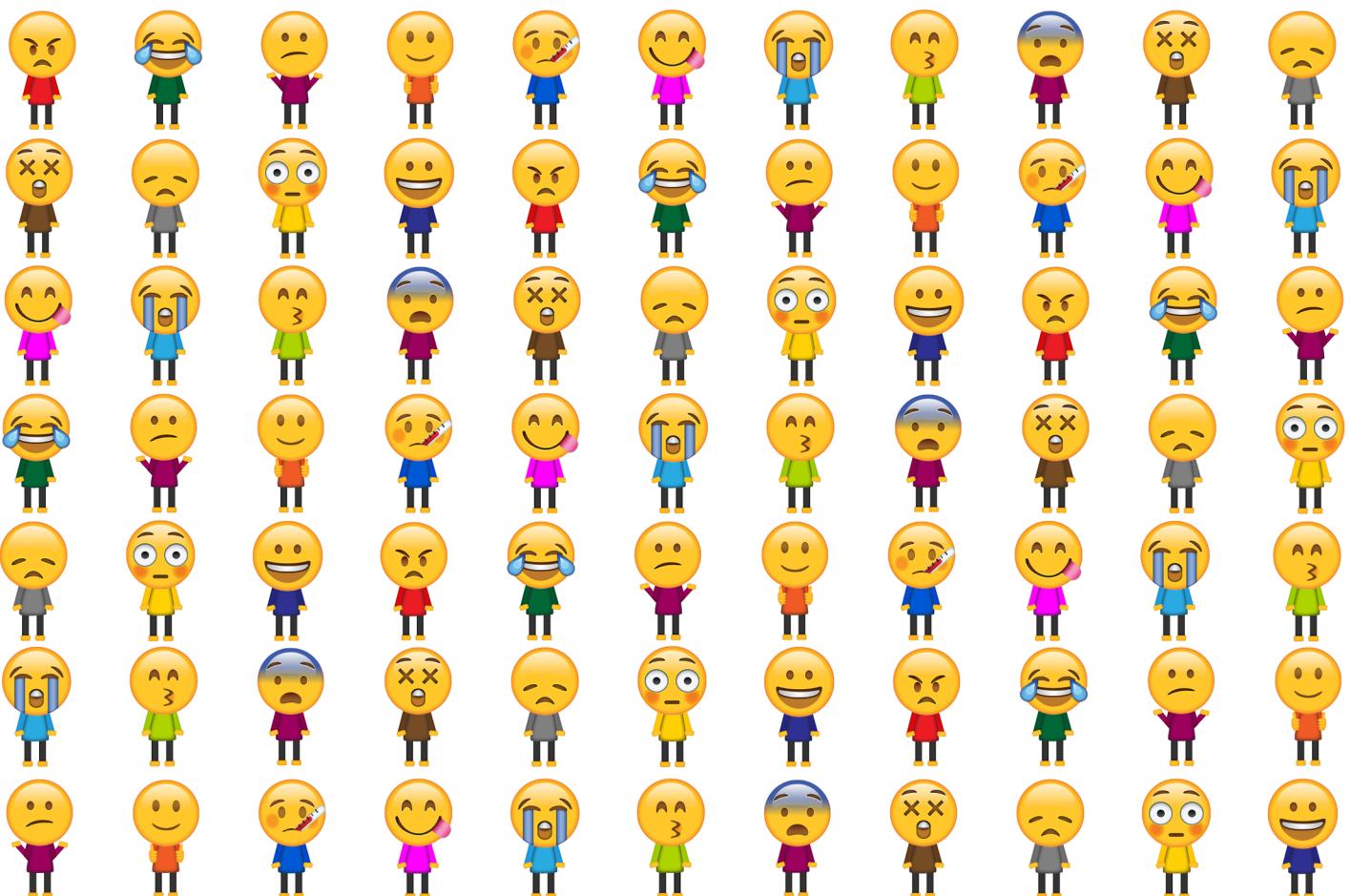


A brief history of communication: hieroglyphics to emojis



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Introduction

This free course, *A brief history of communication: hieroglyphics to emojis*, is an introduction to the history of writing and the key role it plays in human communication. Nowadays, it is difficult to think of language as existing without writing, but in the long history of humankind's ability to use language it is only relatively recently that writing emerged. The course also looks at the vital relationship between technology and writing, and how the development of new technologies alter the way we communicate.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [L101 Introducing English language studies](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand how different writing systems have developed over time
- understand how technology influences what we can do with language, and the form that language takes.

