingly possesses the power to strip all forms of nuanced expression from even the best of us.

But here, the emoji can help: These little pictures enable us to better express tone of voice and body language. In our brave new digital world, we're all, or nearly all, speaking emoji now. And that should impress us.

Professor Vyvyan Evans is an expert on language and digital communication. He has published 14 books on language, meaning and mind. His latest, "[The Emoji Code: The Linguistics Behind Smiley Faces and Scaredy Cats](#)" is published by Picador.

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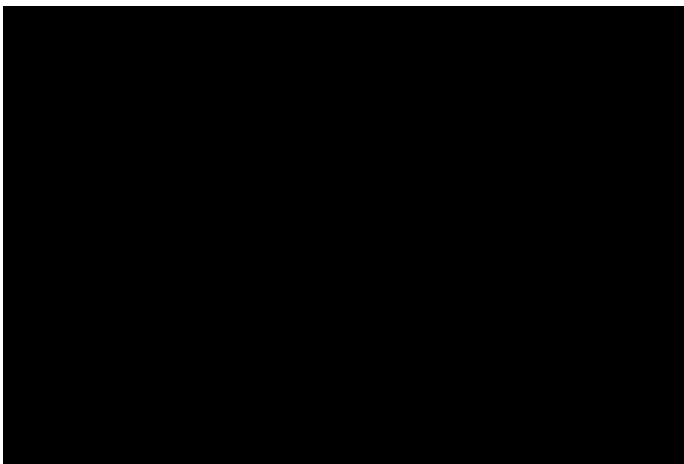
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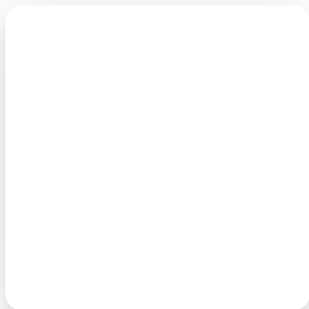
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