


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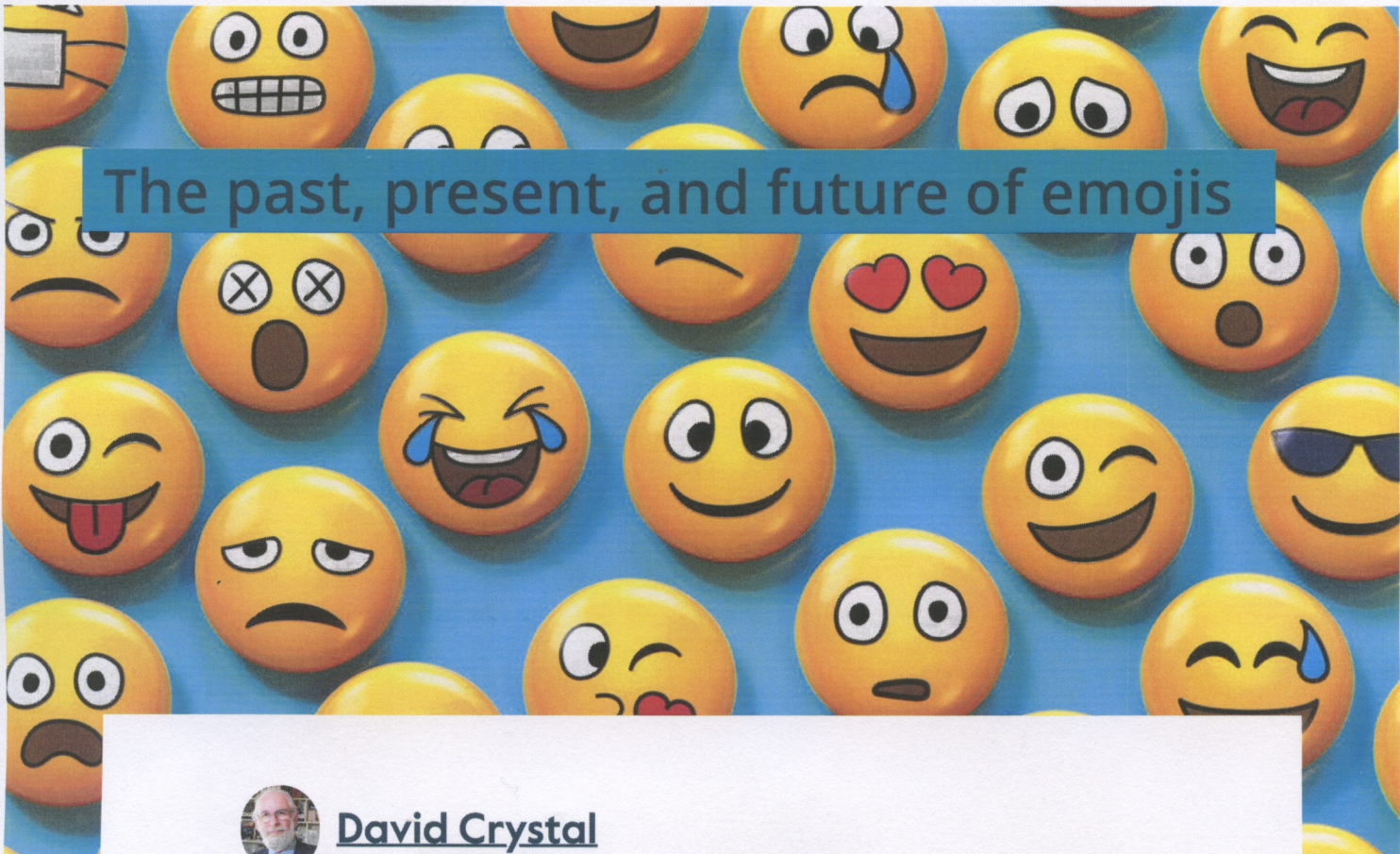
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The past, present, and future of emojis



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To mark World Emoji Day, Professor David Crystal considers the development of emoticons and emojis in graphic communication.