1 Language and everyday technologies

Language is an integral part of our lives. We listen to it in conversation, on the radio, on the TV and on our mobiles. We read it in emails, newspapers, study materials and scribbled notes. We use it to greet our friends, order a coffee, express how we feel or ask for information. In fact, it is hard to imagine how we could navigate our way through life without it. Language is such a common and pervasive feature of our everyday existence that we rarely think about what it is and how we use it.

In modern society, a huge amount of the language we use is mediated by technology of some sort. We don't rely on language alone, but on communications technologies, which transport and carry the language we use. These technologies can take a vast number of different forms, and the nature of these different technologies have an influence on how it is we use language.

Activity 1 Looking at different technologies

Allow approximately 15 minutes

Have a think about all the different technologies you've used over the past 24 hours to communicate with people. Make a list, and try to be as detailed as possible in what you include. Once you've done this, look back over the list and think about what these various technologies made possible about your communication, and how it would have differed without access to them. You can collate your notes in the box below.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Much of the technology we use to communicate today is digital: email, smartphones, video chat, text messaging and so on. Most of these tools are now an intrinsic part of both our working and home lives. They allow us easy and immediate communication with people all around the world.

But it's not just digital technology which plays a central role in the way we communicate. If you think of something as simple as scribbling down a note with a pen for someone to read, this involves technologies such as paper, ink and pen (there was a time, after all, before these had been invented). And of course, the most fundamental language technology of all is writing itself.

2 A brief history of writing

Before we begin examining in detail at how writing arose and the impact it has had on human communication, take a look at the following short video. Video 1 gives a succinct overview of the topics we'll be covering in this course by reflecting back at the history of writing from the perspective of today's obsession with emojis. While you're watching, consider how a modern day writing system such as emojis shares several elements with other, earlier writing systems – but how it also has its own unique properties which make it perfectly suited to modern communication technologies.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1 A brief history of emojis

A Brief History of Emoji



3 Communicating in symbols and pictures

In an article in the *New York Post* decrying recent trends in communication, the journalist Kyle Smith (2015) argued that 'Tens of thousands of years ago, humans communicated in pictures. The thoughts they sought to convey weren't complicated. That's why we call them cavemen'. The broader argument he's making in the article is that the way people communicate today shows a marked decline in terms of both sophistication and subtlety when compared to the way we communicated in the recent past. People's language habits are on a downward spiral. They're degenerating; becoming 'dumbed down', along with so much else in contemporary culture. The way we're communicating today, he'd like to suggest, is in such disrepair that it has more in common with the way that prehistoric humans communicated.

The reason for his use of this rather odd comparison is that his real target is the popularity of emojis. Emojis – on the off-chance you're not familiar with them; or are reading in some future era where they've been replaced by another form of technologically-enabled communication system – are the set of small picture-based characters that are used on online platforms to supplement communication. Their global spread began in 2011, when the computer firm Apple included them in the software for the iPhone's operating system. Since then they've expanded in both popularity and number so that, by the end of the 2010s, they'd become a notable cultural phenomenon; they're the subject of films and musicals, and they feature in everything from fashion design to architecture.



Figure 1 Emojis as a decorative feature in a building designed by architect Changiz Tehrani in the Dutch city of Amersfoort.

3.1 Textspeak and language change

The principal function of emojis, though, is as a means of communication. And it's in this context that laments such as the one in the *New York Post* are framed. Almost identical sentiments could be found in several other publications in the middle of the decade. For example, an article cited in the *Huffington Post* in 2016 complained that 'after 5,000 years of technological progress, we've returned to eking approximate meaning from pictograms' (Smithurst, cited in Gage, 2016). Or there was the assertion on CNBC that emojis are evidence of the 'the death of written language', and that we seem to be 'regressing back to the age of hieroglyphs' (Mody, 2015).

