



Emojis: a new language for a digital age

LINDA YEW explores the world of emojis to find out why they are so popular.

In 2015, the emoji known as “Face with Tears of Joy” was chosen by the Oxford Dictionary as the “Word of the Year”. This was quite incredible, as the emoji was not even a word, but a **pictogram**!

The Oxford Dictionary said on its website that it chose a pictogram over a word to reflect how popular emojis became across the world in 2015.

Emojis are different from emoticons like :) or :-P or =(. Emojis are the colourful symbols – smileys, animals, vehicles, little poops, and so on – that appear as single character images, or “glyphs”, on smartphones keyboards.

They show in simple pictures the sender’s feelings, ideas, and so on. It is a new vocabulary used by around two billion people across the globe.

There is even a “World Emoji Day” on July 17 to celebrate emoji culture.

Why are emojis so popular?

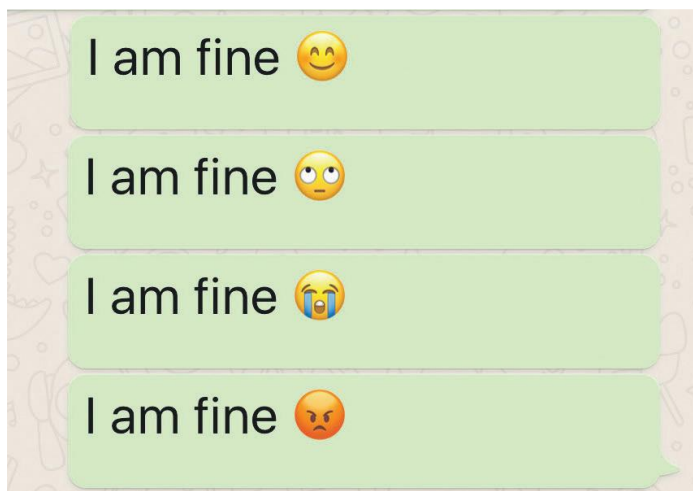
Since ancient times, from Stone Age cave paintings to Egyptian hieroglyphs, early writing tended to be pictographic. Even toddlers seem to like expressing themselves through doodles and scribbles. Something about “a picture painting a thousand words” could explain why pictographic writing is so appealing to us.

Have you ever sent an innocent, neutral message like, “No, thanks”, that ended up being perceived as unfriendly or even angry? This is where emojis come in handy. Emojis assist us in communicating emotion where words alone cannot. This can help prevent miscommunication and causing offence. Adding a smile, winking face, or joking face at the end of “No, thanks” might soften the tone of your message. In fact, emojis appear to be so friendly on its own, it is almost impossible to offend using an emoji. Even an angry face is seldom taken too seriously.

Adding emotion

When we speak, our gestures, facial expressions, body language, and speech intonation allow us to clarify the meaning behind our message. Words alone cannot match the richness of face-to-face interaction. Emojis try to help bridge that gap. They add clues about our feelings.

For example, even though the words in the following messages are the same, you can tell from the emojis that their meaning is different.



If you received the first one from a friend, you might reply, "That's nice." But if you received the third or fourth one, you would reply, "Oh no! What's wrong?"

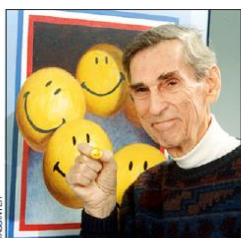
Apart from that, emojis are simply... fun. People would use emojis for the simple sake of making their messages more amusing and enjoyable.

Before emojis, there was the smiley face



YOUTUBE

Shigetaka Kurita, the Japanese inventor of emojis.



ASBNTES

Harvey Ball designed the smiley face decades earlier.



FZYLE.COM

In 1964, the smiley face icon was designed by an American graphic artist named Harvey Ross Ball. He created it for an insurance company who wanted to put it on buttons for its employees in order to boost their morale. The button became a craze throughout America and then the world. In the early 1970s, mugs, T-shirts, and bumper stickers (with the phrase, “Have a happy day”) were produced by two brothers Bernard and Murray Spain, further increasing the smiley face’s popularity.

