

**How Emoji Means:
The Rise and Rise of the New Global Communication System
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Emoji in brief

An emoji is a glyph encoded in fonts, like other characters, for use in electronic communication. It's especially prevalent in digital messaging and social media. An *emoji*, or 'picture character', is a visual representation of a feeling, idea, entity, status or event, such as the ubiquitous smiley 'face with tears of joy' emoji, selected by Oxford Dictionaries as its 2015 Word of the Year.



From a historical perspective, the first emojis were developed in the late 1990s in Japan for use in the world's first mobile phone internet system. There were originally around 170, very crude by today's standards.



In 2009, the California-based Unicode Consortium, which specifies the international standard for the representation of text across modern digital computing and communication platforms, sanctioned 722 emojis. The Unicode-approved emojis became available to software developers by 2010, and a global phenomenon was born. Today, depending upon operating system, there are anything between 800-1600 emojis available to digital users.

Is emoji a language?

Unlike a naturally-occurring system of communication like English, French or Japanese, emoji is not a language. For one thing, with a limited catalogue of emojis, its reduced vocabulary means that it has a relatively impoverished semantic range. Second, unlike a language, emoji doesn't have a system of grammar that allows complex combinations of the vocabulary items. There are, of course exceptions to this.

—In research involving the relationship between language and emojis, based on attitudes, in the UK, to money and conducted on behalf of the financial giant Barclays Bank PLC, we discovered that 40 per cent of Britons find talking about money more awkward than a first date, or even than bumping into an ex-partner; more than 30% of Brits would rather be out-of-pocket than ask for money owed to them, while one in five Britons lost in excess of £100 in the past year for this very reason. In contrast, the same study reveals that nearly half (49%) of young people—respondents aged 18-25—believe that emojis can make a conversation less awkward. To make life a little easier for Barclays' bashful digital customers, I was commissioned to translate the top finance-related expressions that Brits find most awkward to say, into emoji.¹

I can't afford it, sorry



That's too expensive!



I'm broke



You owe me money



You've added that up wrong/
you've miscalculated that



I don't want to split the bill
evenly, I didn't eat or drink



Can I borrow some money
please?



These ‘translations’ require imbuing emoji with a rudimentary grammatical system; for instance, I used the paperclip emoji to designate a subordinating clause in the penultimate example, and the ‘arms crossed no expression’ emoji in two of the emoji sentences as a nation marker. But exercises like this, aside, most people don’t usually attribute grammatical functions to emojis.

Interpreting emoji

One of the serious questions surrounding the rise and rise of emoji is this: Why has the uptake of emoji grown exponentially; why is it a truly global system of communication? Some see emoji as little more than an adolescent grunt, taking us back to the dark ages of illiteracy. But this prejudice fundamentally misunderstands the nature of communication. And in so doing it radically underestimates the potentially powerful and beneficial role of emoji in the digital age as a communication and educational tool.

All too often we think of language as the mover and the shaker in our everyday world of meaning. But, in actual fact, most of the meaning we convey and glean in our everyday social encounters, comes from nonverbal cues. Take gesture: they are minutely choreographed to co-occur with our spoken words. And we seem unable to suppress them. Watch someone on the telephone; they’ll be gesticulating away, despite their gestures being unseen by the person on the other end of the line. Indeed, if gestures are suppressed, in lab settings say, then our speech actually becomes less fluent. We need to gesture to be able to speak properly. And, by some accounts, gesture may have even been the route that language took in its evolutionary emergence.

Eye contact is another powerful signal we use in our everyday encounters. We use it to manage our spoken interactions with others. Speakers avert their gaze from an addressee when talking, but establish eye contact to signal the end of their utterance. We gaze at our addressee to solicit feedback, but avert our gaze when we disapprove of what they are saying. We also glance at our addressee to emphasise a point we’re making.

Eye gaze, gesture, facial expression, and speech prosody are powerful nonverbal cues that convey meaning; they enable us to express our emotional selves, as well as providing an effective and dynamic means of managing our interactions on a moment by moment time - scale. Face - to - face interaction is multimodal, with meaning conveyed in multiple, overlapping and complementary ways. This provides a rich communicative environment, with multiple cues for coordinating and managing our spoken interactions.

Digital communication increasingly provides us with an important channel of communication in our increasingly connected 21st century social and professional lives. But the rich, communicative context available in face-to-face encounters is largely absent. Digital text alone is impoverished and emotionally arid. Digital communication, seemingly, possesses the power to strip all forms of nuanced expression even from the best of us. But here emoji can help: it fulfils a similar function in digital communication to gesture, body language and intonation, in spoken communication—in so doing it provides what linguists refer to as ‘paralinguistic’ cues—essential for supporting language, but being, themselves, non-linguistic in nature. Emoji, in text messaging and other forms of digital communication, enables us to better express tone and provide emotional cues to better manage the ongoing flow of information, and to interpret what the words are meant to convey.

ⁱ http://www.newsroom.barclays.com/r/3377/show_me_the_mon-emoji_