

Signs of the times

DAVID CRYSTAL

WHAT MOTIVATED the increased use of non-alphabetic symbols in English (and other languages) in recent years? There have always been some – &, %, £, @, +, =, and so on – but something different happened in the late 1980s. We saw the arrival of smileys, or smiley faces, and, at around the same time, an alternative term, emoticons. The first efforts used keyboard characters which, viewed sideways in English settings, were intended to convey an emotional feeling or tone.

As the original name suggested, the emotion was one of pleasure or humour, expressed typically by :) , but this was soon followed by variations expressing a range of other meanings. Feelings were supplemented by creative combinations to represent real-world characters, and other events. Then technology evolved to replace keyboard symbols with more realistic faces – yellow and homogeneous at first, and more recently representing different skin colours and genders, in the evolving climate of respect for social diversity.

These symbols were introduced to get round a perceived problem in the typed character of electronic communication, which lacked facial expressions, bodily gestures and speech intonation. The belief was that the new symbols would express emotional intentions unambiguously. :) would show that the sender meant a sentence to be taken humorously.



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Unfortunately, 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, and usage declined.

Emojis came in next, in the late 1990s, viewed as a more sophisticated option than emoticons, and fuelled especially by technological developments in platform availability. They’re continuing to increase in number. The latest release by Unicode brings the total of official emojis to 3,782. And they’re already going in

new directions, such as the emoji + anime blend that has emerged in the past decade in the form of stickers.

Religious emojis are there, though not in great numbers. In the Christian tradition, most of the types of cross (Malta, Jerusalem, etc.) have their own emoji. The simple Latin cross was one of the first to be added. Strings of emojis have been proposed to express more abstract notions. For instance, a string of three – a church, a baby angel and water – can express “baptism”. Another triplet – a face with eyes closed (praying), a candle and a building with a cross on it – is “church service”. Add some musical notes and a face with an open mouth, and we have a church choir. And so on.

Some of the most frequently used symbols, such as thumbs-up, are ambiguous, and can lead to an unanticipated reaction by the receiver, especially in a culture where this gesture doesn’t have the same positive associations as it does for the sender. Some may elicit uncertain or conflicting reactions. A joined hands emoji, for example, has been variously interpreted as “prayer”, “clap hands”, “appeal” and more. In Catholic settings, though, it seems to be increasingly used as a “sign of peace”, both in church and online. Most of the congregation were using it in our church last week.

David Crystal is a writer, editor, lecturer and broadcaster on language, and honorary professor of linguistics at Bangor University.