It was only a dozen or so years ago that the focus of these sorts of newspaper articles was on textspeak (or as it's sometimes written, txtspk) – the medium-specific register that evolved around text messaging (Crystal, 2009). Things such as non-standard spelling, truncated grammar and a relaxed attitude to punctuation were cited as examples of ways in which this ruin was setting in. Ten years on and the odd **initialism** (an abbreviation made by pronouncing the initials of individual words) might persist – terms such as *LOL* ('laugh out loud') or *tl;dr* ('too long; didn't read') retain their popularity. But other than a handful of examples, language continues much as it ever has. Texting didn't have a fundamental influence on English, or any other language.

By the 2010s the moral panic over txtspk had mostly subsided, and the focus had shifted instead to emojis. Almost identical sentiments about them replacing English, ruining people's literacy skills, and so on and so forth, simply shifted across from text messaging to emojis. And a common refrain throughout was that emojis were returning us to the origins of writing – and thus wiping out over 5000 years of progress.

3.2 Picture-based writing

Is it really the case then that five millennia after the Egyptians invented hieroglyphics we're once again resorting to communication via little pictures? And if this *is* the case, is it really unravelling all the advances that have taken place in literate culture over the centuries? As with most moral panics, arguments framed along these lines are based on a complex of false premises and misassumptions. But in having a look at some of these, and identifying why they're misguided, we can get a better idea of what language is and how it works.



Figure 2 Hieroglyphics

The most straightforward answer to the two questions at the beginning of the paragraph above is that emojis aren't really that similar to hieroglyphics at all. Yes, they're **pictographic** in origin: their meanings are based on, or derive from, what they look like. But whereas hieroglyphics comprised a fully-formed writing system all by themselves, emojis are a supplement to other, pre-existing writing systems. In English-language cultures emojis are not replacing alphabetic writing. They're adding to it. Specifically, they're adding a way to convey what we might call 'emotional framing' to online conversations. They fill a particular need in modern-day communication – a need produced by the fact that social media platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp) are part of a trend over the past few decades towards more informal communication, resulting in a more conversational style of writing than used to be the case. In this way emojis are an example of the way that human communication adapts to the contexts and technologies with which it's used – a process which has been happening from the very beginnings of human culture.

4 The birth of writing

Language first evolved in humans around one hundred thousand years ago (putting a precise date on its evolution is a difficult – and controversial – issue). Up until the end of the fourth millennium BC, however, its usefulness was limited to what was possible with the human voice. In essence this meant that language could only be used for direct communication between people who were physically in the same space. A speech, for example, could only be heard by those who were able to congregate within earshot of it. For information to be passed from generation to generation it had to be committed to memory and recited over and again down through the years.

