



Emoji: the world's first truly universal form of communication

# IS EMOJI THE NEW LANGUAGE?

*Long stories can be shortened to a string of symbols.  
JR Ramakrishnan reconciles the current  
global emoji overwhelm.*

**H**ere's an unfashionable take: I don't emoji all that much. The iconic yellow (and now black, brown, hijab-ed) faces, places, and animals make a very minimal appearance in my digital life. I realise this admission carbon dates me as a Generation X/Y-er and puts me in a minority group of the emoji disinterested.

The roots of this phenomenon go back to the late 1990s, when emojis first entered our digital lives. Some 1.8 billion 🧐 —and counting—are being used on Twitter alone, according to EmojiTracker.com, a bewildering and constantly updated real-time tracker of emoji use. Add that to the number of characters sent over text platforms, social media, and e-mail, and we're well into the billions in regular emoji love.

The animated glyphs are to be found in the loftiest of our global cultures perches: *BBC News* has reported news headlines with them; Bangkok's Gaggan, number one in Asia's 50 Best Restaurants in 2017, renders its menu in emojis; there's an emoji version of *Alice In Wonderland*; and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art added the original Japanese set to its collection in 2016. *The Emoji Movie*'s plot revolves around the hero's journey of an over-emojing emoji trying to be a normal single note character. *Star Trek*'s Patrick Stewart gives voice to the poop emoji 🍌.

My favourite emoji moment was when language learning app Duolingo launched the 🌐's first emoji language course. "People ❤️ to 🍌 on emojis, but in a relatively short 🕒, they've far eclipsed their precursor, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and set the 🌐 standard of smartphones among millennials 🙌," said Yuna Kode, a self-taught emoji expert 🧑 behind the course, according to the company's press release. Alas, the press release was also dated April 1, 2017 🤡. I was fooled at first, too 🤡. And by the way, 🤡 was Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2015.

Oxford Dictionaries's embrace of emojis may have endowed these characters with respectability, but without syntax or grammar, emojis can't stand in for language. "Emoji is a system of communication. It's not a language but it fulfills the functions of language," says Vyvyan Evans, linguist, emoji authority, and author of *The Emoji Code: The Linguistics Behind Smiley Faces And Scaredy Cats*. "It is the world's first truly universal form of communication." According to Evans, emojis allow for non-verbal cues to travel in the digital realm. Text is poor at transmitting emotions such as empathy or gesticulations such as a pout or a shrug.

In real life, I can't really hold a conversation without using my hands. I've been told that my big eyes telegraph my feelings, sometimes in spite of what's coming out of my mouth. Digitally, however, I am less inclined to emoji. I don't *not* emoji. I do at times use 🙄, 🍷, and ❤️ as shorthand. According to cognitive scientist Monica Riordan who researches the impact of communications now that we have to deal with 🍌 and 🍌 and their connotations, I am letting emojis do the "emotion work". "How many times in your life have you actually laughed out loud with tears of joy 🤡?" she asks. "Emojis represent a performance. For reasons that could include self-presentation or wanting to avoid an argument, we perform even when we don't feel like it. For example, we laugh at lame jokes to preserve relationships."

Performance aside, emojis caress our text messages for them to arrive more softly with the recipient. A 😊 can pad out a complicated text comment. A 🙄 can be essential to ensure your Twitter sarcasm is transmitted as intended. As someone who prefers to spell out "kiss" rather than dash off a sloppy 🍷, I wonder if words can't do the job on their own. What would the great Oscar Wilde make of emojis? Perhaps Wilde, known for his aesthetic flamboyance, would have embraced the entire emojiopedia in his words. Maybe. For now, I am off to read an emoji treatment of Wilde's *The Importance Of Being Earnest* on the Internet. 🤡 ■