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If You're Fluent In Emoji, Does That Technically Make You Bilingual?

“Vision can be more powerful, in terms of understanding and perceiving something than having to decode language. From that perspective, visual glyphs — a.k.a emojis — are very powerful, effective communicators. In terms of digital technology and communication, visual information is very powerful. This is one of the proven effects of phenomena such as Facebook. Think about it: If Facebook were a country it'd be the largest in the world. Facebook has 1.9 billion active monthly users; 300 million plus images are uploaded, every day, on Facebook. It's just mind boggling.

ELIZABETH KIEFER
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Never gotten around to becoming fluent in a second language? Well, we may have good news for you. If you're using emoji in your day-to-day digital communications, then you're basically bilingual — at least, according to language expert Vyvyan Evans. Evans, whose new book, *The Emoji Code: The Linguistics Behind Smiley Faces and Scaredy Cats*, pointed out on a call with Refinery29 that embedding emoji in your text messages and email is essentially an example of

"code switching" — aka flip-flopping between two languages in the course of a single sentence or thought.

Emoji is more than just technological dialect, though. It's the way that we Digital Age humans inject the humanity of face-to-face encounters into our smartphone exchanges, by subbing in emoji for the nonverbal cues that give context to our IRL interactions.

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And to think: All this time we were just sending out aubergines, willy-nilly, and there was so much more to the story...

Let's go back to the beginning: Where did emoji get its start?

'Emoji' the word entered into English language use in the Oxford dictionary in 2013. But it's an anglo-phised form of two Japanese words that literally mean 'picture character'. Emoji were invented in late 1990s Japan, by someone called Shigetaka Kurita, who was working on early smartphones. What these phones were doing, in essence, was making the world's first mobile internet system commercially available. But they had display limitations, so software engineers decided to use icons to represent a lot of information. For example: If you wanted to know what the weather was like in another city, you'd want to see a display icon rather than the text. And that was how, in essence, emoji were born. To start, there were 176 of them.

How did emoji make the leap from digital message boards to our everyday lives?

Researchers know that between 60-70% of our emotional expression comes not from language itself, but from verbal cues: eye gaze, tone of voice, gesture, facial expression. We humans use 43 muscles in our face to produce in excess of 10,000 distinct expressions that reflect all kinds of emotions. We pick up on these cues to decipher what someone actually means. Emoji are, in text speak, analogous to the nonverbal way we communicate in everyday encounters.

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Emoji is the world's global form of communication: It's important that it should be representative of the global population.

VYVYAN EVANS

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What's the difference between the "stickers" — for example, [Kimoji](#) — and emoji?

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Stickers are bespoke emoji that anyone can design. But a *true* emoji is something that appears standard on a digital keyboard, as a letter of an alphabet on your smartphone or your tablet; there are now around 2,500 of them. Emoji are officially sanctioned by Unicode — a nonprofit consortium of tech giants, many of them North American. The Unicode rules prohibit branded emoji. There are various other rules, too. For instance, you cannot have an emoji that relates to a person living or dead. You also can't have emoji of deities, like you can't have a Buddha emoji, for example.

But that hasn't kept people from lobbying Unicode for new emoji and winning. What are some of your favourite examples of new additions?

There is the dumpling emoji, which was proposed by a San Francisco-based businesswoman who is Chinese American and has a passion for Chinese dumplings: She was trying to communicate this passion to a friend, but realised the dumpling was missing. When she thought about it further, she realised that a lot of the food emoji seemed to be Western in nature. Dumplings are found all over the world. But Unicode is largely made up of white, middle-aged, male engineers who are hardly representative of the global population.

People often say to me: 'Isn't it silliness, making a huge fuss about a dumpling emoji?' It's not. Emoji is the world's global form of communication: It's important that it should be representative of the global population. And that's why something like adding a dumpling is not only fun, but also very important.

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This makes me think of the keyboard updates that added options for multiple skin tones, which happened in 2016.

There is this move within Unicode for better diversification, in terms of representation for gender, employment and job-related emoji, and in terms of ethnicity, etc. Six billion emoji are sent on a daily basis, and there are 3.2 billion internet users in the world — that's approaching half the world's population. Of those 3.2 billion, around 92% regularly send emoji. Soon there's going to be a [hijab emoji](#). It's not just about being politically correct. It's about being representative, so that people of different backgrounds — socioeconomic, ethnic and so on — can still be properly represented in the world's global form of communication.

Can you discuss how certain emoji wind up with certain associations, and how those associations differ depending on their cultural context?

The association really depends on your perspective, your orientation, and a whole number of other things. A good example of cultural variation is the emoji of a [woman with her hand up](#), as if she's holding a tray. It was one of the early ones, invented in Japan; in a Japanese context and culture, that image is based on an information desk person. But it tends to be used in Western culture, where the imagery *doesn't* have this association, to represent someone who is being sassy, and it accompanies messages and text that relates to cheekiness in some way.

But it doesn't really matter what your native tongue is. English, French, Japanese: A smiley means the same thing in most languages. There are words which just can't be translated in a

single word into another language; emoji can often be like that, even though the facial emoji are, to a large extent, universal.

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Another thing you write about in the book, which is something I had never considered before, is that emoji are corporately owned, which complicated their usage.

One of the problems with emoji is that they are potentially prone to censorship because the individual representations are owned by the individual software developers, and these software developers, like Apple and Samsung and the rest of them, have shareholders they need to protect. For example: When Instagram began allowing for searches through captions using emoji, users quickly noticed that the eggplant [aubergine] had been banned — presumably because it's the rudest fruit in town, as a journalist dubbed it in *The Guardian*.

How do you respond to the argument that emoji represents a step backward in the way we communicate with one another?

Some people ask me: Isn't emoji a backward step toward the dark stages of pre-Shakespearean illiteracy? Isn't this the equivalent of an adolescent grunt? That's really not the case. Emoji is enabling us to be more effective communicators in the 21st century digital age. Emoji are a very powerful means to better expressing our emotional selves.

The Emoji Code: The Linguistics Behind Smiley Faces and Scaredy Cats by Vyvyan Evans is published on 1st August 2017.

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WRITTEN BY

ELIZABETH
KIEFER

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