

# 1 The What, the Why and the Where of Emoji

*Thirty-Six Years into the Future* 😄 *Tears of Joy* 😄 *What's in a Name?* 😄 *The Language of Language* 😄 *The Alien in the Machine* 😄  
*Skeuomorphic Stickers* 😄 *Picture-writing and Idea-writing*

---

## Thirty-Six Years into the Future

If you were writing a work of science fiction, how would you make the aliens speak? Would they use words and gestures, in much the same way we do? Or would you opt instead for some sort of inter-subjective telepathy? And how about the language of our distant descendants? Is human communication in this imaginary future going to resemble what we use today? Or will it have degenerated? Be changed beyond all recognition?

Then there's the technology. What part will this play in the way people of the future communicate? Will we be able to recognise the devices that dominate their lives? Be able to trace an evolutionary arc linking modern-day technology with what they'll be using then?

One of the most evocative ways a writer can bring an imaginary world into being is by describing its language. This can give substance to the speculative world you're creating – can add a veneer of verisimilitude. But on top of this, a language can be a vital part of character and plot. Language is such an essential element of our identity that we gain huge amounts of information about someone's background from how they speak. It can stand as a metaphor for an imaginary people's culture, for their personality. It can be an expression of the worldview to which they adhere. How does their language reflect the structure of their

society? Does it have hierarchies embedded in its grammar? Indexes of the caste system and the power relations that dominate their culture? Does the government use it to control the actions of its people?

If you were writing a work of science fiction back in the early 1980s, and setting it thirty-six years in the future (the same number of years that George Orwell was playing with when he wrote *Nineteen Eighty-four*), how would you have imagined the language of the end of the 2010s? Mobile phones and the internet were still almost two decades away from becoming mainstream back then. An English-speaking United States was already the dominant superpower but was rivalled in posturing, if not influence, by the USSR. In popular culture, the end of the 2010s was the imaginary world of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*; of Stephen King's *The Running Man*; of Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira*. It was a vision of android-human conflict, of state-sponsored violence masquerading as reality TV, of the spectre of dystopia.

So how would you have imagined the language of the second decade of the third millennium? Would you have seen it as something which looked as if it were regressing back to the very earliest forms of human writing? But that at the same time could be communicated only via devices that were linked to a global computerised network which operated as the intellectual matrix for all of modern civilisation?

Would the language you foresaw be one designed not for the expression of rational thought but for sentiment? Invented to compensate for the growing emotional distance that characterised the way people were now relating to each other?

Would you have given this language a backstory that began with the hyper-cute handwriting of Japanese schoolgirls but ended with a highly regulated system that was policed by a small, unelected cohort of the world's biggest transnational corporations? Would you have written in the idea that this language specifically encoded Western liberal values through its design? But that at the same time it could be weaponised by white

supremacists and used by radical Islamic terrorists as part of their recruitment drives?<sup>1</sup>

Would your language have been a perfect symbol of consumerist society, with an identity closely linked to the marketing strategies of those half-dozen corporations who also regulated it? Who'd also be able to track your mood, attitude and political beliefs via the messages you sent to family and friends? Would you then have imagined all this packaged in a set of smiling yellow faces, flamenco-dancing women and clinking champagne glasses?

Because if you had, you'd have inadvertently stumbled across the way that a seemingly innocuous form of online communication would become – at least for a fleeting historical moment – one of the defining features of life in the early part of the twenty-first century. And was something that would offer a compelling portrait of the many puzzles and paradoxes that characterise contemporary society. You'd have dreamt into being, in other words, the world of emoji.

## **Tears of Joy**

By the time you read this book it will be out of date. Language always changes, of course. This is one of the few constants about it. But it's arguably changing at a faster rate now than at any previous moment in its history. And emoji – the set of picture characters that people use to punctuate their online correspondence – are at the vanguard of this frenzy for change.

Emoji are, in many ways, the perfect illustration of the adaptability of human communication. On one level they may seem little more than cute images used to decorate text messages. But on another, they're a cultural phenomenon which highlights the inventiveness at the core of communication and provides an early indication of the way that technology is revolutionising the way we relate to one another.