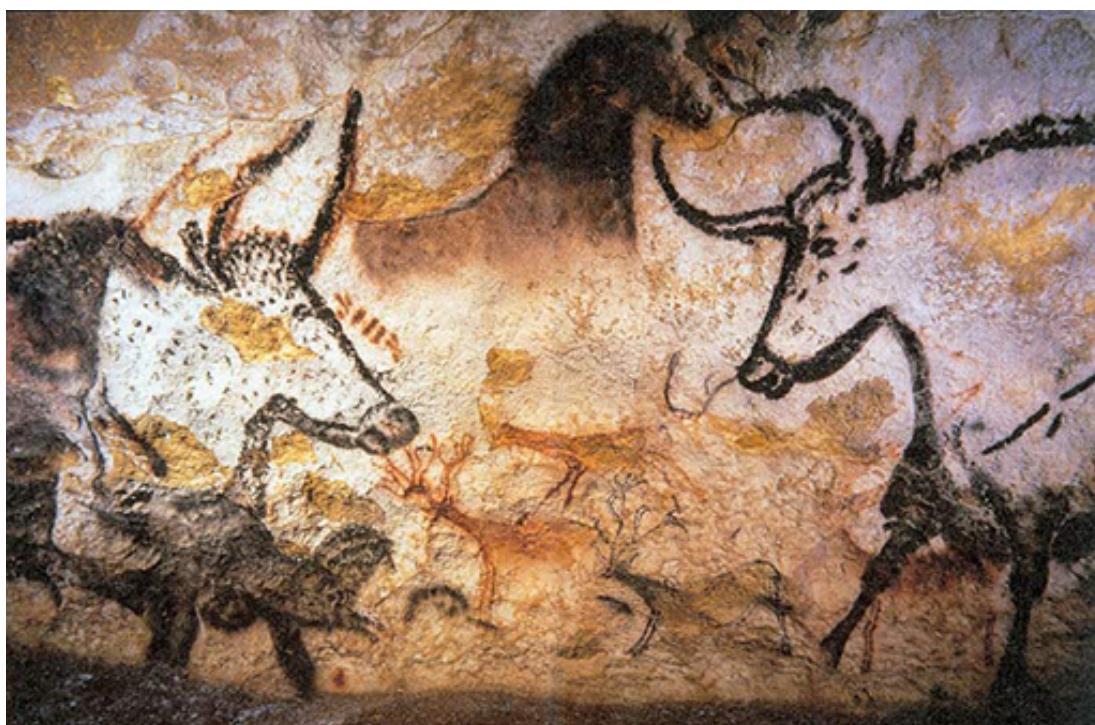


Figure 3 The Lascaux Caves paintings in south west France are some of the earliest known examples of sophisticated figurative art, dating back 20,000 years

Around 5500 years ago, in the Sumerian region of Mesopotamia (in present-day Iraq), this began to change. Pictures and symbols had been used occasionally prior to this as a way of expressing ideas and messages – the earliest examples of human-made images date back some 40,000 years (Wilford, 2014). But they'd never been used as a systematic means of recording events and ideas. In need of a way to keep track of the goods they were trading, the Sumerians started engraving symbols on fired clay tablets. In Egypt at much the same time a similar scheme of symbols began being used as a way of recording the number and nature of people's commodities. By the end of the fourth millennium BC, this innovation – **writing** – had developed into flexible and complex systems for recording the Sumerian and Egyptian languages.

4.1 Broadening the reach of language

The invention of writing changed both the way we use language and the benefits we're able to get from it. It made it possible to accumulate knowledge with far greater ease and accuracy than had previously been the case, which in turn aided the development of science and the study of history. It did this by extending the capabilities of language by giving it an external and permanent existence. Messages which are written down can be passed easily from person to person and from age to age. They can be consulted and accurately copied. The same message can be read by an almost infinite number of people. Writing allows language to travel across time and space; it allows utterances to be transported effortlessly from place to place, from community to community, and from generation to generation. Writing was, in other words, the first major communications technology. All the many innovations in language technology that have followed this – from printing to the telegraph to the internet – then further extend this reach and speed, allowing for today's immediate and effortless global communication.



Figure 4 Sumerian cuneiform tablet

The cuneiform script was used by the Sumerians from the end of the fourth millennium BC right up until the first century AD. The word 'cuneiform' means 'wedge-shaped' and refers to the marks made by the reeds with which it was written.

4.2 Different types of meaning-making

It's worth noting however that writing as we know it today is not a single technology resulting from a single invention. It's a combination of various innovations which took place over a long period, with differing effects in different parts of the world. But the stages of evolution it went through are very similar in all these different places. The earliest incarnations of all these writing systems were pictographic: they consisted of simplified drawings which were stylised representations of concrete entities. A picture of a bird meant 'bird'. A picture of an egg meant 'egg'.

As their use spread, so they began to gather broader meanings based on the context of this use, and to be combined together to create **ideograms**: symbols which represent ideas rather than objects. Bird *plus* egg, for example, represented fertility. A very significant stage in the development of writing systems was when they began to be used not simply to represent ideas, but also sounds. Hieroglyphics, for example, work both as a system of pictures representing objects and ideas; but also as a set of symbols which represent sounds which can then be combined to spell out words. If you wanted to write a person's name, you broke it apart into its different component sounds, and then used symbols which corresponded to each of these sounds.

