



Beyond words: How language-like is emoji?



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The decision by Oxford Dictionaries to select an emoji as the [2015 Word of the Year](http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2015/11/word-of-the-year-2015-emoji/) (<http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2015/11/word-of-the-year-2015-emoji/>) has led to incredulity in some quarters. [Hannah Jane Parkinson](http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/nov/17/oxford-dictionary-emoji-word-of-the-year-crying-face) (<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/nov/17/oxford-dictionary-emoji-word-of-the-year-crying-face>), writing in *The Guardian*, and doubtless speaking for many, brands the decision 'ridiculous' — after all, an emoji is, self-evidently, not a word; so the wagging fingers seem to say. And indeed, the great English word is, for many, the most sacred cornerstone of 'our magnificent bastard tongue', as John McWhorter so aptly dubs the language of Shakespeare. But is such derision really warranted? After all, we live in a brave new digital age. And the media we use to connect and communicate with our nearest and dearest, as well as a virtual world peopled by 'followers' and 'friends' we've never met, surely requires somewhat different communicative systems. And systems, such as emoji, are adaptations to this most recent arena of human discursive intercourse. They get the job done when the tried and tested interpersonal cues, that oil spoken interaction, are impossible or absent. But is emoji, which is most definitely a communicative system, so different from language?

The communicative functions of language

English, like any other natural language, has two major communicative functions. The first is an ideational function: to get an idea across, as when I say, *It's raining*, or *I love you*. It also has an interactive-interpersonal function: to influence the attitudes and behaviours of others, and, in a myriad ways, change an aspect of the world's states of affairs in the process. This can range from the mundane, as when I ask someone to shut the door on the way out, ensuring the door's position conforms to my wishes. But its influence can also be rather more significant, as when a member of the clergy pronounces two individuals, husband and wife, concluding an act of marriage, and thereby transforming the moral, romantic, financial, and legal status of the two individuals vis-à-vis one another.

But emoji can also fulfil these two major functions. In January 2015, a 17 year old from Brooklyn, Osiris Aristy, was arrested for making an alleged 'terroristic threat' based on the NY terrorism statutes introduced after 9/11. His alleged crime was posting a public status update on his Facebook page threatening NY police officers. But what was unusual was that the alleged threat was made up solely of emojis: a police officer emoji, with handgun emojis pointing at it.

The NY District Attorney, in deciding whether to issue an arrest warrant, used the communicative standards that apply to language: his, perhaps reasonable, inference, was that the teenager was threatening gun violence towards the NYPD. And indeed, when his home was raided, Aristy was found to have a .38 calibre Smith and Wesson revolver. While, ultimately, a Grand Jury declined to indict Aristy, and the case was dropped, Aristy's emojis were evaluated in the same way as if he had written 'gonna shoot a cop'. The legal question, and judgement, turned on whether the two self-same communicative functions of language also applied to his alleged emoji offence: did the meaning conveyed by the emojis amount to an attempt to influence the behaviour of others, and incite gun violence, or indeed, represent an intention to cause harm, himself, to New York's Finest. In short, did he mean to go through with it? Was this merely foolish chatter, or a cold-blooded threat? And that, in itself, is a salutary lesson; in terms of digital communication, others are liable to interpret our intentions as much from our emojis, as the words we type — emojis matter: they can and will be used against you in a court of law.

What's in a sign?

In the absence of telepathy, humans have language. And language works extremely well because it enables us to coordinate our action and interaction — for better and for worse. Language is arguably the world's most powerful instrument for getting our thoughts across and changing minds in the process: mental states that are powerful, long-lasting, and can be all-consuming.

Language achieves this by using signs — a physical representation — which stands for a particular idea. For instance, the English word *dog*, made up of the three sound segments represented phonetically as /dɒg/ enables the speaker to convey an idea, allowing the addressee to conjure up a mental idea: the notion of a dog. In this, there is no causal relationship between the sign and the idea it calls to mind. After all, the English sign, /dɒg/, doesn't look or sound like the entity it represents. And different languages make use of very different signs to evoke the same idea, for instance, *cicing* in Balinese, *gos* in Catalan, *skylīn* in modern Greek, *kutya* in Hungarian, *gae* in Korean, and *pies* in Polish. In short, the signs used by English, and other languages, are symbols. They enable great flexibility in communicative expression, as a symbol doesn't have to be connected, in the here and now, to the thing it stands for.

In this, emoji seems to function, at least on the face of it, in quite a different way. After all, signs in emoji are icons: there is, often, a direct causal relationship between the sign, and the idea it calls up. The smiley or winking faces look like, more or less, the ideas that they attempt to convey. So does this mean that, on this score, emoji is quite unlike language?

Not really. After all, it is well-known that there are a large class of signs, in English, that are based on iconicity. One example of this is words for entities that represent the sound made by the entity in question. For instance, the English word *buzz* describes the sound emitted by a bee. And it does so in an iconic way: the sign sounds like the thing it represents. And in this way, language also exhibits an iconic based, just like emoji, for formulating the signs that it makes use of.

