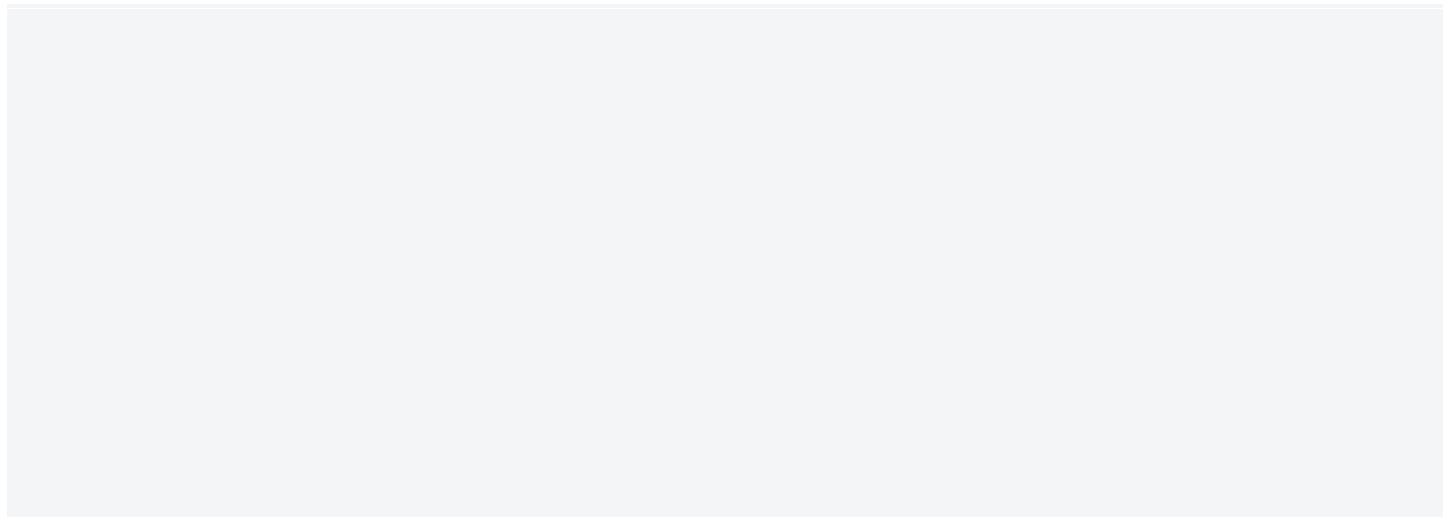


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Are Emojis Becoming the New Universal 'Language'?

BY **CONOR GAFFEY** ON 9/18/15 AT 11:27 AM EDT



Since 2011, when they first became widely available, emojis—the colourful the winks, smileys, lovehearts, and so on embedded as glyphs in our

from the Japanese, is a visual representation of a feeling, idea, entity, status or event.

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 176, but this figure mushroomed during the 2000s, particularly in the Japanese mobile computing sector. 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. These Unicode-approved emojis became available to software developers by 2010. A few more were added in 2012, and in June 2014, Unicode added over 270 more. In 2016, a further 38 will be added, including emojis for bacon and even clinking champagne glasses.

But let's be clear from the outset: emoji is not, strictly speaking, a language, in the way that say, English, French or Japanese are languages—at least not yet. But emoji is certainly a powerful system of communication, that, nevertheless fulfils some of the functions associated with language. They can even get you arrested, as a 17-year-old American Facebook user found to his cost, earlier this year. The teenager posted an ill-advised status update, involving gun emojis pointing at a police-officer emoji. Your emojis can and will be used as evidence against you in a court of law.

English is often said to be the world's global language, so a comparison is instructive. English has both status and reach that puts it on a different level to any other spoken variety: 335 million native speakers, and a further 505 million speakers who use it as a second language. It's the primary or official language in 101 countries, from Canada to Cameroon, and from Malta to Malawi—far outstripping any other language. It has been transplanted far from its point of origin—a small country, on a small island—having spread far beyond English shores.

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But in comparison, emoji dwarfs even the reach of English. The driver for the staggering adoption of emoji has been the advent of mobile computing, especially the smartphone. Emoji was introduced as an international keyboard in Apple's operating system (iOS) in October 2011. And by July 2013 it had been introduced across most Android operating platforms.

There are different measures for assessing the stratospheric rise of emoji. One factor has been the rapid adoption of smartphones. Today one quarter of the world's global population owns a smartphone; and based on a survey of mobile computing habits in 41 countries it is estimated that there will be over 2 billion smartphone users by 2016, and 2.5 billion by 2018. By 2015, 41% of the world's population had regular internet access, with 31% of the global population accessing the internet by smartphone.

in terms of specific countries, China exceeded 500 million smartphones during the course of 2014, and it is estimated that India will have over 200 million smartphone users by 2016, and in the USA this figure will be achieved by 2017, when 65% of the population of the United States will own a smartphone. In terms of smartphones alone, some 41.5 billion text messages are sent globally every day, using around 6 billion emojis—figures that are mindboggling.

Turning now to Instagram, the popular photo and video sharing platform, founded in 2010, its 300 million active monthly users share over 70 million photos and videos everyday. In fact, one fifth of the world's internet users, aged between 16 and 64, have an Instagram account. In the first month following the launch of the emoji keyboard in iOS, emoji use in text and captions jumped from flat-lining to a 10% uptake. This further accelerated with the incorporation of emoji in android platforms. And by March 2015, nearly half of all text on Instagram posts contained emojis. The graph on this page illustrates the trend.

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In the UK, research that I conducted demonstrates that around 80% of smartphone users regularly emojis in their text messages, while around 40% of Brits have sent text messages, paradoxically, without text: containing emojis alone.

In the final analysis, whatever the metric, the adoption rate of emoji is staggering; and this provides grist to the mill that emoji is now the world's new global form of communication; it matters not a jot whether your native tongue is English, Finnish or Japanese: the smiley face means the same thing in every language.

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