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better communicators.

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(Dimitri Otis / Getty Image)



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other languages – both Mandarin (900 million) and Spanish (427 million) have more native speakers – it has both status and reach that puts it on a different plane to any other. English has 339 million native speakers, with a further 603 million speakers who use it as a second language. This means there are around 942 million more-or-less fluent speakers in the world. And with another 500-plus million users with some degree of fluency, that makes for more than 1.5 billion people alive today with proficiency in English. It's the primary or official language in 101 countries, from Canada to Cameroon, and Malta to Malawi – far outstripping any other language. It has been transplanted a great distance from its point of origin – a small country on a small island – spreading far beyond English shores. This was first achieved by the expansion and might of the British Empire, which at its height was the largest empire in history and the world's foremost economic power for well over a century. By 1913, around 412 million people, almost a quarter of the world's population at the time, were directly governed from London; and following the Great War of 1914–18, the British Empire controlled territories amounting to 13,700,000 square miles, around a quarter of the world's total landmass. Since the Second World War, with the United States superseding the United Kingdom as the world's most economically powerful nation, the influence of English has continued apace.

But here comes the undiplomatic put-down; in comparison, Emoji dwarfs even the reach of English.



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smartphone; based on a survey of mobile computing habits in forty-one countries, it is estimated that there are currently over 2 billion smartphones in the world, with the figure set to continue to rise. By 2016, 3.2 billion people (approaching half the world's population) had regular internet access, and 75 percent of internet users accessed the internet via smartphones.

In terms of smartphones alone, by 2015 some 41.5 billion text messages were being sent globally every day; and across social media applications, each day more than 6 billion emojis are exchanged – mind-boggling figures.

Another measure for assessing the uptake of Emoji comes from its penetration in social media applications. Let's consider Instagram. Founded in 2010, Instagram has well over 300 million active monthly users and counting, sharing over 70 million photos and videos every day. In fact, by the end of 2014, one fifth of the world's internet users aged between sixteen and sixty-four had an Instagram account. In the first month following the launch of the Emoji keyboard in iOS, the uptake of emojis in text and captions on Instagram photos jumped from zero to 10 percent. 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.

In the UK, research that I conducted demonstrates that around 80 per cent of adult smartphone users – defined as eighteen to sixty-five-year-



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on 4 July 2013, Rothenberg has tracked over 16 billion tweets containing emojis – for the stats nerd, that’s hundreds of tweets containing emojis every second of every day!

Yet another line of evidence, pointing to the rise and rise of Emoji, comes from the demise of textual forms of internet slang. For example, abbreviations used in SMS messages and social media applications, such as ‘lol’ (laugh out loud), ‘lolz’ (laugh out loud – with sarcasm), ‘imao’ (in my arrogant opinion – used to confidently assert something), or ‘omg’ (oh my god – used to express negative shock or surprise) are increasingly being replaced by the corresponding emojis.

Moreover, and unlike the slang terms, many of which are language-specific (as in they are different in English, German, Japanese etc.), Emoji is now a near-universal form of communication, across all language groups of Instagram users.

A backward step?

Some argue that Emoji is a step backwards to the dark ages of illiteracy, making us poorer communicators. But this view is nothing more than ill-informed and blinkered cultural elitism. One commentator, guilty of precisely this, and taking a dim view of Emoji, has decried the rise of the now omnipresent emojis in our daily, digital lives. Professional art critic and contrarian Jonathan Jones, [writing in the Guardian](#), contends that: ‘After millennia of painful improvement, from illiteracy



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to be performed. And without the paralinguistic cues, the language itself, for all Shakespeare's genius, would remain lifeless, the zombie words of some long-dead white European male. The emotional resonance of Shakespeare's words come from these cues which breathe an interpretation into his plays: was Iago – one of the most inexplicably evil characters to have walked the apron stage – just plain jealous, or did he have a man-crush on the charismatic Venetian general Othello? The meaning derives from the way the words are delivered, their emotional resonance, the ambiguity conveyed, through tone of voice and accompanying gestures and actions. And in analogous fashion, Emoji helps flesh out the meanings they bring to light, clarifying, nuancing and adding to the otherwise arid textspeak of our emotionally abbreviated digital tongue.

One of the flaws with this sort of prejudiced view of Emoji is that it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of communication. Emoji is not relevant for the long form of written communication, for literature, complex prose, and issues of literacy. Emoji's relevance lies in the truncated and otherwise abbreviated digital messages in daily life – the tweets that replicate the thinking aloud that takes place in casual conversation, and the instant chat facility enabled by messaging apps of different types, which we use, increasingly in lieu of brief spoken exchange, to arrange and coordinate our social lives. To assert that Emoji will make us poorer communicators is like saying that using facial expressions in conversation makes your ideas more difficult to understand. The idea is nonsensical. It's a false analogy to compare



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In addition, research from educational and clinical contexts demonstrates that visual representation, especially pictures, offers a powerful means of communicating and an alternative to spoken or written language, especially among the young, who are less adept language users. For instance, pictures have been used to effectively communicate with children after an operation, when the linguistic mode is diminished as a means of effective communication. Some recent projects have even taken advantage of Emoji expressly because it facilitates more effective emotional expression than text. Examples include a Swedish children's charity that has developed a set of bespoke emojis to help victims of domestic abuse. Another example is that of the educational programme, the Emotes project, which uses emoji-like characters in order to teach children to better express their emotions. The utility and significance of Emoji in a range of educational, recreational and counselling contexts is enormous.

Today we are most definitely living in the digital age – our lives are interconnected in a virtual world, with people we have often never met, made possible by mobile internet technology. The overwhelming majority of the world's computer-literate users now use Emoji as a daily necessity. It adds levity, emotional expression and personality. And it is personality that oils communication. Not only does Emoji enable us to better express ourselves in our digital lives, it also enables us to keep friends and make new ones. Emoji is more than just happy or sad faces. It has real communicative value, and represents an important



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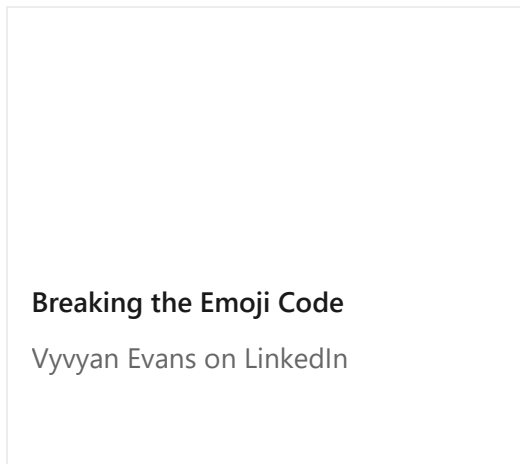
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