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CHAPTER 1

Is Emoji the New Universal 'Language'?

Getting married is often regarded as one of life's most significant events. It can distil our hopes and dreams, and reframe our everyday life; through its ritual and celebration and the serious business of taking vows, we commit to sharing our life with another. A wedding can also mark the liminal passage from a more tranquil existence to the greater challenge of making and, for some, raising a family, and all the responsibilities and pressures that come with that. And, of course, most of us feel nervous ahead of the big day.

In April 2015, tennis star Andy Murray married his long-term girlfriend, Kim Sears. As is often the case with today's celebrities, he sent a pre-wedding

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message to his bride, friends and followers. In the context of early twenty-first-century social media technology, this took the form of a tweet on the morning of his wedding day (see Figure 1 in the picture section). In the message Murray expressed his hopes and expectations for the day, as well as hinting at the nerves he no doubt felt. But what really got tongues wagging was the fact that his tweet was made up of nothing but emojis.¹

Andy Murray's tweet conveys, in pictorial form, the day's events, as Murray expected them to unfold: the early morning preparations, the emotions, the journey to and from the church, the post-wedding partying, the consummation of the marriage and, finally, exhausted sleep. But, despite the headlines that it provoked at the time, Andy Murray's Emoji tweet is not an isolated phenomenon. In February 2015, the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop, an avid Emoji user, conducted the world's first political interview entirely in Emoji – the interview was conducted via iMessage and published on the BuzzFeed website. In one question, Ms Bishop was asked to provide her emoji characterisations of various world leaders. Intriguingly, she identified the then Australian prime minister Tony Abbott as the running man, while Russian president Vladimir Putin was characterised as the angry red face.²

Even an institution as august as the BBC is not immune. Each Friday, the Newsbeat page on the BBC website – associated with BBC Radio 1 and aimed at younger listeners – publishes the news in Emoji. Radio listeners are invited to guess what the headline means. See whether you can figure out which headline the Emoji 'sentence' in Figure 2, in the picture section, relates to.³

Nor is the literary canon exempt: Ken Hale, a visual designer with

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a passion for Emoji, has translated, among other classics, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, a book of 27,500 or so words, into a pictorial narrative consisting of around 25,000 emojis.⁴ Some example Emoji ‘sentences’ provided by the artist are given in Figure 3.

Of course, it’s incredibly hard to read Emoji sentences. It’s for this very reason that the Newsbeat Emoji headline quiz *is* a competition. Part of the satisfaction of reading the ‘translations’ of the sentences, and the humour that we derive, comes from nodding your head in tacit understanding once you’ve read the words. The translations enable us to make sense of how the emojis might add up to a meaningful Emoji ‘sentence’. But just as with the emojiified version of *Alice in Wonderland*, this all goes to show that Emoji just doesn’t function in the same way as a language. As we will see in more detail later in the book, Emoji lacks a grammar – a system of rules that lets us combine the individual glyphs into more complex units of meaning. And it is precisely for this reason that we require a helping-hand to make sense of the Newsbeat and *Alice in Wonderland* examples.

Emoji is becoming ubiquitous. The New York Public Radio station WNYC introduced a subway service, using emojis, to advise passengers of the status of particular New York City (NYC) subway lines. As the WNYC website explained, ‘We’re trying to estimate agony on the NYC subway by monitoring time between trains and adding unhappy points for stations typically crowded at rush hour.’⁵ You can find an example in Figure 5 in the picture section.

In response a leading online magazine has developed an emojiified map of London’s underground rail system, affectionately

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known to Londoners as the Tube. Those familiar with London's landmarks will instantly recognise stations such as Angel, Bank, Piccadilly Circus and so on (see Figure 6 in the picture section).

But is this all a gimmick, a passing fad? Could Emoji ever truly replace language in our digital communication? Or will it develop into a fully fledged language in its own right? And why is it that the younger generation are the most avid Emoji users? And beyond this, what about literacy and spelling standards – are they inevitable casualties of the rise of Emoji? In the final analysis, what does the uptake of Emoji mean for language, and for the future of human communication in the digital age? These are the very issues that I address in this book. And in the process, we'll examine what language is, and isn't, what role it plays in communication, and what the Emoji code reveals about these issues.

The rise and rise of Emoji

Emoji is an anglicised version of two Japanese words – *e*, 'picture', and *moji*, 'character'. And for those who might not be crystal clear on the subject, emojis are the colourful symbols – the winks, smileys, love hearts and so on – embedded as single character images, or glyphs, in our digital keyboards. Since 2011, when they first became widely available on mobile computing devices, they have taken the world by storm. At the ingredients level, an emoji is a glyph encoded in fonts, like other characters, for use in electronic communication. It's especially prevalent in digital messaging