

## Emojis are ‘the language of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’



The language of emotion: Here is an emoji version of Shakespeare's famous lines.

The little yellow faces and symbols are just the latest method of communication invented by humans. But can emojis really be described as a new language?

There is a vocabulary of **2,666 symbols**. There are **subtle** differences in meaning between the symbols. There are international varieties.

They are used in around half of all sentences on Instagram. There has even been a book written purely using these symbols.

These are emojis — the language of social media that is celebrated every year on 17 July. New York's Empire State Building was lit up in yellow to mark the day last year, and now many believe it should be classed alongside English and Chinese, Spanish and French as a new language in its own right.

Emojis emerged from the “language” of emoticons, such as :). They came into their own in 2011, when iOS added an emoji keyboard. Since then, they have **landed a teenage boy in a police cell** and **prompted Vladimir Putin's wrath** in Russia.

And they have a real use. According to the **linguist** and author Gretchen McCulloch, “they're trying to solve one of the big problems of writing online, which is that you have the words but you don't have the tone of voice”.

But, of course, many **purists** turn their nose up at emojis. To some “it is linguistic **Armageddon**”, writes Neil Cohn for *BBC Future*.

So how do emojis compare to languages? Well, the symbols are really no different from the 600 Chinese characters that are **pictograms**, such as “雨” (yǔ), the traditional Chinese symbol for rain.

Emojis, however, do not have sounds, unless you are **eccentric** enough to say “face with tears of joy” in everyday life. This, then, makes them much more **akin** to gestures — a smile, a nod, the raising of eyebrows. But as Cohn says, “when we are speaking, we constantly use gestures to illustrate what we mean”, such as pointing when saying “turn right”.

However, he thinks that the current **constraints** on technology prevent emojis becoming a fully-fledged language.

Clive Thompson disagrees. Writing in *Wired*, he says that people are actually developing **syntax** and rules of use for emoji. For example, “when we use a face emoji, we tend to put them before other objects”. But does this amount to a proper language?

“Of course not”, say traditionalists. Languages involve **nuance, idioms** and, most of all, sounds. A language needs to be able to convey everything a person could possibly want to say. Emojis cannot do that; they act as a supplement to language. And surely words alone can express emotion and meaning?

“Lighten up”, reply others. You can communicate some very complex ideas using only emojis — try it and you will see. And if languages require sound, does that mean that sign languages used by deaf people do not make the cut? As Thompson says: “In an age where we write more than ever, emoji is the new language of the heart.”

### Vocabulary Support

**subtle** - causing delicate effects, difficult to define

**wrath** - fierce anger

**linguist** - an expert in languages

**purist** - a person who insists on sticking strictly to traditional rules and structures

**Armageddon** - a dramatic and catastrophic conflict

**eccentric** - not behaving or thinking in an ordinary way

**akin** - alike / similar

**constraints** - restrictions

**prevent** - stop from happening

**syntax** - the study of the way sentences are formed, and how the words go together

**nuance** - a subtle quality or difference in tone, meaning

**idiom** - e.g. it's a piece of cake