As a form of global communication, emoji only began their spread in 2011. Four years later it was estimated they were being

used by over 90 per cent of the online population.<sup>2</sup> In excess of six billion were being sent every day.<sup>3</sup> Their prevalence in the culture was such that Oxford Dictionaries famously chose one as their ‘word’ of the year for 2015.

‘Words of the Year’ are those judged by organisations such as the major dictionaries to be reflective of the ‘ethos, mood, or preoccupations of that particular year’.<sup>4</sup> As other recent winners illustrate, they tend to have a faddish quality about them. They’re very much of their time. And often, once that time has passed, they fade from public consciousness almost as quickly as they arose. It’s questionable, for example, whether ‘omnishambles’ or ‘refudiate’ will still mean much to most people in a few years’ time. The first of these was chosen by Oxford Dictionaries in 2012 and refers to a situation of hopeless confusion and chaos. It derives from the BBC political satire *The Thick of It* and gained brief notoriety when Ed Miliband used it in a speech to parliament when he was leader of the Labour Party. But as politics and television move on, so do popular expressions. Already the word feels more of historical interest than a vital part of contemporary vocabulary.

Much the same applies to ‘refudiate’. This was the winner in 2010, after Sarah Palin, former Republican candidate for US vice-president, used it in a tweet. Campaigning against the so-called Ground Zero Mosque (an Islamic community centre that was planned for lower Manhattan, two blocks up from the World Trade Center site), she urged ‘Peaceful Muslims’ to ‘pls refudiate’ the idea.<sup>5</sup> As is the way with social media, she was swiftly ridiculed for managing to mangle ‘refute’ and ‘repudiate’, thus accidentally creating a concoction all of her own.<sup>6</sup> Although, as she was quick to point out, ‘English is a living language. Shakespeare liked to coin new words too.’<sup>7</sup> And for a few months, the word seemed to encapsulate perfectly the muddled antagonism of modern politics.

There’s a good chance, then, that 2015’s winner, the ‘face with tears of joy’ 😄, will seem equally dated in a few years. But the reasons *why* it will feel dated – and the implications this has for

how we communicate – offer a fascinating insight into the way that society is evolving. These reasons are also, paradoxically, an intrinsic part of why emoji are revolutionising language and communication. The little yellow circle with dots for eyes acts as a surprisingly good prism through which to view the history of human communication. And to predict the trajectory of its future.

\*

There are two main reasons why language changes. One is in line with society and the way that language mirrors the changes in how we relate to each other and organise our culture. As an expression of identity, it's adapted by different groups and different generations to reflect their own sense of self. It's also constantly assimilating the new concepts and phenomena that are evolving within society.

Words are being created for these reasons all the time. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, is currently updated four times a year, with hundreds of new entries each time.<sup>8</sup> The last few years have seen additions such as *clicktivism* (activism via social media), *genericide* (the loss of a trademark's legal rights when it becomes the everyday term for a type of product), *non-apology* (a phrase which has the form of an apology but doesn't actually express any sense of regret) and *Brexit* (which probably doesn't need defining). All of these reflect aspects of modern life which didn't exist a few years ago or didn't have the same prevalence in the culture as they do now.

Yet despite being one of the world's largest dictionaries, the *Oxford English Dictionary* only scratches at the surface of the vast number of words that are coined and discarded each year by the hundreds of millions of English speakers around the globe. On this score at least, Sarah Palin was absolutely right. English is very much a living language. There's no refudiating that. And what's interesting about emoji in this regard is that they've added a whole new repertoire to this ever-expanding storehouse of symbols. At

this point in our history, the gaps in our vocabulary are being filled not simply by new words but by a completely new system of expression.

