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Signs of our times: why emoji can be even more powerful than words

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Each year, Oxford Dictionaries – one of the world's leading arbiters on the English language – selects a word that has risen to prominence over the past 12 months as its "Word of the Year". The word is carefully chosen, based on a close analysis of how often it is used and what it reveals about the times we live in. Past examples include such classics as "vape", "selfie" and "omnishambles".

But the 2015 word of the year is not a word at all. It's an emoji – the "face with tears of joy" emoji, to be precise.

Formerly regarded with disdain as the textual equivalent of an adolescent grunt, it appears that emoji has now gone mainstream. Even if it's not a fully-fledged language, then it is – at the very least – something that most of us use, most of the time. In fact, more than 80% of all adult smartphone users in the UK regularly use emoji, a finding based on a study I reported in an earlier article.

Yet predictably, Oxford Dictionaries' selection has raised eyebrows in some quarters. Writing in The Guardian, Hannah Jane Parkinson brands the decision "ridiculous". For Parkinson, and I'm sure for many other language mavens out there, it's "ridiculous" because the emoji is not even a word. Surely this is a stunt, they'll say, dreamt up by clever marketing executives bent on demonstrating just how hip Oxford Dictionaries actually is.

But Parkinson also objects on the basis that there are many other emojis which would make a better word of the year. She suggests the nail painting emoji and the aubergine (or eggplant) emoji as just two examples which have a stronger claim to the title.

Missing the point

But both these complaints miss the point. Emoji – from the Japanese meaning "picture character" (a word which only entered the Oxford Dictionaries in 2013) – is in many respects language-like. Spoken or signed language enables us to convey a message, influence the mental states and behaviours of others and enact changes to our civil and social status. We use language to propose marriage, and confirm it, to quarrel, make-up and get divorced. Yet emoji has similar functions – it can even get you arrested!

Consider an unusual case from earlier this year: a 17-year-old African American teenager posted a public status update on his Facebook page, featuring a police officer emoji with handgun emojis pointing towards it. This landed him in hot water: the New York District Attorney issued an arrest warrant, for an alleged "terroristic threat", claiming that the emojis amounted to a threat to harm, or incite others to cause harm, to New York's finest.

A grand jury ultimately declined to indict the teenager for what is arguably the world's first alleged emoji terror offence. But the point is that emojis, like language, can both convey a message and provide a means of enacting it – in this case, an alleged call to arms against the NYPD.

Like our treasured English words, emojis are powerful instruments of thought and, potentially, persuasion. Just like language, they can and will be used as evidence against you in a court of law. In short, those who dismiss the language-like nature of emoji fundamentally misunderstand how human communication works in our brave new digital world.

Evolution of the emoji

The second complaint – that there are other emojis more deserving of Oxford Dictionaries' esteem – also misunderstands how language is evolving in the digital domain.

Emoji perfection. from www.shutterstock.com

For one thing, recent research suggests that just under 60% of the world's daily emoji use is made up of smiling or sad faces, of various kinds. And this particular emoji now accounts for around 20% of all emoji usage in the UK (representing a fourfold increase in use over the past 12 months). It is arguably one of the most frequently used emojis today. In this sense, the "face with tears of joy" emoji is a perfectly appropriate representation of the main ways we use emoji in our everyday digital lives.

Yet this specific emoji is apt for a deeper reason, too. Emoji is to text-speak what intonation, facial expression and body language are to spoken interaction. While emoji are not conventional words, they nevertheless provide an important contextualisation cue, which enables us to punctuate the otherwise emotionally arid landscape of digital text with personal expression.

Importantly, emoji helps us to elicit empathy from the person we're addressing – a central requirement of effective communication. It allows us to influence the way our text is interpreted and better express our emotional selves.

One could even argue that, in some ways, emojis are more powerful than words. The "laughing face with tears of joy" emoji effectively conveys a complex emotional spectrum – which would otherwise require several words to convey – in a single, relatively simple glyph. It manages to evoke an immediate emotional resonance, which might otherwise be lost in a string of words.

Occasionally, emojis they can even replace words – this is what linguists refer to as code-switching. In more extreme examples – such as the translation of literary works such as Alice in Wonderland – they function exclusively as words and are also given grammatical structure. There's truly no arguing with the expressive power of emoji.

So while some will unkindly accuse Oxford Dictionaries of a marketing stunt, I applaud them. We are increasingly living in an age of emoji: they are, quite literally, a sign of our times. There's no doubt that language is here to stay – the great English word is not in peril, and won't be any time soon. But emoji fills a gap in digital communication – and makes us better at it in the process.