

A Plea for Emoji

Alex King

University at Buffalo

It's interesting and a bit surprising how little attention philosophy has given to the status of emoji, those funny little symbols that punctuate text messages, Twitter, and other digital spaces. They have become ubiquitous, but maybe because they're seen as frivolous or a "lower" form of communication, philosophy hasn't paid them much mind.

But they are an interesting aesthetic phenomenon. They are part language, part representational image. That alone is fascinating. They are phenomenologically interesting in their effect on how we experience the written word. They punctuate, accentuate, emphasize, and add flavor to our communication in ways that are difficult to achieve otherwise. It would not be ridiculous to say that they represent a genuine linguistic development—a change in conventional orthography, and of an almost unbelievably sudden and dramatic, even revolutionary, kind. (With all the talk of industry disruption in the fast-paced, Silicon Valley era we live in, we might even think of emoji as a form of linguistic disruption.)

Admittedly, this is all a bit grandiose. It may help if we go one step at a time.

1. What are emoji?

Emoji (or emojis, another acceptable pluralization) are roughly letter-sized images that fit inline with normal writing. They are to be distinguished from emoticons, their technological predecessors, which consist of linguistic symbols (letters, numbers, punctuation, etc.) placed strategically to resemble faces (or other objects). For example, :) and (T_T) and ◦ ∩ ◦ and of course ¯_ (ツ) _/ are all emoticons. By contrast, the paradigm emoji is a circle with two dots and a curve underneath: the smiley. (Unfortunately, for copyright reasons, we cannot reproduce one here. But more on that later.)

It is perhaps an endearing fact about humanity that our first emoji was a simple heart. It was created in 1995 by the Japanese telecommunications company Docomo. They eventually expanded the range of emoji, and when Apple introduced their own set in 2011, naturally everyone else followed suit.

Emoticons clearly paved the way for emoji. However, emoticons suffer a few disadvantages that emoji don't. For one, emoticons can be much more time-consuming to produce. But more importantly, using them fluently requires some serious knowledge, both of the physical way to go about making them (the keystrokes or series of taps) and of what the acceptable forms are. It also requires that the audience know how to decode the emoticon. After all, virtually all of us know :) and ;) and maybe some simple variations like XD, but beyond that things get a bit more esoteric. For example, some readers here may not have recognized or understood (T_T) right away.

Above all, I suspect that it's the range and standardization of emoji and implementation of emoji keyboards that has led to their success. A full emoji alphabet, as it were, is at everyone's fingertips, and producing them doesn't require any special knowledge. If you can "make" one, you can "make" all of them. Finally, they are often self-explanatory, though admittedly some of them have meanings that deviate from their superficial representational content. To take what is probably the most infamous case, an eggplant is no longer just an eggplant.

In what follows, I'll briefly lay out some of the most salient questions of philosophical interest. I will briefly discuss some metaphysical questions, but then go on to what I myself find most interesting: the linguistic and related social and phenomenological questions. I don't mean to solve anything here, but to raise some questions for further philosophical reflection and engagement.

2. Metaphysics

What are emoji, in the metaphysical sense?

In order to answer this, we need a little more background. An organization called the Unicode Consortium sets standards for Unicode, an extremely widely adopted computing system for encoding and decoding text. The consortium contains the Unicode Emoji Subcommittee, and it is they who determine the official set of emoji. Others can be added to this set on a piecemeal basis (through, e.g., various apps), but there is a standardized set which is included on all mobile keyboards, whether Apple, Google, or Microsoft. This means that each keyboard contains a basic smiley, but each company renders the smiley differently.

This raises a metaphysical question. Should we identify an emoji as each company's rendering, so that there isn't one cry-so-hard-I'm-laughing emoji, but as many different emoji as there are different companies (and different versions of, e.g., Apple keyboards through time)? Or should we identify all of those as metaphysically the same emoji, identified perhaps by its individuating Unicode number or its individuating description, like "Smiling Cat Face with Heart-Shaped Eyes", but differently instantiated?

This raises a host of different considerations. Legally, each company owns its own emoji set. (Hence the lack of emoji in the present text.) That suggests that in some very important sense the different instantiations are different objects.

However, something more than resemblance seems to justify our grouping together, for example, all of the heart-eyed cat emoji from different companies. But they sometimes vary so much that even their meanings can change. In one prominent case, the smile on one emoji, Grimacing Face, was rendered as a happy grin by some companies and as a grimace by others, leading to serious confusion.