In 1982, a group of researchers at Carnegie Mellon University who were using an online bulletin board wanted a way to tell people not to take a conversation too seriously. They developed the sideways smiley emoticon :) to ensure that everyone would know that the message was not serious.

In 1998, Shigetaka Kurita, an engineer at the Japanese phone company NTT Docomo, was working on a way for customers to communicate through simple pictures. The result was a set of 176 icons he called Emoji. Kurita says that he drew inspiration for his emoji from manga, Chinese characters, and international signs for bathrooms.

Kurita’s emoji forms became very popular among phone users, especially after 2011, when Apple launched its iOS5 iPhone software, which included emoji characters for the first time. The number of emojis is growing all the time. In June, there were 2,666 emojis.

Emojis are now recognised as art. In October 2016, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMa) in the United States announced that it was including the original set of 176 emojis in its permanent collection. The emojis now sit alongside works by famous artists such as Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock.


THE WORD

The word emoji is an English adaptation of two Japanese words. The e of emoji means “picture” and the moji stands for “letter, character”. So, the definition of emoji is, simply, a “picture-word”.

Emojis for every need

Female occupations

According to one study, women use emojis more often than men. Yet, until recently, women were not represented much in emojis, except for the bride, salsa dancer, and bunny-eared twin emojis. On the other hand, there were male emojis for professions ranging from policemen to doctors.

This was partly corrected in 2016, with the introduction of both male and female versions of 33 existing emojis. Later, 11 new professions were added, with both male and female versions of scientist , chef, graduate, and surgeon emojis.

“We believe this will empower young women, the heaviest emoji users, and better reflect the key roles women play in every walk of life and in every profession,” said a spokesman for Google, which proposed the new female emojis.

Hijab emoji

In 2016, a fifteen-year old Muslim student, Rayouf Alhumedhi from Berlin, was trying to start a group chat on WhatsApp with her friends. Her friends decided to title the group chat by using an emoji that represented each of their faces. That is when Rayouf realised something was missing. She couldn't find an emoji that wore a hijab like she did. So, she wrote to the Unicode Consortium proposing a new hijab emoji **2** to represent herself and hundreds of millions of other women who wear headscarves. This has been accepted as a candidate emoji for 2018.

Skin-colour modifiers

While the default colour for people emojis has been yellow or orange, in 2015 Unicode introduced five additional skin tones, known as emoji "modifiers". There are now five skintone types. As a result, 125 new emojis have been added to Facebook.

Hands pressed together

Emojis can mean different things in different cultures. The original Japanese emoji system used hands pressed together **3** to convey the idea of "please" or "thank you". Many Westerners think the emoji means prayer, so they use it to express hope. In Thailand, this gesture is seen as a greeting, referred to as the wai. The wai is also common as a way to express gratitude, farewell, or to apologise.

Dumpling

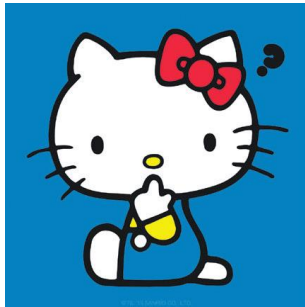
In 2016, a Chinese-American businesswoman, Lu Yiyi, launched a campaign for a dumpling emoji **4**. The dumpling is part of many different cuisines, such as Chinese, Japanese (gyoza), Polish (pierogi), and Spanish (Empanada). The dumpling was approved by Unicode in 2017.



UNREALISTIC IS GOOD

Emojis do not look like real people. They are "abstract" drawings. Something abstract may be based on a real person or thing, but it is not expressed in a way that is realistic. A photograph of a person is an example of something that is not abstract. A smiley face, on the other hand, is abstract. It does not look like a real person. It doesn't even have a nose!

