Emoji, the Language of the Future: An Analysis of the Usage and Understanding of Emoji across User-Groups

Authors : Sakshi Bhalla

Abstract : On the one hand, given their seemingly simplistic, near universal usage and understanding, emoji are discarded as a potential step back in the evolution of communication. On the other, their effectiveness, pervasiveness, and adaptability across and within contexts are undeniable. In this study, the responses of 40 people (categorized by age) were recorded based on a uniform two-part questionnaire where they were required to a) identify the meaning of 15 emoji when placed in isolation, and b) interpret the meaning of the same 15 emoji when placed in a context-defining posting on Twitter. Their responses were studied on the basis of deviation from their responses that identified the emoji in isolation, as well as the originally intended meaning ascribed to the emoji. Based on an analysis of these results, it was discovered that each of the five age categories uses, understands and perceives emoji differently, which could be attributed to the degree of exposure they have undergone. For example, in the case of the youngest category (aged < 20), it was observed that they were the least accurate at correctly identifying emoji in isolation (~55%). Further, their proclivity to change their response with respect to the context was also the least (~31%). However, an analysis of each of their individual responses showed that these first-borns of social media seem to have reached a point where emojis no longer inspire their most literal meanings to them. The meaning and implication of these emoji have evolved to imply their context-derived meanings, even when placed in isolation. These trends carry forward meaningfully for the other four groups as well. In the case of the oldest category (aged > 35), however, the trends indicated inaccuracy and therefore, a higher incidence of a proclivity to change their responses. When studied in a continuum, the responses indicate that slowly and steadily, emoji are evolving from pictograms to ideograms. That is to suggest that they do not just indicate a one-to-one relation between a singular form and singular meaning. In fact, they communicate increasingly complicated ideas. This is much like the evolution of ancient hieroglyphics on papyrus reed or cuneiform on Sumerian clay tablets, which evolved from simple pictograms to progressively more complex ideograms. This evolution within communication is parallel to and contingent on the simultaneous evolution of communication. What's astounding is the capacity of humans to leverage different platforms to facilitate such changes. Twiterese, as it is now called, is one of the instances where language is adapting to the demands of the digital world. That it does not have a spoken component, an ostensible grammar, and lacks standardization of use and meaning, as some might suggest, may seem like impediments in qualifying it as the 'language' of the digital world. However, that kind of a declarative remains a function of time, and time alone.
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