Once this happened writing could emulate spoken language rather than operating as a separate, parallel system of communication. And it was this transition which led to the fully flexible systems we have today (Schmandt-Besserat, n.d.).

4.3 From alphabet to emojis

A key invention in the evolution of writing – for languages in the West at least – was the **alphabet**. This originated somewhere in the vicinity of Egypt or Palestine around 2000 BC, and produced a writing system which was easy to learn, quick to write, and avoided the ambiguities of many earlier scripts. Writers and readers of English, for example, only need to know about 52 alphabetic signs (the lower and upper case letters) along with numerals, punctuation marks and a few symbols such as the ampersand (&) in order to be able to use the language. A reader of hieroglyphics would have had to have a working knowledge of about 600 characters to understand complex texts. The way the alphabet provided such a compact and flexible system was by severing completely the relationship between the look of a sign and its meaning. In other words, the shape of the letters we use today no longer physically resemble the concepts they're referring to in any meaningful sense at all. Instead, each letter is related to a sound (or set of sounds), which combine together with other letters to create the sound of a word.

So where do emojis fit into this picture of developing communications technologies? As with all other writing systems, they have developed along with technology as human civilisation finds further ways to extend its intellectual reach. When messaging each other these days via mobile phones or other computer-based chat systems, we usually write in much the same way that we speak. But unlike speech, writing doesn't always allow us to express emotion and mood in a direct or straightforward way. Tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures – these are all vital elements of face-to-face communication, but they're stripped away in writing. Emojis offer a way of compensating for this. They're a quick and concise way of adding a layer of emotional character to casual, text-based conversation. And it's this that has propelled their global popularity.

5 The universality of body language

Emojis are grouped into different categories of symbols. By far the most popular are those which represent facial expressions (the smileys) and gestures. But does the fact that they're so popular globally mean that they work as a type of **global language**? Or to put it another way, are people all across the world able to understand emojis in the same way, or do different cultures interpret some of the symbols in different ways?

One of the ways we can answer this is looking at the facial expressions and gestures on which emojis are based.

Activity 2 Types of body language

Allow approximately 20 minutes

Have a look at these uses of various different types of body language. Which signs or gestures do you think are universal (i.e. can be understood by anyone anywhere in the world) and which are culture-specific?

Interactive content is not available in this format.

[Figures 5–9 Demonstrating different types of body language](#)

5. The smile: communicating that you're happy
6. The frown: communicating that you're angry
7. The shoulder shrug: communicating that you don't know
8. The thumbs up: communicating that you approve
9. The thumb and finger circle: communicating that everything is OK

Discussion

The universally understood signals here are the facial expressions, especially those which convey basic emotions such as happiness, anger, fear and so on. These are often produced subconsciously, and evidence in fact suggests that they may be hard-wired into us (Matsumoto and Willingham, 2009). People who are blind from birth, for instance, still smile and frown, suggesting that facial expressions are both universal and innate.

The shoulder shrug to convey the idea that you're indifferent, or don't really know the answer to something, also seems to be universal, although it's noteworthy that the accompanying facial expression (raised eyebrows and downturned mouth) is an important part of how the message is conveyed.

The thumbs up as a sign of approval is generally understood around the world. However, there are certain countries, such as Iran, where it has a negative meaning. It is interesting to note that, in Greece, where the sign once had a pejorative meaning, it no longer does. This may well be because of the way it's used in a positive sense in global media, which has thus had an effect on its local meaning.

The so-called 'OK' sign made with thumb and forefinger touching in a circle is socially the most risky bit of body language of those presented here. There are a number of countries where its use would be understood as insulting. In France, for example, it is often used to represent zero and conveys the idea that someone or something is

worthless, while in other countries, such as Brazil, it represents a certain bodily orifice (no, not the mouth) and is not meant as a compliment!

As these examples show, a great deal of body language is culturally learned. Indeed, even facial expressions, although universal, are influenced by culture. The degree to which people show emotion in public is regulated by cultural norms – it is perfectly acceptable in some cultures while not in others. It is also worth considering context when deciding what particular gestures and bodily expressions mean.

For these various reasons then, although the pictorial nature of emojis such as !

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