The second major reason that language changes is down to technology – specifically, the ways in which the technologies we use have an effect on the process of communication itself. Both hardware and software influence what we're able to do, along with how and when we're able to do it. Because of this, new technologies result in us subtly changing the way we interact with each other and also altering the shape of the language we use. Take the invention of texting, for example. When this was launched in the 1990s, people were suddenly able to send written messages to anyone from anywhere. But because of the specific limitations of the technology at the time, coupled with the cost, these messages had to be very succinct. This led to the development of a whole new (albeit ephemeral) convention of spelling: txtspk.

Emoji are following closely in the footsteps of txtspk. They've evolved as a solution to the needs of mobile communication and have been made possible by advances in technology. In particular, they compensate for the way that computer-mediated messaging can sometimes tend towards the emotionally blunt. Whereas face-to-face, or even voice-to-voice, conversations can express emotional closeness through facial expression or tone of voice, this is easily lost when messages are rendered in a few short words on a small screen. Emoji are a means of restoring this emotional framing to an interaction – punctuating your missive with a smile.

But the symbiotic relationship emoji have with technology is also the main reason this book will start to look out of date by this time next year. Unlike almost any other type of language system, emoji have something akin to a built-in obsolescence. They're designed to be updated on a regular basis, in the same way the technology they're used with is. Just as smartphones and their operating systems have a frequent refresh rate, emoji also get routine enhancements. The look of the emoji you have on your phone now will undergo subtle redesigns over the course of time, and extra characters will be added. Because of this, their

usefulness is artificially limited. It becomes functionally constrained, not to mention unfashionable, whenever new designs are released.

In the context of communication systems, this is something that's never previously been the case. In the past, people might have bought a new landline when they were tired of the design of their old phone or if they wanted to get one with whatever latest innovation was going around – an inbuilt answering machine, say. But they didn't have to upgrade the language they were using as well. Even when the fad for txtpsk was at its height, you didn't *have* to embrace it. Indeed, some people took great satisfaction in meticulously spelling out each complete word and properly punctuating each well-crafted sentence.

Emoji, on the other hand, are a case study in how technology and the human capacity for communication are working fully in tandem today – of how the onward march of technology exists at the intersection of consumerism, innovation and design. Moreover, the fact that they're at the front line of a relentless wave of technologically driven change in communications practices encourages – if not necessitates – a great amount of creativity and flexibility in the way they're used. With each new innovation, people need to evolve new practices of communication. Almost as soon as you've got used to one set of resources, another is pushed your way. It's for this reason, perhaps, that emoji are such a touchstone for creative expression.

Finally, there's the way they've become implicated in almost all aspects of modern society, from politics and pornography to marketing and mourning. Emoji are the subject of musicals and Hollywood films. They're the inspiration for fashion design, art and architecture. They're a staple in advertising and commerce. There are Frida Kahlo emoji,<sup>9</sup> Coca-Cola emoji and Catholic Church emoji (the latter including two popes as well as the patron saints of lost causes and the January blues).<sup>10</sup> Understanding why they've become so popular, and how they work, can not only explain something about the nature of language, therefore: it can

also act as a prism for examining our relationship with technology, society and ourselves.

Emoji will undoubtedly continue to change their form, to expand in range and scope. At some stage they'll most likely be replaced by something completely different. But even if they're out of date by the time you read this, the issues they embody won't be. The communication revolution they're spearheading is set to continue, as technology becomes ever more choreographed with our everyday lives. So from one perspective, emoji are a simplified form of global communication which provide the perfect example of the ingenuity and creativity at the heart of human interaction. But they're also a parable for the way consumerism now permeates all parts of our daily existence. Exploring the ways in which they've been embraced by the world can thus explain everything from controversies over same-sex marriage and selfie culture to populism and post-truth politics.

Most of all, however, they illustrate the way that, despite humans having possessed language now for over a hundred thousand years, we're still striving to find a perfect way to communicate with each other. And in this sense, the story of emoji is anything but trivial. Yet before we get to the role they play in attempting to find a solution to this conundrum, it's worth first covering a few fundamentals, beginning with their name.

