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Emoji : Emergence of a new age lingo

Mamta Muthal

Abstract

Use of emoji in communication has thrown open the avenues for research as it has impacted the way humans communicate in the contemporary world of technology. Experimentation has begun with the use of emoji. The current paper wishes to introduce readers to a new language of communication –emoji- and the various ways in which social scientists are trying to analyse its impact on the established languages.

Key Words: Emoji, Emoticons

“Shakespeare’s plays get an emoji touch”[TOI,June 13,2015]; “These Are The Emojis Hinglish Speakers Tend To Use The Most”, [Nair Ashmita, Huffpost, India, June 16,2015.] “Soon, emojis may replace pin codes in netbanking”, [TOI,June 15 2015] – these are some of the headlines of the newspaper which speak volumes of the emergence of this new phenomenon today. In fact, Emoji is grabbing headlines and world attention; social scientists are studying the emergence and impact of this pictorial language; emoji alphabet, emoji website, emoji tracker, translation of a literary text into emoji, - emoji has suddenly become an all pervasive phenomena. What is emoji? Why is it commanding so much attention and focus? The paper will explore the emergence of the phenomena called emoji.

Originated in Japan, emoji means, “picture letter”. Each of its character has an official name and is defined as part of Unicode standard. Shigetaka Kurita first created Emoticons in Japan in 1990’s. He created about 176 characters of emoticons and made them to be used for SMS text messages. In 2008, the uniform emoji

alphabet was created, and Apple adopted it in their iOS5 operating system in 2011.

If one looks up <http://www.emoji.com> he would find a comprehensive categorization, compilation and ascribed meanings of emoji icons. The tabs include symbols under people, places, nature, objects, 100 symbols, skin tones - fair, dark and wheatish. Room for addition of further symbols is created under the tab “new”. The web world is populated with emoji alphabet, free downloads, keypad to suit various platforms of the computer language,

Emojis or emoticons are used while expressing feelings and emotions. They are fastreplacing words on social networks and with the advent of smartphones, emerging as a sub-language of the technology driven world. According to linguistics expert Professor Vyv Evans,”...Emoji is the fastest growing form of language in history, ... based on its incredible adoption rate and speed of evolution. As a visual language, emoji has already far eclipsed hieroglyphics, its ancient Egyptian precursor which took centuries to develop.”

According to the Emoji tracker website people use approximately 300 tweets per second. An online survey and a short study conducted on 1,24,000 messages exchanged by students from 21 colleges suggested that women tended to use emoticons more than men in their messages.

Social scientists, linguists, psychologists have jumped into the fray to analyse the emergence, popularity, utility impact and the future of emoji.

Emoji is easy to understand, time saving and becomes helpful to all those users who do not have adequate and appropriate vocabulary at their disposal. The screen of the smartphones also compels the users to keep their message brief and effective, and the use of emoji comes handy. Time is yet another factor that is promoting emoji as users have to assimilate the message and respond to it in shortest possible time.

Has the human race come full circle while selecting the picture language as a preferred way of communication in modern times? "There's an old utopian ideal that we could create a kind of a universal pictorial language," says Zimmer, a social scientist, "Francis Bacon and John Wilkins dreamed about developing a visual language that could take us back to the pre-Babel era." However, Zimmer's analysis may not be correct as the use of emoji is the demand of new technology era. It is not about going back to the 'ideal world of pre-babel era'; it is more about being practical in making optimum use of all facets of communication available that is driving the assimilation of emoji across cultures. The visual symbols that were used for communication in pre-language

era were culture specific as well as conditioned by specific culture. Emoji, on the other, is all set to rise over cultural barriers. It is understood universally and its acceptance is instant and natural. The pictorial language of the ancient times also differs from emoji in that non-verbal was the only way of expression before organized written language came to be formulated. Emoji has made its appearance after the language as a system is well established. It is evolving further when utilizing its lexicon on the platform became tedious and when the need for "short, quick and effective" communication became imminent. Emoji could also be seen as a product of society that believes in maintaining appearances and may not be interested in "deeper" aspects of life. The preference for emoji could also be attributed to its addition of feelings and colour to an otherwise "toneless, dull, flat" e mail, or mobile communication.

Researches have begun on the use of emoji. Experimentation with emoji to check if it has literary potential began with Beneson inviting willing volunteers to translate Melville's *Moby Dick* into emoji. *Emoji Dick* now sells at \$ 200 hardcover, online. The pdf version costs \$ 5. Beneson confesses to earning \$ 300 to \$ 500 per month. Such is the interest of the readers.

At the forefront of the research into emoji use today is Stanford-trained linguist Tyler Schnoebelen. By analyzing emoticon use on Twitter, Schnoebelen has found that use of emoticons varies by geography, age, gender, and social class—just like dialects or regional accents. Friend groups fall into the habit of using certain emoticons, just

as they develop their own slang. “You start using new emoticons, just like you start using different words, when you move outside your usual social circles,” said Schnoebelen.

From informal communication to official, formal communication emoji had made inroads in corporate communication. Will it soon replace the established languages? Will it alter the grammar, syntax and lexicon of languages? Will it reduce interactions, conversations to monosyllabic icons ? Will it adversely impact the human communication?

Emoticons may make it easier to convey different moods without much effort, however, they have limitations of their own. “You couldn't communicate only with emoticons,” linguist John McWhorter wrote in an email. “You have to know what you're talking about, what happened, when, and so on. Emoticons don't do that.”

Zimmer, another linguist too, concedes that there are important limits on what emoji can communicate. He calls *Emoji Dick* “a fascinating project,” but notes: “If you look at those strings of emoji, they can't stand on their own. They don't convey the same message as the text on which they're based. For instance :

EMOJI:



doesn't quite have the same ring as “Call me Ishmael.”

In current writer's opinion emoji though a feature of G-Chat, Twitter or App, is a feature of face-to face or interactive communication. It will have difficulty in replacing a full bodied written text. It will also have difficulty in making in roads in

hardcore logical discourses such as legal or medical discourse.

Lauren Collister, a socio-linguist at the University of Pittsburgh who studies the interaction of language and society, argues that whether it be emoticons or emoji—both are doing their part in revolutionizing language. In emails, Collister says that emoticons and emoji act as discourse particles—a word that has no semantic meaning but adds intention to a statement.

“People tend to use emoticons when there's some kind of what linguists call a face threat—something kind of awkward or potentially offensive, or somebody could take something the wrong way,” explains Collister. “So people will use emoticons or emoji in these instances to just add that little bit of extra inflection or discourse particle information at work too because it's a useful way to communicate.”

A Scandinavian study on email in the workplace found exactly that: Emoticons in the workplace were not used to convey emotion, but rather to signal how the information in the email should be interpreted. They found three primary uses: to express positive vibes, to mark jokes, and lastly to either strengthen or soften statements that could be misread as reprimanding. An American study found that on that last point, smiley faces in email can reduce negative interpretations.

To conclude, society is witness to a phenomenon called emoji. Most scientists believe that emoji is definitely going to alter the ways of communication. However, it is just a supplement or at best an alternative to the established languages. Emoji is not going to negatively impact the language but only enrich it further.

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