Finally, take the obvious metaphysical picture on which emoji are identified by their individuating Unicode number. This view faces the uncomfortable conclusion that if a new company designed a keyboard on which the piece of code typically assigned to the classic red heart were instead assigned to a star, the star would in fact be an instance of the heart emoji—just a very confusing one.

Rather, it seems like the Unicode number and the individuating description name the emoji rather than are the emoji. Perhaps emoji are actually a class of abstract objects that we communally create (or that the emoji standardization board creates). Or perhaps each instance really is a different object altogether, with some of them bearing a striking resemblance to one another. In any case, the metaphysical picture is far from clear.

3. Language and Linguistics

What are emoji, in the linguistic sense?

Here, we might wonder about particular questions like the following: Do emoji bear semantic content or are they at best vehicles of pragmatic communication? Are they words? Can a string containing emoji express a proposition? What about a string of only emoji? Most daringly, do they constitute a bona fide language?

I'll offer some initial answers to these questions, but everything I say is pretty tentative.

In many contexts, emoji seem to have semantic content. Emoji can function as nouns (“I want [pizza]”) or as verbs (“I [heart] you”). So are they words? Oxford Dictionaries seems to think so. I myself don’t have a view about what words are, but I’m inclined to allow emoji into the club because these examples suffice to show that strings containing emoji can express propositions. Indeed, I think strings containing *only* emoji can express propositions. There are simple strings consisting of only one emoji, including the thumbs-up emoji and handshake emoji, which translated into English typically mean “Okay,” “(That) sounds good,” or “Deal.” There are multi-emoji strings, too, which might represent propositions, though this will be more controversial. For instance, we might translate [pizza][heart] into English as “I love pizza,” where the speaker is the implicit subject. And a string like [pizza][heart][heart][heart] is then “I really love pizza.”

As the heart emoji demonstrates, however, emoji are extremely context sensitive. Whether [heart] means the noun ‘heart’ or the verb ‘love’ will vary wildly with context, though it always means ‘love’ or some other heartfelt pro-attitude. They also vary highly across different linguistic communities. For example, many emoji have a meaning in Japanese culture and for Japanese speakers which they lack elsewhere. Sometimes, we even see the emergence of what we might call emoji dialects, communities in which, for example, an eggplant signifies something very specific.

This context-sensitivity means that generating sentences more complex than the rudimentary examples above is very hard, if not impossible. Most strings are, like all emoji, going to be highly relativized to context, as well as dialect variation. The poverty of grammar is going to make calling it a language – at least a standalone one – pretty difficult, though. Emoji lack standardized syntax, tensing, casing, and so forth, as well as a huge number of important words (conjunctions, abstract concepts, pronouns, numbers, and so forth). All of this suggests that emoji could add a lot to an existing language, but it seems hard to call it a standalone language. (And this, despite attempts to render works like Moby-Dick exclusively with emoji.)

This is not, however, meant to denigrate the importance and versatility of emoji. The written word is in certain ways underdetermined. When we speak, we use tone and emphasis to express more than a sentence itself can convey, or at least to foreground a certain interpretation of the literal meaning of what we say – this is prosody. Because short, quick written messages are similarly underdetermined, and because we are still forming norms of text and Tweet, we use emoji to perform the function we normally leave to prosody, facial expression, and other features of spoken or in-person communication. We use emoji to indicate good will when an answer might otherwise sound brusque and annoyed, and to indicate a wealth of other attitudes like sarcasm, sadness, skepticism, reluctance, and frustration.

Even this would present an impressive versatility. But we use emoji to do yet more. English sentences have subjects and verbs, and often a lot more besides. In addition to this, some languages require (or permit) words that provide the sentence topic, as distinct from the subject. In Japanese, for example, you can say, “晩ご飯は本当に好きでした,” which translates semi-literally to “As for dinner, I really enjoyed it.” You can communicate something like this with emoji. If I write “had fun watching the game today” and append a soccer ball emoji, the soccer ball seems to mark the sentence topic (which has the implied subject “I”). Nothing in the words indicates that it’s about a soccer game, and the time and context may not be enough to help a reader determine what game I watched. But the addition of the emoji adds clarification. (Interestingly, too, an incipient grammar of emoji is forming, according to which such markers appear at the end of the message, rather than at the beginning or in the middle.)

Emoji also have symbolic or metaphorical uses, in addition to their literal meanings. As I’ve already alluded, an eggplant refers to an eggplant, except in its (sexualized) metaphorical use. A peach, too, refers to a peach, except in its (similarly sexualized) metaphorical use.