### **What's in a Name?**

The Catholic Church has, over the years, assembled an eclectic list of patron saints. There's the Flemish Saint Drogo, for example, patron saint of those whom others find repulsive.<sup>11</sup> There's Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, whose patronages include earache and dysentery.<sup>12</sup> There's Bibiana, patron saint of insanity and hangovers. And not to forget Saint Fiacre, patron of gardeners, taxi drivers and those suffering from sexually transmitted diseases.

Given this roll call, the idea that there should be a patron saint of the internet isn't that remarkable. This office is held, at least in an unofficial capacity, by Isidore of Seville, the seventh-century scholar and author of the *Etymologiae*. Although not particularly well remembered today, the *Etymologiae* was a hugely influential book in its time, one whose popularity lasted for close on a thousand years. In essence it was an encyclopaedia, piecing together knowledge from a range of classical texts which covered everything from furniture-design to grammar and theology. As the title indicates, the approach was based around the belief that the etymology of a word (its origins and evolution) was an indication of its true meaning. Unfortunately for Isidore, a good half of his etymologies are highly fanciful, if not downright wrong. He asserts, for example, that the walking stick – 'baculus' in Latin – is thus named because it was invented by Bacchus, god of the grape harvest, in order 'that people affected by wine might be supported by it'.<sup>13</sup> A nice idea, but complete fantasy.

In classical and medieval times, folk etymologies of this sort – i.e. those which are based on coincidental similarities between different words – were often used as a means of finding some sort of divine order in the natural world. There was rarely any actual science to them. Instead they were acts of interpretative creativity that were used to illuminate the hidden symbolic meanings of concepts and the way language and the world fitted together into an intricate web of meaning.

All of which brings us, in a rather round about way, to the word 'emoji'. There's an assumption – a not-unreasonable one – that it's related in some way to the word 'emotion'. After all, one of the primary functions of emoji is to provide a message with emotive content. Add to this the fact that they're close cousins of 'emoticons' – a word which is a portmanteau of 'emotion' and 'icon' – and it seems perfectly natural to assume they derive from the same root.

In fact, the word is an import from Japanese and is composed of the kanji for 'picture' (e- 絵) and 'character' (-moji 文字). It's a loanword, where the form, rather than the meaning, has been

imported into English. But it could just as easily have happened the other way round (what is known as calcquing) – we could have taken the meaning of the Japanese term and translated the constituent parts into English, resulting in us calling them ‘picture-characters’.

This origin also explains why the plural of emoji is – or at least can be – emoji. Japanese doesn’t mark a difference between single and plural nouns, so the same form of the word stands for both. Given that the word has been adopted into English, however, it also gets used with traditional English grammar, so some people do pluralise it by adding an -s.<sup>14</sup> At some stage one version may well win out over the other, and conventional practice will turn into a rule of style. But for the moment it’s still a free choice.

To return briefly to Isidore of Seville: while he may have been woefully mistaken in many of his etymologies, he’s not by any means the only one guilty of this sort of thing. In some cases, the way people see false parallels between words can actually shape the way language evolves. Take, for example, the words ‘male’ and ‘female’. These derive from completely different roots, but the fact that their meanings mirror each other has led to their forms doing so as well. ‘Male’ comes from the Old French ‘masle’, which in turn comes from the classical Latin ‘masculus’. ‘Female’, on the other hand, is originally from the Latin ‘femella’, which is a diminutive of ‘femina’. It wasn’t until the fourteenth century that the spelling of ‘femella’ was altered in mistaken imitation of ‘male’.<sup>15</sup>

We can see something a little similar happening with ‘emoji’ as it’s adopted into English. Although its origins have nothing to do with ‘emotion’, the way in which it’s pronounced – at least with a general British or American accent – clearly shows the influence of the English word. The first two syllables of the words ‘emoji’, ‘emotion’ and ‘emoticon’ are all identical in English, whereas the Japanese would be more akin to the e- of ‘etiquette’ followed by the -mo of ‘mosque’. In other words, the coincidence between similarities of form and meaning have transferred across to the way we pronounce it.