What has motivated the increased use of non-alphabetic symbols in English (and other languages) in recent years? Some have a long history, as a glance at any keyboard will show – &, %, £, @, +, =, and so on – but something different happened in the late 1980s...

We saw the arrival of *smileys* or *smiley faces*. The first recorded use in the *OED* is 1987, though the phenomenon of drawing smiling faces in writing is very much older. An alternative term was coined around the same time: *emoticons*. The first efforts used keyboard characters which, viewed sideways in English settings, were intended to convey an emotional feeling or tone.

History

As the original name suggested, the intended emotion was one of pleasure or humour, expressed typically by :), but this was soon followed by variations that expressed a range of other meanings. Feelings were supplemented by creative combinations to represent real-world characters, and other events.

I have a smiley dictionary published in 1993 containing over 650 variations. Few of these were ever used with any frequency, and usage sharply declined after the novelty peak of the 1990s. There was a resurgence of interest when technology evolved to replace keyboard symbols with more realistic faces.

They were yellow and homogeneous at first. More recently, they have started representing different skin colours and genders. This is in response to the evolving climate of recognition and respect for social diversity. But my impression is that here too, there has been a decline in frequency. It's interesting to think about why...



Intended meaning

These symbols were introduced to get round a perceived problem in the graphic (typed) character of electronic communication. The personality of handwriting, the kinesics of communication (facial expressions and bodily gestures), and the prosodic dynamic of speech – no intonation, in particular, apart from hints conveyed by question-marks and exclamation-marks – were all lacking. The belief was that the new symbols would express emotional intentions unambiguously. 😊 would show that the sender meant a sentence to be taken humorously.

Unfortunately, things didn't turn out that way. The new symbols turned out to be just as ambiguous as their real world counterparts. Why does someone smile? To show humour? Sometimes. But also to show irony, sarcasm, tolerance, impatience, hedging, even a threat: 'Good evening, Mr Bond', says the smiling villain. It didn't take users long to realise this.

Over-use

There was also an inflationary effect. I send you an email with several sentences in it. I add a smiley after the first one, to make it clear that I mean it humorously. Then I think that the second sentence needs one too, in case its absence suggests the opposite. Then the third... And before long I have smileys all over the place.

The effect of overuse of any linguistic feature is to turn it into something that is disregarded. In this case, it becomes a graphic cliché. While there are doubtless still users who litter their messages with a wide range of symbols, my impression is that, on the whole, the range and frequency, though still quite high, has declined. For many users, they have been replaced by *emojis*.

Emojis

Emojis were introduced in 1999, viewed as a more sophisticated option than emoticons, and fuelled especially by technological developments in platform availability. The increase in use has been dramatic, especially in social media. It's too early to say whether they will show the same rise-and-fall effect, but it's possible, for the same reasons.

Some of the most frequently used emojis, such as thumbs-up, are ambiguous. They can lead to an unanticipated reaction by the receiver. Gestures can have different associations in different cultures. There are already pragmatic studies of the different ways in which people interpret a symbol, and we need more.

Some emojis, such as objects and animals, are more likely to elicit a uniform response, whereas others may elicit uncertain or conflicting reactions. A joined hands emoji, for example, has been variously interpreted as 'prayer', 'clap hands', 'appeal', 'I give up', and so on.

What comes next

Frequency by itself is not necessarily illuminating. More important is to explore the distribution and function of emojis, here are some examples:

- sentence type (statement, question, command, exclamation)
- turn-taking (such as replacing a response entirely)
- formulaic utterances (such as following a greeting or signature)

- social context (such as gender, occupation)
- stylistic genre (email, blog, tweet, etc)

Nor must emojis be seen in isolation from other aspects of electronic communication. The increase in emojis noted in several recent studies is likely to cause a decrease of other genres, such as emoticons and texting abbreviations.

And emojis, in turn, are already going in new directions, such as the emoji + anime blend that has emerged in the past decade in the form of stickers. New communicative options seem always to be round the corner, and the future vitality of emojis will be influenced by what these turn out to be.