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Emojis aren't debasing language, they're enriching it

Human beings use symbols or images to communicate an idea all the time. Logos serve as a good example. A deeper example would be works of art as well. That said, the use of imagery such as emojis is not new. However, what is new is the execution: smartphones. These devices have added an entirely new paradigm in day-to-day communication. More often than not, it’s easier to use an image to express emotion than it is to explain in writing. Artists rely on their art and corporations rely on logos to symbolize their values. Individuals are able to rely on emojis to express humor, or rage, or other forms of emotions that they would have difficulty attaching words to. Why would anyone want to respond to a funny meme with a long-winded text message when they could simply send a laughter emoji or a ‘lol’ or ‘lmao’? The latter two aren’t emojis, but they essentially serve the same purpose. That said, the latter two are often used in combination with the former. None of them take away from one another. Emojis are meant to help express emotion.

Emojis are simple. On the other hand, emotions are not. In his report, Weissman uses the ancient Mesopotamian and German cultures as examples. Both of them used symbols such as runes or cuneiform to communicate a message. This is in contrast to the complex written forms of communication that exist now. Runes or cuneiform could express a certain ideology that would take paragraphs to explain in written English. Also, mathematical notations are of a similar nature. It is a lot easier to write ‘2+2=4’ than it is to write ‘two plus two equals four’.

“Ancient Mesopotamian cuneiform featured triangles and lines because the characters were impressed into clay with a dowel; ancient Germanic runes..”(1)

That said, runes and cuneiform weren’t sustainable forms of written communication, but they do add tone. Emojis also add tone to a message. They cannot replace written communication, but they can simplify it. They’re not words, but a lot of words can be said through certain emojis.

Emojis add more context when interpreting emotion. For example, if a person were to respond to a funny message with a sentence such as ‘that’s funny’, or ‘that is really funny’, it could be interpreted as sarcasm or lying. A sentence, especially in a text message, can be difficult to interpret when it comes to what the responder was feeling. After all, it would be very time-consuming to write a detailed paragraph in a message as a means of explaining how funny an image was, or a meme, or so forth. Weissman makes a very interesting point:

“In face-to-face communication, as well as using words we also extract meaning from the tone and pitch of the voice, facial expressions, hand expressions…”(5)

People rely on hand gestures to add an extra layer of tone to their sentences very often. Public speakers do this often, as well as salespeople. Gestures help paint a picture. They help the audience or listeners visualize what the speaker is explaining. Emojis are a digital equivalent to gestures, facial expressions, etc. They add tone, they give context to a text(vice versa as well), they give the recipient of a text something to ascertain in regards to what their friend or associate was feeling.

Texting, by nature, emphasizes brevity. Consider the time of day a person with a busy schedule would take to respond to a text. For some, it’s during their lunch hour. Or, for others, they have to have a specific time after a shift that is solely dedicated to catching up on messages. Meanwhile, there are those who text during their commute to work and continue to do so throughout their shift. In many cases, parents have to do this.

“Just as facial expressions and gestures are intrinsic to our face-to-face conversations, it’s easy for us to use emojis in our electronic conversations to fulfill some of the same functions.”(5)

In other cases, people respond to text messages regardless of the time of day. However, the time of day can affect how much attention is given. Therefore, texting is often brief. It’s something that’s done on the go. Something that is done while there are numerous apps running in the background waiting to draw in the consumer’s attention. Emojis are able to make a text even briefer. A lot more can be expressed, sometimes, with an anger, laughter, crying laughter, or hearts and kisses emoji. Especially when they’re added to a brief sentence.

Emojis aren’t a reversion to the use of symbols to communicate. They cannot be used alone. Rather, they’re used in combination with a text. They add tone to simple messages. They give us a visual cue as to what people may have felt when responding to a message. Sure, they cannot be used in a report. That said, that was never really the purpose. They’re not meant to replace proper grammar. They’re not meant to replace anything. Emojis simply make texting, more fun, simple, and easy to interpret.

### Citations:

Weissman, Benjamin; Emojis aren’t debasing language – they’re enriching it; The Guardian; August 10, 2021