In his book, *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud explains why cartoonists use abstract drawings. Because an abstraction does not look like any actual person, it could be anyone. As McCloud explains, "The more cartoony a face is... the more people it could be said to describe."



Where is my mouth?

A comic character like Hello Kitty (who has no mouth!) is another example. Because it is abstract, people can imagine that they are a bit like Hello Kitty. No wonder this cute kitten with a blank face is such a hit.

DESIGNING A NEW EMOJI

Not any little cartoon would be accepted into the emoji family. For a picture to become an emoji, it must be approved by the Unicode Consortium. This is a club that includes big technology companies such as IBM, Microsoft, Adobe, Apple, Google, Facebook, and Yahoo.

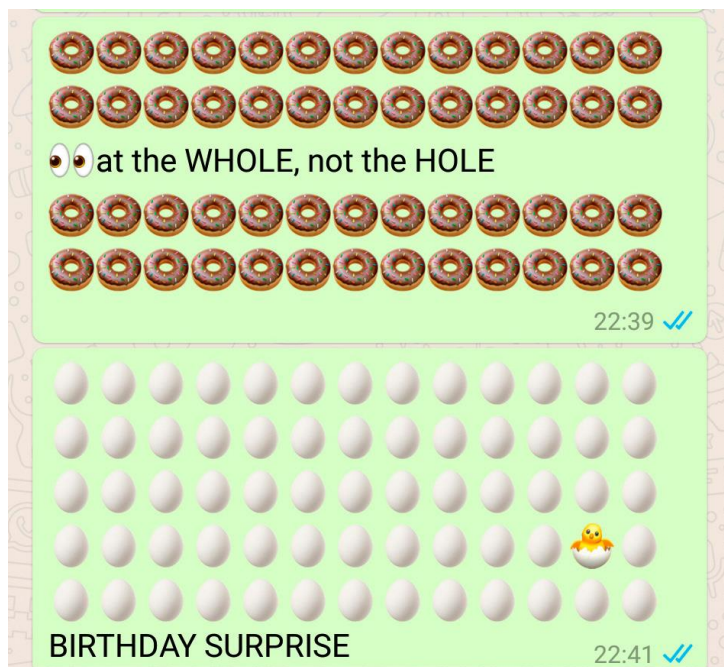
And, if you are wondering, “Can I suggest some new emojis for them to include?” The answer is, “Yes!” However, the qualifying **criteria** for new emojis are rather strict. For instance, an emoji must have wide appeal to ensure that people will actually use it. It must also be compatible across the different operating platforms (Android, iOS, Samsung, etc). It must be something different from the emojis that already exist. It cannot depict an actual person, and so on. Check out <http://unicode.org/emoji/> selection.html for the complete criteria if you have an emoji you feel The Unicode Consortium should seriously consider. Who knows, we might just end up using your proposed emoji one day!

Creating concrete poetry

According to the Oxford Dictionary, “concrete poetry is poetry in which the meaning is conveyed partly or wholly by visual means, using patterns of words or letters, and other typographical devices”.



“The Mouse’s Tale” by Lewis Carroll from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is one famous example.



I was curious to know if it were possible to write concrete poetry with the help of emoji. I’ve tried to create a couple. What do you think?

If you are keen to try your hand at creating a concrete poem of your own, here's how:

- Choose a main subject or theme for your poem. For example, an animal, food, person, or idea.
- Try to describe how your subject or theme makes you feel using words or emoji, or both. It does not have to be long. Neither does it have to rhyme.
- After writing what you would like to say on the subject, think of how to shape it to best bring across your idea. In this case, think also about which emojis best fit your theme, based on their colors and what they represent.

Most of all, have fun!

VOCAB BUILDER

criteria (say “cry-**tee**-ria”; noun) = requirements or conditions. Plural of criterion.

pictogram (say “**pik**-to-gram”; noun) = a pictorial symbol for a word or phrase.

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Thank you. — News For Kids, 5 April 2022