Type of sound	Onomatopoeias
Human vocal sounds	<i>achoo, babbling, gargle, hiccup, hum, etc.</i>
Human actions	<i>smack, thump, etc.</i>
Physical contact, movement or combustion	<i>splat, boom, fizz, plop, whizz, slosh, swish, etc.</i>
Sounds produced by devices	<i>beep, ding ding, tick tock, vroom, zap, zip, etc.</i>
Things names after the sounds they produce	<i>choo choo (train), flip-flops, etc.</i>
Animal names	<i>cuckoo, dodo, etc.</i>
Animal sounds	<i>bleat, buzz, chirp, hiss, hoot, meow, moo, purr, quack, rabbit, woof, etc.</i>

Some examples of iconic signs in English, known as 'onomatopoeias', from Greek, meaning 'echo sound'.

Moreover, the motivation for signs in emoji can be symbolic, just as is typically the case with spoken language. A particularly striking example of this concerns the three wise monkey emojis:

The three wise monkeys depict a pictorial maxim: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. In the Western tradition, this is typically interpreted as advice not to turn a blind eye to inappropriate behaviour or conduct. But this maxim derives from Japanese tradition, probably via the teachings of Confucius, whose sayings include the following: 'Look not at what is contrary to propriety; listen not to what is contrary to propriety; speak not what is contrary to propriety'. The pictorial representation for the homily probably derives from a 17th-century woodcarving [Tōshō-gū](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikk%C5%8D_T%C5%8Dsh%C5%8D-g%C5%AB) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikk%C5%8D_T%C5%8Dsh%C5%8D-g%C5%AB), shrine in [Nikkō](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikk%C5%8D) (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nikk%C5%8D>), [Japan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japan) (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japan>). The carving, which features Japanese Macaque monkeys, a species common in Japan, uses the macaque to represent the human life journey. But while this is a pictorial trope — holding the hands over the eyes, for instance, stands for not being able to see — the point is, there is nothing about three Japanese macaques, with their hands over various parts of their physiognomies which iconically resembles the meaning of the maxim; you and I just have to know that the image relates to a particular idea. In short, this is a primarily symbolic representation: the meaning conveyed by the image is motivated, only very indirectly, by an iconic relationship. Hence, on this score, emoji is very much language-like indeed.

A final point, here, is that some linguistic systems function perfectly effectively, just like emoji, in being largely iconic in nature. While we often think of language as meaning spoken language, sign languages are the functional equals of spoken language: sign language users manage to communicate extremely successfully without sound. But the point here is that much of the motivation for signs, in sign language, is ultimately iconic rather than symbolic in nature, a function of the manual-gestural modality sign language makes use of. For instance, the ASL signs for CHEERFUL, HAPPY, and EXCITED all make use of an upward motion. And many linguists believe that positive states are iconically motivated by the human experience of being more upright, when feeling positive, *He was feeling on top of the world*, while negative experiences are iconically motivated by a lower posture, *She's down in the dumps*.

The organization of language

Finally, language is organized into an inventory of vocabulary items — what linguists refer to as a mental lexicon — and a system of grammatical rules, that enable us to compose our words into well-formed spoken (or signed) utterances. How does emoji fare here?

For most people, and most of the time, emojis are used to add a personal voice to digital text—they don't have a system of grammatical rules. In this it fulfils a communicative value similar to intonation in spoken language, as I [explain elsewhere](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ca8t9JMXLwc&feature=youtu.be) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ca8t9JMXLwc&feature=youtu.be>). And in the domain of emotional expression, emoji enables us to use single glyphs to convey a complex spectrum of emotional experience. A case in point is the 'laughing face with tears of joy', selected as Oxford Dictionaries 2015 Word of the Year, which takes many more text characters to convey than a single emoji, and without the immediacy of the empathic resonance the glyph achieves

But give it time: emoji has been available to a global audience only since 2011. And there are, now, cases where some intrepid souls have developed a grammatical system for emoji. A good example is the work of the visual designer who has translated the classic story of Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/en_uk/blog/author-translates-all-of-alice-in-wonderland-into-emojis), into emoji. And here, we have emoji as language, with grammatical organization to boot.

While this may be a step too far, for some, there is simply no arguing with the expressive power of emoji. Digital communication is the sign of our times. And emoji functions extremely well in that medium, often in language-like ways. And for this reason, it is surely not a stretch to consider an emoji to be, if not a word in the conventional sense, at the very least, having language-like properties.

[A version of this article originally appeared on the OxfordWords blog.](http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2015/11/emoji-language/) (<http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2015/11/emoji-language/>)

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“... so the wagging fingers seem to say” would lend itself to the creation of a new emoji! More seriously, graphic artists and typographers have been extending the English language for hundreds of years. For example, a white circle banded by a red circle, with a diagonal red line across it is universally understood as “No entry”; elaborated with another image covered by the red line specifically prohibits certain actions (such as “no smoking”). These are all legitimate parts of English and many other languages. Some theorists have liked them to hieroglyphics, a system which served Egyptians well for many years

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