But because emoji are imagistic and representational, they can transcend language barriers. I can understand parts of Tweets in languages I don’t understand because I can still “read” the emoji. And if two people, neither of whom can

speak the other's language, exchange the following emoji string: [pizza][heart] and [100][100], they have successfully communicated a mutual love of pizza. It's not the most revolutionary or profound content to communicate, but that doesn't mean the means of communication is neither revolutionary nor profound.

4. Phenomenology and Sociality

The idea of emoji as cross-linguistic brings us to the final section, in which I'd like to note some of the phenomenological and social aspects and implications of emoji.

It is a fact worth noting that emoji are virtually never used in somber or serious contexts. It would be inappropriate to use the weeping emoji in tragic contexts that would warrant sincere weeping. Somehow more fitting, but still inappropriate, would be the more scaled-back tearing-up emoji or other subtler frowning faces. This suggests that emoji are typically infused with silliness or light-heartedness, or maybe just with a sort of warmth.

This, if true, might go some way toward explaining the fact that the first emoji was a heart, and that the perhaps most paradigmatic emoji is a smiling face.

As a means of communication, emoji might be thought to support optimism about human nature. Smiling emoji vastly outnumber frowning ones – indeed, many of the animals and even the sun and moon emoji smile back at us. One might try to see our own fundamentally smiling, happy, positive outlook reflected back in these normally expressionless faces and objects.

But a much simpler explanation rests on the linguistic telos of emoji suggested above: we use them to add levity to short, direct messages that would otherwise sound curt or rude. Maybe we don't need emoji to help us express seriousness or sorrow in the face of tragedy. For things that are very serious, many tend to prefer speaking to text communication.

As online communication has evolved, however, the uses to which we put emoji have become more nuanced. Facebook has shifted from its original, 'Like'-button-or-bust model to a richer constellation of six reactions. Now, in addition to 'liking', users can respond with laughing, surprised, sad, or angry faces, or – of course – a heart. This shift may signal something deeper in the way we experience online interactions. We now want not only to be able to share in the positive, but also in the negative. And we want our built-in reactions to capture this.

There is much more to say about the ways technology reflects and shapes our emotional responses, and the ways that it has created emotional-ecological niches into which our emotions must fit. Here, phenomenology meets the philosophy of technology, the philosophy of emotion, and more.

Before closing, I would like to draw attention to two important social and political issues that accompany emoji.

For the first, a little more history is required. Emoji food and drink were originally dominated by Japanese cuisine, like ramen, sushi, dango, and tea. Look at order the of the fruit: grapes, then... what is that? Some kind of small green berry? The answer: it's a melon, because melon plays a central role in flavoring Japanese cuisine. (I'm focusing on food here, but much the same could be said of any other category of emoji: places, nature, professions, animals...) But as emoji became more widespread, the buffet of emoji also broadened. To the earlier set, we added things like pretzels, sandwiches, burritos, and the avocado and coconut.

Here we see the emergence of questions about dominance and power exerted through technology. Would the same set have developed were emoji not invented in Japan, or were the Unicode Consortium not based in California? Obviously

not. To what extent this is a form of cultural imperialism, or just innocent technological progress, is something worth further reflection.

Second, the introduction of male and female emoji, as well as racially diverse emoji, presents us with a new set of questions and problems. Although there is now more gender diversity of, e.g., occupations, it still reinforces certain gender norms. (Why only male and female emoji? Why must the female emoji have long hair? Why need their genders be marked in any way?) And though there is now more racial diversity, emoji couples and families are never interracial. Given that there are five different skin tones, including every possible combination for couples and families would produce an enormous set of choices. But if what I've said above is correct, then this is a genuinely linguistic supplement to our existing languages. Emoji are in an important sense words, units of our language. And in the same way that we worry about the paucity of words to represent the diversity we find in race and gender, we should worry about the paucity of emoji to represent it, too.

On this note, we can look at a final practical question. Is it possible to engage in emoji blackface? While it might be innocuous enough for a light-skinned woman to use a dark-skinned female emoji in the context of celebrating a new release by Beyoncé, it seems entirely another issue whether the same person is licensed in using a dark-skinned female doctor emoji to celebrate her admission into medical school. Is this something that should be litigated or socially sanctioned in the same way as blackface? Or is it something that can be used to show solidarity? Is it appropriative? Here is one clear case in which philosophers could obviously contribute something practically meaningful to a burgeoning field of debate and discourse. To do so would be a form of public philosophy that might truly change policy and change the language and our means of communication, not just for English-speakers, but the world over. And that is an impressive scope of impact indeed.

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